



SUMMER FESTIVAL

UP ALL NIGHT

A SOLAR CELEBRATION THROUGH TIME



SINCE AT LEAST THE STONE AGE, humans inhabiting Earth's northern hemisphere have celebrated the sun's longest daytime path – the summer solstice – near the end of the month we now call June. For thousands of years before any modern religions or calendars, humans across continents marked this astronomical occasion (solstice literally means “sun stop”) with music, dance, offerings to Earthly gods and structures, like Stonehenge, that stand to this day.

Edmonton's a northern city, but to get the province's best sun-stopping experience you have to drive about three-and-a-half hours farther north, to the Driftpile Cree Nation land southwest of Lesser Slave Lake. Once you cross the creek bridge heading west on Trunk Highway 2 (you'll see the blue train bridge on your left), take your next left at the store and head down the gravel road. Pass the school, avoid the gravel pit turn off, and keep going until you see the log home. The road then turns sharply right – the final stretch to North Country Fair.

For never-attenders, those directions are as nondescript as any in Alberta. But, for long-time fair goers, that last narrow road feels like a portal to a more peaceful place, where the sun stays up so long that an hour from midnight looks the same as an hour from high noon.

It started in the '70s, when a bunch of back-to-the-land people moved to the area and held a small musical gathering in Joussard, on what is now the school playground. In 1980, the group incorporated under the Societies Act as the Lesser Slave Lake North Country Community Association to operate the fair and North Country School, a wood-heated, solar-powered school that emphasized music, self-reliance and respect for the land.

Saying somewhere is a “magical” place oversells without really describing. But North Country Fair is like a north Albertan Narnia, full of unicorns, top hats, flowered hair and a morning mist that clears the lungs and cleans the soul. Some claim they've seen fairies, and they aren't talking about the mural.

Interesting indie bands with ridiculous names lose their minds on each of the four stages, immediately followed by solo, in-between-fill acts that keep the music going while crews reset behind them. In the afternoons, musicians from multiple bands join to play whatever comes to mind in the moment, and some of the most memorable shows are on the cubicle-sized kid's stage, after (most of) the children have gone to bed.

But the songs on stage are only some of the live musical sounds you'll hear. If you pump tunes out of a stereo at your site, your neighbours will boo until you turn it off. That's because there's no canned music (or glass, or dogs) allowed, meaning you can play as loud as you like, but it must be *you* playing it live, and you must let others join. Spontaneous campsite jams, some with mandolins, flutes and fiddles, happen all the time. Sometimes, an unknown friend (there are no strangers at North Country) will approach your site with a guitar and ask “Trade you a song?” like a wandering minstrel from long ago.

The creek runs around the entire campground like a melting letter “U,” where naked hippies frolic and float. And if you camp near the creek paths far from the stages, you'll take one of the more interesting walks of your life each time you head back, passing elaborate camp setups that seem quasi-permanent (listen for the banjo, look for the free-standing door).

Despite no big acts by mandate, North Country ruins other music fests. There are no cramped beer gardens, no aggro-bros, no musical breaks and the porta-potties are exceptionally clean. In over a decade, I've never seen security break up anything resembling a fight, and the few cops on patrol look bored. It feels like the one place, during the one time of year, where “no rules” actually works, because, once you enter, you can't help but follow the North Country spirit. It's the same spirit our ancestors followed eons ago, when they celebrated the sun's refusal to fully set, summed up best by the greeting you'll hear the moment you arrive and every hour you're there: Happy fair. **ED**

– CORY SCHACHTEL