



*A row in the camping area at Rothbury Music Festival 2008 (Nick Meador).*

## Let There Be Roth

by NICK MEADOR

The first ever Rothbury Music Festival was a magical weekend of concerts and camping, a new standard for sustainable events, and a beacon of hope for Michigan culture.

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By the time Rothbury arrived, the music festival phenomenon had solidified in the U.S. and across the world. People had been realizing -- by reputation and by personal experience -- that it feels good to gather with thousands of fellow music fans for a weekend and reel in the positive vibrations. The first major annual festival to pop into mainstream American consciousness was Bonnaroo, which premiered in Manchester, TN in 2002 but didn't catch widespread recognition until around 2004. Next was Coachella, a fest that had actually been running in Indio, CA since 1999. With two rural festivals leading both the east and west by 2005, Lollapalooza reemerged as a one-time event in Chicago, after the touring version -- with roots as far back as 1991 -- came to an end.

I had been to All Good Festival, one of the nation's oldest "jam band festivals," in 2005 and 2007. The West Virginia camp out has taken place in a few different locations since 1995, but never really strayed from the basic formula. In fact, my brothers and I chose to attend All Good in 2005 because Bonnaroo had already gotten too big. Rumors told of Manchester attendance numbers upwards of 100,000, waiting more than 10 hours to be checked into the camping area, and sweltering heat that rose above 90 degrees. All Good welcomed a comfortable 20,000 in the Appalachian foothills with mid-July temps peaking in the low 80s. In exchange, the only bands even close to the mainstream were Les Claypool (originally of Primus) and the Flaming Lips.



But the important point is that, going to All Good in 2005, my brothers and I were horribly under-prepared. We didn't have a table or chairs. We didn't have a tarp to keep the wicked rains from seeping into our tent. We didn't have rain boots to trek through the deepening mud. We had fun the first time, but we returned in 2007 with better equipment and improved mindsets, and we had an incredible time.

A growing number of people around the country were doing the same -- trying out camping festivals, learning the hard way that it's not all fun and games, and then improving upon past efforts. More and more festivals seemed to be popping up around the country: Wakarusa in Kansas, Langerado in Florida, Sasquatch in Washington, Vegoose in Las Vegas, and on and on. This left Michigan natives, and really anyone in the Great Lakes region, with an important question: when would our turn come? So when Madison House Presents and AEG Live announced in late 2007 that Rothbury Music Festival would take place at Double JJ Ranch in Rothbury, MI over Fourth of July weekend 2008 -- well, I practically jumped in celebration.

It made me even happier to read on their website that they'd be striving for sustainability and minimized waste. Part of their mission statement also read, "We are captivated by the unique experience that a perfect live musical moment offers; when we transcend beyond individuals and into a collective." This matched a personal revelation that I had undergone over the past year. I had a feeling that many others were starting to see the same thing. I hoped that Rothbury meant what they said, because it was the first time that a festival was founded with such a bold mission. If a festival in Michigan could actually pull that off, and not just use these lines as a sales gimmick, it could be a great thing for the state as a whole.

After months of waiting -- for tickets to go on sale, for the artist line-up to be announced, and for the schedule to be released -- July finally arrived. I told myself beforehand that the security screen, ticket check, and line to the campground would be the most stressful aspect of the weekend. I knew this because I had attended All Good twice.

I had glanced over Rothbury's list of prohibited items, but I didn't pay close attention since I had been to similar events in the past. I definitely missed the "NO GLASS CONTAINERS OF ANY KIND!" line on that list. So when I got to the security checkpoint, the oafish man in a red polo shirt snagged my bottle of Frank's Red Hot sauce. To anyone unfamiliar with Frank's, this might not seem like a big deal, but to me, it was a threat to the quality of every meal I would eat that weekend. I was thankful that I had brought beer in aluminum cans and whiskey in a plastic bottle. Unfortunately, the man did find our fifth of Black Haus blackberry schnapps, a product only offered in glass bottles. We had to pour it into a Nalgene bottle, but at least we still had the liquor.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the nitwit then informed me that I wasn't allowed to bring knives into the festival. He was holding a pair of two-inch, curved searing blades from a picnic set. I wondered, "How the hell would those be considered a weapon?" But then, the more I thought about it, I realized that I could use one to hook through his jugular vein and bleed him to death in less than 30 seconds. I was still angry, but I took a deep breath and kept repeating in my mind, "He's just doing his job. He's just doing his pathetic, waste-of-a-life job."





*Yonder Mountain String Band performs with guest drummer Jon Fishman on the Ranch Stage Friday evening (Nick Meador).*

Part of the reason this incident was so hard to work my way out of was how he asked the questions: very succinctly, with a straight face, and without offering even the slightest clue of what he was searching for. Looking back, I wished I had just said "no" to every single question. But how could I? Reading the restricted list after the fact, I saw no mention of knives anywhere.

Past that inevitable cluster-fuck, the only hurdle was to set up camp with the meager space allowed to each car. Even at this point, I was still expecting my experience at All Good to give me an advantage. But you're given more space at that festival, not crowded next to your neighbors like it's a third-world slum. Organizers had painted white lines in the trimmed-down corn field, and cars were supposed to stay within them, so that an exit road was open at all times. That meant that each campsite was about twice the size of an SUV. Those who had come with a caravan of a few vehicles were given a considerable benefit, since they could shape their cars so as to make the camping space larger.

I mention all this now because, beyond these initial annoyances, there was very little to complain about throughout the weekend. I can count a total of four grievances: the poor warning about prohibited items, the small camping space, the mounted security guards, and the entry process into the music area.

I expected some kind of security or police presence at the festival, especially after reading that the Rothbury police force consisted of six part-time officers. The Michigan State Police who handled the traffic from the highway to the ranch were actually very amiable, and didn't seem too worried that things would go badly. But in a way, I think they were hoping for a riot, or a volcanic eruption, or something incredibly disturbing, so that they could say "told ya so" and kick Rothbury out of Michigan forever. They were acting creepy at first, like early Friday morning when I saw one State Police car slowly driving down my row of tents.

The same cannot be said for the mounted patrol, who were a rather terrifying bunch throughout the weekend. I had just watched *Dr. Zhivago*, so they repeatedly reminded me of the



Russian police, preparing to massacre any groups who got out of line. I'm still not entirely sure what their role was at the festival. They weren't armed, but they must have had a considerable amount of power in their hands. Or perhaps their power was mostly in their presence, sitting high on top of a horse, capable of pouncing on anyone who broke their code of conduct. They trotted around the camping area the entire weekend.

Their company wouldn't have been so unpleasant if they had done a better job of picking up after the horses. By Saturday, most paths in the camping area had large piles of horse manure, or else stains from where it had fallen, every hundred feet. There's simply no way to completely remove horse stool from a mowed cornfield. As a result, it caked on your shoes and got tracked into your camping area, especially if you made the mistake of taking your shoes into your tent.

The mounties also made themselves known at the entrance to the music area. Most of the time, you could pass through this entry point with little trouble. Security guards (on foot) did their best to prevent you from bringing in any outside beer, pop, or food. If it was something they'd be selling inside, they considered yours contraband. It's always the business factor at stake. They weren't looking for drugs or guns or anything like that -- they were just making sure that you'd spend as much money as possible at the vending booths. Even if your CamelBak reservoir was full of water, you had to pour it out and then use a refilling station inside.

This only became a problem during the major rushes into the concert area. One of these rushes occurred as I was leaving the music area on Friday, July 4. All the "mainstreamers" -- as I refer to people who only came to the festival to see the mainstream artists like 311, Dave Matthews Band, and John Mayer -- were trying to get to Snoop Dogg's 4:15 pm performance. As a result, there was a massive crowd of people in line to get past the security checkpoint.

I thought this would have cleared out a few hours later, but I was wrong. Around 11:30 pm, the crowd was still not being handled well. People were chanting and yelling in protest, and some even tried to jump over the fence next to the security post, only to be turned away immediately. The darkness added to the chaos, since no one could really tell if the crowd was moving. I eventually pushed to the right side of the "line" and was through the gate after 45 minutes. Widespread Panic was finishing their set around 12:15 am, and I was nearing the front of the line, when the fireworks show went off. This pumped me with rage at the festival organizers. No one should have to watch a fireworks show from within a mob.





*At night, the Sherwood Forest turned into a glow-in-the-dark spectacle (Nick Meador).*

By Saturday afternoon, the mounted patrol were lined up near the short fence where people tried to jump over the day before. Leaving the music area after watching the Emmitt-Nershi Band, I complained to an employee at the exit. I asked him why the mounties were standing there, and if staff was going to improve the entry process. He had no good answers. The atmosphere of danger didn't subside until sometime Saturday evening. When I entered the music area at 9:00 pm to watch DMB, the security was practically waving people through with a quick glance into their backpacks or purses. They would still grasp the bottom of your bag to check for hidden beer cans, but in general they had accepted that things were going extremely well, and that it isn't feasible to thoroughly check every single person.

This was also about the time that the festival grounds started to get really, really dusty. After all, the weather had been something like 75 and sunny since Thursday morning. With 40,000 people steadily trampling a dried-out cornfield and ranch, it's no wonder that dust clouds started to rise in the walkways. When I blew my nose on Sunday, dust came out in similar amounts to when I was in London.

Other than the previously mentioned nags, the weekend was -- to be brief and slightly obscene -- fucking awesome. Thursday was the most exciting music day for me, since I'm a fan of the more electronic jam bands like Disco Biscuits and Lotus. Unfortunately, I was dead tired on Thursday from traveling and setting up camp. In fact, it was hard not to be tired every day. The music went until about 4 am Thursday to Saturday, and started at noon Friday to Sunday. The other source of major exhaustion throughout the weekend was foot travel. When your campsite is a mile from the music area entrance, it takes careful planning to make the most of each day and not spend hundreds of dollars on food and drinks.

Allow me to explain: I was careful to bring enough food and drinks so that I could cook most of my meals and not have to buy many beers. However, if you are in the music area when the hunger strikes, that automatically means you'll have to walk four miles round trip. Each trip takes a sizeable toll on your body, and it was always tempting to take a nap there instead of



rushing back to the concerts. I took two trips on Thursday, three on Friday, two on Saturday, and one on Sunday. That means I walked approximately 15-18 miles throughout the weekend. On the other hand, if I had spent all day in the music area and took naps there, I would have had to pay \$6-\$8 per meal and \$4 per beer. Obviously that can add up to dangerous expenditures.

If things stay consistent at Rothbury, I will probably spend more time in the music area. First of all, I got angry at myself for missing so much music. By Sunday I was so tired that I only saw Steel Pulse and Brett Dennen, and then couldn't muster the energy after lunch to go back to the music area. I definitely could have rested more in the Sherwood Forest area, a fenced-in haven of Michigan pine trees between the Ranch Stage and the Odeum. There were two paths through this area, but people strayed in all directions. A few flower blossom pods stood in the trees for people to hide within, and dozens of hammocks were strung between the trunks. Fabric banners and black light globes hung in the pathways, and were lit up at night with high-grade concert lighting. Tree trunks along the path had sparkly contact paper around them as well.

In short, this place made even the sober feel like they had stumbled into Alice in Wonderland. That effect was strengthened at night, when the lights also waved up at the tree canopy. The ground was soft with moss and pine needles, so many people who couldn't grab a hammock simply passed out on the forest floor. The forest was also the ideal destination for those at the festival who were taking drugs.

At Rothbury the drug presence was widespread, but quiet at the same time. I didn't see anybody freak out or even act all that unruly. Most of the drugs at a festival like Rothbury are hallucinogens that are not considered very harmful for your body. Some are potentially harmful for your mind, but everyone seemed to keep a buddy close in case something happened. I was approached on several occasions by people selling drugs, but they were polite and respected my personal space. Everything is sold according to slang terms, presumably to help the dealer avoid police intervention. At All Good in 2005, I barely recognized any of the names I heard, and even by 2008 it was slightly frustrating to still not understand what the dealers were offering me. However, Internet discussion boards and awareness groups help, and I was eventually able to uncover the real meanings.

There weren't that many street terms to keep track of. "Rolls" means ecstasy, or MDMA, the pill form of the drug that is often associated with raves. These pills occasionally have a small amount of amphetamine as well, since it would help someone dance for extended periods of time. Ecstasy has the reputation of being dangerous, but from what I've read, it seems that most injuries are from dehydration because people dance like crazy without drinking enough water.

Pills are sometimes sold as ecstasy without actually containing MDMA or MDA (drugs with similar effects). DanceSafe.org publishes pill test information from ecstasy pills, and you can search by street term, location, and other criteria. Some pills are half MDMA, half caffeine (stimulant); some only contain over-the-counter cold medicine like pseudo/ephedrine (decongestant) or guaifenesin (expectorant/cough medicine); some include more dangerous



drugs like ketamine. As a result, it seems necessary to have a chemical test kit to verify the contents of a pill if someone wants to avoid a scam or a terrible experience.

"Molly" is a crystalline form of MDMA, which is supposedly more pure and "clean-feeling" -- if you can trust the dealer, or if you have one of those test kits. Pills need an adhesive to hold the compound together, but the powder form is just that: a white powder. As such, it can also be "cut" with fake product in order to increase profits. Moving on..."mushrooms" are magic mushrooms, or psilocybin. "Doses" means LSD, or Lysergic acid diethylamide, most likely blotter paper that has been soaked with acid.

"Nitrous" is nitrous oxide distributed in balloons from large metal tanks. Nitrous probably sounds familiar because many people are exposed to it at the dentist office. But the dentist gives you a steady flow through a mask, not a sudden burst from a balloon. One afternoon in broad daylight, I saw a man suck the nitrous out of a balloon and immediately fall on his face in the middle of a cornfield road. His friend was there to pick him up, so I didn't feel too bad laughing at him. After all, he was an idiot for not waiting until he got back to his tent to inhale a substance that interrupts the signals between his brain and his muscles.

Marijuana sales aren't as common at a festival like Rothbury. You can find it, but it's probably going to be more expensive than it would be back at home. Plus, most smokers want to ensure the quality of a product they're going to spend that much money on. Whatever you do, don't listen to the middle-aged man offering "vanilla ganja icing" in a voice that too closely resembles Tommy Chong. His product will almost certainly let you down. Think about it. When was the last time this man was even near a stove, where he could have cooked the marijuana to extract the Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and mix it with vanilla icing? The reputation of ganja cookies, brownies, or icing at a festival suggests that you spend your money in more reliable ways.

There was also the occasional drug dealer who traveled to the rural music festival from an urban area. They were offering hard drugs that aren't as common with the live music crowd. These dealers were pretty easy to pick out by the way they advertised "yeyo." Hearing that word just makes me think of Al Pacino snorting a bunch of cocaine in *Scarface*. It's hard to believe that anyone would take a dealer seriously who shows up on a cornfield in Rothbury, Michigan using that term.

I didn't experiment with drugs at Rothbury, and to some extent I feel foolish and even a little ashamed. As many writers and journalists have realized throughout time, you can't grasp the entire essence of something without experiencing it for yourself. I was actually surprised at the consistent mention of drug use in mainstream newspapers. I thought they would have casually omitted it from reports.





*I had to walk about a mile to the music area. The main pathway got dustier as the weekend passed (Nick Meador).*

I had a great time nonetheless, and actually enjoyed the artist line-up more than I was expecting. Festival organizers did a great job of inviting both bands who are dedicated to the original festival vision (i.e. - descendents of the Grateful Dead), and bands that will sell enough tickets for the festival to take place (i.e. - DMB). There was a universal sense that the bands booked at Rothbury were special, and both scheduled and surprise collaborations increased this sentiment.

All five members of the currently defunct String Cheese Incident were present in various side projects: EOTO, Kyle Hollingsworth Band, Panjea with Michael Kang, and Emmitt-Nershi Band. Primus rocked during a midnight set Friday night, after years when Les Claypool focused more on Oysterhead, the Fearless Flying Frog Brigade, and his solo project. Mike Gordon performed with Trey Anastasio for a miniature Phish reunion on Sunday afternoon. Also, Phish drummer Jon Fishman turned Colorado bluegrass band Yonder Mountain String Band into a five-piece on Friday afternoon.

Aside from the amazing music and weather, I also must acknowledge how easygoing and open-minded most of the people were. Everywhere I went at Rothbury felt like home. It certainly felt good to be a Michigan native at this kind of cultural event. It was probably the first time people traveled to Michigan for something other than the Cruisin' Woodward weekend in August, when automobile enthusiasts gather to flaunt their machines of destruction.

My neighbors in the campsite were pretty quiet. On one side were three guys from Wisconsin; on the other side was a mixed group of about eight from Texas. I didn't meet too many others, but I saw license plates from almost every state in the eastern U.S., mostly Illinois, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. I also saw a few from Nebraska and one from Alaska. It made me glad to see all these colorful plates, but it was also comforting to see a lot of Michigan plates. Since I knew few personally who would be attending the festival, I was worried that not enough Michiganders would take advantage of Rothbury.



The minimal police action was another testament to how well people acted. I heard that only about a dozen arrests occurred throughout the weekend, and that most were drug related. Those numbers sound entirely accurate to me. I'm not even sure if the 20 or 30 confiscated nitrous tanks involved arrests, or if that dozen were more serious offenses. I only saw one altercation; on Saturday afternoon, two guys almost got into a fight on the main pathway. Then an older man approached and yelled, "I'll kick my own ass before I let you guys fight each other!" That was pretty much the end of the quarrel.

Aside from Sherwood Forest, some of my favorite memories of the weekend are my time at Tripolee Domes and Ranch Stage, which were, in my mind, the two most spectacular venues. Late night on Saturday, I sat in one of the open-air metal domes (think of a big version of those old playground domes) and listened to DJ Harry, while someone in front of me swung flashing bulbs in the air. It was a true audio-visual experience, and it made me wish that Tripolee was a permanent venue where I could go unwind once a week.

The Ranch Stage was massive for a temporary set-up, and set in a yard surrounded by huge trees that felt almost like a natural amphitheater. It was the ideal place to lay on a blanket in the shade and soak in the music. The fact that most of my favorite performances took place on that stage probably boosted its appeal. It was there that I saw the Disco Biscuits, Yonder Mountain String Band, Of Montreal, Primus, and Sam Beam (of Iron & Wine). There was nothing wrong with the Odeum, the headline stage, but it just didn't feel as special. Likewise, the nearby Sherwood Court stage seemed barren, with less grass to lie on or trees to provide shade. I only went to the Establishment circus tent (which hosted mostly nonmusical events) and the Wagon Wheel (an indoor venue where many DJs got second performance slots) one time each.

I was amazed that Rothbury hired staff to guard the trash stations in the music area. There was always at least one employee standing at three bins marked "Recycling," "Compost," and "Landfill." Rothbury had made a commitment to being a sustainable festival. One way to accomplish that was by serving all drinks in petroleum-free, biodegradable cups made from corn. These cups, along with food, tissue, and similar items, went in the compost bin. I'm not sure if Rothbury accomplished their sustainability goals, but even forcing people to sort waste correctly is a step up from other festivals.

Rothbury had also advertised a lake on the festival grounds where attendees were allowed to swim. However, they failed to mention that the lake is filled with mucky, sediment-laden water that leaves black specks all over your skin. Because of this, the outdoor shower at the lake had a line of about 30 people during the day. I guess this wait was ideal to some, when compared with the \$10 shower out in the campground. I didn't try to shower -- I used antibacterial wipes and steady applications of deodorant. I did shampoo once, using the large jug of water I had brought from home.





*A man swings flashing bulbs during DJ Harry's late-night Saturday set at Tripolee Domes (Nick Meador).*

Speaking of bathing facilities, the porta-potties were kept in good shape most of the time. One benefit to having a camping spot near far northwest corner of the cornfield was that the potties were not as busy. But there's no doubt in my mind that I'd prefer to be deeper in the hustle -- and closer to the music area entrance -- if I go again next year. I didn't arrive until around 11 am Thursday morning. I saw pictures of cars passing the security check while it was still dark out, which means that Rothbury must have broken their 8 am entrance plan. It couldn't have been past 6 am if it was dark out when cars began entering.

I also didn't plan well for Sunday. In the future, I will make arrangements to camp Sunday night and leave Monday morning. I barely saw any music on that fourth day because I was too tired to go back to the concerts after packing up my camping gear. I drove away from Double JJ Ranch, passed through the nearby cherry fields, and turned onto southbound US-31, feeling like I hadn't experienced the weekend to the fullest potential. I was mad at myself for missing so much music. I hadn't danced enough. I emitted no screams of joy. I wasn't overtaken by any fits of gut laughter.

Leaving Rothbury was a little like being dumped by a girl who never really took the time to get to know you. Of course, that means you never got to learn her imperfections either. All surface defects were accepted at face value in the instinctual pursuit for sex. I imagine it's also like walking away from a long visit to an oxygen bar: for a while you received only pure life-fuel, then you're put back on a diet of thinned-out, contaminated, deficient air.

Almost every individual response to Rothbury that I've read on the Internet has been overwhelmingly positive. On YouTube clips, the Rothbury Facebook group, Archive.org (a site where people post microphone recordings), and What.cd (a torrent site where people post soundboard recordings) -- everyone posted endless praise.

Many of them even proclaimed that it was the best weekend of their life. I agree it was amazing, but I can't say the same. It might be that I'm a bit older, or that I've had the opportunity



to travel extensively, or that I've been to Lollapalooza and All Good and other kinds of festivals. The truth is that I don't really have a good reason, and a part of me feels empty for not being able to honestly give such high praise. However, I don't discredit their impression. In fact, if this was the best festival ever or the best weekend in the lives of many attendees, I'm glad that it happened in Michigan.

But, in a way, it wasn't Michigan. It looked like Michigan, especially the rows of pine trees in Sherwood Forest and the cherry trees just north of Double JJ. But for that four-day stretch, it wasn't a real place that corresponds to a name on any map. It stood alone, like its own planet, its own galaxy... it's own alternate dimension. Rothbury Music Festival has the potential to become a strong figure in Michigan's culture, if organizers stay committed to this original vision. If they keep it at less than 100,000 people, somewhere in northern Michigan, focus on the sustainable mission, and invite musicians who are dedicated to live performance, they can't go wrong.

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