

The Dilemma of Representation: Local Content at the Calgary Folk Festival, 1999-2009

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The Calgary Folk Festival, now in its 31st year of operation, provides a meeting place for musicians and folk music fans in the midst of the city's downtown. Although it has recently begun to bring in diverse acts from around the world, has partnered with other Western Canadian folk festivals to hire popular headliners, and has broadened its roster to include a variety of musical genres not always thought of as "folk," the Calgary Folk Festival (CFF) also gives local roots

musicians a venue that exposes them to a broad audience. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Calgarian artists were often able to secure a place on the festival roster, which not only had the immediate effect of an expanded audience, but had the long-term effect of attracting locals to their regular gigs. But as the CFF has increased its offerings from beyond the city limits, local musicians have faced tougher competition for spots at the festival.



Figure 1: Mainstage at the Calgary Folk Festival¹

The Calgary roots music scene is one that is defined by independence; its activity typically passes under the radar of the Canadian music industry at

large. This comes from a dual marginalization: one of roots music by the mainstream music industry and one from Calgary's isolated position on the Canadian

prairies, removed from centres of music production in North America. As such, local roots musicians carve out performance opportunities by whatever means necessary, engaging in practices generally carried out by record label staff or management. Musicians advertise their recordings and gigs through a variety of media online, negotiate directly with venue owners, and attempt to secure unusual and lucrative corporate gigs with local businesses. For a scene that is marked by struggle, isolation, and hard work, the opportunity to play at the festival is a welcome relief for local acts.

I have been conducting research on the Calgary roots music scene since the late 1990s, and have been volunteering with the festival since 1999. I have watched the relationship between the festival and local acts change over this time as competition from artists outside the city has made it more difficult to be featured at the festival. This article will explore the role of the CFF in Calgary, as well as its history, audience demographics, and programming trends. These trends will provide the basis for further examining the dilemma Western Canadian festivals currently face: whether to offer international acts to an audience rarely exposed to them, or to maintain a certain level of support for local musicians. I will frame my discussion from my point of view as both a researcher and a festival volunteer, roles which generally served to complement each other during the course of my research.

Description of Ethnographic Setting

It is Thursday afternoon, late July 2008, the first day of the Calgary Folk Festival. When I get to my volunteer area, the Green Room, I find that nobody else has arrived. It is a long walk from the downtown area of Eau Claire, where I parked my car, to the Green Room. Along the way, I cross through a restaurant area with open patios; pass a children's wading pool; walk over the river's bridge, where festival ticket sellers and buskers are catching passersby; pass a long line of eager audience members, lined up since the early morning hours along the dusty path into the festival site; and see the many food and souvenir vendors on site, the six side stages, and the mainstage, at the back of the festival grounds (see Figure 1). The Green Room itself is a large area to the left side of the mainstage, blocked off by a double set of fences, which are covered in dark plastic for privacy. Inside the area, several tables with umbrellas are scattered across the grass, and a tented space with a makeshift bar and food tables occupy the back corner. It is here that I work, preparing snacks, fruit,

and cheese plates, clearing and washing beer pitchers, and doing general service work for the visiting artists and their entourages.

Since I'm the first in the tent, I set to washing tables, opening umbrellas, and setting up the area. As the afternoon progresses, the Green Room becomes a hub of activity: the crew that I work with brings food and serving items on golf carts, tables are set up, the beer kegs arrive from the festival's sponsor, Big Rock Beer, volunteers test the beer to make sure it is good enough for musicians, and finally, the caterers show up with trays of food for the evening's corporate dinner. Off to the side, a local Greek fusion band, the Rembetika Hipsters, are testing out the small PA system, practicing a few of their songs for the evening's entertainment in the Green Room, and attractive lanterns and framed posters of 1960s concert advertisements are hung around the tent.

As my shift ends, I make my way to a table occupied by my fellow crew members. It is getting busy: corporate donors from various press outlets, media sponsors, and businesses around the city are being treated to a night of catered food and drink. The Rembetika Hipsters have long been drowned out by the din of drunken conversation and pre-festival excitement, and it is nearly impossible to move through the crowd in the bar area (see Figure 2).

When I sit down, a fellow crew member introduces me to Jerry Keogh, a merchandiser for major touring acts, who used to be a concert promoter, and also owns Heritage Posters, the store that supplied the evening's décor. Keogh tells me that he chaired the festival's board from 1994-1999, during which time he hired the current artistic director, Kerry Clarke, and thus was partially responsible for bringing the festival into the mainstream. Keogh argues that the only reason the festival survived in the 1990s was because mainstream headline acts were brought to the festival, thereby extending its length to four days and drawing in larger crowds every year. He tells me that the local acts are still welcome on the side stages, but the mainstream performers are needed to keep the festival going, and despite the uproar that has ensued among many critics and audience members that headliners (such as Macy Gray) are not "folk," the change has been a largely positive one.²

I wonder about this statement. The continuing debate about what constitutes appropriate folk festival programming plagues events like the CFF and the Edmonton and Winnipeg Folk Festivals (see, for example, McManus 2005; Tsai 2007). Moreover, why is local content sidelined to the smaller stages, suggesting that international or national acts will always take precedence in the audience's mind? What effect

has this had on the CFF's audience and the perceptions participants hold of the festival? A brief history of how the festival has adapted to the expectations of

participants will help explain how it currently operates.



Figure 2: Green Room Bustle

History and Background

The Calgary Folk Festival was founded by Mitch Podolak, founder of the Winnipeg and Edmonton Festivals, in 1980. Podolak, known for the Western Canadian festival format of main and side stages³ and the communal approach to deciding on, dividing, and doing work, partnered with the head of the Calgary Folk Club (CFC), Mansel Davies, to appeal to the Lougheed-led Conservative government for festival funding that would amplify celebrations surrounding Alberta's 75th anniversary. The festival continued to operate as a branch of the CFC, plagued throughout the 1980s by bad weather and dwindling audiences, not to mention perpetual arguments over what should and should not be allowed as folk programming. Vic Bell, head of the Nickelodeon Music Club, took over as artistic director in the 1990s, separated the festival

from the management of the CFC, and incorporated it as a non-profit organization. As Keogh told me, the festival began to change significantly with the shift in programming in the mid-90s, which was also partially the result of bringing Edmonton Folk Festival producer Terry Wickham on as a consulting producer. Staying in its original home of Prince's Island Park, despite continual battles with nearby residents over the noise, the festival grew throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, bringing on many headlining acts and opening its roster every year to more and more acts from around the world (Brooker 2004; Keogh pc 2008; siemieniuk 2008). While the site is vulnerable to the elements and complaints from residents, few would suggest that the festival could take place anywhere else. Prince's Island is a very, very attractive natural venue for the folk festival. When I

think of other outdoor venues, McMahon Stadium, the Stampede Grounds, Shaw Millennium Park, Olympic Plaza, Canada Olympic Park, none can really compare even though some can hold a much larger audience. There was a significant political struggle for the folk festival and other events to secure the use of Prince's Island in the 1990s. Some factions felt that music events had no place in a 'natural' park. For us, the park was the 'natural' place to present music. When attending the folk festival you will see family groups or individuals taking a break from the crowds and the music by sitting under the trees or down by the river and lagoon. I can't imagine presenting the festival on the pavement of the Stampede Grounds, for example; it simply would not work. (Bell 2008)

The audience principally consists of relatively affluent Calgarians who return year after year. The festival conducts an annual survey, and although the survey often generates a small percentage of responses (approximately 500 out of 10,000 attendees in 2008), it is considered to be indicative of the audience at large, and guides future programming, advertising, sponsorship, and administrative decisions. The survey is conducted by Zinc Research. The sample is random and representative of attendees and the data is weighted by the type of pass or ticket purchased. A summary of the results that are significant

for the present study are presented here, but the full results of the festival's official survey (which incorporate results since 1998) and the methodology used can be found on the festival website (www.calgaryfolkfest.com).

According to the survey, Folk Festival attendees in 2008 were typically:

- Female (63%): consistent with previous years.
- Relatively youthful: almost 3 in 5 (58%) were under 55 years (down from 2006 festival).
- Calgarian (83%): Among these local attendees, 1 in 7 (14%) brought out-of-town-guests.
- Affluent: Among participants providing a response, almost half had an annual household income of over \$80,000, with a mean of \$87,000/year (higher than the average Calgary household).
- Attend in groups with other adults (69%): The average group size was 4.0 persons. However, families also attended the festival with just about 1 in 5 (21%) in groups with children under 17 years.

Just over one-quarter (27%) of attendees had never been to the festival before (down from 2006), while 33% of attendees have been attending for 4+ years (about the same as in 2006).

In short, an overall view of the audience can be determined from Table 1:

Table 1: Calgary Folk Festival Audience Demographics

STATISTICS %		MARITAL STATUS %	
Female	63	Single, no children	39
Male	37	Single, with children	7
		Married, cohabiting, no children	24
		Married, cohabiting, with children	30
AGE %		HOUSEHOLD INCOME %	
Under 24	11	\$20,000 to under \$35,000	20
25-34	26	\$35,000 to under \$50,000	10
35-44	21	\$50,000 to under \$80,000	22
44-54	21	\$80,000 to under \$100,000	14
55+	11	\$100,000 +	34
Average age 41		Average income \$87,000	

(Source: Sponsorship Guide; Calgary Folk Festival website)

The percentage of female attendees is somewhat surprising and inexplicable. This is a trend that has continued over the festival's documented surveys, and

may simply be the result of particular tendencies in audience groups to either return year after year, or be more willing to fill out surveys at the festival. The

other results are not surprising; those in higher income brackets may be more likely to have holiday time or grown children and are able to attend for the full weekend, whereas those in lower brackets may be young (i.e., university age; working at part-time jobs) or working in arts-related industries, which might encourage interest in and attendance at the festival.

Music: Programming the Festival

Programming a folk festival has never been without its problems; Brooker notes that the earliest manifestations of the contemporary Canadian folk festival at Mariposa encountered criticism for not programming true “folk” music (2004). The literature investigating what constitutes folk is substantial and ever-changing; these discussions influence contemporary discourse on the subject, which in turn perpetually shapes how the CFF approaches its programming.⁴

Festival programming depends on the ideologies governing what constitutes folk music, the tastes of the audience, precedents set by past successful festivals, and most importantly, on the availability of funding, either from government grants, ticket revenues, or corporate assistance, such as the sponsorship of side stages on site (e.g., the stage sponsored by local oil company Conoco Phillips). The CFF’s funding comes from a variety of sources that have increased exponentially in recent years, thanks to the festival’s growth and prominence in the city. The government granting agencies supporting the festival include Canadian Heritage at the federal level, which provided \$120,000 in 2008; at the provincial level the festival received \$75,000. This is in great contrast to previous years: during Ralph Klein’s tenure as premier, and prior to that, the money given to the arts in general did not change over 18 years. This meant that, given the increasing amount of competition for this limited funding from other events, the CFF got as little as \$29,000 some years (siemieniuk 2008). The restructuring of arts funding that emerged with new premier Ed Stelmach has provided a significant increase for the CFF and related ventures, fostering the growth of the arts across the province. At the municipal level, more money is available to the festival; it received \$80,000 in 2008 from the Calgary Region Arts Foundation (CRAF), which has been rebranded as the Calgary Arts Development Association (CADA).

Equally important are ticket revenues, which reach upwards of \$1 million per year, and the corporate sponsors, which vary widely both in source and level of funding. However, I wondered at the visual

markers of this corporate sponsorship at the festival. Over my time there, it seemed as though these had become much more visible, which on the one hand was good for growth, but on the other, detracted from the politically-oriented folk ideology that has persisted at events like the CFF. How could it be perceived as a grassroots, non-mainstream event if the stages are governed by corporate signage (see Figure 3)?

The festival is wise to the possibility of misperceptions of their partnerships with sponsors: “In this town, it’s not a problem—because this town, with the Stampede, this town lives on corporate boxes, stuff like that, the fact that we put a sign up...we don’t have corporate boxes. We don’t have set aside seating, like those corporations can’t buy the stuff they buy at other places because it’s a folk festival. And with all the fundraising we do and all the government money, our box office is a million dollars. Those are the people, if we piss them off, they’ve stood in line all night to get a good seat because have them running to the tarps, if they show up all of a sudden, wait a minute they’ve blocked off seats for the corporate sponsors, they’ll stop coming. And I’d rather lose the sponsorship than the audience. So we always make that very clear. And in some cases, we’ve found that the corporations actually find that quite refreshing. Because they get treated well here, but they get treated differently than they do at other events and the ones that demand that stuff, well we don’t want their sponsorship because they don’t get it.” (ibid.)

Moreover, the staff position themselves as bearers of ethical responsibility, and draw the line at accepting certain sources of funding: “There’s cigarette money available still. We won’t take it. There’s some oil companies that get themselves involved in places in the world where there’s some question as to what’s going on there. We haven’t run into that, but we have not taken, we have the board rep talk about that. We had a huge argument, the board was really split, it took hours to come up with a decision when the Herald [local newspaper] went on strike. They’re a major sponsor. So, you keep them as a sponsor?...don’t just take money because it’s money. We are a folk festival.” (siemieniuk 2008)

But there is a reason why this corporate sponsorship is so great, why the audience size and revenue has increased so drastically in recent years. As mentioned above, the influence of Terry Wickham as consulting producer pushed the CFF into a mainstream realm. By hiring headlining acts on the premise of “spending money to make money,” the festival moved from being a grassroots, small-scale event to one that appealed to a cross-section of Calgarians.

Evidence of this is seen in the substantial percentage of audience members who came to the festival primarily to see Blue Rodeo,⁵ but also in the changes in programming over the last decade to include performers such as Steve Earle, Arrested Development, Macy Gray, Elvis Costello, Emmylou Harris, Glen Campbell, Kris Kristofferson, and David Byrne, among others, all of whom have achieved substantial mainstream success during their careers. Wickham's approach has found great success at the Edmonton Folk Festival, and, although following suit to a

smaller degree, the Winnipeg Folk Festival has adopted a similar approach recently. Why the mainstream acts? The reasons are numerous, but clearly in a climate of a rapidly growing population, the challenge to "traditional" folk music from other genres for listener tastes, and the desire to keep the festival going and meaningful to its potential audience have contributed to the presence of these headliners. And while they may be a central draw for the audience, they remain a smaller percentage of the total performers at any given festival (around 20-25%).



Figure 3: Sponsors listed at the side of the mainstage

The festival does not escape criticism for its programming practices, though, and the reasons for that are also numerous. Central to these criticisms are the tensions created by the folk-popular music divisions, as noted above, and these are not easily resolved, particularly for long-time attendees who conceive of a relatively narrow definition of folk music. Part of the problem for the festival is the recent change in artist promotion and communication that technologi-

cal advances have brought about. Artists from around the world are now able to submit applications to play at the festival through email or the festival website, opening the door for Artistic Director Kerry Clarke to find many more performers. The festival thus approaches the problematic term 'folk' as such: if it is a proven audience favourite, if it is interesting, innovative, or perhaps usually inaccessible to a typical Calgarian audience, if it falls within previously

determined boundaries of folk (singer-songwriter, political, acoustic, of particular Western European and American traditions such as blues, country, or bluegrass), or if it sponsors the local scene somehow, then it has a possibility of being on the roster. And siemieniuk’s definition of folk music encompasses all of those: “So, that’s where the beauty of folk music lies, because the definition is, you find me a definition...The music’s a political music, looking back and reaching for traditional music, that’s never going to go away with good musicians. But the thing they make the noise with may change. But it doesn’t matter! There’s folk by style, there’s folk by attitude. We try to mix both.”

Alberta Content at the Festival

Another arena where the festival is subject to criticism is in the amount of space devoted to local performers. For the festival, “local” means Albertan, so the inclusion of regional performers increases the competition for Calgary musicians who may want to play. The festival appears to be turning into a source of tension for roots musicians in the city; while most of the Calgary musicians I have spoken to have been given at least one slot on the side stages in the last decade, many feel that the festival’s broad approach to programming prevents the kind of local support it should be giving. I asked siemieniuk if the festival maintained a mandate for representing local acts, and while it does not officially, he and Clarke feel there should be some consistency:

There’s nothing that’s written in stone...but I’ve sort of noticed a) people do like to see favourites, like if you caught on to Jim White, you’d like to see him again. Not every year, but, so we try and bring people back. b) You always gotta put on new stuff, so who’s never been here before. Gotta bring in some really new cool stuff, like people who have never played Calgary, it’s really cool. Okay. We do need to have a local component, well how many? Enough! Enough that it’s not tokenism, so we usually hire, and by local, we mean Alberta, usually 8-10 out of 60. Okay, we need some singer-songwriters for workshops, that area, so that’s 8-10, we need some world music, so you try to balance it. (ibid.)

Some would argue that it is irrefutably not enough, given that the eight to ten are spread across the province, and given the festival’s very broad definition of folk. That is, local visual artists featuring installations on the site, or urban funk bands studying at the University of Calgary’s jazz program are included in the local category, thus reducing the available space for musicians who anchor themselves firmly in a folk-roots tradition as defined here (i.e., country, bluegrass, blues, acoustic, singer-songwriter folk).

I traced the festival’s representation of local content over the years 1999-2009 (see Table 2), and have noted that it has decreased over that time, moving from a high of 21% of total performers in 1999 to as low as 11% in 2009, which, coincidentally, was the festival’s 30th anniversary.

Table 2: Alberta Content at the Calgary Folk Festival, 1999-2009

	Total Artists	Canadian	Albertan	% Albertan
1999	46	20	10	21.74
2000	51	27	10	19.61
2001	49	28	9	18.37
2002	48	29	8	16.67
2003	56	34	11	19.64
2004	60	33	8	13.33
2005	57	29	10	17.54
2006	65	34	11	16.92
2007	67	37	10	14.93
2008	61	31	8	13.11
2009	62	33	7	11.29

Clearly, according to siemieniuk, budgetary constraints, artists’ touring schedules, and audience taste play a large part in programming decisions, which

may partially explain the high percentage of Canadian artists featured at the festival (which frequently exceeds 50% of the total). In referencing complaints

he had overheard about the Winnipeg Folk Festival's programming, one performer suggested that he has encountered similar discussions in Alberta: "We've got kind of an identity crisis here, we could do a lot better" (Anon 1). When asked what he thought of the festival, another musician replied, "The Calgary folk festival? I like it, I think this year they had almost no Calgary acts. I counted one. And I don't know why. They used to have way, way more. I mean, I know Kerry [Clarke], the artistic director. And I don't know, like I thought we were going to be playing there this year, she kept coming out to our shows and saying yeah, we gotta get you guys back in, right?" (Anon 2).

Artists are well aware of the difficulties of gaining access to the festival, and rarely place their hopes on finding a spot; some recognize that all festivals are structured as such, and do not depend on the festival circuit for income in any way: "Well you know, what I've been on about lately is any year that you put an album out, you're not likely to get a festival [laughs]. Well, that's the way we see it...it's the year after...But, festivals, you know, bloody. It's the same thing every year, you just fire off a package. I mean I've gotten to the point, I don't even contact them, I just send the package. I mean I know better, you got different ideas, people say 'oh you should stay on them, man, 'cause you'll get the festival,' then you'll find out no, if you bug them too much they'll tell you to piss off. They don't want anything to do with you. It's all these silly little juggling things that you have to do. So, I figure, I see it as well, send them the music, if they like the music, they'll hire us. That's it. If they can find a spot for us." (Anon 3)

Jenny Allen and Lin Elder of the Fates note: "JA: I've always done quite well on the folk festival circuit as a solo artist and, but with the amount of artists, again, that apply, ten years ago compared to now, it was a lot easier to get into the folk festivals, because not as many artists were applying. Now, there's a lot more artists applying for the same amount of spots. LE: The festivals have all been elevated to a certain degree because they all have access to world players, performers." (2007)

The Festival: A Summary

The Calgary Folk Festival constantly negotiates between multiple desires and forces, and treads a line between the marginal and commercial, between grassroots and corporate, always attempting to satisfy everyone. The attitude of "anything goes" seeps into many facets of its materialization over the four days. Perhaps the most obvious result of this attitude is the

workshop format. The workshops run during the day on Saturday and Sunday on all six side stages, featuring most of the artists invited to the festival in various configurations. The most basic option in this format is to have each performer/band play one song, and move down the row of four or five artists until everyone has had a turn, then start again. However, interaction is encouraged, and performers usually give some structural clues about the song for anybody who wants to join in. As difficult as they are to program, they often lend themselves to unexpected musical collaboration and a challenging musical environment for participants. Artists have commented on the benefits of the workshop format, especially as it compares to the typical urban bar setting that they are used to playing: "From a musician's standpoint, it's a great way for musicians to get together [...] and you're in the same spot for more than one day typically, whereas that doesn't always happen when you're on the road. And there's a lot of chance for collaboration and sharing ideas and jamming together and just having fun and doing what we do best just to make music. Yeah, the folk festivals to me are a great opportunity to collaborate." (Dekker 2008). "The audience is listening...I think it's the expectation too at the folk festival that you'll step outside the box a little bit. You'll play your edgier material...You can play more controversial music at a folk festival [people want to hear that] people want to hear stuff that's pushing the edge or making a controversial statement." (members of Widow Maker, 2008).

Perhaps the Calgary Folk Festival is representative of the recurring tensions in Calgary at large. The obvious need to appeal to an increasingly diverse audience is part of what guides programming decisions, and aligns with similar initiatives seen at bars like the Ironwood Stage and Grill or heard on radio stations such as CKUA. From a programming standpoint, the decreasing importance of a 1960s folk revival notion of folk music performers means that openness to alternative notions of folk music is necessary. Furthermore, competing festivals in the city and the influence of mainstream popular culture cannot be ignored if the festival wants to improve or maintain its box office sales, and thus mainstream acts encourage attendance from those who may not normally be attracted to conventional conceptions of folk music. Finally, the absence of funds at the municipal and provincial levels has forced the festival to turn towards corporate sponsorship, which serves to generate advertising space and festival benefits for donors, at the small price of displaying banners on site and ads in the program to an audience familiar with corporate imagery.

For many, however artificially or temporarily constructed, a sense of community created by those gathered on the island for four days often dispels any tensions created by disagreements over the purview of folk ideology or over the programming practices of the festival. Boundaries between performer and audience are blurred as artists wander freely among crowds to catch workshops, many of them feeling like fans themselves. Tony Dekker commented: "But because the idea is folk music...it appeals and applies to a lot of different types of people...And I don't know, the word 'folk' kind of has this unifying aspect to it...Yeah, it just makes for a festival that can appeal to everyone on a lot of different levels. Everyone can enjoy it in a lot of different ways. It unifies everybody" (2008).

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Notes:

¹ All photographs taken by author unless otherwise indicated.

² Personal communication, 2008.

³ Although the side stage format first appeared at the Mariposa Folk Festival in its early days.

⁴ For example, see Neil Rosenberg's edited volume *Transforming Traditions* (1993), in which authors attempt to investigate the intersections of the traditional, the popular, and the ideological strains of folk music, particularly in relation to the 1960s folk revival. Monographs such as Grunning's *Millennium Folk: American Folk Music Since the Sixties* (2006), MacKinnon's *The British Folk Scene: Musical Performance and Social Identity* (1994), and Narvaez and Laba's *Media Sense: The Folklore-Popular Culture Continuum* (1986) similarly problematize the folk-popular debate, focusing on issues of authenticity, technology, the incorporation of world music into definitions of folk, the role of festival and club programming, and the reconciliation of these with a middle-class urban identity that is often responsible for shifting definitions of folk.

⁵ Considered in folk festival circles to be a mainstream act.

⁶ For some earlier articles in *Canadian Folk Music* on the Calgary Folk Festival, see Murray Leeder's review of the 2008 festival in Vol. 42.3, and Rosaleen Gregory's account of the 25th Anniversary festival (2004) in Vol. 38.3.