

ROADTRIP

| High-Tail It to Bluegrass Country



WHERE: Oakland, Md.

WHY: Country crafts, pastoral paths and blisterin' bluegrass.

HOW FAR: About 175 miles or three hours from Rockville.

The bluegrass boom of the past decade means that it has become ever easier to see and hear the genre's biggest stars — even in cities and suburbs. But there's still nothing quite like a trip deep into the country to experience bluegrass at its rootsy, down-home best and hear performers fiddle and pluck with wild abandon.

That's what two dozen musicians from Maryland and several nearby states will do at the Official Maryland State Banjo, Fiddle and Mandolin Championships on Friday and Saturday, where pickers and bow-scrappers will compete for cash as they each speed through two songs in five minutes.

You want authentic? The panel of judges doesn't allow any "gimmicks or electrical equipment," which they say "overrate a contestant's ability to perform." Each competition is divvied up by age group (peewee, youth, junior

and senior), so you get to hear child prodigies like Stormy Keating, 10, who placed first in last year's peewee fiddler's contest. And keep an ear out for regular competitor Jack Crites, 61, 2004's senior first-place mandolin winner.

Friday's bill will include a 7 p.m. musical performance by actor-turned-musician Ben Jones, who played Cooter on the old "Dukes of Hazzard" TV series. Accompanying Jones will be the General Lee — not the historical figure but the (somewhat) historical car showcased in the "Dukes" TV show and movie. An Americana-style meal will be served (hot dog-chips-brownie-and-beverage combos for \$5). That and the \$15 admission benefit the Dove Center, which helps victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.

This expedition into Maryland's mountain country starts at Joe's Record Paradise, a homegrown store with stock that answers the musical question: "Oh, brother, where art bluegrass?" At Joe's you can nab hard-to-come-by CDs by the likes of Riders in the Sky and Hobart Smith. Purists can thumb through Joe's old vinyl albums, which include titles by Jimmy Martin and the Sunny Mountain Boys as well as the Hotmud Family.

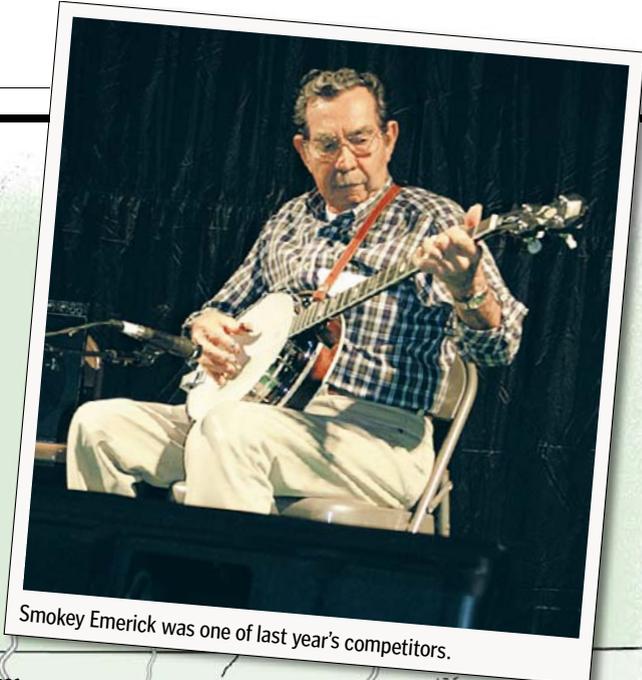
Venture up I-70 into Myersville, and you come across the Ross General Store, which

lives up to its name, since its wares range from bird houses to antique bottles from Moxie Original Root Beer. If you need to stretch your legs, pull off at Big Pool, where the Western Maryland Rail Trail snakes through 20 miles of all-encompassing wilderness.

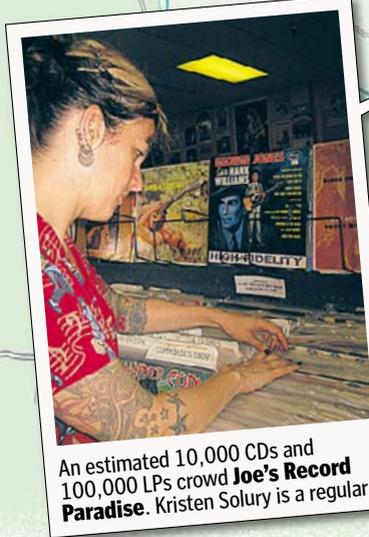
Get yourself a bucolic bellyful at Little Sandy's Restaurant at the Hancock Truck Plaza, which is far classier than your average truck-stop eatery. Here, you can indulge in real meat 'n' potatoes fare, like the 12-ounce T-bone steak and an order of potato wedges. The 24-hour restaurant also serves up country-style breakfasts 'round the clock and boasts friendly waitresses who call their customers "hon" — a sublime salutation whether you're from bluegrass country or a city slicker. — **Tony Sclafani**

The Official Maryland State Banjo, Fiddle and Mandolin Championships, Southern High School, Gymnasium, 345 Oakland Dr., Oakland, Md., 301-334-6255, www.garrettdovecenter.org. Friday at 8 p.m. (banjo competition); Saturday at 7 p.m. (fiddle and mandolin contests). \$12-\$15, younger than 12 free.

Road Trip maps are available online at www.washingtonpost.com/roadtrip, as are addresses and hours of operation (be sure to check before you go). Have an idea for a trip? E-mail roadtrip@washpost.com.



Smokey Emerick was one of last year's competitors.



An estimated 10,000 CDs and 100,000 LPs crowd Joe's Record Paradise. Kristen Solury is a regular.