

How can a form of music be so popular with performers and audiences and yet so comprehensively ignored by the mainstream arts community? Exactly what is ...

The trouble with folk?

by DAVE O'NEILL

I suspect it has something to do with an identity problem.

I mean, no one seems to really know what folk music is.

Ask twenty people for a definition of folk music, you will get twenty different answers. To some, it is the old bush songs, made popular by bands like The Bushwackers. To others, it is the folk singers like Peter, Paul and Mary who sing songs made popular in the folk revival of the '60s and '70s. Others would say it is anything with an acoustic guitar in it. Or songs with a social conscience. To still others it is World Music, the blending of different cultures with modern arrangements. It could also incorporate bluegrass, blues, old-time hillbilly, gypsy, gypsy jazz, country, Celtic, swing, singer/songwriters, rock and roll, bush music, Indigenous, rap, Klezmer, contra, belly dance, Cajun, Zydeco, and traditional dance and song from all countries.

The fact is that folk music is all of the above, plus a whole lot more. It includes community choirs and orchestras. And let's not forget dance: everything from bush dancing to tango and salsa are to be found at folk festivals.

Folk music is a many faceted diamond that warmly takes many genres under its wing. And this is both its strength and its weakness: it brings together so much creative energy from so many different styles but that makes it hard to define. In the modern world of marketing, everything needs to be able to be pigeonholed into comfortable categories, and folk music just won't be confined like that.

Folk music is, by anyone's definition, a hugely successful music. There are upwards of 30 folk festivals between October 2007 and June 2008 in NSW alone. These range in size from The Bush Traditions Festival in Goulbourn, with an attendance of about 200 people, to The National Folk Festival in Canberra, with a daily

attendance of 12,000 over its 4½ days. Yet folk music hardly rates a blip on the arts radar. It is seen as the poor cousin, simple music that requires little skill. Nothing could be further from the truth. To master any style of music requires great dedication and skill, and folk music, with all its diversity, is no exception.

One of the beauties of folk music is that it is an ever-changing entity: folk musicians learn from the generations that preceded them, change the music to reflect what is happening now, and then hand the tradition on to the next generation. It is not a museum piece, stranded in time, but is constantly changing, while at the same time respecting where it came from.

In Australia more and more creative people are turning to folk, in all its guises, to express themselves. At present, there is an influx of highly trained young musicians coming out of various music schools and conservatoriums, highly trained in classical and jazz, who are realising that there is a whole world of music out there to explore. There is some incredible music being created by these fine young musicians, and it is the folk scene that gives them a platform to present their creations. At the same time they will be rubbing shoulders with, and learning from, masters in purer forms of traditional music.

But if there were one word to sum up the folk scene, it would be 'participation'. People who come to folk festivals are actively encouraged to get involved in one way or another. You will find workshops in all styles of music, a wide range of instruments, singing styles, song-writing, poetry, performance skills, mime, circus skills, not to mention the countless styles of dance — and these range from beginner classes to advanced master classes. There are the festival

February

4 — 6 February

 *In The Bin* workshop and Film Festival. Three days of filmmaking workshops for young people with their finished products being screened alongside finalists from around the country and beyond. **WEST WYALONG** Tel 07 5534 7538

7 — 10 February

 *Australian Blues Music Festival*. The very best of emerging and established blues acts from around Australia. Workshops with the artists, open mic, Youth in Blues Jam, buskers vintage guitar and amp shop. **GOULBURN** Tel 02 4823 4492

9 — 11 February

 *The Big Joke: Bangalow Comedy Festival* **BANGALOW** Contact Mandy Nolan, Director Tel 02 6687 2956

14 February

 Evening Valentines Day Recital Mitchell Conservatorium, **BATHURST** www.mitchellconservatorium.edu.au



Tetrafride Percussion perform at the National Folk Festival 2007. Photo: Bob Parker

choirs that you can join, and many ensembles: it could be the ninety piece Balkan brass band run by Lindsey Pollok, or a Kwela whistle band from South Africa. The point is, folk festivals celebrate the joy of making music whether through song, instrumental or dance, and everyone is welcomed.

Running throughout the many folk festivals are the informal music sessions where the musicians and singers get together in the various bars and play music for the sheer joy of it — sessions that go on for hours, where you will find masters jamming with beginners. The main session bar at the National Folk Festival is open 24 hours a day, and in it you will find different groups, from two or three people up to thirty or so, playing music together. The music is all acoustic, and diverse in style. Many of these musicians and singers never even go to see a concert, but spend the whole weekend playing in the bars. Others will be jamming in the bars, rush off to play their gigs, then race back to keep on playing.

So what is the problem with folk? Only that it won't fit in a box. But folk don't seem to mind. The number of musicians and singers applying to play at the many festivals around the state just continues

to rise. Folk music welcomes everyone and celebrates excellence. So come to a festival if you haven't before. You are in for a wonderful surprise. ■

Dave O'Neill is the Artistic Director of the National Folk Festival
Website www.folkfestival.asn.au.

Coming up in NSW

- 17 – 20 January 2008 Illawarra Folk Festival Music**
- 7 – 10 February 2008 Australian Blues Music Festival**
- 14 – 16 March 2008 Blue Mountains Music Festival**
- 22 – 24 February 2008 Cobargo Folk Festival Music**
- 23 – 24 February 2008 Hunter Music Festival**
- 20 – 24 March 2008 East Coast Blues & Roots Music Festival**
- 20 – 24 March 2008 National Folk Festival (ACT)**
- 24 – 27 April 2008 St Albans Folk Festival**

February

14 February – 2 March

👁 *Creative Couturiers - Highlights from the Couture Collection* A selection of works from the award winning designers Ross Weymouth and John Claringbold. **GRIFFITH** Regional Art Gallery Tel 02 6962 5991

16 February

🎸 *Sizzling Strings* featuring Internationally acclaimed virtuoso guitarist Bruce Mathiske + guests including Tamworth Bluegrass Banjo Champion Dave Hellens & Aria Award winner Chris Duncan. The Jetty Theatre, **COFFS HARBOUR** Tel 02 6652 8088

19 – 23 February

🏠 *Township Stories* An engaging tale of life on the streets of South Africa. Cinematic in style, epic in scale, but powerfully intimate as well. Merrigong Theatre Co, IPAC **WOLLONGONG** Tel 02 3366 4226

22 – 24 February

🎪 *13th Annual Cobargo Folk Festival* Music, dance, song comedy, theatre and poetry. 200 performers at the Cobargo showground provide a pageant of Australian and international talent. **COBARGO** www.cobargofolkfestival.com