

Beyond the Ivory Tower: Reaching Out to the Community

by Angus Kress Gillespie

Established in 1975, the New Jersey Folk Festival (NJFF) is an annual, free, not-for-profit family event, the oldest and largest in the state. Managed by undergraduate students at Rutgers, the State University, in New Brunswick, the festival is held on the Douglass Campus, always on the last Saturday of April, rain or shine. Each year the festival attracts 12,000 to 15,000 in attendance and is one of the City of New Brunswick's largest regularly scheduled events. Inclusion of the local community ranging from carnival-style food vendors to local merchants, to political figures, government workers, businesses, hobby groups, religious leaders, media folks, community scholars, and ethnic groups, ensures the vitality and genuine community support of the festival.

The mission of the NJFF is to preserve, defend, and protect the music, culture, and arts of New Jersey. Therefore, the primary focus of the NJFF is on traditional indigenous music, crafts, and food of the diverse ethnic and cultural communities within New Jersey and its surrounding region. Typically, the event features three stages of music, dance, and workshops as well as a juried craft market, a children's activities area, and a delicious array of food vendors who offer everything from hamburgers, vegetarian fare, and funnel cake to a wide variety of ethnic foods. In addition there is a folk marketplace and a Heritage Area that offers a close-up look at that year's ethnic or geographic theme.

Each year the festival strives for diversity in selecting performers, not only seeking out not only talented "American" folk revival artists, but also reaching out via field work to the

many ethnic communities found within New Jersey. The annual Heritage Spotlight contributes an essential connection to these varied cultural groups represented in the state's population.

In their landmark book *Folk Festivals: A Handbook for Organization and Management*, Joe Wilson and Lee Udall warned the most common mistake of all was “the tendency of organizers to underestimate the amount of planning and preparation needed.” In our work of organizing the New Jersey Folk Festival for over thirty years, we can heartily agree with that sentiment. However, we can ease our burden somewhat by identifying the communities that we serve and by figuring out how they can help us. In the case of the New Jersey Folk Festival, we can readily identify seven distinct communities: 1) the university community, 2) the folk revival community, 3) the media community, 4) ethnic communities, 5) the political community, 6) the business community, and 7) the larger New Jersey public community. Each of these communities can offer something; each can bring something to the table, if we can only figure out how to tap into it. We have to work hard to build relationships with the people who help us—whether with money, goods, services, or advice. Favors from individuals are acknowledged with personal notes of thanks. Large contributors are recognized in printed materials such as press releases, flyers, posters, and the program book. Let us take up these communities, one at a time.

The NJFF is first and foremost a creature of Rutgers—The State University of New Jersey. The University provides a supportive structure for the festival in several important ways. The fact that there is a course on “Folk Festival Management” means that I can, as a folklorist-professor, devote one-fourth of my teaching responsibility to the fourteen students who are officially enrolled in this internship-type course. The students, in turn, carry out most all of the routine management duties of the festival.

At the same time, the NJFF is a creature of Douglass College, the women's college of Rutgers University. The event takes place on the Douglass campus, and the NJFF has always provided leadership opportunities its young women. Fortunately, Douglass College provides an annual operating subsidy that goes to offset heavy infrastructure costs incurred by using the college's groundskeepers, custodians, electricians, security guards, emergency medical technicians, and police.

Our second community is the folk revival community of New Jersey. Some professional folklorists have criticized us for our inclusion of folk revivalists at our festival, but we defend our outreach to this community. We are following in the footsteps of Sarah Gertrude Knott, who held the first National Folk Festival in St. Louis in 1934. Knott made a distinction between *survival* and *revival* performers, and she presented both types at her festivals. Today, professional folklorists often speak of *urban folksong revival performers* or *folk revival performers* with disdain. However, we have welcomed this community at the New Jersey Folk Festival. Typically, they perform on the same stages as our unimpeachably traditional performers. We feel that the key is to tell an honest story about an honest festival. We do not try to pass off revival performers as tradition bearers. We make the background of each performer crystal clear in our printed program book, and we instruct our emcees to do the same in their introductions on the stage.

We maintain our connection with the folk music revival community through both formal and informal means. For example, in formal terms, the New Jersey Folk Festival is an institutional member of the North American Folk Music and Dance Alliance (known as the Folk Alliance). From time to time, we communicate informally with members of the Princeton Folk Music Society, an organization that has encouraged the growth of folk music for some forty

years (it was in place before the NJFF was founded). We also consult from time to time with such organizations as the Minstrel Coffeehouse of Morris Township, New Jersey; the Folk Project of Northern New Jersey; and the Princeton Country Dancers who sponsor weekly participatory American contra dances and English folk dances. In the most practical terms, working with the leaders of these organizations puts us in touch with potential performers, emcees, and sound technicians. At the same time, many of their rank-and-file members are perennial patrons of our festival.

Our third community is the media community. We make it a point to monitor folk music available on local radio stations. We keep the hosts of these shows advised about the content of our upcoming festivals so that they can convey this information to their listeners. Since they are expert announcers who display enormous self-confidence in front of large audiences, we often employ such radio hosts as emcees for our festival. As longtime supporters of the NJFF, they often invite selected members of our student staff to discuss our festival and its performer in advance of the event. But we must always keep in mind that airtime is a valuable commodity, and the host is the ultimate judge of what gets attention on his or her show. We always make it a habit to thank the host and acknowledge his or her help in our printed materials.

For example, we work with Richard Skelly, host of “Low Budget Blues” which airs Thursday nights from 8:00 to 10:00 pm on WRSU, 88.7 FM, the Rutgers University radio station. Skelly often interviews nationally known blues musicians who are passing through New Brunswick on their way to New York or Philadelphia. Also on that same station is Mark Corso, host of “Homemade Music” which airs Sunday mornings from 10:00 am to 12 noon. Corso has a keen ear for identifying up and coming singer-songwriters.

In addition, we work with John Weingart host of “Music You Can’t Hear on the Radio,” which airs on Sundays evenings from 7:00 to 10:00 pm on WPRB, 103.3 FM, the Princeton University radio station. Weingart’s show mixes folk music, bluegrass, blues, and humor. Carol Beaugard, a frequent main stage emcee for the NJFF, is one of the leading voices for bluegrass and country music in New Jersey and the surrounding area. Her show, “The Sunrise Saloon,” airs Thursday mornings from 6:00 am to 9:00 am on WFDU, 89.1 FM, and features a mix of classic and contemporary bluegrass music including special segments on bluegrass gospel.

By the same token, we work closely with print journalists in order to get the word out on the NJFF. In every case, it is important to identify the person who covers music and concert review on each paper. We start with the *Daily Targum*, the Rutgers student newspaper, distributed free on campus, Monday through Friday, with a circulation of 17,000. We also work with the *U.S.I Newspaper*, a weekly distributed free to local business and professional offices, with a readership of 100,000. More important is the local regular newspaper, *The Home News Tribune*, with a paid circulation of 70,000 daily and 81,000 on Sunday; this paper covers New Brunswick and the surrounding community. Most important of all is *The Star Ledger*, with a paid circulation of 405,000 daily and 682,000 on Sunday; this is the largest statewide paper in New Jersey. Our task in getting the attention of busy journalists is made somewhat easier by the fact that every year we have a different theme or “heritage spotlight” where we focus our attention on a particular ethnic community. Changing the theme every year provides a “hook” for the journalist writing about our festival. The local press has been conditioned to ask us, “What’s the theme this year?” There is a sense of renewal, a sense that we are presenting something fresh every year. This notion leads us to our next category.

Our fourth category embraces ethnic communities. New Jersey is uniquely blessed with ethnic diversity—some 113 distinct ethnic groups have been identified by the department of state. Using ethnicity as a key, one can, with some effort, recruit musicians who truly learned their music in home and community. Over the years those groups featured in the festival included, for example, Cuban, Dutch, Scottish, Filipino, Irish, Italian, Haitian, Greek, Lebanese, and Puerto Rican. Doing the fieldwork to identify these bearers of tradition has taken us into all twenty-one counties of New Jersey. Ironically, our lean budget forces us to do high-quality, intensive fieldwork. It's not possible simply to pick up the phone and talk to agents who book expensive acts. We are forced to find grass-roots community and church groups. Once the artist is identified, we have to document the tradition, and then invite the tradition-bearer to the folk festival. The artist enjoys the publicity and the recognition of being invited to a major folk event and returns to the community with a renewed pride in the tradition.

Our fifth category is the political community. Over the years, we have received financial and other support from the state, county, and local levels of government. From time to time, we have received assistance from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts; however, our most consistent support has come from the government of our local county, Middlesex County, most notably the Cultural and Heritage Commission. At the county level, we find the paperwork is simpler and the procedures most straightforward. In addition to modest financial grants, the county makes available every year their "Showmobile," which is a portable trailer that opens out to become our main stage. When open, the stage platform area is 13.5' X 36' and is about four feet off the ground. Another helpful county agency is the Middlesex County Improvement Authority. Among other things, this is the agency that runs the county golf courses, and they have generously made available golf carts for us to carry about equipment and personnel

throughout the grounds on festival day. The field is quite large and therefore these motorized carts get us around more quickly than walking. On the day of the festival, performers with their instruments who need assistance moving from stage to stage are given a lift. We have gratefully acknowledged the help of Middlesex County in all of our printed materials, and recently we made Middlesex County Freeholder Stephen J. Dalina “Honorary Chair” of the NJFF.

In similar fashion, the City of New Brunswick has also been helpful to us in many ways. For example, the Department of Parks lends us a number of outdoor picnic tables for use by our patrons. We set these up in front of the food vendor area, creating a sort of food court, a convenient place for people to sit and eat and visit. From time to time, the New Brunswick Fire Department has lent us a ladder truck, when, for example, we have needed to display a large flag. In one of our previous festivals, we made the Mayor of New Brunswick, the Honorable James Cahill “Honorary Chair” of the NJFF.

Our sixth category is the business community. It goes without saying that the business of a profit-making corporation is to make money. Yet businesses do give to charity, so it makes sense to ask. With our long, well-established history, extensive media coverage and our track record of consistently high attendance, we are able to provide exceptional, high-profile visibility for sponsors. On occasion, we have received tremendously generous support from large corporations, underwriting nearly the entire cost of the festival for a single year. In 1991 the festival was sponsored by New Jersey Bell Yellow Pages; in 2000, by Cablevision. However, this kind of corporate support, in our experience, is only for a short time. Unrestricted gifts from large corporations on an ongoing basis seem to be rare.

While corporate support is difficult, the local business community presents a different picture. Individual contributions are generally small, but taken together enough of them can be

an important source of revenue. To maintain visibility in the small business community, we have taken out membership in the Middlesex County Regional Chamber of Commerce, and we make it a point to attend one of their functions every month. We feel that we have a social obligation to come down from the Ivory Tower and to foster better “town-gown” relations. In return, we have been helped in many ways. Because of our partnership with the local community, we have received both tangible support and intangible goodwill.

We have been eager to recruit local business people with an interest in the folk arts for our Board of Trustees. Such people often bring not only expertise but also significant support. Several of them have consistently and generously donated money, purchased program book advertising, and provided in-kind services. Others buy small advertisements in our program book, often year after year, and we appreciate their support.

In the same vein, when it came time to choose a bank, we deliberately avoided the national chains and went with a local hometown bank, Magyar Savings Bank, founded in 1922 mainly to serve the local Hungarian immigrant community. We felt that big banks are not necessarily better. Although we are a relatively small depositor, our support has not gone unrewarded. Last year, Magyar bought a full-page advertisement in our program book.

Our seventh and final category is the larger public community, whom we hope to reach as our patrons. Since our festival is located in central New Jersey, only five minutes from the New Jersey Turnpike (Exit 9), the NJFF attracts festival-goers from throughout the state, the metropolitan area, as well as from far away as New England and Virginia. However, our most recent demographic survey indicates that fully 40% of our audience comes from our own Middlesex County, and 25% comes from the surrounding New Jersey counties of Somerset,

Union, Monmouth, and Mercer. The remaining New Jersey counties make up 25% of the audience, and only 10% of our visitors are from out-of-state.

Although our festival takes place on a college campus with many young people, we do attract a wide range of ages. Those 25 and under make up 29% of our audience; those 26 to 44 make up 30%; those 45 to 54 make up 16%; and those 55 and over make up 25%.

Unsurprisingly, we do attract a rather well educated crowd. High school graduates make up 20% of our audience; current college students, 20%; college graduates 30%; and those with advanced degrees, 30%.

Ours is not a particularly wealthy crowd. Those with household incomes of \$30,000 and under make up 54% of our audience; those with incomes between \$31,000 and 74,000 make up 31%; and those with incomes of \$75,000 and higher make up only 15%.

Given the modest income of our patrons, we have opted for a somewhat unusual business model. The admission to the festival is free. Paradoxically, we believe that we have strengthened the festival's position by making admission to the public free of charge. The resulting large audience provides a customer base to patronize our craft vendors and food vendors, both of whom pay ground rent fees which subsidize our festival tradition-bearers. It is our hope that patrons will be attracted to our festival not only because it is free, but because of the artistic quality of our programming. Once there on the ground, we hope that our visitors will spend money with our vendors. It is the vendors, more than anyone else, who consistently support the festival year after year. As long as we are able to continue to provide large crowds, we should have no trouble attracting quality vendors.

Here in New Jersey, the most industrialized and the most densely populated state in the union, we have been able to bring together all seven of these diverse communities. It is a

wholesome family activity, full of fun. The event takes place on a spacious, three-acre lawn in the springtime, ironically only five minutes away the New Jersey Turnpike, the widest and most heavily traveled highway in America. Once a year, in an annual celebration, we have the honor of gathering these many people from communities across the state. It is an amazing process to showcase at a single event so many exemplary practitioners of music, crafts, and occupational traditions. With the cooperation and help of many different segments of our society, we present the cultural heritage of New Jersey in an educational and respectful way on the campus of the State University.