

A Festival of Folk

'But, I hate all that traditional 'diddy-dee' stuff, and shanties, and miserable ballads sung by sweet voiced females that sound exactly the same.'

'It's not like that anymore,' hubby told me. 'Well there is some of it, but it's in the minority. Besides, the weather is looking great. You'll love it. The worst you can do is laze about in the sun, read a book, drink wine and chill.'

That sold it to me. 'Ok, I'll give it a try, at least for one of the days.'

'The thing is,' he said, stringing out the "is", 'I've already bought two tickets for the entire weekend. They cost a fortune so I think you should make the effort to enjoy it. Even if you don't, at least pretend to.'

I groaned and wandered off to rifle through old clothes for anything at all that resembled hippyness. If I were to be forced to endure, then I'd look the part.

Five days later, Friday on August bank holiday weekend, we parked in the West Midlands Showground car park, a giant field. Trillions of camper vans, caravans and tents had already pitched behind a meshed fence.

Christ, I thought, it's going to be busy.

Off we trundled to the entrance to be manacled in a shocking pink wristband emblazoned with Shrewsbury Folk Festival, that under no circumstances should be removed for the entire weekend. They made sure of it by clamping together the two metal blobs at both ends with a strange gun thing. The wristband was secured tight.

Oh well, if I'm to be bound I might as well head for the bar. Hubby had a different idea. First we must explore the site, get our bearings and allocate a place to meet if we should become separated.

Yeah, yeah, let's be sensible and practical, never mind spontaneity.

The place was huge, like a village. I half expected to walk through a haze of marihuana smoke and chants of, "Hey man, its groovy", but reminded myself we were no longer in the 1960's. Instead, thousands of silver-haired oldies, who of course were not so old in the 60's, walked back and forth smoking ordinary cigarettes as if it were the middle of a shopping centre. And indeed, shopping was to be had in countless mini tents encircling a central open-aired rostrum called the Purity Village Stage. If I'd thought hippy clothing could no longer be bought, I was wrong. Seems there is a whole culture of tie-dyed elephant panted, Jesus sandalled, vegetarian/vegan folk living among us normal people. Funny, I never ordinarily notice them, but here they flocked as natural as they come. Mind you, some of the oldies, the women in particular, in their elephant pants with flowers strung around their hats atop straggling long grey and green streaked hair, should have looked in the mirror. No sense of style at all.

But hey, I'm being judgmental. Live and let live I tell myself just as a blackened faced Morris man in red knickerbockers and jangly bells cavorted in front of me.

"Aggh, can we go to the bar now?"

Sipping wine from plastic wine glasses we sat on the grass in warm sunshine around the Purity Village stage waiting for the first act to appear at six-o'clock.

This stage is used to showcase less well-known acts trying to make it in the folk scene. If they are well received they might progress to one of the bigger tents next year. Speaking of which, there were three, Bellstone, by far the largest, Pengwern and Sabrina. We would come to know each of these venues well over the weekend.

At last the first act. Two young lads called Paddy and Lloyd, an acoustic duo, began to play their guitar and ukulele.

Hmm, sounds promising, not diddly-dee at all.

Then they opened their mouths and out came the most glorious harmonizing I've heard in a long time. I was spellbound. For an hour they played well-known songs, beautifully sung and above all, tuneful, joyful and varied. What a talented pair. Perhaps the weekend wouldn't be so bad after all.

Next up, in the Pengwern tent we listened to a band with contemporary Celtic influences, which was OK, but almost verging on the diddly-dee. After that a young reverend from St Louis with black crinkly hair down to his waist, played and sang tunes that were repetitive and, quite frankly, boring. Between numbers he preached to us about civil rights and the plight of immigrants. It's OK to sing protest songs, I applaud them, but what I don't want at a music festival is a sermon from a patronising young man young enough to be my son. I want to enjoy the music. We walked out. Perhaps Paddy and Lloyd were an anomaly and I was right about folk festivals all along.

That was before we listened to Gary Stewart's Graceland band. Paul Simon has an exact double in looks and voice. The resemblance was uncanny, except that Paul Simon is now in his late seventies. Absorbing this eclectic mix of pop, rock and African roots transported us back to the mid eighties, when we were neither young nor old. A standing ovation of whooping, whistling and clapping demanded and encore, and I was there, whooping the loudest. What a way to end the first evening.

I was hooked.

Over the course of the weekend seven thousand people roamed the site on any one day. More and more young people joined the crowd bringing cute little toddlers in mini elephant pants. They ran bare foot across the grass, jigged in time to the music and giggled when daddy let them run between his legs. The atmosphere began to feel younger and livelier.

Tempting smells from stalls serving world food lingered in the still air. Cooks with big smiles on their faces, stood behind hot vats of steaming stews and barbecues and dished up plates of delicious fare despite the baking sun. I couldn't resist a chicken curry followed by a large helping of farmhouse ice-cream in a chocolate dipped cone.

I was never a hippy in the old days, more of a 'mod', me, but I paid homage to those flower power days and had a free-style henna tattoo on my hand, the closest I'd ever get to a real tattoo.

A festival of folk - except that it wasn't. The line-up consisted of fifty individual bands or solo artists. Highly talented and accomplished musicians, young and old, came from all over the world - Brazil, America, Canada, Africa, South Africa, Italy, and of course the British Isles. They could actually play their instruments - and not just one, but in many cases, several. A fusion of rhythm

and blues, pop, folk rock, soul, hints of jazz, African roots – and somewhere among that lot you might find a traditional shanty. Like I said, not a folk festival.

We flitted between the three tents picking and choosing what we wanted to listen to. We sat, we sang, we danced in the mosh pit beneath the stage, and we sweltered, especially inside the tents. People used programmes, hats, anything they could get hold of as fans to cool themselves down. This couldn't be right – it always rains at festivals, doesn't it?

My favourite act of the weekend was a band called 'Burden of Paradise'. Two tall, skinny men and a tiny woman, at least she appeared tiny next to them, walked onto the stage. They must have been sixty plus, in good company with their audience. The woman, Helen Watson, wore scruffy jeans and a shabby top. Her short moppy, tousled hair put me in mind of Susan Boyle of Britain's Got Talent fame. I didn't have high hopes of this aged band, but when Helen began to sing, accompanied by sax and double bass, my face must have taken on the same look that Simon Cowell's did when he first heard Susan Boyle's voice. Helen's small frame percolated silky, deep jazzy-blues tones, like Cleo Lane. There was an eerie quiet in the tent throughout the performance. Like me, the audience was captivated.

The next day I tried to buy their album, but it had sold out.

The final day had us sitting outside Bellstone (far too hot within) listening to Andy Fairweather Low of Amen Corner, another aging pop idol of the 60's. I remembered him well. He played all the old songs and had everyone singing along, inside and outside the tent.

*If paradise is half as nice as heaven that you take me to,
who needs paradise I'd rather have you,*

rang across the showground.

The last act, Skerryvore, a young award-winning band of eight Scottish musicians full of energy and verve, closed the festival in a fanfare of lively contemporary Scottish music, including the occasional bagpipe.

Hubby was right. I did love it, in fact I enjoyed it so much I skipped out of the exit and, brandishing my henna'd hand, waved goodbye and said in true Schwarzenegger style,

"I'll be back."