

What to Do With A Folklorist:

**A Practical Guide for Folk
Festival Organizers**

by Janet McNaughton

Academically trained folklorists (myself included) are often aware that people tend to regard us in the same light as stuffed moose heads—decorative perhaps, but not entirely useful. In this article I will try to dispel that notion by suggesting ways in which folklorists can help festival organizers. (Folklorists are useful in other areas of course, but there isn't space to discuss that here.)

Gaining Perspective on All Festivals, and Your Festival

Folklorists have studied folk festivals and can help organizers gain perspective on the folk festival movement. Festival organizers often work in relative isolation, without a lot of contact with people involved in other festivals, and especially without a knowledge of what has been tried in the past. This can be a good thing, as it encourages the development of unique approaches. But it also prevents people from learning from mistakes that have been made in the past, and from being exposed to ideas that might be adapted to their own unique situation. A perspective of this kind would save organizers work and help them to plan their festivals more effectively.

More generally, all folklorists are trained to observe events, especially performance events (like the festival). We study performance-audience interaction and, to use a catch phrase, artistic communication in small groups. Any organizers who call upon a folklorist to observe their festival and report on what worked, what didn't and why will be surprised to discover how much a trained impartial observer can tell them. Again,

I believe this might save the organizers some trouble.

Choosing Performers

Festival organizers are, of course, quite competent in selecting professional performers. But they are often reluctant to make judgements about those people folklorists call "active bearers of tradition," or what I call source performers: people who are the sources of music, dances, crafts and so on that we see at festival. (1) I've heard people say that the reason festivals have been using such performers less and less in recent years is that source performers just don't appeal to festival audiences. But I would argue that most of us who attend festivals look forward with excitement to seeing authentic performances by traditional artists. The things that put people off are what would sour us on any type of show—seeing performers who are not well adapted to the context in which they appear, or seeing the same people do the same things year after year. In the 60s the organizers of the Newport Folk Festival hired folklorists to do intensive field work in regions of North America (Cape Breton included). Source performers were selected for the festival by these folklorists as a result of this work. Many of the performers chosen in this

(1) This sort of term is also useful because it avoids discussions about who is folk, semi-folk, quasi-folk, pseudo-folk and non-folk. These discussions seem to have no resolution and only create bad feelings among people who are trying to work together.

way were later brought to Mariposa. The affluent 60s are gone, but organizers can still consult with folklorists when looking for new source performers for their festivals. In the case of a regional festival, it might be possible to find grant money to hire a field-worker for a while.

Folklorists are trained to observe performance events like festivals, and can make an important contribution to them

Planning Workshops

As a performer at folk festivals, I have been shocked on occasion to find myself in a workshop for which I had no songs, and most of us have heard rationalizations for including some material in workshops that make the American involvement in El Salvador sound reasonable to comparison. One method of avoiding this problem is to have people (not necessarily folklorists, but volunteers trained and supervised by one) conduct repertoire studies with performers a few months before the workshops are planned. Studies of this type would give the organizers a better idea of the talents and repertoires their performers possess, and all sorts of new workshop topics would probably suggest themselves. This technique would not replace more usual methods, such as asking the performers to suggest workshop topics

themselves, but could complement methods of planning workshops that have worked in the past. Such repertoire study would be easiest for a regional festival, where you have access to your performers throughout the year, but this type of study could also be used by the larger festivals given that they are held in cities that are often visited by performers during the seasons when festivals are being planned.

Organizing What's Left

Most festivals make an attempt to create a permanent record of events, using tapes and photographs, saving old programmes, publicity and the like. And this material is stored so that it is virtually impossible to find anything, and so that it deteriorates as quickly as possible. Most folklorists have archival experience and can organize such material so that it is easily accessible and properly preserved. The advantages for festival organizers are many. Publicity for coming festivals often requires photographs taken in previous years, and any festival planning a book, record or educational project will want to have its resources readily available. A well organized archive also implies a permanence that should impress grant giving institutions.

Well, there are some suggestions for festival organizers who may have wondered what a folklorist could possibly do for them. If these ideas were put to use the results could be less exhausted organizers, folklorists who aren't merely thought of as decorative pendants, and maybe even more exciting and creative festivals. I'd be pleased to hear from any festival organizers who would like to talk about these suggestions.