

Bluegrass buffs feast on sound

By ERIC PETERS and JOAN SHERMAN

Memorial Sunday was a day-long feast of music and dance for country music enthusiasts from all over Southeastern Michigan.

It was the first Motor City Bluegrass Festival, held at the Baldwin Pavilion on the Oakland University campus near Rochester.

The grand scheme of Larry McDaniel, radio host of "The Arkansas Traveler," the festival was part of a fund-raising drive for radio station WDET.

The festival, though not exclusively bluegrass, was probably the first such for Detroit since the days when Henry Ford had conventions of country fiddlers here. It was an event long overdue but certain to be followed by more.

BLUEGRASS as a musical style dates from 1945 when Earl Scruggs joined Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville. He brought a three-finger-picking banjo technique to Monroe's blues beat renditions of mountain tunes. Now bluegrass is a liberal mixture of folk song, country, gospel and blues sounds.

Headlining the day-long program were the Red Clay Ramblers from Chapel Hill, N.C., one of the best of the old time string bands. The ramblers' highly individual style, encompasses in a 1930s bluesy, jazzy numbers and Irish tunes, was shown in songs like "Beefalo Special" and "Beale Street Blues."

Tommy Thompson is the group's banjo picker extraordinaire, playing the old mountain two finger rapping, or clawhammer style which produces a steady downbeat rhythm.

Rambler Bill Hicks plays his fiddle with a short bowing beat.

By playing more than one string at a time, he creates a drone effect which harkens back to Scottish bagpipe music where many country fiddle tunes originated.

With Jim Watson on guitar and mandolin, Mike Craver on piano and Jack Herrick on trumpet, the sound is well rounded out and the group alternates playing a dozen different instruments for other effects.

DEMONSTRATING the bluegrass side of country were Roy McEwen and the Sunnysiders, a vigorous, bright and lively sounding group with the modern instrumental virtuosity and speed many musicians tend to feel go together in bluegrass.

The Sunnysiders are a crowd-pleasing band with a repertoire of standard favorites like "Mountain Dew," "Top of the World" and one of Bill Monroe's best known hits "Blue Moon of Kentucky."

In contrast to country string bands, bluegrass fiddlers frequently use improvisations in imitation of Western swing and country music. Songs such as "Orange Blossom Special," done by the Sunnysiders, are made to show off a fiddler's virtuosity (who in this case is V.E. Edney).

Sunnysider Robby Beaussu plays the rousing three-finger-picking Scruggs style, which clips briskly along like a freight train through the farmlands of the South, just as in the Earl Scruggs song "Foggy Mountain Breakdown."

'Pygmalion' stays for summer fest

Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion," which has been playing to sold-out houses at the Hilberry Theatre since Feb. 29, will be held over to open Wayne State University's 1980 Summer Theatre Festival.

The festival, running June 24 through Aug. 2, will include three productions in the Hilberry Theatre and three in the Studio Theatre downstairs, on the WSU campus in Detroit.

"Pygmalion," Shaw's greatest financial and popular success, is scheduled for 8:30 p.m. June 25-28 and July 2-5. It will be followed in the Hilberry by Mary Chase's perennially popular "Harvey," at 8:30 p.m. July 9-12, 16-19, and mystery writer Agatha Christie's "Murder at the Vicarage," at 8:30 p.m. June 23-26 and July 30 to Aug. 2.

The Studio Theatre, downstairs at the Hilberry, will open June 24 with

theater

"Aladdin," a revival of last summer's production for children. Performances are at 10 and 11:30 a.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays, through July 31.

EVENING PERFORMANCES in the Studio begin July 9, with Judith Ross' comedy about politics and love, "An Almost Perfect Person." It will play at 8:30 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays, through July 19.

"Oh Coward!" the musical revue comprised of numbers from Noel Coward's theatrical works is the final Studio production, playing at 8:30 p.m. July 23-26 and July 30 to Aug. 2.



The Red Clay Ramblers was one of the seven bluegrass bands that performed Sunday at the Baldwin Pavilion.



The Hotmud Family was another group appearing at the WDET First Annual Motor City Bluegrass Festival.

Another top group, the Hotmud Family, of Southwest Ohio, sang with nice harmony and had power behind their playing built on a confidence which some of the other lacked.

There seemed to be much more music coming out of the family than was possible from just five members.

They are not strictly bluegrass, being most at home doing old fiddle tunes such as "Forked Deer" and "The Yellow Rose of Texas," which they did with the Red Clay Ramblers.

Suzanne Edmundson accompanied herself on guitar in a lovely solo rendition of "Red Rockin' Chair" and displayed a fine grasp of old mountain-style singing.

The Costabella Cloggers dance team provided example for much dancing by festival-goers, mixing square and contra patterns with couples and freestyle.

Clogging is a kind of visual manifestation of the music, combining a foot-stomping shuffle with high stepping leg lifts, kicks, leg twirls (called buck-and-wing) which make the dancers look like

concert, and much of the action was unconnected with the stage show.

There was a good deal of parking lot picking as musicians met to play with other they might not otherwise meet.

They clustered about in tight clutches of music, making comradeship all around the grounds.

Boot jeans and cowboy hats comprised the regulation uniform for the day of food and beer, friends, softball and frisbees. It was as if thousands had heard the message that rock was out and bluegrass was in, that disco is dead, but clogging lives.

wild puppets bouncing and clattering about the stage.

OTHER GROUPS which appeared throughout the day were the Acme Bluegrass Company, Livingston Country Grass, Michigan Consolidated Grass Company, and Unexpected Company.

Not the cream of the bluegrass musical world, it was, nevertheless, a good showing of area groups for a day of fast-moving fun.

At any rate it was an outing, not a

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Strolling clowns, white-faced mimes, jugglers, dancers and playing children provided plenty to watch. Above the rolling grassy Meadow Brook grounds covered with picnickers, kites bobbed and soared in the blue skies.

FOR LATE STAYERS there was dancing and whooping as the hot sun yielded to a chilly evening. Diehards settled in, curled up in blankets or ran down to the pavilion to join the sardine-packed dance scene below the stage, where area folk dancers joined the party, threw away style to bounce, stomp and hop to the driving rhythm.

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