Our Man at the Cambridge Folk Festival
Karl Greenow (Puremusic 9/2003)

The summer of 1991 was a bit of a turning point in my musical journey. I was asked to shoot some pictures of the Cambridge Folk Festival, an annual four-day event held at the end of July in Cherry Hinton, a suburb of Cambridge, 45 minutes north-east of London by train. I wasn't enthused—to the average Joe in the street, British folk is characterised by bearded men with flagons of ale sticking their fingers into their (own) ears and singing songs whose chorus always seems to consist of "hey nonny-nonny." I also imagined the average "folkie" doing a fair amount of slapping of (again, their own) thighs, but then I am half-German, a race proud of their tradition of wearing leather shorts and slapping thighs. But I digress…

I went along to the Festival filled with trepidation, which I always thought would be a good name for a real ale. The first day seemed to confirm my fears when I bumped into one of the geekiest guys I knew and he said he was playing trumpet for one of the bands. Trumpet? Not exactly rock & roll, I thought. The main reason I was there was to take photos of Ruby Blue, a folk band who were in the modern mould. They would later split and the lead singer, Rebecca Pidgeon, would move back to her native USA, marry David Mamet, and produce several records of searing beauty. As I was there for the whole weekend, I wandered from venue to venue marvelling at the bands and easing into a love affair with the festival that I've had ever since. Here's just a taste of who I saw that first year: Suzanne Vega, Butch Hancock & Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Janis Ian, Clannad, Roddy Frame (he of Aztec Camera), Charlie Musselwhite, The Happy End (a wonderful swing band), and Roaring Lion (84 year-old Jamaican calypso singer) along with Young Pretender (so-called as he was only 76).

Since that first time, I've tried to go every year, only missing for the relatively poor reason of living for a couple years in Akron, Ohio. The festival is my regular summer holiday, an oasis of fine music, lovely people and…well, an indefinable "vibe" that nothing need be hurried, no decision requires painful deliberation. It's a special little world where, though we all have our own festival, we become, for these few days, a community.

A lot of festivals in the UK have grown into corporate behemoths, smeared with sponsor logos, surrounded by high security fences, with the average festival-goer herded around, forced to buy over-priced and undercooked food, which inevitably leads to a visit to a deeply unpleasant and overflowing chemical toilet. It's a grim experience, for which the public are expected to shell out, on average, £100. (A four-day ticket for Cambridge costs half that.) Although CFF isn't exactly small (somewhere in the region of 11,000 people are on site over the weekend), it maintains a family atmosphere. And this is not just family as in people with kids (which are in abundance), but an extended family of familiar faces that you see year on year. The guy with the Viking helmet and water-pistol. The massive tattooed biker in his Alison Krauss T-shirt. Kirsty scooting about the site in her powered wheelchair. And the many festival workers, all from the area, who return again and again to invest of themselves—among them the security guard on the second stage who invariably claims that my backstage passes are forged. (Oh, how we laugh.)

It's hard for me to express how laid-back the whole experience is. I think of an older woman dragging her (initially reluctant) husband to his feet to dance to Edward II (a

now-defunct band who successfully mixed up traditional English folk with reggae and African rhythms), the two of them dancing side-by-side, hand-in-hand in the sunshine. Or a group of kids whirling around in a big circle to James Taylor. And dancing's not confined to the audience—having just taken pictures of Bill Wyman's Rhythm Kings cooking a storm with R&B classics, I walked backstage and past Suzanne Vega and her daughter happily jigging about by the stage entrance. That's another thing—there's not the huge gap between audience and performer, as you'll often see artistes ambling around the festival site, in the beer tent, catching other artists, or just chatting with people. Joe Strummer, sadly missed Clash singer, came for years as a paying customer before finally playing a wonderfully rocking set.

The lead singer of The Clash at a *folk* festival? Surely some mistake? But no, look at the setlist from when he played Cambridge. From his new songs, "Bhindi Bhagee," a song that celebrates the multi-cultural country that Britain is, or "Yalla Yalla," about the erosion of personal freedoms. Then there's the extensive Clash back-catalogue, from "White Man In Hammersmith Palais" to "Bankrobber"—themes of racism and working-class alienation. Songs about people and the world they have to live in. If that's not "folk" music, I genuinely have no idea what is. Joe was playing with The Mescaleros, a band that matched his energy and enthusiasm. This was no "backing band"—the communication across the stage was palpable—this was one whole producing a sound and emotion-level damn near to perfect.

I'd seen Joe perform before, but never photographed him. To see his body tensed and the pain etched on his face as he sang, I got even more of a feeling that he *lived* his music. From the jerky movements, chopping at his battered guitar, and the flecks of foam escaping his mouth as he sang, the impression gained was that there was no way he wanted to be anywhere else or doing anything else than playing—right here, right now. The set was glorious. After taking photos for the regulation first three songs, I got rid of my camera bag and disappeared into the middle of the crowd, becoming part of this body of people both lost in and united by our appreciation of the music. It was only four months later that Joe died, which wasn't marked by the mawkish universal hand-wringing and flower-laying seen at the death of some "celebrities" but by heartfelt tributes to his work.

Right, we've established that I believe in a broad definition of folk music—as, apparently, do the festival organisers. They really embrace the concept of "not wrong, just different." Over a festival weekend, there will be groups of fiddlers playing traditional reels & jigs, ceilidh bands, solo singers (including singer songwriters, or what might be called troubadours), young bands, and bands that have been around since the beginning of time. Though the festival attempts to reflect and promote the best of new music, it also does not lose sight of the "roots" of folk music. Witness this year, John McCusker & Phil Cunningham or John Spiers & Jon Boden, two variations of the combination of fiddle and accordion, playing tunes written both 200 years ago and this year. Or contrast The Pack, 12 teenagers playing energetic and ebullient tunes, to the powerful presence of Martin Simpson, an enduring and talented singer and guitarist delivering potent and thought-provoking songs.

As I was writing this, I thought of that line from *The Blues Brothers*, where the bar-owner is asked what sort of music they have there. "Oh, we have both kinds: Country *and* Western." CFF only has Folk, but in many forms, guises, and styles. Not everyone digs

all the artists, but what brings people to the festival is the knowledge that, whatever country, culture, or ethnic group the music springs from, and whether it's traditional, modern, or enhanced by cross-pollination, it's all rooted in the people—the *folk*—and communicates at the level of human emotions.

But even with the diversity of the festival, I was a bit baffled at first with the choice of Julian Cope to appear this year. After a spell playing edgy pop with The Teardrop Explodes, he ambled off into the sunset to write strangely beautiful songs. Over the years, he's become regarded as a classic British eccentric (he wore a full-length egg costume at a Poll Tax demonstration), a committed eco-warrior, and an authority on ancient stone circles and matters Druidic (see his excellent book, *The Modern Antiquarian*).

So we get to Cambridge 2003. As I went into the press pit, I noticed the stage was empty, save for a keyboard. A few minutes later, Julian appeared dressed in black with shades, big hair and big beard, wearing a headset microphone. He said that given the current Western paranoia for people with beards, he would add to it by putting his hood up. So he did. As he prowled the stage, he explained he'd just been to Armenia where he couldn't fathom why he was greeted by nervous people around him in Yerevan Airport. They explained that it was "a bad time to have a beard in Armenia." He then spotted some more beards in the audience, chirpily remarking "Good beard, man." Someone shouted to him that they used to be his neighbour. He looked, then said "In my whole life, I've had four neighbours…and you *are* one of them. Hello!" The whole thing was declared "spooky" before he realised several minutes had passed and he hadn't even attempted a song yet. Approaching the keyboard, he hit a key producing a low drone. After some negotiation with the sound engineer, he pronounced himself happy with the drone and plucked a few experimental notes on his guitar. He played one song, not familiar to me, but the interplay of guitar, drone, and his almost spoken singing voice was brilliant. Then he prowled the stage a little more, chatting about his house and that he really ought to sing another song. This last comment was greeted by howls from the audience to the effect that they were supremely happy just having Julian chat with them for an hour or so.

As he wandered round the stage talking, I realised what was happening—he had *no* idea what to do next. He called for "a set list. Doesn't have to be mine, anyone's will do." A roadie appeared with a sheet of paper. A flash of recognition, he changed guitar to a lime-green Les Paul and launched into "Conspiracist Blues," a touching ditty of a dream he had about Madonna, Courtney Love, and Margaret Thatcher adrift in a lifeboat, hilarious as well as expressing his dislike for the first first lady of the UK (if you discount Boadicea and Liz 1, but you get my drift…). A little less rambling and into the third tune, with some screaming guitar and effects. As the song finished I checked my watch: 40 minutes had passed in the blink of an eye. I reluctantly left the pit and dashed off to snap another performance. Julian said as he took the stage, "I am the ultimate folk artist," and I see his point. I've never felt as much love for one artist there or such a real two-way relationship between stage and audience. Unconventional, strange, witty, angry, and in some ways unfathomable—a description of the British? OK, so I would need to add "reserved," but Julian represents that ancient sense of Britishness traced back to the pagan ethic, rather than the watered-down Imperial and Victorian version. Truly, the man is The Drude.

In addition to brilliant British performers, there's always been a US and Canadian presence at CFF—right back to the maiden festival in 1964, when a young Paul Simon

was shoe-horned onto the bill at the last minute. And this year, for the first time, the US Embassy in London provided financial assistance to the US artists travelling over to play. Thus we were graced with Steve Earle, Rosanne Cash, Laura Cantrell, John Hammond, Robert Randolph & The Family Band, and The Yonder Mountain String Band. Of course, names like Cash and Earle are well known here, but this was a wonderful opportunity to introduce a whole new audience to legends such as Hammond, or to new bucks like YMSB who gave us a fantastic taste of bluegrass music. I used to view bluegrass with some disdain until I saw Rhonda Vincent & The Rage a couple of years ago at the festival—they brought the house down and I was hooked. (Rhonda's band had arrived in London to be told their instruments were in Amsterdam. They got to the festival site, explained their situation, and within minutes were furnished with banjos, guitars, and a stand-up bass from fellow musicians and the on-site shop.)

So, how does the actual festival work? There are three stages: the main stage, the Radio 2 stage, and the club tent. The main stage is in a large marquee that can hold about 5,000 people, with the back and sides open to let the punters in the park enjoy the music in the open air. The BBC sponsors the Radio 2 stage, a slightly more intimate venue, accommodating around 1,500 people but again with the sides open. Most artists will play both the main and Radio 2 stages at some point over the weekend, allowing more than one opportunity to see them.

Over the years, the BBC's involvement with the festival has grown. Now many performances are recorded for broadcast on Radio 2, the national radio station covering folk, jazz, and popular (as opposed to "pop") music. Some main stage artists are filmed, either for later broadcast or, in the case of the Afro-Celts this year, live transmission on BBC4, a nationwide arts TV channel. For us photographers, it can be a little frustrating to have a lovely shot lined up, only for a TV camera to gently drift across our view—but we do have a privileged position, and it makes a change from missing shots due to carefully aimed bottles or crowd-surfing youngsters. (Generally in the press pit at Cambridge, I just get handed a rucksack or a jacket to put behind the barrier for safekeeping. Bizarrely, someone did try to hand me a toddler once, to the consternation of myself and the immense amusement of my less than sympathetic colleagues.)

The club tent is the "grass roots" of the festival, hosted over the weekend by several local folk clubs. Here, in addition to performances, there are workshops on anything from bodhran to fiddle to vocal harmony. (Brian McNeill, legendary Scots traditional musician running a composition workshop, soundchecked his bouzouki by playing "Jumpin' Jack Flash" before introducing himself thus: "Hello, I'm Brian, and as we're all radical folkies, I'd like everyone to take all your clothes off and make love to the person on your right. No? Well, it is only Friday, I suppose…") The club tent also has showcases for up and coming young players, this year featuring Anna Massie (BBC Radio Scotland Young Traditional Musician of the year) and singer-songwriter (and Horizon award nominee) Kirsty McGee. A few years ago, I was tipped off that "something special" was going to happen in the club tent in five minutes. I dashed across, arriving just in time to see Joan Baez deliver a beautiful version of "10,000 Miles." She was headlining the main stage that night, but wanted to sing in a "proper" folk venue, too. It was just one song, but totally spellbinding.

And it is an emotional festival, for many people and for myself. I've often been stunned out of my professional photographer persona by moments of beauty. The time when

Loudon Wainwright duetted with Christine Collister in a tribute to festival founder Ken Woollard, who had died the year before. They sang of “flying so high above us,” an image of someone departed looking down on, in this case, the festival he created. Or when Tom Robinson, after introducing his anthem “Glad To Be Gay” as usual (“You don’t have to be gay to sing this…but it helps”), was clearly moved by 4,000 people bellowing the chorus back at him. Or when veteran left-wing politician Tony Benn appeared with Roy Bailey (described by the Minister for Culture as “one of folk music’s finest performers and one of the world’s best carriers of the people’s message”). Tony spoke of how folk music was rooted in protest from the Levellers to the Chartists to the Suffragettes, reflecting eloquently and with passion about the importance of community and love for your fellow man and woman, interspersed with songs by Roy. It was just too much for me, a smiling photographer with a tear-streaked face.

So I love the festival, as do many thousands of people. This in some ways is a shame, as tickets sell out within days, faster each year. If there were some way that everyone who wanted to go could do so, then the organisers would take it. But they can’t—not without making the festival bigger, which would entail moving it. Either change would cause the loss of so much of the essence of this festival, which still views folk music as music for and by the people, uncomplicated music expressing emotions directly, reaching the hearts and the minds of the listeners. A unique relationship has been built during the festival’s 39 years—and a large 40th anniversary celebration is already being planned for 2004. I’ll be there, along with the family that I may only see once a year but who, in the music and memories, are with me every day. Just another music festival? I’m glad Cambridge never has been and hopefully never will be.

•