

Five Years of the Princeton Traditional Music Festival

Jon Bartlett, Festival Coordinator

Rika Ruebsaat and I created the Princeton Traditional Music Festival in 2008 with two objects in mind: to create a free, musician-based, traditional music festival and to reflect where possible the musical culture of the southern interior.

The first of these objects was the easiest. By “musician-based”, we mean we wanted to provide a locus for traditional musicians to get together over the course of a weekend for the pleasure (and the musical growth) that gigs, sessions and commercial loci could not provide. We use the term “traditional” because our preferred term, “vernacular”, is neither widely used nor understood, and “traditional” seems to us the second-best (the term “folk” of course now meaning nothing or next to nothing, or everything). Vernacular music, like vernacular architecture, is the everyday, quotidian or mundane. (That “mundane” is defined in places as “common; ordinary; banal; unimaginative” merely gives a clue as to how high society thinks of us low-lifes). This music is oral rather than written (though it might be written down) and its sub-genres—lyric, ballad, tune, and shanty—all have their own aficionados.

We had come to the notion of a free regional festival from the example of the Northwest Regional Folklife Festival, founded in the early 1970s. Musicians there are unpaid and the staffing is almost entirely volunteers. Performers are drawn from the northwest of the U.S. and the southwest of Canada. We have attended almost every year, and have watched it grow from a relatively small festival into the monster that it is today.

Our first attempt to bring the model to B.C. was CityFest, founded in Vancouver in 1994 by Vancouver Folk Song Society members and others. I became the Chair the following year and stayed with it for some seven years. Each year nearly 1,000 performers were featured on six stages over three days. Its organizing rubric was “the music you hear through the wall”. Since Vancouver is such a multicultural city, and since there are few ethnic enclaves, the music one hears in one’s neighbourhood tends not to be from one culture. The boundaries we set were from the border to the north shore of Burrard Inlet and from Mission to the sea; within those boundaries, every performer who applied was presented.

CityFest died because it was not supported by the city or the province or the federal government and because it was an exhausting task to run benefits throughout the year to pay for those items in the budget that we couldn’t beg or borrow. It also had to confront media silence, in love with the Vancouver Folk Music Festival and unable to comprehend music that was a process rather than a product.

Our second object in founding the festival, to reflect where possible the musical culture of the southern interior,



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is the subject of our own historical and musical study, the results of which have so far found expression in a CD and a book. We worked for decades with Phil Thomas, Past Honorary President of the Society, in his collection of songs from British Columbia. As I wrote in the liner notes to the CD *Now It’s Called Princeton: Songs and Poems of B.C.’s Upper Similkameen*:

The folk songs of British Columbia reflect the diverse cultural and occupational heritage of the Province and the daily life of its people in a form that remains accessible to this day. Songs made and sung by ordinary British Columbians are primary resources through which we can experience the history, culture, and way of life of people in this province. Without Thomas’ focused work, almost all of the material he found, in every part of the province, would have disappeared. The people and contexts which gave birth to the songs are long gone. Most of his informants are now dead, and his work could not now be replicated. Thomas caught their songs in their dying days and bequeathed to us a vital piece of this young province’s ephemeral history. It is thanks to him and his tenacity in collection, publication and dissemination, that the body of

orally transmitted songs – from the logging and fishing industries, from the early settlers in B.C., and from the days of the gold rushes – is now known.

Some of Thomas' material in his *Songs of the Pacific Northwest* had been drawn from manuscript, and one or two songs from newspapers.

Our search for more of this "written down" material drew us to the collection of Princeton area papers in the Princeton & District Archives & Museum. We read assiduously through every copy of every paper and our collection and analysis resulted in the CD mentioned above and a book, *Dead Horse on the Tulameen: Settler Verse from B.C.'s Similkameen Valley*. That the "written down" material in the Princeton area was so copious led us to investigate the mining area to the east of Princeton, the West Kootenays. Foundation dates of the towns and villages throughout this region reflected the mining boom of 1893-1914, and the over fifty newspapers founded there (almost all of which survived for no more than five years) generated some 3,500 items of verse and song. This material is being databased and indexed and we hope to present it in a year or two.



Rika Ruebsaat

Can we speak of a vernacular song/verse form of this region of southern B.C.? In form it shares its laconic and ironic language with much of the west of the American continent at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and its content, too, reflects the characteristics of the foundation of the west; the prolonged search, discovery and pro-

cessing of metals, serving the burgeoning chemical industries of the continents of America and Europe, and the attendant infrastructure from the building of railroads to the creation of towns. But B.C. verse seems to lack the US characteristic of the ascription (rather than "appropriation") of voice. We have in the Kootenay papers a number of U.S.-generated verses presented in fake Dutch, Black, Chinese, and working class (as "workin' class"), whereas in the Kootenays this material is only present in the form of a Drummond-style Quebec voice.

It is still too early to make any definitive claim in this area, but the material we have rediscovered through the work of trawling (perhaps "panning" would be a more appropriate word) through the archives, both in Princeton and at Selkirk College at Castlegar, forms part of our singing repertoire. We hope others are as intrigued as we are by its musical and textual strengths, and that this long-neglected culture will undergo something of a revival.

The Festival receives financial support from the Town and the Regional District, and together with a grant from the federal Heritage Branch, sales of advertising in the *Program Guide*, and generous donations from our audiences, it is financially stable. Princeton citizens, on the other hand, still regard the weekend's music with some degree of puzzlement. The base of the music presented is song, predominantly Canadian, together with instrumental music that owes a great deal to the modern practices of an Irish session. The present musical vernacular of the town, however, pumped through every radio station and imitated by many local singers, is so-called "country" music, sung with as close an approximation to a Kentucky accent as possible.

The musical tradition of the town has been overlaid with this material since the coming of radio in the late 1920s. This year the confusion was even worse, but deliberately so since we invited musicians with some experience in playing many of the various styles of music from Eastern Europe. We presented among others a Turkish cabaret band, a Balkan group with a predominantly Ukrainian repertoire, a band familiar with the repertoire of a Roma wedding band, a Doukhobor male choir, an Albanian accordion player, and music and dance from two Slovenian groups. Those townsfolk who are neither British immigrants nor from eastern European families have never heard any of this music, either live or on radio or record, but they were delighted, if nonplussed.

To revert to our first object: the musicians certainly enjoy the weekend. We provide food vouchers, exchangeable at local restaurants (which keeps the restaurants happy); accommodation at the best campsite in town or by way of billets; some reimbursement of travel costs; a house to relax in or to make new musical friends; and two extremely popular parties on the Friday and Saturday nights. The town is welcoming and attractive, and the company exhilarating, and so we believe we have succeeded.

Photos on this and the following pages are courtesy of Marian Buechert, Steve Britten, Bob Morgan and David Gregory.