RETROSPECTIVES

THE HOME COUNTY FESTIVAL
(Reprinted from the Cuckoo's Nest Newsletter, with thanks to its Editor, Alistair Brown.)

The Home County Folk Festival, now in its fifth year, was held in Victoria Park, London, 21-23 July. The festival is free during the day with a paying concert indoors each evening. As with other festivals the same performers played both indoors and out. This festival underwent some significant changes this year, although it is felt that these merely represented a stage in the evolution of the festival, from its beginning as a series of concerts featuring contemporary folk artists, towards more of a festival concept, more representative of what folk music is currently available and popular at festivals and clubs around the country.

An attempt was made to create a better balance in the park by building two large stages to complement the bandshell. All three stages were treated equally, and all performers played concerts and workshops on them. The workshops were equally as important as the concerts. This formula worked very well and was very popular with festival-goers and performers.

The hots of the festival, surprisingly enough (!) were acts that had not been considered in the past. Comhaltas, Mark Rust and Priscilla Herdman all received outstanding acclaim, both from the audience and from the press.

Having three indoor concerts meant that all performers got a chance to perform a decent set (and generated some hard-needed cash). In the past the only indoor concert was held on the Sunday night, when only selected musicians got to play one number each. It may have produced a lot of adrenalin, but the artistic quality was a bit lacking. This year, audiences got a chance to see performers at their best. A few unscheduled pauses in the concerts gave our superb emcees, Owen McBride, Bob Cunningham and Cathy Fink and Duck Donald, a chance to prove they were not just pretty faces. Some of the impromptu stage routines they cooked up were magnificent!

The crafts, sixty of them, were spread throughout the park rather than being in a specific area as in other festivals, and this seemed to add to the festival atmosphere and general decentralization. One enormous improvement was food. Several local restaurants set up booths and provided a fair variety of victuals throughout the day and into the evening. Judging by the response and the way people stayed on over the supper hour, this change has been long overdue.

The free nature of the festival during the day and its downtown location is really important, especially in a town like London which hasn't really been exposed to much folk music over the years. Ten or twelve thousand people a day dropped in to the park to listen to, and enjoy, acts that most of them had probably never heard of and would never have dreamt previously of paying to see. So there's an educational aspect that helps everyone - performers, coffeehouses, and, of course, those people who've discovered something new and interesting.

All this sounds as if Home County this year did something terribly radical - nonsense, of course. Few of the changes this year were anything other than an adoption of ideas that had been seen to work elsewhere. Several were a result of the particular needs of this festival, always bearing in mind that each festival must have its peculiar character and must respect its roots. The balance of folk music in this town has always been towards the contemporary, and the festival, rightly, respects that.

Anyway, it changed, and the response has overwhelmingly endorsed that change. The performers liked it, "Touch the Earth" liked it, the Free Press didn't like it, then liked it, then didn't like it again. Other festival directors applauded the changes and most importantly, the people in the park liked it.

Alistair Brown

MIRIMICHI FOLK SONG FESTIVAL

For three consecutive nights in June the Beaverbrook Theatre and Town Hall in Newcastle, N.B. was once again the scene of the Miramichi Folk Song Festival; the festival, one of the few of its type in North America, celebrated its 21st birthday, remaining virtually unchanged since its inception.

The communities along New Brunswick's Miramichi River boast a rich legacy of indigenous folk song, spawned primarily from a once-thriving lumbering industry known
“Peter Emberley”, “The Jones Boys”, and “The Jam on Gerry’s Rock” have long been associated with the area, as have names like Larry Gorman, the balladist known as “the man who makes the songs”. Coupled with this history of local song one can also find a rich collection of variants of Celtic and English ballads from those who settled the region, as well as the contributions from a neighbouring Acadian culture.

It was Lord Beaverbrook himself, (Newcastle’s most famous son and patron) who suggested to the late Dr. Louise Manny in 1947 that the songs of the Miramichi should be collected and preserved. As a result of her work in the field, Dr. Manny became the major organizational force behind the Folk Song Festival until her duties were taken over by Mrs. Leo (Maisy) Mitchell; Mrs. Mitchell remains in charge of co-ordinating the Festival, as well as contributing as a performer with songs in English, French, and Arabic.

The first impression one gets from attending the Festival (at $1.00 a night, a bargain) is that it’s extremely “loose” and exists on its own terms, completely void of the trappings of more commercial ventures; for the most part, songs are sung unaccompanied, in the spirit of the oral tradition by which they were learned. Instrumental numbers are never “arranged”, and they sound not unlike a spontaneous “jam” around the kitchen stove. And since the audience and performer are close or distant neighbours, there’s always an immediate interplay and rapport.

This year’s Festival featured close to 25 performers, the vast majority from the Miramichi area, and others coming from such places as Stanley and Moncton.

If such a nebulous term can be used, the undisputed “stars” of the Festival over the past few years would have to be Wilmot MacDonald, Paul Kingston, Ray and Frank Estey (with a long first “E”), and Marie Whitney Hare. Performers of this calibre have long been recognized by folklorists and indeed several of them have been recorded by the Folk-Legacy label and the like.

In particular, Marie Whitney Hare’s reputation is growing deservedly; this summer she also sang at the Atlantic Folk Festival in Nova Scotia, at Pinewood in Massachussets, as well as taping a “Canadian Express” television segment with Ryan’s Fancy.

This year Wilmot MacDonald sang “Roarin’ Pat Murphy”, a “transplanted” Irish song, as well as the Miramichi Ballads “Jeremiah of Bartibogue” and the famous “Jones Boys”. MacDonald has a stage presence which has
Paul Kingston

endeared him to Festival audiences for years; he invariably rocks back and forth on his heels, swinging his arms or wringing his hands, almost in child-like delight, smiling all the while. Most people will tell you that his rendition of “Peter Emberley” is the “definitive” one.

Paul Kingston, eldest of the performers, sings sitting down and occasionally stops himself, chiding the audience if he feels they haven’t been paying close enough attention, or to explain something of interest in an upcoming verse. His trademark is his moose call, which he blows as he enters or leaves the stage area, or, to the delight of the audience, in the middle of someone else’s number. This year he sang “The Flying Cloud”, “Morrissiey and the Black”, and “The Pride of Glencoe”.


Marie Whitney Hare

Other notable performers included fiddlers Willie Leblanc and Allan Macdonald and step-dancer Francis Taylor, whose body seems to move in different directions at the same time. Taylor, a perennial favourite, is known locally as “Drive ‘Er Francis”, an appellation derived from the verbal urgings of a good many Festival goers.

The Miramichi Folk Song Festival, in existence for 21 years, will last for a long time yet, though, unfortunately, there appears to be a dearth of young singers in the area to carry on the tradition.

Those wishing further information on the Festival could write me c/o the Bulletin, and I’ll pass on the inquiries. In the meantime, I heartily recommend Songs of Miramichi by Louise Manny and James Reginald Wilson (Brunswick Press, Fredericton, N.B. 1970).

Jim Stewart
THE NEWFOUNDLAND FOLK FESTIVAL

With the summer drawing to a close and winter fast approaching we can look back on a fine summer of music and good times in Newfoundland. Two festivals were held this year, one at each end of the island. The most recent was the three-day "Good Entertainment II" festival held at Lomond in Gros Morne National Park on the west coast. (See the lead article in Bulletin 1-4) Those who attended claim it was an unqualified success, with participants from all over Newfoundland and Labrador. The site proved to be a good one, if somewhat small for the number of people who showed up. Organizer Susan Shiner reports that negotiations are underway with park authorities to have the site made the permanent home of the festival. A more detailed review of this festival will appear in the next Bulletin.

The other festival held this summer was the Newfoundland Folk Festival under the auspices of the St. John's Folk Arts Council. Held in St. John's, the provincial capital, the festival again took place in Bannerman Park right in the centre of the city. The festival brought together approximately thirty singers, dancers, storytellers and instrumentalists representing all regions of the Island and the Labrador Coast.

Many of the problems which beset the 1977 festival were eliminated in this year's event. A specially constructed stage with plenty of room to accommodate larger groups of performers was a major improvement over last year's stage which adjoined the park bandstand. The number of performers was less than half that of 1977, which allowed for a less crowded and more organized programme. The sound system provided by CHOZ-FM was excellent, and a great improvement over last year's.

Weather was one problem the organizers had no control over, and for the most part the three-day event from July 1-3 was plagued by cold winds, fog and mist. The threat of rain forced the cancellation of Saturday night's programme, but this proved to be a little premature, as the rain never came. For the rest of the weekend, however, the festival continued in spite of the less than desirable weather conditions.

Beginning at noon each day the festival featured a series of hour-long sessions, each with its own theme - work songs, lumbering songs, sea songs, songs of war, and so forth. Performers were with few exceptions older traditional singers and musicians, most of whom had had little experience in dealing with large crowds. Similarly, the crowd, sometimes as big as two thousand, had had little exposure to this kind of music as a form of public entertainment, the usual context for such performances being small informal gatherings in private homes, and occasionally in smaller local concerts in the Newfoundland outports. Because of the unfamiliar, and to some extent artificial, performance situation of the festival stage, the host for the sessions, usually younger performers or members of the FAC Executive, played an important role in providing continuity to the programme, chatting to the performers between songs and encouraging them to talk about the music they were sharing with each other and with the audience. For most of the people involved, this turned out to be a worthwhile and rewarding experience. The performers especially seemed to enjoy meeting other people from different regions of Newfoundland and Labrador and exchanging songs and experiences through their music. All of this despite the fact that in many of the sessions the performers did not keep to the stated theme. Nevertheless there was plenty of good music and singing enjoyed by performers and audience alike. A significant feature of the festival was that even though some of the performers - notably singer John White of St. John's and singer and monologist John Joe English of Branch, St. Mary's Bay - were highly popular with the audience, there were no 'stars' as such, and each performer was enthusiastically greeted by the audience.

Each day's activities concluded with a two-hour concert featuring performers who had been seen in earlier sessions, as well as unscheduled performances by people who had dropped in unexpectedly. The less-structured evening concerts offered some of the best moments of the festival.

The crafts area which accompanied the festival was to some extent a disappointment, not because the displays and demonstrations of spinning, weaving and rug-hooking were not interesting, but rather because they did not go far enough in representing Newfoundland's wide range of traditional crafts. As a result the crafts area appeared more limited and less organized than the musical side of the festival. In future, festival organizers might consider an expanded crafts section with more variety in the displays.

These observations aside, the festival was generally a successful, well-run and well-attended event, and certainly one which was appreciated by both audience and performers. There are rumours in St. John's that the Folk Art Council is considering abandoning the idea of folk festivals entirely. It would be a shame to see this happen, just as they are becoming
proficient in the handling and organizing of such events. If the rumours are true, the Council should be persuaded to think again. Given the success of this year’s effort and the general improvement over last year’s, the holding of such festivals in future years could only be a positive move.

Paul Mercer

WILD ROSE FOLK FESTIVAL EDMONTON, ALBERTA.

Well, folks, despite all the disorganization, it actually happened. What’s more, thanks to a glorious day and the fact that lack of publicity ensured that only a small crowd attended, it even enjoyed a certain measure of success and its meagre resources weren’t too strained.

Of course there were problems, the most noticeable from the audience point of view being poor or non-existent sound systems on two of the three stages. State 2 sound blasted straight onto the children's stage where performers were struggling without mikes, and the sound man from Stage 2 was absent from his booth most of the time, leaving performers to holler for a new mix when they changed instruments and need new balances - hey ho!

Then there were the added attractions of “a vast selection of crafts” (as described in the program). Well, if you searched the half-mile of grounds you could find the six small craft booths without too much difficulty and then - lucky you - you could buy a T-shirt, a ring, a glass prism pendant, a leather belt, a woven belt or a batik.

If, of course, you’d rather spend your hard-earned cash on some sustenance for the body, then this was more difficult. Here again I quote from the program: “A wide variety of foods are available at the fair. The booths have been selected to represent many different cultures. Hopefully a new culinary experience will introduce itself to you.” Somebody is pulling somebody’s leg. Two food outlets, a popcorn and coffee stand were it. What’s more, three pieces of 1” x 1½” meat on a bamboo skewer for $1.50 is a culinary ripoff.

However, there was the music and despite all the foregoing grumbles, it was music we were really here for and we did get our money’s worth. Without it being an absolutely brilliant affair, I’m happy to report the Canadian talent, both local and national, knocked spots off the imported ‘big names’. In fact, I even felt sorry for John Hiatt who had to follow a magnificent set by Tom Jackson, including songs of his own composition, a couple of a cappella songs, some duets with K.C. Cramer and his harp, all done with quality and professionalism and sensitive use of his beautiful voice that sounds like dark molasses.

Some of the nicest things happened during the day when, again, the local talent was given a chance to be heard. But what a pity that in the whole twelve hours there were only three half-hour workshops! Not only do the performers enjoy cross-fertilization at a workshop, but often an audience that wouldn’t sit and listen to a full half-hour of a cappella traditional singing will enjoy one or two such songs interspersed with other music. So please, let’s see more of these at the next Edmonton festival.

A big improvement over last year was the presence of three traditional groups. Last year, Brandywine struggled alone in the middle of the bluegrass- and country - oriented festival. This year they were back with support from Paddy Tuit, who did a very pleasant set of ballads accompanying herself on dulcimer and guitar, and, the “find” of the local people, John Shanahan and David Keagan, two Irish whistle players (David also plays the Irish pipes). They surfaced suddenly at an open stage about two months ago and struck us all dumb with amazement. They have no showmanship, but they don’t need it. They sit there quietly, the jigs rip off their instruments and it’s very hard to keep your feet still. I hope we’ll be hearing a lot more of them.

Frank, Gay and Nick Vandermeer are also local, though their fame is now national and very well-deserved. Frank, of course, not only plays his own instruments but also builds them. He and Nick wooed the audience with beautiful music, ranging from country to Mozart.

Did we enjoy the festival? We enjoyed the music very much, but I’ve certainly been to better-organized events.

Andrea Spalding