

Performers' Memories: Reflections on Playing the Festival

David Gregory

I sent out an e-mail questionnaire to about seventy individual artists or groups who have over the years performed at Princeton, asking the following four questions:

1. How and when did you get involved with the Festival, and what is special about it to you?
2. Is the Festival succeeding in its initial aim of resurrecting and popularizing the traditional music of the B.C. interior?
3. Do you have any recollections of the Festival that especially stand out in your memory?
4. Are there any particularly important or memorable songs that you sang at or first heard at the Festival?

I received about a dozen replies, some very brief but others lengthier and informative. Not all were entirely favourable, and you will find a few of the less enthusiastic comments included below.

Surprisingly, the last question produced only a handful of specific items, with "Kettle Valley Line" winning hands down. In the following selection of responses I have therefore not devoted a separate section to it, but I have included a few answers under replies to question # 3. However, I will take this opportunity to mention three songs that stand out in my own memory: Jon Bartlett singing "Know Ye the Land", Brian Robertson performing a newly-written piece about an historic fire in Vancouver (which I'd like to see printed in *Canadian Folk Music*), and my partner Rosaleen's superb version of "Thomas the Rhymer", which is my favourite Child ballad (I suspect it was much touched up, if not wholly composed, by Sir Walter Scott). Anyway, here are some of the performers' reflections about and memories of the Princeton Festival.

How and when did you get involved with the Festival, and what is special about it to you?

Mike Ballantyne:

I had heard about Princeton on the grapevine and, as I was just getting back into music after a few years in the doldrums, I thought I would contact [Jon and Rika] about performing. This was Princeton's second year and I was newly back into blues—a genre that I had first embraced in my first recordings with the *Tarriers RN*, a Royal Navy folk group, for Phillips Records in Singapore in 1965. (I had been influenced, of course, by the skiffle boom of the 1950's.) Princeton, to me, is a great little down-home festival. I attended the festival by myself the first time, and then [my wife] Anne and I considered it a holiday from the second year onwards, and we continued to go as a couple until 2011. In 2012 Rick Van Krugel and I arranged to play as the Hokum Steamers, but regrettably it was necessary to leave our wives at home in order for us to travel economically in one vehicle.

Charlie Baum:

Lisa Null and I first met Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat when they came East on tour; they told us about their festival in British Columbia, and invited us to participate if we should travel West. Both of us not only perform at various music festivals on the East Coast, but we're both involved in organizing

local festivals in the Washington, D.C. area, so it was an exciting opportunity for us to see how folks out West do it. Lisa and I brought our East Coast repertoires, heavy in the music of the Maritimes, New England, and the Appalachians, and shared them with the singers who had gathered in Princeton, mainly Westerners, who in turn exposed us to what was being sung in their communities.

Both Lisa and I were particularly taken with "Kettle Valley Line," the song about the rail line that passes through Princeton, and it entered our repertoires long before we returned home. We were also astonished to discover that lots of folks from Seattle and Vancouver were singing the original songs of Janie Meneeley, our neighbor in Silver Spring, Maryland, whose material had been brought to the Pacific Northwest by William Pint and Felicia Dale. Mainly though, we were impressed by the way in which the festival integrated itself with the entire town of Princeton—musical or not. The finale stands out in our memory, with Orkestar Slivovica leading a procession of many performers throughout the town on Sunday evening, stopping in at each place of business to offer our music to restaurateurs and other town folk who had been too busy to leave their posts; it made us understand that this festival was truly a community celebration.

Marian Buechert (of Soft Focus):

We are members of the Vancouver Folk Song Society, where festival organizers Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat have been active for many years. When we heard they were organizing the second festival we applied and were thrilled to be invited to perform. We've returned every year since. PTMF is like a wonderful weekend party with our friends or a family reunion with family members you actually like! For those three days, it's one place in the world where I can walk down the street and recognize most of the faces I meet. And the great thing about folk musicians is that they aren't caught up in their own egos—most of them are in it for the love of the music, not to get rich or famous, so they are usually laid-back, friendly people who just love to jam and talk. The audience is full of familiar faces as well, and is so welcoming of a diversity of music.

For a young festival, it's very well organized, with a group of volunteers who do a fantastic job of pulling everything together. The fact that the performers appear for free, often spending several hundred dollars of their own money so that they can be at PTMF, shows how much we love the event. And I think many of us support the idea of a festival that is free for the audience, so that anyone who can get there can enjoy the music.

Becky Deryckx:

I got involved with the Princeton Traditional Music Festival pretty much at Jon and Rika's insistence...those two simply wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. We met at a New Year's Eve party at John Gothard's house almost three years ago; Jon and Rika had come over from Princeton, and I had driven up from Mount Vernon because some musician friends of mine from Vancouver encouraged me to attend. Meeting Jon and Rika was an 'aha!' moment for all three of us; there was an instantaneous rapport there, and we all felt that we had known each other for ages...in fact, we spent considerable time that night and the next morning trying to figure out if or when and where we might have encountered each other before. Not long after that night, they emailed me to ask if I would come to Princeton to play; and I emphatically and absolutely turned them down. I do not really consider myself a 'performer', and wasn't at all eager to put myself up onto a stage in front of others. However, they kept after me; and finally---after talking to Randy Vic (with whom I had played a good deal that night at John G's), the arm-twisting became too much to resist. Randy and I signed on, and we ended up having a truly great time.

The smallish size and overall feel of the Festival were what made it "work" for us; rather than being in

a 'performance'-type situation, it felt intimate enough that playing was more like sharing the music with a group of friends and neighbors.

Rosaleen Gregory:

Dave and I missed the first "official" Festival in 2008 because we were involved with Whitby Folk Festival in England, but we haven't missed one since and I've been privileged to participate in each one. Laugh if you like, but I've still got my first "Performer" ID tag hanging up in the bedroom at home because I was so proud to be invited to be a part of a Festival that *truly* honours genuine traditional music and puts it above commercial considerations. Whether it's old or written more recently "in the tradition," at Princeton it's the music of the people that gets celebrated.

Roger Holdstock (of Fraser Union):

Fraser Union first performed in the pre-festival year when Jon and Rika were just getting started. I'm not sure which year that was, but I think it was 2008 (?) We were not there for the first "official" year, but we have performed for the past 3 years as a group. What is special about this festival is that it feels like a gathering of long-standing friends who have had connections in most cases through the Vancouver Folk Song Society either currently or sometime in the past. I go back 38 years in my association with that group, and I have known Jon and Rika since then. So, this gathering has deep community roots. It is also special because it feels as though the festival is truly a part of the community of Princeton. It is a great idea to connect with the businesses through vouchers and to take over the main street.

Suzanne Leclerc (of Vazzy):

We first heard of the festival in 2009 but could not make it as we had another gig. We participated (as musicians) in the Princeton Traditional Music Festival in 2011 and 2012. We enjoy the set-up of the festival, it is a festival where we get to perform a few times in various settings: stage performance, workshops with various themes. People who attend are generally there because they enjoy and seek out traditional music. There are a lot of interactions between musicians also, sharing our music and playing together.

Barry Luft:

I got involved because my American musician friend, Tom Rawson, said it was a great festival and that I should apply. So I did, based on what Tom described as a good weekend and a festival that he really likes. What is special is that there is lots of variety in the performances and other activities to keep attendees interested. Plus the physical territory covered for all

the stuff going on isn't ever too far to travel. On the way from one stage to the other you are entertained by the street dancers—great programming.

Lisa Null:

My domestic partner, Charlie Baum, and I had heard Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat here in the Washington DC area and were fascinated by the songs they collected and sang. When we decided to take a long dreamed of trip to the great Northwest, it was only natural that we should want to make the Princeton Folk Festival one of our stopping points. Charlie and I have both been active with the Washington Folk Festival, which features strictly regional acts. Because of this, we were particularly interested in a festival with a strong sense of place, a roster of community-minded volunteers, and a lot of regional musicians. We were not disappointed. We loved the way the festival became the town for a weekend, and vice-versa, with many local restaurants and civic organizations entering into the spirit of the occasion. Some of the major streets of the town were blocked off to become spaces for both stages and street musicians and dancers.

My favorite memory is parading through town at the festival's end with a brass band from Seattle playing gypsy music. I also loved the audience. Many members of folk clubs from Portland, Seattle, Vancouver, Victoria came up, not just as spectators but as hosts for after-hour sings. Other members of the audience were local people who had grown up on the nearby ranches and farms and had strong memories of traditional fiddle tunes and dances they had heard

Is the Festival succeeding in its initial aim of resurrecting and popularizing the traditional music of the B.C. interior?

Mike Ballantyne:

I'm not sure whether its aims are being met, or even if this is its real aim. I don't know how many people come from afar to attend the festival; I would suspect, from the numbers I have seen, that not very many come from any great distance. From the number of performers and their families I imagine that we are, for the most part, all performing to the cognoscenti.

Marian Buechert:

Certainly Jon and Rika work hard toward that aim and try to incorporate that into the festival. They have exposed me (a native British Columbian) to local music that I would never otherwise have heard.

Becky Deryckx:

as children. One did not feel one was introducing "esoteric" material to a crowd cut off from traditional music.

Felix Possak:

I heard about the festival three years ago from a passenger on the train. My first - and to date only - performance there was in 2011. My contacts with the folk singing community are rather scant. I love performing folk music, but as a professional entertainer I have to strike a balance between it and revenue producing music - with the latter usually winning out.

Barry Truter (of Fraser Union):

As a member of the Vancouver folk group, Fraser Union, I've performed at the Princeton Traditional Music Festival for the past three years (2010 to 2012), and also at Jon and Rika's Canada Day event in 2007 that preceded the current festival. The Festival has a distinct focus on traditional folk music. In that regard it follows the long established tradition of the Vancouver Folk Song Society which I discovered in 1980, and where I first met Jon and Rika.

Paddy Tutty:

I first heard about the Princeton Festival and was invited to play at in 2009 but wasn't able to make it. I travelled to Princeton to perform in 2010. It is a special festival because it is one of a handful of Canadian festivals which genuinely feature traditional folk music.

Not sure about this one—since the traditional music of the B.C. interior is not my personal focus, I think this question would be better answered by Jon and Rika themselves, and by the other musicians and singers from that area who have been able to participate. Certainly I have heard and enjoyed the songs from the Similkameen Valley that Jon and Rika have done so much to make known; and I think it likely that—as those songs and melodies have come to light—additional threads of the music from that area will undoubtedly surface and become better known and appreciated as well. It takes time for an area whose own (or indigenous) music has been swallowed up by the larger popular-music culture to begin to value the music that was there in the early days; but it seems to me that this Festival has the makings of being a true little gem in this part of the world.

Rosaleen Gregory:

I think Jon and Rika's success can be measured by the obvious enjoyment written on the faces of Princeton festival-goers; whether performers or audience; it's transparently clear that everyone's having a rave on those all-too-short two and a half days in August. At the same time, there's an interconnectedness between the different Princeton musics that makes for a tighter and more cohesive experience overall. Without in any way stifling individual creativity, Jon and Rika's own commitment and integrity vis-à-vis their subject matter foster similar attitudes amongst other performers, discouraging egotism or false values. Because of this, I don't think it matters if not all the music at Princeton is directly linked to the B.C. interior: that's a big part of it, for sure, but music from further afield is valuable and valued too, so long as it also has popular roots. I feel local Princeton residents are behind the festival, at least judging by some of the positive comments I've heard at local restaurants and hotels. The meal vouchers are a win-win situation for all concerned.

Roger Holdstock:

Each year the festival seems to expand on its application of traditional music, bringing in musicians of different ethnic backgrounds. This, of course, is all relevant to B.C. and its history. I'm not sure about whether the focus of "B.C. Interior" is all that clear (other than in Jon and Rika's informative and well-focused presentation), but those of us who have B.C. historical songs in our repertoire try to emphasize them. Fraser Union has sung "The Kettle Valley Line" more than once at the festival. It feels right, somehow, to sing a song that is emblematic of the location and that honours the collecting of Phil Thomas at such a festival. We also do several songs by Bill Gallaher that are highly relevant to the history of B.C.'s interior.

Suzanne Leclerc:

I would say yes to that. I have known Princeton for over 30 years and the festival transforms that small community in a very positive way. Princeton never used to be a center of traditional music. We live quite near Princeton and we also perform [locally] and do traditional arts workshops with children (school and community events). To us it is very important to pass on the traditions and to engage the younger generations hands-on to those traditions....otherwise, they will not survive. We must make a point of doing that. In our experience, they love it when they get exposed to it. We must find ways to reach them, give them a

taste and they will jump on the wagon!

Barry Luft:

How could it not be doing this with Jon and Rika at the helm? Whether this results with a large impact remains to be seen. In other words will audiences keep coming back and will the traditional music of the B.C. interior be revitalized is anyone's guess. But it has been a good start.

Mike Marker:

I don't know if the festival is succeeding or not. I don't think it is possible to "popularize" old songs from anywhere. If the songs are done with an artistic contemporary resonance, they will have purchase on the imagination of the listeners. If the songs are done by artists, then they will become art. If the songs are done by amateurs then they will remain "folksongs," but somewhat irrelevant as contemporary folksongs. Music evolves. Folk music must also evolve. I don't know if the festival is contributing to this. Maybe other festivals are doing this better. I don't know. Where are the youth at this festival? Where are the contemporary themes of modern life connecting to historic themes?

Lisa Null:

I think it is doing a good job. It is not featuring this music exclusively, as something rarified. Rather, it is a comfortable part of the program. Many local singers and musicians are featured, some professional and more—just people who love to make music. There is a rich trove of material, much collected by Jon and Rika, and we left with some of these songs in our own repertoire. Many people in the audiences seemed to know the choruses to local songs and sang them lustily.

Barry Truter:

The Festival does its part in keeping the traditional music of B.C. alive, including the music of the B.C. interior. Each year I've noticed new elements of this tradition being introduced, such as this year's focus on Balkan and Eastern European traditions.

Paddy Tutty:

Although the performances at the festival are much broader in scope than traditional B.C. music, I know that Jon and Rika focus on B.C.'s history and music. Their own performances, books and recordings give a much needed representation of the genre.

Do you have any recollections of the Festival that especially stand out in your memory? Are there any particularly important or memorable songs that you sang at or first heard at the Festival?

Mike Ballantyne:

Recollections include the warm weather, the pancake breakfast, wandering round trying to decide where to spend one's meal vouchers, and on what, but only three or four performers of note. There have also been a few performer disappointments. I haven't been amazed at any new songs and have, perhaps, remained rather selfishly, self-centered about the songs I sang, to the exclusion of much else.

Charlie Baum:

It was a wonderful opportunity to exchange traditional musics, which are often regional and don't get around as easily as popular stuff. And I enjoyed the devilish opportunity to wear the ball cap from the festival I help organize, the Washington Folk Festival—everyone in British Columbia assumed it was in Spokane or somewhere in Washington State rather than (in fact) near Washington, DC. Now I proudly wear my Princeton Traditional Music Festival cap to singing events on the East Coast, and fool folks who assume it's something they haven't yet heard about in New Jersey.

We need to schedule a return visit to Princeton--maybe we can get lots of balladeers to agree to gather—we'd love to sing with the likes of Rosaleen and Paddy Tutty again, and to actually get to meet Moira Cameron, if we can convince her to come south from Yellowknife. It's a long drive for us (or an expensive flight)—but there are all sorts of places between the coasts that we want to see en route if we can carve out a few weeks in our schedules.

Marian Buechert:

The astounding sight of Jon and Rika's house lit up with a party that has jam sessions happening in a half dozen locations in and around the house. On the porch, there's sea shanties. In the back yard, a traditional Celtic jam. In the living room, Blues are the thing, while the kitchen pulls in younger musicians in a lively jam. Off in a corner of the front yard, people are singing Gordon Lightfoot, Rolling Stones, and John Prine. The crowd packed together under the cupola to sing shanties en masse. Janet Michael in 2011 singing a seven-minute *a cappella* traditional murder ballad—and keeping us glued to our seats through the entire thing.

In 2012, we performed a song called Joseph Nkolo is Singing Tonight, written by Judy Small, about a South African prisoner singing in a prison choirs festival. Steve was born in South Africa, and I had just returned from a trip to South Africa a couple of days before the festival, so for us two—a native of

B.C. and a South African—to present this very moving song written by an Australian about a man in South Africa seemed to encapsulate the idea of “world music.”

Becky Deryckx

Lots of great recollections from the two times I have been to the festival and performed there....many of which have revolved around getting to know other musicians and singers from other areas, and playing tunes in spontaneous 'sessions' held after the stage performances concluded each day. However, I have especially enjoyed watching the significant interest in and appreciation for the music that the audience at large has shown.

Many members (a majority, even) of the audience are older individuals who---one might think---would have less interest in various types of folk melodies/genres/dances than might be the case with a younger (and supposedly more culturally diverse or enlightened) crowd. But the enthusiasm, interest and comments from these audience members has shown that the performances have often sparked memories of music that they knew or heard in their homes and communities when they themselves were young. The potential ramifications of that are of course huge, as it may well be that additional contacts will be made and additional sources of local music will come to light because these folks will bring their memories and knowledge (and perhaps even talents) to the Festival organizers.

I can't really say that I've heard any songs at the Festival for the first time. That's partly because I myself have tended to spend more time with musicians who play the music rather than singing it; but it's also because---through my association and friendship with Jon and Rika---I had heard many of the songs they know and sing before I ever came to Princeton. I have really enjoyed the book of songs of the area that they have published, and I think that one of the best things about a Festival like the one at Princeton is that it helps to put the spotlight on a community and region that might otherwise be considered 'out of the way' and 'less important' than in larger and/or urban places where cultural traditions have remained strong and music and song have continued to be recognized and supported by their communities.

Rosaleen Gregory:

The community spirit that's characteristic of PTMF is clearly visible in the Saturday night parties at Jon and Rika's house. There have been times I've stayed

away from these or left early; I just don't seem to have enough stamina these days to stay up all night after a whole day of sun and music. But I know I'm missing out on a really special experience and I'm going to try to do better in future! It seems a real shame to pass up those opportunities to share more songs and get to know people.

Everyone has her or his own favourite memories; personally I'm always drawn to the Francophonie workshops and concerts because although I love listening to French language songs they aren't something I do myself, except quite rarely. I remember especially the song about the girl who loses her ring and the man who's drowned trying to retrieve it. A few years back I remember thoroughly enjoying Doug Reid's dry humour and unusual 18th century Scottish semi-literary poems set to music; that was really something different. And I remember a very moving song about nature performed by Ed Peekeekoot the year he came to Princeton.

Roger Holdstock:

The Saturday night parties are always memorable. They are like a 5-ring circus with Morris dancing in the street, shanties on the porch, and various tune and song sessions in parts of the house and yard. An important memory for me is the song circle at the Museum stage on Saturday night 2011 because Bob Rosen was a major part of it, and he is no longer with us.

Suzanne Leclerc:

Most of what goes on there is quite memorable, interesting and well done. Blocking the main street to pedestrian users only, dancing in the street (village style), some great performances by great performers....and the unequalled performers', volunteers' and organisers' party at Jon and Rika on Saturday night, where we get to share the playing of many kinds of traditional music and songs with many other players.

Barry Luft:

Things that stood out in my memory of that one festival: A joyful spirit throughout the weekend; lots to choose from every hour; a good song circle in the evening; great array of workshop topics; good performers.

I thought that, from my own set of songs, "The Dying Outlaw" was the most memorable, since it was one of the few traditional songs on any of the Wilf Carter recordings. Memorable also because it comes from the prairies (not B.C.), but I'll bet old timers in B.C. who had Wilf Carter '78 rpm records would recall it, hopefully with pleasure.

Lisa Null:

Other than the impromptu parade following the gypsy brass band from Seattle, I loved the choruses spilling out of Jon and Rika's house until the wee hours. They hosted anyone who wished to join them, it seemed, and there were no police enforcing noise ordinances. We met many neighbors who just seemed to welcome the occasion, and the music was beautiful.

Felix Possak:

I loved the intimate atmosphere of the two stages and the enthusiasm of the performers. It was quite apparent that all of them enjoyed the opportunity to perform material that was dear to their hearts. On the minus side it was disappointing to witness the low level of performance skills of some acts. [However,] the sea shanty singing sessions were quite impressive. It was a real joy to hear all those voices rising together.

Barry Truter:

I've greatly enjoyed MCing at the festival, performing our Fraser Union set, participating in the blues workshop, and bellowing at the Shanty blowout. The parties hosted by Jon and Rika are rousing sing-outs and song swaps. Also memorable for me is the opportunity to hear and enjoy performances by musician friends who I may not re-connect with were it not for the festival. Fraser Union enjoys including the traditional and contemporary folk songs of B.C. in our sets at the Festival, as well as originals by Fraser Union members that fit the tradition such as West-coast Lullaby (Roger Holdstock), and The Ballad of Robert Harkness, Song for Robert Dziekanski, and Pipeline Blues (Barry Truter).

Paddy Tutty:

The Morris dancing on the street was exuberant and wonderful (I have photos!). My partner and I stumbled across a wonderful pub lunch on the Sunday, singing shanties and songs with the morris dancers. The ballad workshop that I was in was particularly inspiring: the participants had corresponded via email prior to the festival, and it was great to meet people from all over the continent (in particular, Lisa Null, who enlightened me with details of the ballad Fair Annie, which I performed.) The parties, hosted by Rika and Jon in their home, were nothing short of amazing: endless singing on the front porch, jamming in the living room, French tunes in the parlour! The shanty singing at the festival was awesome.