

# Some Thoughts on Folk Festivals

by Micheal Cooney

There is no **best** festival; as with almost everything, it's a matter of taste. Some like it hot, some like it big, some like it full of chewy stuff (workshops, etc.), some like one big weekend party. Therefore I can only write with conviction about what I like on a folk festival and why. But first, a definition:

Folk music, for the purpose of this discussion, is music learned by ear, made in small group situations, kitchen-music. This has nothing to do with value judgements; folk music is not better or more noble than other musics, it's just **different**. A major difference is that it's not written or composed. You can't write a folk song. (But "the folk" don't sing just folk songs. People sing anything they like, always have. I think the folklorists and purists have done a disservice by not making that more clear. You can't make a person like only one kind of music.)

I make this definition because, on the whole, very little folk music is heard at folk festivals. Mostly one hears recently composed music and songs. Why? Because most people don't care for folk music. It's an acquired taste, like any music not in the mainstream (jazz, classical music, opera). It takes getting used to. **And** because folk music is small group music, in a **style** sense. (In that sense, most folk music at festivals is made in the camping areas, after the concerts are over.) **And**, the larger the audience, the less appreciation of subtleties. So if performers wish to get a reaction

from the audience (and the one who doesn't is rare indeed), show-biz techniques come into play. Finger-picking gives way to wild thrashing on guitars, slow and quiet songs give way to loud and/or fast. (But "YEE-HAW!" isn't an indication of appreciation of artistic ability; it's a Pavlovian response...)

Does all this mean I like only small festivals? Not necessarily. Truly, I like all kinds, 'cause I like many kinds of music, not just folk. I love some of the acts at the big festivals. (Al Simmons "the Human Juke-box," Riders in the Sky, and the legendary Blues Band, at last year's (1981) Winnipeg F.F., come to mind). But I do feel sorry for the occasional "real folk" who get stuck in with the big-time ENTERTAINERS. They often appear dull because they're out of context and don't know the show-biz techniques. Now and then they do learn the techniques, and come out like Doc Watson, who plays what could be termed country-rock and bluegrass, but more often they get accepted with polite applause and a patronizing attitude.

It won't do to get "real" folk performers to one's folk festival just because they're "authentic," or recently re-discovered, or obscure, etc. They must also be very good at what they do, if they are to stand up among today's high-power performers. These are becoming increasingly hard to find. I don't know what's to be done, 'cept look hard. Communicate with other festivals, societies, folklorists, collectors, etc. Solicit tapes from these and others. (But don't take anyone's word that their recent find is "GREAT!" Many collectors have a bias for obscurity and little critical ability...)

City folk acts are a dime a dozen; good real folk musicians and singers are hard to find but worth the search. Make it easy for modern audiences to enjoy these less "exciting performers in complimentary situations, those which show them at their best. To me this is a bigger challenge, more interesting, than merely putting together a "dynamite show."

"Workshops" have traditionally been the place to see the "smaller" performers in a smaller-audience situation. Unfortunately, from a participants viewpoint, the size of the audience at one's workshop is often taken as an indication of one's merit. "Git-Down Blues" workshop will outdraw "Songs from a Newfoundland Outport" fifty-to-one. What's to be done? There is the real challenge, the Art in festival planning. A festival needs both kinds of workshops. This is why one takes the "Give 'em What They Want" sign off the office wall and puts up "Give 'im What They Need" in its place. Who knows what

they need? But if you keep that as a goal, chances are you'll end up a lot closer to a more-interesting-than-average festival.

The choice of "host" or M.C. at Workshops and concerts is crucial. There's a real need for people who understand the audience AND the performers, who can communicate the value of each performer and type of music, especially the less mainstream ones, to a basically "a.m. radio" audience, without being boring.

The ideal "workshop" is a combination of entertainment and knowledge exchange. Those which are all entertainment seldom achieve anything of value. (Contrary to common belief, pleasure does not equal happiness.) A great workshop might have just one performer. There is no advantage to having more than four participants. (Quantity does not equal quality.) In my mind, I divide "workshop" into three categories:

I. DISCUSSIONS: Maximum talk, maybe some music. The object is knowledge and idea exchange. Examples - "Streetsinging for Fun and Profit;" "The Music Business and how to survive;" "Everything You Always Wanted To Know About (Banjos) But Didn't Know How To Ask."

II. WORKSHOPS: Half talk, half music. Discussions of a type of music (for instance) with examples by participants. Examples - "What is Folk Music - The Oral Process Explained;" "The Music of Woody Guthrie (or Leadbelly, etc.);" "The Old Ballads" (P.S. Have you ever seen a 1-hour "ballads" workshop with 14 participants? I was in one! Rediculous!); "Sea-Chanties for specific Tasks;" "Performing (Interpreting) Traditional Music For Modern Audiences;" "The Esthetics of Accompaniments."

III. SINGAROUNDS: Song-swaps on a specific topic. The host briefly explains the topic, and the participants try to stick to it. This is the most common "workshop." The challenge is to get away from the tired old standards, (but not completely - keep in mind that in general they aren't "folkies" out there...) Examples - "Required Love Songs;" "Songs of Work and people's Attitudes To Their Work as Reflected in their Songs" (Take this Job and Shove It); "Songs in Which the Woman Wins..."

One of my favorite festivals was the Fox Hollow Folk Festival in Petersburg, N.Y., run by Robert Beers from 1966 until his death in 1972. I was a performer at those festivals, and on the board of directors for the last few.

Fox Hollow was one long weekend party, with a concert lasting from before noon 'til after midnight. We visited with people we hadn't seen for a year, made music in the campgrounds into the wee hours, and listened to new and old performers in between. If there was a good newcomer, the word spread quickly, and everyone would check to see when she or he was on again. And there was the large and very interesting crafts area, which was its own festival.

When Bob wanted to institute workshops, I campaigned against them, partly from my own selfishness. Perhaps it was because it was one of the last festivals of summer and because it was quite small and in a beautiful woodland setting, but I didn't want Fox Hollow to get "serious."

Why did the Mariposa Folk Festival have no evening concerts? Probably because of the Woodstock movie, one message of which was: if there's enough of you, you can get in free. Mariposa went through a few years of increasing numbers of gate-crashers, who, once they were in, didn't just sit quietly and listen to the evening concerts. They weren't there for the music; they were there for some ACTION. Things got more uncomfortable each year until a number of performers said, "We'll come for the daytime activities, but we don't want to be in the evening concerts." That was 1970, the year in which James Taylor and Joni Mitchell were on the same evening concert.

After that Mariposa adopted a policy of no really big names and no night concerts. From that naturally evolved a greater concentration of creative thought on workshops and daytime activities.

That policy was very successful then, but the restrictions no longer apply. There's reduced interest in folk festivals in Toronto these days, and if it is to survive at all, Mariposa will have to return to evening concerts and big names.

My favorite folk festival of all time? I value different festivals for different things. My favorite annual festival, for being consistently great, year after year, was the Mariposa Folk Festival in Toronto, but for a single event, all things considered, I'd have to say the 1963 (University of California at Berkeley Folk Festival, for many reasons. Barry Olivier planned that festival and he did things there that haven't been done anywhere else. For instance:

**Introductory Concert:** The first event at the Festival was an afternoon get-acquainted

concert, with a bit of chat and one song by each performer, in a nice woodsy glen on campus. (This needs a good M.C., to "bringout" the less talkative" folk.)

**numbers of Performers:** 9 performing entities (single, groups), plus a few folklorists. Nice.

**Panel Discussions:** Noted folklorists, performers, promoters would discuss a sometimes controversial subject, with questions and comments from the audience. Hot stuff.

**Movies:** An hour of Folk Films every evening around 6:00. There are many many great old and new folk movies which nobody ever sees!

**Noon-hour, Round-robin Concerts:** 4 performers, sometimes in unlikely combinations, on stage together to sing one song each around, to see how they influence each other.

**Short Evening Concerts:** Four performing entities each night for four nights (Wed. through Sat.) meant concerts lasted until 10:30 or so. THEN:

Many After-Concert Activities:

- Coffeehouse in student centre - the best local performers in a nice (jam-packed) coffeehouse situation with a festival performer or two scheduled to "drop in unannounced" to sing a few songs.
- square-dancing in Student Union Ballroom
- Sign-up-and-sing "Hootenanny" in a University Hall - Two songs or 10 minutes per person, whichever is shorter.

- Group Singalong by a big Campfire - (led by me in 1963). Again with Festival performers (who knew singalongs) scheduled to drop by for "surprise visits." (I was supposed to say, "Hey! There's Pete Seeger. Would you lead us in a couple of songs, Pete?" Instead, when I saw him coming, I forgot the words to the song I was leading, my banjo went out of tune, and my voice dried up. "H-H-H-Hey! H-H-H-Here's P-P-P-P...")

Need I say More? O.K. It was scheduled so everyone could see almost everything. Maybe you had to go without eating and do a lot of running, but it could almost be done. Also, workshops by Pete Seeger, by himself, on "How To Get People To Sing Along" and Leadbelly-style 12-string guitar playing, in which he really had

time to discuss the topic without worrying about using other performers' time. And Sam Hinton did a very thorough workshop on "Sources For Learning Folk Songs" with a 3-page hand-out bibliography!

The festival was all on the campus, workshops, movies, etc., in lecture halls, evening concerts in the student Union ballroom or auditorium. There was a sunday morning brunch for performers and folklorists, etc. (a reasonably small number) at the director's mother's home, followed by a big sunday afternoon, concert in the University's greek bowl with all performers (and one "big draw" (Joan Baez?) to pay for everything). This was followed by a cook-out and camp-fire sing with all staff, volunteers and performers in the early evening. NICE.

I am still running on energy, knowledge and inspiration from that festival. Thank you Barry Olivier.