CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION

THE NATIONAL FOLK FESTIVAL IS HERE — AND IT'S A WHOLE NEW LOOK FOR MUSIC CITY U.S.A.

BY JEWLY NIGHT
The press kit for the National Folk Festival contains a ringing endorsement of its mission from the president of the United States. Yes, when the event arrives this weekend in Nashville, which beat out 43 other cities to host it, it will carry the approval of the commander-in-chief in office during its earliest years—President Franklin D. Roosevelt. (The first National, as it’s called for short, was held in St. Louis in 1914.) As public relations go, that’s a sizable score. Add to that the fact that first lady Eleanor Roosevelt served on one of the festival’s committees—as did a pre-White House
Harry Truman, novelist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston and the venerable poet James Weldon Johnson, to name just a few—and you’ve only scratched the surface of why the National, now approaching its eightieth decade, may be the most historically significant, culturally rich music festival most people have never heard of.

Not to mention one of the most inclusive. It’s not particularly groundbreaking for a festival to take a melting-pot approach now. That’s status quo at Bonnaroo. But folklorist Sarah Gertrude Knott faced her traveling folk festival in a very different world. In the 1930s, mono-cultural folk fests were the norm—some established by purists who saw it as their duty to keep Anglo-American folk culture unassailed by anything as dusty or exotic as African or Native American influence.

So it’s no small thing that the National cultivated diversity from the start. In 1936, Knott and her team dared integrate their stage in segregated Dallas. Two years later, the festival welcomed uptown African-American bluesman W.C. Handy to a Washington, D.C., venue owned by the

Daughters of the American Revolution—one that explicitly prohibited black performers. Now the National is coming to Nashville for a three-year stay in Bicentennial Park, culminating in the celebration of the festival’s 75th edition. At first glance, it may seem an odd pairing of event and host city: a multiethnic showcase that was once ill at ease with commercial music, in a city that’s recognized more for its music industry than for its embrace of ethnic diversity.

“Because Nashville’s already known for its music focus and many musical events, it did surprise people,” says Julia Olin, executive director of the National Council for the Traditional Arts.

But now it’s Nashville’s turn to be surprised—a by an event that offers dozens of diverse, dynamic, anything-but-dry cultural performances. A great deal of thought goes into the festival, but it’s no academic exercise. When these bands play hot dance music, audiences actually dance.

Better still, the spirit of cultural ambassadorship runs both ways. According to published estimates, previous festivals in cities such as Chattanooga have drawn as many as 90,000 people. As hometown folks and visitors to Music City work up a sweat to a top-notch band from another part of the country, playing the style of music from another part of the world, the hope is that they will come away with a new appreciation for Nashville’s own cultural riches.

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his will not be the first Nashville visit for the National, though memories of it are understandably scarce. The only other time was in 1959, back when founder Knott and her collaborators still populated the bill with nonprofessional, unpaid performers. Anyone who attended the five-day event at the Fairgrounds Coliseum would have seen war-dancing Kiowa Indians, shape note singers, a band of Wiscons in lumberjacks, a Scottish-style high school drum corps, square-dancing 4-H kids, African-American singers of spirituals from Agricultural and Industrial State University, Mexican folk dancers, fiddlers and myriad other offerings.

Conspicuously absent, though, were the pickers and singers who cut commercial records and entertained on the Opry. (An exception that proved the rule was guitarist playing folk balladre Jimmie Driftwood.) In Staging Tradition, Michael Ann Williams noted, “Although located at ground zero of the country music industry, Knott found few native singers in Nashville.”

A lack of native singing didn’t mean a lack of rootsy talent. Back then, folklorists tended to draw an artificial line between hillbilly and folk music. Anybody who made a living as a hillbilly entertainer, the reasoning went, couldn’t possibly qualify as an “authentic” folk singer.

But in the 52 years since the National was last here, a lot has changed about how we think and talk about folk music—the way it travels, the coziness with pop culture, and what constitutes folk tradition in an age when households are infinitely more plugged in than they were even in the days of family radio.

By the time the urban folk revival reached its zenith in the early ’60s, hordes of college-age idealists had adopted folk music as their own. They gathered around their own youthful revivalist
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it was a fusion. It was a fusion of Cuban music, Puerto Rican music, a little bit of everything in between, including rock. So we've kind of just brought that back." The fact that what they're doing appeals to both their peers and a lot of other folks is a sure sign they're on to something.

"A lot of the older generation comes and hears us," Vasquez-Cofresi says, "and they say, 'Wow, man! You guys make me feel like I'm 15, 15 sneaking into a club again. I haven't heard a band like this in so many years.'"

That said, there is no such thing as a main stage or a headliner at the National. In this thoroughly egalitarian setting, La Excelencia and Massive Monkeys will do their thing alongside acts that contemporary eyes and ears would immediately identify as folk. It's not only an entertaining mix; it's also an educating one. Those performers who have more obvious ties to tradition are hardly insulated from pop culture, even if they are from up in the hills. Take the acclaimed Holmes Brothers, an electric gospel-blues trio made up of Sherman and Wendell Holmes and drummer Poppy Dixon. (All three sing.) They have a distinctly raggedy, soulful sound and a half-century-long history with music to boot. But their repertoire ranges from generations-old spirituals to an anthemic reading of Tom Waits's "Train Song."

Or consider Dale Ann Bradley, one of the finest traditional singers in contemporary bluegrass. Bradley had the sort of rustic Kentucky upbringing — without modern conveniences like electricity — that you'd associate with someone much older. Yet her songbook contains room for a stirring breakneck version of U2's "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For."

Meanwhile, Ben Hall — fresh out of Belmont and also brokered at the National — plays a kind of guitar you wouldn't expect to hear from anybody so young. He's an impressive, knowledgeable and tradition-conscious Merle Travis-style thumb-picker, even though he's generations removed from the guy who did more than anyone else to popularize thumb-picking worldwide, Chet Atkins. Hall started out listening to his dad's country reel-to-reel, but by his early teens he was immersing himself in the thumb-picking festival scene and learning firsthand from old-timers like George "Moon" Miller and Leon Redbone.

"I put my hands on the headstock, but I was curious about who these people were doing these things," Hall says. "But finally this gracious gentleman sat down and said, 'I think you've got some potential here playing this style.' That's when I put my focus on that particular thing... and kept it there for several years...."

Hall will share the stage with another thumb-style player he holds in high esteem, Eddie Pennington, who hails from Travis territory in Western Kentucky. On a high-school trip to Washington, D.C., Hall was elated to find a pennington CD in the Smithsonian gift shop. "I can't explain to you how that made me feel," Hall says, eloquently summing up the value of preserving the folk tradition. "For once my musical style has been validated. Right exactly where I wanted it to be validated — not on the hit charts, but in the Smithsonian."

The National's mission to lay the groundwork for an ongoing festival in Nashville. To say it will be joined in a crowd-filling spirit was the obvious. Every year there's Bluegrass Fan Fest, which Bradley has frequently played, the American Music Festival, at which Hall's late boss Charlie Louvin appeared; SoundLand, the new incarnation of Next Big Nashville; and the granddaddy of them all, CMA Fest. Which raises a good question: Why in the world does Nashville need another music festival?

Garry West, who, along with his banjo virtuoso wife Allie Brown, heads Compass Records and Nashville Folk and Roots, a new nonprofit that's serving as the NCFA's local partner — doesn't downplay the number of existing music gatherings in Nashville. But he emphasizes the differences between the National and the rest.

"[The others] seem to be sort of built for the industry, and they welcome the general public," West says. "This is built for the general public — and we welcome the industry, of course. But it's built for the general public and it needs to represent the general public as it exists in the community, not just what any one person's perception of it is in the community."

"Most people's doesn't even need to buy a wristband to get in. It's free. And since it's a free event — not federally funded and new to most of the big-check writers in town — raising the cash to pull it off has been the challenge anybody would expect it to be."

But Mayor Karl Dean, who has given the festival an FDR-style blessing locally, believes it has the potential to be a unique cross-cultural attraction.

"My hope is that it appeals to all Nashvillians — underline all — in a way that no festival we've ever done has," Dean says. "Showing off Nashville as Music City is something we can do easily, and we do it a lot. Showing off our diversity and the way the city has grown is a harder thing to do, but I think it's a good thing to do. It's hard partly because Nashville hasn't fully come to terms >>p22
with its own diversities, as evidenced by some Nashvillians’ anxiety over the presence of undocumented immigrants. But Dean — who’s been a friend to immigrants and live music alike — sees evidence of progress in various quarters, among them Nashville voters’ rejection of the so-called English Only proposition in 2009.

“If we had lost that English Only vote, it would be an interesting question of whether [the festival] would have come to Nashville,” Dean says.

All these anecdotes shaped the pitch to the NCTA. “We really talked to them a lot about our perceived need for Nashville to understand itself as it is today, not as it was 30 years ago,” Compass’ Allison Brown says. “Because I understand according to Forbes magazine, we have the fastest-growing immigrant population in the country here in Nashville. So how do we represent the diverse demographic of the city? And what better way to do that than through music?”

The NCTA took the lead in choosing the performers, but only after a good bit of conversation with a local programming committee and various ethnic communities in Nashville. “The idea being that, first of all, we want to create an inclusive festival that is obviously welcoming to many different cultural communities,” Olin says. “And then it’s also about learning what hidden gems may be in the local immigrant community that have not received very much public attention.... It’s an ongoing process where you can never accommodate all those goals in one year.”

With Nashville’s Hispanic community in mind, they’ve booked not only La Excedencia, but the world-class Mexican mariachi band Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano. To acknowledge the city’s sizable Kurdish population, they’ve invited the Bong Ensemble, an Iranian Kurdish and Persian quartet, to play with Özden Öztokr, a Kurdish virtuoso from Turkey who now calls the Bay Area home.

Also, the Chinese Arts Alliance of Nashville is sending Chinese lion dancers. And at the request of the Japanese community, the duo Oyama x Nitta are on the bill. They’re virtuosos of the shamisen — sort of a three-string banjo — who have a virile, shape-shifting approach to their instrument that can, at moments, bring to mind Led Zeppelin.

As for local treasures, there’s Memphis-born Reverend John Wilkins, a gifted gospel singer who, like his father Robert Wilkins before him, is a former member of the famous Pentecostal Church. He was part of a group of musicians who formed the first gospel record company, and he’s been a prominent figure in Nashville’s music scene for many years.

In one of the most exciting collaborations of the festival, the Bong Ensemble will be joined by Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano, and the two groups will perform together on stage. This will be a unique opportunity to experience two distinct traditions of music in one setting, and it’s sure to be a highlight of the festival.

The NCTA has also booked a variety of other performers, including a mariachi band, a Kurdish virtuoso, and a group of Chinese lion dancers. These performers represent the diverse cultural communities in Nashville and will help to create an inclusive festival that celebrates the city’s diversity.

Overall, the NCTA is working to create a festival that is welcoming to people of all backgrounds and that celebrates the city’s unique musical traditions. The festival will be a great opportunity for people to come together and experience the richness of Nashville’s cultural landscape.