

Home County Folk Festival

by Alistair Brown

This year's Home County Folk Festival, to be held in Victoria Park, London on July 23, 24, 25, will be the ninth, since its inception in 1974. That, much to our surprise, makes us one of the granddaddies of festivaldom in Canada.

The history of the festival dates back to a folk concert held on the campus of the University of Western Ontario in January, 1974, as a benefit for Smale's Pace Coffeehouse. Appearing were a number of well-known musicians, either based in London, or with strong connections here: Valdy, David Bradstreet, Doug McArthur, Willie P. Bennett, Gord Lowe, Michael Lewis, Brent Titcombe, David Essig and Stan Rogers. Out of this concern, the Home County Folk League was born.

Flushed with the success of the concert, the League decided to promote a Festival that summer, and the whole process began.

While the Festival has evolved considerably since those early days, the principles governing it remain the same. It was agreed that it would be free to the public and held downtown. In this way, it is not appealing solely to the converted, nor does it rely on "name" acts to induce media watchers to buy tickets. By being held in Victoria Park in the centre of town, it is much more of a community event, with constant traffic all weekend. Numbers, predictably, are high. It is hard to assess accurately, but 20,000 during the day would not be pitching it too high.

The festival, of course, is not only music, and the layout of the site has a carnival atmosphere in mind. The crafts, (75 booths!) are not confined to a craft area, but are spread along the walkways throughout the park. Similarly with the 9 or so food booths, which are set up by local restaurants. We do try to avoid the carnival food syndrome, and care is taken to provide varied menus, and a reasonable standard.

There are five stages running throughout the weekend. Along with the park we inherit the bandshell. Hardly artistic dynamite, but it does have backstage facilities and power, and is very conspicuous, so it functions as the evening concert stage, as well as one of the three main daytime stages -- the other two are marquee

and scaffold affairs, an idea stolen (I freely admit it) from Mariposa. In addition, there is an open sign up stage, and a stage in the children's area. The children's area is being run by the London Regional Children's Museum, and is a very busy place indeed. Rather than create a quiet (did I say quiet?) little enclave in a corner, they are integrating their theme with that of the festival as a whole - making your own entertainment, and being an active participant in music and crafts.

The question remains - how is it funded? There is of course no such thing as a free festival. Our weekend budget is \$35,000 - not large by today's standards, but a lot of cash to find for a weekend. Much of it comes from the usual sources - programme book advertising, corporate donations, government and city grants, and T shirt royalties. A significant chunk comes from rental fees paid for food and craft booths. About \$7000 comes from passing the hat. Home County is probably unique in this. The idea



came from board chairman Tom Siess, and, frankly, everyone, including Tom, was amazed at its success. Whether this thunderbolt arrived in the bathtub or during the 16th beer, no one knows, but it has made the difference between ulcers and elation on our balance sheet. I've written about this before, so I'll not belabour the point. Suffice to say that, done with good taste, a sense of humour, and a good sense of timing, it works. In short, what is Home County trying to do? Well, it is trying to entertain the public. It is taking music, dance and crafts to the public, and letting them judge what they hear and see. It is trying to break down barriers in people's minds between different types of folk music by showing the relationship between a common experience and the music that arises from it. Lastly, we try not to forget the role of the folk festival in the performer's development. Singers meet other singers, exchange ideas, learn more about their own music, and help it evolve. As it should!