

THE BIRTH OF NEW FOLK COMPETITIONS AT KERRVILLE

(Part 1 in a series by Rod Kennedy on the History of New Folk)

By December of 1971, the Kerrville Folk Festival's first line up for June 1-2-3 of 1972 was complete. I received a phone call from Newport producer George Wein asking me to tour with Peter Yarrow as his tour manager to three or four Texas cities. The tour was to promote his first solo album for Warner Bros. following the break up of Peter Paul and Mary in 1970. My meeting Peter Yarrow would change my life and the life of many others. The many hours of traveling by car together in my new Buick Riviera were filled with long conversations about our respective careers, and we quickly became friends.

One of the things that happened on that tour was that after every one of Peter's concerts a handful of young writers would show up at the stage door to ask Peter to listen to their songs. He always took the time to listen and to encourage them. Later on the road, Peter learned that I would be producing the first festival at Kerrville in 7 months and he asked to be added to the roster.

Our conversations turned repeatedly to the plight of the unknown songwriters, none of whom had any music industry connections. Peter asked me if my new festival had any opportunity for unknown songwriters like those we had met on our tour. I told him we had no planned mechanism for this, and Peter described his New Folks Concerts that he had started at the Newport Festival. Then he asked if I could provide that kind of opportunity at Kerrville.

He said, "Simply put a story in the newspapers on your publicity list and the writers will come". I asked him if we should charge them to get in, and he said, "That's up to you", and I responded, "I don't think we should." At that point Peter offered to come to the festival as a performing artist and to help host the concerts.

It was too late to add Peter to the posters that were already printed, but immediately following the release of our New Folk story, the responses started coming in and I had two dozen writers who were totally new to us. Included in that first year's crop were Bobby Bridger (who we later learned already had 2 LPs on RCA), The Flatlanders (Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Butch Hancock, and Joe Ely, who were picked to play on a main stage spot at the Municipal Auditorium), Bill Oliver and Kurt Van Sickle.

Peter and I were joined in hosting by Carolyn Hester and Allen Damron while the spectators sat on hay bales surrounding the small stage at the first Texas State Arts and Crafts Fair on the Schreiner College campus.

Peter's loving spirit began to pervade the festival and really planted the seeds for the ambience that became the festival's trademark. The three days of main stage performances, the New Folk competition and the Folk Mass celebration

filled the hearts of 2800 ticket buyers and the pages of three major metropolitan dailies with the pure joy of the first Folk Festival.

The response to the first festival created the opportunity to expand the festival to five days, May 24-28, and increased the ranks of main stage artists from 12 to 21 including 10 of the first year's stars, among them Peter Yarrow, Allen Damron, Carolyn Hester, Michael Murphey, Mance Lipscomb (who because of illness was replaced by Bobby Bridger), Bill and Bonnie Hearne, and Kenneth Threadgill. Among the newcomers in 1973 were Willie Nelson, B.W. Stevenson, Townes Van Zandt and Jerry Jeff Walker as well as barrel house pianist Robert Shaw. The New Folk entries totaled 54 and included Courtney Campbell, Bill Oliver and "Plum Nelly", a duo of Jerry Jo Jones and Bill Stoner, which in later years, expanded to four artists. Again Peter was the reassuring and loving host of the concerts and rekindled the same ambience for the 5600 fans attending the five days of the 1973 event.

By 1974, the festival went outdoors on the newly acquired and constructed outdoor theatre of our own Quiet Valley Ranch, where our third festival repeated the five day format with a roster expanded to 25 artists including Asleep at the Wheel in their first outdoor concert, Ray Wylie Hubbard (who had appeared as a member of Texas Fever in 1972 and who was now a headliner), "Orange Blossom Special" originator Chubby Wise, and Ewing Street Times (Shake Russell, John Vandiver and Michael Mashkes) who had built a following at the first two Kerrville festivals.

With the realization that the songwriters were becoming the key ingredient of the festival, including those in the New Folk competition (especially those who graduated to the main stage like Bobby Bridger, Denim, George Ensle, Vince Bell, and Lucinda Williams), I began to take the responsibility for showcasing original songwriters even more seriously.

New Folk competition had become the heart of the festival, and songwriters dominated the onstage rosters. Even bluegrass bands, gospel groups and blues artists had to be original songwriters to play the festival. Original Kerrville artists like Allen Damron, Carolyn Hester, Bill and Bonnie Hearne, and Kenneth Threadgill began to try their hands at becoming writers. By 1974 the number of entries in New Folk had increased to 57 and we began to closely audition entries and to include only the best 32 according to the producer's standards.

By 1975, we formalized our dedication to emerging songwriters by chartering our non-profit Kerrville Music Foundation. We had suspected that as the years passed we would be inundated with requests for artists who wanted to play the festival, and the foundation would provide a fair system to help us in discovering really worthwhile but unknown writers. With rules and a reward system in place, we would be able to effectively serve more artists and provide our audiences with newcomers selected from the best. And so, we instituted a modest cash reward for six finalists to at least reimburse them for some of their travel expenses. We

also selected annually three paid, qualified touring and recording artists to judge and select the six award winners from the 32 finalists. Many of these finalists would find their way to the main stage and become featured artists in future years.

By 1975, our award-winners would include artists who became well known regional or national artists like Tom Russell, Shane and Kitty Appling, David Ruthstrom, Mark David McKinnon (who later became press secretary to Governor and then President George Bush) and Bill Haymes.

Our main stage artists in 1975 included Guy Clark, Billy Jo Shaver, Oklahoma's Bluegrass Revue (which included Vince Gill on guitar), Augie Meyers, and Red River Dave (who wrote "The Ballad of Amelia Earhart") and Allen Fontenot's Cajun Band from Louisiana. That rain-soaked festival drew only about 3700 fans over the five days. While the festival faced severe losses, the catastrophe brought fans, volunteers, and performers closer together than ever.

The first benefit for the rain damaged festival featuring Peter Yarrow and 18 other performers took place June 14-15, trimming the losses by half and solidifying the spiritual optimism that would keep the festival going for decades.

By March 10, 1976, I had moved my home and offices to the ranch, closing my Austin offices but continuing 40 selected events with Sol Hurok and others including the only Texas performance of the touring Israel Philharmonic Orchestra which sold out at Austin's Municipal Auditorium.

The 1976 festival marked our fifth anniversary at Kerrville and welcomed a number of the original 1972 performers plus composer-conductor David Amram, Bill Stains, Gary P. Nunn, Patsy Montana, former New Folk Mark David McKinnon and Bill Haymes, Mike Williams, Milton Carroll, Harmonica Frank, Guy Clark and his bass player Steve Earle (who was also a New Folk finalist), St. Elmo's Fire, and celebrity visitor Hondo Crouch, the legendary mayor of Luckenbach.

As the years passed, the New Folk rules were refined and carefully spelled out targeting excellence and fairness so that the songwriters' competition would not become another "talent show". By now, the New Folk winners had become widely celebrated and the number of annual entries to be screened ran from 500-800 writers. The number of finalists was trimmed to 32 to allow a less hurried competition with 16 writers per day of the 2- day event. The time clock for each finalist became less of an issue and the pace was more conducive to comfort and efficiency for both the writers and the judges.

To this day, the New Folk competition at Kerrville remains among the most honored and respected events of its type in the world having assisted hundreds of writers with recognition, self assurance and networking at a time in their young careers when they are most vulnerable. Among the perks for qualifying entries are scholarships for the Foundation's Songwriting School, a rich networking

experience with their peers, complimentary admission to many days of the festival, the chance to win the title and financial assistance for being a Kerrville New Folk Award Winner.

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