

Those Lazy, Hazy, Crazy Days of Summer ...

David Morrison

There are many things I love about living on Vancouver Island, the readiness of the populace to throw a party certainly high on the list. It seems that any excuse to arrange festivities will do, a mentality I find greatly satisfying as one who thoroughly enjoys a good knees-up. Summer, naturally, is when it all kicks off big time, the sunshine months meaning that a festival begins somewhere on the island the moment another concludes elsewhere. It's a veritable non-stop panoply of musical and cultural entertainment, programming usually happily accidental in sating most every taste by season's end.

So much goes on—more than perhaps you know—that I could conceivably pen an entire guidebook previewing your choices in festivals each summer. A plan for the future, perhaps, but on this occasion I've chosen to highlight the three I see as offering the most spectacular bills in terms of roots music. Folk, blues, country and bluegrass fans, your ships have come in with this year's Vancouver Island MusicFest, the Islands Folk Festival and Coombs Bluegrass Festival.

A friend who shares my fondness for quicksilver rustic banjo recently described the Coombs event to me as "a riot." A regular attendee, he was not implying that this shindig is notorious for disorder—nothing could be further from the truth—but rather that the high octane live entertainment for which the genre is famed is guaranteed.

"And waking up fuzzy-headed in my car to the strains of a high lonesome fiddle is something I'll never forget," my pal reminisced, gagging for more of the same from August 1st through 3rd. He has plenty to look forward to, with a cast of blistering bluegrass outfits from the US and across B.C. lined up to throw down the hoedown.

The Vancouver Island MusicFest up in Courtenay, meanwhile, grows in stature year-on-year. Attracting an increas-

ingly dazzling and plain classy international bill, its reputation has spread far beyond this province to pull in patrons from all over Western Canada. Running July 11th through 13th, this year sees another extraordinary line-up including revered veteran blues maverick Taj Mahal, Appalachian music legend Dirk Powell, genre-commingling banjo virtuoso Béla Fleck, Winnipeg indie kings The Weakerthans and, of the new breed, Toronto's unfeasibly brilliant purveyors of "death country," Elliott Brood. The list goes on and impressively on; it's hard to choose who *not* to mention.

But my personal choice and recommendation goes to the Cowichan Folk Guild's 24th Annual Islands Folk Festival, staged at Providence Farm in Duncan, July 25-27. As one who prefers the smaller festival experience, I appreciate the location, compact site and, particularly, the intimate interaction with performers that this event offers.

I spoke recently with the CFG's Artistic Director, Robert McCourty, to discover more about the event. Beginning in explanation of the broad musical policy by which acts for the festival are selected, he says: "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, its 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. So, part of my role is to select the correct artists to satisfy the festival attendees, while staying true to our roots as a folk festival."

Needless to say, this is not as easy as it may sound—especially as such a prestige event attracts a heavy inundation of approaches from acts eager to perform. "With over three hundred artists applying for thirty-one stage slots, it can become a critical, yet daunting task," McCourty confirms.



Wake Up
with Dave & Kim



This said, it seems that he and his colleagues have done a wonderful job for 2008, presenting a diverse and exciting bill. I'm particularly looking forward to a repeat rendezvous with Vancouver's roots rock powerhouse Cousin Harley, plus Winnipeg's Cara Luft and Victoria's Balkan Babes' beautiful-yet-quirky take on East European choral music. The real enticement, however, lies in the unknown, with a whole bunch of artists and bands whose names are totally new to me. It's going to be so cool!

McCourtly feels a new feature for this year's festival could be a real show-stealer. "One highlight this year will be the addition of a 'Youth Showcase' on Saturday afternoon," he states with confidence. "One of our four outdoor stages will be dedicated to youth performers, giving them a chance to showcase their talents to a festival audience. We have some extraordinarily talented young people throughout Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands; I think people will be amazed at the calibre we have in our own backyard!"

And with the ink barely dry on this year's performers' contracts, preparations for 2009's historic event are already underway. "We're already in the beginning stages of planning for our 25th anniversary festival," affirms the tireless McCourtly.

Although he only took up his role in February, he's obviously acutely aware of the event's sizeable footprint on Vancouver Island's cultural landscape. "We've literally had people say they've

'grown up' at the festival and now bring their own children and even grandchildren back each year, so a sense of family is a very strong component," he states, identifying a key element to the appeal of this annual gathering. "Families feel comfortable at our festival; perhaps that's the special magic of the Islands Folk Festival? That – and the music is great, too!"

Before we meet again with fall beckoning, a final word, if you please. I ask you all, as you whoop it up this festival season, to spare a thought for the legion of volunteers that make these incredible festivals a reality. There will be nearly four hundred at Providence Farm alone, and without them our summers would be silent. So thank you, guys and gals... and have a fantastic summer, everyone.

Islands Folk Festival:
www.folkfest.bc.ca / Email: info@folkfest.bc.ca / (250) 748-3975

Vancouver Island MusicFest:
www.islandmusicfest.com

Coombs Bluegrass Festival:
www.chrco.org/bluegrass.htm

Images, clockwise from top:
 Children of Celebrities: Performers at Islands Folk Festival 2008 (photo: Kim Sinclair, manipulation: Jesse Ladret)

Women in Docs: Performers at Islands Folk Festival 2008 (photo: Romi Willing)

Vancouver's Tamara Nile entertains the 2007 Islands Folk Festival Crowd (image courtesy of Cowichan Folk Guild)

Ivonne Hernandez: Performer at Islands Folk Festival 2008 (photo courtesy of ivonnehernandez.com)

