



2nd Annual Lighthouse Bluegrass Festival

by David Morrison

On March 28 this year, the music world lost a true giant. Earl Scruggs, the greatest banjo player that ever lived, was a musician so significant in the bluegrass community that he was largely responsible for lending the entire genre its signature sound, the key element setting it apart from country, folk, or so-called ‘hillbilly’ music. Effortlessly brilliant, his influence is so huge that his name is given to the now standard three-finger picking technique he pioneered. In Foggy Mountain Breakdown he wrote a tune likely to be forever regarded the most famous bluegrass instrumental of all time. As I say, a true giant. Upon Scruggs’ passing, actor-comedian Steve Martin (no slouch on the instrument himself) succinctly summarized his contribution to bluegrass (thereby music in general) when saying: “Before him, no one had ever played the banjo like he did. After him, everyone played the banjo like he did, or at least tried.”

While its cultural origins are considerably older, bluegrass music – categorized as such, with a core instrumentation – has surprisingly only existed for around six decades. For over half that time Linda Thorburn has been utterly devoted to it, and to the instrument on which Scruggs helped define it. For Thorburn, a key member of the Mid Island Bluegrass Society (MIBS), bluegrass is more lifestyle than interest. Indeed, when I spoke to her in pursuit of this article she had been up most of the night, immersed in the music she loves.

“I was up to 3:30 in the morning, playing bluegrass with a very old friend,” she laughs. “We played all night, sharing tunes together and talking about the good old days!” Keen to glean the information I needed before Thorburn might be forced to take a nap, I asked her about the forthcoming 2nd Annual Lighthouse Bluegrass Festival (LBF2) and her part in the festival’s founding.

“There’s five (MIBS) directors, a group of us that got together to make the first festival happen,” she begins,

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rightly eager from the off to point out that the festival is, of course, a big team effort. “There’s a real community behind all this, close to forty volunteers, and without them it wouldn’t happen, but it all started about six years ago when we saw a set of grounds in Qualicum Bay that had very little use. (Linda’s husband) Bob and I and several other people in the community read an article in The Beacon about how that parcel of land had fallen into disuse, so we went up to The Beacon and asked if anyone had mentioned any ideas of what could be done with it. When I first met (fellow MIBS director) Sheena McCorquodale she said, ‘What would you do with this big area?’ I said, ‘I’d have a bluegrass festival!’ She took the idea and talked it up with the community people, who flew with it!”

The seeds of this exciting new festival sewn long ago, it became a reality last year and is back in 2012 to offer Vancouver Island bluegrass fans a full weekend of extraordinary music. The spirit and memory of the great Earl Scruggs will inevitably loom large this year as banjos power along the fiery tunes and add a lilting delicacy to the ballads. For Thorburn the banjo is the sonic focus of bluegrass, while the social aspect of what is unquestionably a blue-collar art form, a true “community music,” has genuinely shaped her life’s path.

“I’ve been hooked on the banjo for thirty-two years,” she explains, “so when I hear bluegrass music and the banjo really driving the tune, that’s the essence of the bluegrass sound. But the real essence of bluegrass, for me, is the friendships I’ve made through the people I’ve played the music with.” Thorburn is entirely accurate in her assessment of how this music unites people. It possesses a tangible magic that promotes a sense of community, borne of its humble origins as the dance music of small Appalachian communities. As a fan and former live promoter of bluegrass myself I can attest to this. This aspect of the music’s power was observed by Bill Monroe (1911-1996), the man who virtually invented bluegrass. (In late 1945, Monroe added the ‘final piece’ when drafting Scruggs into his band, the Blue Grass Boys. This combo was, quite obviously, to inadvertently give the genre its name.) Monroe, the “Father of Bluegrass,” said: “Bluegrass has brought more people together and made more friends than any music in the world. You meet people at festivals and renew acquaintances year after year.”

Many of the friends Thorburn and her committed MIBS co-organizers have made through bluegrass down the years will be in attendance at LBF2 in Qualicum Bay over the Canada Day/Fête du Canada weekend (Friday June 20 – Sunday July 1 inclusive). Oh, I didn’t mention that it was all kicking off on that particular weekend, did I? It is sure to be one of the great local parties to be at as our nation celebrates its 144th birthday!

The Mid Island Bluegrass Society was formed to “play, preserve and present bluegrass music,” and it will hold true to that mission statement in real style at LBF2, especially the presentation aspect via an amazing parade of talent. For example, all the way from Oklahoma comes Mark Phillips & IIIrd Generation Bluegrass Band. So in demand is this hot outfit that they are booked right through until May of next year, their only other Canadian appearances during that time being in Stony Plain, AB, in August. Unmissable, I tell you! Then from Toronto, the Foggy Hogtown Boys’ mandolin genius, Andrew Collins, brings his brand new trio to Qualicum Bay for what I believe is their first appearance on Vancouver Island.



Up from eight at the inaugural festival, eleven acts play over the weekend this year, also including John Reischman & the Jaybirds from Vancouver. Reischman is widely considered not only one of the greatest mandolin masters Canada has ever produced, but one of the greatest, from anywhere, period. So if you have never had the pleasure of seeing the man and his remarkable band play, here’s your chance. Although as we go to press I cannot confirm the running order for the weekend, supported by a cast of stellar local (VI and BC) bands, all three acts featured here are scheduled to play on Saturday June 30. Thorburn promises it will be “a night to remember,” and I for one second that emotion.

Just as it is to speak with anyone possessed of a deep passion for something, talking to Linda Thorburn about bluegrass music is a lovely experience. She is a servant to the bluegrass scene of this area, as are all the MIBS folks and the mini-army of volunteers that ensure events like LBF2 happen. We are very lucky and should be thankful. But I guess we should be most grateful to the bluegrass pioneers who will continue to inspire such as Thorburn - incredible musicians like Earl Scruggs (1924-2012). “I don’t think you’ll ever get enough picking,” he once said of his love for the banjo... and it just so happens I know a woman who agrees with him! ~

For further information about the 2nd Annual Lighthouse Bluegrass Festival – including location/directions, ticket prices/availability, performers’ line-up/schedule, camping and advertising or volunteer opportunities – please visit www.lighthousebluegrass.com, email info@lighthousebluegrass.com or call Linda Thorburn of the Mid Island Bluegrass Society on (250) 752-0383.

*Photos: John Reischman & The Jaybirds - Mike Melnyk p.28, Highrise Lonesome - p.3
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