

Rhythm and Roots

BRISTOL'S MUSIC FEST

"I wonder if there's extra insurance required for a hotel full of musicians?" asks Josh Bearman as he and fellow musician Rob Bullington swap stories about Bristol, the southernmost point on Virginia's Crooked Road and home to the annual Rhythm and Roots Reunion.

Nashville may be country music's modern mecca, but the genre traces its commercial success to the Tennessee/Virginia border where, during two hot weeks in 1927, back-holler banjo pickers, church choir soloists and family jug bands from across the southern Appalachians made their way to Bristol for a talent search that is now referred to as country music's Big Bang. "So many of the seminal old time and country acts were first recorded there," says Bearman, noting the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers.

A lot about Bristol has changed since '27. It now boasts a Chinese restaurant, a bagel shop and a cappuccino bar. But plenty's the same. State Street still runs down the Virginia/Tennessee line, the mountains still keep summers temperate, and music is still the main draw. Last year's seventh annual Rhythm and Roots Reunion drew 23,000 people to performances on more than a dozen stages. "The audience in southwest Virginia is great," says Bearman. "They know how to flatfoot, and they appreciate the varied genres." That's a treat for Bearman, whose band, Special Ed and the Shortbus, plays everything from bluegrass to rag time. Fans of country music, gospel, Celtic, Americana and rock 'n' roll will find plenty of acts to suit their tastes.

This September's lineup includes bluegrass legend Doc Watson, Grammy award winner Ralph Stanley, Sam Bush (a.k.a. "the King of Newgrass") and the Charlottesville-based Hackensaw Boys, with whom Bullington sings and plays mandolin. Bullington and the Boys spent 175 days on the road last year. They've performed in every state in the lower 48—"except South Dakota"—but this will be their first time playing Bristol. "I hear it's a great festival," says Bullington. "It hasn't gotten too big yet."

BristolRhythm.com

—NICOLE ANDERSON ELLIS

Rhythm and Roots Reunion
BRISTOL, 9/19-21



Former President George H. W. Bush's custom Rigby shotgun.

John Bolliger, who owns Idaho-based Mountain Riflery, was so impressed with Tomlin's work that he flew to Virginia just to meet her. "Our market is the top two or three percent of those individuals buying guns," he says. "We just supplied a gun to the King of Spain." He says that the importance of a talented engraver cannot be overstated. "I have built guns whose value has been diminished by a poor engraver, and I have built guns that have gained in value because of the engraver."

Tomlin, who uses the classic hammer and chisel method, engraves about five guns a year. She learned her craft from Ken Hurst, a Master Engraver for Colt, whose company also did work for Ducks Unlimited and others. Says Tomlin, "I asked Ken for a job, but he said he didn't need additional employees. However, he asked me to draw an elk on a piece of paper the size of a quarter. I submitted it and he hired me. I trained for weeks; he had me make at least a thousand commas with a hammer and chisel before he would let me work on any projects. He wanted to make sure I could handle the tools

The Picasso of Guns

LISA TOMLIN ENGRAVES FOR THE HUNTING ELITE | BY CLARKE C. JONES

When internationally known custom shotgun and rifle manufacturers need an engraver, they don't place a call to the local jeweler. They seek out the finest engravers in the world. And one of the best lives not in Italy or in England, but in the foothills of the Blue Ridge, in the small hamlet of Evington, south of Lynchburg.

For more than a decade, Lisa Tomlin has engraved shotguns and rifles for such renowned gun mak-

ers as the John Rigby Company and Mountain Riflery, the latter of which recently sold a custom rifle for \$225,000. Former President George Herbert Walker Bush owns a Rigby custom shotgun engraved by Tomlin. So do Gen. Normal Schwarzkopf, John Milius (director of the Dirty Harry movies) and former test pilot Chuck Yeager. Geoff Miller, Rigby's managing director, calls Tomlin "one of the best engravers in the world, if not the best."

properly. If the chisel slips on the piece you're working on, there could be a real problem."

Tomlin has very few problems, which is why Miller considers her engravings to be works of art that could one day be "as famous and valuable as a Picasso." That's heady praise for a woman who loved to pencil-draw animals as a child and later hoped her work would be noticed. It has, and as she says, "In a way it has been rather humbling."

Call of the Bobwhite

BLANDFIELD NOW OFFERS UPSCALE UPLAND HUNTING

Need a place to use your custom-made rifle or shotgun? Blandfield Plantation, a 3,500-acre property overlooking the Rappahannock River in Essex County, has been a private hunting preserve specializing in waterfowl. Now the facility aims to become a premier upland hunting venue for quail, too. A private party of up to six people can hunt the grounds exclusively for two days, spending one night in a lodge. A customized "bird buggy" is the mode of transport. Two guides and a driver attend to the hunting party, with either four or six dogs on the wagon. "We have two dogs on the ground at all times," says Dave Pomfret, Blandfield's upland manager. Blandfield has 10 pointers of diverse breeds; all are titled, and most are actively campaigned in field trials. The dogs are all "steady to wing and shot"—meaning they don't move when the quail flush and the noise begins. Each stay starts with an afternoon hunt followed by a gourmet dinner. The next day there is a morning hunt, then a "lavish" brunch. Price: \$5,000. Ph: 540-229-8045.



Taking aim, at Blandfield