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An interview with Kentucky native Sam Bush on the upcoming Merlefest

By Tim Bullard

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Kentucky native Sam Bush had a relationship with the Deep Gap, N.C. native Merle Watson, and he talked about MerleFest which is coming up soon.



In the 1980s Doc Watson, Merle's father, picked 'Over the Rainbow' in the green room of the former P.B. Scott's Music Hall in Blowing Rock where Bush played a few times. Interviewing Watson was Tim Bullard. (Photo by Terry Ketron)

This year at MerleFest 2009, set April 23-26 in Wilkes County, Sam Bush will perform again, this time on Friday and Saturday.

Bush knew Merle. "Oh yes," he said. "I knew Merle quite well. We started knowing each other very well in 1974 through New Grass Revival. We did 15 gigs opening up for Doc and Merle. We did a festival in Kansas in mid-September and went to the West Coast. It was back then that Merle had a band called Frosty Morn.

"New Grass Revival would play, and then Frosty Morn and then Doc and Merle and then T. Michael Coleman with them played." Then he played on a record with Doc and Merle, "Memories."

"I became a good pal of Merle's. He would hire me to play on records he was producing. Many a time we would sit together. Merle was a great slide guitar player." A Kentucky native, Bush isn't too shabby on mandolin either.

"His favorite slide guitar player was Duane Allman, as was mine. We would sit and listen to The Allman Brothers together and marvel at the great slide playing of Duane. I always thought Merle was an acoustic version with the same intensity that Duane had. So years later I played the slide mandolin."

He wrote a tune based on Merle's and Duane's playing, so he called it "Watson Allman."

"When MerleFest first started, everybody who played on it were personal friends of Merle's and Doc's. When it first got going, it was real emotional because we were still missing Merle, and we still do. Really that's how the festival got going. Now of course it's grown much larger. We still think about Merle all the time."

Bush visited the Todd studio the Watsons had. Bush also played at P.B. Scott's Music Hall in Blowing Rock, a geodesic dome with hippies galore, weird smoking on the third floor and sometimes an appearance by ASU Coach Bobby Cremins with his staff.

"We used to play at P.B. Scott's. I remember Merle coming to hear us one time. It was an odd sounding room I remember," he said. "You could literally be playing and hear the sound man talking on the other side of the dome. It sounded like he was

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standing next to you during the sound check. So the sound really traveled across the top of that dome."

The Legislature of Kentucky honored Bush for his work in bluegrass music.

"Well actually it was the Senate. It was a proclamation. It's really an honor for a kid who grew up on a cattle and tobacco farm outside of Bowling Green, Ky. You never dream of anything like that. It's a big honor. I take pride in being from the state of Kentucky. It's the home of bluegrass music. It was a thrill. It was an honor. I never dreamed anything like that could happen."

New Grass Revival was a seminal band he was in.

"When we started New Grass Revival, it was in 1971. At that time the audience, I was the same age as the audience, the college students. At the time with the popularity of Crosby, Stills & Nash and James Taylor, there was a lot of Joni Mitchell, and there was a lot of interest in acoustic music within rock and roll.

"Those trends seemed to change in the latter 70s with disco, but the great thing about this kind of music and the great thing about MerleFest and sustaining an audience is that people are enjoying acoustic music more than ever, it seems. That is because 'A,' I think it's an honest music that doesn't revolve around trends.

"Two, we have a lot of great younger musicians coming up who are great musicians, so obviously it's going to interest a lot of young audiences to hear young musicians on stage too. So it's a pretty healthy time for the music too, I think."

Satellite radio is helping bluegrass music. Bush listens to baseball on XM.

"Personally I am a fan of satellite radio. I have an XM radio and a Sirius radio. For me it has brought the joy, as a radio listener, back to radio. You don't have the same 20 songs that they play. Each song is unique in its own way. XM brings us the Bob Dylan Show, The Marty Stuart Show, bluegrass, it's all on there. I love XM because it has all baseball games.

"For Sirius Del McCoury has a show. Sirius has NFL. I want to hear our local teams play. I enjoy the wide variety. It's like when I was a kid the way FM radio seemed to have less restrictions. I love any radio format that has bluegrass."

He listens to a lot of different types of music. "All kinds of stuff," he said. He listens to Flatt & Scruggs and Jeff Beck.

"It's a pretty wide range of things I like to listen to. I just recently got turned on to a record from the 60s, Miles Davis, 'Sketches of Spain.' My listening is varied. I'm just interested in all kinds of things. Also I have the Bob Dylan live album during his gospel period. I find myself rediscovering great old Beatles songs that I've forgotten about."

He also listens to The Rolling Stones. Bush talked about Jerry Garcia and Old & in the Way.

"I think Old & in the Way, especially on the West Coast, you know, was where people could actually hear them play live, Old & in the Way and Jerry and The Grateful Dead and Peter (Rowan) and David (Grisman), all those guys, and Vassar (Clements) brought what was pretty much traditional bluegrass music to the attention of a rock and roll audience.

"I think that was very important in the 70s," he said. Bush met Garcia.

"We got to jam a little bit in 1974 in Warrenton, Va." he said. "We played in 1989, New Year's Eve, during a show at the Oakland Coliseum. It was our last job. It was wonderful."

Tim Bullard is a freelance writer and photographer. Visit him online at www.timbullard.com for pictures from last year's Merlefest as well as other articles and photographs.

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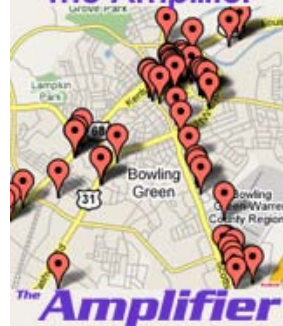
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