

Seat Sale: Invasion of the Jam Bands

by Jonathan SMITH

"Bar the door! There's jam bands a-comin'!"

Such a statement would have been a logical reaction for any resident of Turin, New York on the weekend of August 30 - September 1. Over the course of three days, the small New York State community suddenly acquired a bundle of diverse musical talents, and almost five thousand temporary residents along with it. Jam band fans of all types, from all over the state and beyond, traveled to the Snow Ridge Ski Area outside the town and proceeded to set up camp along the base of the hills. All had come for the same purpose - to attend the third annual moe.down.

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What exactly, you might ask, is a moe.down? I asked myself the same question when I was invited to attend, and I discovered that the answer is quite obvious, really. The moe.down is an annual music festival that is hosted by the jam band moe. (yes, that's how it's written). For those who aren't familiar with the genre, jam music tends to be almost entirely propelled by improvisation and solos, with songs that can go on for as long as thirty-five minutes or more. The great part about this is that it adds an element of spontaneity to the music, and ensures that the songs are never the same from concert to concert.

Another aspect of the music is the fact that it is very broad and unspecified, with lots of room to push the envelope and be original. The styles ranged from the hard rock jams of moe to the creative ensemble of the Jazz Mandolin Project (which featured



File photo of Engineering Society jam-band in action

Jon Fishman, of Phish fame, on drums). Along with the traditional bass, rather than a guitar it featured a mandolin (you'd be surprised at the variety of sounds one can get out of an electric mandolin). By far one of the strangest acts was the jazz trio Medeski, Martin and Wood. Their incorporation of strange sounds and industrial noises into their melodies made it easy to see how they had earned their reputation as being somewhat "out there". Along with the unconventional approaches, there were also the more traditional but nevertheless entertaining styles of groups such as Robert Randolph and the Family Band, a jam group lead by the amazing young guitarist Robert Randolph.

The music itself was only a small part of the weekend though. Simply being there was in itself an experience. Jam concerts tend to stand slightly apart from other rock concerts in that there is almost an element of tradition to them, a set of unwritten rules, if you will, that to the uninitiated may seem confusing and odd. Take for example the growing practice of hula-hooping to the music. Yes, you read right. The trend apparently began in the west and has spread to become a feature of a number of jam band shows. It's particularly popular at outdoor night shows, as flexible glow sticks wrapped around many hula-

hoops creates an interesting spectacle in the dark. Another custom, also popular, is what is known as "glow stick wars", in which anyone and everyone who has a glow stick in their possession throws them into the air repeatedly. In the air, the sticks resemble fish seemingly leaping out of water (apparently this was popularized at Phish concerts; go figure). Another interesting feature of the weekend was that, set up at the base of the hill, was what could only be described as a community. It included everything from food stands and vendors of all types, to a massage tent, and, of course, the obligatory tent in which the local brew could be sampled.

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Perhaps the most interesting aspects of the whole festival, however, were the people themselves. At the final closing set of the concerts, the annual "Mayor of Moeville" election

was held, the winner being ceremoniously crowned on stage. It turned out to be "Flutegirl", a fan whom the previous evening had been invited up on stage to jam with moe. with her flute. She managed to beat out such characters as Beer Man, an avid fan of Budweiser beer, who over the course of the weekend constructed himself a suit of armor consisting of beer cases and beer cans. Yes, interesting folk were everywhere, whether it be the crowd next to my tent, who insisted on playing their bongo drums at 5 A.M. in the morning (and couldn't seem to keep a decent rhythm), to those who had smuggled in numerous arrays of fireworks and were content to shoot them off all through the nights.

One of the most interesting aspects of the moe.down was that one will not find it advertised on television or radio. The whole thing has been organized and advertised for the last three years through word of mouth and that ever-useful invention known as the Internet. This year the event attracted about 5000 people, which is said to be around twice the number of last year. The word has been spreading.

It wasn't until the whole event was over and I returned to civilization that I realized that it had been like being out of sync with the rest of the world. I found myself sitting in a roadside Wendy's, listening to people around me talk about normal everyday things and realizing that I probably looked like hell after spending three days camped out in the upstate New York wilderness. It had been three days in which people threw aside their everyday lives and acted out in pretty much anyway they wanted to. It was the first situation in which I had ever been where no one truly cared about what anyone else thought. Perhaps that's something that we could all use from time to time. A little less of the high speed of everyday life and a little more downtime at the moe.down.