



Focus on Festivals

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Introduction

If you want to start a heated discussion, just try mentioning the words "folk festival" to a group of performers, researchers and teachers. The reaction will be rather dramatic! This certainly happened at our AGM in London last year. There was a session on the "dissemination of folk music" and once the word "festival" was mentioned it was impossible to change the topic. No matter how hard Alistair Brown or Edith Fowke or others tried, the conversation continually swung back to festivals. This seems to suggest that festivals, in and of themselves, are an important part of the Canadian folk music landscape - and thereby deserve some study and discussion. Hence this feature.

Canada has had a definite role in forging the shape of the "modern" folk festival. Under the directorship of Estelle Klein, the old Mariposa Folk Festival introduced several innovations that are still in evidence today. Tony Barrand indicates

that everyone tried to imitate - consciously or unconsciously - Estelle's "continually creative and flexible concept of a festival, particularly of a 'workshop'....she was able to tap into the personal roots of folk music and exploit that for musical ends in a way no one else did, and she successfully brought dance and instrumental music into balance with song" (*Come For To Sing*, 1982, 8(1), p. 14). Thus, not only is there a contemporary interest in festivals, witness the dissemination session, but Canada has also played a role in shaping the festival as it exists on the continent today.

The goal of this feature, then, is to look at the contemporary Canadian folk festival. Through this examination, I hope we may come to realize the complexity of the topic, and the importance that the modern festival can and does play in the vitalizing of Canadian folk

music. We will gain glimpses of the festival as it occurs in different parts of the country, and hopefully come to realize some of the diverging views that exist about the importance and place of the festival in the Canadian cultural experience.

Virtually all societies of the world periodically set aside time for celebration. These "time outs" are characterized by "recurring moments of special significance" and form the basis for the broad definition of the festival (see, for example, R. M. Dorson's **Folklore and Folklife**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). Within this, there are often periods of license, in which certain social sanctions are lifted as a part of the festival. (Have you ever NOT smelled grass at the main concert stage of a larger festival?) Festivals are thought to serve a number of functions. For the contemporary folk festival some of these are: (1) entertainment - particularly in the out-of-doors, which implies a celebration of our short-lived summer season; (2) money making - at least for some types of festivals; (3) recruitment of potential new members into the folksong community of the region; (4) closely allied to (3) is the education of people into certain musical traditions; (5) bringing people to share common experiences; and (6) celebration of regional cultural identity.

These functions are reflected in the kinds of behaviours and activities that are a part of most festivals. For example, workshops serve (4) for the audience - and oftimes (5) for the performers. The noteworthy activities of most folk festivals are: main stage performances (large audience, spectator-oriented concerts), workshops, parking lot "jam sessions" where the performers interact among themselves and others, children's activities, and social gatherings of the performing and organizational staff. Each of these activities is oriented toward serving one or more of the functions outlined above.

Within this general view of the festival, there exist some very important regional differences across Canada. In Newfoundland and Cape Breton there are numbers of small, regional festivals that bring together the local performers - perhaps for their only public performance of the year. Miramichi stands out in this regard. Ian Robb has described these kinds of festivals as "conveniently large kitchens" in that they represent a natural extension of the homegrown music experience that is oftimes kitchen (or in more modern homes living room) based. Typically, such festivals are grant-supported and do not rely on bringing in outsiders to sell tickets. They are fundamentally non-commercial.

In contrast to these small, regional festivals we find the mammoth commercial enterprises such as Winnipeg and Vancouver. These are clearly oriented toward making money, and are typically dependent upon "stars" to attract a large gate. More often than not the "stars" are imported - usually from the US or Britain - although there is a troupe of Canadians who do the circuit. These large festivals have adopted the original Mariposa format, but place more emphasis on the main stage concert, and oftimes the workshops are afterthoughts.

There is some middle ground between these two extremes as well. London's Home County Festival is free for the spectators, but follows the basic Mariposa format. Owen Sound, by remaining small and planting its roots in the local performing community, has been able to maintain a regional flavour using the Mariposa model. Some of the emerging festivals on the prairies are showing signs of developing into distinct types as well.

As far as Canadian folk music and festivals go - there is considerable debate. Some suggest that the large festival **should** be showcasing Canadian traditional music - while others suggest that isn't their function. Some feel that the small regional festival is the **only** place for the performance of Canadian folk music. Still others feel that there is no **place** whatsoever for Canadian traditional music in the festival, and that other media - radio, recordings etc - are the only vehicles of use.

This general discussion of festivals in Canada sets the backdrop for the articles to follow. A number of persons interested in the festival from varying perspectives were contacted and asked to contribute. There are numbers of interesting thoughts in the following submissions. **Kelly Russell** briefly describes the Newfoundland festival. The Miramichi experience is documented by **Ronald Labelle**, and he sadly notes the steady decline of this seminal event. The festival as it exists in Quebec is overviewed by **Donald Deschenes**. **Alistair Brown** has provided some interesting background on the Home County Festival. The performer's-eye-view of the festival is articulated by **Ken Bloom**, while **Art Thieme** discusses the plight of the singer as cloggers and "heavy metal" folk groups gain prominence. **Michael Cooney** has provided some very penetrating observations on workshops and main stage concerts - offering some very intriguing alternatives. Finally, **John Leeder** looks at the festival from the spectator's perspective. All of these provide some very interesting thoughts on the topic of the festival in Canada.