



Bluegrassin'

Volume 23 Special Edition

August, 2021

The Montana Rockies Bluegrass Association is a non-profit association dedicated to promoting, preserving and sharing our love of bluegrass music in a spirit of family and friendship.

Special Summer Edition 2 Weeks—2 Festivals

Summer season is festival season. After last year's pandemic layoff, this year's festival goers were more than enthusiastic to get back to some pickin n grinnin. To celebrate the return of live bluegrass, MRBA is issuing this very first special edition newsletter

Whether you went to a big festival or a backyard jam, it was clear that music is just the right tonic for easing into a somewhat syncopated sense of normalcy. Sharing stories, jokes and reminiscences was a like a breath of fresh air—even if the skies were rather smokey.

After hibernating the last year I had to dust off the jammin skills but the bands and fellow jammers didn't miss a beat. They were as sharp as ever with hot licks, tight harmonies and that high lonesome sound. The music was finger-licking good and the Montana sunsets were the perfect backdrop for soaking in the sounds and sights of bluegrass.

Just for fun, this newsletters focuses on two festivals that occurred one week and 200 miles apart. The HardTimes festival south of Hamilton, MT is in its 12th year and had record attendance. Local and regional bands were able to showcase their talent in front of an appreciative crowd. As always, Mike and Tari Conroy deserved kudos and a big, big thank you for all of the heavy lifting of pulling off this event.

This was the second Under the Big Sky Festival. The music was more eclectic and the crowds were triple the size of the host town of Whitefish. The music line-up featured big national names along with local talent. Logistics for such a big event are an incredible challenge but the concert professionals managed. Everyone is looking forward to the festival returning next year.

To all involved in the festivals—thanks for the summer of music. I can only hope that readers enjoy this special edition half as much as they enjoyed the music.

From the Editor—Kate McMahon

Check out these web sites for other festivals in the region!

Idaho:

<http://www.idahosawtoothbluegrass.org/>

Washington

<http://www.spokanebluegrass.org/>

HardTime Reviews (From Facebook)

The Hardtimes count is in. Tari said--"judging by the arm bands we don't have, we had 1400 people this year" Wowie-Zowie.From the stage it looked like a mini-Woodstock. Everyone loved the new location and "without a word of a lie"--- this festival is really put-on by all the friends that volunteer to help us. Thank you all so very much.. It was AWE-SOME... *(Mike and Tari)*

Another phenomenal festival. This Hardtimes Festival has become everyone's favorite festival. Thank you Tari and [Mike Conroy](#). Your sound system is incredible. That mic Mike is so good. *(Raynae Redman)*

They just called it a day, friends. 8:30 pm. They put on the most successful Hardtimes Bluegrass Festival to date. I hope they are enjoying some much deserved relaxation and a good whisky 🍷 Cheers! And thank you *(Paddy Moore)*

Tari and Mike, thanks for the great festival weekend. You guys and your festival crew did a great job and we will be back next year! *(Randy Schuler)*

I can't sit still, tapping my feet and dancing around *(Viola EmoSanderson)*

Lochwood had a great time playing at Hardtimes last weekend *(Steve Taft)*

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Montana Rockies Bluegrass Association

Hardtimes Photos

(More photos to come in next newsletter.)



Pretty in Pink



Will and Bill



I got my mando, cowboy hat and sunglasses.
Ready to roll



Montana Waltz



The next generation.



A creek runs through it.

Under the Big Sky Photos



Sunset @ Under the Big Sky



OMG! Look at that crowd!



Baby's first concert!



Under the Umbrella



Hat's off to the Festival Organizers



Two dudes styling.

Band Snapshots—Under the Big Sky Fest

Under the Big Sky Fest features all types of Americana bands including country western, bluegrass, indie, hillbilly rock, and cover bands. Although bluegrass was just a smattering of the band offerings, those bands were crowd favorites and were headliners for two of the three nights. These band snapshots might represent different generations and different styles but they all represent the bluegrass sound.

Billy Strings

There was much anticipation for the flat pickin sensation Billy Strings, the winner of this year's Grammy for "Best Bluegrass Album". He did not disappoint. In addition to Billy Strings, the band got hot licks from banjo, bass and mandolin. The foursome showed off their talents with extended jam band segments that were infused with jazz and rock overtones. In one number the jam band action lasted a full 10-minutes before breaking out into a rousing rendition of the bluegrass standard, "Ole Slewfoot". The set list included original numbers that crossed genres, interspersed with newgrass elements, and traditional bluegrass songs such as "Lay My Money Down." Billy Strings displayed his vocal talents with a soulful rendition of the American songbook standard, "Summertime". While the big crowds, flashing lights and teleprompter are a far cry from the local bluegrass scene, there is no denying the virtuosity of the performers. To find out more about the band and download music go to: [Billy Strings](https://www.billystrings.com/)



Hog Slop String Band

High energy pickin and high energy skinny dippin were highlights of this band. Hailing from Nashville, TN the band members displayed mighty fine musicianship along with entertaining stage moves. The colorful bass player switched back and forth between a standup doghouse bass and an old fashion washtub bass. He jumped around while he played and had moves that would make an exotic dancer jealous. The fiddle player joined the fun by jumping onto the shoulders of the guitar player midway through a tune without missing a beat. Although the banjo player used a frailing style on an open back banjo and there was some harmonica accompaniment there was no denying that this was hard driving bluegrass. To finish off the set of hot licks under a hot sun, bandmembers stripped down to their skivvies and invited audience members to jump in the creek with them. Fortunately, only the young, hard body crowd took them up on this offer and us old folks just shook our heads in amusement.



Band Snap Shots—Under the Big Sky Fest

Emmylou Harris and the Red Dirt Boys

It was nothing but love for Emmylou on Saturday night. Even though Ms. Harris has always played a mix of country, bluegrass, Americana and cross-over hits she was friends with and played with the “Father of Bluegrass”, Bill Monroe. She even mentioned him twice in the first ten minutes of her set. For those who want to quibble over the use of an accordion in a bluegrass arrangement, even Bill Monroe once featured an accordion in an early configuration of the Blue Grass Boys.

Anyway, her bluegrass roots run deep. International Bluegrass Music Association Hall of Fame member Ricky Skaggs was a member of Emmylou Harris’s Hot Band and wrote the arrangements for her bluegrass-roots album, “Roses in the Snow”. This was the first Emmylou Harris album I’ve ever owned and it was one reason I, and many others, were motivated to become a bluegrass aficionados.



Given the sizeable crowd, and the enthusiasm of the younger generation, Ms. Harris still has the same appeal. She opened her one-hour set with “Montana Cowgirl” and featured old favorites like “Orphan Girl”, “Together Again”, “Making Believe”, “One of these Days” and “Rose of Cimmaron”. Emmylou, of course, played rhythm guitar and although the sound system was not to her exacting standards, it did not detract from the performance. The back-up band Red Dirt boys played fiddle, mandolin, keyboard, accordion, electric bass and drums. The hot weather had shifted to comfortable evening temps and between the songs and story telling it was a grand way to spend a night with a music legend.

Lil Smokies

It was a lot smokey for the Lil Smokies when they played on Saturday night. Harking from Missoula, with Whitefish local Andy Dunnigan, the band is touring nationally most of the year and it only plays a few dates in Montana. The local fan base made the most of the opportunity to see the hometown favorites and were joined by new fans to fill up the expansive lawn in front of the stage. With the sun setting and a backdrop of rodeo horses trotting playfully in the cool evening air, the Lil Smokies were the perfect ending to a day of music. With a traditional bluegrass combo everyone was treated to toe-tapping instrumentals and tight harmonies. The music and the atmosphere just begged people to get up and dance. It is not difficult to see why the band has such a loyal following.

Band Snapshots—HardTimes

When you think of traditional bluegrass, you likely imagine a festival like HardTimes. Tucked away in the mountains down a gravel road with campers and jammers parked all around. For many musicians, this is where they earned their bluegrass chops, so to speak. Thanks to all of the talented musicians who performed over the weekend. Below are just a few of the bands that shared their love of bluegrass with the crowds.

Song Dog Serenade

A traditional bluegrass band from Billings delighted the crowd on Saturday. The group is led by husband and wife team of Scott Moore and Paddy Moore and are joined by Ed Pierson on the fiddle, Mike Blohm on the banjo and Trent Ireland on the mandolin. The band has been playing together for about eight years and is a repeat visitor to the HardTimes festival. They are active in the Yellowstone Bluegrass Association including Friday night jams in Billings, playing at the local winery and sometimes performing at the Miles City Bluegrass Festival. I had a chance to talk to some band members after their set and asked for advice for up and coming bands. They recommended that groups try to practice in front of a single mic. It is not just the playing that is important but the choreography that goes into whose turn it is to take the lead and making sure that they are positioned so the mic can pick up their playing. This should be worked out before getting on stage. Listening to their up-tempo style, it is clear that they have mastered the single-mic fox trot to perfection.



Kentucky Sky

Fred and Emily Frank have been regulars at HardTimes playing in a number of different bands. For the last 2.5 years they have been playing in a band called "Kentucky Sky". In addition to Fred on the banjo and Emily on the bass, the band includes Chad Fadley on mandolin and Randy Hackworth on guitar. Randy is actually from Kentucky and his home state is the basis for the band's name. The band has been busy this summer playing at different venues in Idaho and the Draft Horse Expo in Deer Lodge, MT. They are scheduled to play at the Mount Saint Helens' Bluegrass Festival in August. The band has also been busy recording a CD that includes a combination of original tunes and traditional arrangements. To order the CD or find out more about their schedule, visit the Kentucky Sky Facebook page.

Band Snap Shots—HardTimes

Throw Together Band Contest



What better way to showcase local talent than with at “Throw Together Band Contest”. Festival goers had a chance to form a band with friends and sign up for a 5-minute set. Seven bands competed for the chance to win “Best All Around Band” and “Band with the Most Character”. All the bands came ready to play and thrilled the crowd with inventive band names and good music. The audience “clap-o-meter” was used to determine the winners. Hat’s off to all of the bands in the contest!

- Drastic Measures (Winner—Best All Around)
- Good Ole Boys (Winner—Most Character)
- Wood Nymphs
- Fully Cooked
- Bic Mac & the Small Frys
- Summit Valley Syndicate
- Old Gospel Group

Mike & Tari

Mike and Tari organize the festival, do most of the promotion , set-up, clean-up, volunteer management, crowd control, official photographer, social media and countless other tasks. Still, they have time to perform! Talk about multi-tasking. With Mike on mandolin, Tari on guitar and a bass accompaniment, the group played traditional bluegrass like it was meant to be played. Pretty soon, Mike invited friends up on the stage and soon it was filled with MRBA regulars that had the crowd singing along with them. The old television theme song from “Petticoat Junction” got toes tapping and I half expected to see Mr. Ziffle and Arnold the Pig joining in. (Fans of the show will remember those characters.) We said it before, but we’ll say again—Thanks for the memories.



Overheard Quotes - From Various Bluegrass Bands

"I think I see all my future wives in the audience tonight."

(Hog Slop String Band @ Under the Big Sky Fest)

"You know what they say about country Music—Three chords and the truth"

(Emmylou Harris @ Under the Big Sky Fest)

*Interesting Fact: **Three Chords and the Truth** may refer to an often quoted phrase coined by songwriter and country singer Harlan Howard in the 1950s which he used to describe his singing. "All I got is a red guitar, three chords, and the truth." (Source Wikipedia)*

"We are from Missoula but we don't get to play in Montana much anymore."

(Lil Smokies @ Under the Big Sky Fest)

"If can put up with my ramblings, which my wife calls a stream of semi-consciousness, you should escape unscathed."

&

"God bless your hearts and all your vital organs"

(Ladd Canyon Ramblers @ HardTimes)

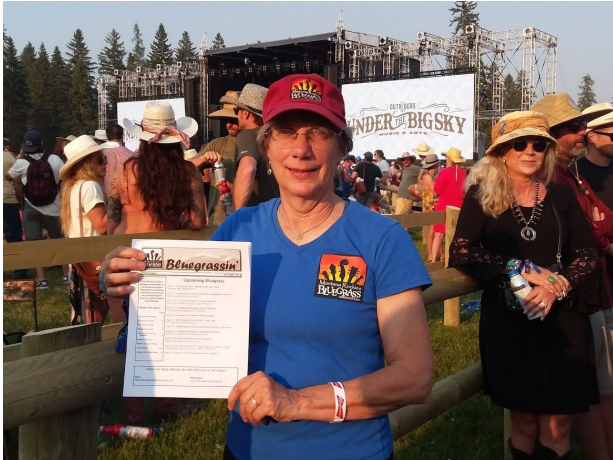
"People ask, do you put on this festival? I just say no—my wife does everything."

(Mike Conroy @ HardTimes)

A Tale of Two Festivals

| | HardTimes Festival | Under the Big Sky Festival |
|------------|---|---|
| Music | One stage—Omindirectional microphone. Bluegrass only please. (OK, there was gospel on Sunday) | Two big stages. Country, bluegrass, adult contemporary, rock.... Speakers that could blast sound a mile away! |
| Activities | Music, Music, Music | Music, Rodeo, Petting Zoo, Beer Tent, cornhole, vendors, photo ops |
| Camping | Camping on-site & jamming all night | Camping off-site |
| Crowd | Laid back, plenty of elbow room, one big bluegrass family | Shoulder to Shoulder. Fun loving crowd with beach balls and lots of dancing from all over the United States |
| Fashion | Bitterroot Casual | Upscale Cowboy to Montana Casual & everything in between |
| Scenery | Mountains—Breathtaking | Mountains—Breathtaking |

ON THE ROAD WITH MRBA



Editor, Kate McMahon, went with full MRBA attire for this photo shoot at the Under the Big Sky Festival



Triple thanks to the Heilands (and canine) for hosting the HardTimes festival on their ranch.

Don't Forget

If you are traveling or festival hopping this year, take a photo with the MRBA newsletter and send it with a short description to:
Editor kate@appcom.net