

Ottawa Folk Festival

The 2005 Ottawa Folk Festival was a topical one, with current events in both the United States and Canada providing unifying strands uniting disparate artists. The vigil of bereaved mother Cindy Sheehan outside the Bush compound in Crawford, Texas, was mentioned by several American artists, including Cary Cooper of the Dreamsicles (more on this later), Sara Lee “daughter of Arlo” Guthrie, and Eliza Gilkyson, who managed to rename the poor woman “Cindy Crawford” (oops!). The other overarching theme — this being Ottawa, after all — was the CBC lockout.



At the CBC Fuse workshop

Certainly, one of the highlights of the mainstage was a non-musical one, as anchor Rita Celli made an astonishingly passionate and measured speech on the union’s behalf. It makes sense that journalists should be the most articulate advocates for their position that one could ask for. Several artists offered songs to the cause, especially at the intriguing “CBC Fuse” workshop, featuring Leslie Feist and John K. Samson of the Weakerthans. Booked long before the lockout began, hosts Amanda Putz and Bill Stunt explained that they were torn about attending but did so out of respect to the festival, not as representatives of CBC. They introduced themselves and explained the

situation before bowing out of further activity, retiring to the audience to watch the musicians.

And then there was, in sharp reversal of anything topical, Kalan Porter. As the last act of the last night, he, as the *Canadian Idol* victor, was the target towards which the whole festival drove . . . either that, or his placement was carefully designed to allow all but his fans to leave in time, an invitation I would have accepted if I had not felt a certain duty to document his presence. The final day sported a crowd suspiciously large on pre-teen girls and, bizarrely, middle-aged women wearing shorts that said things like “I Am Kalanadian”. He has his *Idol*-izing fans, to be sure, but then so do the Arrogant Worms, especially the drunk woman standing by me who kept on shouting random song lyrics at odd moments during their set. But as to Porter: I have no inherent objection to the idea of pop acts playing folk festivals. It is not 1965, and it is not as if there is no precedent. In fact, I invite it, for it is in the folk festival setting that such acts appear at their most humble, graciously putting their rock star swagger aside for a minute or two.

This idea, apparently, never occurred to Kalan Porter. His woeful smoke and lights stage act may serve its purpose in a closed setting, but looks ridiculous in the middle of a grassy field. I feared the worst but the truth was beyond my expectations. I was embarrassed for him as he strode onto the stage amid a whirl of smoke, holding his gimmick fiddle aloft, with stage banter that would make Spinal Tap weep: “We’ve been having a contest. Last night we thought it was loud. But I bet you can be even louder here in Ottawa.” He reminded me of another Canadian, Hayden Christensen of *Star Wars* fame, who seems to have been mysteriously placed in a public position far beyond what his talent or personal attractiveness can support. The best that can be said for Porter’s booking here is that it forced his fans to listen to The Original Sloth Band and Tony McManus. One may wonder, nowadays, just where to chart the bounds of acceptable programming for a folk festival: I have seen the answer, and he has curly locks.

The festival managed to duck the bad weather that seemed to be looming as it began, but could not escape problems of organization. Almost every night, the mainstage sets slid further and further back until they were an hour or more behind schedule. Fine – annoying, but to be expected...except that I got the impression that performances were then being

shortened to make up the difference, a time spent instead staring at sound checks. I also would have appreciated more from the festival program; a short paragraph on each artist is a far cry from the reams of information I've seen at other festivals, which can easily become overkill but also helps greatly as one plans one's moves from workshop to workshop. Furthermore, the sales tent seemed quite unable to keep up with the demand for certain artists' work (which, I hasten to add, is outside of the festival's hands). I suppose it's a certain mark of honour to sell out stock, but I'm sure most of them would rather have kept selling. "Do you have any more of Feist's CD?" seemed to be something of a mantra in that tent.



Leslie Feist

Yes, one of the biggest successes was (Leslie) Feist. Feist is "magical", in the assessment of *The Guy Behind Me On The Bus Home*, and I cannot disagree. Blessed with a mix of sensual voice and coltish stage presence, she makes for a transfixing live act. "Turn up your mike!" shouted an audience member, echoing my sentiments; "Turn off my mike?" reacted Feist with disarming mock horror. I was sufficiently impressed with her to acquire her album *Let It Die*, fascinated by the glimmering mix of jazz-flavoured synth pop and a mature, independent sensibility. There will be much more to hear from her, I'm sure.



Lucie Idlout

I was equally impressed, though differently, with Nunavut artist Lucie Idlout, whose hard-edged rock-toned delivery seems grittily real, fueled by both personal anger and the buried anger of her people (the title track of her album *E5770 – My Mother's Name* says it all, referring to the government's former practice of registering Inuit under numbers rather than names). She has a rock star swagger that doesn't seem like a put-on. Indeed, at a Sunday morning workshop she seemed authentically hung over, and sounded all the better for it, as did her hard-bitten rocker band (minus the perma-perky keyboardist, who looked pristine as a rose and just as out of place).

This festival was where I finally caught up with a band I've heard much about, the Weakerthans. They have a very strong following, as evinced by the fact that I've never heard a stronger cheer at the word "Winnipeg". I enjoyed their mainstage set, though there was a nagging disappointment I couldn't quite nail down until the next day, when I saw front man John K. Samson perform solo and acoustic. I enjoyed this stripped-down setting far more. I also enjoyed Joan Armatrading's forceful vocals, though I wondered whether they were best served by the listless Adult Contemporary flavour of her backup group. I was impressed by the Alberta group Painting Daisies and the charming U.S. songstress Anais Mitchell (who I can easily imagine as a major star of the future). Willie P. Bennett received the Helen Verger Award and handled his acceptance with grace

and gratitude, comparing it favourably to the “you know” award, and also got the biggest laugh of the night by coyly referencing his own baldness, letting the audience make up their own punchline.



Willie P. Bennett

African and African-American acts contributed many of the most memorable moments to this festival. The sextet H'Sao, from Chad but now residing in Montreal, briefly ignited the mainstage audience with their soul and humour (as they suggested that the local form of dancing must be “sitting down and moving your head from side to side” in order to shame the audience into rising to their feet). Surely it was bad thinking to put them on so early in the evening, and to condemn them to a set no longer than 20 minutes! Easily the most interesting workshop I attended was called “African Roots”, featuring American Afro-Diaspora group Linda Tillery & the Cultural Heritage Choir (minus their founder, who was recovering from surgery in California), and a local Ottawa African dance troupe. The trick is that the Baobab Tree Drum Dance Community is 90 per cent or more white, and for all appearances is a mix of soccer moms, aging hippies and enthusiastic young dancers committed to learning authentic Ghanaian dances (some have even gone to Ghana to study).

The fascinating thing was watching the Cultural Heritage Choir’s reaction to these white people engaged in African dance. Their expressions plainly read: “What do I think about this?” But I think they

and the audience were both won over by Baobab Tree’s astonishingly athletic and rousing dance routines. Both groups came together for an unmistakable form of exchange, which is always what you want to see at workshops. Set aside all questions of cultural hybridity and appropriation; this was great fun.

Under the heading of “for specific tastes which are not mine” were the Dreamsicles, a Texan duo (Cary Cooper and Tom Prasada-Rao) as treacle-y as their name. They do a lot of songs about how they’re in love with each other, plus numbers reflecting female half Cooper’s mid-life crisis. Cooper committed the cardinal offence of doing a song in her mainstage set and then again at a workshop *with exactly the same lengthy spoken intro!* I was also somewhat dismayed by her mentioning Cindy Sheehan’s battle of wills with Bush over her slain son, and then segueing into a song about her own battle with her daughter’s third grade teacher. A little more than I could take. American singer-songwriter Chuck Brodsky was all but omnipresent at this festival, clocking in at workshop after workshop. I was soured on him after his mainstage set, which had not one but two songs about developmentally impaired adults, singing the simple-minded and more than a little patronizing praises of their innocence and pureness, leaving all kinds of bad tastes in my mouth. On a related note, I’m rather tired of American artists pandering to their Canadian hosts by talking about how great Canada is, how much they’d like to move to Canada to escape the Bush administration. Ah, but how many of them actually do this?

All in all, I consider this to be a mixed bag of a festival. There were some significant positives, but none can wholly counterbalance the headliner. Kalan Porter was a real fiasco, an attempt at stirring up controversy that backfired utterly. Who knows? Perhaps he exposed his fans to a more diverse group of artists, and more likely, perhaps he brought the festival some money. But I think this festival should examine just what it wants to be, and just what its own dignity is worth.

*Murray Leeder, Ottawa, Ontario,
with photographs by Rachel E. Beattie*