

Rolling Stone

Robert Plant, Bob Mould, Steve Earle Rock Huge Audiences in San Francisco

Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival draws 600,000 people over three days

by: Benjy Eisen



Patty Griffin and Robert Plant perform as part of Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco.

Tim Mosenfelder/Getty Images

Despite obvious ties to non-commercial forms of music, Hardly Strictly Bluegrass in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park has quietly become the largest music festival in the country in terms of audience – with an estimated 600,000 attendees over three days – and it's completely free. It's also completely free from advertising and corporate sponsors of any kind. "It's the coolest American festival that I've been to," Elbow's Guy Garvey told *Rolling Stone* backstage shortly before the band's headlining set on Sunday. "It reminds me a bit of Glastonbury – mainly the way Glastonbury used to be, actually. The vibe is really buzzing and really old school and everybody's really happy."

Paid for by billionaire venture capitalist Warren Hellman, who calls it his gift to the city, the event began in 2001. Back then, it was titled Strictly Bluegrass to reflect its benefactor's taste in music (Hellman traditionally sits in on banjo with many of his favorite performers every year). By 2004, however, it

expanded in scope significantly enough to mandate the "Hardly" disclaimer, now officially a part of its name. This year's roster included punk rockers (Thurston Moore, Bob Mould), indie kids (Gomez, Fitz and the Tantrums), folkies (Jayhawks, John Prine) and classic rock royalty (Dr. John, Steve Earle). That's in addition to a solid program of proper bluegrass and country stars, including Hardly Strictly regulars Emmylou Harris, Ralph Stanley and Gillian Welch. Also returning: Robert Plant, who performed with his Band of Joy on Friday and then, as in years past, was seen throughout the entire weekend taking in lots of music as a fan.

But of course, peace, love and music are no strangers to Golden Gate Park. Since the Summer of Love in 1967, music programs have been a constant, with many events staged for free. On September 28th, 1975, the Grateful Dead performed an hour and a half set in the park's Lindley Meadows. Thirty-six years later, almost to the day – and just a couple hundred feet from that actual spot – Dead tribute band Dark Star Orchestra faithfully recreated that specific show, providing a historical retrospective and appropriate ending to this year's festival.

Dark Star's Rob Barraco – who has performed with the surviving members of the Dead in various projects – attended Hardly Strictly as a fan for the past five years. This was his first time as a performer. "I thought it was named after a guy named Hardly and a guy named Strictly," he told *Rolling Stone* beforehand, explaining that it took awhile before the meaning of the festival's title finally dawned on him. "So now that I get that, we're a perfect fit," he said. "Because we're hardly strictly bluegrass. Yet . . . we *are* bluegrass enthusiasts."

[Photos: Random Notes, Rock's Hottest Pictures](#)

On Friday night, another return guest of honor, Conor Oberst, curated the Rooster Stage. His special lineup included Kurt Vile, the Felice Brothers, M. Ward and of course, Bright Eyes, who were celebrating the final show of their long and winding tour. During their set, Oberst brought up M. Ward to sit in on "Smoke Without Fire," which the pair co-wrote during the Monsters of Folk era. Oberst then invited just about anyone still around backstage at set's end – including an animated David Rawlings – to come up for a rousing "Road to Joy" finale.

On Saturday, legends Merle Haggard and Kris Kristofferson took to the Star Stage together to trade tales and tunes. After Kristofferson introduced Haggard as the greatest "singer and songwriter since Hank Williams," the two backed each other on classics from their respective catalogs, including both "Me and Bobby McGee" (which certainly has its own history in the environs of Golden Gate Park) and Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee," which name-checks San Francisco.

Afterwards, a collective group of heroes of another sort entirely took the adjacent stage: Broken Social Scene performed what they claimed would be their second to last show in a very, very long time – perhaps ever. "Don't forget us," ringleader Kevin Drew pleaded with the audience in the middle of an emotional set. Members of Stars and Apostle of Hustle joined their larger collective for a victory lap through their much-loved catalog, including "Fire Eyed Boy" and "Anthems for a 17-Year-Old Girl," the latter of which featured Stars' Amy Millan on vocals.

Hardly Strictly's daring nature further displayed itself on Sunday morning when the 20-member male choir

Conspiracy of Beards performed an entire set of rearranged a cappella Leonard Cohen songs. "It was told to me today that we're going to bring a little 'Jew-grass,'" joked musical director Daryl Henline, who led the choir through goosebump-friendly versions of Cohen classics, including "Suzanne," "Chelsea Hotel No. 2" and, of course, "Hallelujah."

In the early afternoon, Robert Plant performed the country classic "Sea of Heartbreak" (made famous, in part, by Johnny Cash) with Buddy Miller, who also invited Emmylou Harris and Patty Griffin to sit in on a couple tunes during his set. Before exiting, Plant showed Miller some love, telling the crowd that he's "the savior of my legitimate career."

But perhaps the true spirit of the festival was most embodied by a group of upstarts from Michigan called Greensky Bluegrass. Much like the festival itself, Greensky are hardly strictly bluegrass and, yet, they're representing the genre for a whole new generation. "We like fun, rowdy, energetic crowds who drink a lot and scream a lot," mandolinist Paul Hoffman told *Rolling Stone* after coming offstage from a set that literally won over tens of thousands of new fans, instantly. In fact, Greensky reportedly sold more CDs than just about any other performer during the weekend. "We bring bluegrass to people who aren't familiar with it. Often I'm told, 'I don't even like bluegrass but you guys are great,'" said Hoffman, who was also quick to point out that recent successes by Mumford & Sons and the Avett Brothers have certainly helped the cause. "We're the gateway for some people; I think that's an important tradition."

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