Big Festivals Don't Work ...at least for me!

by Lanie Melamed

The challenge to face my ideas about folk festivals came during the last meeting of the Society in the midst of a rich discussion on the future of Canadian folk music. For the first time I heard a few people articulate my own rather undeveloped thoughts about the subject- ...that big festivals did not work. At least for me.

As I began to reflect on my twenty years as a performer and spectator at festivals in Canada, the States, Europe and Latin America I was able to single out one or two features which were crucial to my enjoyment; the chance for intimate sharing of music (art, dance, crafts, theatre) between performer and audience, and the sense that people were sharing their art with me, more for love than money. The format or structure of the festival itself, seemed to enhance these values in small subtle ways. As festivals grew in size and scope, what appeared to be happening was a Festival type of sound, dance or act which accommodated itself well to a large format, thereby crowding out other possibilities. In Seeger's words,

> Set up a 50-foot stage, and have 5,000 or more seated in front of it eagerly looking forward to a show — I mean a Show — and you might as well realize that a lot of American's truest folk performers could not appear successfully. From beyond the tenth row no one would see the twinkle in the old ballad singer's eye, nor the grace or gnarled fingers on the fiddle strings. So who has to take over the show... The seasoned performer, who with gestures and broad smiles and stage experience can project to the back rows.(1)

It's the twinkle in the eye that I find so appealing about folk music.

Perhaps it is my age, burn-out, being female, greater wisdom, or the "times," or a little bit of each which brings me to this point. A large part of it may be a reaction to increasing bigness, economic conglomerates, commercialism, and the electronic explosion, which moves me toward seeking smaller, more authentic social settings. My reason for preferring folk music over other musical forms is not so much to be entertained as to feel connected to myself, the performer and other members of the audience. Most of the music I like does not adapt well to large stages, bright lights and sophisticated equipment which diffuses the performer in a web of wires and unnatural seating arrangements. In fact, all of this is a far cry from the "kitchen" where much of the best music-making takes place. I agree with Michael Cooney when he states (from the perspective of a performer) that in today's entertainment world the package is often more important than the contents, that as the number of listeners increases, the demand for "show" becomes more insistent. When the criteria for songs becomes blaring sound, intensity and speed, many of the songs he loves best would be unsuitable.(2)

The picture is not black and white, of course. There have been many exhilarating moments at large festivals and a lot of bad ones in kitchens. Neither can I overlook Pete Seeger or Tom Paxton concerts. Each of these men has the rare

talent of being able to perform for thousands while making each person in the audience feel individually included. I suspect that there is a relationship between the fact that both performers refuse to go the show "biz" route, that they include me and my neighbors in the music-making and that their songs express my own worries, joys and concerns.

Over the years I have watched the progressive growth of the Big Festival, where success was measured in terms of size and receipts at the gate. In fact, it was difficult to keep a good festival down ... sooner or later the word got out and the desire to have more performers, thereby needing more money etc., created a ceaseless spiral. Excellent festivals such as the Beers Festival (New York, mid-sixties) soon overextended themselves and bigness certainly achieved its zenith at Woodstock with an attendance of 400,000. Looking closely at the development of the Mariposa Festival and some of my own experiences at other festivals is one way of highlighting some of the problems and opportunities I see around festival organization.

I attended my first folk festival (in the format we have come to know it today) in Philadelphia in 1963, two years after that festival's inaugeration. This was the period immediately following the first Newport Folk Festival which heavily influenced the format of the large folk festival in North America. At that time, I was an overextended mother, community worker and folk dance teacher, soon to become a part-time student in the Folklore Department at the University of Pennsylvania. I became involved in those early years in leading children's dance and song games at the festival. By 1964, some of us convinced the Festival Committee to include participation folk dancing for adults in the weekend lineup. Until that time, participation was programmed only for children and an occasional sing-along workshop. Daytime concerts and workshops were followed by mammoth evening concerts which lasted all night (to avoid having thousands of people leaving the grounds through the one exit gate at the same time). The philosophy seemed to be to wear out both audience and performer until everybody packed up and went home. The Philadelphia festival developed its own vital and special ethos under the artistic direction of Kenneth Goldstein, then a professor of Folklore at the University of Pennsylvania. Its early days were marked by a time of political and social unrest following the repressive 50's, the civil rights movement and increasing anti-war activism.

My involvement with the Mariposa Folk Festival began in 1968, first as a spectator, then leading folk dance and play-parties, next as a talent scout for Quebec dance groups, eventually coordinating the ethnic dance stage, and now as a Foundation board member and co-organizer of Mariposa in the Woods. In the late 60's the Mariposa Festival had an almost magical quality, situated on the Toronto Islands amidst stately old trees, lush greenery and surrounded by the waters and ducks of Lake Ontario. The boat ride itself had the effect of separating you from one world and connecting you with another, one less real, less permanent, but full of special delights and wonders. The Festival was friendly, warm, and relaxed, reflecting a society which had not suffered the effects of social upheaval and a violent war abroad. There was excellent music to satisfy a smorgasbord of tastes. Travelers who festival-hopped, said it was the "best festival in North America." One of the reasons was the artistic direction of Estelle Klein. Not only did she have excellent taste in folk music, an uncanny ear for new talent and a deep and profound knowledge of the roots of folk music, she was also a creative and capable organizer committed to excellence on her own terms. When something did not work, she was not afraid to change it.

As the festival grew in popularity it shaped, and was itself shaped, by the musical happenings of the times, Woodstock, drugs, freebees for the "people," and guerilla-type activism; the idyllic peaceful days abruptly ended. In 1970 a mob of angry people unable to buy tickets (which were sold out) stormed the barricades during an evening concert. The festival committee was forced to rethink its future. Under Estelle's leadership the decision was to completely revamp the festival format and philosophy. Instead of big evening concerts attracting thousands of people, many of whom were less interested in the music than in "being there" it was decided to emphasize workshops, participation and the little people who constituted the folk music and dance movement. Big stars were played down and the hoopla which accompanied them was eliminated. (The year Bob Dylan tried to attend the festival as an ordinary person a police escort was needed to get him off the island safely. It was like being in the midst of

the Calgary Stampede instead of a community folk event.) The reasons for the changed format were communicated to festival subscribers in a mailing;

> *There will be no evening concerts.* Concerts will happen during the days and will be more in number but fewer as to the number of acts in each. This means that you'll still get to see old favourites and unfamiliar people too, but each act will probably have more time on stage. Some will be solo concerts. Workshops will be happening all the time as well and we will go straight thru till *9 P.M.. There will be more areas* along with expanded crafts and Native Peoples sections, thanks to last year's profits. There will be much colour added by a larger representation of our "ethnic" community and you'll see some of the richness that exists right here in Toronto. Our profits also made it possible for a qualilfied folklorist to study this aspect of Toronto.
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> *There will be more ways in which you can participate* — folk dance, square dance, crafts you can do, open sings — all with the view that you are a part of us and we all can make a festival. The emphasis is on "festive." As well as seeing some of those "names" you love, you'll see them more often. They won't be on a "one time only" basis. Maybe you will even decide to pass them up in favour of someone new or different. It's your choice.(3)

It was a risky decision. The evening concerts were not only big money makers, but they were the supposed highlight of the festival. Would people come to a *daytime* event in which big stars might be present but not spotlighted?

I hope the future will bring more smaller, regional festivals across Canada

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The festival went on to develop the daytime workshop format, enlarging to include whole communities of people performing, building, cooking and sewing in the context of their own lives and among their own kin. In 1977 Mariposa was awarded a grant to bring a group of Native people from the Prairies to the festival. In the years which followed, Native musicians, dancers, storytellers and craftspeople from Nova Scotia, James Bay and British Columbia set up camp at the festival and shared their folk heritage. It became a folk-life festival not unlike the Smithsonian Festival in Washington D.C. The expanded day format and the elimination of evening concerts turned out to be an artistic and financial success. The 1973 flyer exuded confidence, setting forth the new philosophy with even greater positivism than the previous years.

> Mariposa is a folk festival where musicians, singers, dancers and craftsmen can be completely together with their audience, and their audience with them.
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> Many of the barriers that divide audience and performer have been broken down at Mariposa — you are invited to take part in many of the activities in an active way — to perform at open sings, take part in instrumental workshops, join in crafts sessions, and dance your feet off.
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> Mariposa remains primarily a folk festival — and there is an important and growing involvement both with craftsmen in many different disciplines, and with Eskimo and Indian people from all parts of Canada. It is sometimes easier to explain the things that Mariposa is NOT: It is not a pop music festival; it is not a junior league Woodstock. Mariposa seeks a FAMILY audience. There are no "headliners" and no "stars" and no power-packed concerts with performers who have been mass-marketed by the media.
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> Because Mariposa needs to bring performer and audience together, it is essential that the size of the audience be restricted, so that the warmth and intimacy is not lost.(4)

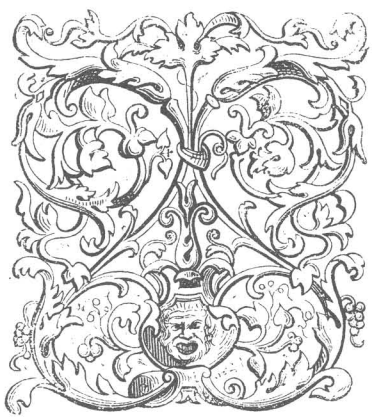
While Mariposa is best known for 17 years of annual festivals, the Folk Foundation has also been involved in a number of diversified worthy projects. The Board of Directors, Advisory Council and hundreds of volunteers were and are dedicated to the preservation and propagation of folk music, dance and art as a creative force in Canadian cultural life. Other activities of the Foundation include publishing books and records,

sponsoring year round workshops and concerts, a research project on folk life in Newfoundland, educational programs in schools, a year round series of family concerts and a resource library which includes taped documentation of the festivals. A non-profit organization, the Foundation has continually turned its profits back into community educational and recreational events.

In 1970, Mariposa in the Schools (MITS) was inaugurated to develop continuing audiences for folk music. With assistance from the Ontario Arts Council, this project currently employs 26 performers who visit schools each year throughout Ontario, giving more than 2,000 informal workshops to children of all ages. MITS has already produced one successful children's record and is working on another. The most recent addition to the Foundation's activities is Mariposa in the Woods, a country setting where 100 adults can combine learning folk instruments, song style and dance along with vacation-type fun and relaxation. This project carries with it the idea of smallness, intimacy and learning in a relaxed outdoor environment. By now, the reader must have surmised that my attention to the details of the changed format and the Foundation's diversified activities meet with my wholehearted approval.

During the ten year period after the festival moved to the Toronto Islands it had expanded to attract up to 25,000 people per weekend. It had hired some 200 performers who were housed in an entire small hotel. It relied on 17 year round committees, and had kept more than 300 volunteers busy during each three day weekend. These were Mariposa's "golden years." And they had to end. Anything which is vital, alive and growing must also be constantly changing to accommodate internal as well as external demands. Bigness is not necessarily better, and Mariposa seemed to reach its zenith. Two years of unreliable weather and diminished advance ticket sales combined to threaten the Festival's finances. As well, new festivals were gaining popularity in nearby areas; Sudbury, London, Hamilton, Owen Sound. It seemed important to take time out; to re-evaluate and to make changes. Mariposa made another courageous decision — to suspend the festival for a while and to explore new avenues to bring people together through folklore.

The decision came at a time when noticeable changes were also happening in the larger world. Instead of bigness, we seemed to be entering an era in which social critics were suggesting that



"smaller is better;" small is more efficient, more ecologically sound, more human and sociable. As an antidote to the mass events of the 60's, the 80's seem to have closed in; times are harder, and people seem less expansive; there is less job security and too many people have no jobs at all. These are the times which create rich song traditions, but not mass celebrations. If the "medium is the message" as McLuhan suggests, perhaps the time for large festivals (8000 day) is over. At least for now.

My hopes for the future of folk music in urban settings, include the following ideas:

- that we start again at the base, singing in people's homes, basements, community centers and coffee houses, forming a groundswell over the coming years of new and old singers and dancers.
- that we search for music and ambiance which is more deeply rooted in people's lives, which is produced from their own lived experience and which represents their deepest concerns. It may be that the issue of planetary Survival unites us and mobilizes us to find new ways.
- that instead of buying entertainment which is sold on the basis of its packaging, we insist on making up our own minds about what we like and don't like — that we learn to distinguish between hype and honesty and begin to affirm our own preferences. (A far-fetched dream I know.)
- that smaller, regional festivals be held more frequently, which require less organization and structure and

where informal groupings are encouraged. Traditional festivals could be sponsored in small towns and by local organizations throughout Canada. These organizations might well form into a loosely organized association supported but not dominated by governments.

that festivals be places of formal and informal learning where communication takes place on many levels instead of the traditional one way, from performer to audience.

that more opportunities be created for informal participation, sharing and learning. The English Country Dance and Song Society, for example, has been sponsoring sell-out weeks for 40 years where music and dance classes are held in country surroundings. Mariposa in the Woods is an attempt to meet this need.

These are the directions which would encourage my interest and participation. Big festivals were, are and can be wonderful but they don't feel right for me — just now.

NOTES

(1) Pete Seeger. *The Incompleat Folksinger.* Simon and Schuster, N.Y. 1972, page 196.

(2) "A Case Against Fame," *For What Time I am in This World: Stories from Mariposa*, ed. by Usher and Page-Harpa, Peter Martin Associates Ltd. 1977, page 79.

(3) Pre-season letter to Mariposa Festival subscribers 1971

(4) From the Festival brochure 1973