

Skynyrd, midway highlight state fair



■ Classic rock, demolition derbies and hair-raising rides entice fairgoers.

BY JASON HARDY
Senior staff writer

Glaring lights, violent noise and "Rehab is for quitters" T-shirts tucked into tight black jeans.

That's right. The Nebraska State Fair kicked off Friday, an annual celebration of Husker heritage and geriatric special events. Every year boasts scores of new attractions and bigger events. The 11-day festival began with the amusing destruction of the demolition derby, a bigger midway and, best of all, Lynyrd Skynyrd.

By 5 p.m. the air rang with the cries of carnies encouraging patrons to ride rides or get ripped off at one of the many game booths.

The midway games repeatedly featured on Dateline NBC's hidden camera investigations anxiously waited in formation, its occupants ready to pounce. And as fairgoers' ears rang with the noise, the friendly state fair smell greeted the nose: the sweet mixture of funnel cake and gasoline.

From the oval-shaped basketball hoops that "just look that way" to the giant bouncy rooms that reek of children's urine, the state fair had all the makings of another ground-breaking year.

This year there are a few exceptions to the usually yawning midway machinery. One such ride, "The Wind Shear," is comprised only of a long horizontal seating section, swung by two massive arms. The screams changed in pitch and tone as the occupants were flung through varying elevations.

The sound of screaming children was soon drowned out by that of roaring engines though, as the demolition derby lurched into action. Held in an arena typically reserved for more docile creatures, the car crashing carnage was metallically beautiful. The view from the stands was not.

Unfortunately, there were about 40 yards of concrete and dirt between the front row and the derby pen, so the action was difficult to see. However, the audience seemed content with the somewhat obstructed view and everyone cheered and cheered as the auto-body count kept rising. After all, they knew what was still to come — Lynyrd Skynyrd.

The concert started promptly at 7:30 p.m. when a recorded version of "The Magnificent Seven" blasted out over a near-capacity crowd and the legendary Lynyrd Skynyrd straddled the stage.

The audience, which ranged in age from early teens to late 40s, roared in adoration and the lighters were waving before the band even lit a lick.

Although the group tried to mix old and new tunes, the audience reserved its loyalty to the past — the best applause came after hits like "What's Your Name," "That Smell" and "Sweet Home Alabama."

However, the big winner in the "best song of the night" category undoubtedly goes to "Free Bird," which the band let fly after a quick wardrobe change — out of pitted shirts.

The song lasted almost 10 minutes, five of which were a guitar solo, and in the middle of it a disco ball the size of a Volkswagen lowered from the ceiling and turned the Devaney Center from a hillbilly haven into a whirling vortex of rock 'n' roll craziness.

While the band has aged quite a bit since the first days of Skynyrd (25 years to be exact), the group's music still sounds trailer-park tight and the effect is as intoxicating as any swig of Southern Comfort. Sure, they weigh more, sport less hair and are incredibly corny now, but the music that made them famous lives on.

After the stars and bars were lowered and the disco ball was lifted back into its original resting place, the legions of Skynyrd fans slowly wandered out of the Devaney Center.

Their bellies filled with corn dogs and "Free Bird" still singing in their ears, the rag-tag mob of freedom rockers undetectably sifted back into the lights and smells of the Nebraska State Fair.



JOHNNY VAN ZANT, lead singer of legendary rock band Lynyrd Skynyrd, sings "Sweet Home Alabama" to a near-capacity crowd Friday night at the Devaney Center. The group kicked off the state fair concert series, which will include country greats Clint Black and Mark Chestnutt.

MATT MILLER/DN

Sideshow handler enjoys attention

BY JASON HARDY
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In the northernmost corner of the Nebraska State Fair's midway sits a brightly colored tent.

Its kaleidoscope walls of canvas hang far away from the Ferris wheel and the bumper cars; past the last corn dog stand and cotton candy vendor. The tent stands alone, awaiting those intrepid souls who are strong enough to encounter "the strange, the odd, the sad and the true."

For the past 10 years a simple man known only as "Lefty" has spent his life with nature's rejects and bottom-feeders. Animals hideous and disgusting to most are family to him. Lefty cares for them as you and I might care for a younger brother or sister — in some cases, better.

Lefty works as an animal handler for Big John Strong's Circus Sideshow, which currently is spending a week at the Nebraska State Fair. After that it's anyone's guess as to where he'll end up, but one thing is for sure: He's got some wacky pets.

"I've got a snake as big as your head," Lefty says, estimating the animal's size by cupping his hands around my head. "His name is Julius Squeezer."

He speaks with a nonchalant tone that makes "three-legged ducks" and "Chinese hairless dogs" seem as adorable as anything on Sesame Street.

"I got some hairless rats, too," he interjects.

He leans back and smiles like a proud homeowner when I ask him the definitive

question in freak show reporting. Are these misfits of bio-genetics actually real?

"I'll put them right up in front of your eyeball," Lefty barks in reply. "I've got a duck with three legs, a lizard with two heads and a half chicken, half turkey that's alive, man!"

In previous years, Lefty's sideshow also boasted a display of dangerous stunts by Lefty and the manager of the circus.

"My boss would swallow swords and spit fire and stuff," Lefty recalls. "I used to lay on a bed of nails and a big fat guy would stand on me."

To make the traveling attraction more cost effective, the human tricks were removed from the program.

Although most people would see Lefty's creatures as little more than freakish novelties, he considers them partners. After all, it is to these freaks of nature that he owes his livelihood.

Lefty first joined the sideshow business 10 years ago when his friend offered him a better life: a chance to trade his mother's home in San Bernardino, Calif., for a new view of the world. It was a career move Lefty said has paid off.

"Hey, it's been 10 years, and I'm still here ain't I?" Indeed he is.

Lefty's business takes him across the country every year and the animal trainer was even featured in the Red Hot Chili Peppers' video "Soul to Squeezer," which was set in a spooky and surreal carnival.

"I got their autographs in my truck," he says, defending his claim.

Since the video and his general sideshow success, Lefty believes he's



JASON HARDY/DN

CARNIVAL WORKER "LEFTY" holds his prized albino boa constrictor, Julius Squeezer, at the Nebraska State Fair Friday night. Lefty said his unusual and occasionally mutated pets have been collected from around the world.

achieved a pseudo-celebrity status, recognizable at any fair or circus in America.

"I could walk up and down this midway and everybody'd be like 'Hey Lefty, come over here, man,'" he says as he grandiosely motions across the midway. "Now I go home and I have respect by everybody. I walk down the street and people are like, 'Hey Lefty man, can I walk to the store with you?'"

The dubious tales, the boasting and the mischievous laughs go on and on — as do the highways and byways of America's sideshow carnival circuit. And at the helm of this freak train is a man known only as Lefty.