National Folk Festival wraps up second year in Greensboro (Video)

By Dawn DeCwikiel-Kane

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Heather Thompson (right) does one more dance through the misting station with her daughter Ayla (left) as they leave the National Folk Festival on Sunday, Sept. 11, 2016. This was the second of a three-year run the festival in Greensboro, N.C.

Andrew Krech/News & Record
GREENSBORO — After the last notes of National Folk Festival music sounded Sunday evening, thousands headed home hot but happy.

For the second year of the festival’s three-year residency, crowds had spent three days on downtown streets, taking in a mix of free traditional music, dance, storytelling and puppetry from a variety of cultures.

They cheered a lineup that ranged from big acts such as DJ Grandmaster Flash, to the tiny — really tiny — Alberti Flea Circus.

They bought crafts and dined on regional, ethnic and classic festival foods.

They did it all under clear skies. While temperatures dipped only slightly Sunday into the upper 80s, it didn’t rain.

“It has been so unifying, with so many different races and ethnicities,” said Kim Gatling of Greensboro, who came to the festival with her husband and three sons. “It’s been a phenomenal weekend for our city.”

Organizers with ArtsGreensboro would agree.

The arts marketing and fundraising agency partnered with the National Council for the Traditional Arts to bring the festival to Greensboro each September through 2017. They plan to continue it as the locally-run North Carolina Folk Festival when the national moves on.

“We are just blown away,” Tom Philion, ArtsGreensboro president and CEO, said about this year’s results.

Helping to run the festival were 1,000 volunteers, who filled 1,500 three-hour shifts.

They helped with such tasks as staffing information booths, providing backstage and site support, accompanying artists, and manning a Bucket Brigade collecting...
donations to help keep the festival free.

Volunteer Coordinator Susan Sassmann expressed gratitude for the volunteer turnout. “But we could have used more people,” she said.

Philion said he doesn’t know yet how many festival-goers showed up over three days. It will take several days to compile an estimate.

They will rely on information from sources such as the Greensboro Police Department, merchandise sales, aerial photos and contributions collected by the Bucket Brigade.

But Philion said he expects it to top last year’s attendance of 102,000.

“On Friday and Saturday nights, the crowds were much bigger than they were last year,” Philion said.

On Sunday, the largest crowd showed up for pioneer hip-hop artist DJ Grandmaster Flash. The Dance Pavilion on East Washington Street overflowed with enthusiastic fans. He got the crowd clapping and singing to a mix of new and old-school music.

“Are you enjoying yourselves so far?” he asked. The crowd roared its approval.

Kim and Danny Gatling brought their three sons, ages 4 to 12. The couple had enjoyed Grandmaster Flash’s show so much on Saturday night that they returned on Sunday.

“We just wanted to school our kids on real old-school music and the old-school style of DJing,” Kim Gatling said.

After the show, an exhausted Grandmaster Flash joined his son, Kereem Saddler of Greensboro, and grandchildren off stage.

He called the audience “very open-minded.” Hip-hop, he pointed out, is not just one genre, but includes samples such as pop, rock, jazz, blues, R&B and alternative.
“I play a vast variety,” he said. “Because what you might like, she might not like. And what he likes, she might not like.”

“I love what I do,” he added. “My objective is to hug your memories. If I can keep playing songs until I get in, then I want to hug them for two hours. I was able to hug here, and this is really important.”

On Sunday, the downtown entertainment began before the festival even started, when Greensboro reality television star Whitney Thore made an appearance at Center City Park.

Thore and her dance troupe filmed a performance for her TLC network show, “My Big Fat Fabulous Life.”

It will be shown during the second half of the show’s third season, which starts airing in January, said Lisa Insana, one of its producers.

Soon after the festival started, children and parents gathered in the Family Area to watch Jim Alberti of Winston-Salem and his flea circus.

The circus was brought to the United States in the 1880s by Alberti’s great-great uncle.

He enlisted 8-year-old Miller Long of Oak Ridge and other children to help with their tiny props. It took them a bit of imagination to envision the fleas.

“But they could have been there,” said his sister Eleanor, 12.

Back at the Center City Park stage, the heat didn’t slow Leonardo Sandoval.

The crowd’s clapping and a bass provided the rhythm for the internationally renowned Brazilian tap dancer.

Najah Qureshi, Sergio Bastos and children Ayana and Kayan came from Summerfield to watch.
Bastos moved to the United States from Brazil 20 years ago. They also wanted to see the Brazilian puppeteer Chico Simóes.

“It’s not always that you get Brazilian performers here in Greensboro,” Bastos said.

“Even after the folk festival moves on,” Qureshi added, “I hope that Greensboro would make an effort to continue to bring different experiences, different cultures, different artistic expressions to the city.

“It brings the world to Greensboro.”

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