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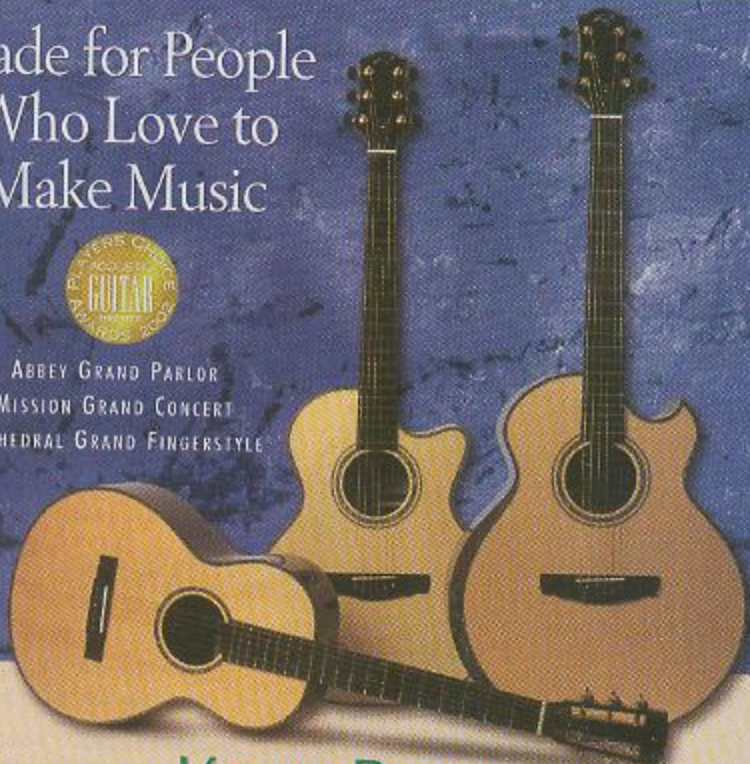
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sicians announce the next song in strongly Dutch-, Czech-, German-, or Swedish-accented English and proceed to belt out the lyrics in a perfect Kentucky drawl, but by the end of the weekend it seems quite natural.

But the biggest delight of this festival is the unmistakable ethnic flair that the musicians bring to their music. This is not a bunch of wannabe Americans. These bands are invigorating bluegrass with their own language and culture.

Wasel Arar and North State (from Finland) start their set with a dark and distinctly Nordic-tinged tune of their own composition called "Wild Cherry." Their introspective stage demeanor and occasionally surprising chord progressions remind me of another Finnish band, world music supergroup JPP.

The Country Bandists (their name is a play on the word *contraband*) from Smolensk, Russia, build a musical bridge from Eastern Europe to America. Fiddler Alexey Kotchetkov plays hoedowns shaded by Romanian Gypsy fiddling, and singer Irina Gribova projects Slavic vocal style and body language despite her fringed buckskin skirt and ten-gallon hat. The band does some bluegrass standards in English, but members write much of their own material in Russian and include Russian folk songs in their repertoire. I'm exhilarated and moved by the way their music embodies Russia's strong tradition of village choral singing. They end their set with a Russian folk song done a cappella in six-part harmony, then tear into a breakdown in which banjo player Alexandr Naumov takes a hambone (body percussion) break. The audience loves it.

The Italian group Bluegrass Stuff offers an energetic, 1940s-style stage show, wide ties and all. Lead singer Perry Meroni plays a vintage Gibson guitar with a red sunburst and keeps his multinational audience in stitches with his comedic vocal affect, body language, and patter. He sings "The Ballad of Jed Clampett" in a deadpan imitation of Lester Flatt, but with an Italian accent. When the audience hollers for an encore, he launches into "O Sole Mio," but not in Italian. He croons the English "It's Now or Never" lyrics à la Elvis, complete with an impersonation of the King. The band's zany shenanigans win them the festival's Audience Favorite award.

This place seems to be a haven for guitar players. Almost every performing group has a lead flatpicker, with skills ranging from good to awesome, and there are more who've just come for fun.