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# Bluegrass Canada

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Rogersville Bluegrass Festival

# Autographs

by Chris Higgins

Chris Higgins tells of his autograph collecting at Bluegrass Canada 1975

I'm not sure why I decided to start collecting autographs that weekend at Carlisle Bluegrass Festival. It wasn't something I normally did as a hobby, like playing with trains or collecting baseball cards. In 1975, I was only twelve years old and more into road hockey and soccer than bluegrass at the time.

Although as the young son of a Bluegrass fanatic and musician, I knew most of the acts that were on the bill that weekend. Like the Country Gentlemen, The Country Gazette and, my favourites to this day, the Seldom Scene. I knew their music from playing my father's record collection, hanging around his band practices and following him around to shows and festivals. So, needless to say, when our family pulled into the festival grounds at Courtcliffe Park that long ago Friday morning in 1975, I knew the cars lined up at the gate were waiting to hear some of the top bands in Bluegrass at the time. My father's band, Bluegrass Revival, was playing so we camped backstage in Staff City where the musicians and volunteers camped for the weekend.

When I look back now, it was quite a special place for anyone who'd caught Bluegrass fever. There were always Pickin' sessions happening at all hours of the day or night. For a young kid from the suburbs, it was another world where you'd hear southern drawls and Appalachian twangs from musicians who'd come from all over the States to play. There were the musicians, but there were also the volunteers. It was the 70's and all sorts of characters would show up at the campfires and jam sessions that lasted long into the night. Most brought instruments along while others just sipped their drinks and listened to the music. All were welcome.

Staff City was also a great place to find autographs because it offered access to anyone who was going on stage. That weekend at Carlisle was almost fifty years ago and, unfortunately, my memories of those encounters are now quite foggy with the passage of time. There is one encounter, however, that I do recall.

It seems fitting that the first signature in my notebook is Bill Monroe. I remember his shiny tour bus with his name emblazoned across the side and on the front. A thick crowd of

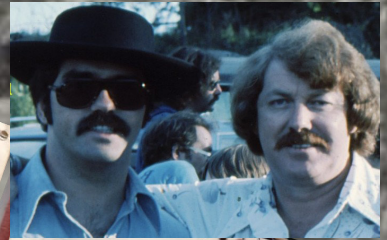
onlookers gathered to watch as his bus rolled down the dirt road towards the gate into Staff City. They parted to let the bus through as it drew closer and then turned a corner finally parking next to the stage. The aura of his presence seemed to ripple through the whole park. Word got out pretty quick that the King, "Bluegrass Elvis" if you will, was in the building. I guess it was just the naivety of my youth, but after a short time had passed I just sauntered up to the bus and knocked. The driver opened the door to let me in and then yelled to the back of the bus that "some kid wants Bill's autograph." Eventually, Monroe shuffled down the aisle wearing a white undershirt and a grin on his face. Maybe it was my dirty coveralls and the train engineer's cap that was glued to my head all summer that made him chuckle. He said hello in his thick Kentucky accent, signed the page and that was all there was to it.

Catching the big fish early in the game must have emboldened me to keep looking because I managed to fill the pages of my notebook with quite a grand list of bluegrass talents. The exchanges were quick though. I was only 12 and didn't 'pick' so there was no lingering conversation about chords, songs or tour dates. One other image, however, that I do remember, involves The Country Gazette. They were inside someone's tent trailer, sitting around without their instruments just hanging out. I remember there was no room for me to enter so I stood by the door and they passed my notebook around. It was a pretty jovial atmosphere and a few jokes were made while I waited.

Looking back, the fact that I could approach these famous musicians says something about the spirit of the music and the immodesty and humility of these people. There were no stocky security men in black t-shirts stopping me from handing a pen and paper to what amounted to the Robert Plante's and Mick Jagers of Bluegrass music. Nobody I recall ever refused the pen when it was passed to them. They all kindly obliged. After all these years have passed, the autographs are relics of a time when a trailer park outside a small Ontario town was the site of one of the biggest bluegrass festivals in North America if not the world. Big enough at least, to have attracted the illustrious names on those pages.

Best wishes  
Lawrence Jones  
The Kentucky  
Club

Sincere Wishes,  
Jimmy Jandrea



Best Wishes  
Bill Mowae



The Silver Fox  
Ron Allen  
Best always  
John Brown

Tom Brown  
John Robby  
Nick Chalkley  
for [unclear]

The Country Gentlemen  
Mark Johnson  
Bill of the  
Charlie Waller  
H.W. Holden

To Chris  
From the  
Country Gazette  
Richard White  
Roger  
Buell  
Alan Munde



To Chris  
Keep on Pickin'  
Bruce Good  
Thanks to  
John Allen  
See you next year  
Chris  
Michael Lee

Bill  
Howling

To CURTIS  
[unclear signature]



Even the two signatures I can't identify tell us something about that achievement. My guess is they were probably two volunteers strumming instruments that simply did what the chubby kid asked and signed his notebook. Famous or not, they were important to the whole show. Two of the many volunteers from a community of Bluegrass fans that still works hard to this day to make it all happen, year after year, just for the love of the music.

Chris Higgins

All photos by Mike Higgins