

# Find Yourself At Kerrville

## Kerrville At 35: Hearing Is Believing

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**KERRVILLE** — If you haven't been to the Kerrville Folk Festival lately, you haven't missed much.

Which is why you need to go back.

Even by this reading, you will still have time to tail-end this 35th anniversary of Texas oldest and largest outdoor music festival and remind yourself of all you thought you'd lost.

Circus-colored dome tents still bury themselves among the cedars, and chunks of Austin chalk still line the trails to remind you once again that you shouldn't have worn sandals.

There are some changes, like wider guts and thinner hair, old people in new T-shirts, with that Kerrville look about them. It's a look, like they actually believe the "Welcome Home" and "It Can Be This Way Always" signs at the gate, like parents who still believe in Santa Claus long after they've become Santa Claus.

Yet you're also surprised at the number of young people at Kerrville, people you used to be, who smile from a heart without scars or calluses, who *know* they can fix the world and politely pretend your stories are wisdom.

It's one of the few places left in Texas that hasn't been taken over by "ranchettes" and tame deer hunts.

And you don't have to put up with them damned born-again, shiny-boot Republican fern bars.

Hold on, Kerrville still isn't about politics.

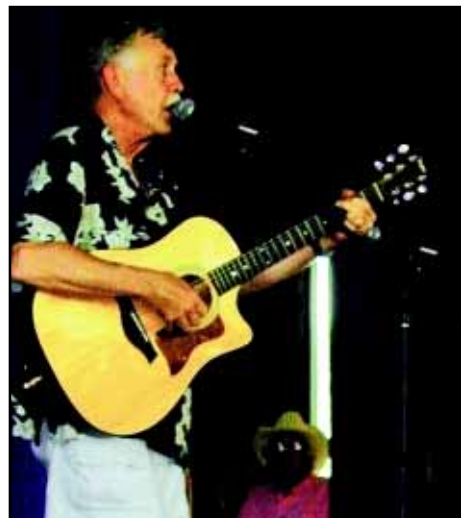
Half the people there could be out-and-out Fascists and you probably wouldn't know it. Well, OK, a little hyperbole never hurt anybody.

### Musical Maternity

The Kerrville Folk Festival, ultimately, is still about music.

In Texas, Kerrville is pretty much the birthright of anybody who picks a string. And it is the birthplace of most of them.

Kerrville's stages have introduced generations of musicians to a kernel of Texas audiences; some players went on to wider recognition; others, lucky or not, remained comfortably within the shuck, successful by that ultimate standard of all real musicians: always having a place to play where people listen.



Steve Fromholz pays tribute to Allen Damron.  
— Staff Photo By Don Fisher



Dulcie Taylor picks her way through the Kerrville crowd.

— Staff Photo By Don Fisher

Kerrville is not nostalgia; the maternity continues with songwriting and guitar schools, singer-songwriter competition, two stages and those nightly campfires.

That may be the essence of Kerrville's success. Nightly, after the spots have cooled and the audio system is quiet, all up and down those hills, faint and flickering yellow-orange circles of sound welcome all manner skills, and there ain't no bad music.

Even those who sit and listen are part of Kerrville.

### The Real King Of The Cowboys

If Kerrville is the mother of Texas music, the late Allen Damron was the attending physician.

"Allen Damron kicked open the doors for a lot of people," Steve Fromholz said at Damron's memorial. Although he hadn't performed there in two years, this was the first festival since Damron died last August.

Allen Damron was the best known "unknown" figure in the music business.

He wasn't fodder for CMT or Entertainment Tonight, but you'd be hard pressed to find anyone in the music business who didn't know him, or owe him.

Name a Texas musician, from Guy Clark to the Dixie Chicks, and he or she probably shared a stage at one time or another with Allen Damron, who commanded a fanatically loyal core audience like a band of Comanches.

They extended that loyalty to anyone Damron introduced.

It was then up to the performer's where-with-all whether he or she could build upon that core.

Allen Damron had more than talent. He had character.

### Ramblin' Jack's Saga

It says a lot for a man that Ramblin' Jack Elliot would deliver a eulogy at his

memorial.

Damron introduced Elliot to Texas at Austin's Chequered Flag, an early '70s picker's bar.

"Allen Damron saved my life a couple of times," he said. "I won't tell you about the second time because the first time was too good."

He launched into a monologue about letting his dog, Caesar, drive him to a Colorado gig while he slept.

"I had a Volvo, which is a pretty easy car for a dog to drive," he said, but he still woke up to find Caesar hadn't made good time, and he had to call the club owner to explain he would miss the performance.

Uh... Elliot made the call, not Caesar. "He said, 'Oh, yes, tonight we have Ramblin' Jack Elliot.' I knew he didn't know me, because there is no 'G' in my name."

"I sang a few songs into the phone. I thought I could hear people clapping."

In fact, he said, Allen Damron played his set that night and held the audience.

At that point, Ramblin' Jack Elliot sang Bob Dylan's "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right."

### Peacemaker

Texas A&M Chancellor Bob McTeer, former Federal Reserve Bank in Dallas talked about how Damron mixed with his banker friends, and taught his bank guards anger management, a lesson Damron added to his handgun permit classes.

He said he particularly remembered Damron's admonition that when dealing with an angry person, "Telling them to calm down is not always the best strategy."

There was more that was said and still more that could have been.

His performance and persona earned Allen Damron the title of Texas "Goodwill Ambassador to the World" from the Texas Legislature as part of the state's sesquicentennial celebration in 1986.

But the most telling tribute to Damron, and perhaps the real reason that Kerrville remains the kind of celebration that it is, came from Dan Merry, also known as Dan the Tire Man, who annually showed up at Kerrville with a trailer full of tires for the casing-ly challenged.

He told of Damron's last days battling cancer when he took time to teach his songs to a 12-year-old boy who also suffered from the disease.

"One sick old man teaching one sick kid to play a song. In the eyes of the world, what does that matter? But in the eternity of things, that's significant."

Such significance imbues the Kerrville

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Allen Damron's family and friends at the May 29 memorial.

— Staff Photo By Don Fisher