

# **Open Season on Festivals ...again!**

**by Ian Robb**

(A cynical Monday morning viewpoint, written, like so many songs, when the author was feeling depressed.)

Summer is approaching. Here comes another round of folk festivals large and small, organised and disorganised, political and apolitical, free and expensive, wet and dry (in more ways than one). And here comes another round of complaints. *Everyone* has an axe to grind; *everyone* thinks he or she has the formula for the perfect folk festival, and most have a perspective which ignores that of everyone else.

And still the audiences come, pay their money (or not) and ninety percent of the time go away having had a ball, having heard things previously unfamiliar and having a feeling that they have been part of an important event. If they haven't enjoyed themselves, the most likely culprit is not the artistic direction of the festival, but - you guessed it - the weather!

Folk festivals, by their very scale, are designed to appeal to the folk, not to the folkies. Unfortunately, the folk really don't care that much about the music. As long as they can spend a weekend barbecuing their bodies in an attractive setting, being part of an "event" and listening in a fairly superficial way to sounds pleasant and a little different, they are ecstatic. A few may become turned on to something new and unfamiliar, but these are really a drop in the bucket. However, let's not kid ourselves; these "eventers" are the bread and butter of all but the tiniest paying festivals, and indirectly that of the free ones, too (no city is going to support a festival that attracts a mere 500 small-spending folk music fanatics).

For us, the enthusiasts and perfor-

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mers, some festivals offer good things in the way of musical and social interaction. For those of us concerned about our careers in music they offer the dubious advantage of an enormous audience, plus good summer employment. However, like anyone who cares, we tend to get quite critical about certain aspects of festivals. I'm not talking about the frequency of the performers' bus, or the quality of the food; these are irritating but probably inevitable. It's the global things like the artistic direction or the size of a festival which tend to

threaten the integrity of our music and about which we feel compelled to bitch. Well, perhaps we shouldn't bother. Perhaps if the demerit points of a festival outweigh its credits, we should just stay away. Perhaps we have no business telling the organisers of big successful festivals what they should do. They're doing fine, thanks very much, so why should they listen anyway? It really doesn't matter that a one hour ballad workshop has fifteen people on stage. Nobody is going to come to it anyway, they're much too busy listening to the rock'n'roll workshop. Even the folkies know that most outdoor stages lack the focus necessary for effective ballad singing. Such workshops are little more than a misguided sop offered to those of us who care.

Folk festivals can never and will never do the things that we enthusiasts seem to expect of them. We will never "win over" a significant proportion of festival goers, as most of them do not identify with the views and the morality that folk music espouses, and prefer to listen and enjoy in an uncommitted, superficial sort of way. Folk music has always been a great morale-booster and solidifier of causes, but its recent track record as an evangelist is less than sparkling. It is just too easy to ignore or gloss over in our comfortable, media-soothed lifestyle cocoon.

Perhaps we should just leave the festivals to do what they do best; -entertain large numbers of people in a friendly and relaxed fashion with as little show-biz glitter as possible. In the grand scale of things, this isn't so bad; it sure beats sitting in front of the idiot tube and it



probably deserves our tolerance, if not our support. If a festival hooks a dozen people out of the horde, so that they turn up at the next concert or coffee house, then so much the better.

In general, Canadian festivals are doing what they *can* do rather well. The fact that they can't do what we want them to do is our problem, not theirs. Mariposa tried to do something meaningful with Canadian music last year, and discovered that nobody wanted to listen. Perhaps they were a little naive in expecting thousands of people to turn out on a less-than-scorching weekend, to a less-than-idyllic site to listen to several forms of less-than-popular music? One wonders how much more of a financial disaster would have ensued, had it not been for the beer tent.

The answer? To festivals, life and everything? Maybe we should just let 'em be, and stop confusing them with all our contradictory demands. Stop expecting a silk purse and put up with a pretty good sows ear. It's all we're going to get from a big festival. Good folkie-oriented events generally ignore the public; -they neither go out of their way to attract them, nor need them to make ends meet. Nevertheless, without really trying they probably win over as many uncommitted souls as do large festivals. This doesn't make them better (they don't entertain as many people); -only different. If that's what you want in a festival, then go out and get your own. There's no substitute for putting your energy where your mouth is. In the meantime, enjoy your weekends in the sun. There are many worse ways of passing the time.

