

Documentary takes viewers on a 'Bluegrass Journey'

Each year, thousands of people make a pilgrimage to upstate New York to participate in a lifestyle far removed from their daily lives.

Their destination: a bluegrass festival set on a hayfield.

They go to hear bluegrass music, an amalgam of traditional Scottish-Irish, blues, Southern gospel and country played almost unnaturally fast on banjos, fiddles, mandolins, dobros and guitars.

Blended and matured by Bill Monroe and his Bluegrass Boys in the mid-1940s, bluegrass music is marked by high harmony singing and is considered by many the ultimate form of Americana. It has undergone a resurgence in recent years.



STEPHEN IDE/The Patriot Ledger

From left, Del and Ronnie McCoury are interviewed in the documentary, "Bluegrass Journey," which featured scenes from the Grey Fox Festival in 2000.

Documentary shows that the grass is always bluer

■ BLUEGRASS

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"Bluegrass Journey," a documentary by producers/directors Ruth Oxenberg and Rob Schumer (www.bluegrassjourney.com), gives viewers a lovely slice of contemporary bluegrass, with extended clips of performances, endearing interviews, a look at festival camp life and a taste of the musical history that draws so many people.

Filmed mostly in 2000 at New York's Grey Fox Bluegrass Festival — one of the Northeast's premier festivals — the film visits a four-day annual mountainside party. It shows festival-goers as a hardy bunch, since 2000 was particularly rainy.

Despite the rain and mud, musicians like Nickel Creek's Chris Thile and Jerry Douglas perform under scant protective stage cover. Undaunted, the audience huddles under umbrellas, ponchos and tarps to hear the music they've come to love.

Musician, singer and songwriter

DVD REVIEW

BLUEGRASS JOURNEY

A documentary, featuring the Del McCoury Band, Tim O'Brien & Darrell Scott, Jerry Douglas, Peter Rowan, Tony Rice, Nickel Creek, Rhonda Vincent & The Rage, Bob Paisley & the Southern Grass, Buddy Merriam & Back Roads, Dry Branch Fire Squad, Old Crow Medicine Show, The Krüger Brothers, Lonesome River Band, Peter Wernick.

Tim O'Brien narrates and explains much of the history and the attraction that musicians and the audience have to the music.

The film includes heartwarming interviews with Del McCoury (considered the voice of bluegrass) and with his son, Ronnie, an award winning mandolin player, who explains his love of the music.

The DVD presents a broad spectrum of music seen and heard at Grey Fox, which ranks among the country's more progressive bluegrass festivals. It includes traditional acts like Bob Paisley & the Southern Grass and the Del McCoury Band to groups

that draw influence from other genres, like Peter Rowan & Tony Rice or jazz-oriented Nickel Creek and Jerry Douglas, and the Irish influences of Tim O'Brien & The Crossing.

If anything, the film weighs a bit too heavily on Nickel Creek, who seem to get more air time than most of the other acts.

For devotees, bluegrass is the kind of music that is not just for listening, but for participating.

The filmmakers turn their cameras on the Grey Fox campground, where people pick instruments and sing into the night. They "live large" on great food, and they enjoy the hillside culture, including a wedding that took place at the festival in 2000.

The film takes you inside festival dance and workshop tents. Workshops represent a significant portion of any bluegrass festival. At Grey Fox, three or four workshop tents run concurrently with the main stage. The workshop tents give the audience a chance to see artists up close and ask questions.

In addition, the film shows that

dedication to the music starts young. They show early footage of Thile on stage and today's Bluegrass Academy, which teaches dozens of children at the festival and then gets them on stage to perform by the end of the four days.

The film also offers a nod to the World of Bluegrass, an annual gathering and awards show in Kentucky of the International Bluegrass Music Association. Held in a hotel in October, it's an odd bluegrass setting, made odder by the presence of country acts Marty Stuart and Dolly Parton, who recently released their own bluegrass CDs.

In fact, it's refreshing when the footage returns to Grey Fox for a sampling of a Tony Rice guitar instrumental and the now-defunct All Festival Band, a performance by hundreds of musicians in the audience.



STEPHEN IDE/The Patriot Ledger

— STEPHEN A. IDE
The Patriot Ledger

Bob Paisley & The Southern Grass, at the 2000 Grey Fox Bluegrass Festival, was featured in the documentary, "Bluegrass Journey."