

# Review: Ottawa Folk Festival

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I struggled for some time to begin writing this review. Not for lack of interest in the 2012 Ottawa Folk Festival, but because I could not seem to find an entry point. No matter how often I put pen to paper to describe the event, I ended up with nothing, save a number of disjointed ideas. That is, until I realized that this review is in fact a review of the Ottawa Folk *Festivals* – two festivals in one park, sharing the same physical and sonic spaces but competing for attention.

Let me explain.

The Ottawa Folk Festival's format has changed dramatically since it came under the direction of Bluesfest organizer Mark Manahan and moved to Hog's Back Park two years ago. The need to develop new audiences to sustain the festival has been recognized for some time, and this year's event – bringing in between 25,000 and 30,000 fans – demonstrated a successful move in that direction. What was in the past a small festival that focused on local acts and predominantly acoustic performances, this year included headliners like Ben Harper and Bon Iver, as well as bands like Said the Whale and Alberta Cross. A genre-jumping lineup like this is perhaps not surprising for those used to the outdoor concert model of Ottawa's Bluesfest, but it marks a significant shift for the Ottawa Folk Festival. As someone who did not experience the festival before its "new" incarnation in 2011, I cannot speak experientially to the changes and their results. I can, however, offer up some subjective observations about this year's event.

The model for the 2012 festival was unique, and in many ways a positive effort to blend the fiscal necessity of increased ticket sales with the desire to preserve the Ottawa Folk Festival's traditional base. Festival grounds were divided in two: on one side were workshop stages, artisan tents, food vendors, and the Kidzone; on the other, three main stages, beverage and popcorn vendors, and a merchandise tent. Whereas access to the grounds of the workshop stages was free of charge for the duration of the five-day festival, tickets were required to enter the main stage area.

The free side of the festival grounds boasted diverse programming that included song circles with well-known artists (Luke Doucet, Lucy Kaplansky,

John K. Samson, Danny Michel, Amy Helm), interviews and performances by solo artists (Jill Hennessy, Saul Williams), and workshops in genres ranging from Bollywood (Kuljit) to Bazouki (The Once). This side of the festival also housed the Envirotent, where workshops on topics like fair trade and solar power were held, and where festival-goers could purchase organic-vegan-(nearly)-gluten-free sweet foods from Ottawa's B. Goods Bakery mobile truck. The festival mural, painted by festival-goers over the course of the weekend, provided another connection to the festival's past. The canvas is large enough to accommodate fifty painters at once and has been a fixture at the festival for eight years running, says artist Arthur II, who helps to guide the collective effort and encourages participation from a broad spectrum of festival-goers.

The small size of the stages on the "free" festival grounds offered an opportunity to listen to stories and songs in an intimate setting. This is not unexpected at a folk festival, but there were nevertheless moments of spontaneity that are worth pointing out. Spoken word artist Saul Williams, upon noticing the rain while being interviewed by local slam poet Ian Keteku, invited audience members to join him on stage. At another session, Williams was gracious enough to allow a latecomer who mistook his performance for an open mic session to interrupt the set and recite his own poems.

Other highlights included beat boxer and Ottawa native Julia Dales, John Gorka with Lucy Kaplansky, and Raul Midón. Midón is a New York-based performer that I had not heard before, and while patchy weather and scheduling made for a modest audience (he was up against Great Big Sea on a main stage), it was clear that those in attendance were rapt. Midón, blind since infancy, worked with artists like Shakira and Julio Iglesias before going out on his own, and combines incredible technical skill with creative song arrangements that one does not expect to come from a single sound source. Mimicking the sound of a trumpet with his voice (not only timbre, but also technical aspects like flutter-tonguing), using his right hand to play percussion and his left to play guitar, and experimenting with complex cross rhythms and countermelodies among these voices, Midón creates a sound that is not only technically brilliant, but also sonically interesting.

Compelling for entirely different reasons was the Bytown Ukulele Group's ukulele jam. Bringing

together ukulele players from diverse levels of experience, the group serenaded festival-goers near the food tents, singing familiar tunes like “I’ll Fly Away”.

On the other side of the festival grounds, immediately adjacent to the free area, were the main stages – what I will call Festival #2. This area was ticketed and was a venue for big-name acts throughout the course of the festival. Performers Ben Harper, Great Big Sea, Lindsey Buckingham, Dan Mangan, and Bon Iver headlined the five nights, though they were not the only popular acts represented. Kathleen Edwards, Old Man Luedecke, Timber Timbre, John K. Samson, Danny Michel, Whitehorse, Corb Lund, Hey Rosetta, and Patrick Watson (among others) were also on the bill.

Though it was her first time to Hog’s Back Park, Ottawa native Kathleen Edwards was very much at home on stage, telling the audience that she wanted to be part of the 2012 festival when she heard that “they were getting their party on”. She thanked the hometown audience for their support over the years, and put on a strong show that drew from her 2012 release, *Voyageur*, as well as past work. Edwards’ clear vocal timbre and chemistry with band members (Jim Bryson in particular) was stellar.

Large numbers of people in the enclosed ticketed area made it clear that Festival #2 was a success. Its separation from the food and workshop tents, however, also gave the space a sense of being somewhat disjointed; more home to a series of outdoor concerts than a festival. Keeping one’s ticket handy at all times, and waiting in line to enter and exit multiple times throughout the course of a day contributed to this, as did the garbage strewn on the grass as the evening turned to night. I realize that such a description may sound curmudgeonly. This is not my intent. Rather, I wish to point out that some festival models are more easily cohered than others.

Unfortunately, these two festivals – each successful in its own way – were not entirely compatible. While efforts were clearly made to offer a mix of programming within each time slot, the effects in a small park with large stages (and sound systems) were in some instances very disappointing. I cannot recall, for example, a performance that was not interrupted to the point of distraction by what was happening elsewhere in the park. Granted, sound bleed can be a meaningful part of outdoor listening; it gives festival-goers the sense of being part of something bigger. In this case, however, it gave one the sense of being trapped beneath something bigger. It was unfortunate, for example, to be within 50 feet of Lucy Kaplansky and John Gorka and to hear only the fragments of melody that fell between phrases of a klezmer band performing on the other side of the park. Even performers had trouble responding to the noise. John Smith, after singing a ballad, thanked the audience for staying at his stage “in the face of aggressive klezmer”.

This competition for sonic space was not confined to “paid” versus “free” spaces. With two of the three main stages hosting a musician during most slots, even the paid stages were competing to be heard. Again, musicians were gracious in their responses. During their set, Whitehorse musicians Luke Doucet and Melissa McLelland dedicated a song to “the quiet people”, and after another, quipped “...percussion by Dan Mangan”, who was performing on the next stage over.

The Ottawa Folk Festival has found the ingredients necessary to ensure financial viability. It will be interesting to see how the festival develops in the coming years, hopefully finding a balance that works for its diverse audiences, its performers, and the music and sonic spaces that they share.