

Folk Making A Scene

By Gina Gray

With the National Folk Festival attracting around 50,000 visitors annually, you could say that folk is, well, making a scene.

Maureen O'Brien comments on the independent music scene and the surprising variety and uniqueness of sound that's around today.

Are you one of those people who shudder when someone mentions folk music? Does it revive prefer-to-be-forgotten memories of the 60s, the hippy scene and flower power? Or perhaps Ye Olde English tunes about romping through meadows in other centuries?

Then maybe it's time to look at what's happening in the contemporary folk music scene of this century.

Folk has come a long way from the smoky basement coffee bars of the 60s where obscure artists in black turtle-necked sweaters sang obscure songs accompanied by a little naive guitar strumming.

In an age where the world is bombarded with mass-produced music for a mass-taste audience, where 'stars' are created by image makers for short term consumption, it makes for a refreshing change to find a whole new world of different, unique and exciting music to tantalise every discerning palate.

'Folk' music is the 'music of the folk of the day' so it's crazy to expect that the things folk musicians are writing and singing about today are the same as the 60s, 20s or the 19th Century. This doesn't mean that material from those eras should be discarded, however, and there are always traditional folkies who will keep up the traditions.

For the uninitiated, though, it can be nigh impossible to find today's folk scene because to a large extent, it has been forced underground where it relies on word of mouth to promote its existence ... successfully.

Regular informal sessions that start with just a few musicians gathering together to play music can find themselves inundated with appreciative listeners as word begins to spread and pretty soon, the crowd doesn't fit the premises.

Audiences can be exposed to individuals and groups who are writing and performing new, dynamic, exciting material. Some with instant appeal, others becoming an acquired taste once they've been heard a few times, and still others with little appeal now or possibly ever. And that's the nature of a living, growing organism.

But don't look for these sessions in your usual pubs and clubs. Fewer venues today are supporting live music and those that do tend to steer towards mass music and styles that attract younger drinkers with short pockets.

A good starting place is your nearest folk festival and there are hundreds of them throughout Australia. The largest, the National Folk Festival, attracts around fifty thousand visitors to Canberra annually. Spokesperson Jenny Simpson explains its success as having "community at its heart."

Food and wine festivals are another good place to dig around—organisers often employ independent musicians and groups to entertain visitors.

Today's folk festivals are far more sophisticated than those of the hippy era. Visitors can expect to see crowds of people from children to the young trendies and the middle class up-and-comings to the baby boomers lamenting the fact that it's taken them so long to find this scene.

They can expect to see few ageing hippies and as many state-of-the-art mobile homes as tents (and most of these are pretty state-of-the-art these days, too), indeed a whole range of accommodation from camping through to pub stay and B&B.

Visitors can expect to enjoy a choice of listening formats from concert style, to dinner show, al fresco and more. What they won't expect, however, is the diversity of music style and the quality of performances from local, national and international artists.

It seems every style that doesn't fit into the neat and narrow pigeonholes defined by today's popular music culture has found its way into the 'folk' category, yet it bears little resemblance to the folk of any other era.

Vibrant, enlivening, dynamic folk is alive and thriving.

Novocastrians and Hunter residents particularly have the advantage of easy access to **two** excellent festivals close to home. The St Albans festival near Wiseman's Ferry has been running for more than two decades and has a small, vibrant and family-friendly vibe. It's always held on the weekend closest to Anzac Day. Find out more about the 2007 festival on 20, 21 and 22 April at www.snalbans.iwarp.com

The inaugural Folk-in-Broke festival is being held the first weekend in November at Broke in the Hunter Valley vineyards. Folk-in-Broke – a Musical Spectrum, the festival will feature Eric Bogle, Brisbane quartet MOOT (Brazilian-influenced Folk/Jazz) and some of the finest acts and artists from the Hunter Region. It's an excellent opportunity for Hunter locals to sample a taste of this burgeoning movement in independent music.

Check out www.folkalliance.org.au for information on the national and international folk scene including youth folk events. There's a whole new world out there to enjoy!