



The Mariposa Folk Festival: A History. By Michael Hill.

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There is a growing awareness of the long-term impact of folk festivals on the North American musical landscape. We are seeing more histories of festivals published in various formats, including commemorative publications, book-length journalistic accounts, and scholarly analyses.¹ With the arrival of Michael Hill's *The Mariposa Folk Festival: A History*, this culturally significant festival now has representation in all of these categories.

This work is a synthesis of pre-existing research and Hill's own venture into the Mariposa Folk Festival (MFF)

archives, combined with his experience as the MFF's artistic director. In his acknowledgements, Hill graciously gives a nod to two MFF-related histories that preceded his own—namely Debra Sharp's 1977 account and my own 2013 Ph.D. dissertation.² Knowing that these were two of Hill's chief resources (ones which contrast each other in tone, format, depth, and time period of publication), I proceeded to read with an eye on how the author balanced nostalgia with fact-based writing, and deduce his potential target audience.

Most discussions of folk festivals, whether aimed at an academic or general readership, proceed by acknowledging the history and definition of "folk," and its blurring of boundaries with mainstream music. Hill's work is no exception, as he devotes his short introduction to this topic. The subsequent chapters proceed chronologically, covering the various locations in which the MFF was staged. Hill discusses the event's genesis in 1960s Orillia, highlighting its key organizers, Canadian programming, financial difficulties, and the 1963 rioting (itself the result



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1. See, for example, Rick Massimo, *I Got A Song: A History of the Newport Folk Festival* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017); Sija Tsai, "Public Policy and the Mariposa Folk Festival: Shared Ideals in the 1960s and 1970s," *Musicultures* 38 (2011): 147-58; and Ronald Cohen, *A History of Folk Music Festivals in the United States: Feasts of Musical Celebration* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008).

2. Debra Sharp, "Mariposa: How Times Have Changed," in *For What Time I Am in This World: Stories From Mariposa*, ed. Bill Usher and Linda Page-Harpa (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates Ltd., 1977); Sija Tsai, "Mariposa Folk Festival: The Sounds, Sights and Costs of a Fifty-Year Road Trip" (Ph.D. dissertation, York University, 2013).

of record-number attendees). He does an admirable job of seeking out media references for this period. Proceeding to the Innis Lake and Toronto Islands periods (1965-67 and 1968-79, respectively), he acknowledges the influence of Estelle Klein, whose model for daytime programming was later adopted by festivals across North America. Nevertheless, Hill presents a somewhat oversimplified view of her process, stating, “It was her idea not only to present concerts but also to conduct what she called workshops” (p. 23). Klein was in fact innovating upon an idea she borrowed from the Newport Folk Festival. In fairness, however, Hill does cover an aspect of Klein’s career that has not been mentioned elsewhere: namely her relationship with Vivienne Muhling, who mentored her in the music business.

Although the MFF is best remembered for its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, the subsequent decades are equally fascinating. The MFF struggled financially throughout the 1980s and 90s. It changed locations frequently, with its longest stay being a difficult seven-year stint at Molson Park (1984-1990). Hill outlines the administrative trials faced by the event throughout this period, citing media coverage, interviews and program books. In particular, he highlights the vigorous work of volunteers and board members (notably Lynne Hurry) to keep the festival afloat throughout difficult times.

At the turn of the millennium, the Mariposa Folk Festival was returned to its home city of Orillia and six years later Hill began leading its artistic committee. With his experience as the festival’s organizer, he is able to provide personal observations about the festival’s relationship with the city of Orillia, and offer humorous anecdotes about his interactions with performers. Through his perspective, readers can begin to see Mariposa as a contemporary event rather than a 1970s hippie gathering.

There are subtle changes to the writing style throughout the book. Some sections offer a flowing narrative, while others delve into administrative minutiae, such as the extensive listing of Molson Park sponsors (page 108), or the activities of the foundation’s subcommittees (page 136). When Hill himself enters the festival’s history as artistic director, the narrative becomes more anecdotal and entertaining.

The benefit of a festival organizer writing this book is their ability to elucidate aspects of the planning process that many journalists and academics will never experience firsthand. However, Hill does not shy away from the nostalgic aspects of Mariposa either. For example, in his coverage of the 1970 gatecrashing incident (already mythologized in journalistic accounts), he states that “As many as fifteen hundred quasi-anarchists decided to storm the barricades at Mariposa that weekend” (p. 62), while the actual number may have been as few as two dozen.³

3. While Sharp (1977: 196) provided the figure of 1,500, it has been shown to have been greatly exaggerated (see Tsai, 2013: 196).

Though some scholars may be dissatisfied with the occasional inaccuracies, overall, this book provides a well-rounded and in-depth discussion of the MFF's fifty-six-year history. Readers will come away with a better understanding of the live music industry in Canada, and the latter chapters may serve as a useful resource for aspiring arts administrators. Joining the existing histories of Mariposa, Hill's book contributes perhaps the most detailed account to date of the festival in the 1990s and 2000s. And while general readers might find it hard to square the flowing nostalgic passages of one section with the exhaustive administrative details of another, there is one group that will undoubtedly appreciate both: the dozens (or hundreds) of volunteers and committee members who have remained loyal to this festival throughout the last few decades. This book is very much an ode to their efforts.

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