

## SERFA Keynote, 10/15/09, Mountain View, AR

I went to my first Folk Alliance Conference in Calgary, Alberta in 1992. The organization was a young one then, only a few years old, and being in Canada, there weren't many of us there from the southeast, but we went to the Regional meeting and talked about how we could organize the southeast. We continued to talk about it at subsequent Conferences until a few of us decided we'd try to do more than just talk about it, so we put together a planning meeting in Asheville, NC at Warren Wilson College where I work, to see what we could do to bring more folks from the region into the Folk Alliance, and maybe have our own conference. About 15 of us met that fall, including Executive Director Art Menius, Folk Alliance President Phyllis Barney, and a dear friend of us all, Mike Seeger, who passed away just a few months ago. Mike dedicated his life to traditional music and he was there to make sure it was well-represented in any Southeast Regional organization.

One of the results of that meeting was that we resolved to try to energize the region by hosting the Folk Alliance Annual Conference. At that time, the Conference site moved into a different region each year, and the Southeast's turn was coming up. Over the next few years we submitted bids on two separate occasions to host the Conference in Asheville, but were unsuccessful. It was at that point that I decided to take a step back from a leadership role in trying to organize the Southeast Region, though I did moderate (some would say referee) the Regional meetings at the Annual Conference for the next several years.

Most successful events, organizations, businesses and institutions begin with one or two committed individuals. Enter Kari Estrin, who picked up the SERFA torch once again, and made it happen. Now, she will be the first to start naming all the other people without whom none of this would have been possible, and certainly she had a lot of help, and certainly they deserve their props as well, but the fact remains that it was Kari's dogged determination and will to see it through that resulted in the first SERFA conference last year, and which brings us here today, and I would like to ask you to join me in thanking her.

Those of us who have been part of Folk Alliance since the early days have watched the organization shift from a core group of folk presenters, folk societies, and folk artists and enthusiasts to more of a professional organization dominated by those of us who make our livings from this music. Traditional and roots music has been less well represented as the ranks of singer/songwriters and Americana artists have grown. In recent years there has been a laudable attempt by Folk Alliance to bring traditional artists back into the fold, and I believe the Southeast Region, being the home turf of so many quintessentially American folk traditions: blues, old-time, Cajun, bluegrass,

country, zydeco and more, has a unique opportunity to take a leadership role in strengthening that part of the Folk Alliance's mission. I've been remembering my friend Mike Seeger a lot lately, and thinking back to that first planning meeting in Asheville, although I would never presume to fill his seat, I do see myself as moving my chair over right next to his, to take up his cause in his absence, championing the value of traditional music.

Last year, I was invited to a conference to explore methods of strengthening traditional and roots music. Over several days of meetings, the strategy seemed to take the form of banding together with other folk organizations to lobby government agencies and foundations for more money for traditional arts. At one point, one of the meeting's organizers declared that if more money was not found to support those folk artists who perform for a living, those traditions would die out. I told him flat out that I didn't believe that.

These traditions have persisted for generations with no expectation of financial reward, and although a small number of the finest players will always have the opportunity to perform for money and perhaps make a career of it, very few people are willing to dedicate themselves for the years it takes to master the Macedonian bagpipes or the West African kora, or learn to sing in Gaelic with the expectation they will make any money, much less a living from it. They do it because it expresses in a way nothing else can what it means to be Ukrainian, Vietnamese or Appalachian. They do it because, as members of that community, it is their heritage and their birthright. They do it to honor those who taught them by becoming the next generation of respected tradition-bearers and teachers. They do it for the sheer love of the music, and they won't stop playing it just because they aren't getting paid to do what they love.

Traditional and roots music is the great wellspring of most forms of American music, influencing everything from pop to jazz to classical to rock & roll. It is the primal source that so many artists return to time and again to reinvigorate and inspire their own work. Take, for example, Bruce Springsteen's recent project honoring the music of Pete Seeger, or country singer Kathy Mattea's re-discovery of her folk roots with her latest album of coal-mining songs, or Aaron Copland's orchestral works based on American folk melodies.

The program I run, The Swannanoa Gathering, is a series of seven week-long workshops in various types of folk music and dance. Each year, some of the finest folk artists in the world come to our mountain valley to share their traditions with a thousand or so people who come from around the world to immerse themselves in our folk heritage.

I believe we at the Gathering, and other music camps like The Augusta Heritage Center, Common Ground, Port Townsend and Ashoken are on the front lines of the effort to keep our traditions strong. I encourage all of you to return the sources of this music from time to time and drink deeply.

Keep this music constantly in your house, but let your children discover it on their own, and if one of them takes an interest in the banjo, encourage her. By all means, support traditional and roots artists by going to their concerts, buying their CDs and requesting their songs on your local radio stations, but remember that these are your traditions, too, and you're not just a member of the audience, you're also one of the players. I know I'm preaching to the choir here, but take this message home with you and pass it around, that the best thing you can do to keep these traditions strong is to participate in them:

1. Learn it. Immerse yourself in the music until it's a part of your life and sinks into the very marrow of your bones.
2. Play it. This is folk music and you are the folk. It's yours. If you love the fiddle, go ahead and buy that Tommy Jarrell CD, but sign up for lessons, too.
3. Pass it on. Seek out your fellow folk lovers and share some music together. And when they say "Hey, what was that last tune?" show them how to play it and then ask them to show you one of theirs.

It's a process that has worked pretty well for the last several hundred years.

Let's keep it going.

– Jim Magill