

# Notes From the Field

Geoff Whittall (Grande Prairie Regional College)



**Figure 1: Afternoon mainstage at the Edmonton Folk Festival (all photos by G. Whittall)**

## Grande Prairie, Alberta, August 2011

I have just returned from a trip doing field research at a trio of folk music festivals in Alberta. Over three consecutive weekends, I attended the Calgary Folk Music Festival, the Canmore Folk Music Festival, and the Edmonton Folk Music Festival. This is now my fourth summer of moving from festival to festival as part of my dissertation research, and it has been twelve festivals full of interesting interviews, musical surprises and discoveries, and, mercifully, surprisingly few mosquitoes.

As I move from city to city, I have stayed with a variety of friends and in hotels near the festival sites. It is nice to stay with friends because it provides me with some distance from research and the opportunity to discuss what I'm doing in a different social context than where I'm doing it; this always leads to introspective moments when I try to explain what I'm do-

ing. However, using friends as hotels is not a great strategy for retaining friendships and at times, the distance from late-evening aspects of the festivals is not helpful. Hotels close to the festivals have been useful for keeping friends' names in my phone book, and the hotels I have used have also been conveniently close to the parties that the festivals hold for their volunteers and guests. The research passes that the festivals have given me, along with my volunteer status in Edmonton this summer, have provided me with access to those parties, which are in large part private dance concerts featuring high-energy performers from the festivals. It has been educational to learn how much of a vibrant folk festival culture exists after it has formally ended for the evening or weekend; while the parties are not closely-held secrets, the majority of festival goers remain unaware of these desirable events available only to a limited demographic. Indeed, they are considered to be a major perk by many of the volunteers.

I started my 2011 tour of the festivals with a seven and a half hour drive southeast to Calgary, aiming for the centre of the city. Prince's Island Park is the site of the Calgary Folk Fest, and it is located just north of the business district in Calgary. Checking in at the Festival's host hotel provided me with both a festival pass and a program; it is always a relief upon arrival, to discover that planned arrangements have been completed. Poring through a festival program is always high on the list of tasks to accomplish early; it gives me a chance to figure out how I can see the performances that I personally want to see over the course of the festival, perhaps on stages where I like to be a spectator—picking the really hot, open field seating areas isn't always a great choice if the temperature is in the high 20s, or if there isn't much of a breeze. Because a music festival site is a complex zone for doing ethnographic work, it's worth it to figure out plans and schedules of travel through the site, to be able to simultaneously be able to hear artists of interest, even if only with one ear, and to perform my research. Of course, this gets balanced by the occasions when I feel my time will be well spent

wandering a festival site, looking for “interviews of opportunity” with people who look temporarily disengaged. One of the benefits of finding a performance to enjoy is that it also gives me a chance to write fieldnotes, watch people and performers, and think about how things are fitting together, while I'm actually there. Writing field notes when I am off site often provides a necessary opportunity for reflection, but it also creates a distance that I try to control in my notes; I don't want to sound like I'm sitting in a drawing room trying to recollect things from the past; I want my descriptive notes to read as if they have a sense of intensity, as if I am there. For that reason, I often dictate my notes into my recorder, instead of writing them. Dictating is much faster than writing, and it's neater, but sometimes the sound level at a festival makes it difficult to hear what I have said to myself which adds a level of difficulty to the process. The good thing about dictating is it gives me a chance to revisit my notes when I transcribe them, it puts them into a searchable format, and it ensures I make copies that protect me from losing the contents of my notebook.



**Figure 2: One of the many unusual tarp markers found at the Calgary Folk Festival**



On the second afternoon of the festival, I was sitting in my hotel room dictating some fieldnotes into my laptop as the festival's start time was approaching. Simultaneously, storm clouds were approaching. I decided that it would be time well spent to continue working on my notes from the previous day instead of heading out to the festival site, and was relieved that I was still in my room when it started to hail. Once the hail ended, I headed out to the festival, and met some people returning from Prince's Island Park; they were completely soaked and coming back to the hotel to change. Fortunately, the adverse weather affected only the first hour or so of that day, and the weather was pretty good for the rest of the weekend. By and large, festival crowds are a hardy bunch, and if people are already on a site when weather worsens, the majority pull out umbrellas or hide under tarps, and tough it out as long as possible. I have considered myself lucky to not have experienced snow in the years I have been at Canmore, but I know that a lot of the crowd prepare themselves for it.



**Figure 3: Rain and cold at the Calgary festival, while Matt Andersen warms up onstage**

The musical-social highlight of the Calgary folk Fest for me was seeing k d lang perform with her new band, the Siss Boom Bang. Of particular interest to me was the difference in her reception versus that of other festival artists. Standing at the side of the stage and watching her—and observing the audience watching her—emphasized the poignancy with which she performs Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah". While other performers on the main stage garnered a certain amount of attention from the people in the performers' lounge next to the stage, lang brought many people who had been seated to their feet and away from their tables to listen and watch intently. The fact that

we were standing on grass and music was coming out of loudspeakers with lots of energy makes it ridiculous to suggest that we could have heard a pin drop, but that was the effect she created. While I found her performance to be powerful, what was really striking was seeing how other people were reacting to it.

Once the festival ended, I did a quick but necessary trip home before returning south to Canmore for its festival just a few days later. What should be a one-hour trip from Calgary to Canmore took me 15 hours of driving via Grande Prairie. Canmore is a much smaller festival than Calgary, and the relatively low number of stages (three) compared to Calgary's seven allows every performer who plays the festival to have a slot on the main stage. Canmore is also such a small site that it is likely that one will bump into people more than once. I ran into people I have interviewed in previous years, which is always a nice experience.



**Figure 4: Stage 2 at the Canmore Folk Festival with the end of Rundle Ridge in the background**

Canmore's Festival takes place in Centennial Park which is adjacent to Lawrence Grassi School, and is only three blocks from Main Street; if one tires of the festival merchants for meals, it's only a couple of minutes on foot to find something different and local to eat. At one point, while I was watching a performance, the school's lunch bell rang, and a woman near me turned and asked if the sound of the bell brought back memories. This was a perfect opportunity to ask for an interview, and I was fortunate to spend the next 15 minutes talking with her about her festival experiences. One of the highlights of the Canmore Folk Fest is the chance to turn one's head away from looking at the Stan Rogers Stage in the evenings, and see Rundle Ridge, backlit and in profile, stretching away from the festival site. Artists

regularly comment on the beauty of the view while they are performing, and indeed the setting in Canmore is gorgeous. The impact of the Folk Fest is proportionally bigger in Canmore than Calgary or Edmonton. There are venues off the main site but still in downtown Canmore where a street party, a kids concert, a fundraising pancake breakfast associated with the festival, and a (new) pub stage take place. Each of these off site locations embed the Festival more deeply into the community, and bring value to the inhabitants, as well as the festival patrons.

Traveling from Canmore to Edmonton required just over three hours of driving, and it was good to be heading north to what I still consider to be my home festival. The Edmonton Folk Music Festival is the largest of the festivals in my project, and because it uses a river valley ski hill for its site, it has a unique setting that includes a natural amphitheatre for the main stage. As part of my goal of using the research methodology of participant-conservation, I had signed up to be a volunteer in Edmonton. The 18 hours that I was scheduled to work during the festival meant that I could only see about half of the performances, but it did provide me with new insights into the enjoyment that people get out of volunteering at the festivals. Edmonton, for example, had about 2200 volunteers this year, and many of them return repeatedly, with some investing more than 100 hours of effort each year. I was on the Green Team, a relatively new “crew” of volunteers working on recycling and composting initiatives. A lot of my work was helping people decide how to dispose of their waste; was an item compostable (almost every piece of cutlery and cup on site was made of cornstarch), recyclable, or just garbage? Ensuring that people scraped their return-for-deposit dinner plates well enough that they could be run through the dishwasher wasn't a highly glorious task (I was wearing rubber dishwashing gloves and standing over a barrel of compostable food scraps, convincing people to clean their plates as well as they could), but it certainly contributed to the environmental goals of the festival, and it was consistent with my own values. And there was the opportunity for banter with patrons and the other crewmembers working with me on that shift. Although the work felt good, it was still a minor relief to finish my shift and head off to the volunteer tarp in front of the main stage to listen to Lyle Lovett and his Large Band.

Ideally, one will find beauty and pleasure in their research. Calgary has a great site with big trees and lots of shade, and the Bow River running past Prince's Island Park. Canmore has the mountain

backdrop and small town setting. Unlike Calgary and Canmore, Edmonton's major charm is human made: it is the candles that light the hill in the evening concerts. There are literally thousands of candles, dancing in their clear plastic candle guards (most tarps burn easily), creating a living carpet of people who are hidden in the dark, enjoying live music. At the end of a long day of being in a festival, it is great to be able to look around and see how people are increasing the intensity of their experience, by helping to create an enriched concert environment. The festivals in my study have been full of music from which I gain a lot of pleasure, and I was fortunate to speak to people from a wide variety of backgrounds, with a wide variety of opinions.



**Figure 5: Early evening candles at the mainstage in Edmonton**

My tour of festivals ended with a “teardown shift” after the Festival Finale in Edmonton. We were levering fence posts out of the ground even before the last of the patrons and other volunteers had left the site. Generally speaking, the festival infrastructure must disappear from the sites very quickly after it finishes. Finally, there was a shuttle ride up to the Festival Hotel, to catch some of Alpha YaYa Diallo's performance at the volunteer party. By the end of the three weeks, I had once again had a terrific set of experiences. I had spent time with friends, shared conversation with a valued colleague, listened to a lot of live music, collected new data, reviewed old data, volunteered at a festival for the first time, and continued to piece together the big picture that I was seeing after four years of fieldwork.