

Random Thoughts About Folk Music and Folk Festivals

I went to the Lowell Folk Festival recently and had a great time. It got me to thinking about folk music and folk festivals.

I have loved folk music since I was a teen-ager, exposed to it simultaneously as a camper-waiter at Camp Echo Lake, where there was a lot of folk-singing led by counselors with copies of Carl Sandburg's American Songbag, and when I started hanging out with the friends that eventually became Reading Out Loud. We sang a lot of folk songs, and we did a lot of square dancing.

By my early 20s, I thought I had heard every folk singer worth hearing. And when I was organizing for Local 38, my office was on the same floor as Moe Asch and Marion Distler of Folkways Records, which broadened my exposure to folk music. I bought a lot of Folkways records, since Marion let me have them for \$1 for 10 inch records, and \$1.50 for 12 inch records. (They retailed for \$4.95 and \$5.95.) Marion tried to get me to buy "world" music, but I stayed with Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Cisco Houston, and Richard Dyer-Bennett. The only non-English records I bought were two wonderful Yiddish folk music albums by Mark Olf. (Not to get ahead of myself: I find it bittersweet that the Folkways catalogue has been taken over by Smithsonian Records, and that Smithsonian has also taken over the National Folklife Festival.)

By the '50s, there was a lot of folk music around New York. Hootenannies were everywhere. And no liberal or left-wing rally could take place without a folk singer kicking it off. But hoots and rallies and supper clubs are not folk festivals, so let me jump to Washington DC and the National Folklife Festival on the mall.

Seems like every summer around July 4, from the time we moved to Washington, the National Folklife Festival took place. It ran about a week. I have a vague memory that it took place in Wolf Trap in Northern Virginia a few times, but my strongest memory was the fantastic folk music on the mall. I would come down with the family, with friends, colleagues from work, and on my own. I took lots of pictures, and on a few occasions, I took a tape recorder and taped the music. (No one said I couldn't.) One year they had musicians from Romania and I visited with them, proudly telling them that my mother was from Vaslui. Another year, it was Utah Phillips singing labor songs. The Festival outdid itself in 1976, the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Instead of a week it ran for most of the summer. It was always hot, but it never bothered me. Nor did walking up and down the mall from 7th Street to 14th Street. And it was free.

Some time around 1970, I attended a management training program for Federal employees in Berkeley California. We were housed in a pleasant hotel across the street from the University, and a folk festival was taking place on campus at the same time. And the performers were staying at the same hotel. On the second or third morning that I was there, I went downstairs and saw an older man with a guitar case, looking bewildered. I asked him if I could help him, and he said he'd like to get some breakfast. We walked together to a nearby coffee shop and he introduced himself: Arthur Crudop, known as Big Boy, from Virginia, a blues singer. I introduced myself: Jacob Schlitt, known as Jake, from Washington DC, a government worker.

We talked about everything—our lives; our families; but mostly about music. He explained that he has been playing the blues most of his life, made a few recordings, and for the past few years

has been playing festivals around the country. He said that some of his songs were recorded by Elvis Presley. When we finished breakfast, he invited me to come along with him to the festival grounds. It was a while before the music would get under way. I was thrilled, accompanying my new friend back stage. He introduced me to the other performers and I just hung around as they tuned up and kitized. A fiddle player from Louisiana called me over to see his fiddle. To me, one fiddle looks pretty much like another. However, he held it up to the light so that I could see the writing inside. I saw some writing but couldn't make it out. He said with great pride, "It's a Stradivarius." Come on! I didn't think it was possible. A Cajun fiddle player with a Stradivarius? Still, why should I doubt him?

I stayed for the morning's performance. I felt as if I was back in high school, cutting class, when Benny Goodman was at the Paramount. But this was better. I was a friend of one of the performers, and the guy on fiddle was playing a Stradivarius. When I returned home, I kept looking for recordings by Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, and finally found one on the Delmark label. Years later, I learned that he had recorded for RCA in the '40s and '50's, that he was born in Mississippi and made his way to Chicago, and that he died in 1974. I am grateful for the day that I spent with him.

In the mid-80s, the City of Lowell initiated its own Folk Festival. Very much like the Washington Folklife Festival, except that it is held over a weekend toward the end of July. It also has several stages and brings in musicians from all over the country and the world. When I discovered it, memories of the National Folklife Festival came flooding back. For several years, Fran, David and I drove up to Lowell, and we had a great time. We listened to the music at the different stages sprawled on the grass, ate lots of ethnic food and bought a few tchotchkes.

For the past few years, it has become difficult for Fran to make it, so I have been going by myself, taking fewer pictures and running around less. And I don't sprawl on the grass; it is getting much harder to get up. I go to the stages which provide seats; I make my choices, not by musicians, but by the accommodations. The fact is, the performers rotate, so I could sit in one place for the entire afternoon, and most of the musicians will show up.

It is an easy drive to Lowell, and this year I caught a French Canadian group, a bluegrass band, and at the St. Anne's Churchyard Stage which set up a lot of folding chairs, they had a remarkable Greek ensemble led by a virtuoso Bouzouki player, followed by a six member Gospel quartet. A remarkable duet of Inuit throat singing was next, and before I left, I heard an Irish band from County Sligo.

I no longer walk all over Lowell. And I no longer feel I have to hear every performer. Sometimes there is a "Must Hear" musician. That was the case last year when they brought in Joshua Nelson and the Kosher Gospel Singers, from East Orange N.J. Or the year before when they had a Klezmer group from Philadelphia. But if it doesn't have a Jewish or labor angle, I am open to any kind of folk music, domestic or international.

