

# From Stages to Campgrounds

OLD SETTLER'S MUSIC FESTIVAL SUSTAINS A ROBUST COMMUNITY

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY STEVE LEVINE/STL.IMAGES

**The setting - bucolic. The music - acoustic, mostly. The vibe - community, family. The lineup - strong, national, and local.**

The 38th Annual Old Settler's Music Festival, happening this year over the final weekend in April, was not just the latest installment of the longest-running festival anywhere near Austin, Texas. It was not just an eclectic mix of beloved and outstanding "roots" musicians. Old Settler's 2025 was, more than anything else, the annual reaffirmation of a decades-old promise to reunite fans who love to enjoy, perform, and discuss - fans who love to immerse



Eleven year old Oliver Mosely

themselves in - the nation's oldest musical traditions.

"This festival has a reputation for being fun, a reputation for coming out and being yourself," said Larry Collier of Austin, one of Old Settler's earliest organizers and now a fixture in the after-hours, campground picking scene. "It's really a festival run by volunteers with big hearts and it's all about being kind to one another and loving each other and celebrating acoustic music."

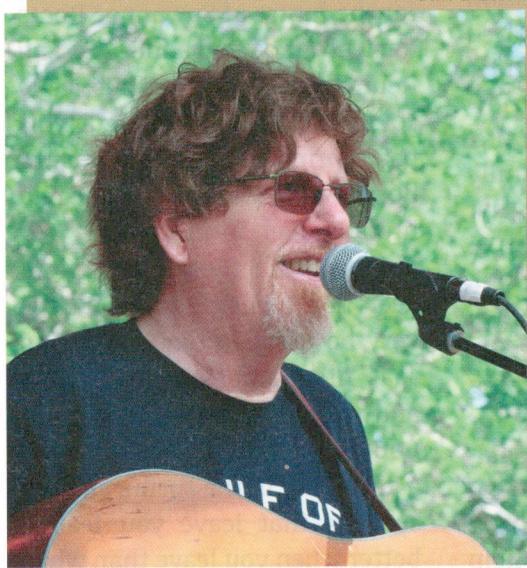
Betsey Boone, the current president of the 501(c)(3) organization that runs Old Settler's, agrees. "The festival is not owned by anyone or any entity; it is for the community and run by the community," Boone said. "You're part of the festival. You're not going to someone else's festival. It's your

festival."

Iris McCloud is a 16-year-old volunteer working the merch booth. She proudly shares that she hasn't missed an Old Settler's since she was an infant. "I've grown up around all these people, and it's just a fun and happy place to be, and it's like a family," she said. "It is a family. Yeah."

Mandolin superstar Sierra Hull was excited to return this year for her third appearance at Old Settler's. "First off, it's a beautiful setting, all these trees, we're out here in kind of what feels like back in the holler a little bit," Hull said after her 90-minute, Sunday afternoon set that closed the festival. "There's a real community, family vibe happening here, where it's just all ages, people who are really listening to the music, but aren't afraid to get up and dance too." Old Settler's began in, and got its name (minus

Tim O'Brien



the apostrophe) from, Old Settlers Park in the center of the Austin suburb of Round Rock. "It was a very fun and great little festival," said Collier, "but at the time, it was maybe 150 to 200 people on Friday and Saturday."

Along with other leaders of the Central Texas Bluegrass Association, Collier says, he took it to the next level. "It became well known throughout the world as a really great place to go and a very easy festival to attend," he said. "They had a lot of people – 30 team leaders and 300 volunteers – just loving each other and loving the fans and the artists and all the crew. We were just a big love fest for many years." The festival jumped to several locales in a circle around Austin, landing three years ago at this 29-acre ranch, 30 miles southeast of the capital.

The lineup has included most of the past three decades' bluegrass icons – Jerry Douglas, Sam Bush, Tony Rice, Tim O'Brien, Hull, Billy Strings, Béla Fleck, Chris Thile & Nickel Creek, Alison Krausse – top jamgrassers like Railroad Earth, Leftover Salmon,

the Infamous Stringdusters, and Yonder Mountain String Band, and country/folk musicians from Guy Clark to Iron & Wine.

Peter Rowan, in various incarnations and collaborations, has appeared on the bill at least 16 times, more than any artist. As "Peter Rowan's Free Mexican Airforce featuring Los Texmaniacs" in his last visit (2022), Rowan pulled extensively from his Old & In the Way days, playing songs like "Midnight Moonlight" and "Panama Red."

The Travelin' McCourys (four times on their own, and 11 in their dad, Del's, band) were the top frequent flyers on the 2025 Old Settler's bill. They satisfied the Friday evening crowd with favorites like "Runaway Train," "I Like Beer," and their cover of Paul Simon's "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover."

Tim O'Brien, making his 6th appearance, says he enjoys coming back to play for the Old Settler's crowd. "Texas music fans don't have borders around the different kinds of music," he said. "They like country and blues and rock



and roll and bluegrass – it's all music to them. And so there's a kind of a free spirit about it and a blending of things."

That free spirit certainly defines the late-night picking circles. Campers bring out their guitars, mandolins, harmonicas, banjos, upright basses, and more. A not-unusual song progression might run from a Bill Monroe standard to Willie Nelson to the Rolling Stones to the banjo-led theme from the *Beverly Hillbillies* TV show. Steve Clamons, a mandolin-playing camper from Austin, says he and his friends buy tickets for Old Settler's every year, regardless of who is on the bill, just to jam in the campgrounds.

"It's a community, man," Clamons said. "You're always gonna learn something new. People walk by and just pick a song or two. It's fun to see what other people are doing. They do a song you know, maybe you don't, then you try to figure it out. It's a way to keep connected with our instruments and motivation."

Regular camper Lee Thompson, a guitar player from Eugene, Oregon, says the vast

Nick Piccininni (left) and Coleman Smith (right) of Yonder Mountain String Band



majority of late-night tunes are originals. And he has a good way to remember that. "There was a little joke going on in the campground I was in yesterday where if you heard an original, you had to swig a drink," he said. "You had to toast it."

Boone, the festival president, recalls many times when artists left the stage and wandered the campground jams. "Vince Herman of Leftover Salmon showed up at my campsite one year and played for hours, just by himself," she said.

Collier, the festival co-founder, says he loves to play all night under the pop-ups and canopies he and his friends construct inside a ring of RVs, vans, and big tents. He likes to seed his circle with top-quality musicians he knows or finds. This year, Collier invited several members of Righteous Intonation, a local country swing band that features vocalist Nick Spyker's sweet, buttery tenor, to sit in. "I'd heard them a couple of times, just a couple of songs, I knew they were great," he said. "And so they came over and then it just organically spilled into this really fun, exquisite jam."

At a nearby campsite, an 11-year-old wearing an Amarillo Calf Fries ball cap and a big acoustic guitar walked confidently into the circle. "Y'all know any Dylan?" Oliver Mosely asked a dozen or so men and women three, four, six, even seven times his age. He proceeded to rip into "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" and won hearty applause from the



Kym Warner (left) and Tony Kamel (right)

crowd. "I've been going here since I was five weeks old," Mosely said afterward.

The next morning, Mosely showed off his chops on guitar, ukulele, mandolin, and harmonica, as one of three finalists in Old Settler's annual Youth Talent Competition. He laid down tracks from Elvis, Noah Kahan, Billy Strings, and Neil Young. Another 11-year-old prodigy took home the prize, but Mosely said he would try again. "He has seven more years to play Old Settler's," said Collier, who was one of the contest judges. "I think he will win it." If so, Mosely will follow in the footsteps of Sarah Jarosz, who won the festival's first youth contest in 2002, when she too was 11 and on her way to four Grammy Awards and counting.

Several hours before his twin fiddle solo with Coleman Smith generated the most crowd excitement of the weekend, Yonder Mountain's Nick Piccininni reflected on the highly

interested and engaged audience at his "pickin' peaches" workshop under the trees. "They all want to do it," he said. "They want to be pickers, and they're all practicing and wondering how they can get better."

All of that adds up to a real draw for artists who want to play in front of a crowd loaded with pickers and serious music lovers. "I've always enjoyed this festival," said mandolin player Kym Warner, formerly of The Greencards. "I'm always a bit bummed when I'm playing elsewhere on the road or whatever and I'm not able to attend."

Hull said she "already knew" how she would answer when she saw the invitation to play Old Settler's this year. "Of course we want to do that," she said, "because I know it's gonna be a really fun, rewarding audience to play for." Judging by the faces of the dancing, bouncing crowd in front of her stage, Hull was not disappointed.

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