

# The Performer at Festivals

by Ken Bloom

For the past eight years I've been performing at folk festivals and I've discovered a few things. The viewpoint of the performer is quite different from that of the audience. I'll try to give you an idea of what it's like for those of us who hit the folky trail every summer.

There is a loose-knit group of about 30 to 50 acts who are the "regulars." This includes all kinds of performers. Some are strict traditionalists, some are "revivalists" like myself, and some are singer-songwriters. This group is made up of people who can work effectively in many kinds of workshops and interact well with many other kinds of performers. The organizers of the festivals know that these folks are ones who can be depended on to keep workshops moving along, come up with some workshop ideas, and can provide some additional backup for other performers. They are also easy-going and can be called on to help when the sound system blows up or some one didn't make it for their evening concert. This group is changing all the time. It is not the **Canadian Folk Music Mafia**. The bulk is certainly Canadian, but there are many others from the States, the British Isles, and elsewhere.

The festivals are like conventions for performers. You see friends you haven't seen in years. Lots of playing goes on back at the hotel where performers often get together in discrete groups to play quietly without the pressure of an audience to entertain. Many tunes are exchanged and learned. Much alcohol is consumed. Little sleep is to be had. Loves are won and lost and a whole year's worth of gossip is manufactured for the Great International Folky Rumour Mill. There is clearly something for everyone. Many of us plan little surprises for the next day's workshops and a few of the older, battlescarred veterans even manage to sleep. All and all, it is quite a celebration of Dionysian excess.

Let me include a few thoughts on some of the individual festivals. Each one has its own unique quality. A few years ago there was some talk about forming some kind of **National Folk Festival Board**. I'm very glad this never came about. I think having some national agency controlling the purse strings would have been the kiss of death to the festivals. Because each one is independently run, each one is unique. They reflect the regionalism which is so important

in folk music and helps to keep the mono-chromatic homogenizing influence of mass culture away. Hooray!!!! Let's hear it for the little guy.

I first played in Toronto at the **Mariposa Folk Festival**. This was always my favorite for a number of reasons. There was no evening concert so there was no differentiation between a "Mainstage" performer and on who "just did workshops." Since the Festival ended by about 8:00 every night, all of the performers got a chance to play there brain out and still get a good nights sleep. There was also room here for just about any kind of workshop you wanted to do. My first exposure to many kinds of music was at this wonderful festival and I will always be in their musical debt. They would also take a chance on unknown performers. This doesn't happen often. I wish more of the festivals would do this. I've been able to build a career for the last eight years thanks to these folks. At least now I have a chance to publicly thank them.

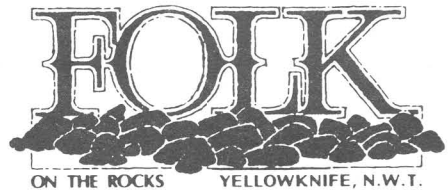
The **Winnipeg Folk Festival** is the largest. This is both good and bad. They certainly treat the performers like visiting royalty. You are met at the airport, taken to your hotel room where they have some food and refreshments waiting for you. If you need help carrying things they have schleppers. They were one of the first to institute this blessed system. The food for performers has always been legendary. My heart-felt thanks to Harry Paine and staff for many wonderful meals. The sound is usually good. They have given many people a place to play. However, I think the very size of the festival threatens to negate many of the pluses. Winnipeg has grown every year and now seems to have almost more acts than it can handle. This gets frustrating from two ends. The audience can't possibly see all the things they want to because there is too much going on and the performer can't play as much as he would like because there just isn't room. The overload also hurts all of those areas that have made the festival legendary among performers. If you have to many performers, you can't give all that much individual attention to each one. Still they do a great job and you'll see things there you won't anywhere else. It is much more commercial than the other festivals.

The **Vancouver Folk Music Festival** has a very West-coast ambience to it. You will see more political things here as well as more specific ethnic groups highlighted. Vancouver will also take a chance with an unknown from a place no one can pronounce. They seem more intent on presenting the best rather than the most well-known. You won't see everything at every festival, but each one has unique areas which are emphasized and done very well. I recommend this one especially for serious listeners who want

some contact with great singers, players, and entertainers.

These are the established festivals. The folks with the **Edmonton Folk Festival** have been working hard to put on a superior production. Edmonton tends to emphasize more Canadian talent and certainly more Albertans. Each year gets better and better. They have tried to learn the best things from the other festivals and are succeeding.

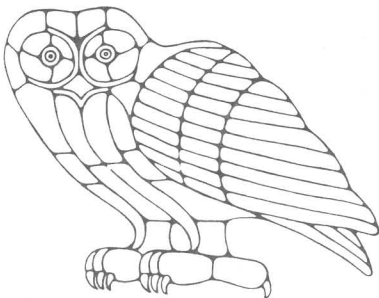
There are three others I'd like to comment on, Whitehorse, Yellowknife, and Owen Sound. In February, Whitehorse has the **Frostbite Festival**. This is a small affair done on a grand scale. It's held in the Whitehorse Rec center and has come to symbolize the end of heavy winter when errant Yuknoers return. Frostbite is small and the Yukoners go to amazing lengths to see that the performers "Northern experience" is a pleasant and memorable one. Northern festivals are more easy-going about the type of music you hear than the Southern ones. These are music festivals and they include jazz, blues, R&R, country, and just about anything else you can imagine. I love it. Since these are small festivals, each performer plays a lot. I love it. The food is usually Moose, Bear, Beaver, etc. I love it. There is more of an emphasis on locals. I love it.



**Folk on the Rocks** in Yellowknife is absolutely unique. They split up the performers into four categories. There are whites from the South and whites from the North. There are Indians and Inuit playing white music and Indians and Inuit playing their own music, both traditional and contemporary. Since the audience is about half native, it makes the focus of this festival a little different. Here is the only festival I know of where whites and native mix both on and off stage. I would like to see more of this, where native performers are brought into the festival at large and not just shunted off to a Native Peoples area. It has only been in Yellowknife where I have had the opportunity to hear much Native music and talk with some of the performers. It's great. I love it. The organizers of this festival go to extreme lengths

to see that every one is well taken care of even though facilities are often a little primitive. They have managed to come up with a successful festival when everyone was telling them, it would never happen. My hat is off to them. The food was always Northern, musk-ox, caribou, and Arctic char. I love it.

Finally, there is the **Owen Sound Folk Festival** in Ontario. This is a little jewel of a festival. It comes at the end of the summer. It almost always rains and no one cares. Owen Sound is small and has blessedly stayed the same size since it started. Because it comes at the end of the summer, much music is played that you don't hear earlier on. By August, most of us have run out fiddle tunes to play and ballads to sing, though of course this goes on. Many of us get back to real roots and sing R&R till dawn. One year I organized a band to play



for the party back at the hotel. It was a whopping success. It seemed that the more traditional the performer, the harder they boogied. You've never seen Morris dancing quite like that! Owen Sound is truly wonderful. The spirit seems to spill over to the festival grounds. It is more relaxed than most and everyone has a great time.

These are just a few of my own rambling views. I've not mentioned all of the festivals that I've played. It would be a book. **What is wonderful about the festival here in Canada is that each one is unique and has its own special spirit and feeling.** I hope that more communities decide to organize things like this. I hope they all continue for many years to come. They broaden horizons for the performers as well as for the audience and give us all a chance to grow.