

# HARDLY STRICTLY BLUEGRASS

San Francisco's Golden Gate Park hosts an annual free festival in the autumn. **Jeff Kaliss** looks at the secret of its success and the legacy of its founder

Back in the 1960s, while Warren Hellman was launching his potent financial career, he was also determined to get a grip on bluegrass. From his base in New York City where he was then the youngest-ever partner at Lehman Brothers, Hellman tried several times to reach Pete Seeger, who had written *How to Play the 5-String Banjo*, Hellman's guide to his instrument of choice.

In a 2011 interview (#80), the 77-year-old multi-millionaire reflected on his stonewalling by Seeger's handlers. "Why would he have wanted to give lessons to a capitalist?" Hellman chuckled.

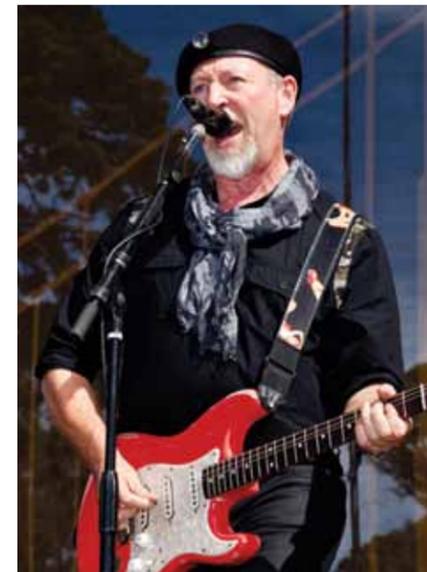
You might see the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival, now in its 14th year, as Hellman's sweet revenge, though Seeger in fact would have smiled on the event. Hellman positioned the festival along a tree-lined stretch of meadows in Golden Gate Park, far from his office on the other side of San Francisco. It was an idyllic site where buses of schoolchildren assemble on a Friday afternoon in early autumn each year for a special introductory concert, followed over the ensuing weekend by hundreds of thousands of fans of all ages and estates, who arrive bearing picnic boxes and blankets. Over the course of the three days and

across various stages, each and every attendee is guaranteed to discover something new, and have a damn good time in the process.

Pete Seeger's brother Mike had been a regular participant, up to his death in 2009, as had militant populist songwriter Hazel Dickens, who once declared from the stage: "If Warren goes on being so nice, I may have to change my thinking about those kind of people." There'll again be plenty of banjos and bluegrass this autumn but the 'Hardly' part of the festival moniker, added three years after its launch, has come to include country, blues, reggae, gospel, and much that eludes even such plastic categories as 'roots' and 'Americana.'

"I think Dawn Holliday does a really great job at getting a diversity of acts in there," testifies festival producer Sheri Sternberg about the event's talent booker. It was Holliday, Sternberg, and internet advertising pioneer Jon Nelson who had met with Hellman in 2001 and helped him put his money where his favourite music was.

"Maybe it's throwing caution to the wind," Hellman had commented about his investment in the festival, "but I've always said, if you can pick great people to be in business with, they'll figure out a way to make it successful. And the striking difference



Clockwise from left: past performers have included Alison Krauss with Robert Plant; English singer-guitarist Richard Thompson; Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys; festival founder and occasional performer Warren Hellman

here is looking at hundreds of thousands of people enjoying themselves in the sun, smoking something they're not supposed to, not getting in fights, and not buying Picassos." Mind you, this isn't the capitalist model of a business – admission is free, and that inspires the festival's diverse demographic, from Hellman's privileged Pacific Heights' peers to middle-class families and homespuns who happen to be wandering through the park.

Shortly before his unexpected death in December of 2011, Hellman had himself appeared on the festival's Rooster Stage with The Wranglers, the group which included alt-country legend Jimmie Dale Gilmore and featured Abigail Washburn as guest banjoist.

Hellman provided for ongoing funding for the festival after his demise, and for continuation of the policy of free admission. In the same spirit, advertising is absent and press spare. "There's something about it being in a non-commercial environment, without corporate sponsorship, it makes it more honest," says Mick Hellman, Warren's son. The younger Hellman notes that the festival's unadulterated down-home tone encourages many artists to stay in town for the entire weekend, jamming with each

other on and off stage. Among the eclectic celebrities eager to be a part of this scene have been actor-musicians Steve Martin, John C Reilly and Hugh Laurie, as well as music legends Kris Kristofferson, Merle Haggard, Ralph Stanley, Edgar Meyer, Béla Fleck, Zakir Hussain and Emmylou Harris. "They create an environment where lesser-known acts can show up and get a large audience they otherwise couldn't," Mick Hellman points out. "And by providing that focal point, they expose a lot of people in the audience to things they wouldn't see.



Despite the free admission – or perhaps in part because of it – good vibes seem to spread with the crowds across the grassy tree-lined festival grounds, with few disturbances and impressive organisation and cleanliness. The climate is likewise temperate, cool mornings and evenings but warm enough for shorts and souvenir T-shirts at midday. The food offerings are even more diverse than the music, from tacos to pad thai, alongside such American tasties as barbecued ribs and New Orleans jambalaya. There's no parking on the site but San Francisco boasts plenty of public transport.

"People come from all over the world to see this," beams producer Sternberg. "I think people like the fact that San Francisco is a great city to come visit. The locals are not super-rigid, and are probably a little more willing to listen to stuff that they don't know. And to be in Golden Gate Park is really nice, especially at our time of the year. Also, Dawn [Holliday] will always take some of the bands from the festival and have them play at the clubs during that timeframe." Sternberg confirms that her colleague is actively interested in developing newer and younger acts, as well as liking "to surprise people." The line-up is kept secret until the date of Hellman's birthday, on July 25.

Nancy Hellman Bechtle, Hellman's sister, appreciates the city's renaming of the festival's largest of the six staging areas as Hellman Hollow, but wants nothing in the way of a mournful memorial to her late brother. "The best way to honour him is to listen to the music, and just to have a great time," she says. "Because he always had a great time!" ♦

**+ DATES** The 14th edition of the *Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival* takes place October 3-5