

From Cajun to country, ovations all over

By Kathleen Pierce, kpierce@lowellsun.com

Article Last Updated: 07/29/2007 06:33:25 AM EDT



HONKY-TONK MAN: James Hand performs with the Magic Band at the Dutton Street Dance Pavilion. SUN / TORY GERMANN

LOWELL -- It was the first act of the day and the skies threatened. But fiddle star Eileen Ivers was ready to give a poised crowd a good time.

During the fulsome title song to the Irish musical *Riverdance*, the skies opened over Boarding House Park. Crews scurried to cover up equipment as Ivers furiously bent her bow between the raindrops with a wide grin.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean *Riverdance*, literally," said Ivers, who is synonymous with the show she performed in for three years.

At the end of the set, the plucky Bronx native jumped into the crowd and danced around the park, fiddle in hand. It was one of those magical moments that happen only at the Lowell Folk Festival.

Over at JFK Plaza, James Hand showed us



Members of Bonzalo Grau Y La Clave Secreta get the crowd moving at the Dutton Street Dance Pavilion yesterday. SUN / TORY GERMANN

what sincerity is. The Texas singer, who bills himself as honky-tonk, delivered a delightful heap of country to the hungry crowd. Cooing into the microphone, he conjured up hints of Johnny Cash on songs like "In the Corner at the Table By the Jukebox."

Flanked by stellar guitar player Will Indiana and an equally talented hand on bass, the cowboy hat-wearing Hand evoked the smile factor as he wailed on songs about firelight and misty moonlight.

Virginia bluegrass band No Speed Limit looked as contemporary as an art-school band, but delivered soulful songs that made one want to drive a tractor through a cornfield at fill-tilt. The mandolin and banjo provided the perfect sound bed for lead singer Amber Collins' timeless vocals. At 18, her youthful energy and mod haircut was the refreshing elixir the steamy afternoon needed.

Refreshing was also the word for the Lost Bayou Ramblers. The strapping Cajun band, lead by the Michot brothers, inherited the sound of the bayou from their father and uncle, who toured the world as a respected Cajun ensemble. They had the Lee Street stage feeling very up with their varied accordion soul music. They, too, looked more New York City cool than preserved-in-amber traditional, adding to the freshness this 21st festival possessed.

With roots that couldn't be more local, Old New England upheld the contra-dance tradition with a lilting mellowness that had everyone do-si-do-ing under the Dutton Street tent. That's where the action was for the footloose. The huge space always turns into a party atmosphere, and, at its best, that's what the festival imparts.

Back over at Boarding House Park, The Lee Boys held their own with gospel-tinged hosannas in the highest. The six-member group did not hold back on the rock, encouraging the crowd to show their hands and "step up" to the sacred steel-guitar altar.

At the intimate Lee Street Stage, Cape Breton fiddle melded with upbeat Celtic and nontraditional Cajun picking for the midday fiddle workshop. These educational sessions are a good way for professional and fan to learn something new.

Despite all the hoopla, the Lowell Folk Festival's core mission is about strengthening familiar roots. That was palpable at the Market Street Stage, when Franco-American fiddlers The Beaudoin Project reached back 150 years and pulled out the tender "One Day I Will Go and See Her." The song, about dying and going to heaven to see the Blessed Virgin Mary, had couples reaching for each other's hands and looking skyward.