

One:
Festivals: My Death & Rebirth

“We stand in the tumult of a festival.

What festival? This loud, disordered mooch?

These hospitaliers? These brute-like guests?

These musicians dubbing at a tragedy...”

- From ‘The Auroras of Autumn’ by Wallace Stevens (1879-1955)

I stopped attending stadium-size shows and (principally, rock) music festivals many years back. There was no conscious decision involved in doing so, but at some indeterminate point the realization must have dawned that I’d simply had my fill, that there was no longer any motivation to go to them. I cannot recall which of the numerous ghastly experiences that inadvertently proved to be the final straw, as there were twice plenty.

This said, even in the spunkier, mosh pit-crashing days of my youth I was never that enamoured with the large-scale live music experience in the first place. More to the point, I guess, is that I’m a notorious curmudgeon with serious patience issues. Therefore, my tolerance for what I personally see as festivals’ consistent irritants and infuriating inconveniences usually snapped around the time I’d join the line-up to enter the venue. Yes, I know: that’s rather early. From that point on at any such event, to the exasperation of my companions, I’d only stop ranting about this beef or that annoyance when the bands were playing, when nobody could hear me anyway.

What, then, riled me so intensely about the average festival? Why in the grand scheme have I decided to cut off my nose to spite my face, seemingly depriving myself of so

much potential pleasure? Well, there are many things about the set-up of (note) *gargantuan* (note) *commercial* festivals that I abhor, but I'll merely touch on the whats and whys of my key grievances here, as it is these that bear relevance to what follows. To give you a head start, however, I feel the following excerpt of a July 2008 MySpace bulletin from Vancouver's 'controversial' (read: 'politically tuned in') 'klezmer-punk' musician Geoff Berner speaks volumes, succinctly echoing my overall objections:

"Here's how you make a festival: You generally gather thousands of people together in a place that's usually not considered fit for human habitation, like a farmer's field, or a park, or a race track, and then those people proceed to lay waste to the land and themselves for about 2-3 days. By the end, the people are exhausted, ravaged by the forces of nature and the forces of booze and drugs, and the land is a churned-up wound full of garbage and shit. People die, people are conceived; marriages begin or collapse."

I'll return to Berner's observations later. In the interim, I strongly suggest you check out his music. *The Wedding Dance of the Widow Bride* (Jericho Beach Music, 2007) is as good a starting point as any. He plays a wicked accordion. You'll love him.

Anyway, let's get stuck into my festival issues, shall we? Firstly, then, I quite like to be comfortable when I'm entertained. Who doesn't? You don't, after all, sprawl on a bed of acid-tipped porcupine quills to watch television, do you? Or wear a flea-infested hairshirt to hockey games? Oh, you do! Well, that's your prerogative, but I'm trying to give up both of those habits.

As Berner implies, I feel most of the more musically “enticing” festivals accommodate more humans in one place than is reasonable - *obviously* in order to maximize profits - but I find being in such enormous gatherings very uncomfortable. There may well be a mild claustrophobic element to this – I’ve not been on a couch for it and do not generally otherwise suffer – but it’s mainly the obstructive lack of ease in accessing what I want or need that really upsets me. I find it utterly ridiculous that the sheer volume of people I’ve been hemmed in by at festivals has dictated the need to set out from hard fought-for scraps of ground to locate a toilet even before I felt the urge to use one. Such is the time it takes to battle through the unruly hordes to where they’re sited. Pre-emptive planning was always the key: “I *might*, just *might* need a wee in an hour, so I’d best be on my way this instant.”

I’m sure there are health and safety regulations in place concerning at what point the capacity of a festival is capped in relation to where it’s held, but I’ve never seen this in obvious action. There have always been waaaaaay too many folks at all the events I’ve attended, and being compressed to within three breaths of suffocation in the midst of several billion sweaty lunatics never did that much for my general ‘festive’ mood. Additionally, enforced camaraderie aside, shuffling with agonizing slowness around festival sites, my movement governed solely by the flow of amorphous ‘humanity’ I was trapped among, was also not so often my idea of a great day out. “Hey, everyone! I didn’t *really* want to be at the cotton candy stand, to be frank. Can we perhaps veer east and shamble as one towards the veggie burger concession? Thanks ever so much!” Hell, exiting festivals in said manner often took several days.

So populous were these cursed events that when it came to ‘watching’ the bands, being a little fellow I’d usually find my nose rammed into someone’s coccyx, rancid armpit or glistening chest hair, unable to catch more than fleeting glimpses of any performance on a stage that was, by the way, several miles from where I was trapped. “Are those humans with instruments? Or ants? Amoebae? Binoculars, please!” That position, of course, was as close as I could get in the crush, if in fact I ended up by some good fortune facing the stage at all.

Secondly, there’s the cost of not only the tickets, which I’ve usually found to be just the wrong side of extortion with psychological violence, but *everything* on sale within festival sites. It’s scandalous, really, yet so many drones simply shrug, sigh, resignedly accept this year’s 7000% increase on last year’s prices due to “rising administrative costs” and meekly cough up three months’ salary for entry, souvenirs and the muck masquerading as food and drink. Six bucks for a bottle of water? Bargain! All in the name of ‘fun’: where’s the hoot in being royally ripped off?

Then, deep sigh – this *does* need to be discussed - there’s the disgraceful mess some feel it’s amusing to leave the portable toilets in after it’s taken me that precious hour of missing a miles-away-band to reach them, stemming from the fact the patrons are so bombed they’d miss the target even if required to dispose of their bodily waste in a meteorite crater whilst suspended inches above its dead centre. Farmyard beasts possess better aim and manners than the average rock festival attendee, I tell you. They also smell

better. And how there aren't cholera outbreaks in the wake of every major festival, I'm genuinely at a loss to explain.

Did I mention the line-ups? Oh, the line-ups! More fool me, I've waited in line for forty minutes to purchase a token for a mugger's tariff, only to take it to another long line-up in order to exchange it for a plastic tumbler of warm, watery froth - which I hoped against hope *might* be beer, but alas, no - only to lose the lot on my shoes when a pyramid of plastered Oasis fans collapsed on me as I returned to my cozy disad-vantage point twelve kilometres away. And what about the safe transportation of more than one "beer" back to your patch, so friends may also be refreshed? Not a chance in hell unless you're inside an armoured personnel carrier, although joy is yours in abundance if you've ever yearned for warm, watery froth-drenched forearms and thighs costing a week's rent.

Trust me, I could go on. And on. For many pages more. I have not even *begun* to skim the scum from the surface. But in respect of your sanity and because I'm told I'm actually supposed to be writing about something else, I'll rein it in right here. Also, I appreciate that such experiences may be totally alien to you. In all likelihood, concerning the subject matter of this volume, they will be. Nonetheless, please believe me that within these reminiscences, obviously bloated for a sorry attempt at comic effect, lie many dark truths of the festival nightmares I endured until I simply couldn't be bothered with it any more.

So why did I force myself through all this before pulling the plug? Pretty simple, really: the music. *Nothing* but. Rather obvious, yes? I mean, for example, when casting an eye

over a bill for a Belgian single-day festival boasting Neil Young, Lou Reed, Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds, R.E.M., Joe Jackson, Pixies, Robert Cray and Elvis Costello - all at their peak - plus just a couple of ho-hum fillers (singing anagram Tanita Tikaram, anyone?), the urge to say no remained very strong, almost driving me eleven-sixteenths insane. But resistance is futile when the power of rock commands thee! I'd put up with most anything you care to mention to witness that lot live in one day. In fact, I did.

Biting the bullet with a curious mix of reluctance and excitement, I handed over a ludicrous sum of Flemish francs (or whatever Belgian currency was before the euro made everything *even more* expensive), and hopped on a bus to the Continent. This particular festival, Werchter Rock, proved to be the anticipated mix of brilliant performances (Nick Cave altering the course of my life that day); extreme discomfort (oh, that lake of vomit); the very worst of youth gone wild, and the laughably blatant exploitation of a captive market. (If I told you the price of the waffles, you'd call the police.)

However, *very* occasionally since those days, though I remained stoically in festival retirement, I've been delightfully surprised to see the trends of festivaldom I so despise defiantly bucked by apparently like-minded individuals. But then, one such example occurred in July 2007 in Nanaimo - my new hometown of just seven months at the time - with the staging of the first Green Mountain Music Festival.

I'd not considered checking out an event like this for so long, but was magnetically attracted by certain distinct qualities, ones usually absent from larger scale festivals. That it was a charity event - all bands playing for free, every cent of profit headed to the Canadian Cystic Fibrosis Foundation - was obviously an appealing aspect.

And that, despite this, the tickets were a mere ten bucks for twelve hours' diverse indie rock entertainment, was also very impressive. (It's so perverse that this was one instance where I'd have happily paid more, but there is no denying the bargain price helped sway my wife Susan and I.)

It did of course also count that we knew people in a couple of the bands. Additionally, it seemed from all advance publicity - conducted well away from mainstream channels to seemingly urge word-of-mouth promotion - that this was definitely going to be a small grassroots affair. The site was apparently a small farm, also adding to the appeal.

Finally, crucially, there was a pronounced thrill-of-the-new keenness about us in respect of this festival. We'd been in wide-eyed, full-on exploration and cultural sponge modes since arriving permanently on Vancouver Island from the UK in December 2006, eager to assimilate and find our feet as quickly as possible. Anything that was going on, we wanted to know about it, especially in terms of musical entertainment. We'd left behind a city boasting a rich, globally recognized music scene in which I'd been heavily involved in various capacities for nearly twenty years, so I started on finding out what was what here as soon as we got off the plane. It may even have been as soon as baggage reclaim.

Consequently, we were aware that the island's summer festival season was lively, and despite all reservations based on past experiences I thought it worth investigating in the event we were missing out on something truly special. Although naturally still fearing the worst, The Green Mountain Music Festival was the first outdoor event we'd heard of

since arriving that looked fairly closely aligned to our musical tastes. So we took that plunge and picked up some tickets.

In a nutshell, it was an incredible day. So much faith was restored! I've already underlined the excellent value offered by this shebang and how noble its intentions were, but my other fears were also allayed to such an extent that if I could design my own festival, the model wouldn't fall too far short of this one. Believe me, I do not say this lightly!

A comfortably sized crowd of just a few hundred made moving around, claiming a bit of land and clearly seeing the bands, a doddle. Personal space was respected. The easily identifiable party-heads partied, but behaved themselves, offending no-one. (It helped that there seemed to be no obvious Oasis fans present.)

The bands, mainly new to us, were absolutely on the money. One, No Horses, has since become one of my favourite bands on this or any other planet.

Everything on sale - tasty homemade snacks, mini-doughnuts, candy and other bits and bobs - was sensibly priced and served by folks who were happy to see you. They were *so* cheap and served with *such* friendliness, in fact, that it was almost unnerving, arousing a but-what's-the-catch suspicion in one so accustomed to rip-off festival culture! What's more, there were *no* line-ups. No tokens. No warm, watery froth. No spillage. No hassle. No kidding.

And God love us, the toilets remained clean and respectably used for the benefit of all present. Even late in the day, aside from the unavoidable, though never

overpowering aromas, the facilities were in as sanitary a condition as I'd imagine could be maintained in any situation where a large group of humans are assembled.

See, it *can* be done!

Above all - not that festival locations themselves ever particularly irked me - the site was extraordinary. Hugging the base of Mt. Benson in the lush, rural Jingle Pot area, the flatbed stage was backdropped by a pretty rock outcrop topped with arbutus trees, and the performers' view from the stage can have only served to inspire. As we watched the bands in this unexpected comfort, squadrons of dragonflies cruised low and silent over the farm all day, adding an almost surreal, dreamy dimension to proceedings. It really was so *very* lovely.

Yes, this *was* an off-the-radar event to a great extent, untainted by commercialism, held on private property and kept deliberately low-key to avoid hassles with the RCMP or any other potential sources of disruption - *but* it did serve to illustrate just how good festivals can be when all the right elements slot nicely together. Some would claim it was not a festival at all, but an oversized party with bands. Regardless, we left musically sated, impressed at the organisation, with some new friends.

Most of all, my curiosity was fired as to how things might be done elsewhere, at the bigger events on Vancouver Island I'd been reading about. I wondered whether this would be strictly a one-off or if this really was the way of things in this part of the world? There was no doubt I was encouraged – dazzled, even - by the refreshing Green Mountain experience but, if we were to decide in its wake to attend more like it, regardless of musical theme or overarching genre, might it *actually* transpire that I'd

discover such levels of civility and all-around pleasantness everywhere? Or had this all been just a nice dream and I'd wake up to find myself trampled under a stampede towards where Nine Inch Nails were about to let rip?

The Green Mountain Music Festival served to galvanize us to attend one more festival that summer. It may well have been more, but we moved house in August (on the weekend of the Coombs Bluegrass Festival – the one I most fancied), so were financially stretched with an awful lot going on. The one we chose was called – to this day, for no obvious reason – Farmfest '93. (If you look carefully, the clue's in the name concerning the type of location at which it was staged.)

From the off, when we heard only its banner and one of the artists booked to appear, it felt as if this event would be in the same groove as Green Mountain, especially as it again seemed way off the grid. So far off it, in fact, that finding out *anything* about Farmfest '93 was a real grind. Beyond fogged clues popping up on the MySpace pages of various Victoria and Nanaimo bands presumably booked to appear, there was absolutely *no* discernible local publicity.

But this is exactly what appealed to us: Farmfest '93 seemed like another deliberate attempt to remain as underground as could be achieved, an ethic we connect with, though I did wonder how such a strategy would affect the potential of attracting a crowd to make it worthwhile. After all, there'd surely be a few attendant bills to pay? But maybe there was no concern for that? As it happens, Farmfest '93 turned out to be an entry-by-donation event, so perhaps not. I don't really know, but what I can tell you is we

found out the venue's coordinates and who was performing only a couple of days before the festival took place. It felt like a secret meeting.

Though it was no Green Mountain Music Festival, Farmfest '93 was a lot of fun. Held on a dramatically located farm in Cedar, it became even more visceral when the sun sank behind Mt. Benson to leave the lights of Nanaimo twinkling distantly below. We also dug the delightfully ramshackle vibe, best illustrated by the facts that the wooden stage was still being built as we arrived, and that the live entertainment started two hours later than scheduled.

When it eventually got underway, there was some good music that day – Chet, Away R'io, Amy Honey, Hearse (who were hilarious) and more – and Farmfest '93 served as further evidence that the levels of comfort, value and decorum I personally need from a festival *could* be found at events on this island I now called home.

My willingness to attend festivals consequently miraculously rekindled by these two small-scale, low-key happenings, could I go the whole hog and step up with confidence to something a little bigger, to an event considered a major staple of the island's festive calendar? And if I did, would I walk away satisfied, or be once again destroyed with disappointment at the same old annoyances of festivals the world over? On the last weekend of July 2008, I'd find my questions emphatically answered by the 24th Islands Folk Festival.

Two: Now Arriving...

How I came to write this book is, I think, an amazing story in itself. Whenever I've told anyone the full details, they've been dumbstruck at exactly the same facts that astonish me on a regular basis. Even recalling it now gives me the shivers. I guess that related in expanded form it could make a nifty tome in itself, but that's for another day.

The extraordinariness of the tale stems from the feeling that it genuinely seems as if I've been led here, to be typing these words by fate, destiny, kismet, cosmic intervention, divine design: call it what you will. It's become impossible not to recognise the catalytic events and extraordinary coincidences apparently shaping my world. I can trace a straight line (okay, I admit, with a *couple* of kinks in it) from meeting a young journalist / musician in Brighton, England, nearly a decade ago to the moment I was asked if I'd like to write the book you now hold. There is a direct correlation, tangibly linked by numerous other coincidental factors, so it's difficult not to get spooked by this uncanny lineage if I consider it too deeply!

The diminutive young scribbler / strummer in question is named Eamon Hamilton. He and I used to write for a free Brighton arts and listings publication called *The Source*. He was also in a quirky local band I liked called Brighter Lunch. Then he went solo, briefly, joined another great band called British Sea Power, toured the world with them, then left to concentrate full-time on his own band, Brakes - his bandmates being three other acquaintances of mine. BrakesBrakesBrakes - as the band has been ludicrously forced to rename itself for North America - has become a fairly successful act, touring internationally, with three albums released to date.

Between meeting Eamon and now, everything that's happened in my life - whether good or bad – clearly seems to have been adding that little extra torque to the rubber band of the catapult that eventually shot me over four thousand, seven hundred miles to Nanaimo to start a new life. I'm not suggesting that Eamon is some kind of mystical catalyst for it, but in terms of my being chosen to write about the Islands Folk Festival, he simply has to be the logical starting point.

You see, when I tell you that Eamon's aunt, Deb Maike, is the co-founder of the Cowichan Folk Guild, the group responsible for staging the Islands Folk Festival, whose Artistic Director, Robert McCourty, *independently* approached me with the book idea - Deb having *absolutely no knowledge* of his advances until later - then you should see why I feel even as the grounded individual I am that it goes *way* beyond coincidence! I mean, of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world. Talk about degrees of separation, small world experiments 'n' all that! And if you knew everything in between meeting Eamon and Robert's approach, I'd surely need to whip out the smelling salts!

The second Green Mountain Festival, another spectacular day attracting a hundred or so more than the inaugural event, was held on Saturday July 19th, 2008 – the weekend before the 24th annual Islands Folk Festival at Providence Farm in Duncan. Courtesy of Robert, Susan and I were bestowed with VIP media passes to attend the latter, and confidence was high in the wake of another positive festival experience that we could be in for a real treat. Cool: our first “proper” Vancouver Island roots bash!

We first met Robert literally when he was playing acoustic guitar for his splendid and splendidly named band, The Flying Accusations. At the time, he just happened to be surrounded by freakish examples of a vegetable whose name, somewhat misleadingly, originates from the Greek word for “large melon.” As big fans of country and bluegrass-flavoured music, we stood listening as he and his talented cohorts twanged up a storm. I say ‘listening,’ as how we could actually *see* the band over the barrier of boulder-sized pumpkins is anyone’s guess. But then this *was* a festival devoted to both standard and monstrous examples of the good ol’ Cucurbita pepos, held at Nanaimo’s late lamented Shady Mile Farm. (For the horticulturally inclined, incidentally, Mr. Art Carefoot’s colossal pumpkin took the gold award in 2007 - tipping the scales at an insane 1,070.8 lb. Imagine how many pies you’d get outta that. Moreover, just like when the faces of deities mysteriously appear on pieces of toast, his whopper appeared to bear a visage... *without eyes*. Just a nose and maniacally smiling mouth: I never knew vegetables could be so chilling.)

We were delighted by what we heard of Robert’s band, especially a snappy ditty called *Lies, Halftruth (sic) & Misinformation*. It’s a song, as the title bears up, about the distortion and manipulation of the truth in the worlds of politics and... er... the media. (You know, people like *me*. I’ll get my coat, shall I?) Anyway, it was one of many great songs they played that afternoon, so as brand new converts we took the opportunity to introduce ourselves to the guys when they took a break. I handed Robert a business card, he handed me their CD, ‘*Now Arriving...*’

A bitter winter and pleasant spring later, Robert got in touch with me just before I was actually going to contact him. In his new role as the Cowichan Folk Guild’s Artistic

Director, he was wondering if in my ongoing role as a freelance writer whether I'd be interested in helping to publicize the forthcoming 24th Islands Folk Festival. By coincidence (they're *everywhere*), I was planning an article on the Central Vancouver Island summer roots music festival season, highlighting Courtenay's Vancouver Island Music Festival, the Coombs Bluegrass Festival and the Islands Folk Festival, with Robert as my sole interviewee. So I said: "Funny you should say that!" He loved the resultant article and, out of the blue, approached me with the book idea. So, following that convoluted fanfare, here I am ...

Upon arrival for my very first taste of the Islands Folk Festival, I was familiar with the names of exactly seven of the scores of acts appearing, four of those simply because I'd noticed their names regularly popping up in local entertainment listings. Of those seven, I'd only ever heard three, one being in two other musical projects. (Still with me?)

It was an interesting situation to be in, especially as I was acutely aware from a little advance legwork that some of those lined up for 2008 were as legendary in Canadian folk circles as the festival itself is locally. Despite a lifetime spent working in manifold capacities within the UK music industry, plus an ability to retain music-related trivia that verges on the preposterous, I was certainly a fish out of water on this occasion. Yet my woeful lack of knowledge made the situation intriguing, enticing, one where I was open to the possibility of a significant cultural awakening, of a watershed being crossed.

Three: Folk / Heroes

It may surprise or possibly even horrify you to discover that literally until my early forties I took little notice of folk music - or at least what is defined as “traditional” folk music according to where you’d find examples of it racked in a decent music store.

Although my work in the music industry always demanded I was familiar with names and titles – not a problem with my aforementioned capacity for music-related trivia - I’d always - ignorantly, I now acknowledge - thought folk rather too “Hey Nonny Nonny” and peculiarly rural for my city boy tastes. Consequently, I paid it little mind for what I now appreciate was far too long. I missed out on *so* much stunningly gorgeous music, eh?

Granted, I’ve always deeply enjoyed Nick Drake (but is he *really* folk?), considered John Martyn a genius (because he took chances, bending folk out of shape), recognized Richard Thompson as one of the greatest guitarists alive, quite enjoyed Lindisfarne’s *Fog on the Tyne* album when tripping over it as a nipper, and thought a few other overground folk songs fairly pleasant. But folk music as *I* understood it never had much of a part to play in my musical development. In the same rustic realm, I actually came to country music first, probably around twenty-two years ago, even then via such disparate portals as The Byrds, Johnny Cash’s ‘pop’ hits and my mum’s Glen Campbell cassette boxed set. But as my tastes have gradually evolved and streamlined, acoustic-based music shifting in emphasis to play a bigger part in my life, so folk music and I have become quite chummy.

This said, I cannot deny that the (awfully tagged) ‘neo-folk,’ ‘acid folk,’ ‘freak-folk’ or ‘anti-folk’ scene of recent years has acted as a catalyst to get me delving into

dusty archives to investigate dropped names, plus others I'd known all along were well overdue my attention.

As with any 'new' art form based on traditional values, one wonderful thing about this contemporary twist on folk music is how it's stimulated record companies to reissue lost gems and compile long forgotten obscurities for the consumption of a hungry new generation. In this climate of reappraisal, I've pounced on many such titles and standards of the genre, the volume of astonishing music I've unearthed and now cherish like family being quite amazing. Ironically and personally satisfyingly, it is now folk-flavoured music that pretty much dominates my listening.

Whilst not especially easily influenced by trends and hype – I usually like to take things in at my own pace - I've nonetheless always taken note of any championed influences on musicians whose output I really appreciate. You couldn't conceive, for example, the number of bands and artists I may have otherwise never listened to and bought product by if it hadn't have been for a member of R.E.M. giving them the thumbs-up. (My fanaticism for that band once knew no bounds, an obsessive collector's mentality gripping me for many years. I realized I had a problem when ordering a CD from Italy by a *Clockwork Orange*-imaged mob called Flor de Mal – *genuinely* the worst band I've *ever* heard, boasting not one redeeming feature – just because R.E.M. bassist Mike Mills appeared on *handclaps* on two tracks.) So, when such as the wonderful, fan-appointed neo-folk figurehead Devendra Banhart cited The Incredible String Band and Vashti Bunyan as major influences, I was bound to have a look.

Another good thing that can be triggered by musical revivalism is the welcome resurrection of long dormant careers, or at least an outbreak of deserved coverage of

artists long owed some kudos. The delightful Bunyan is a classic case in point. To her eternal surprise, she finds herself back on track, viewed as a musical treasure as a consequence of the fandom lavished upon her by Banhart and others. It's funny, though, that she doesn't see herself as a folk singer, but it's where you'll find her recorded output filed. Her wistful ditties certainly exhibit pop sensibilities, but bear undeniable traditional folk instrumentation and lavish chamber arrangements.

It was Scotland's sublime contemporary folk artist James Yorkston that alerted me to Michael Hurley, another veteran (nudging septuagenarianism) rightly finding a fresh audience. Consequently, Hurley finds himself recording with the wonderful, impossibly cool Vetiver, which often acts as Banhart's live band. Massachusettsian indie dreamers Damon & Naomi tipped me off to Tom Rapp's *Pearls Before Swine*. And when I learned elsewhere of the maverick genii reputations of Anne Briggs and John Fahey, I dove right in. There are other examples of the new generation leading me to the old, but now hooked like a haddock, I set out on this exciting sonic mission, feverishly crate digging in search of classics and obscurities of this wonderful new-old sound. It's been a very satisfying trip so far, but there is still a *loooooong* way to go, especially as I also now have a massive Canadian catalogue to explore.

But I tell you what: my life is *considerably* enhanced by the presences of such as Davy Graham, Shirley Collins, Jackson C. Frank, Nic Jones, The Waterons, Sandy Denny, Bert Jansch and dozens more now in it. And, oddly, this music makes much more sense to me in this part of the world.

Four: Gathered in One Vessel

I love the phrase “like a kid in a toyshop.” It’s so immediately vivid and self-explanatory. To say that I was the kid and the 24th Islands Folk Festival was the toyshop would be an understatement on par with stating that Chris Tucker’s voice is mildly annoying. Here before me was a situation of great interest, partly geared towards research, partly towards musical discovery and attendant new experiences.

Due to prior commitments, we were unable to attend the Friday evening opening of the festival, but committed ourselves to the remainder of the weekend until it was due to wrap up. Driving to Duncan on the Saturday morning, an unbroken week or so of summer sun came under a typically bad-timed threat from evil looking clouds spitefully spitting out brief showers. We demanded it immediately desist with a smattering of choice profanities and, at least for the time being, the black clouds soon gave way to the more popular white. It’s remarkable what a bit of constructive cussing can achieve.

As someone who promoted in the region of three hundred shows during my last six years in England, I empathize with any event organiser faced with factors beyond their control, factors capable of putting the kibosh on weeks or, in this case, months of exhaustive planning and preparation. Nearing Providence Farm when it had started to rain, I could see in my mind the worried faces of the organisers, looking imploringly skywards and wondering aloud: “Why *now*?” Even though the forecast was favourable, you can never legislate for the weather, so we crossed our metaphorical fingers for favourable meteorological conditions as we entered the site.

And *what* a site Providence Farm is. So much so that it must be spoken about in a separate dedicated chapter, awaiting you a little later.

Whilst the Islands Folk Festival and Providence Farm are in a multitude of ways intrinsically, inextricably *of each other* – it seems inconceivable the festival could be staged elsewhere - there is a definite need to examine the two separately. As legendary an event as it is (enough to have a book written about it, no less), and regardless of the intensive months of planning going into it at the Cowichan Folk Guild's Providence Farm office, the highlight of their annual calendar physically takes over the farm for just three days each year. It's very important to know that where this festival takes place is considerably more than 'merely' the setting for an annual folk rave-up, the musical element of its existence being one part of a much bigger whole. A large part, sure, but daily life at Providence Farm is by no means governed by it. Far from it, as this is indeed a working farm, yet one with extraordinary aspects within its boundaries. This is a deeply spiritual, faith-centred locus where important humanitarian work is carried out. It's this facet of the farm for which Providence Farm is overall most regarded, but its public image outside of its immediate community is naturally as a folk music Mecca. So yes, music certainly makes a notable contribution to Providence Farm being the remarkable, beautiful place it is, but such is its history and modern day function that presenting it to you reverentially within its own frame is something I see as essential. I'm sure you'll understand why a few pages hence.

Nonetheless, offering as it does four distinct performance stages, it's unavoidable for me not to refer to the physical layout of Providence Farm as it's configured for the Islands

Folk Festival. Upon arrival, the natural flow of foot traffic takes festivalgoers straight to the main area, a longish strip of lush green lying ahead of you. At the rear, so on the right as you enter, is a covered wooden beer garden; on the left, the huge Islands Stage backs onto a thickly wooded area. At each much shorter end, crafts, merchandise and food stalls, information points and so forth serve to cosily hem in the gathered patrons to form a natural community of spectators. (“Community” being the operative word.) As I’m sure most do immediately upon arriving here, Susan and I chose a patch of available grass to pitch ‘camp,’ set up our Persian Blue beach chairs, then decided to explore.

As we left the main arena, opening the Islands Stage for the day was English troubadour, Richard Grainger. One of only three overseas performers appearing in 2008 (the others hailing from Australia), Grainger consequently holds the honour of being our very first taste of the Islands Folk Festival. And for a folk festival, he really couldn’t have been more apt an opening act. He specializes in songs of the Northumbrian folk music tradition, in which maritime themes, tales of endeavour and the struggles of the common man are rife. Perhaps the most famous example of this distinctly regional sub-genre, at least in England, is a jaunty number called *When the Boat Comes In* (or *Dance to Your Daddy*). It’s essentially a fishing song with nursery rhyme-y lyrics delivered in a quaint Northeast vernacular, but is known UK-wide as the theme song to a popular (and very good) television series of the same name that ran from 1976 to 1981.

In truth, Grainger’s style is exactly the sound typifying everything I didn’t used to like about folk music. But once I finally overcame that barrier and investigated the remarkable canon of the similar Martin Carthy, for example, I was diverted down a hitherto untrodden, scenic musical path where aspects of the history of my homeland and

its earliest musical traditions intermingle. So, hearing Grainger's homespun acoustic ballads wafting over the site was a gentle and nostalgically familiar introduction to our weekend.

Although in advance of the event we'd selected a few names on the weekend's bill that looked intriguing, we opted when getting to the site to just go with the flow and soak in everything the 24th Islands Folk Festival sent our way. The refreshing ease of movement around the site became obvious within our first half-hour of wandering, so watching those we'd chosen without charging breathlessly back and forth looked perfectly feasible. To absorb as much as possible, we resolved to watch a portion of any given set, then move onto another, unless we found ourselves so entranced by a performance that we couldn't tear ourselves away.

Yet forget not that this was a situation demanding a degree of work on my part, the rough plan being to chat at reasonable length with at least a few folks both identified upfront and from a list of interviewees recommended by Robert McCourty and the now excitedly in-the-loop Deb Maike, both of whom we bumped into early. Some were musicians, others volunteers and people who'd been involved with the festival in various capacities for many years. Yet as we sought and came upon each in turn, they all looked so extremely busy! My consequent reluctance to approach most for even a brief natter was based on personal experience as a promoter, when the focus on your given role and immediate job in hand is frequently so intense that dealing with annoying interruptions (like, on this occasion, me) or unexpected curveballs might be compared to trying to guide an out-of-control car through a slalom course.

I decided to hang back out of respect for the preoccupied individuals concerned, knowing I could catch up with them at a later date when research for this book began in earnest. So I wasn't too concerned, but assure you you'll meet many of these fine folks in pages to come. Besides, just observing everything going on served to enlighten me on aspects of the festival's organization as much as any hurriedly snatched words could do.

So around the festival we trundled, taking in performances on the three outdoor stages: the Islands Stage, St. Anne's Stage and Tzouhalem Stage, where a very impressive Youth Showcase was underway. The indoor Chapel Stage was (and always is) such a hot ticket that we were unable to acquire passes for any of the performances there, but had made provision for this possibility by noting the times and locations of outdoor sets by interesting acts that were also appearing in the chapel over the weekend.

On October 3rd, 2008, as witnesses to a great performance from hot young bluegrass quartet, Skagway, we were to emphatically discover for ourselves why the acoustics in the chapel are so revered by musicians the world over. Protection Island's celebrated singer-songwriter, master guitarist and producer, David Essig, is just one awestruck by the sound that can be achieved through unamplified performance there. He told me: "It's just brilliant. It has just about the best acoustics I've ever encountered. There are only two or three places in Canada with such sound - and that's one of them. It would be an ideal place to do a live recording with a mobile recording unit, as it's just incredible! But it's interesting that when you play in it empty, it doesn't sound right, but when it's full of people, it sounds incredible with the people providing just the right amount of sound damping – not too much and not too little."

Essig is absolutely bang on. Skagway performed in the traditional bluegrass way, gathered around one microphone. Standing several feet back from it, their voices nonetheless carried effortlessly into the audience without any distortion, booming, echo or harshness whatsoever. Each voice and instrument was clearly distinguishable, at uncannily equal volume. The overall clarity of sound was such that it was as if the band was miming to its own CD, but not having issued one at that point in time, that's rather unlikely. Even more extraordinary was that the volume and clarity was consistent wherever I positioned myself in the room. To echo Essig, it was just brilliant.

Next up for us, on the St. Anne's Stage, was Ed Peekeekoot, from Crofton - just up the road from Duncan. A tall, handsome, august man with a silver ponytail and charming stage manner, he played some utterly delightful songs on acoustic guitar and fiddle. I seem to recall one being a novelty ditty about being goosed by a moose (or similar), but in the main his set consisted of lyrically poetic songs deferential to aspects of his Cree heritage. And boy, can the man pick.

Back at the Islands Stage we caught a chunk of what was on offer from Chanel Lucas and Roz Pappalardo, better known to the world at large as Women in Docs. From the Indigo Girls mould of female folk-pop duos (not that the earth teems with such acts), the cheeky ladies from Brisbane exhibited a classic Australian sense of dry humour that went down a treat between songs.

We stayed around the main stage after their set, because bellies were a-mightily rumbling. It was as we chowed down that I received my first exposure to a Tweener. My research remains inconclusive as to whether Tweeners are exclusively a Canadian folk

festival thing, though the concept does generally seem to be folk festival related over any other kind of musical event. Regardless, a Tweener has his or her place as MC and interim entertainer while the stages behind them are prepared for the next act. In this respect, it doesn't take a lot of working out how the name originated, though in the past I've certainly heard rather more alarming uses of the word. (Check your dictionary with caution.) We saw several (extremely experienced) Tweeners in action over the weekend, their performances adding to the festival's musical value and their informational bulletins to the sense of tight organization.

Ex of Winnipeg's The Wailin' Jennys, Cara Luft took to the Islands Stage with a problem: a broken left index finger. But she soldiered bravely on to perform a reflective set of sweet folk songs as dragonflies zoomed in angular flight patterns over the heads of a respectful audience.

I love dragonflies. Such beautiful creatures - especially as they eat mosquitoes. And mosquitoes love my blood as much as I *hate* them, so I'm content for every dragonfly on earth to gorge on them until they're sick.

Since moving to Vancouver Island, we have been in thrall to its remarkable natural beauty, fauna and flora. So sitting in warm afternoon sun as escadrilles of these winged beasties went about their day to Luft's delicate acoustic soundtrack was joy untrammelled. Utterances such as, "Ah, this is the life!" came thick and fast as the innocent loveliness of nature intermittently further enhanced the magnificence of the setting. A lone Blue Heron glided by with its spindly legs trailing behind. Hawks and turkey vultures silently traced huge circles overhead, while pretty butterflies bobbed about like scraps of coloured paper caught on the breeze. And when day stepped aside to

introduce night after a brief set from dusk, bats zoomed through the site like little leather fighter planes. We could've sat there blissfully watching this occurring around us for the rest of our lives.

A couple of years back, I had the pleasure of writing a magazine article about a wonderful mandolin player and all-round good guy from Nanaimo named Ira Pelletier. Prior to the 24th Islands Folk Festival I'd seen him play in a "bad boy" bluegrass outfit called Vincent 45 and solo, though in a rare situation with an acoustic guitar. So many had told me about his incredible act with master guitarist Edward Lee (who we'd also seen a breathtaking solo performance by) that our next St. Anne's Stage stop was the first set holding genuine anticipation for us. As it turned out, we were not disappointed. A dazzling, dizzying amalgam of bluegrass, folk, jazz and even progressive rock elements knocked us over. Cruelly, however, we were forced to leave fifteen minutes before the end of their killer performance to pay our first visit to the Youth Showcase at the pretty Tzouhalem Stage. The irony of ironies was that we were off to see the lovely Natalie Germann – a great friend of Ed and Ira who plays in Skagway with the latter! Sometimes, you just can't have it all!

Her performance was an utter treat, recalling to these ears the best of Ani DiFranco, early Joni Mitchell and contemporary artists like Kathleen Edwards and Angela Desvaux. So it was so far, so *very* good: not one sloppy showing or boring act - but of some relief in this instance, as I was scheduled to also pen a piece about Natalie!

It was about this time we ran once more into the tireless Robert, managing to exchange a few sentences with him before his walkie-talkie crackled to summon him elsewhere. He was bristling with excitement over the presence at the festival of the mother, Margaret, and sister, Theresa, of the late, truly great Ontarian folk icon, Willie P. Bennett, invited to Providence Farm as Guests of Honour.

I was saddened and truly shocked when on February 15th, 2008, Bennett passed away suddenly of a heart attack, aged just fifty-six. I had the great pleasure of promoting a show in Brighton a few years ago with Willie as opener and drummer for country-folk legend Fred Eaglesmith, finding him one of the most affable individuals I ever worked with in this capacity. A wonderful songwriter and true gentleman to a fault, it is only now, here in Canada, that I fully understand how he touched the lives of those that knew him, both as a musician and human being. In honour of Willie P., a workshop called *Gathered in One Vessel* had been arranged for Saturday, to celebrate the music of a man whose absence from the Canadian roots scene has already hit hard.

After catching the tail-end of a lively performance from the charmingly eccentric, Tom Waits-obsessed Victoria band, Children of Celebrities (whose most famous press shot shows them straitjacketed in a rubber room), we sat with Natalie Germann in a brief downpour to listen to a perky collection of reggaefied, acoustic surf grooves from young Tad Ruszel. You'll meet him properly later, but note that in the wake of the 24th Islands Folk Festival, he replaced the relocated guitarist, Darrin Wiebe, in Skagway, after having met Natalie and Ira for the first time there. That's about the perfect illustration of alliances forged at this event, I'd say.

After most of Manitoba Hal's Piedmont blues masterclass and a performance of enchanting bluegrass from the charming Backyard String Band, it was good to sit down for a time. The outer stages wrapped up for the day and all present gathered around the Islands Stage to get the evening party moving.

The Ecclestons are as good a band as you'd find anywhere to rise to that particular challenge and effortlessly nail it. This trio possess an obvious folk music identity sonically speaking, especially their incredible harmonies, but by introducing their own twist on universal crowd pleasers such as Beatles classics, in medley format, they're animated enough in a live scenario to raise the dead. But as if enough perspiration droplets hadn't flown around the site as a result of the dervish dancing stirred by The Ecclestons' spirited showing, proceedings positively reached fever pitch when Ivonne Hernandez followed them onto the Islands Stage.

Ahead of us, a yellow helium balloon left an unknown hand to rise with unerring perpendicularity into the rapidly darkening sky. I watched it disappear, ushered from this realm by the fiery fiddling of Victoria's brilliant Hernandez and her sister Kallissa. They ripped out sets of traditional Celtic, bluegrass and Cajun fiddle tunes with such intense conviction, it was as if they'd been told when walking onstage that the world would end if they failed to perform at the absolute zenith of their powers. I refuse to believe they could play any better or harder than they did that night without imploding. Simply fantastic... but even better was to come.

It was Led Zeppelin's leonine legend, Robert Plant, that said: "The way I see it, rock 'n' roll is folk music." Such an outlook would certainly explain the presence on the bill of

the 24th Islands Folk Festival of the powerhouse rockabilly twang ‘n’ slap phenomenon that is Vancouver’s Cousin Harley.

At this juncture, before further ado, it could be an idea to expand just a little on what *exactly* folk music might be, or perhaps as it is viewed in respect of this event. I was deliberately fairly narrow in my pigeonholing earlier, but obviously appreciate there’s a lot more to folk music than acoustic guitars and fiddles and nasal singing with your hand cupped over your ear. (Yes, I’ve seen *A Mighty Wind*: you gotta love it.)

Depending on where you might search for a concise definition, folk music could be *this*, *that* or, indeed, *the other*. For example, one source I raided suggests that many artists and enthusiasts of the genre “have a hard time pontificating exactly what folk music is anymore,” especially since the arrival of the hip young neo-folkies and their myriad influences. Devendra Banhart, a classic illustration, is considered as a neo-folk artist, his early material being mainly acoustic – so, perhaps, “traditionally” folky - yet he’s increasingly flirting with all manner of musical styles: psychedelic rock, Brazilian tropicalia, doo-wop and so on. His music is evolving into something far beyond what’s usually recognized as folk, further serving to push its boundaries. (Interestingly, perhaps tellingly, though, I’ve yet to see his CDs displayed anywhere other than rock or “indie rock” in music stores, only adding to the confusion. Yet if Banhart was to play the Islands Folk Festival, he’d slot right in. Of that, I assure you.)

The majority of definitions do, however, agree on one thing, being that “folk music” is a traditional musical form that’s community-driven, so representative in some way(s) of a group, area or nation, its key elements passed on from generation to

generation. Another facet of folk music where there's popular consensus concerns overarching lyrical themes. It's seen as a music of protest, social commentary and, frequently, rebellion. In which case, there can be little argument that punk rock and hip-hop are strains of folk music... can there? It all goes to show how irrelevant the compartmentalizing of music can often be.

I like Saskatoonian musician Jake Holzkopf's simple theory (as lifted from the sleeve notes of the 2008 Saved by Radio label compilation, *Saved by Saskatoon*), in examination of his city's independent music scene. "My version of folk music has nothing to do with a specific sound and everything to do with a specific community," he states. Whether viewing the definition of "community" as meaning the tiniest hamlet, or as a town, city, county, country, subculture or otherwise, I tend to agree. Folk music is all things to all men, wherever they're from, whatever instruments they play and whatever they have to say. So reggae is folk music, rai is folk music, flamenco is folk music, Tuvan throat-singing is folk music and yes, Robert Plant, rock 'n' roll is *certainly* folk music. For sake of argument, let's just call *all* music folk music! It would save a lot of brain-ache.

I'm thinking that Robert, the man largely responsible for programming my first Islands Folk Festival experience, should have the last word on the matter. When I interviewed him for the aforementioned magazine article, with great clarity he informed me: "When most people of our generation think of folk music, images of Pete Seeger; Peter Paul and Mary or The Kingston Trio may spring to mind. While this *was* folk music in its purest form, it's grown substantially since then to incorporate many different genres

of music, including blues, Cajun, Celtic, bluegrass, alt.country, world beat and gypsy jazz – just to name a few. All of these styles and influences are now intermixed.”

Now this has been established, I can tell you that Cousin Harley – surely one of the world’s rockiest folk bands – absolutely blew us away. But as they’d devastated us before, we’d suspected they might do so again.

The trio took to the stage at a moment when the night could hardly have been more perfect. It was comfortably warm, and in the wake of Ivonne Hernandez’ electrifying set the site hummed with an atmosphere so tangible it seemed I could grab a fistful of energy molecules from the nothingness before me and feast on them. The night sky was clear, and as I can offer no better words than his, I must paraphrase the inspirational Canadian writer, Paul William Roberts, in gushing that the stars appeared as “a pulsing web of fiery diamonds shining through unsoiled air.” The Big Dipper in particular looked positively, well, celestial.

Cousin Harley ripped it up. Then they ripped it up again into even smaller pieces. Drummer Jesse Cahill and the crazed, awesome, lady-killing double bassist Keith Picot laid down a diamond-hard foundation over which guitarist Paul Pigat ran riot for forty-five minutes of vice-tight rockabilly mayhem. Actually, describing the astounding Pigat as simply a “guitarist” hardly does the man justice, as there are few stringbenders anywhere that come even remotely close to achieving what he does. Other than Cousin Harley, his own vehicle, I’ve seen him play in a wonderful western swing outfit called The Knotty Pines, a band in which every other member is an acknowledged master of their instrument, yet it’s Pigat that unfailingly steals the show without breaking sweat or

exhibiting any flash whatsoever. He's just a superb, natural musician. So, yeah, Cousin Harley veritably *owned* us that night.

In headliners Delhi 2 Dublin and Jon Bone & the Karuna Movement, there was plenty of great party music and revelry yet to come, running through until 1:00am, but we were absolutely spent after Pigat, Picot and Cahill's rock 'n' roll fiesta, so decided to scoop up our mini camp and head for home.

It had been a curiously emotional day, a tapestry of indelible images and a megamix of euphonic delights. Without any great reason to be, we were both rather surprised at just how much we'd enjoyed ourselves, and *extremely* impressed with the way of things. But what would tomorrow bring?

Five:
Here's How You Make a Festival...

Sunday, as you might expect, was a quieter affair. The third day of the Islands Folk Festival is shorter, proceedings concluding with a half-hour closing ceremony. As for our spectatorial involvement, we'd again chosen a few acts of particular interest, two of which we'd failed to see on the Chapel Stage on Saturday. So it was straight to the Tzouhalem Stage Youth Showcase for the first of these, a perfect illustration of the pan-generational appeal of folk music idioms on Vancouver Island.

The precociously skilled Victoria prodigies Qristina (fiddle) and Quinn Bachand (guitar, banjo), then seventeen and twelve years-old respectively, are a hot attraction already making international inroads at such tender ages, so had packed the Tzouhalem Stage area even before we turned up ten minutes ahead of the scheduled start time. Within seconds of launching into their set, it was blindingly obvious why. Playing with unnerving, thrilling technical brilliance, gushing confidence and real panache, they floored everyone watching with a rampant set of reels and jigs. These kids will go as far as they want to, especially as they seem so comfortable onstage.

We'd been looking forward a great deal to seeing Victoria's eleven-voice, all-female choir, Balkan Babes. (The 'Babes' bit of the name is - I'm guessing here - clue enough to their gender.) The principal reason for our enthusiasm harked back a decade to two extraordinary releases on one of my favourite record labels, the ultra-cool 4AD. Responsible for issuing some of the most ethereal contemporary sounds imaginable - like the exquisite Cocteau Twins, plus the output of seminal bands like Pixies - 4AD deliver their goods in unswervingly gorgeous packaging, often designed by the innovative

Vaughan Oliver. The label also released the first two volumes of *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* – field recordings of untrained, Bulgarian female village choirs – in a genius move perfectly aligned to the label’s propensity for heavenly music. The recordings spanned a fifteen-year period, captured by Swiss ethnomusicologist Marcel Cellier - the man to hold to account for many an elevator classic by unleashing Romanian pan-flautist Gheorghe Zamfir upon this earth. Anyway, a tape of these recordings somehow, bizarrely, found its way to Peter Murphy, singer with Goth-rock overlords Bauhaus. Justifiably stunned by what he heard, Murphy played it to his 4AD label boss, Ivo Watts-Russell, who subsequently licensed and released the recordings to massive critical acclaim. Goths? Pan-flutes? Bulgarian villages? You couldn’t make that up if you tried.

What Balkan Babes do is a quite lovely take on this traditional East European rural sound. With great authenticity and impossibly delicious harmonizing, they perform aged songs from the (natch) Balkan and Baltic states, in the relevant native tongues, each Babe taking a turn to introduce a song by explaining its meaning. Regardless of the fact that I don’t understand a word of any of the languages concerned, I find this music deeply moving and very powerful in a *Nessun Dorma*-kinda way, so the spine-tingling performance by these talented singers was a true highlight of the weekend.

Wandering carefree back and forth between stages for the rest of the day, we took in portions of the sets by Montreal’s Lucie Blue Tremblay, local folk luminaries Trinitude, Vancouver’s veteran Metis / Cree / Saulteaux singer-songwriter, Sandy Scofield, and the festival climax of Trish Clair-Peck’s Nanaimo Fiddle Ensemble. Yet it was all over far too quickly, the shorter schedule almost feeling like an overview of

excerpts of the day's programme. We were ready to get moshing with some Cousin Harley-esque crazy rhythms when all beats and melodies fell silent.

As it always is and should be, Cowichan Folk Guild co-founder Deb Maike took to the stage to bring the 24th Islands Folk Festival to a close. Robert and Guild President Norm Thorne profusely thanked the hundreds of volunteers, performers, technicians, vendors, Tweeners, audience and so many more before the traditional closing song, led by Deb. "*Tzouhalem looks down with granite countenance,*" she sang in her sweetly mournful voice, the great mountain in question dominating Providence Farm's surroundings for millions of years before the festival was even a twinkle its founders' eyes. It was a poignant, downbeat moment, at least for me, in direct contrast to the celebratory vibe of the whole weekend. I felt akin to a tire with a slow puncture, but that was that – the festival was over and done for yet another year.

Since I'd heard them spoken from the St. Anne's Stage the previous day, the words of regular Islands Folk Festival Tweener, Billevity, had been pinging around my head. Between songs, he'd been describing his deep regard for and enduring love affair with the Islands Folk Festival, succinctly summing it up thus: "A good little model for what we can take out into the community."

Having honestly never encountered such a chilled and *civil*, obviously blissed-out large-ish crowd as I did at this festival, I couldn't agree more. If only things out there in the real world were like it is at Providence Farm each last weekend of July, where people of all ages, backgrounds, situations and outlooks interact with a rare unforced decorum. A

simplistic idealistic wish, maybe, but valid, as, unfortunately, life just isn't like that. Yet it's not to say that principals held dear and adhered to at the festival cannot be applied outside of it at every opportunity.

Certain obvious factors seem to me to promote the sense of community so evident at the Islands Folk Festival. The pastoral, tranquil setting is certainly greatly conducive to overall contentment and good behaviour. Also relevant is the fact that – although there appears to be plenty of room to expand – the capacity is capped at something like a sensible three thousand, ensuring that wherever you choose to go watch music, it's easy to get there and comfortable when you do. You can claim a little space that is only ever encroached upon in error.

That Providence Farm is a religious site also unquestionably goes a long way towards the all-pervading sense of spirituality at this event, dictating that there's a high level of respect for people, property and the culture and reputation of the festival itself. It is truly a beautiful thing, nurtured over the last two-and-a-half decades by a gradually expanding hardcore of devotees determined to make a difference through the unifying force of music. One of these is noted festival "friend," Clive Michael Justice, a well-known figure present with a food stall at the very first festival. At *my* first he was nattily attired in a green kilt, Roman sandals, wide-brimmed bamboo hat and intricate facial henna, a get-up indicative of the spirit of creative self-expression the Islands Folk Festival appears to inadvertently encourage. Justice has been there, done that and worn the t-shirt at this event, and his words in the Cowichan News Leader & Pictorial's July 29th review of the festival spoke volumes: "This is my tribe and my family."

Although, sadly, we did not meet them all, we spent our weekend in the company of three thousand-odd seemingly rather pleasant members of Justice's tribe and family. Between them all, a distinctly hippie edge and true family atmosphere gave a lovely balance, making for a blazingly colourful sea of tie-dye, straw Fedoras, billowing summer dresses and those men in kilts. Children scampered about freely and were royally entertained by professionals that'll appear in these pages in due course, so the little ones have just as good a time as mum and dad. Seeing a parade of nippers passing the Islands Stage in crazy costumes, led by a pantomime cow and a gaggle of gaudy clowns, I suspiciously eyed my tumbler of beer for a moment, but realized it's all just part of one big, joyous jamboree.

Testament to the overall respectability of the adult humanity typically attending the Islands Folk Festival was that, although alcohol is readily available in a beer garden open throughout, I didn't see a single instance of drunkenness, booze-induced stupidity or unruliness throughout the entire weekend. Plenty of jollity and high spirits, sure, but nothing untoward occurred, at least while we were around. In fact, we didn't see *any* kind of incident to concern us, but when we first ran into Robert on Sunday morning, he confirmed that there *had* unfortunately been one overnight problem for security in the campground: a marauding raccoon! Otherwise, all that transpired was within the festival's realms of acceptable behaviour. Honestly, I've never known the like...

As the army of precision-drilled volunteers swarmed all over the mammoth task of tearing down the temporary festival village, and our fellow festivalgoers packed away their belongings to stream steadily homewards, I watched in rapt fascination. Where was

the vast expanse of crushed beer cans, whisky bottles, smashed plastic tumblers, curry tubs, food wrappers, fries ground underfoot, half-eaten burgers, water containers full of urine, shredded sleeping bags, pizza crusts, single shoes, crumpled newspaper, vomit, discarded clothing, cigarette butts, banana skins, generic detritus and other unimaginable filth usually revealed when the ground clears at a festival's end? Where were the unconscious rockers, laying face-first where they collapsed? Where were the mud-caked fornicating couples, oblivious to all beyond their own berserk lust? Where were Geoff Berner's ravaged souls, wasted land and the "churned-up wound, full of garbage and shit"? Not here, apparently.

Truly, this was a revelation. Unnerving, even. I could not see a *single speck* of litter. *Anywhere*. As people upped to leave, they all to a man, woman and child scooped up absolutely everything within the imagined radius of their patch, and took it with them. It appeared that if there was as much a stray peanut, it would be located and bagged. I watched this happen time and again, utterly atingle at the respect shown to the land and to those that would otherwise have needed to clean up after them. Blimey, was I in Utopia?

This is, of course, how it should always be – it really is not difficult - but in my experience, never was – or, from what I've observed from afar, usually is. I was delighted. It helps enormously that the typical Islands Folk Festival patron seems a very decent human being for whom such actions are firmly established as lifestyle routines, but then the event has for many years aimed high with its green initiatives. The message has clearly got through. On page *one* of the 2008 programme, before any mention of music, the green mission statement appeared. The ultimate aim through intensive recycling and responsible waste management is that this festival eventually becomes a

zero waste event. By the organisers' own admission that's a tall order, but on the evidence I was party to, totally achievable in time. To reiterate, I've never known the like...

On the same weekend as the 24th Islands Folk Festival, another event of some significance was dramatically unfolding approximately one hundred miles northeast of Providence Farm as the crow flies. The setting was unarguably incredible, the internationally adored bill extremely impressive, but when the inaugural Pemberton Festival was first announced, all I could think was, "Uh-oh." I won't deny I was also pleased for B.C. that a major rock festival was to be staged in the province – our collective voracious appetite for music alone warrants it - but this was tempered by fears for the logistics of such a colossal undertaking in that particular location.

I appreciated that as a new festival it would experience teething troubles to be improved upon or eradicated entirely in coming years, and that the organisers would frequently realize throughout their event that they hadn't, in fact, left all stones unturned. But, wearing my promoter's hat, I seriously wondered how easily or not the site could be accessed, and what chaos the festival might cause along the Sea to Sky Highway connecting Vancouver and the Lower Mainland with tiny Pemberton. I mulled on how the arrival and three-day occupation of many thousands of rock fans would impact upon Pemberton's miniscule population and their delicate environment... and it made me shiver.

As a few friends had attended as fans or staff, reports of what had occurred at Pemberton starting filtering through to me almost immediately after it had ended. I so

wanted everything to have gone superbly well - or at the very worst a bit stickily, but generally smoothly. Unfortunately, though there were accounts of some incredible performances (most notably, as usual, The Flaming Lips), it seems my fears had been legitimate. Overall, the consensus was that it had been a truly miserable experience.

In its wake, I read a few mixed reviews of the Pemberton Festival, some rather philosophically approached in attempting to balance the positives with the negatives. Not one of them convinced me in any way that I should've been there. But it was not until September that I encountered a report containing portions that could've so easily been penned by me about every major festival I've ever attended. It's not like I was waiting for it, but it just landed in my lap.

If you care to refer or think back to the content of the first chapter, you will hear loud echoes resonate in the words of the spectacularly monikered Maxwell Maxwell, writing for the University of British Columbia campus radio station CiTR's *Discorder* magazine. In his splendid article's first paragraph he describes the entrance to the Pemberton site as "a vast and depressing holding pen for tens of thousands of souls who aren't suffering, but still aren't having a very good time." Of the conditions for the crowd, he says: "Inside, it's like a refugee camp-themed vacation destination. Everyone is (already) dirty, tired, and shirtless. Everyone wears scarves around their mouths to block out the ever-present dust." Wow. I thought I'd been "through it" in my festival experiences, but I can say hand on heart I've never had to endure a dust storm. That would've been quite novel.

And what of the crowd? "40,000 tight young bodies walking around half-naked, drunk on half a million plastic cups of cheap beer... milling around in dusty confusion."

How easy was it access to the site? “Along the Jeep-clogged single-lane roads leading to the festival grounds,” Maxwell explains, “a mile-long stream of people hike past cars inching forward at a snail’s pace.” Organizationally, it also seems things could have been much better, Maxwell stating: “The security is an absolute mess... near-riot over a lack of shuttles from the parking lot to the campgrounds. People waited hours only to be denied entry.” Oh dear. But, despite everything, perhaps it was good value? Er, no, it seems not. “Maybe it was the \$150+ single-day tickets,” our hero complains, “the \$7 beers, or the fact that this is the festival’s first year, but the majority of my friends gave Pemberton a pass.”

So, I bet you thought I was exaggerating earlier on. As you can see, I am not alone. I’ll repeat that I’m sure aspects of the Pemberton Festival will be much improved in time, and I really hope so for its potentially valuable future, but this remains the – or *my* - archetypal major rock festival experience – one I feel is unacceptable and refuse to personally tolerate until big changes are made. Although it has had twenty-five years’ practice, when the ethics, ideals and consideration for humanity so abundantly present in the “good little model for what we can take out into the community” are firmly in place at events like Pemberton, I may well return. But until that day, I know where I would rather, and will, be.

It was just two days after the Islands Folk Festival ended that I read Geoff Berner’s unwittingly impeccably timed MySpace bulletin. It came in as I’d been mulling over our weekend at Providence Farm, rerunning things in my mind, getting to grips with the

powerful impressions it had made on me. But what I haven't revealed to you until now is the silver lining of Berner's dark cloud, his missive concluding thus: "*Somehow, magic emerges from the process.*" Even at Pemberton, I have no doubts that in some ways this rang true. But over at Providence Farm, the magic was already there.