

Folk Alliance 2015

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In February, I headed down to the annual Folk Alliance International conference and showcase, which was running its second year in Kansas City. After a stretch in Memphis and a one-year stop in Toronto, FAI has made Kansas City its home for the next several years.

I arrived just before the Lifetime Achievement Awards were given out, one of which was awarded to CSTM in the business/academic category. Past recipients of this honour include Folkways Records, The Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and The Newport Folk Festival – we are in stellar company! Unfortunately, a blizzard descended on the city just after I landed, snarling up traffic, but our President-Elect, Kaley Mason, was on hand to receive the award.

I spent the remainder of my time exploring new acts and reconnecting with old friends, an easy feat in the context of Folk Alliance. The organization books two hotels, where several floors are kept aside for showcases that run from about 9:00 p.m. to 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. It feels at once like organized chaos and a big reunion; each room holds a maximum of a dozen chairs for listeners to drop in while artists have just a short set to win over folk club organizers, festival programmers, media, and venue owners.

Although it seems at times like the amount of music is beyond comprehension, if approached the right way, it can be rewarding for anyone wanting a full dose of new music. Since each room needs a host to organize the weekend's program, I was able to plan according to the collection of artists I wanted to hear, or programmers I wanted to support. In particular, I was keen to find out what the Alberta Room had to offer. Now in its third year, the room is organized by the Bow Valley Music Club out of Calgary. The club creates a compilation album of Albertan artists that will be featured at that year's showcase, and sells it at every Bow Valley concert, raising funds to send the artists down. Every bit counts, since Folk Alliance is an expensive endeavour: between paying for travel, accommodation, and a pile of merchandise to make available to potential bookers, artists typically take on the burden themselves, hoping that a few key gigs will have made the trip worth it.

This year, I was pleased to find artists I have known for a while, alongside some promising new acts. They spanned the Alberta Room, Breakout West, and many other Canadian spaces. Below is a little review of what I heard at this year's Folk Alliance.

Rebecca Lappa

Rebecca Lappa is an extraordinary example of the time and energy young musicians are putting into their craft. Perhaps she signifies a new way of learning that is oriented around online instructional videos and troves of old footage from genres like bluegrass that reside on YouTube. Lappa is not only strong on banjo and piano, she is also writing thought-provoking songs with inspiration as diverse as Hamlet and the nomadic existence of gypsies. In this video, she uses the Child ballads as inspiration.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9h_VEILXwF8



Figure 1: Rebecca Lappa.

Jesse Roper

I was intrigued when I first heard Roper in the fall; he at first appears to have an image that combines a Vancouver Island hippie philosophy with the technical proficiency of Jimi Hendrix, all delivered with a wry sense of humour. Further examination revealed a guitarist who is trying to modernize the blues with some vigour and the contemporary perspective of the young heartbroken guy. His mesmerizing performances really do invigorate a genre that is in need of a new approach.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdNx3N4Qpo>



Figure 2: Jesse Roper.

Lizzy Hoyt

Another Albertan, Hoyt mixes clogging and fiddling into original tunes that draw on Irish ballad traditions and contemporary songwriting influences. Although she is best-known in her home territory of Alberta, she's been recognized by her fellow Canadians in recent years, being nominated for Canadian Folk Music and International Acoustic Music Awards. Songs like "Vimy Ridge" call to mind the ethereal sound of Anne Briggs, using sparse textures and delicately decorated melodies. Not to be deterred by airline limitations, Hoyt packed a cutting board to serve all of her clogging needs.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ML5vLA4XLFM>

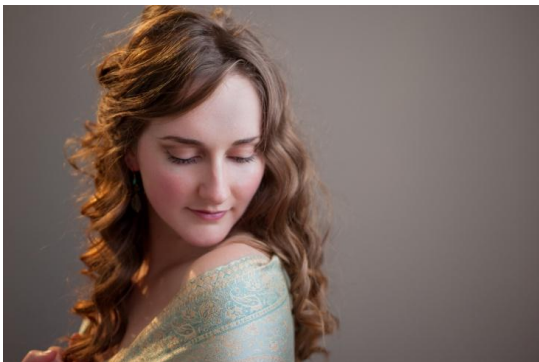


Figure 3: Lizzy Hoyt.

Samantha Martin and Delta Sugar

As Canadian room organizer Richard Flohil put it, "Staples Singers meets the swamp." Samantha Martin

is a force on her own, with a voice that governs any room, band, or genre she tackles, but pair her with singers Sherie Marshall and Stacie Tabb and you've got a powerhouse, even with only the guitar and drums they had behind them. Martin's most recent album, *Send the Nightingale*, showcases these vocalists, highlighting their power both as a collective and individually.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0_SSUfBiKA



Figure 4: Samantha Martin.

J.R. Shore

J.R. Shore dips in and out of the Alberta audience's sight, since his day job and family life often take over his schedule. Lately, he has been dividing his time between his solo work and a bigger project, The Front Porch Roots Revue. Both draw on inspiration like The Band and Gram Parsons, to the extent that they've recorded a number of covers from that magical era of roots rock. Shore is one of the best pianists I've seen in recent years, able to deftly pull off a ragtime number, and then follow that with a Garth Hudson-esque rock-infused piece, all while delivering witty commentary in songs about baseball or a Texas foosball challenge.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxqjsEBpfpM>



Figure 5: J.R. Shore.