

## **Big Bear Festival**

**Zuidlaren, NL**

### **The small festival with the big name(s)**

The first festival in 1983 was Egbert Meyers' initiative. He had attended my first Strictly Country Festival in Diever the year before and wanted to do something similar in Grolloo, where he had found a nice little open air theatre that looked promising, the Berenkuil (the 'bear pit').

He asked me if I had anything against that, and I decided to help him get it off the ground with the simple philosophy: the more bluegrass music, the better. For the date we chose Pinkstermaandag (Whitmonday). 'Pinksteren' in the Netherlands is a holiday weekend that falls some time between May 11 and June 14 (seven weeks after Easter).

On May 22, 1983, the first edition took place with Bob Paisley, Peter Rowan, Transatlantic Bluegrass, Jerrycan, and Egbert himself on the program. It was well attended and we decided to keep going. The next one drew even more people, so the Berenkuil was too small, and we started looking for a better location. Another reason for that was, that Grolloo - just like Diever - did not really have the possibility of moving indoors when the weather was bad, and in our climate you will need that about half of the time.

Those first two years the festival was called Berenkuil Festival, and when we moved out of Grolloo, we wanted to keep the "bear" in the name. That is when Egbert came up with the Big Bear name and the logo that has been used ever since. In 1985, it was in Zweenloo and the next three years in Papenvoort, where Ab Sligter - who later started the successful concert series in De Amer in Amen, NL - helped us out.

For the first time in 1989, the Big Bear Festival took place in Zuidlaren. On the grounds of the psychiatric hospital Dennenoord we found De Kimme, a very nice theatre that will hold several hundred people and a park around it that provides a great place to do music outdoors when the weather permits. Around that time Egbert Meyers moved on to other things. In the meantime, 'Diever' got rained out a few times too many so Big Bear became more and more 'mine'.

Dennenoord welcomed the festival as it fit quite well in their endeavors to further the integration of the hospital population - many patients live there permanently - and the 'normal' society. I was very happy with the logistics as just about everything we needed was there, including helping hands for the chores on the festival day. Just about the only things I need to do myself is book the bands, promote the festival in bluegrass circles, put up my record booth on the festival day, and take care of the annual deficit.

Of the Dennenoord staff, I have worked closely together with first Frans Diemers, then Paul Bitter, and nowadays Herman Overberg. Egbert Meyers stayed connected to 'his' festival for quite a few years doing the MC work, later to be followed by Paul Bitter, who is still very much involved. The sound has been in Pieter Groenveld's capable hands for close to 25 years, until a few festivals back I found Jan and Beppie Pals able and willing to make things sound right.

Over the many years many famous and less famous artists have stood on the Big Bear stage. The main focus has always been bluegrass and acoustic country music, but when opportunities presented themselves, we have had very memorable shows by the likes of Dave Van Ronk, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Santiago Jimenez Jr. Even if I say so myself the list of performers is impressive, to say the least.

But despite its 'big' name, Big Bear is a small festival. In the best years we have had over five hundred people, but lately we are happy with half of that. Enough for a nice atmosphere, and quite ideal to enjoy the acoustic music, if not always enough to pay the bills. However, for the foreseeable future, I plan to keep it going and hope to see many familiar and new faces every year.

**Rienk Janssen**

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