Open Season on Festivals ...again!

by Ian Robb

(A cynical Monday morning viewpoint, written, like so many songs, when the author was feeling depressed.)
Summer is approaching. Here comes another round of folk festivals large and small, organised and disorganised, political and apolitical, free and expensive, wet and dry (in more ways than one). And here comes another round of complaints. Everyone has an axe to grind; everyone thinks he or she has the formula for the perfect folk festival, and most have a perspective which ignores that of everyone else.

And still the audiences come, pay their money (or not) and ninety percent of the time go away having had a ball, having heard things previously unfamiliar and having a feeling that they have been part of an important event. If they haven’t enjoyed themselves, the most likely culprit is not the artistic direction of the festival, but - you guessed it - the weather!

Folk festivals, by their very scale, are designed to appeal to the folk, not to the folkies. Unfortunately, the folk really don’t care that much about the music. As long as they can spend a weekend barbecuing their bodies in an attractive setting, being part of an ‘event’ and listening in a fairly superficial way to sounds pleasant and a little different, they are ecstatic. A few may become turned on to something new and unfamiliar, but these are really a drop in the bucket. However, let’s not kid ourselves; these ‘eventers’ are the bread and butter of all but the tiniest paying festivals, and indirectly that of the free ones, too (no city is going to support a festival that attracts a mere 500 small-spending folk music fanatics).

For us, the enthusiasts and perform-
probably deserves our tolerance, if not our support. If a festival hooks a dozen people out of the horde, so that they turn up at the next concert or coffee house, then so much the better.

In general, Canadian festivals are doing what they can do rather well. The fact that they can't do what we want them to do is our problem, not theirs. Mariposa tried to do something meaningful with Canadian music last year, and discovered that nobody wanted to listen. Perhaps they were a little naive in expecting thousands of people to turn out on a less-than-scorching weekend, to a less-than-idyllic site to listen to several forms of less-than-popular music? One wonders how much more of a financial disaster would have ensued, had it not been for the beer tent.

The answer? To festivals, life and everything? Maybe we should just let 'em be, and stop confusing them with all our contradictory demands. Stop expecting a silk purse and put up with a pretty good sows ear. It's all we're going to get from a big festival. Good folkie-oriented events generally ignore the public; -they neither go out of their way to attract them, nor need them to make ends meet. Nevertheless, without really trying they probably win over as many uncommitted souls as do large festivals. This doesn't make them better (they don't entertain as many people); -only different. If that's what you want in a festival, then go out and get your own. There's no substitute for putting your energy where your mouth is. In the meantime, enjoy your weekends in the sun. There are many worse ways of passing the time.