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TIM WALTHER

The promoter introduces a new iteration of All Good and creates a Trifesta.

By
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In 1997, the All Good Music Festival & Campout debuted at Wilmer's Park in Brandywine, Md. Béla Fleck & The Flecktones, Strangefolk, the Gibb Droll Band, All Mighty Senators, The Recipe and Lake Trout were among the artists that promoter Tim Walther invited to the inaugural event. All Good quickly became a Southern staple of the jamband scene, leaving Wilmer's after three years and relocating to five additional sites through 2015, as it grew in size and stature. It became a goal of certain artists to headline the event, while others aspired just to appear on the bill.

Following an initial turnout of around 1,000, attendance eventually peaked north of 20,000 over a decade later. However, with the festival market experiencing a glut, Walther and his fellow founding partner Junipa Contento-Süslü issued a statement in February 2016 that declared, "With a heavy heart we are announcing today that we are retiring the All Good Music Festival and Campout."

Over the years to follow, Walther remained an active independent promoter, while also managing Dark Star Orchestra. Then this past November, he confirmed that All Good Now, a reimagined version of the event, would take place at Columbia, Md.'s Merriweather Post Pavilion on June 14 and 15. The lineup will feature Goose, along with numerous All Good alums, such as Joe Russo's Almost Dead, The String Cheese Incident, moe., the Disco Biscuits, Keller Williams, Pigeons Playing Ping Pong and The Bridge.

What's more, it will be part of the All Good Trifesta, which also includes Dark Star Jubilee (May 23-26 at Legend Valley in Thornville, Ohio) and the 4848 Festival (July 17-19 at Snowshoe Mountain Resort in Snowshoe, W.Va.).

Walther explains, "In addition to the hundred club shows that we do every year in Baltimore and D.C. as All Good Presents, we also have those two other festivals that people might not know are connected. The Trifesta is the concept of letting everyone know that, even though the festivals are in three different states, they're all under the All Good Presents umbrella. This helps people understand how they're going to be treated and that they can expect to have a good time. And while I may be kind of biased, that's how I feel."

What led you to promote your first show?

It came out of touring with the Grateful Dead. It was such an amazing, life-changing situation for me with the scene and the people. I just wanted to stay involved with that.

Then when Jerry Garcia passed away, it was like we were all kind of left out there—what do we do now? I wanted to do what I could to be more involved in the music. I started with the street promotions, so I got out there, hand-to-hand, face-to-face, talking to everybody and really getting a sense of the vibration of the scene.

The one place to go to a campout music festival around here was Wilmer's Park. I would basically go as a street promoter, but as a fan I'd want to get everybody a flyer for what was going on. Cellar Door was paying me to promote H.O.R.D.E., and that kind of thing.

Then, as I saw how certain events taking place, I witnessed the way they were being run and heard stories about people not being treated properly. I was like, "That's no way to run a festival." So I really got inspired by seeing it being done incorrectly.

I felt like it should be a place where people feel safe, welcome and taken care of. Then I just kind of got the gumption to say, "OK, let's go for this. I can't really afford to throw a festival, but I've got some credit cards in my pocket."

Since you mentioned the Grateful Dead, can you step back and talk about your connection to their music?

I was the quarterback of my high school football team, so I was more of a jock back then. I thought that people who smoked cigarettes were grits and people who smoked joints had drug problems. Then I went to college and I started to get into that kind of stuff, as far as partying and smoking weed and eating mushrooms.

Then, one day, my friend said, "Hey, we're going to Cap Center in D.C. Do you want to go?" They were going see the Grateful Dead and, to me, the Grateful Dead was a drug-infested country band or something like that. I had no real idea.

I feel like I kind of have the classic story, where I got to the Cap Center, I was in the parking lot and it was an amazing scene. Then somebody put a square piece of paper on my tongue and I experienced a whole new world that I didn't know existed. Thank God that happened at that time. They played "Ripple" that night [9/3/88], and I didn't know why everybody was going apeshit, but it was because they hadn't played it in nearly 10 years.

It instantly felt like I was with 12,000 of my best friends and I continued to feel like that at every show. I went to 54 shows. Who counted? I did. I have them written down just like everybody else.

I drove from city to city and hit the campgrounds in between or slept at rest areas just to get to the next place. I didn't care about anything else. There was nothing else in my world that really meant anything in comparison to that. I actually can't believe I got through school, but I somehow finished my degree and I got out of there.

A lot of what I've continued to do is try to evoke that exhilarating feeling that I first got at a Grateful Dead show. Music, in general, kind of heals your soul and when you're really into the groove and the band's speaking your language, there's nothing better than that. It's an escape that you can't create in any other situation. I feel very fortunate that I was able to see the Grateful Dead.

How did you come to be a street promoter?

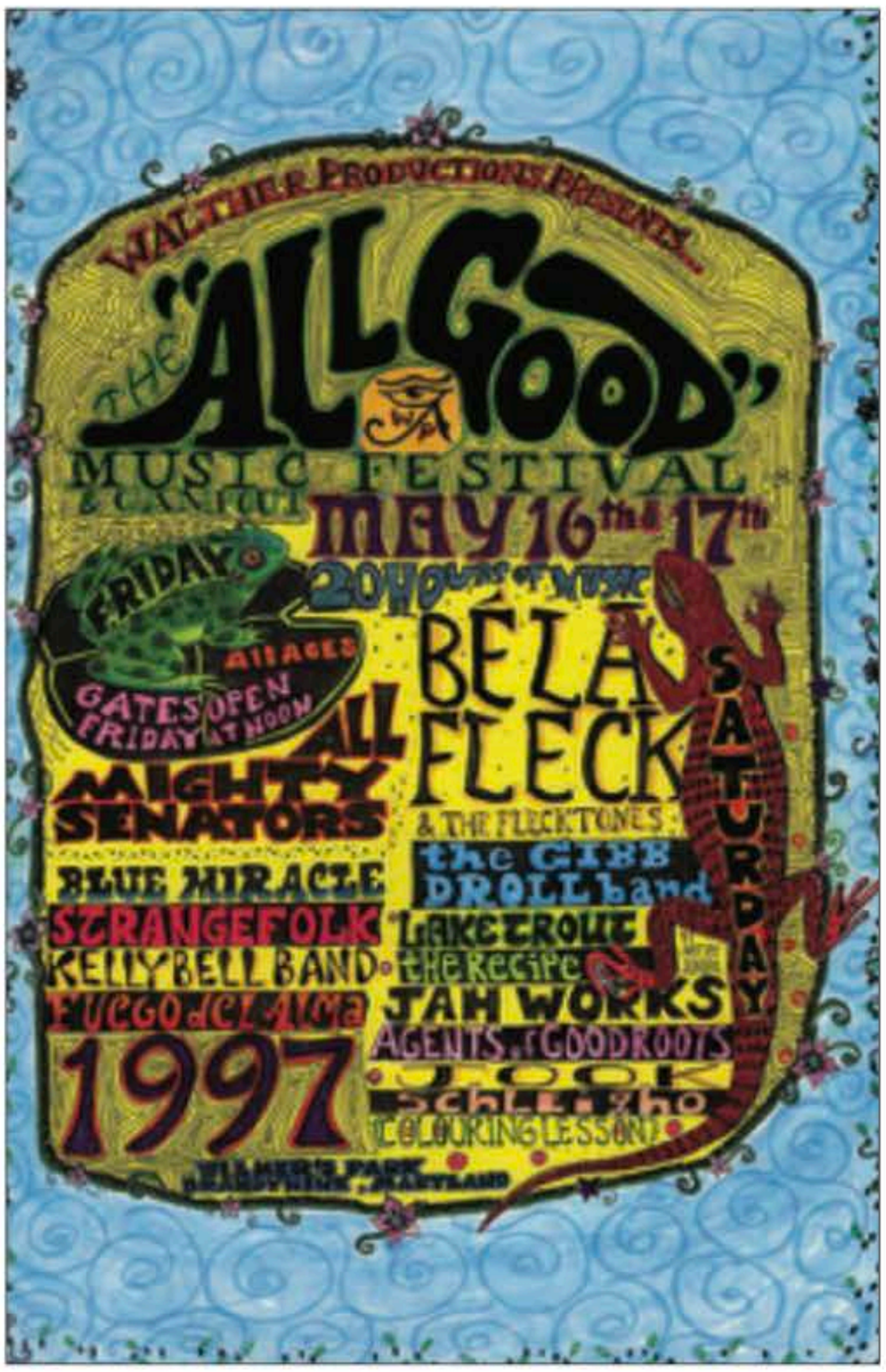
A close friend of mine was going out with Lo Faber, the lead singer of God Street Wine. This was before I'd handed out a flyer or gotten my toe in the business. Lo was like, "We're playing the Grog and Tankard in D.C., and we need somebody we can trust to work the door." I was like, "Yeah, I'll

DYLAN LANGILLE

do it. No problem." So I did that and it was my introduction to working in the music business. I helped process everybody, getting them in there.

I was excited about God Street Wine and what they were doing, so I was like, "Hey guys, can I put out some flyers and put some posters up in the colleges to help you out there next time through?" Of course, they were like, "Yeah, go for it."

So I did that and I really only worked for them—or not even worked for them; basically I worked for myself because I had volunteered to do it for free. They'd come through three or four times a year, and I would go ballistic with thousands and thousands of flyers, hitting everybody I possibly could at 12 colleges. Their business grew in the market faster than it was growing in other markets and, at some point, when they went to the Bayou in D.C., they told Cellar Door, "You need to pay this guy 150 bucks for doing street promotion for your show." That was the first paycheck I got in the music business.



You wrote an essay, in which you mentioned sitting in Arthur Wilmer's living room and negotiating a deal while watching *The Price Is Right*. How challenging was it for you to convince him to let you use his site, given your limited experience?

I didn't know how old he was because, at that time, everybody who was over 50 looked equally old to me. [Wilmer passed away at age 86 in 1999.] But it was getting to know the guy and trying to gain his comfort with me doing an event there. He had a very modest house with furniture from the '50s, with the smells of the dog running around.

He and I were sitting there, trying to come to terms as two different people from two opposite parts of the world, with the common ground being the music. He had the passion to bring in James Brown and Jimi Hendrix back in the day, but he wasn't doing any of that anymore. So he could relate to me as a young, aspiring promoter and I feel like he thought I was coming from the right place, so he was willing to give me a shot. He didn't hit me up for money up front; I paid him as it came in.

He was a kind and interesting guy. He was always straightforward and trustworthy, and I think we had some commonalities that helped us work well together.

One of the things you did as a promoter early on was to help foster a regional scene. That was really important for touring bands in the pre-social media era, when they were hoping to identify as many supportive markets as possible to help them route across the country. How conscious were you of what you were doing?

Now that I think about it, instead of having bands to attract fans, I almost had fans that I wanted to connect to bands. The fans were out there and we were rubbing elbows because I was one of them.

I can't believe what I did back then. There were times when I threw four or five festivals in a season, from May to September, and it was just two of us, plus whoever we could get to work the shows. It was ridiculous.

It was really about those bands. It didn't seem like they were on these big tours. It seemed like we were the event they wanted to play because we were the event that was most suited for them and their kind of people. Maybe they were good for 50 people at a bar in Pittsburgh, but they wanted to play this show outside of Baltimore because there was a buzz on the streets that it was a cool place to play and there were a lot of fans out there who were going to get turned on to their music.

The fans were super excited to see these bands that they had never seen before and it was like I found the bands through osmosis. Somebody would say, "Hey, did you hear that band?" Then I'd start looking into the band, trying to find a show to see or checking out a tape if someone had one.

It really wasn't about, "Oh, Aquarium Rescue Unit can bring 2,000 people." It was like, "That music sounds amazing and the fans are going to love it." It wasn't about how much they can draw. It was about what they were going to deliver and how people's minds were going to be blown. That was the fun part. It's still the fun part.

In that essay I mentioned, you also wrote: "It took me a while to learn, but fireworks should be done by professionals." Is there a story you can share?

I've always loved fireworks. I would do fireworks, renegade style, at Wilmer's Park and pretty much everywhere I went.

It got to the point where my security was like, "Tim, you can't do fireworks anymore." Then the next year, I wouldn't let them know that I was doing fireworks and I would set them off. Then the security would come down on me and be like, "Oh, it's fucking Tim." After that it was like, "OK, we're going to control it more. Tim can't just do them out in the woods by himself. We're going to bring them backstage and be more safe about them." So then there were like five or six of us, and someone might be drunk and a tube would fall over and the thing would shoot out and bounce off a shed. That kind of stuff. Everybody freaked out that we were creating the most hazardous situation at our own festival.

At that point, I finally relinquished and said, "OK, we're going to go professional from here out." Actually, I made that agreement, then broke it when I got to Legend Valley. That's when Laura Trickle at Legend Valley said, "Tim, you have to do this professionally." So I didn't quite learn my lesson until the second or third time.

When you started out, there were a limited number of festivals in general, let alone in the jamband scene. What was it like for you to watch the proliferation of fests, with so many happening simultaneously in a given weekend?

In those first three or four years, there were just a few of us across the whole country that were doing a jamband thing at that level. Can you imagine that today? I remember hearing

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about High Sierra and there was also Gathering of the Vibes.

I felt like it kind of grew organically back then, and now it's grown in a different way over the last 10 years because everybody wanted to do a festival after they saw success happening somewhere else. I don't understand how anybody comes to any of these events with the number of events going on.

But I suppose the way I approach it is just being true to the music and true to the scene, doing the right thing. I don't feel like I'm doing anything special. But at the end of the day, maybe that's why I'm still in business, as the jamband scene has gone up and down for 30 years. This might be my strongest year in 10 years—it's certainly ramping up to be. I feel very grateful and excited for throwing three festivals and I'm super excited to put out this Trifesta concept because I don't recall ever seeing it done before—three different festivals, three different styles, three different states, three different markets, one vibe. I'm pretty excited about that concept.

You were learning on the go when it first came to the festivals. How long did it take until you felt comfortable with operations?

I followed my gut and my instinct to get me all the way to about 2006. I hired a local porta-john guy or hired a local security company or pretended I knew how to manage traffic or handle 10,000 people at a gate. My growth first caught up to me in '99 when I was doing 5-6,000 people and the place held barely 4,000, and I was parking people in neighbors' yards. Then with the next place, Buffalo Gap Campground in 2000, I was trying to get everybody down a one-lane road, but I didn't really go in there to study the ingress and egress to figure out if it was going to work. It was more like, "Oh, that campground looks cool. Let's do a show there." There wasn't the professional evaluation that a site operations person brings to the table.

Then I got to Oakley Farm [in 2001] and Sunshine Daydream [in 2002], and the same thing happened—the first time there, we got a thousand more people than we could fit on the mountain and we had to put them somewhere but it was raining and everybody was getting stuck in the mud.

From there, we went to Marvin's Mountaintop. I thought, "OK, we've got a huge campus; we've got 275 acres. Great, we can fit everybody." Meanwhile, I still had a one-lane road that went five miles from the main tributary up to the festival.

Finally, in 2006, when we grew to 10-12,000, we had weather issues, we had security issues, we had nitrous mafia issues. That was the first time I was concerned about the safety of my event while I was throwing it. When that happened, I talked to some people like, "Hey, do you know anybody who can give me some advice here? Help me out on the fly?" Jim Tobin was on tour with String Cheese Incident at the time, and Jim Tobin Productions basically took over operations from that moment forward. He got on a bus, he met me and I think he liked what I was trying to do as a young promoter trying to do all this with no big festival experience. He went around with me, helped me pull the campground and the lanes together, get the security in place, push back the nitrous guys and get everything to an operational and safe level. Then he came back and did my site operations every year from that point forward.

So I guess the lesson I would say is that, when it gets bigger than you, hire the professionals to do it. Don't wait for it to get bigger than you; try to be ahead of it.

I give Jim Tobin a lot of credit for the success that the All Good Festival had because he changed the way my festival was getting run. It became a top-notch operational festival that was handling 23,000 people up a single-lane mountain road with 1,200 personnel, 400 porta-johns and 200 light towers. That was well beyond my experience at the time. It was full-on year round. He was all-in and we became really close friends. We were probably on a call every day for 10 years. I owe him a lot of credit.

In terms of All Good Now, what finally prompted you to relaunch it in this form?

When the idea came to me, that's when I realized how much I'd missed it. What happened is

"I was driving with my mother to my daughter's graduation at Ohio State and it just dawned on me: 'All Good Now, Merriweather Post,'" Walther says.

I was driving with my mother to my daughter's graduation at Ohio State, and it just dawned on me: "All Good Now, Merriweather Post." It kind of came out of the ether. I was like, "Oh, my God, this is what it could be." I even talked it out with my mom, who doesn't get involved in those kind of conversations.

It's hard to break into amphitheaters with Live Nation and IMP there. The expenses are also really high. So there are a lot of challenges for an outside promoter to be successful.

I have a really good partnership with IMP, though, as far as the 20 years we've worked together. I know that, when I do a show with IMP, like I will at Merriweather Post, they're going to market it like it's their show. So I've got one of the best promoters in the country promoting All Good Now with me, and their crew is going to work with me and their staff is going to help me make it special. There's a really cool synergy that's going to take place.

I don't think I would have done this five years ago. This works now because times have evolved and COVID came and went, and people changed their way of going about their lives. The campout used to be the thing and I believe that this is the next thing for the jamband festival, although I don't think it's going to work in every place because it's not a cookie-cutter thing.

I'm very fortunate to have one of the best amphitheaters in the country and one of the best partners, as far as doing a show and doing the right thing by the fans. Everybody knows they're going to be treated properly from the All Good camp and the Merriweather camp. We have the two stages there. We have a wooded area that we can have some fun in. We can do fireworks. It's all going to work.

Looking back on nearly 30 years as an independent promoter, what has been your North Star?

Putting All Good Now together and bringing back the All Good name and vibration has been the most impactful thing in my life lately, at the age of 57. It just feels really good. The All Good Festival peaked and it dropped and it came to an end and I felt like that was my baby. I felt like I had lost a child. Then I put that in the rearview mirror and went about the rest of my business and developed other festivals. But there was always something in the back of my head like, "Maybe the time will come when I can do something that carries on the tradition."

I knew it wouldn't be the same but, as I've been telling that story of Wilmer's Park, I came to realization that, "Wow, for the most part, I really am where I started." My principles back then are the principles that I've carried all the way through and they're the principles that I live by today.

To me, they're obvious—to take care of the fans and make them feel like they're wanted. Having that community vibe is what it's supposed to be, so to me, it's all common sense. This is the way it's supposed to be done.

I've always had issues with larger corporate entities that make it more of a cookie-cutter operation and spend too much time on spreadsheets and that kind of stuff—companies that don't really put the love and passion behind it and don't take care of people. So I'm very fortunate as a person, and as a promoter, to have been able to stick to my guns and do it my way, which is also the way that I felt was great for the fans and the bands. r

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