

These workshops involve three or four bands coming together on stage and sharing their songs with each other. One band is chosen as an emcee for the workshop, offering a chance to explain to the audience that the session they're about to watch is probably the first time these bands are meeting. The bands then take turns playing their original songs, and the other bands will join in with harmonies and instruments where they see fit.

Evan Wesley Acheson, singer for local band Boreal Sons, describes these collaborations as some of the most exciting moments of playing the festival. His band played with the likes of Great Lake Swimmers, Andy Shauf, Mo Kenney, and The Provincial Archive during these workshop sessions in 2014.

"It becomes this creative, spontaneous thing," says Acheson. "They sang beautiful harmonies on some of our songs and brought out a totally different sound to what we had. It's neat when you can put different artists together and create a musical Frankenstein monster." Acheson has

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- MATT OLAH

When you hear "folk festival,"

it's common to envision bearded men picking at banjos while belting out blue grass as fans sit on tarps making dandelion necklaces. At first thought, folk may not be the genre for everyone—but the Calgary Folk Music Festival has been dispelling preconceived notions of what folk music is for decades. More than just bands on a stage—this isn't your daddy's festival anymore. This July will mark the 36th anniversary of what many will call the "Folk Fest," and if you haven't attended in recent years, what you find may surprise you.

Artistic director Kerry Clarke travels yearly to find bands to fill the 75 spots open on the bill, opting for an eclectic mix of genres. From hip hop artists, to R&B crooners, to eerie Nordic chanting, there is something for everyone in the wide variety of musical artists. "When we say there is diversity and variety, people don't really realize what that means," Clarke says of first-time attendees. "They come in knowing a band or two, but they don't realize they'll leave loving a different band."

Collaboration is Key

It isn't just the music that keeps fans coming back year after year. The festival becomes a tradition for fans because it is truly an experience, not just a concert. The entire event is highly curated—from the choices of food offered, to the local artisans vending handmade goods, to bands collaborating in trademark performance workshops.

been attending Folk Fest for years, first as a fan, then a volunteer, and eventually as a performer. This unique perspective of the festival, combined with his experience playing festivals in Europe, affords him the intimate knowledge of what it is that makes the festival special. "There's something about the experience... it almost feels like a microcosm of Calgary," he explains.

"If you could reduce Calgary down to its essence—the people you see, the things you do, the combination of excitement and relaxation, great food, great people, for me, that's what makes it feel like home. There's nothing like it."

Summer Camp for Calgarians

The demographics for the event are vast, ranging from toddlers to seniors, and those from all walks of life. Kerry Clarke jokes that every year, you can expect to see "hip hoppers, to CEO's, to people in Birkenstocks." There are entire families laid out on blankets in front of the stage, enjoying picnics in the sun while they take in the music. The diverse lineups and family-friendly atmosphere ensure that anyone and everyone can have a wonderful time.

MORE THAN BEARDS BANDS BANJOS

words by Ashley Materi
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The Calgary Folk Music Festival has something for everyone, not just the patchouli-scented hippies or Big Rock-swigging hipsters.

With thousands of festival goers, around 70 bands, and almost 2,000 volunteers, you are bound to run into someone you know at Folk Fest. Matt Olah, marketing manager of the festival, describes it as a “summer camp for Calgarians.” There is a massive social component involved with the experience, and Olah attributes this as one of the reasons that people make attendance a tradition with their circle of friends. “You can spend the day in the beer garden and not see a single band, but see everyone you know in town,” he says.

Evan Wesley Acheson echoes this sentiment, and believes there is a lot of comradery that is involved amongst festival attendees. “People that you know are going [to the festival]. People that you have something in common with are going, whether that’s musically or not. It’s worth going just for that.”

Good Vibes

Folk Fest is in its golden years, which gives it both credibility and a solid fan base. It is a major event in the city, and has achieved the status of a well-known music festival in North America. However, it can be a challenge to express the positive, community-driven vibe of the festival to those who have never been, but have attended other “big box” music festivals.



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While these “big box” events are for profit, all of the money made at the folk festival goes directly toward funding the next and to Festival Hall—the year-round event centre, says Matt Olah. “We’re a community-based organization, we care about you coming back next year, and we care about your experience.”

“We’ve all been to festivals where you have to sit there for hours to see the big act because if you move, you lose your spot,” explains Kerry Clarke. “At our festival, you can get close to the stage—you can actually see your favourite artists.”

“If you haven’t experienced anything different, you don’t realize it can be more human-scale,” says Clarke. “It really isn’t just ‘put a bunch of people in a field and put some beer in their gullets and some music on a stage.’ We try to go deeper.”

Ashley Materi, born and raised Calgarian, is a freelancer, sushi addict and a word-connoisseur.

Running July 23 to 26th, don’t miss out on this year’s experience.

Check in on Calgary’s Folk Fest online for further details.

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