

FOLK ALLIANCE

IS BUILDING COMMUNITY

...And Welcomes Bluegrassers!

If you're happy with the great things that the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) has done for bluegrass, take note of the Folk Alliance (a.k.a. North American Folk Music and Dance Alliance). It was January 1989, when the seed was planted to form an organization to strengthen individual and organizational initiatives in folk music and dance. Clark and Elaine Weissman of the California Traditional Music Society (CTMS) made a sweep around the country recruiting people to come to a gathering in Malibu of 130 delegates representing folk communities throughout North America. Since that meeting six years ago, the Folk Alliance has grown to become an influential organization providing education, networking, advocacy, field and professional development.

At their first annual meeting in 1989, participants attended sessions on large and small societies, camps, schools, radio and print media, booking agents and government support services. Clark Weissman recalls, "We talked, and talked, and danced, and talked, and sang, and talked and agreed on 15 elected representatives of a steering committee to ennoble all the words into a legal non-profit structure to accomplish our goals."

Bluegrass music was well represented on the committee by Art Menius, then Executive Director of the IBMA. The steering committee elected interim officers to an executive committee and the Alliance was off and running. "The biggest reason that I was brought in," recalls Menius, "was to say, 'By gosh, IBMA has worked. This idea will work too. It's totally doable to build a continent-wide folk organization.' Some were skeptical that an organization with that broad a scope would work."

"The Folk Alliance has positively impacted the established arts community and the public," states Elaine Weissman, "by focusing the collective power of hundreds of organizations and thousands of folk aficionados."

Art Menius adds, "Neil Rosenberg argues quite convincingly that the folk revival or folk boom of the late 1950s through the mid-1960s did not die, but rather fragmented into bluegrass, old-time, Cajun, singer-songwriter, storytelling, Celtic, dance, blues, and several other camps. The Folk Alliance is about drawing these different, wonderful factions together to work for our overarching concerns, to tap into the strength of our collective efforts. The current funding problems for the folk arts in the U.S. and Canada provide just one handy example of why this is so vital to the health of all the different performing folk arts in North America."

The Alliance's 1990 annual meeting in Philadelphia drew about 250 people. "For the first couple of years," reflects Menius, "the two big issues were meeting each other and deciding whether we wanted to proceed in this venture. Obviously, we did! Once that second meeting happened, we had a feeling of accomplishment, solidity and that the thing would be on-going."

Art Menius was then hired as Manager a couple of months following the Chicago conference in 1991. Attendance continued to blossom at annual meetings in Calgary (1992), Tucson (1993), Boston (1994), and Portland, (1995). Each conference now has a theme. In Boston, it was "Enriching the Folk Community Through Multicultural Diversity." The Portland conference chose "Building Community."

Nearly 1,100 attended the 1995 Portland conference. Performing artists, presenters, agents, society members, folklorists, educators, administrators and recording company representatives all gathered and shared information in panel discussions and workshops. Bluegrass groups were seen with



Art Menius

tables in the exhibit hall's folk marketplace that brought together artists, agents and businesses. Ann Brock, of the Missouri-based Fresh Cut Grass observed, "On the first day, we didn't really know anyone and felt a little out of place. But, that all changed, and by the second day, we felt like one of the folk family."

Brock feels that the Folk Alliance has an important mission. "I'm afraid that, at some point, traditional music will

By Joe Ross

BLUEGRASS UNLIMITED

cease to be passed down. We need to get away from our television sets and back in touch with our humanity. The festivals and conferences help us get back in touch and so much positive energy is generated. Who knows, maybe music will save the world!"

Linda and Kerney Bolton also manned a table to promote the Northern Lights bluegrass band, and singer/songwriter David Mallet. Linda Bolton comments, "Portland was our third Folk Alliance conference, and it definitely won't be our last. But, again, Northern Lights is among a very small group of bluegrass bands represented. I don't understand why, when so many folk festivals and coffeehouses include bluegrass. We hail from the 'Coffeehouse Capital'—New England—so we know folk venues are great places to play, and we're amazed that more bluegrass bands haven't discovered this. Folk and bluegrass have a lot in common, so I certainly don't feel like an outsider here. I'm just surprised that more bluegrass bands don't participate."

Showcases featuring some of the best folk talent in North America are an important aspect of the gathering for presenting one's act. Besides showcasing, participating in the jam sessions also helps musicians make connections. In Portland, for example, a continuous old-time jam occurred in the lobby, and one hallway session featured the members of Silk Road (pipa player Qui Xia He and Erhu player Shirley Yuan) playing everything from old-time to swing music with slide guitarist Bob Brozman, fiddler Tony Marcus (of the Cats and Jammers), and others.

As the gathering has grown over the years, jamming has increased while conference showcasing spots have become more competitive and shorter. Of the 250 acts that applied to showcase at the 1995 conference, scheduling space only allowed 18 to be selected. One was the fine contemporary bluegrass group, Cornerstone, from Ithaca, N.Y. Banjo-player Chris Stuart comments, "Bluegrass of any style is very well received by the folk community, especially when it emphasizes original material. We had a blast showcasing in Portland and made a lot of new contacts. We especially appreciated Art Menius' hard work. Art will

make sure that bluegrass has some presence in the folk world."

Besides Cornerstone, some other bluegrass and old-time acts that have showcased over the years include Jody Stecher and Kate Brislin, Lynn Morris Band, Good Ol' Persons, Mike Seeger,

David Holt, Marley's Ghost, Laurie Lewis and Grant Street, and Loose Ties.

During the conference, other privately-sponsored "guerilla" showcases are scheduled until the wee hours of morning at rooms and suites throughout the host hotel. Many are sponsored by agencies or record companies desiring exposure for their artists. Art Menius remarks, "The event keeps growing with its own momentum. There's much debate about the future of showcasing. The privately-sponsored showcases have really taken off since they started in 1993 in Tucson, and perhaps that will be the future of showcasing. Other similar conferences have taken that approach, and there are a lot of people arguing for that approach." One highlight in Portland were traditional music showcases by the likes of Pete Seeger, Mike Seeger, Jody Stecher and Kate Brislin, Hank Bradley, Alice Gerrard, Jeff Davis and others.

Dates for the Eighth Annual Conference in Washington, D.C. are February 15-18, 1996, at the Renaissance Hotel and the theme will be "Expanding Alliances: A Capital Idea." In 1997, the folk community gathering takes place on February 13-16 in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. In 1998, the conference moves to Memphis, Tenn.



Above: Jim Rooney presents the Folk Alliance Lifetime Achievement Award to Pete Seeger in 1995.



Kerney and Linda Bolton of Northern Lights Management had a table with info about the bluegrass band, Northern Lights, and singer/songwriter David Mallet.

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Art Menius comments, "We can look forward to substantially larger venues in the future. As both an event and an organization we have far to go to fulfill our expectations, particularly in increasing participation from the multicultural, traditional, storytelling, and dance communities, but each year we have made marked progress. In Portland, we made a good step forward getting different sorts of traditional music and traditional communities involved, but we still have a long ways to go with dance. We're still very much a Caucasian organization. To reach our potential, we have to get out of that box."

Phyllis Barney, 1993-94 President of the Folk Alliance Board of Directors, and as of November 1, 1995, the first Executive Director reflects on the growth of the organization. "After a few years, the directors came to a startling realization that we were no longer laying the groundwork for an infant organization. We were setting goals in place for a dynamic and mature alliance of our diverse community. And, now we're advocating debate to find the best solutions for our organization." In 1995, Jeri Goldstein, well-known in bluegrass circles as agent for Dan Crary, California, and Robin and Linda Williams, was elected to serve a two-year term as President. Interestingly enough, every Folk Alliance president so far has been involved in bluegrass music at some point.

Divergent points of view in this grassroots folk organization stimulate considerable discussion. Some feel strongly that the Folk Alliance could benefit from the growth experiences of the IBMA. However, the IBMA and Folk Alliance have each taken separate paths to achieve their missions. For its legal structure, the Folk Alliance was set up as a IRS 501(c)3 educational, rather than a 501(c)6 trade organization like the IBMA. "We're at two ends of the nonprofit spectrum," explains Menius. "The reason we do the conference is to let people know what's out there—to educate the public."

Other debate centers around whether folk music should be for commercial gain. Should folk music and dance be solely for self-entertainment? Some feel strongly that you shouldn't have to pay for it, or you do it yourself

instead of having people do it for you. These kinds of questions generate considerable discussion among Folk Alliance membership.

Some of the issues facing the Alliance may stem from the massive range and body of material under the folk umbrella. While bluegrass has very specific elements and alternate relative styles, references to folk music and dance connote much broader interpretations.

Art Menius responds by pointing out that some issues like whether folk music should be sold have been debated since the 1930s or earlier. "We are under an incredibly broad umbrella. There's no genre with a scope as wide as folk especially if you include world music in the equation. Some approach the music and dance completely commercially and others approach it totally as an art form. Part of what is so exciting is that the Alliance is providing the enormous umbrella that encompasses the variety of these people and styles."

Another issue raised is whether the organization is largely becoming dominated by singer-songwriters. Highly individualized, some feel that the singer-songwriters don't assimilate any common stylings or messages, and are driven primarily by a need to sell and promote their product in hopes of becoming the next Bob Dylan or Joni Mitchell. Some perceive that the singer-songwriters don't exhibit much interest in each other's music, or in older traditional music. Persons with these views say that, in contrast, the IBMA conference attendees exhibit strongly for the health of the music, as well as for their own career advancement.

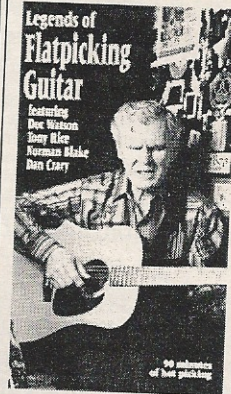
"Those are valid concerns," Menius replies. "The singer-songwriters are the people most comfortable with networking, hustling for gigs, showcasing, all the business trappings. That's why it is important to point out that we're not a trade organization. We want to educate about music and dance and celebrate the old masters who made the music available to us today. We hope to educate singer-songwriters about what's come before and have them realize that they are part of something much greater than their own music. Many of the singer-songwriters want to be stars. There are models who have achieved success--Bob Dylan, Joni

Mitchell, Suzanne Vega, Shawn Colvin. Those who have achieved a degree of mainstream success will definitely affect how people view things. We'll see how Alison Krauss having a [platinum-selling] album will affect people's thinking in the bluegrass community."

In the April 1995, issue of the London-based *Folk Roots* magazine, editor Ian Anderson referred to the 1994 Boston conference as "singer/songwriter hell." He found Portland, however, to be a more enjoyable event. "To be sure, the singer/songwriters were on the prowl again," Anderson writes, "but on the whole seemed somewhat less pushy and obvious than the previous year—maybe the hard-selling low-talents had faced reality and gone back to their day jobs (and their therapists). Or maybe they were just avoiding me! The general spirit was altogether more outgoing and sharing: last year [in Boston, 1994] half the people who stood up in workshops and panel discussions gave the impression they were mainly trying to draw attention to themselves, whilst this time 'round, contributions were much more interactive and genuinely helpful."

Anderson attended one session in Portland where veteran folk activist Manny Greenhill was interviewed by Jim Rooney. "I think it was Utah Phillips who made the point," Anderson recalls, "that whereas many of the generation of singer/songwriters who were around in the previous folk boom of the '60s were at least aware of their musical roots and antecedents and wrote songs on general or universal subjects, many of the current horde know nothing other than soft rock and the 'me' generation."

Dissent between traditional musicians and commercial folk singers is nothing new. History indicates that the conflicts have existed for decades. Menius refers to the book, *Wasn't That A Time*, edited by Ron Cohen (Scarecrow Press), a collection of papers presented at a conference in 1991 at Indiana University. "It quotes John Cohen as saying the New Lost City Ramblers viewed singer-songwriters as the enemy. They felt nothing but hostility toward them, saying the singer-songwriters seized performance opportunities that could otherwise have been made available to traditional and



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bluegrass artists. There's at least 35 years of bad blood that will take a while to overcome. John Cohen described the conflicts as another form of blacklisting. Not just by the House un-American Activities Committee, but also the commercial folk singers blacklisting the traditional singers."

The Folk Alliance publishes a bi-monthly newsletter that includes regional updates, and information on events, government affairs, schools, technology, recordings, books and organizations. In April 1995, Margaret Loomis joined the staff as office manager based in Washington, D.C. In July 1995, Art Menius took on new duties as conference manager and newsletter editor.

The organization also occasionally issues advocacy alerts on subjects such as postal rules affecting bulk mailing, or the way that licensing organizations like ASCAP and BMI do business. Chris

Lunn, 1994 Chair of the Folk Alliance Advocacy Committee, remarks, "I acted as the central clearinghouse for issues that affected any segment of our organization and then coordinated a combined effort to bring about a positive outcome on that issue. To continue our effectiveness on issues like visas, postal rates and eligibility, censorship, national funding for the arts, IRS rulings, mail order sales taxes, use of Brazilian rosewood, health insurance and a lot more, the Alliance needs to respond to issues quickly and in mass."

Art Menius affirms, "Advocacy alerts are a crucial thing we do to draw in the commonality of interest across many lines of genre and geography."

As part of its educational mission, Folk Alliance has issued two special publications in 1993. These two initial booklets are *Visas For Folk Artists To Tour The United States* by George Balderose and *Contracts For Corporate Sponsorship Of Concert Series* by Michael Melford.

Other resources available include six lists, available in printed form, on gummed mailing labels or on disk. The lists delineate presenters, broadcast media, print media, folk organizations, recording companies, and merchandisers/record stores.

"Our charge to attendees of our 1996 conference," states Art Menius, "is to build their own cultural and political awareness and to educate non-government and government organizations, the music industry and media about the value of the folk music and dance field. It is by developing professional relationships with other organizations that members of the folk music and dance community can communicate their views and needs."

Opportunities to build additional partnerships with the bluegrass community are being sought. At the last three conferences, the Folk Alliance benefited greatly from the assistance of such organizations as the Oregon Bluegrass Association, Boston Bluegrass Union, and Tucson Friends of Traditional Music.

"There are also many more opportunities at folk festivals than people in the bluegrass community realize," suggests Menius. "They haven't exploited that as well as they can. Joe Mullins and the Traditional Grass got booked into

the University of Chicago Folk Festival and someone said, 'You-all are the best group we've had up here since the Stanley Brothers.' It had been 30 years since the Stanleys had appeared. There are tremendous prospects, especially for traditional bluegrass groups at the folk festivals."

The Folk Alliance is a relatively young organization that has grown by leaps and bounds. There are many active, dedicated and involved people among the leadership. Debate taking place is healthy for a grassroots coalition that gains its strength from the people committed to folk music and dance. "We all have our different viewpoints and different musics and dance which are dear to our hearts," emphasizes Menius. "There will always be controversy and feistiness because our members do care so much, and we attract a diversity of people. That's good. It's better than folks just going along with the program without thinking about it. What I keep discovering is how deeply rooted so many of the debates are. So many are issues that can be traced back 50 or more years."

The Folk Alliance continues to reach out. They have entered into an agreement with the Network of Cultural Centers of Color whereby booking will be possible off their touring roster. Ties with the bluegrass community are getting stronger every year. Most agree that, while the Folk Alliance is presently very much a singer-songwriter scene, a stronger bluegrass presence and membership would improve the organization. "The more that bluegrass and old-time folk become involved," declares Menius, "the more we can serve their needs."

(For more information about the Folk Alliance, write to Folk Alliance, 1001 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Ste. 501, Washington, D.C. 20036; 202-835-FOLK (3655), Fax 202-835-3656, email fa@folk.org. In December 1995, they established a worldwide web site at URL <http://www.hidwater.com/folkalliance/>)



Joe Ross, of Roseburg, Oreg., presents an educational "Roots of Bluegrass Music" show at fairs, festivals and schools, demonstrating up to ten different instruments while discussing the music's development. He also plays mandolin with the Cold Thunder Bluegrass Band.

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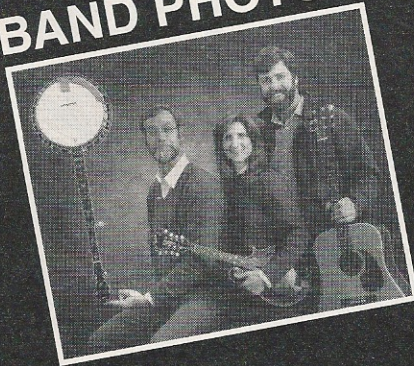


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