

COOMBS BLUEGRASS FESTIVAL: IT'S HOEDOWN TIME!

BY DAVID MORRISON

When I promoted shows of various musical persuasions back in England, one of the most thrilling evenings starred a young Raleigh, NC band called *Chatham County Line*. A traditional around-one-microphone bluegrass combo of seemingly telepathic musical understanding, they generated such intense energy in the venue that at times I could do little but laugh in disbelief at what was going on. But then this is routinely the power of bluegrass.

At its most potent, as it so emphatically was that night, there simply is no music like it. From whichever era, whether breakneck breakdowns or tears-in-your-beer heartbreakers, bluegrass delivers me a huge emotional punch. So what a treat it'll be for my wife and I to finally attend our first Coombs Bluegrass Festival this year. Moving house when it took place in '07, therefore broke in '08, this is the summer festival staple we've been most looking forward to. Would you care to join us?

This year sees the 31st such event, held since the second one at the Coombs Rodeo Grounds on B.C. Day weekend (July 31-August 2). The featured band for 2009 is Missouri's brilliant *Midnight Flight*, but from where I stand the supporting cast is also looking pretty awesome. *Queens Bluegrass*, *5 on a String*, *The Hillside Gougers*, *Last Train*, *Just Us*, *Clover Point Drifters* (pictured), *Skagway*, *Coombs Old Time Fiddlers* and *Grassmates* all play at what will undoubtedly be a hoedown of gargantuan proportions.

One member of Grassmates is banjo player, Linda Thorburn. Along with husband Bob, Sharon Klassen and Terry Whibley, she sits on the current Coombs Bluegrass Festival Committee and is the main person to thank for identifying and consequently booking such a tidy line-up of talent.

"I've been involved since the very first one," she says of her relationship with a festival that helps keep her happily "knee-deep in bluegrass," but it was the Coombs Country Opera – the festival's true community roots – that first opened her ears to this beautiful, exhilarating music.

"We'd drive by the sign outside the old Coombs Hall that said 'Coombs Country Opera,'" Linda recalls, casting her mind back to the late 70s. "I guess we sniggered and thought, 'No opera for us!' But we got talking to neighbours who



Clover Point Drifters

told us it was country and bluegrass. We didn't even really know what bluegrass was, but we went down there and saw four bluegrass bands. It was absolutely awesome! There was so much energy and fun down there! I soon bought a banjo and got sucked right in."

In a way, what is now B.C.'s longest-running bluegrass festival could be considered a happy accident, one borne out of community needs. As related on the event's website (URL below) by the Coombs Hilliers Recreation Community Organization's Jim Brown, the intention of the first festival in 1978 was simply to raise funds towards building a new community hall. It was such a success on all fronts that, thirty-one years later, it's going strong as one of the premier grassroots festivals in the Pacific Northwest.

Longevity should also be the middle name of the Coombs Country Opera, held in the hall it helped to build on the third Saturday of the month between September and May. We went along to April's event to find a parade of local and guest veteran bluegrass talent playing up a storm to a sizeable, appreciative audience, as has occurred for over three decades.

The evening was hosted and programmed by Jim Brown, a man typifying the community-focused spirit of volunteerism behind the

success of music and arts festivals the length and breadth of this country. If it were not for folks like him, Linda and the thousands of selfless volunteers who year-in, year-out, devote themselves to producing great entertainment for their communities, our summers would be awfully quiet!

We're so looking forward to this festival we can barely contain our excitement. Bluegrass is such a highly social form of music: its traditional core instrumentation of banjo, fiddle, mandolin, upright bass and acoustic guitar is so powerful, it's soaring harmonies so spine-tingling that it can be truly transcendent, at least in my experience. In fact, as Linda attests, bluegrass can genuinely change your life.

"Looking back on it, going to the Coombs Country Opera changed everything," she says. "And I think buying a banjo was the best thing I did in my life. I've met so many people through bluegrass, so many old friends. I look forward to meeting new ones – and you usually meet them playing a tune!"

The Coombs Bluegrass Festival takes place July 31-August 2 at the Coombs Rodeo Grounds, 2595 Alberni Hwy. Full information about tickets, performers, directions and the history of the festival can be found at www.coombsbluegrassfestival.ca.