

Bayou Seco – Hitchin Rhythms of the World Festival – 13th July 2008

Review by Jonathan Aird

The highlight of the second day of the ROTW festival, indeed the highlight of the whole weekend was the marvellous set by Bayou Seco. Bayou Seco are Jeanie McLerie (5 string fiddles, acoustic guitar, lead vocals) and Ken Keppeler (accordions & banjo) and they play a mix of music from New Mexico and Cajun traditions plus cowboy songs and the odd Carter family standard. They've been playing together for about 30 years, and this date was part of their 16th UK summer tour.

They were a breath of fresh air, no pretence just straight ahead American roots music played with flair and a genuine enthusiasm. They opened with "Keep on the Sunnyside of life" and didn't really stop for the next half hour. Even when it became clear in the middle of a song that his banjo mike wasn't working Ken just put it down and danced a step dance with high kicks at the edge of the stage. The song "Chile Verde" (traditional tune with new words praising Mexican food) was introduced with an endorsement for the nearby Tex-Mex food stall. "Get Along Little Doggies" was a great join in the chorus round 'em and herd them out joy of a song. McLerie's strong voice was good in English, Spanish or French. There was even a little Navaho. This was music straight from the source, as they've been gathering many of their tunes for years from older players in villages around New Mexico.

The audience throughout was highly appreciative – I'm sure I hadn't heard a better audience response the whole weekend. And deservedly so, as this was a joyful, life affirming, exhilarating set. They did their set and the encore, then had to be stopped from packing up to do another encore, such was the audience appreciation. Not bad for a couple of oldies....

And offstage they were just as nice – Ken showed me his fretless travel banjo, which took him three days to make, and I have to say that a day which involves talking about banjos and trying out another fella's homemade fretless 5-string is never a day wasted.

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