

Electric picking, Ethnic Spinning: (Re)Defining the "folk" at the Winnipeg Folk Festival¹

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Abstract: The old debate "What is folk music?" carries a fresh face at the Winnipeg Folk Festival, where it is embodied in a web of considerations regarding economic concerns, availability of mainstream and "world" music artists, and the growing cultural and stylistic diversity of artists who identify as Canadian. Founded in 1974, the festival has produced 35 years of public discourse surrounding the way in which the term "folk music" should be defined. Using media coverage and ethnography, this paper explores how the programming changes at the WFF have helped alter public conceptions of folk music over the past three decades.

"Well, you can go to another stage if you want! Here we are playing music inspired by Jamaica, *where I was born!*"

During a sunny afternoon at the 2002 Winnipeg Folk Festival, dozens of audience members (including myself) watched with interest as Simon Twitchin, the vocalist of Horace X, shouted defensively from the workshop stage at a fellow who had heckled, "This is not folk music!" Though I had never seen such an argument take place *during* a performance at this event, the "what is folk music" debate had indeed made appearances in local media, usually in the summertime when the festival was fast approaching or already in progress. Therefore, it was not too surprising that a singer accompanied by reggae-influenced global beats and assisted by digital technology found himself in a position to declare his roots to an audience such as this one.

In musical academia, this scenario might be merely seen as yet another manifestation of an aging (yet stubbornly resilient) debate concerning the definition and usage of the term "folk music." Members of the International Folk Music Society took it upon themselves to publish a definition in 1955

(Cherbuliez et al. 1955) only to revise it in 1981. The Canadian Society for Traditional Music has also demonstrated a struggle with its definition, as can be seen in published debates among its members (Spalding et al. 1988).² Keil (1978) has lamented its usage among those he refers to as "the bourgeoisie," while Bohlman has drawn attention to its "peculiar resistance to systematic classification" (1988:33). Others have examined its complicated relationship with popular music (Blacking 1981, Middleton 1981, Redhead and Street 1989). In fact, with its apparently flexible boundaries, one might say the term "folk music" would lend itself well to discussions of genre in popular music studies; indeed, genre studies by Dunn (1999), Hibbett (2005), and Holt (2007) cover many themes applicable to so-called "folk music," such as roots, authenticity, politics, and community. Still others have referred to its presence within the context of globalization. Since the proliferation of "world musics" in the 1980s (as described by Feld 1994 and Klump 1999), much academic discourse on this phenomenon has referred to folk or traditional music in discussions of technology, appropriation, and transnationalism (Erlmann 1996, Frith 2000, Guilbault 2006).

As many are aware, the "what is folk music" debate is not limited to academia. As demonstrated by the Horace X example, folk festivals give significant representation to these inherent issues. Since their programming includes much music that highlights the traditional versus the contemporary, the local versus the global, the non-commercial versus the commercial, as well as the blurred lines between these binaries, these events have served as a catalyst for much media, Internet, and informal discourse concerning folk music as genre.

Indeed, Sparling (2008) has shown that discourse is integral to the construction of genre, which itself is "subject to change depending on historical time and place" (422). The changes that have taken place in the festival's programming have given way to two notable discursive streams concerning the shifting definitions of "folk music." These pertain to the festival's adoption of world music into its programming, as well as its engagement with mainstream artists. In discussions of world music, the "what is folk music" debate is particularly occupied with the growing plurality of traditions represented at folk festivals, their relationship to Canadian ideals of cultural diversity, and their acceptance into the so-called "folk" genre. In some ways this discourse recalls the themes of belonging and ownership which arise in Radano and Bohlman's discussion of music and race (2000).³ In regards to mainstream music, WFF discourse evokes the familiar ideologies of "legitimacy, authenticity and community," to borrow the titular themes of Redhead and Street's 1989 article. The authors' application of the "roots" concept to the sociological origins and

sound ideal of popular musicians is a useful framework with which to understand much WFF discourse, which often displays concern that the festival is moving away from social activism and acoustic sound ideals towards commercial artists which bring more financial stability to the festival.

This paper will trace the usage of the term "folk music," and its evolving definitions, in three decades of discourse generated by the Winnipeg Folk Festival (mainly from 1974 to 2006). The chief sources of discourse consulted for this research were newspaper articles (many of which contain interviews with performers and audience members), festival programs, and personal communications, though additional references will be made to Internet sources and commemorative books. After a brief outline of the WFF's history I will examine the way folk music was defined in the event's early years through its programming. This will follow with a discussion of the growing pluralism in artistic representation, as well as the way definitions have been re-conceptualized in public discourse as a response to the increased presence of world and mainstream music.⁴

History

Founded in 1974 by Mitch Podolak, the inaugural Winnipeg Folk Festival was held August 9th to 11th in Birds Hill Provincial Park, twenty-four kilometers north of Winnipeg.⁵ Comprised of a mainstage, three smaller stages, and an arts and crafts area, the festival was said to have attracted 22,000 people throughout the entire weekend (Ladd 1974b). Though originally intended as a celebration of Winnipeg's centenary, the event became an annual tradition and quickly established itself as a prime destination for folk music fans, functioning around a community-oriented structure that is said to be derived from Podolak's experience as a left-wing activist (MacDonald 2008). In its third year of existence, it was acknowledged to be one of the three largest folk festivals in North America, along with the Mariposa and Philadelphia festivals (Dickhoff and Dickhoff 1976:2). One year later it surpassed the latter two, with an overall attendance of 24,000 people (Whysall 1977). In 1979 a writer from the U.S. publication *Folkscene*, lauding it as "...quite simply – the best..." offered some possible reasons for its success,

Suffice it to say that in terms of cohesiveness, volunteer effort, dedicated staff efforts, and the quality and diversity of music represented, Winnipeg is the folk festival lover's folk festival. (Necheles 1979:6)

while at the same time foreshadowing its longevity:

So few events are able to maintain their quality over the years or to hold on to the ideals and enthusiasm they started with. The Winnipeg Folk Festival stands out among the rest in the field as a festival dedicated to maintaining the folk festival spirit of sharing and discovery. (11)

Despite the glowing praises of its atmosphere, however, the festival was not without financial hardship. A succession of rainy years in the early to mid-1980s slashed its attendance figures significantly. In 1986, with an accumulated deficit of \$140,000,⁶ the festival made a public appeal for funds (Prokosh 1986). Though the next artistic director, Rosalie Goldstein (1987-1991), began to stabilize this problem with the addition of crowd-drawing "big-name" acts, the festival did not find itself completely in the black until 1992.

Financial figures aside, the festival's reputation as a prime destination for music fans has been largely maintained throughout the years. It continues to attract ticket-buyers from many parts of Canada, and recent surveys have indicated that 28% of its audience comes from the United States (Press 2007).⁷ It has seen three more artistic directors, Pierre Guerin (1992-2000), Rick Fenton (2001-2004) and Chris Frayer (2005-present). The extent of the festival's physical growth since 1974 is evident in its present infrastructure. The park, which originally made use of four stages, is now equipped with seven stages during the festival weekend. Further entertainment can be found in a family tent, an outdoor nightclub, and the didactic "Folk School" tent (WFF Program 2006).

Early definitions of "Folk"

Early discourse of the Winnipeg Folk Festival reveals an event which is strongly reminiscent of the performance practices and social values of the mid-twentieth century North American folk revival. If one is to consider writings by Jackson (1993), Laing (2006), Gruning (2006), Mitchell (2007), and McDonald (2007), this includes performances (often vocal) of traditional material (often ballads) and original material (often highly politicized) by mostly young individuals (often self-accompanied on guitar). There are of course exceptions, such as older "source" singers, instrumentalists, and artists who choose to perform more personal (rather than political) material. In any case, such

performances are likely to contain "unadorned and rhetorically amateurish vocals and the exclusive use of acoustic instruments," as part of a "gesture of refusal of the polished affectations of commercial entertainment" (McDonald 2007:55). Early programs of the Winnipeg Folk Festival refer to many of the elements discussed above, and early media coverage similarly implies a connection with these roots, as the following examples will demonstrate.

The program of the inaugural 1974 festival, for example, provides a window through which to view the ways in which folk music was defined by festival organizers. In particular, these can be observed in artist repertoires and countries of origin, references to musical instruments, and workshop formats. As shown in Appendix A, the program lists 46 artists⁸ (not including MCs), all of whom came from North America, the U.K. and Ireland. In addition to this "Anglo" majority there is a predominance of self-accompanied solo singers.⁹ Given that many of the latter performed repertoires of mixed geographical origins (e.g., North Americans performing Irish ballads, British musicians performing North American repertoire), the most obvious way to differentiate between them is to divide them by contemporary, original and traditional repertoires. The programming was heavily weighted toward solo singers performing original material (32.6%). Examples include Bruce Cockburn, Shirley Eikhard, and Tom Jackson. These were followed by solo singers performing traditional material (21.7%), including Enoch Kent, Mike Seeger and Liam Clancy. The program also included other types of solo singers (e.g., those who combine traditional & contemporary material), as well as a small number of duos and bands. According to program biographies, the latter were also largely influenced by North American or British traditions.

As stated above, the boundaries of the "folk music" genre at this time are also hinted at in discussions of instrumentation throughout the program. Didactic articles outline the origins and uses of the guitar, banjo, harmonica, fiddle, mountain dulcimer and mandolin, with additional reference to "not so common instruments" such as autoharps and concertinas (WFF Program 1974:5-9). The voice and lyrics are also recognized for their importance in the delivery of folk music, as one can see with the printing of music (i.e., melody, chords and lyrics) in other parts of the program for songs such as "Maids When You're Young, Never Wed an Old Man" (1974:16) and "The Banks of the Don" (1974:39).

Media accounts of the inaugural Winnipeg Folk Festival appear to be in agreement with the "North American revivalist" definition of folk that pervades the program in ways discussed above. The following is a description of the programming that appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press on the second day of the 1974 festival:

The three-day program, designed for all ages and musical tastes, offers more than 50 top international folk artists, Manitoba melodies, ethnic folk music of the British Isles, French Canada, native Indian music and sounds from other regions, traditional blues from the deep south, Maritimes music, novelty acts, country-western, medieval ballads, humorous songs and just plain folk. (Ladd 1974a)

The meaning of the final phrase "just plain folk" reveals itself after a process of elimination. Since it is not "international" and "ethnic" (both of these terms being used to describe musicians coming from the British Isles), and not French Canadian, "native Indian" or blues (among others), "just plain folk" is most likely describing the remaining (and largest) contingent of the programming: self-accompanied solo singers performing traditional English-language repertoire and/or contemporary originals -in other words, a staple of 1960s North American folk revivalism.

Growing pluralism

Throughout the next three years of the festival, the programming remained largely dedicated to similar artists. As the 1975 program cover demonstrates, the festival adopted the banjo as part of its logo in that year. But in terms of the music programming itself, a few visibly different features began trickling in as well over the next few years. These included an aboriginal performers' program and a sitarist (1975), a stronger presence of French-language and bluegrass music (1977), and a Latin-American group (1978). The 1979 program introduction refers to a conscious effort at "expanded international representation." The results of this effort were a kora player, a Klezmer band and three bands from South America, contributing to a total of 82 artists, not including MCs (WFF Program 1979). In an expansion on the "South American" theme, the program contains a didactic article about traditional Andean instruments.¹⁰

Along with expanded cultural representation, the programs of these years also betray a growing sense of pluralism *within* traditional and popular North American music. Many performer biographies refer to compounded influences, such as "jazz, rock and blues" (Bruce Cockburn bio, WFF Program 1975), "country and western, abstract jazz, classical pieces and traditional folk tunes" (Ken Bloom bio, WFF program 1977) and "blues, ragtime, gospels, spirituals, and original material" (Lauri Conger bio, WFF Program 1979). These pluralistic repertoires helped to lead the festival into the 1980s, which

saw more discussions of musical diversity in the media. Some of these media commentaries referred to diversity as a gradual deviation from 1960s symbolism, such as the 1981 remark "...festivals have also improved by diversifying and weeded [sic] out the sorry-eyed singers who do 'bad renditions... of Blowing [sic] in the Wind' " (Haynes 1981). One reviewer proudly noted the musical diversity within Canada (albeit a diversity that relied heavily on American and British influences):

If billing last night's opening concert of the Tenth Annual Winnipeg Folk Festival as an all-Canadian event was an attempt to reaffirm people's faith in the musical diversity of this country, it certainly succeeded.

From the swing era, rock and even Old English madrigal a capella [sic] stylings of Natch Gloria to the Nashville-influenced country rock of Colleen Peterson, and everything in between, came a rather startling realization of the multiplicity of Canadian music form... (Cory 1983)

As diversity grew within North American repertoires, however, artists from outside North America and the British Isles also continued to grow in number. Yet these were often referred to with a sense of "otherness" in media accounts. For example:

Themba Tana and African Heritage followed with a variety of African songs played on exotic-sounding instruments like hoshos, balafons and bushman's bows. Their set was always interesting and sometimes amazing as the group pounded out strange rhythms on their instruments. (Stone 1984)

Despite the sense of exoticism portrayed in this description, the fact that traditional music from Africa was now being heard at the Winnipeg Folk Festival and reviewed in local media is indicative of a growing potential (at the time) for shifts in the audience's conception of folk music.

Expanding boundaries: World and mainstream music

Until the early 1980s, the idea of "folk" at the Winnipeg Folk Festival was largely defined, through the festival's programming, as an outgrowth of the 1960s American folk revival. However, as becomes evident after the first dec-

ade of the festival's existence, geographical representation was expanding and performer repertoires became more pluralistic, occasionally betraying influences from pop idioms. These elements point to inevitable shifts in the public's conception of folk music. The evolution of this conception can be broken down into the two main streams of world music discourse and mainstream/pop music discourse (while there is admittedly occasional overlap between the two).

A discussion of "world music" in relation to WFF programming warrants a clarification of the term itself, given this music's complex relationship with the festival. The appointment of Rosalie Goldstein as artistic director in 1987 happened to coincide with the emergence of "world music" as a marketed genre. Therefore it is not surprising that in her first year on the job, a heavily marketed "third world" act such as Ladysmith Black Mambazo was featured at the festival. However, while many academics (Guilbault 2006, Erlmann 1996, and Klump 1999) refer to the label "world music" in terms of its marketing origins (and its original association with music such as *zouk* and *rai*), the Winnipeg Folk Festival would feature many artists whose musical style or ethnic origins implied alternative usages for this term. Some of these were North American musicians of non-European ancestry, drawing on musical traditions from their cultural heritage. One such example is Fubuki Daiko, a taiko drumming group from Winnipeg with Japanese-Canadian membership.¹¹ Others were comprised of ethnically diverse members who used their differing cultural backgrounds as an opportunity for "fusion." Punjabi by Nature is one such example, with its combination of "an Indian-Canadian lead singer who sings in Punjabi, a Rastafarian rapper, a South African keyboardist, and a white guitarist with pink hair who plays a wicked South-Asian riff" (Ditchburn 1996).¹² Many of these "world music" bands record for smaller labels and have limited exposure, in contrast to the performers whose material is "...mass-distributed world-wide yet associated with minority groups and small and industrially developing countries..." (Guilbault 2006:139).

Another usage of the term "world music" is implied in the following statement: "Manitoba's largest outdoor music festival celebrates traditional sounds from around the globe" (Kives 2004). With this in mind, WFF performers may not necessarily originate from "the ubiquitous nowhere of the international financial markets..." associated with much world music production (Erlmann 1996:475), but instead may simply represent musical traditions from their countries of origin. The Bisserov Sisters,¹³ a trio of women from Bulgaria who sing traditional songs of their home country, provide an example of this category of artist. Despite the implied sonic and cultural differences between the three artists mentioned above, they do share the common thread of

performing under the umbrella of "folk music" while at this festival. Indeed, the inclusion of these three performers under this label calls into question the same global-local binary explored by Guilbault and Erlmann. Fubuki Daiko, being from Manitoba, is the most "local" in terms of physical proximity, but relatively "global" in its application of a tradition from East Asia. Punjabi by Nature is the most "global" in terms of its sonic expansiveness, but very local in its embodiment of the close-to-home ideal of cultural diversity.¹⁴ The Bisse-rov Sisters, coming from Bulgaria, are the most physically "global" by default; however, the ritual function of their songs, as well as their lack of electric instruments, give them an air of untouched "localness." Of these three groups, who is the folkier at the folk festival?

The question of whether WFF audiences accept "world music" as "folk" has garnered mixed reactions. Despite being long-time festival-goers, some still refer to "world music" as an umbrella genre, without taking note of the inherent geographical and cultural distinctions between the artists it encompasses. The following quotation illustrates one such view:

...I just don't get world music...I know I need to broaden my horizons and all, but I'll stick with recognizable melodies and lyrics any time. Many of the world performers end up amazing me, and getting even me excited (like Ba Cissoko, one of the better world beat acts I've seen) but others are not so successful. The Kawa Brass Band was a perfect example of the kind of world music that I just don't get. They didn't appeal to me at all. 'nuff said. (Robson 2006)

Though this radio personality had contrasting reactions to Ba Cissoko and The Kawa Brass Band, he did not consider that these two performers represent very different traditions.¹⁵ However, the following fan, in describing a workshop featuring Scottish and Klezmer music, offers another interpretation of the cultural diversity of festival programming:

They touched a chord. Suddenly their music flooded me with memories of the stories my Scottish grandparents had told me of their home. But then, Klezmer, that Yiddish band, started to play, and they struck the same chord. Which is strange, because I'm not Jewish. But both musics made me feel the same way. Both made me feel old and not lost and 'home.' (Geddie 1998:41)

This observation suggests that the cultural diversity of festival pro-

gramming has indeed fostered open-mindedness among some festival-goers, allowing them to move beyond their initial impressions of "otherness" from world music programming to observe similarities in performances from disparate traditions. The acceptance of other musical traditions has merged with discourse of Canadian cultural identity at the WFF, particularly under the subsequent artistic director Pierre Guerin. Guerin is well-known for his openness to music from non-western traditions, and his programming for the WFF in the 1990s has already been acknowledged in academia for the way it "counterposes, rather than separates, cultural differences" (Greenhill 1999: 43).¹⁶ In 1993, he told a reporter:

For 20 years we've been saying that folk music helps define Canadian culture. But Canadian culture is changing and we've got to come to terms with that. It's not as simple as saying, 'This year we have a Filipino group.' That diversity has to be reflected throughout the whole organization. (Dafoe 1993)

Guerin has also made comments regarding a change in Canadians' conceptualizations of "folk music," which appear to be founded on the acceptance of the "other" into Canadian identity. Referring to his own festival performance as a Celtic musician in 1980, Guerin said in 1994:

Fifteen years ago we came to Winnipeg to play Celtic music, and it was considered exotic... Now, I get demo tapes from kids who are combining Celtic and African music with South American rhythms... (Ostick 1994)

These 1993 and 1994 statements by Guerin, when viewed back-to-back, suggest that Celtic music has diminished in its exoticism over the years and has increasingly come to be accepted as a Canadian style. His comments further imply that other traditions more recently considered "exotic" (such as African and South American styles) might potentially make a similar move to "Canadianness" in public consciousness, considering the increasing regularity with which they are heard by the Canadian public. This process simultaneously conjures up and complicates Radano and Bohlman's idea of ownership, which they summarize as the fact that "...few deny that one type of music can be possessed and claimed as one's own, while there are other musics that belong to someone else" (2000:6). While this type of Self/Other dichotomy was clearer in public reactions to earlier instances of world music at WFF (e.g., in the early 1980s), the dichotomy has become increasingly blurred as so-called

"world" music traditions are accepted as part of the Canadian cultural fabric.

Certainly, the WFF's vision of Canadian diversity has faced some criticism; for example, Greenhill (1999) has likened the festival's programming of Guerin's tenure to a form of "Benetton multiculturalism." While acknowledging that "the fact that equal time and space is allotted to various musics and perspectives creates some space in a colonial/heterosexist political economy for subalterns," she points to the commodified nature of "pluralism" in the publicity materials of an event which "makes no alterations in power dynamics beyond its own frame" (41). But in the context of the festival's entire programming history, it must be acknowledged that Pierre Guerin's vision demonstrates an important shift from the conception of Canadian musical diversity seen in previous decades. From the media and audience comments mentioned earlier, one might conclude that the diversifying cultural representation of festival programming (regardless of whether it is labeled "world music") has encouraged a number of people to expand their personal definitions of "folk music" to include musical traditions outside of those associated with the North American folk revival. In addition, the idea of non-European Canadians being adopted into a mainstream vision of "Canadian" music in folk festival discourse stands in contrast with the conception of national identity represented in rock/pop music discourse, which, as some scholars claim, is still dominated by music associated with a white male demographic (see Duffett 2000 and Pegley 2004 for discussions of the programming of large-scale Canadian musical events).

As mentioned earlier, one of world music's chief partners in loosening the boundaries of "folk music" at the WFF is the presence of mainstream music. A lifelong trait of Winnipeg Folk Festival programming has been its continuous negotiation of a balance between "big-name" and little-known artists. While the presence of well-known performers helps to guarantee ticket buyers, lesser-known performers help to maintain the musical integrity of the event, as well as create an environment of discovery for festival-goers. Evidence of this negotiation dates back to the early years of the festival, as can be seen in a 1979 comment made by Mitch Podolak:

What makes this festival work? First, you invite stars – not because they're stars, but because they're good. Then, you bring in acts people have never seen. But you don't have to bore people. You have to come up with a mix that will both educate and entertain. (Sullivan 1979)

Future years would see endless second-guessing of this programming philoso-

phy, with the scale tipping to either side at different points in time. In 1984 (a year when sixty-five percent of the artists were new to the festival), Podolak himself stated, "I think we're going back to what the folk festival should be. A place where unknown performers can be introduced" (Haynes 1984). Thus, even after eleven years of programming, an ideology of authenticity was still present at the festival. Despite many years of experimenting with "star" performers, organizers were expressing the same concern for "roots" outlined by Redhead and Street, notably that "...the sounds and style of the music should continue to resemble the source from which it sprang" (1989:180).

The continuation of the "roots" debate into subsequent festival discourse was further highlighted in discussions of the programming strategies of Rosalie Goldstein and Pierre Guerin, as well as in comparisons with the Edmonton Folk Festival. After her appointment, Goldstein quickly made a name for herself by booking more eclectic, fusion-oriented groups such as Bela Fleck and the Flecktones,¹⁷ and performers with mainstream acclaim, such as Jane Siberry, Bonnie Raitt and Billy Bragg. According to her statement in the 1988 program introduction, Goldstein saw this eclectic programming as very much an opportunity for discovery:

There is music from the tradition [al?] to the cutting edge and music from many corners of the world. We invite you to the music and hope that you will find it exciting, exotic, a bit of a challenge and certainly a great deal of fun. (WFF Program 1988:1)

Three years later, however, the festival announced that it would not renew her contract. A round of the "what is folk music" debate subsequently flared up as the media explored the possible reasons for her dismissal:

...there's the beards and banjos factor, the feeling that Goldstein had moved the festival too far and too fast into the future, alienating those who come to folk festivals expecting dulcimer players and clog dancers and found themselves confronted with Afro-pop bands, weirdo electric guitar players and some guy singing about Stuffin' Martha's Muffin. The word "balance"- between Goldstein's innovations and the dusty folk traditions – was bandied about a great deal over the past few months. (Dafoe 1991)

This longstanding binary of innovation versus tradition remained a concern when Guerin stepped into the job after Goldstein's departure. A statement made in 1993 suggests that he chose to tackle this problem via the "big name"

issue: "It's an event with an ensemble cast, not half a dozen big names coming in. If somebody wanted to do one show and a press conference and leave town, it wouldn't work" (Ostick 1993a). His first programmed festival, which largely featured lesser-known performers, drew in the second-highest crowd ever (matching one of Goldstein's years) and erased the remainder of the rain-induced deficit from the mid-1980s. However, the following account suggests that he, like Goldstein and Podolak before him, held the festival tradition of discovery high in his priorities:

Guerin says meeting the needs of established fans while attracting first-timers is 'a delicate process.' "You want the veterans to find what drew them in the first place, but also to discover a couple of things they hadn't heard before. Newcomers may be drawn in by a specific act or genre, but they'll be exposed to surprises. When I see that happening, I'm really happy." (Ostick 1993b)

It was during Guerin's time as artistic director that the Winnipeg Folk Festival, which had enjoyed acclaim as one of the top-ranked festivals in North America, found a new rival in the Edmonton Folk Festival. A glance at the press coverage of the time reveals that this rivalry was largely rooted in the "big names versus unknowns" debate. In 1994, Edmonton's became the highest-grossing folk festival in Canada, a fact attributed to a well-publicized appearance by Joni Mitchell (Walker 1995). A year later, the announcement by Edmonton of forthcoming appearances by Elvis Costello, Rickie Lee Jones and Ry Cooder prompted one Winnipeg journalist to declaim:

... "Why are we letting Edmonton beat us at our own game?" they ask... I, too, have glanced over the Winnipeg Folk Festival's lineup and found most of the names either overly familiar or completely unknown. But once you're out there...you realize a folk festival is not about famous performers... It's about the mellow atmosphere, enjoying the outdoors, running into old friends, discovering some excellent music you've never heard before. (Walker 1995)

Not surprisingly, the issue of definition rose to the surface in his declamation:

...Elvis Costello...is he a folk singer? Is Ry Cooder a folk singer? Are the Barenaked Ladies...a folk act? Musical definitions are fluid things, no doubt. But as soon as a musician's work becomes

popular, you can argue that by very definition, the leopard has changed its spots. A folk musician, conversely, may simply be a pop musician who isn't popular. So for all you people who complain that the Winnipeg Folk Festival doesn't present enough popular acts, maybe you're asking it to become something it should never be: a pop festival. (Walker 1995)

This journalist's view was both matched and refuted by other festival-goers. During Guerin's tenure, a fifteen-year-old volunteer was quoted as saying, "It's nice to be away from the pop sound. Everybody here is playing real drums and real guitars. They are real instruments" (Lyons 1995). Michael Handler, who had formerly worked with the festival, praised Guerin's approach in terms of its inherent opportunities for discovery:

I can sympathize with and share people's wish that we had big names. It makes us feel important when what the world considers a big name comes to town... But every year when the festival lineup is announced, one-third I've heard of the act and the music; a third I've heard of the act but I haven't heard the music; and a third I've never heard of. Every summer, my favourite act comes from the third that I've never heard of. (Lyons 1996)

Others, however, were not so easily persuaded that lesser-known artists lead to discovery. In 1994, a disappointed reviewer stated that, besides a surprise appearance by Burton Cummings on the opening night, "the rest of Guerin's festival doesn't seem intent on knocking down too many preconceptions about folk music." After describing the "pleasant but somewhat predictable" lineup of blues, bluegrass and Cape Breton fiddling, the reviewer added,

... what was missing was the element of surprise, even shock, that can transform a festival from a pleasant evening on a blanket in a field to something that makes you think again about what 'folk music' means. (Dafoe 1994)

Despite his obvious disagreement with Guerin's admirers, the reviewer shares with them a common priority of discovery. In discussions of authenticity, mainstream music and big-name performers in festival discourse, one finds an audience whose majority *wants* their tastes to be challenged, and for the most part, welcomes the opportunity to stretch the definition of "folk music."

Current issues

With the two most recent artistic directors (Rick Fenton and Chris Frayer), the friendly debate concerning the boundaries of folk music has continued in the media and among audience members. Many arguments question whether the original features of the Winnipeg Folk Festival programming (particularly local representation, lower-profile artists, political conscience, and "acoustic" sound ideals) have departed the picture. For example, one journalist has raised the concern about an apparent decline in aboriginal representation, stating "I set out to cover the participation of First Nations people in the Winnipeg Folk Festival and I ended up covering a one-man band" (Marks 2007). In 2001, another reporter pointed out that the WFF appeared to have traded places with the Edmonton Folk Festival by booking more mainstream pop-oriented acts, while the latter opted for lesser-known artists (Kives 2001). In addition, Paul Phillips (a singer in the Manitoba Labour Choir and former festival volunteer) wrote of that year's festival:

This was not a folk festival but a multistage pop-concert festival with a few folk performers thrown in for flavour.¹⁸ Some of the stages at the Festival are still sponsored by the Manitoba Federation of Labour, the labour-based Crocus Fund, and the community-based Assiniboine Credit Union. But you would have heard no labour songs, no protest songs, no music of the common people at this festival. That is because it is no longer a folk festival. (Phillips 2001:40)

The question of political presence has been answered in other various ways, however. Ben Sures, a contemporary singer-songwriter, has also measured the "folkiness" of music in terms of its political weight, stating "Rap is the closest thing to traditional folk because it expresses political opinion and social issues" (Arts Reporter 1998). However, despite believing that political music is something no longer seen at festivals, he has differentiated between "political" and "socially conscious," describing himself as the latter, and also referring to songwriters such as Bruce Cockburn and Ani DiFranco (who still perform on the folk circuit) as socially-conscious artists.

Politics aside, the "sound ideal" aspect of the "what is folk" debate has also continued into recent years, as demonstrated by the fact that the festival dropped the banjo from its logo in 2004 (Kives 2004). I recall a conversation with a Winnipeg banjo/guitar player who played at the festival in the early 1990s. He remembered that time as one where,

...if you were wandering around and came across any group of guitar or banjo players, you could sit down and jam with them. It wasn't like today...I don't go anymore. That world-beat stuff is so popular, and I'm not really into it. (Anonymous musician: 2005)

Nevertheless, despite an expanding diversity of programming and expanding demographic of young people, I have continued to meet middle-aged (and older) people who have been faithfully attending for many, most, and even *all* of its thirty-three years. As recently as the 2006 festival, I spoke to two men who have been attending for over twenty years each. When asked how they thought the programming had changed over the years, they responded almost in unison, "Oh, definitely less pickers."¹⁹ But when asked why they continued to attend the festival despite this, one man's face became animated. "Well, the diversity! The sheer range of music you can take in on a weekend is amazing. There's always an opportunity to discover new music you've never heard before" (Anonymous fans: 2006). Though the commentators of this section have differing opinions of the social and sonic value of many aspects of festival programming, they nonetheless agree on one particular notion: that it has indeed changed over the years.

The program of the 2006 festival reveals many of the transformations that the festival's soundscape has undergone over the past three decades. As one can observe from Appendix B, the classification of the 2006 artists even required a slightly different approach than that of their 1974 predecessors. Given that the 1974 festival was clearly dominated by performers, instruments and repertory from North America, the U.K. and Ireland (with geographical mixing of styles and repertoires), the programming fell into logical divisions of Solo Performers, Duos and Bands (each with its own subcategories). But as already discussed, the years since 1974 have seen a gradual increase in world- and mainstream-influenced musical performers, many of whose approaches to invoking "tradition" differ greatly. Therefore, for the 2006 programming the quantitative membership of the artists (solo, duo, etc) has been largely disregarded in favour of categories which describe the way in which performers employ varying degrees of tradition. Each of these categories may contain any number of artists (solo, duo, etc).²⁰ One such category is "Contemporary interpretations of traditional music, with some presence of innovation in instrumentation and/or performance practice." These include acts such as Vishwa Mohan Bhatt and Salil Bhatt, who draw their performance material from classical Indian idioms but make use of the mohan veena, a guitar-sitar hybrid invented roughly thirty years ago (WFF Program 2006:17). Another example is Flook, a band from the U.K. which plays repertoire derived from

Celtic traditions but incorporates non-traditional performance practices such as soloistic bodhran playing.

Another prominent programming shift since the festival's inception is an increase in what one might call "Americana" fusion artists. These "Combinations of various traditional and contemporary North American pop idioms" (as identified in Appendix B) include Steve Earle and Alejandro Escovedo, who have been labelled "roots-rock" and "alt-country" in popular discourse; others represent the popular (American) music scene of a bygone era, such as Solomon Burke; while others fuse various American pop styles in a way difficult to categorize, such as The Sadies.

Despite the growth in "worldly" and "mainstream" artists, perhaps the most revealing items in the programming are the things that have *not* changed. The number of self-accompanied solo singers²¹ (whether of traditional or original material) totals twenty-three (26.4%), rendering it the highest-represented type of artist of 2006, the same being the case for the 1974 festival.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that many disciplines in the social sciences and humanities are now preoccupied with issues arising from global commerce, technology and various forms of transnationalism. Ethnomusicology and popular music studies are no exception. Keywords such as "hybridity," "diversity," and "identity" penetrate much recent music scholarship together with the time-worn theme of "authenticity" (for a recent summary, see, for example, Stokes 2004). As this paper has suggested, the Winnipeg Folk Festival functions as an ideal case-study to examine the ongoing reconceptualizations and musical articulations of such terms, in ways consistent with concerns of much recent academic work. In particular, its changes in programming, as well as the discourse generated by these changes, reveal a gradual unraveling and reworking of the conception of "folk music" over the last three decades. From its clear roots in the North American Folk Revival, the programming at this festival has evolved to include a substantial amount of "world music" artists each year, as well as artists with strong connections to the mainstream music industry. As this paper has shown, the WFF's world music programming reflects blurred boundaries of ownership as the music of the "Other" is increasingly accepted into Canadian conceptions of "folk music," particularly under the banner of cultural diversity. This is demonstrated in the inclusion of traditional and popular music from non-Western countries, music borrowing from the traditions of diasporic groups living in North America, and fusion groups reflecting

multiethnic musical influences. Meanwhile, the role of mainstream artists in expanding the boundaries of folk music (even while maintaining the genre's name), cannot be solely attributed to a steady commercialization of folk music over the years. Instead, it is part of a conscious and continuous negotiation between achieving economic stability and maintaining musical integrity. The challenge of honouring the festival's "roots" has been represented differently by each successive artistic director of the festival, with the programming displaying different proportions of lesser-known and mainstream artists at various points in time. Thus, the relatively inclusive genre of "folk" music that today's festival-goers are familiar with did not materialize without years of programming experimentation and extensive public debate. But today's inclusivity at folk festivals was also made possible by another factor---notably, a priority for musical discovery expressed by all parties in the debate, be they festival organizers, world music aficionados, or children of the mid-20th century folk revival. 🍀

APPENDIX A: The 1974 Winnipeg Folk Festival

Total number of artists: 46

Number of artists who are Canadian or based in Canada: approx. 2722 (58.7%)

Number of artists who are Manitoban or based in Manitoba: 7 (15.2%)

MCs: 2

SOLO PERFORMERS

Solo singer (with instrument):

Traditional material only: **10** (21.7%)

Original material only: **15** (32.6%)

Traditional material & contemporary originals: **5** (10.9%)

Traditional and non-original contemporary material: **4** (8.7%)

Older pop idiom-inspired material: **2** (4.3%)

Solo instrumentalist: **1** (2.2%)

DUOS (vocals with instrumental accompaniment)

Traditional material: **1** (2.2%)

Original material: **2** (4.3%)

Original, traditional and older pop-influenced material: **1** (2.2%)

BANDS

Vocal & instrumental combo: **3** (6.5%)

Instrumental only: **2** (4.3%)

APPENDIX B: The 2006 Winnipeg Folk Festival

Total number of artists: 87

Number of artists who are Canadian or based in Canada: 42 (48.3%)

Number of artists who are Manitoban or based in Manitoba: 13 (14.9%)

MCs: 4

Traditional instruments, repertoires and interpretations: **3** (3.4%)

Contemporary interpretations of traditional music, with some presence of innovation in instrumentation and/or performance practice: **12** (13.8%)

Bands whose repertoire and /or instruments strongly references a geographical and/or temporal diversity (a.k.a. fusion): **5** (5.7%)

Family entertainment: **7** (8%)

Singer-songwriters:

a) solo: -inspired by a particular tradition or locale: 5

-performing personal, topical or political material: 18

Total: **23** (26.4%)

b) duos/trios: -performing personal, topical or political material: **5** (5.7%)

Combinations of various traditional and contemporary North American pop idioms: **18** (20.7%)

Pop: **1** (1.1%)

Musicians with expansive repertoire and instrumental skills, employing humour and performing at both children's and adults' stages: **2** (2.3%)

Solo instrumentalists: **9** (10.3%)

DJs: 1 (1.1%)

Visual artists: 1 (1.1%)

Notes

1. This article is derived from a chapter of my M.A. thesis (Tsai 2007). Many thanks to Louise Wrazen, who has guided much of my research into this subject area and offered me invaluable advice throughout the many drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank my two anonymous reviewers, who provided me with helpful suggestions for finessing certain editorial details and enhancing particular critical perspectives.

2. The Canadian Society for Traditional Music was formerly known as the Canadian Folk Music Society. This name change stands as another testament to its struggle with the definition of "folk music."

3. It should be noted, however, that WFF discourse on world music is distinct from the racial discourses discussed by Radano and Bohlman. While the latter authors define the racial imagination as pertaining to "...constructions of difference associated with body type and color" (2000, 5), WFF discourse tends to construct difference in ethnic (rather than racial) terms, especially within Canadian frameworks of multiculturalism and cultural diversity.

4. As this paper will show, the gradual changes which have been applied to programming over the years are often attributed to decisions made by artistic directors, with the latter frequently acknowledging the challenges and potential implications of their programming strategies. While the festival's funding sources may have some influence on the WFF's program content, a thorough examination of the festival's funding and its relation to programming over the years was beyond the scope of this study, which focuses chiefly on genre discourse. My findings from a separate study relating to the Mariposa Folk Festival (Tsai 2009) suggest, for example, that its multi-ethnic programming initiatives arose independently of government funding concerns. While the history of the Winnipeg Folk Festival's own funding-programming relationship obviously did not develop synchronically with Mariposa's, one can assume it is an equally nuanced relationship, and best reserved for a separate study.

5. In subsequent years, the event has taken place in July.

6. This figure varies in the media coverage of that time, but retrospective coverage in the 1990s (such as Ostick 1993b) report the figure more consistently as \$140 000.

7. In fact, the Canada-U.S. border crossing in Emerson, Manitoba reportedly experiences its busiest northbound traffic flow of the year during the weekend of the Winnipeg Folk Festival (Everett-Green 2005).

8. Throughout this paper, my use of the singular term "artist" may also include a *group* of musicians listed under a single name in folk festival programs. Therefore,

the figure of "46 artists" in Appendix A would be higher if one were to account for individual musicians within each group.

9. Though the term "singer-songwriter" would be used regularly in later years to describe this type of performer, it does not yet appear in the 1974 program.

10. Page numbers were not available in this program.

11. Fubuki Daiko performed at the Winnipeg Folk Festival in 1999.

12. Punjabi by Nature performed at the Winnipeg Folk Festival in 1996.

13. The Bisserov Sisters performed at the Winnipeg Folk Festival in 1997.

14. The transnational and/or multi-ethnic character of groups such as Fubuki Daiko and Punjabi by Nature also illustrate Guilbault's concern of how older interpretive frameworks (such as structural homology) can be problematic in considerations of much world music (1997:36-37).

15. Ba Cissoko is a Guinean kora player (incorporating pop and rock elements into his music), and The Kawa Brass Band represents a brass-playing tradition which developed in India after the arrival of the British.

16. For a comparison to the musical diversity of other folk festivals see McManus (2005) for a useful overview of musical programming in the broader Canadian folk circuit.

17. A four-piece band known for its jazz-bluegrass fusions.

18. It should be noted that 2001 was Rick Fenton's first year as artistic director, and subsequent programs that he later curated indicate a different distribution of genres in the programming than what Phillips may have observed at this time.

19. String players (e.g., banjo, guitar, mandolin).

20. A notable exception to this is solo instrumentalists. As their repertoire is usually described as eclectic in performer bios, I have used this common trait as a basis to give them their own category.

21. These are referred to in Appendix B as singer-songwriters.

22. A handful of artist biographies in the 1974 program did not indicate the performers' countries of origin. The numerical figure of 27 is based only upon artists whose origins were explicitly stated or strongly alluded to.

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