

RockyGrass Academy

Lyons, Colorado

By Candace Horgan

Held every year on the Planet Bluegrass festival grounds the week of the RockyGrass festival, the 2001 RockyGrass Bluegrass Academy offered novice and advanced fiddlers alike an excellent opportunity to learn from two of the best bluegrass fiddlers in the world, Del McCoury band fiddler Jason Carter and Nickel Creek's Sara Watkins. Dennis Caplinger of Bluegrass Etc. also taught fiddle during the week. Besides fiddle, pickers studied guitar, mandolin, Dobro, banjo and bass. There was even a class offered by Michael Hornick of Shanti guitars that let students build their own mandolin. Many other world class bluegrass musicians taught at the school, including Chris Thile and Sean Watkins of Nickel Creek, Robbie and Ronnie McCoury, "Dr. Banjo" Pete Wernick, Mike Bub, Bryn and Billy Bright, and Missy Raines. Peter Rowan and Del McCoury acted as traveling emissaries, sitting in with various classes.

While there were three classes offered in guitar and mandolin, there were only two, novice and advanced, offered in fiddle. The primary instructors were Watkins and Carter, who taught each level; Carter took the advanced class the first two days and the novices the second two days, and Watkins taught the opposite. Caplinger floated between the two classes, offering some personalized instruction when opportunity arose. For instance, Owen Leslie of Evergreen, Colorado, found that Caplinger offered him a lot of good advice for keeping his wrist loose during an advanced class early in the week. Said Leslie, "He was very helpful, and he has the loosest wrist of anyone I've ever seen play except John Hartford."

Both Watkins and Carter took time to teach their approach to playing certain songs. One afternoon, Watkins led us note for note through her version of the old traditional "Cuckoo's Nest." Over in the novice workshop, Carter worked the class through the gospel traditional "Man in the Middle," working on intros, solos and fills. Both instructors strived to impart skills the students could work on at home, sometimes even writing things out for them, as Watkins did for the novice class after teaching them "Sally Goodin'." Said Watkins, "I like to teach them things they will take home other than new tunes. Tunes are good and let you get involved with jams, but I like to give them exercises and ways of thinking about playing that help them get through blocks that they might have down the road."

Carter said that a lot of his focus was dictated by his students' desires. "The first thing I do is to ask them what they want to learn. They have more control than I have. I don't want them to pay money and then learn something they don't want to. I try to set my guidelines by that."

Of course, technique played a large part in the skills we picked up. Carter worked a lot on slides and double stop use with the advanced students. Watkins commented, "Jason is a master at using double stops, unlike me. I'm pretty wimpy about them; they scare me." One of the focuses of the classes is learning the skills necessary to play as part of a bluegrass band. Playing with other musicians does offer greater opportunity to improve quickly. To help students overcome performance fears, after the morning sessions the different classes all broke down into groups of twenty or so, each with a few instructors. After choosing a song from the bluegrass songbook, the group would then play it, and the instructors offered tips on how to execute rhythms and solos, and how to sing both harmony and lead. Students got a chance to play and learn songs from groups that included Jason Carter and Nick Forster, or Sally Van Meter, Robbie McCoury and Sara Watkins.

Each day ended with "electives." Instructors gathered together in small groups of two to four and played songs requested by the students, who then could ask questions about execution and styles. On Wednesday, Robbie

Spring 2002



Jason Carter and students at the 2001 RockyGrass Academy

Photo: Candace Horgan

McCoury and Jason Carter sat down and played a variety of tunes. On "Bonaparte's Retreat," students learned a little bit about cross-tuning, as Carter tuned his fiddle to DDAD. One student questioned Carter about his tendency to lift his bowing shoulder high when playing solos. Explained Carter, "I don't think about it. It's like I was saying earlier, I do whatever I feel at the moment to get the sounds that I desire out of the instrument."

Besides instruction, Planet Bluegrass offered students some magical moments during the Academy. On the first and last night, they held a big barbeque near the river, letting us soak up the atmosphere of the Rockies.

To close the Academy Thursday afternoon, Peter Rowan continued his tradition of leading a sing-along in the river. Rowan, Wernick, Carter and Del McCoury stood in the river with the students, while Missy Raines brought her standup bass down and perched herself on a rock on the banks. We all sang some gospel tunes, including "Amazing Grace" and an appropriate "Down by the Riverside," in an almost baptismal scene. Carter also played a few fiddle tunes, including "Angeline the Baker," and Peter Rowan dedicated a version of "Good Old Boys" to the late John Hartford.

There was plenty of late-night opportunity to practice playing with other people. A Band Scramble contest was part of the fun; students entered their name in a random drawing, someone picked five names out of a hat and the chosen would play together as a band. Each "band" got to play two tunes over the course of the first three nights; the top four as chosen by judges competed in the finals on Thursday. T-shirts were awarded to the winners, a band that included eleven-year-old guitarist Dominick Leslie and nine-year-old fiddler Gina Leslie, who got a chance to play the solo from "Man in the Middle" that Carter taught her that week.

Of course there was plenty of picking in the campground at night. Some people even managed to stay up till sunrise wandering around, joining a picking circle for a few tunes, then moving on. I never lasted past 2:00 am, but enjoyed fiddling some Irish tunes like "Swallow Tail Jig" with one group and then playing rhythm guitar on some traditional bluegrass tunes like "High on a Mountain." Some jazz tunes, like "A Minor Swing" could even be heard coming from one circle. Said Carter of the late night picking circles, which he joined on a couple of nights, "I think that relaxes everyone; in your classes you don't really get to know the students. To go over and party with them and do some picking eases everyone's nerves."

The RockyGrass Academy offers a wonderful chance to learn playing skills from the masters and take home some lasting friendships. Tickets go on sale the first Monday after Thanksgiving, and many classes sell out the first day, so grab them early.

[This year's RockyGrass Academy will be held July 26-28. Fiddle instructors will be Jason Carter, Darol Anger and Richard Greene. Tickets/info: 800-624-2422; www.planetbluegrass.com/pages/rockyhome.html]

[Candace Horgan is a freelance writer living in Denver, Colorado, who covers music for the Denver Post, Relix, and other publications.]