



I Still Call It "Fan Fair"

by Bill Cooley

I'm writing this, my first column for Guitar Sessions, while the CMA Music Festival "The World's Biggest Country Music Festival™" is going on here in Nashville. The festival now takes place over a long weekend along the Cumberland riverfront and in the stadium where the Titans play, but for many years before, it was a week-long test of survival called Fan Fair® held at the dusty old Tennessee State Fairgrounds.* I have played at most of these events ever since moving here twenty years ago, usually several shows during the week, sometimes dashing from one just in time to make another. The memories that remain are of the strange and funny occurrences that happened, challenging the ethic that the show must always go on.

Playing my first Fan Fair with Reba McEntire was quite a thrill. With my wife and children watching from backstage, it was a very proud moment- right up until I stepped forward for a solo, planted my foot on my cord and unplugged my guitar. I started looping the cord through my strap after that! The next year, again with Reba, the heavens opened up and poured down rain during our set. The wind drove it under the covered stage so we got drenched along with the crowd.

I must digress for a moment to inform you that once Reba took the stage, she never relinquished it. At the Indiana State Fair one year, we played during a heavy rainstorm, all the while watching the awning above us fill with water. The stage hands finally pulled Reba offstage seconds before it collapsed from the weight.

I also played several Fan Fair shows with Hal Ketchum over the years. The first time, he'd just released a new album with a single climbing the charts. Hal is a wonderfully free spirit and spontaneous singer and that day, with the head of the record label backstage and in front hundreds of rabid fans- the type who'll go back home and call radio stations to request new songs- he did not play one new song from the record, preferring instead to call out some older tunes he felt like singing that day. One could never accuse Hal of making calculated career moves!

The one thing you can always count on during Fan Fair week is the erratic weather. No matter how nice a spring we're having, when the second week of June rolls around, it will be brutally hot and humid which, of course, brings the thunderstorms mentioned earlier.

One year, I was playing a midday show with Kathy Mattea and it was already above 100 degrees. About five songs into our set, I picked up my fretted Dobro®, which had been sitting onstage baking in the heat and seriously burned my forearm as I laid it across the metal resonator. Across the stage, our fiddle player had it worse. The stage itself was so hot the soles of his shoes melted and came off. Then, as he

tried to kick off the intro to the final song, he realized the glue in his instrument was softening - his fiddle was coming apart! He frantically did his best to retune it to get through the song and get off the stage.

By now, besides laughing at the "glamour" of it all, you probably realize how committed these artists are to their fans. Through these and many other trying conditions, it was always about giving the fans their money's worth. As more than 130,000 fans travel from all over the world to be present at this event - disappointing them is not an option.

Until next time-
Bill Cooley

Listen to a sample of Bill Cooley's "Scooter Pie" from his album ***A Turn in the Road***:
[scooterpie.mp3](#)

To learn more about Bill Cooley, please visit his website at:
<http://www.billcooleymusic.com/>

For a comprehensive history of the CMA Music Festival, please see:
<http://www.cmafest.com/2005/general/history.asp>