

TALES OF BLISS

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Some of you might like to know about a very special music festival that has been taking place in northern Michigan for some 32 years. Blissfest or "Bliss" as we like to call it is not your normal music festival, but rather a non-profit educational and performing arts organization founded in 1981. Bliss is tasteful about what acts perform there and the whole atmosphere is one of community rather than the fare we find at many festivals. Just imagine the spirit of the 1960s carried into the present (without losing too much of the essence) and that would be Blissfest.

As an older person (I like the term elder), I feel very much at home at Bliss, for one because I am not alone. There are people of all ages at Bliss, and lots of kids too. This is definitely a festival where the whole family can go and feel welcome. And Bliss never fails to offer memorable moments, so I hope you don't mind if I do a blog or two on the Blissfest Music Festival that I just attended. Here is one story that was fun:

Blissfest has three stages going all the time, not to mention additional venues like the Songtree (where you can hear your favorite performer doing an acoustic set), an instrument workshop area, of course the Drum Kiva, and others. This story is about one of the other venues, called "Club Bliss."

I was interested in something called the "Irish Session," not because I am half-Irish, but because I knew Tyler Duncan would be there. I am just getting to know Duncan personally, but I had heard him a number of times before when he was with the group Millish (a progressive Irish cross-over band), where he would often play the Uilleann pipes, the Irish form of bagpipes. I loved his playing, but did not then know that he had twice won the All-Ireland Championships on the pipes (and bodhran), the first American to win the "All-Ireland" award. The "All-Irish Championship" is the world championship of Irish music. He is better known in Ireland than in the U.S.

Anyway, Tyler Duncan sat in with my daughter May and her husband Seth at a set they did on Third Stage last Saturday starting at 10:30 PM at night, a little late for me. In that set Duncan was playing what is called the "low whistle," a larger version of the Irish tin whistle or pennywhistle. Although Duncan played on just a couple of tunes, his music and the sound of the low whistle was absolutely captivating. Without being aggressive or showy, his music rang through the night like a bell. It was wonderful.

So the next day I was up to hearing some more from Duncan, and we even had a chance to talk. He and I chatted a bit before the Irish Session about life and metaphysical topics. We have things in common. The session was held in what is called "Club Bliss," a newly built and not-quite-finished timber-frame cabin that is part of a solar-energy initiative at Blissfest. This cabin is

one of several auxiliary venues at Blissfest, and it has a performing schedule of its own. The cabin had ten or so folding chairs and a wall of tall windows to let in the sun. It is not a large building. Along those windows were some makeshift seats made with hay bales, on which long boards (maybe ten-inches wide) were placed, barely wide enough for your butt. People crowded in to sit along those boards. I will come back to these boards later.

The session started up with a couple of fiddles, an Irish harp, a guitar, some drums, and other instruments. Tyler Duncan was there playing the low whistle. These players were not a regular group, but my guess is just those that showed up and wanted to play. The music was very nice indeed. I like Irish music, in general. My ancestors are Careys and come from County Kerry in Ireland, so maybe there is some innate synergy.

At one point Duncan switched from whistle to the uilleann pipes and wowed everyone with an incredible display of his award-winning virtuosity. It was only for one song, but it was absolutely captivating and wonderful. But there is a kicker to this story, so let me get to that.

Unbeknownst to me, another player had come in and was silently sitting at the back of the room like the rest of us. It turns out his name is Nic Gareiss, a dancer. Then while the group of players up front were performing, Nic got up, walked over to one of the empty very narrow lumber boards next to a wall, jumped up on the board, balanced himself, and began dancing. There were taps on his shoes.

What Gareiss did is not traditional tap dancing, but what I think is called hard-shoe dancing, a kind of dancing that belongs to the whole Irish tradition. I am not an expert. Well, for one, the dancing was marvelous, so intricate and precise. It totally punched up the music. Of course those of us watching were surprised at this and the group of players up front could not see who was dancing because a wooden stairway was blocking their view.

Soon all of the players were craning their necks, twisting in the chairs, to see where these tap sounds were coming from. And the tap dancing so perfectly fit what they were playing. It is obvious this young man knows the music intimately. Watching him up on that narrow board, somehow avoiding crashing into the wall right next to the board, and performing these very exact rhythms was mesmerizing. It was like dancing on a tightrope, something out of a movie, you know, when Fred Astaire suddenly breaks into dance. This was indeed magic.

When the song was finished, everyone erupted in applause and as Nic Gareiss jumped down, the players finally could see who it was that was contributing to this event. My description does not do the moment justice, but it was one of those spontaneous events that makes a festival like Blissfest so much fun. You can read about it here, but I have seen the movie!