



Features

Northwest String Summit - Jeff Austin's Perspective

By Jason Gershuny
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For nine years now, summer time in the Pacific Northwest has been graced with the musical bounty that is [Yonder Mountain String Band's](#) annual **Northwest String Summit**. Not only has this [festival](#) brought some of the most influential [bluegrass](#) pickers of both national and international fame together in Oregon, but this conflux of incredible talent has continued to grace the northwest at one of the most intimate and beautiful venues in the nation, Horning's Hideout. This year's festival will take place July 15th-19th at Horning's Hideout in North Plains Oregon.



The N.W.S.S. uniquely creates a balance of a relaxed family friendly picnic vacation, as well as a feisty dance party with countless adventures to be found throughout the lush and beautiful woods. It is hard to find a festival anywhere that can be all at once a raging party full of spectacle and revelry, as well as a safe place for children to play and explore safely. Yet the N.W.S.S. creates this balanced dichotomy with incredible success.

In addition to the amazing vibe amongst the crowd is the incredible music coming from the stage. The host for the weekend, Yonder Mountain String Band will be playing a full [concert](#) all three nights. If you haven't seen Y.M.S.B., what sets them apart is their ability to sear through a instrumental jam that causes hearts to skip a beat, and then on the next tune to weave through a sad cautionary tale that could bring a tear to the eye, and then head in a whole other direction without hesitation with each song throughout the show. Each concert is a musical adventure that has the ability to leave fans physically exhausted yet mentally satisfied all at the same time.

Joining Y.M.S.B. will be a variety of styles to satisfy the musical tastes of all types of fans. For those traditionalists who want to hear layer upon layer of plucking magic, have no fear because Y.M.S.B. is bringing some folks like Danny Barnes and Friends, Infamous Stringdusters, Darol Anger's Republic of Strings and Great American Taxi to fill your heart's content. Collaboration is a key component of what makes the String Summit so special, and you can bet that these musicians won't be limited to their own bands' time slot to pick and pluck to their hearts' content.

Y.M.S.B. is also bringing two heavy hitters from the non-string based musical genre on Saturday night, which is just begging for a famous N.W.S.S. super-jam explosion. The Rhythm Devils, featuring the backbone of the [Grateful Dead](#) percussive force of Bill Kreutzmann and Mickey Hart, as well as [Keller](#) Williams and others, will be blending intricate song stylings with a driven percussive thunder that will echo through the forest.



After the Rhythm Devils show will be Y.M.S.B. second of three concerts for the weekend., which will then be followed by a special set from rock and roll powerhouse moe., who will grace the crowd with a special 20th anniversary acoustic/electric set. I for one am fired up to welcome moe. to the confines of Horning's Hideout. They will bring a perfect balance of acoustic prowess to satisfy the more traditional bluegrass fan base in the crowd. Then they will plug in, go electric, and in the immortal words of Spinal Tap's Nigel Tufnel, "Turn it up to 11," to close the night out in a furious rocking style that should show the Pacific Northwest what this New York based band is all about.

As a veteran of all the previous eight String Summits, I can unequivocally say that this is festival not to be missed. The music is always superb, the company is relaxed and intimate, and the experience will be epic no matter what adventures your day brings. A few weeks before this year's festival I had an opportunity to talk to **Yonder Mountain String Band's** front-man **Jeff Austin** about his perspective on what makes the String Summit such a unique musical experience.



How you would describe the Northwest String Summit to someone who has never been there before

The Northwest String Summit is the greatest family reunion/picnic that you could imagine. What sets the String Summit apart is the family vibe and the fact that kids can have a blast, and then the adults can go out and get freaky later if they want. That balance is like nothing I've ever seen. For me, it is like everyone I want to hang out with is here, and there is all this amazing music that you want to see at the same time.

I love it because playing the String Summit lets me hang out with people who I only get to see once a year. It isn't a coincidence who plays the festival either. moe., in particular, are friends of ours from way back, and we have wanted them to come out here for years. It is great to have friends we love come on out here to experience this with us.

How does it set itself apart from other festivals?

The thing that is most important is that the fans are all about supporting each other, and to me that's what it is all about. I grew up going to Grateful Dead shows as a teenager, and I saw that kind of community, and it is amazing to see that community here too. It is like if a kid wanders off, we as a community make sure to get them back to their parents as soon as possible. It seems that more parents wind up getting lost at the String Summit than the kids.

Where did the inspiration for the String Summit come from?

There was a festival in Oregon that we played in 2000 called Dexter Lake Shake & Bake. Ryan Moore, who worked with the Silver People production, invited us out to the festival that was headlined by Leftover Salmon. This was right after we got started as a band, and it was great to play outdoors up in Oregon.

The following year Dexter Lake festival asked us to headline, and we thought "why not?" It was really a fun time, and I remember a really big jam with all of The Slip and us on stage at one time. It was great, but that was the last year of Dexter Lake.

Then word began to spread about this amazing venue in Oregon that The String Cheese Incident had played their own festival at, and we thought that maybe we should put on our own festival. The guys from S.C.I. encouraged us to do it and we began to look into it to make it happen. The first year was crazy for us. It was pouring rain, and the stage was so tiny. It was so surreal at the time, and it is amazing how much Horning's Hideout has changed.

All festivals are a lot of work, but getting to work with Bob Horning through the years has made the String Summit really special. That man can get so many things done when sitting in his 4-wheel gator it would amaze you.

Where is the music going next? Describe the musical theme and journey we should expect in the next few years.

The beautiful thing is it just happens. We wanted moe. to play the festival for years, and they were one of the first bands that confirmed. On the other hand the Rhythm Devils were one of the last bands to sign on, and as an old [Deadhead](#) I am so excited. It was really funny how



it all went down. The promoter Gregg Friedman said he had one last band that he wanted to add to the list, but he wanted to check with us first. When he told me it was the Rhythm Devils, how could I not be excited? A few days later I was randomly talking to Keller Williams, and he mentioned that he had this new gig with the Rhythm Devils, and it seemed like at that moment it all came together perfectly.

As far as the fans expectations go, they are [pretty](#) open-minded folks. I mean they have put up with our antics for 11 years now. The String Summit is an open book for what is possible with music. You should see the list we have that we want to play here in the future. The beauty is people are open to it all.

What is your favorite memory from String Summits past?

The space station flying overhead last year trumped everything that I've seen. It was told to me ahead of time, and when I announced it from the stage, all 4000 people looked up and raised their hand to the station flying overhead. It was a major moment for me. Another thing that always stands out for me is the big family feast that we host. It is just a bunch of folks sitting around, drinking beers, eating, laughing and talking about nothing. At a lot of festivals, separate backstage areas cut off bands from one another. This feast is totally different. We all just get to be ourselves and hang out and become people. Moments like that are born from four days of us all hanging out and becoming friends. It is a totally genuine way to get to know folks, and during the feast it all comes together.

Is there a musician or band that if you could you would bring to a [future](#) String Summit?

We have a list of all kinds of acts that we want to bring with us, but I can't give it all away. Next year will be our 10th anniversary and we want to do it right. Off the top of my head, I'd love for Sam Bush to be able to make it out to one of these. We actually needed to get Sam Bush out here 9 years ago (laughs). He is a really busy guy, but we would love to find a way for him to make it out sometime. I planted the bug in his ear at Telluride, so we will see what happens. Doc Watson would be another person that is really high on my list. That would be incredible. Steve Martin would be great too.



What are you looking forward to most for this years' Summit?

Getting there. We are going to be coming from an incredible opportunity playing at Lincoln Center in New York City as the house band for the Blind Boys of Alabama. That is going to be incredible. I don't know who we have naked photos of to have made this show happen, but it is happening, so someone must have photos somewhere. (laughs)

The Blind Boys of Alabama are going to be playing a few shows with a different musical theme each night, and we are honored to be playing the bluegrass/country themed night. I'm actually thinking on buying a bright red suit for the gig, but I'm not sure if that color is already claimed by the Blind Boys of Alabama. The idea of going from playing in a suit at Lincoln Center to crawling into Horning's Hideout a few days later to hunker down in the lush forest is surreal.

Do you as a band get a say on which musicians are involved in each year's festival, and if so what is that process of choosing like?

The band has equal input with the promoters. They respect our input, and Gregg Friedman is like an uncle to me. We are like family and it is great to get to help our friends get out there, especially the ones who have never been. I talked to the guys in moe. about their show, and they were asking what type of show they should put on. I told them that friends don't stifle other friend's creative process, and that they should play whatever kind of show they want. I said it is your gig, and you should be yourselves.