



Into the Open Air: Reflections on the 2023 Central Ohio Folk Festival

By Michelle Hughes

If you were to say that I am a betting woman — well, you'd be right. And one bet that I would take every time is that while there were so many shared experiences during the 2023 Folk Music Festival, there isn't a single person's experience at the Festival that was the exact same as another's. There were so many different and incredible ways for attendees to experience the Festival — concerts, workshops, jam sessions, and even volunteering!

However, one of the most important and impactful shared experiences that every single attendee had was walking up to the festival — while there was yellow tape at the front boundary to indicate where the Festival began and ended, the pathway into the Festival itself was wide open and the first faces you saw as you approached were volunteers who were just so happy you came to enjoy what they love so much — music and community. There were no barriers to entry, to

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Music fosters intelligence. It stimulates the brain to grow. Math and music are linked, and we want our son to get that stimulation as early in life as possible.

-2023 Festival Attendee

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Innovative Kansas City Bluegrass band, The Matchsellers, at Reeb Center June 28

INTERVIEW BY PETE INSABELLA

Always willing to push the boundaries of a bluegrass show and wanting folks to have a nice experience, the Midwest's own Matchsellers will perform at Reeb Center, June 28 at 6 pm.

Pete Insabella: The Matchsellers are known as one of the most creative Bluegrass groups to emerge from the Midwest in recent years. How much of your music is your own original compositions and how much is traditional Bluegrass?

Andrew Morris: I think folks really started talking about our creativity when we did our outer-space bluegrass opera "Bluegrastronauts" in 2018. That was a fun time where we dressed up as space rangers from the future and told a wacky story in between songs. Since then, I did a sci-fi electronic banjo album called "One Fine, Sweet & Sunny Day" with a companion dystopian podcast in 2020. For our latest project "The Wishful Thinkers' Hall of Fame," I wrote a play that we performed with the album.

We're always looking to push the boundaries of what a bluegrass show can be. We use some elements from cabaret, schtick, stand-up, etc., in our performances. We really just want folks to have a nice experience. Our shows mainly consist of our own material, but we do often throw in some of our favorite folk and bluegrass classics or some hidden musical gems.



Photo Courtesy of Martin Farrell Jr.

Pete: How did you meet Julie Bates, your vocal partner? How long have you been together?

Andrew: Julie and I met in Germany in 2012. She's from Kansas City and I'm from Indiana. We both got Fulbright scholarships to teach English and wound up in the same city. We met and started playing music on the streets of Leipzig, Germany. It's amazing that we had to go all the way to Germany to find each other and start the band!

Pete: How much touring have you done so far? Have your tours brought you to any interesting places?

Andrew: We toured full time from 2013 until the pandemic in 2020. We were living out of our car for about 5 of those years, sleeping on couches, all that stuff. It was a

lot of work, but we got to perform in almost every state in the US and several countries in Europe. We were very fortunate to get to play some really prestigious spots like the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, TN, the Birthplace of Country Music in Bristol, VA, the Fiske Planetarium in Boulder, CO and Mountain Stage in Charleston, WV. But don't let those places fool you. We've also played in dirty punk rock basements, dive bars and at a bizarre hot spring in Utah, where a deadhead diverted water from this hot spring into bathtubs he set out on the side of a hill. Wild.

Pete: What are your reflections on the life of a working musician these days? If you had it all to do over, would you make the same choices?

Andrew: Doing music full-time is tough. I think most people have to either tour a lot or do multiple things to make ends meet. I picked up side-work repairing instruments pre-pandemic and now both Julie and I work for a violin shop in Kansas City when we're not on the road. I also teach banjo. I think you really have to want to do music to make it work. It's a very difficult career path and it takes a lot of sacrifice to make it work. Often playing music isn't the only thing you wind up doing. You wind up teaching, booking, doing promotion, etc. But I feel there are some people who don't have a choice. I feel that no matter what, some people just have to do it.

I'm very glad that I have had the opportunity to play music. I don't really regret anything. Of course, I wish maybe I had made a few different business decisions, but I got to see the world,

practice my craft and meet some amazing people. For me, making music for people has always been and still is a true joy that I'm so thankful for.

Pete: Where and how does Bluegrass figure in today's music scene? Where would you place it in the folk music hierarchy?

Andrew: I got into Bluegrass from the outside. And now that I'm pretty deep in it, I think Bluegrass means different things to different people. Some people who are not really familiar with the genre assume any kind of folk/acoustic thing is Bluegrass. Whereas people who are steeped in the tradition, feel that you have to have the proper instrumentation, stylistic choices and know some of the canonical repertoire (Flatt & Scruggs, Bill Monroe, Stanley Brothers, etc). I think this more traditional kind of Bluegrass is a really special thing. Bluegrass informed a lot of early Rock and Roll. For example, Elvis Presley recorded "Blue Moon of Kentucky" early on, which is a song by the so-called "Father of Bluegrass" Bill Monroe. And then there's Jerry Garcia who loved Bluegrass and played banjo in an important band called "Old and in the Way". Bluegrass is loved by conservative country folk and liberal hippie types. They may not be able to agree on anything, but they can both generally agree on Earl Scruggs. It's a really interesting idiosyncratic American music.

I love Bluegrass, but I also love Cajun, Gospel, Old-time, Honky-tonk, Blues, Ballads, etc. I don't think any kind of folk music is better than any other. I love it all, except the bad stuff!

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access to knowledge and art, to opportunities to express yourself artistically in a space made for sharing. Donations were welcome, but never required — the responsibility falling as it should; those who can, do, and those who can't, we got you.

My colleagues — Bill Cohen and Katy Oberle — have shared their own unique takes on the Festival. I hope you'll take a look at them and be able to go back for a moment to the meadow at Highbanks Park, sunshine or rain, music and laughter all around.

As for myself, I think Scottish singer Julie Fowlis said it best in her song "Into the Open Air" — what we've just tasted, we somehow still miss. I'm looking forward to 2024.

Bill Cohen:

There were 30 educational workshops on a huge variety of topics which attracted dozens of people. One example includes the tin whistle workshop — nearly 20 people showed up to get some tips on the small, but mighty instrument. As one woman put it — "You cannot be sad and play the tin whistle. It's just like ice cream. It makes you happy."



On the main stage, The Pairs, a group made up of the three Coughlin sisters from Canada backed by two instrumentalists, belted out super-tight angelic-sounding 3-part vocal harmonies that rang through the air. They were delighted by just how much their audience was joining in with their "progressive folk" songs. "Holy hell!" exclaimed Noelle playfully, "you sing and clap along!"

From the showcase stage, Affrilachian storyteller Lynn Ford told of childhood pranks she did with other kids. Once being dared by others to throw things at passing cars, she threw a head of lettuce into the open window of what turned out to be a police car. "Whenever our parents asked us if we had done something wrong, we never said yes, we never said no. We said — 'it's a possibility.'"

At the always popular instrument petting zoo, a young couple had their son, just shy of two years old, pick up and touch several instruments. Asked why, the father said: "Music fosters intelligence. It stimulates the brain to grow. Math and music are

linked, and we want our son to get that stimulation as early in life as possible." Sunday began with rain, and at first, it seemed like the whole day would be a washout with almost nobody attending the festival. However, just after noon, some of the clouds parted and the sun shone through. Folk music lovers began trickling in, and by mid-afternoon, there were hundreds.

Symbolic of the miraculous turnaround, singer/songwriter Heather Pierson and husband/bassist Shawn Nadeau began their 11 am Main Stage concert with only about five people in the audience, but by the end, they had 30. They blew away the crowd with variety — a complex instrumental version of the Beatles' Norwegian Wood, a jazzy upbeat version of "When You're Smilin,'" and a beautiful melodic song they taught the audience, "Take the Time to Show Your Love."



As the 2-day festival drew to a close, many volunteers began folding up chairs, stages, tables, and signs while two distinctly different types of folk music played out. At one end of the festival site, more than 80 people, adults and children alike, joined a drum circle, pounding on all kinds of

percussion instruments to a mesmerizing beat. Meanwhile, at the other end of the festival site, a crowd at a song circle, harmonized to classic folks songs, including an especially appropriate one to wrap up the festival – Peter Paul and Mary's "Day is Done."



Katy Oberle:

The rain didn't slow down the music or workshops on Sunday. In fact, the sun started peeking through the clouds around 12:30 and stayed out all afternoon! From the food trucks to the beer tent, there was no shortage of refreshments for attendees. And also no shortage of activities! Multiple stages of music, workshop tents, and a children's instrument tent were in full swing on Sunday.

Additionally, at the Festival tent were local artisans selling their wares, Folk Festival merch for sale, and CDs and merch from Festival performers available for purchase. The forested landscape of Highbanks Park served as a fitting backdrop to this grassroots festival celebrating singer-songwriters, bluegrass, folk, and Americana music. You could head in any direction on the festival grounds and hear beautiful tunes being played and see beautiful people enjoying the community of this very special yearly event.

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Pete: How much has Bluegrass changed from the days when the Carter Family was performing?

Andrew: The Carter Family was a foundational rock for the Bluegrass that followed. The Carter Family's oeuvre is quite diverse. It reflected the broader music of the 1920s & 30s. They do some Blues, Murder Ballads, Gospel, Waltzes, etc. Back then, the music reflected the Americans of that time. The music focused on more pre-modern themes like religion, agriculture, death and the mentality of the day. Today a lot of those themes still exist in Bluegrass, but there are also songs about modern topics such as Motorcycles, Modern Politics, and I even wrote one about some Tator Tot Nachos at a favorite Kansas City restaurant called "The Hot Mess". Nowadays, the genre reflects the broader musical taste of our time. You have bands like Gangstagrass mixing hip-hop, Billy Strings jamming extended solos and all the people coming out of Berklee mixing classical elements in. There are threads that keep the current music connected with the past, but it also has changed with the times. That's part of why I love it.

Mid-April Bluegrass Concert Successful!

by Bill Cohen

A rare mid-month CFMS concert April 14 was, as usual, wildly entertaining, as the bluegrass group Wrygrass performed toe-tapping upbeat songs and poignant ballads. But some other aspects of the program were also positive in other ways.

First, the concert was staged at the Reeb Center, a neighborhood social services hub in a low-income area on Columbus' Southside. Second, the audience of more than 50 was a mix of neighborhood residents who've never attended CFMS events and longtime "regulars" who often attend CFMS concerts in our "home base" in Clintonville on the North side.

Third, this concert highlighted the intersection of folk music, culture, and history. Bandleader Brent Davis began the evening by stressing to the audience the link between the appearance of bluegrass music in Columbus and the migration decades ago of Appalachian people from Kentucky and West Virginia northward to Ohio. He localized the link even more by noting that close to the Reeb Center, along nearby Parsons Avenue, businesses and restaurants featuring live bluegrass performers and informal jams have been standout destinations for people seeking entertainment and musical joy.

This concert is part of a renewed effort by CFMS to spread the joy of folk music even further throughout our community. New CFMS board member Marian Harris is heading up the drive to augment our traditional end-of-the-month concerts in Clintonville with other events in new venues and at other times of the month. She's already working on scheduling even more special "outreach" concerts.





Welcome NEW Members

Welcome all New Members and Returning Members! Watch for details in the September newsletter.



Save the Date!

CFMS Annual Meeting

Sat, June 3. Details to follow in an e-mail to CFMS members.

Americana/Folk Concert Series

The Matchsellers

Wednesday, June 28, 5:30 - 6pm
Refreshments / 6 - 7:30pm Concert

Free-will Donation. This concert is part of the CFMS' Americana/Folk Concert Series. The concert features the talented bluegrass band, *The Matchsellers*, from Kansas City, MO.

Venue: Reeb Center, 280 E Reeb Ave.

Zoom Jam Sessions

Offered to nursing homes Thursdays 10am -12 noon. If you wish to participate, please contact Jane at:

vanaukj@gmail.com

In-Person Jams

Mondays 6-8pm at 4th Ave Christian Church, 296 W. 4th Ave.

Saturdays 9:30-11:30am, outdoors, Whetstone Community Center, at the large picnic shelter past the library or by the playground behind the Community Center.

NEWSLETTER TEAM

Editor (interim): Diane Boston

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Newsletter on Summer Break

The labor of love that is the Central Ohio Folk Festival is such an intensive project for many on CFMS staff, the newsletter will be taking a BRIEF hiatus for the rest of the summer. Look for our return with the September issue!

Yet Music Still in the Air!

There will be in-person jamming opportunities throughout the summer. These informal get-togethers for the sheer joy of playing and singing occur in "judgement free zones" and are great for building new skills or sharing well-honed musical abilities. CFMS will also have a couple of summer pot-luck picnics, one in July and one in August, that typically include music jam sessions. They are not scheduled but notices will come out via the CFMS e-list which is open to members and non-members who request to be included.

To be certain you don't miss any fun musical get-togethers, check out the [CFMS website events page](#). There you will find monthly jamming calendars and the latest information about planned concerts. Watch for details on the John Prine Tribute Fundraising concert planned for Sunday Sept 17 at 1pm at Nocterra Brewing.

Plus, more information about CFMS, how to join and even purchase merchandise for gifts or for yourself can be found on the website.



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General Age Range – Born: 1930s-40s 1950s-60s 1970s-80s 1990s-2010s

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We are also a growing, vibrant community of volunteers; the awesome force behind our work! Please at least 1 box.

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MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS ARE DUE ANNUALLY ON DECEMBER 31. one of the membership levels listed below.

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