

Folk Festivals - A Personal View

by John Leeder

My old "3rd Annual Mariposa Folk Festival Program" from 1963 evokes memories. Performers like Alan Mills, The Travellers, the young Ian and Sylvia, Judy Orban, Al Cromwell, Malka and Jose, Stu Phillips... My roommate and I timidly drinking beer in an Orillia parking lot, thus peripherally taking part in the Great Disturbances which resulted in the Orillia city fathers rendering the festival temporarily homeless. It was my first of many folk festivals, and the first of many locations for Mariposa -- locations including Maple Leaf Stadium, InnisLake, Algonquin Island, Olympic Island and, in Mariposa's reincarnation this coming summer, Toronto's Harbourfront Centre.

For many years (1963 to 1976) Mariposa was the only folk festival in my life. For most of that time it was the highlight of my musical year: looked forward to months in advance, with anticipation taking a sharp upturn as the list of performers was released; revelled in for three glorious days of total immersion in music; and savoured in memory throughout the following months. Small wonder that for me Mariposa still represents the archetype of the folk festival. It defined not one but two standard folk festival formats, one of which is still almost

universally followed by Canadian folk festivals of the present day.

(I interject at this point that this memoir is being written from a specific point of view: that of a concerned audience member with absolutely no contact with the festival organizers and absolutely no idea of what was going on behind the scenes. Perhaps someone who was involved will see fit to present that point of view on a future article.)

Of the two formats, the first is what I think of as the "classic" format. Mariposa probably didn't invent the classic format; it likely borrowed it from the granddaddy folk festival of them all, Newport. But Mariposa honed, fine-tuned and propagated it and --most importantly-- abandoned it when it had taken it as far as it could go.

The classic format involves "workshops" in the afternoon and an "evening concert" on the "main stage" in (you guessed it!) the evening. The term "workshop" originally meant a small, informal teaching session, likely with audience participation. Some workshops are still like that. But as audiences got larger, stages got higher and the audience-performer distance widened, "workshop" came to include other types of event as well. It could be nothing more than a mini-concert by a single performer or group. It could assemble performers with a common area of expertise on the same stage to play and discuss "Cajun Music", "Banjo Styles" or whatever. It could involve performers from different traditions swapping songs on a given theme, which could be as prosaic as "Sea Songs" or as outrageous as "Songs That're So Bad They're Good", or on no specified theme at all (known as a "singaround"). Ideally there was a mingling



of professional and non-career musicians, traditional and contemporary music, old-timers and newcomers. In general, a "workshop" was thought of as being less formal than a concert and as making an effort to teach the audience something as well as entertaining them. Usually there were several workshops happening simultaneously at different locations on the festival site.

It was at these early Mariposas that I learned survival techniques for festival-goers. I learned to take a packsack with raingear, warm clothes, sandwiches and liquid refreshments (smokeables hadn't caught on in the circles I moved in in those days); to park at the far end of the parking lot and walk to the gate, thus avoiding the madhouse traffic at departure time; to use the toilets farthest from the stage (they were marginally cleaner, and the extra walking time was more than compensated by the shorter lineups); not to bother taking an instrument (who had time to jam when there were so many masters to listen to?). If I had to miss even a moment of music, I wanted it to be at a time and place controlled by me.

The music was it. The craft areas, the frisbee players and sunbathers, the users of mind-altering substances, even the occasional ventures into toplessness by comely female audience members, all were mere distractions from the main event, the music. It wasn't all traditional music (it wasn't all what I thought of as "**folk**" music, in fact), it wasn't all presented ideally or in the most ideal atmosphere, but there was lots of great stuff, and it was there for the hearing. I soaked up as much as I could.

With this obsessive attitude, small wonder that I felt that the evening concerts were an anticlimax, and the weakest part of the festival. Somehow the idea of a performer on a huge stage using massive loudspeakers to attempt to communicate with an audience of thousands, at least half of whom were involved at any given time with the socializing aspects of the gathering and paying little attention to the music, was ludicrous in view of the delicious musical smorgasbord on which I had been snacking all day. The setup demanded experienced professional musicians who could cope with the situation -- the newcomers, part-timers and traditional singers were necessarily excluded. Too, probably it was necessary for Mariposa (and still is, with most festivals) to book a few big-name performers, often only marginally involved with folk music, to draw the crowds and ensure financial viability. The concomitant audience hysteria and sometimes performer arrogance usually left a bad taste in

my mouth -- an unfortunate way to end an otherwise rewarding festival. I got in the habit of leaving before the headliners came on.

Mariposa's organizers must have shared these views. At the height of the festival's popularity using the "classic" format, they took the bold step of scrapping it and going to what I can't help thinking of as the "Mariposa format". They simply eliminated the evening concerts entirely and went with workshops throughout. In its heyday, Mariposa ran six stages of workshops simultaneously from 10:00 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Paradise! Not only were there more hours per day of the sort of situation which I personally preferred, and a wide selection of events to choose from at any given time, but the setup was healthier for the folk music movement as a whole. The "big draws" were still there, and people still came to see them, but their impact was diluted by the less formalized situation. The commercial performers' fans couldn't help being exposed to grassroots music, and in some cases were turned on to it. As well, in some cases hard core traddies like me gained new respect for the commercial performers by seeing them in a more relaxed setting. To my mind, the "Mariposa format" represented nothing less than the next major stage in the evolution of the folk festival as an institution. Mariposa had grown up.

Unfortunately, the glory days of Mariposa's maturity ended all too soon for me, as I moved to Calgary and gradually lost touch with what was happening in the East. Of the newer western festivals -- Winnipeg, Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Regina, Canmore, Red Deer, the Folk Festival on Rails -- only the latter approaches (on a much smaller scale and in much more intimate surroundings) the Mariposa format. It may be that a festival has to survive for several years and build a healthy audience base before it can even consider abandoning the classic format and proceeding to the second stage of evolution. It may be that a festival one of whose objects is to make a profit for its organizers is of necessity trapped forever in stage one. It may be that it takes a special kind of daring and foresight on the part of festival organizers to move their festival out of childhood and into maturity.

Let's hope that at least one western festival survives long enough, and has organizers possessed of sufficient boldness, to adopt the Mariposa format. Meanwhile, though, the existing "classic" festivals provide lots of good music in at least reasonably pleasant circumstances. Go hear it! Support your local festival -- without your help, it can't grow up.