

WELCOME TO TRAD CAMP

I recently decided to attend one of those weeks that promise total immersion in traditional music for those courageous enough to seek same. Instead of getting involved with one of the established venues like Elkins or Swannanoa, however, I opted for a slightly cheaper version closer to home. Its first year was also its last, for reasons that will become obvious as you read the following excerpts from my diary. (In order to avoid any legal complications, I will refer to it as "Trad Camp" - not its real name.)

Dawn

Arrive at campus from three hours of fitful dozing at the Amtrak depot. I struggle with gear amidst yawns and wonder again why the Trad Camp organizers have chosen such an ungodly hour for check-in. Wait outside station for a half hour before only public transportation available at 4:00 AM rattles up. No Uber or Lyft within 32 miles of the place. Cab driver "Vern" is pleasant but seems proud of once being mistaken for a serial killer, and tells me more times than necessary that he can eat "any goddam steak in Texas" with his one good tooth. Further doubts raised after I enter the compound and am handed a gas mask. I try to explain to the Person in Charge at the check-in desk that my name isn't Maggot, but she doesn't seem interested. Am I in the right place? At least they don't take away my fiddle. I am comforted by the sight of other participants stumbling around. I hear no music but am too tired to care. I am pushed into a dark room and collapse fully clothed on what looks like a bunk-bed. I use the gas-mask for a pillow and fall asleep instantly.

6:00 AM

After two hours sleep - in the uncertain course of which I discover that my bunkmate is a piano accordion player with flatulence - we

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are awakened rather rudely by a militaristic type beating on a garbage can. He reminds me of Sergeant Buzzcut from "Beavis & Butthead". The noise would be bad enough, but we discover that the garbage can is labelled "breakfast". It smells pre-digested. Sergeant Buzzcut calls our names off a clipboard; when we respond, he throws a spoon at us. When we all have spoons, he yells "bon appetit", laughs rudely, and disappears. We fight off the flies only to discover that the garbage can contains nothing but grits. So much for the "gourmet dining experience" mentioned in the Trad Camp brochure . . .

7:00 AM

Three of my fellow inmates have been rushed to what we presume is the infirmary with unbearable stomach cramps. Those of us remaining are advised by yet another unfriendly Trad Camp staffer that registration will shortly be taking place somewhere across campus. No directions are offered. It's already 92 degrees and there's no air conditioning, and one of the flute players has hung his sweaty socks out to dry on the only fan in the barracks. Mimsy and Wendy, the two bodhrán players from some place in Ohio, get into a terrible fistfight over a bar of soap. Somebody else tries to do a few push-ups and gets screamed at by the Berkeley autoharpist as an "anal retentive fascist pig". Is this the "bonding experience" the brochure praised so highly?

Two out of the three unisex toilets don't seem to be working. Maybe that's why there's a kind of low-level stench in the air. Guessing that taking out my fiddle to play a few tunes isn't such a great idea after all ...

11:00 AM

Hard to believe that there are so many people in attendance, and that the sub-humans registering us are so incapable as to leave us

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milling around smartly in the 90+ heat outside the Registration Building. We stand like lost souls awaiting entry documents to Hell, surrounded by our instruments and baggage (when we ask if

we can leave everything in the barracks, the humanoid in charge of us chuckles and says "Yeah, good idea!", but it's easy to tell she's not being sincere). You can hear strings breaking and seams splitting as the instruments slowly bake inside their cases. A few of the older registrants have fainted and are lying uncared-for on the garbage-strewn "lawn" outside the Registration Building. (Could that have been a pair of pigs I just saw, or have I too started to hallucinate?) One of the Trad Camp staff arrives eventually in a pickup truck, jumps out and starts pouring water out of a fire bucket onto the unconscious forms. When they fail to revive quickly enough, he kicks them, gently at first, then more forcefully until they start to show signs of life. Then another bucket of dirty water and he's gone. Later I check the Trad Camp brochure and am amazed to read "First-class medical attention provided on campus in the event of an emergency." I start to laugh, and I guess I get hysterical because the next thing I know, Mimsy is slapping me repeatedly across the face...

11:45 AM

We are advised by a Trad Camp officer using a bullhorn that the registration process will continue after lunch. He points with his riding crop - it never occurs to us to ask why he needs one - to a low cinder-block building about a half-mile away and informs us that it is the "chow hall". We have a total of 30 minutes to get there (carrying instruments and luggage, of course), eat, and get back on line to register. Mimsy, who we understand had spent several years in a convent before discovering the delights of the bodhrán, yells out an obscenity and makes a rude finger gesture in the direction of

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the officer. He gives a friendly wave in return. When we reassemble after lunch, Mimsy is not there. We never see her again. Rumors run rampant.

12:00 PM

Lunch cannot be described - my pen is woefully unequal to the task. But just to give you an idea: the food is so bad even the flies stay away - a pity, since their protein content would be welcome. The soup is toxic waste recycled by a not-particularly-gifted seventh-grade science class. There are slabs of pinkish material laced with inedible gristle, giving the mouth feel of Spam and rubber bands. White grainy material on the side looks like rice but seems to be moving. Round greenish things could be brussel sprouts or golf balls or bizarre body parts from a large iguana. There a pitchers of warm liquid on the table the color of the stuff that drips relentlessly from somewhere under your cousin's 1983 Yugo. Cutlery and dishes have apparently been dry-cleaned for the past twenty years. The paper napkins have been used before, many times. The servers are apparently hired on the basis of [1] rudeness [2] unfamiliarity with English [3] severity of their lung disorders, which apparently they have been encouraged to share with us.

1:20 PM

Somehow we are all finally registered and have been directed to a "session area" that consist of twenty or so folding chairs arranged around a pit in which a lively fire is blazing. Some murmured questions are heard about why it's needed, since by now the air temperature is at least 105 degrees. Those of us brave enough to take instruments out notice a ring of doberman pinschers watching us warily from behind the tree line. When one of the flute players screws up the turn of "Cliffs of Moher", some menacing growling is

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heard. Did the dogs just move closer? We don't want to think about it . . .

Well, I think that will give you an idea of what awaited all of us. If we had known that Day 1 was the high point of the Trad Camp experience, 99% of us would have gone over the hill, deposit or not. But in spite of the physical traumas, the unspeakable personal degradation, and the utter incompetence of the Trad Camp teaching staff, some beautiful friendships were formed. I myself fell instantly in love with Ann Marie, a gorgeous blonde fiddler with hazel eyes, but fell out of love just as quickly when I discovered she was Sergeant Buzzcut's wife. Oh well . . . no accounting for tastes, I guess.

EPILOGUE: Trad Camp never opened for a second season once the local authorities determined that it had been illegally operating on land that had once been a chemical waste dump. I guess that's why it always smelled funny. I don't think many of the first-year attendees were thinking of going back anyway.

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