

Summer in the city: Boundary-crossing music

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [June 30, 2009](#) issue

If, as Karl Barth said, God may speak through a blossoming shrub or a dead dog, I reckon God may be found at rock festivals. At least that is my hope every spring as the Chicago winter finally eases its grip and I begin planning rock music outings.

It has become a tradition for my family and some friends to structure our vacations around popular music. For seven years running, we have spent a three-day weekend in Memphis. We eat barbecued ribs at the Rendezvous, ride riverboats on the Mississippi, visit the National Civil Rights Museum and Graceland and the Stax Museum of American Soul Music, watch minor league baseball games, see Gibson guitars manufactured, catch the ducks parading from the roof to the lobby fountain of the Peabody Hotel, and buy shirts at Lansky's (Elvis's clothiers). We concentrate on listening to a lot of blues. And on dancing.

I know, only fanatics or idiots would visit Memphis in the middle of its steaming summer. But that's when we and our friends can go together, and being idiots together is more than half the idea.

Memphis seems not too much of a good thing, so it has also become a family tradition to take in some summer music festivals. Chicago's Grant Park generously hosts free jazz, gospel and blues festivals every year. My daughter and I, again with friends, have enjoyed two Lollapalooza rock festivals at Grant Park. Late this summer, I'll fly to Texas for my second straight Austin City Limits music festival.

There are downsides to these events. Sunburn is a hazard. The food and beverages are overpriced. I've seen more instances of egregious public urination than I care to remember. The dust can get so thick people walk around with scarves across their faces, like outlaws or coal miners.

Jostling crowds of 50,000-plus try the patience in other ways. Once in a while someone gets intoxicated and obnoxious. For example, there was the short guy at a

Willie Nelson gig who used his miniature stature as an excuse to cut in front for prime sightlines. And there was the blitzed valley girl who turned her back to the stage and stared into a friend's face to pick a fight. (At such times it is inconvenient to be a Christian pacifist.)

But all these downsides pale into nuisances, a few gnats at a picnic, alongside the innumerable good times. The rock group the Flaming Lips is a festival favorite, and every Lips concert is a carnival with confetti and balloons and audience members dressed up in superhero and Santa Claus costumes provided by the band. Bobby Bare Jr. writes smart songs, and in concert he pretends to be hysterically neurotic, shouting, "Stop staring at me! You're repeating all the words to the song—are you mocking me?" What delight it is to hear and see your favorite artists, from Wilco to the Eels to Robert Earl Keen, in the open air doing what they do best.

Then there are all the ways, however fleeting, that people from very different walks of life connect. It is often noted that music wonderfully crosses racial and class boundaries. What is not so often noted is how it even can cross the formidable lines of age differences.

Once a friend and I settled in on a cramped patch of grass to see Ben Harper and the Innocent Criminals. While we waited for the act to start, a high-school-age girl leaned across a couple of other people, pointed to her boyfriend, and said to me, "He wants to take your picture. Is that OK?" I am not typically accosted by the paparazzi, and she must have detected my puzzlement. "He wants to be like you when he grows up," she said.

Then I remembered I was a 50ish guy in a sea of younger people, a gray-haired "aging hipster," as my daughter calls me, in a Johnny Cash T-shirt amid bronzed prime-of-life kids. It was a rock festival, after all. I awkwardly but happily posed for the commemoration of the moment.

About halfway through the set, Harper and his band were cooking red hot. I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the boyfriend. "This is real, man!" he yelled over the pounding music and raucous applause. "We are really here!" I gave him a thumbs-up. The girl beamed.

When the show was over, we gathered our backpacks and water bottles. I told the teenagers, "Thanks for helping to make this a fun evening."

The girl nodded, but the boy vigorously shook his head and sputtered, “No, man! Thank you for being alive!”

I chose to take it as the compliment it was intended to be. In summer, with good music, good friends and sweet strangers, just being alive is joy enough. And you know what Barth said about that: “Joy is really the simplest form of gratitude.”