

# ON FESTIVALS

Photo: Anna Holbech



*Nola Johnston*

For someone with unlimited time, money and a semi-masochistic passion for folk music festivals, this could have been a very hectic summer. Those of us without these advantages probably managed to get some sort of festival fix as there were a lot to choose from. I attended two—the Vancouver Folk Music Festival and the Northwest Regional Folklife Festival in Seattle—each of which I have now seen on three successive years. Their aims appear similar in some ways, but are actually quite different, and I think that each represents much larger trends in terms of organization and effects. I wish to emphasize that this is not intended as a *review* of either festival. Each can be praised or faulted on various points, but it is insofar as they are representative of *types* of festivals that I am approaching them with an attempt to analyse some of the implications of the differences in their approaches.

Both are large festivals. The Vancouver Folk Music Festival is now run by an independent, non-profit society. This year it featured 56 acts on 5 stages (plus evening concerts) and attracted about 20,000 people over 3 days. The budget for this festival is about \$200,000. It is run by a core of paid staff as well as many volunteers. Performers are flown in from all over North America (flights booked and paid for by the festival), put up in a hotel, fed by a professional chef, ferried by bus to and from the festival site and paid quite well (\$400 for a single, \$600 for a duo, etc.). Tickets cost \$11 a day (\$8 if you got them far enough in advance). The festival hired primarily name acts from the U.S. (about 60% of the acts were American), Canada, Britain and a few from elsewhere as well as a scattering of local musicians. Over 90% of the performers were full-time professional musicians.

The Northwest Regional Folklife Festival is sponsored by the Seattle Folklore Society and the Seattle Centre, with support from other organizations. The budget for the 1979 festival was in the neighbourhood of \$14,000-\$20,000. Except for the festival co-ordinator and perhaps 1 or 2 paid staff, it is run entirely by volunteers. Hundreds of acts are involved, with a maximum of 8 stages operating at any given time as well as an evening concert. Admission to everything is free with the exception of a very few special events where you need a festival button (cost, \$1) to get in. Performers are not paid.

They look after their own transportation and are reimbursed for gas mileage. Most performers are from the Pacific Northwest and most of them are not professional musicians. Accommodation consists of billets throughout the city with members and friends of the Seattle Folklore Society. There is no selection process for performers in Seattle: whoever applies before the deadline is accepted. There is, therefore, a great range in the quality of performance.

Both festivals stretch the definition of folk music to its limit so that it almost becomes definition by exclusion—it's easier to categorize what was left out than what was included! The Vancouver festival describes folk music as "music which speaks directly to and from people's experience." Well, all music speaks from *someone's* experience—the question is, does it speak from common *social* (as opposed to personal and private) experience? Is it accessible and understandable to an audience? Is it more than a pretty or interesting tune and vaguely imaginative lyrics? At both festivals the answer to this was sometimes no. In some ways Seattle did better here because their performers were almost entirely local, and thus more often playing in an immediately recognizable idiom. Some of the ethnic material might have been less accessible to large segments of the audience because of a lack of cultural context and language differences. This is not to say that one cannot understand and appreciate music from elsewhere—good music usually comes across to some extent—but to identify with it, it helps if it originated or developed in your own area. While the imported performers

at the Vancouver festival were not as obviously from a different cultural context as the ethnic performers in Seattle, they suffered from the same problems. They were flown in from elsewhere and offered as a musical 'smorgasbord' to a community with which they had little or no connection.

Both festivals were successful in that they brought in huge crowds, created new audiences for folk music (however vaguely defined) and pleased almost everyone in some way. The main difference seems to be in the area of financing. But this is a crucial difference because the financial approach of each festival has far-reaching consequences in terms of their long-range effect on their audiences.

The Seattle festival, with its more limited budget, does not pay its performers and does not provide them with hotel accommodation. What it does do is billet out-of-town performers with people in the city. This is a very flexible arrangement, especially since all sorts of parties consequently happen in various homes each night. The festival itself provides several workshops each day. Led by performers, these tend to be both informal, informative and participatory. One workshop I saw had about 15 concertinas learning together. There is also one stage with an open mike where anyone can sign up to do a half hour spot, and the Seattle Folklore Society runs a song circle each day for people who are interested in group singing. There are no fences, walls or gates other than those already existing at Seattle Centre, and one can wander pretty well anywhere without worrying about

properly approved authorization. What this does is to break down the distinction between performer and audience, and encourage the exchange of ideas and information. All over the site are clusters of people—performers *and* audience—singing and playing music together, jamming in groups that constantly dissolve and reform. My memories of Seattle are ones of participation. We wandered from concert to concert and sang or played along with the performers. We sang and played in the workshops, on the grass, in the restaurant over dinner, at the parties, in the car. Some of us were performers, some weren't, but there was a constant mix and exchange that was both exciting and educational, with music happening everywhere spontaneously.

At the Vancouver festival I felt like an "audience" rather than a participant. Unlike the Seattle festival, Vancouver offers no forum for participation. It provides concerts—large, small and on themes—but no workshops. The performers are provided with hotel accomodation and a heavily-guarded performer's area on the site which you can't get into without the appropriate pass. Food for performers is provided in this area, which is also a convenient place for performers to meet and learn from each other. There are parties back at the hotel, and the public is *not* invited. The performers need never see their audience except when they are onstage, and when things are this comfortable, why should they care? The entire organization of the festival, while making it function with admirable ease and efficiency, has the effect of isolating the performer from the audience.

The fact that the performers are largely imported and thus limited in their local contacts serves to compound their isolation. The whole set-up emphasizes the distinction between audience and performer and encourages the perpetuation of the star syndrome with its hordes of worshipping groupies. It is almost impossible to meet a performer informally. Even indirect contact is extremely limited. Recording is strictly forbidden, so if you want to learn a song or some bit of technique, you have to buy the record. This is to protect the performer, but it raises all sorts of questions about the idea of folk music as an item that can be owned and copyrighted, whether written by a particular performer or traditional and in the public domain. The question of the ownership of folk music is a huge one and shouldn't be dealt with here. Suffice it to say that this situation reinforces the idea of performer as producer, music as a product and audience as consumer. Somehow in all this, the "folk" seem to be getting left out of "folk music".

The idea of folk music as a product is significant. It teaches us that folk music, like all the other forms of music, is something that musicians (i.e. talented artists) make, and which is inaccessible to the rest of us (except on records and tapes which we must pay for) because we are not musicians. We are audience and our proper position is one of attentive respect and reverence. We are encouraged to become passive consumers of the product. The music loses its relationship to our everyday experience because it has been made into something separate from us. When we pay for a festival ticket, we

are paying for the music just as we pay for any other product, and the situation is one of *caveat emptor*—buyer beware. We have very limited input into the content or quality of what we hear because direct and convenient lines of communication between audience and performer are practically non-existent.

There was a lot of excellent music at the Vancouver Folk Music Festival, just as I'm sure there is at the other big festivals of this type. Festival organizers have a formidable task—making an operation that draws a paying audience of 20,000 over three days run smoothly and efficiently. I think that the festival staff and volunteers did an excellent job and I'm not suggesting any sort of plot to turn us all into folk music consumers par excellence. It's just that large financial operations of this sort necessarily produce a system of product and consumer, audience and performer, which seriously distorts the nature and function of folk music as music of the people. The long-term result can all too easily become a sort of embalming of folk music. We live in a passive age of non-thinking, non-critical consumerism and it is very difficult to operate successfully in any other way. But I think that the organizers of the big festivals should seriously examine the indirect as well as the immediate effects of their operations.

I think that the big festivals have their place and do serve a useful function, but I also think that they should not hold the position of dominance in the folk music milieu that they do now. What is needed is a better balance with other forums for folk music which combat some of the

festivals' detrimental effects. Seattle is proof that a festival doesn't have to be financially high-powered to be a huge success. Unfortunately it is very difficult for smaller organizations with limited funds to compete with the big festivals. Seattle is proof that there is a viable alternative, but it is the result of a lot of hard work. Big festivals with imported performers can expose us to new music, but we must be made to understand that they are not the be-all and end-all of folk music.

*Nola Johnston*



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