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All grown up & on its own

NedFest moves forward without its father

By Dave Kirby

The Little Festival That Could now belongs to the town that knows a thing or two about beating the odds.

In the beginning, Nederland was a milling settlement that processed metal from the generous veins of gold at Caribou Hill to the west; it got its name from a Dutch company that bought the Caribou mine in 1873. Aligned with the fickle fortunes of Colorado's first industry, the settlement went through several boom-and-bust phases throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries. Mining gave way to tourism and vacation-home real estate; the hippies of the 1960s and '70s came and left (well, some of them left). And if underground gold supported the place at first, it was the spectacular Continental Divide and proximity to a thriving Boulder that helped Nederland escape the ghost-town fate that befell so many other mine-busted towns in Colorado.



Far Left: Billy Nershi (String Cheese Incident) and Greg Schocket (Runaway Truck Ramp) perform at the 2011 NedFest. Middle: Hula hooping to the music. Right: Members of New Monsoon rock the audience during the 2006 festival. Left: "Michigan" Mike Torpie at the mic during the 2011 festival.

In the hands of a few friends, a music festival endures with the same determination. NedFest, formally known as the Nederland Music and Arts Festival, celebrates its 14th season this August by staging three days of music by local bands and national acts, framed by local vendors and microbrews, and hosted by a community gently at peace with its past and its present. For a town that spends much of the year waving to traffic on its way to someplace else—fall-foliage tourists on their way to the Peak-to-Peak Highway, skiers heading to Eldora, Front Rangers bound for Estes Park or Central City—NedFest is an invitation for the flatlanders to come on up, park the wagon, and set a spell to take in the mountain air and shake their things for a day or two, or three.

"It's a town tradition," says Nederland resident and local musician Davis Sites, who has performed at NedFest. "I've been for 10 years, and every summer it's sort of the summer event. For a local person, it's great. The same people work there every year, and it's just a fun event for the whole town."

Michigan mike builds the scene

Like any number of other area musicians, Sites was a good friend of "Michigan" Mike Torpie, NedFest's founder and guiding force, from its inception as (literally) a backyard music party in the 1990s to the festival it has grown

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into today. Torpie succumbed to depression and personal demons, ending his own life last November, but during his time in Nederland, he was one of the area's most industrious music promoters. He got his start in the mid- and late '90s hosting the now legendary Nederland Acid Jazz sessions at a number of Nederland clubs—a kind of weekly open-stage event where local players would come up from Boulder or Denver to trade licks in an informal setting.

It is exactly Torpie's kind of free-form, unscripted environment that communities of musicians thrive upon, playing for their own sake and largely detached from the rigors of bookings and contracts. Many are convinced that Torpie's role, in both the acid-jazz series and staging NedFest, was absolutely key in building the Front Range music scene—even if NedFest, at 2,000 tickets per day, is a relatively modest festival by industry standards. Constrained by the limited space at the Jeff Guercio Memorial Baseball Park, on the west shore of Barker Reservoir, it's unlikely to grow any larger.

"That was his whole vision," notes drummer Dave Watts, a longtime key player in the local scene whose band The Motet, now a nationally respected funk and jazz outfit, has played on all but one or two NedFest bills and jammed regularly at Torpie's nightlong sessions at Top of the Square. "He loved to put bands together and have his local scene up there. It was like his own Monday-night jam session. Mike just loved being in the thick of the musicians' part of the business—not just the organizational part, but what was going on in the musicians' world. Trying to put musicians together, getting involved in that whole thing.

"I feel like I got my start in Colorado with Mike," he continues. "He was one of those guys that would say, 'All right, we can build this scene together.' When I moved to Boulder, there wasn't anything really going on up in Nederland, and it became a weekly or a biweekly thing, heading up there to play music. The scene has grown so much in the last 15 years, and I really think that was the starting point of it all. Mike always had the musicians' backs."

Sites agrees, pointing out that Torpie enlisted many of his friends—players who didn't necessarily have big, successful bands—to play the "tweener" sets while the main bands were setting up. That's how he got up to play at the 2009 show.

"It was actually a bet—a dare, if you will—between Mike and myself. He said, 'Well, you're not actually getting out and playing anywhere because blah blah blah,' and I said, 'OK, then book me for NedFest.' And he did."

Paying—and playing—it forward

After his death, a handful of Torpie's friends who had helped out with prior NedFests got together to form the Peak to Peak Music Education Association to direct the festival's usually modest profits to local music-education programs. But at heart, the association meant to keep NedFest alive.

Kristen McFarland, who now holds a board position with the PPMEA, says that the work of organizing the festival, which Torpie used to do more or less by himself, has been parceled out to a number of his close confidantes. "He did not delegate very well," she says, "and that was for a lot of reasons. It was his baby and he wanted to do it all. But he ran himself pretty ragged every year trying to manage the whole thing. Part of the problem was that Mike wasn't very organized. I spent a month going through boxes and boxes of random paper—vendor stuff from five years ago, permit stuff from six years ago. He had in mind what he wanted to do, but we always thought it was a bit of a miracle that he actually got it done."

And while it was Torpie's creation, everyone agrees that the festival grew into something that was owned by the whole community. "The town government, the people in town, are all really glad we're keeping it going," McFarland says. "The first few years [of the festival], we had to plead and beg with the town board, trying to get people to come to the meetings and stuff, but now it's considered an ongoing event that's here to stay."

This year's shows include appearances by noted guitarists Steve Kimock, Jimmy Herring and Keller Williams, as well as locally based stars like the terrific Americana outfit Great American Taxi, String Cheese Incident's Kyle Hollingsworth and his band (with Watts sitting in on the drums), and the Fox Street All Stars. As it has for many years, the festival is offering specially priced three-day passes (in addition to the usual one-day pass) and some limited camping in Chipeta Park, near the baseball field where the festival and vendor booths will be located. (Chipeta Park, incidentally, was the site of the very first NedFest.)

McFarland says the subject of memorializing Torpie has come up, but the plans are pretty simple. "One of the only really serious things we're doing is giving a free boost to the mental-health center—suicide prevention. We'll have pictures of him up, and his parents are coming. But we're going to try to keep it light. He wouldn't want his festival to be all somber, or all about him."



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