

RudyFest

Rudy Fest

by Susan Marquez

For fans of bluegrass, a festival is the hands-down best place to hear music all day, often for several days running. There are many festivals around the country, most of which have been in many years, with loyal fans who return year after year. Choosing the right festival for an artist is one that music promoters take very seriously.

When promoter Phyllis Ousley Rice was researching festivals for her client, bluegrass artist Larry Sparks, she discovered Rudy Fest and was successful in booking Sparks to play at the annual festival. "We were so impressed," she says. "As far as music festivals go, you can't beat it. They know how to treat the fans and the artists. You can't ask for any better."



Rudy Fest began twenty years ago when Rudy Burchett committed to raising money to buy uniforms for a local junior football league. He contacted a group of guys that he got together with each Sunday evening to listen to a bluegrass program hosted by "The Bo-Man" on local radio station WSIP out of Paintsville, Kentucky. The group called themselves the Bob Cat Alley Bluegrass Boys. With his love of football and his love of bluegrass music, Rudy decided that a music festival would be the best way to raise money for the uniforms. The Bob Cat Alley Bluegrass Festival was held in May 2000, and despite having to move the festival indoors due to a massive rainstorm, 80 people showed up to hear music by Ernie Thacker and Route 23, Billie Renee and Cumberland Gap, and several local bands.

The next year the festival was moved to the fourth weekend in June and renamed Rudy Fest. Over the years, the festival has grown, with thousands showing up each year to hear their

favorite bands. Fans have become friends, and the festival has the air of a giant family reunion. Rudy Fest is held on Poppy Mountain in Morehead, Kentucky.

Leroy Walker, who has toured with IIIrd Time Out, joined Rudy Fest three years ago, booking performers for the popular festival. He says the festival was held one county over for several years before moving it to Poppy Mountain.

“That’s just a better location for the festival,” he says. For one thing, it’s on higher ground. In 2017, massive rains flooded the festival site and several vehicles and campers were flooded. “At least no one died,” says Leroy. “Luckily, that didn’t affect our attendance for the next couple of years. People just continue to come back!”





Quality talent and excellent fan experience are paramount to the organizers of Rudy Fest. "Our attitude is one of trying to provide the best entertainment for our fans," Leroy says. "We are constantly working to increase our band budget to match the growing crowds." Leroy says the festival has always had strong local support, and now has several national corporate sponsors. "It's reaffirming to get that kind of support because it means we are doing something right."

Over the years, Leroy says he has played at many festivals around the country. "I think it is a pretty repetitive formula," he says. "There are things that just work for any festival, and people do that over and over again. All successful festivals have a strong lineup of talent." Then there are special things that set some festivals apart from the others. "We took some of those ideas and incorporated them into Rudy Fest, as a way to make this festival even better."

One of those things is feeding the artists. "It's something we made a policy to always do," Leroy says. "We have a huge catering operation with a staff of 250 people, and they do a great job feeding our performers all four days of the festival."

A portion of the proceeds of the festival still benefits youth

sports, and Leroy says it's not unusual for entire teams to help out with the festival. "They volunteer to park cars, drive people around in golf carts, and such," he says. "In exchange, they'll earn funds for uniforms, tournaments, and more. It's a great way to get kids involved in the community."

Phyllis says she was so impressed with the festival that she agreed to head up the band competition, which was held for the first time

last year. "It was a big success," she says. "Bands came from all over." A panel of judges decided the winner, who received a \$500 cash prize and tickets to the festival.

Sadly, there was no band competition this year, as there was no Rudy Fest. The COVID-10 pandemic has made it impossible to hold the popular festival. Rudy Fest has been rescheduled for June 23 through June 26, 2021.