

NEVER TOO OLD TO ROCK 'N' ROLL

Not quite Woodstock, but nobody's complaining

by Irish McKinney

DARRINGTON, WASH., JULY 31-AUG. 1—My first one was Fourth of July 1970; we were young and on the run and it was a grand adventure. It was known as the Buffalo (political) Convention, because back then, rock festivals were illegal. We managed to run the police blockades and there was "Gentleman" Jim Longozo of the Shifters MC in the parking lot next to his chopper holding court.



El Loco

He spoke of injunctions and appeals and was willing to do so as long as the substances kept coming. We stayed and listened only until the cycle of the story began to repeat itself; because after all, we were there for the music. That was then...

We headed out Friday morning, the last day of July 2009, running north on I-405 in the HOV lane. The pop-up trailer was on the back of the bike, because it was almost 40 years later and you couldn't get by with just an old army blanket anymore, could you? We were headed for Darrington, Washington, east of Arlington on the way to the North Cascades Highway. We had been invited to attend StrutzFest, a weekend-long rock festival at the Whitehorse Mountain Amphitheater just outside the town of Darrington. It was Seafair weekend and with Seafair and road construction season happening at the same time, traffic in Seattle would be hor-

rible. Weather predictions were pretty close to perfection, so off we headed for the tall mountains and the tall trees. It was mostly freeway riding until we got to the exit at Arlington; then 530 East was a nice two-lane road through farmlands and into the Cascade foothills, the only tight spot being Arlington itself. As we rode east you could feel the land begin to lift beneath you, the line-of-sight distances got shorter and the road itself got more interesting. We knew we were almost there when the craggy peak that could only be Whitehorse Mountain appeared almost due south. Rounding a corner, there were the signs and parking lots for the Amphitheater.

We pulled up to a gate and announced ourselves; they didn't know anything about us and sent us off to another gate... but in a very friendly way. At the second gate we got our armbands and were sent off to find Quinten. After we found Quinten and got our credentials, he led us off into the trees to our shaded camping spot—I liked this thing already. After setting camp and doing a quick tour of the main part of the facility, we decided to ride into town to get the provisions we didn't carry with us on the bike.



Toby & Quinten the morning after

Darrington is an old logging town, holding on by its fingertips to its legacy of logging, but also trying with all its might to make that transition to tourist destination. Literally a bend in the road, Darrington is picturesque, with too many "for rent" and "for sale" signs on Main Street; the down economy has hit hard in the midst of a changing economic structure. But this means the bikers, hippies and freaks get a warm welcome for the events at the Amphitheater.

Back at the site, the music had started and we got our first good look at the venue. The facility is a half-bowl with a six-foot-high stage and a slab "dance floor" in front of the stage at the bottom. The bowl itself has 15 cement tiers, with each tier deep enough to bring a chair to sit on. At the top of the tiers are the concessions and vendors. At stage left is the beer garden, with a smaller stage to be used during changes at the main stage, meaning once the music starts there's very little down time until it wraps for the night.

Friday was tribute band time, with El Loco (ZZ Top), Randy Hansen (Hendrix), Whiskey Creek (Lynyrd Skynyrd) and Hell's Belles (the all-chick AC/DC tribute). All the acts are local, but the talent and presentations were big-time. As the music wound down that evening, it was nice to wander off into the trees to our campsite. Eventually things grew quiet (sort of) and an exhausted sleep came.

Saturday morning waking under the trees was a pure pleasure. We fixed breakfast and decided a ride was in order. We headed out from the festival grounds and took a left toward Darrington. In Darrington we took a right and rode along the Sauk River through the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest until we hit the sign that says, "Pavement Ends." Heading back to Darrington, we continued on Highway 530 up the Sauk Valley to the wide spot in the road that is Rockport and the junction with the North Cascades Highway. The temptation to continue on North Cascades was intense, but with jaws clenched we hooked a U-turn and headed back for the festival... there is more music to hear.

The music on Saturday is a potpourri of old and older, with Cherry Cherry (Neil Diamond tribute) followed by Northwest icons Shyanne and the Beatniks. Blue Tattoo's faithful rendering of '80s hair bands was followed by Heartless (Heart). The energy amped up with the hard rock of Magic Bus and finally the long awaited Strutz, whose members were instrumental in the staging of this event, ended the night. As the show wound down, the people who had been taking care of us the entire weekend (and doing a damn fine job of it) began to come alive—it was their turn to howl as their work came to an end. Sleep was fitful that night.

Sunday morning after packing and before hitting the road we got the opportunity to sit with a couple of the principals, Quinten and Toby Strutz, in a bleary-eyed critique of the weekend. The consensus is that it was a successful weekend, but it could take weeks to get final numbers. We said our good-byes with implied commitments for the future.

The ride home was fairly uneventful, considering all the things that happen on this particular weekend each year. I usually make every attempt to not ride I-5 through the middle of Seattle, but this day it seemed to be the least trouble. As we hit the Michigan Street Exit off the freeway, we passed along the south end of Boeing Field just as the Blue Angels left the ground to start their show over Lake Washington for the people watching the hydroplane races. As the jets roared over our heads, I thought, "Boy, don't that just drive the exclamation point into the weekend?"



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