

The Singer at Festivals

by Art Thieme

Scenario: It's 2 a.m. The evening concert at the festival is over. The party is in full swing. At one end of the room are four fiddlers, three banjo pickers, and an assortment of guitars, button accordions, Irish pipes, spoons, bones, and kazoos. Cloggers are dancing up a storm on every available inch of turf. Sitting strangely quiet in chairs along the walls are the singers and balladeers. They don't stand much of a chance in this confusing din. Halfheartedly, one of them says, "Maybe we should get together in someone's hotel room for a song swap." This doesn't happen. Too much instant organizing is involved, and we're all exhausted from a long day at the festival site. We each drink four or five beers and then, one by one, we drift off to our rooms for some sleep. When we arise in the morning, the din of the music upstairs is still audible through the ceiling. Naturally, our room is right below the cloggers. Subconsciously, we entertain thoughts of murder. Three cups of coffee usually eradicate these thoughts from our minds, but we still must live with the guilt of having wished mass destruction on the "boogiers" of this world.

Now, folks, don't get me wrong. I love string-band music. I love Cajun accordion. I love klezmer bands, even when they play too loud and too long. I love bluegrass, old-timey, electric blues, bagpipe bands, and all the other "heavy-metal" folk sounds that have emerged in recent years. I'll even sit through shrill Irish bands who, incredibly, somehow manage to alternate songs of love and peace with "kill the other guys" songs, all in the name of Christianity. Certainly, this is all wonderful music, but we really do have to take a serious look at the fact that many folk gatherings are running the serious risk of becoming **just like** rock concerts. The decibels and the beat are the draw.

If you ask some of the people I've seen attending folk events recently why they like certain string bands or certain high-powered Celtic bands, I'm sure you're quite likely to get an answer like, "I'll give 'em a 10; it was easy to clog to!" The folk subculture has to decide quickly whether it wants to attract an audience of numb-minded drunks who seem to feel that high-pitched rebel yells are appropriate ways to express musical approval. Folks, we're in danger!

Glenn Ohrlin, Nimrod Workman, Blind Jim Brewer, Almeda Riddle, Larry Older--these are just a few of the fine word-oriented balladeers who seem to be showing up less and less at the major folk presentations. These are the folk with a story to tell, the ballad singers. Somehow, I seem to sense that their lyric offerings are being drowned out. We run the risk of becoming "antisemantic."

Last April, I was asked to be a part of the 4th Annual Folk-Legacy Festival in Hartford, Connecticut. Held inside St. Paul's Methodist Church, this is definitely a singer's festival. The gentle sounds of Sandy and Caroline Paton, Cindy Kallett, Jonathan Eberhart, Andy Wallace, Howie Burson, Gordon Bok, Ed Trickett, and Ian Robb, among others, enchanted the audience at the Sounding Board Coffeehouse for two solid days. The singers were heard at this festival.

Another balladeers' gathering is the Great River Festival held at La Crosse, Wisconsin, each Labor Day weekend. Run by Fred and Barbara Starner of the original Clearwater sloop crew, this event reflects their gentle musical tastes even though they know that some high-powered bands might double the take at the gate.

By far, the most amazing singers' convention I've ever had the privilege to be a part of was the 1979 Wesleyan Folk Song Festival held at Middletown, Connecticut. It was run by Lisa Null as a showcase for her favorite singers--Norman Kennedy, Margaret Cristl, and others. I will never forget the magical duets by Louis Kilien and Peter Bellamy. That "Love Songs" workshop will remain, for me, one of the finest moments I've ever experienced at any festival. The 82-part harmony coming out of the audience was mind-boggling.

But why should festivals have to exist separate but equal? Why should one festival be set up as a brawling event where the music is almost secondary? Why should the singers have to drift off to a smoke-filled motel room while the pounding of the bodhran monopolizes the party? Why can't all kinds of music be presented at the same concert in a way that will satisfy everyone? (Everyone, that is, except those who would just as soon be at a rock concert.)

Maybe I'm crazy, but there should be a way for Na Cabarfeidh and the Red Clay Ramblers to play on the same concert with Nimrod Workman and Jean Ritchie. The audience at folk gatherings should be given the latitude to appreciate the many varied aspects of this folk revival. In

the early years of the revival, we were trying to soak up as much as we could of every style imaginable. We couldn't get enough. Around every musical corner was a moving and enlightening experience. It's up to us to see that the narrowness and polarization that has affected so terribly much of American life doesn't infiltrate the folk revival in the 1980s. As Bob Dylan once said, "You can be in my dreams if I can be in yours."

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