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Festival Celebrates 20 Years

By Kevin Adler

In an age when corporate sponsorship seems to have overtaken music festivals, sporting events and even the clothes we wear, the Takoma Park Folk Festival stands out from the pack — just like its hometown. The Takoma Park Folk Festival continues to be an event by and for the community of Takoma Park, and its all-volunteer organizing committee and performers maintain the legacy of founder Sammie Abbott.



"I remember Sammy calling several of us over to his house for a meeting," says Saul Schniderman, one of the seminal organizers of the festival and still a Takoma Park resident. "He said, 'We've got to save the Takoma Theatre, and here's how we're going to do it.' Sam just had the will and energy to make things happen." That first year, 1978, a one-stage festival was held at Takoma Park Middle School, and it raised about \$1,100 to help keep the theater out of the hands of a developer. Since that time, the festival has grown in size and stature, but it's remained true to its roots as a celebration by and for Takoma Park citizens: The Festival for the Folk of Takoma Park.

Ad Hoc Roots

"We put on that first festival only six weeks after the day Sam Abbott held that first meeting," says Dave Sawyer, who helped coordinate the first nine festivals. Sawyer and Schniderman were part of the group Folkworks that performed during the early years. "It's hard to imagine those first few years, but we had nothing. It was just a bunch of people who came together and put on this event," says Schniderman. They include highly dedicated people like Paul Plant and Sara Green who worked for years on festival food. "After the festival, we'd pay all our bills and repay people who'd put out money from their own pockets. We'd donate the proceeds to the community beneficiaries. That's all there was to it."



Sam Abbott

Sam Abbott was the driving force. A graphic designer by trade, he created the first (and still beloved) folk festival logo that highlights the wooded image of Takoma Park he loved to project as a community activist and mayor. Abbott used to love to tell people — true or not — that Takoma Park has the largest stand of hardwoods east of the Rocky Mountains. Another key link right from the start was Lee Jordan, "a superhero and saint of the neighborhood," recalls Schniderman. Jordan was a janitor at Blair High School who made it his life's work to help kids through the Takoma Park Boys' Club (later expanded to the Boys' and Girls' Club). Jordan suggested using the recreation field at Takoma Park Middle School for that first festival. Today, that spot is known as the Field

Stage for the Folk Festival — and was designated Lee Jordan Field a few years ago by the city council.

No one knew it at the time, but the school turned out to be "an ideal site because of its nooks and crannies," says Kathie Mack, festival co-chair for the past few years. Sound doesn't travel too far out of each nook, enabling the placement of so many stages in close proximity and gives the festival its intimate feeling. For that first festival, only the Field Stage mattered, and Jordan's Boys' Club volunteered as the clean-up crew, a role they held for many years. "Having the energy of those teenagers those years was wonderful," says Sawyer.

By the second year of the festival, Jordan and Abbott targeted festival fund-raising for the Boys' & Girls' Club and other community groups. "We would raise maybe \$500 for each group in those years," says Schniderman. "That's a whole lot of money for a youth group. It wasn't charity, it was really sweat equity."

First Years

The first festival, in 1978, was a one-stage affair that drew an eclectic mix of local musicians, including, Celtic Thunder; the Takoma Mandoliers; a dixieland jazz band called the Shieks of Dixie; Rumisonko, an Andean folk band; and labor songs from



Folkworks. There was a sense even early on that the festival could be a perennial. "Sam Abbott put 'First Annual' on that program," says Sawyer. "At that point, we were committed to doing another event." "It was a very exciting time," says Lenore Robinson, who joined the planning of the first festival with her husband Larry. "The Folklore Society of Greater Washington had started the Washington Folk Festival at Glen Echo just one year before we did, and there was this growth in interest in folk music and folk dancing." Together, Lenore and Larry Robinson became integral parts of the festival. Larry has performed a wide range of music (swing, contra, Israeli, Scandinavian) at the festivals, and Lenore initiated the international folk dancing exhibitions in 1979 and has remained active in the festival since that time. For the past few years, she has been the co-chairperson of the event with Kathie Mack.

As the festival became known as an annual event, more of Takoma Park's music- and art-lovers joined in the fun. For the second year, a second stage was added to accommodate the many musicians willing to volunteer their time and talents. By the fourth year, yet another stage was added, and the crafts show was in full swing. Members of Takoma Park's singer/songwriter community also joined in encouraging other members of the singer/songwriter set to perform, and so the Grove Stage was developed by Abby Bardi and others to highlight acoustic music.

Children's programming, now a staple of the event, was also the "cause" of one dedicated volunteer, Fran Tall. While enjoying the festival in 1984 just after she moved to Takoma Park, she wondered if there was enough performance that appealed to children. Attending an organizational meeting for the next festival, she mentioned her concern — "so they put me in charge of children's programming," she recalls. With a series of phone calls, Tall located some potential performers, and then quickly realized that she had more performers than her allotted time on the Grove Stage. "I went to the site and saw an open space with trees as an overhang and backdrop," she says. "I decided to use that open space and call it the Grassy Nook."

The rapid growth of those first few years left formal organizational planning far behind. Schniderman recalls that the group had no insurance, nor any written protection for liability of any kind. In fact, the festival wasn't formally

incorporated until 1982, and it took the wife/husband team of Nancy Chisolm and Ed Murphy well into the 1980s to bring much of the house in order, says Kathie Mack.

During that first decade, Sawyer maintained a left-wing presence at the festival, performing union songs and arranging for like-minded performers. Sawyer, still a musician in the Baltimore area, also saw how the festival fostered relationships across Takoma Park's many communities. "Takoma Park in the late 1970s was having its growing pains," he recalls. "It needed events to unite it — events that could bring people together regardless of income, ideology, or anything else."

"Many people brought things to the table for the folk festival," says Sawyer. "The only question was how large of a table could we build." The festival even helped spawn other events, such as the Sisterfire Festival that began in the mid-1980s. Sisterfire used the Takoma Park Middle School its first two years, emulating the atmosphere of the folk festival, says Sawyer. The Old Town Business Festival hired Sawyer as coordinator/liaison for its first four years, as it blossomed into a town favorite.



Rejuvenation a Decade Ago

By the late 1980s, the festival's founders were seeking new people to carry the load. "I jumped at the opportunity," says Larry Rubin, now a city council member. "I'd been going to the festival for 10 years, and I've been involved in folk music all my life." "There was a sense of a passing of the torch," says Terry Mulligan, who joined the festival in 1989 as part of that second wave. "The founders wanted us to carry on, and they encouraged us to be innovative." Mulligan, the wife-husband team of Tall and Rubin, and others pressed the boundaries of festival performance. "I wanted to get outside the 'old school' of folk musicians," said Mulligan. "I'd call some of the acts we got in those years as the bad boys of folk — groups with more of an attitude."

Performers such as the Pheremones, Rest Area/Big Village, Blue Shift ("wonderfully chaotic," Mulligan recalls), and the Keating Five volunteered their talents. Louder, heavily electric sounds became the mainstay of the Field Stage. Poetry readings and short theater skits were offered. The new chairpersons also built upon the festival's strengths. Rubin asked about the pre-festival dance, an occasional event held the night before the festival as a fundraiser. As usual, the person who asked about something became its organizer. "The festival really pulls you in," he laughs. "It's a magnificent way of bringing together Takoma Park in all its diversity to share a day in the sun." The Abbott Stage (named in honor of Sam Abbott) was also developed during those years by Rubin as an indoor stage.

Return to Roots

By the mid-1990s, many of the second-wavers were finishing their run in charge. In came a new set of programmers who favored more traditional folk music, and who pressed to get away from electrified sounds on the Field Stage and heavy doses of political activism on the other stages. "Political sensitivities may have overtaken musical excellence at times," says Schniderman. "This makes some sense for Takoma Park, but you can see why there's been a return to traditional folk, too."

"This is a folk festival," says David Eisner, owner of the House of Musicial Traditions and a program coordinator for the past few years. "People expect to see folk music, and that's what we are giving them." But innovations continue. The sound quality at the stages has improved, as professional recording equipment has replaced some less-than-stellar sound systems. Emcees at each

stage now include local folk music radio personalities. The presence of performers representing other countries and cultures is on the rise. "The only thing we can't do is add another stage," laughs Mack. "There just isn't room."

In these past few years, the festival has been able to expand its accessibility to the handicapped and support as many as 10 beneficiary groups in some years. The crafts show has overtaken the entire middle school basketball court, and now it's bursting at the seams. The spring Jazz Fest, held the past two years, has been started by long-time festival volunteer Dave Lorenz as an outgrowth of Takoma Park citizens' demonstrated love for music. It just seems as if the festival has a limitless impact on the community.

Finally, having the festival at Takoma Park Middle School once more is special to the coordinators because it has been the site of the festival from the start. Indeed, one year the festival's proceeds were donated to a parents' group fighting to keep the school open. That fight was successful, as the middle school was turned into a magnet school—so the festival organizers were able to express their appreciation to the school's principal for her years of support. Now the the 1997 festival has arrived. It probably won't outdraw Pete Seeger's 1986 performance. It may not have a performer as colorful as Root Boy Slim (seen in 1982). But it's a wonderful mix of long-time performers — some returning for their sixth, seventh or even tenth appearance — and exciting new acts. "The festival is a great way to enjoy the community aspects of Takoma Park, as well as to see your neighbors in a whole new light — as performers, artists, volunteers and politicians," says Eisner. Indeed, whether it's city council members cooking the festival's famous veggie-burgers, the Cub Scouts operating children's games, community groups distributing informational literature, or plain-old music enjoyment — well, there's nothing else like it.

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