



**GO**  
Marion Theatre  
hosts Taiko Dojo  
to raise money  
for restoration,  
**INSIDE**

50¢ / FRIDAY, MARCH 10, 2006

OCALA, FLORIDA

OCALA.COM

## Folk fest

Amateur and professional performers 'swap licks' around the campfire

By RICK ALLEN  
STAFF WRITER

Suppose they gave a big party in your honor you didn't want to attend; *really* didn't want to attend.

But they gave it anyway, and somehow it just got bigger and bigger every year.

That would have been the dilemma facing Florida troubadour Will McLean, were he still alive. However, he died before his namesake festival began on the banks of Rainbow Springs near Dunnellon.

"He would hate it and do everything he could to zap it," says Margaret Longhill, a late-life McLean friend and companion and president of the Will McLean Foundation that hosts the annual Will McLean Festival — dubbed Willfest.

"He had a tendency to undercut success. I think he feared it would taint the purity of his work," she says.

Sixteen years ago only a 12-hour celebration of Florida folk music, this year Willfest expands to three days for the first time. Again it'll be held at the Sertoma Youth Ranch near Dade City — about the only Florida campground large enough to hold performers, three stages, vendors, workshop venues and more than 3,000 music fans, as many as two-thirds of whom will stay the whole weekend.

"And the beauty is the audience can camp in the same areas as the performers, and be there when they jam about the campfires at night," Longhill says. "It's like a family reunion."

Willfest also is a place where up-and-coming Florida folk singers can be discovered and

### WILL MCLEAN FESTIVAL

**WHEN:** Today, Saturday and Sunday

**WHERE:** Sertoma Youth Camp, Clay Hill Road off State Road 41 west of Dade City; accessible from Marion County via I-75 or U.S. 98-301

**COST:** \$30 camping whole weekend; \$18 just day Saturday; \$15 just day Sunday; children younger than 12 admitted free.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:** (352) 465-7208 or [www.willmclean.com](http://www.willmclean.com)

nurtured. "Many of the professional musicians have been cultivating young musicians for years," she adds. "Some pros take them under their wing as they sit around jamming. They call it 'swapping licks.'"

Many of the dozens performing during the course of the weekend were found at previous festivals. A number of them appear on a Will McLean Foundation CD called "These Diamonds" that celebrates natural Florida. Many of them are scheduled to appear this weekend.

Also scheduled to perform, Longhill notes, are the three top winners of the most recent Best New Florida Song contest: Mike Jurgensen, Mary Anna and David Evans and Larry Mangum.

Workshops in guitar, banjo, dulcimer, autoharp, harmonica and songwriting are being offered all three days; "You can get a whole course in a weekend," Longhill says.

Even as cozy as this all sounds, McLean himself probably would feel out of place.

According to his friend, and



Artists performing at the Will McLean Festival will include, from left, Grant Livingston, Magda Hiller, each of Coconut Grove, Mary Cox of Tallahassee and Mindy Simmons of Sarasota.

BILL MARDER/SPECIAL TO THE STAR-BANNER



BILL MARDER/SPECIAL TO THE STAR-BANNER

Jon Semmes and his Florida Friends perform at the Will McLean Festival this weekend. Semmes, originally from Alabama, lives in Dunnellon and the "friends," Pete Hennings, Pete Price and Ingrid Ellis are solo artists who perform with Semmes.

accounts written after his death from cancer in 1990, the unassuming folk singer preferred the state's quiet natural settings where he could musically celebrate his beloved old Florida, and lament its passing.

One story notes he was offered a contract after an appearance at New York's Carnegie Hall, but he declined and

returned to his native Florida to stay. He traveled the state in a black van, his home, and was welcome wherever he stopped.

Often he would camp at Gore's Landing on the Ocklawaha River. After his death his ashes were sprinkled on the river, and a marker there commemorates his love for the site, and his state.



BILL MARDER/SPECIAL TO THE STAR-BANNER

Tom Shed has been playing and writing music since the 1960's. Growing up in Florida, he has performed across the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, Australia and New Zealand.

And while this weekend celebrates the legend of the man, it also commemorates the legend of the land the man loved.

"Florida is such a precious, fragile state, a marvelous natural treasure, a jewel in the world," Longhill says. "People feel passionate about our need to save what's left of Florida."

"Our motto is saving Florida

through music."

That's one even old Will could appreciate. "He was not interested in making money," she adds. "But he sure did love Florida."

Rick Allen can be reached at [rick.allen@starbanner.com](mailto:rick.allen@starbanner.com) or 867-4122.