

Tumbleweed Music Festival is going into its 9th year and it has become one of the Northwest's favorite festivals. This year's festival will be September 3rd and 4th, the Saturday and Sunday of Labor Day weekend. Tumbleweed is produced and sponsored by Three Rivers Folklife Society and co-sponsored by the City of Richland. The City supplies the infrastructure of beautiful Howard Amon Park on the banks of the Columbia River and adjacent to downtown Richland. The park is also the location of the Richland Community Center which houses the indoor dance stage, large and small workshop spaces and the hospitality center where abundant amounts of food are available for performers and volunteers. As the park facilities have expanded and improved, so has Tumbleweed evolved and grown since our humble beginnings in 1997.



The Tumbleweed Music Festival grew out of a need and desire of members of 3 Rivers Folklife Society, in the Tri-City area of Eastern Washington, to have our own festival. Three Rivers Folklife Society was conceived in about 1987 after our first concert with Dan Maher. John and I opened for Dan's concert and invited anyone interested in starting a folklife group to a brunch in our backyard the next day. I think we had about 10 people at that brunch but the idea of a local folklife society was sparked. It actually took about a year to start putting on regular concerts and contra dances and another two years until we became incorporated and got our 501(C)3 status. We started a monthly coffeehouse and held concerts once or twice a month as well. Some of us in the group were involved in producing festivals for a local festival production group, *Sunfest*. We helped put on a bluegrass festival for 3 years and a Children's Festival for four years. Then *Sunfest* had some financial set backs and eventually went out of business, leaving a huge void in our local area as far as festivals go.

3 Rivers Folklife had already put on a small scale Women's Music Festival for three years. Many of us had been performing for years at Folklife and the Yakima Folklife Festival, the Oregon Folklife Festival, etc. We knew how much work festival production is, yet we knew we needed to have a local folk festival, and with the demise of *Sunfest*, we were the logical group to do it. One driving force was the fact that as our concert and coffeehouse series expanded and prospered and our network of performers and contacts grew, we found ourselves with many more people who wanted to play at our venues than we had weekends in the months. A festival was a way to have lots of our favorite performers all at one time. So a small group of us bit the bullet and started to organize the first Tumbleweed Music Festival in 1997.

As you would expect, folks on the first Tumbleweed committee had different ideas of what we wanted the festival to be. We all agreed that we wanted the festival to be free to the public. This seems to be a hallmark of the Northwest's folk festivals that we had experienced. *Sunfest* had also got into financial trouble because their festivals started out free with local and regional performers and evolved into having big name performers at outrageous costs and charging more and more for admission at the gate. Our first concept was to be free during the day and have a big name folk performer do a paid concert on Saturday night. We went after Arlo Guthrie and discovered we had to do a proposal and make a bid, and of course our bid was rejected- thank God! That's when we went to Plan B - the option that has served us well over the years- choosing four headline acts from the folks who have applied to perform at the festival. We pay the headliners a percentage of the gate and the concert still ends up to be a major income generator for the festival. We also charge for the Sunday evening contra dance and pay the bands and caller a set fee and usually come out ahead.

All out of town performers at Tumbleweed get a travel stipend depending on miles traveled. This year we will be raising the travel reimbursement due to rising gas costs. Local performers still play for free, but like most performers at the festival they play for love not money. We have discovered over the years that we do not have any trouble getting people to apply for Tumbleweed because even though we don't pay much, we treat our performers very well. Performers love Tumbleweed! We sell their CD's and tapes and don't take any cuts. We feed them wonderful meals in our comfortable hospitality center. Chris Mesford is our chief cook and hospitality chair and she outdoes herself every year. We've come a long way from the early days when we served meals in the yellow-jacket-plagued gazebo area! We offer other perks that save our performers money, with optional home stays and discounts at local hotels and motels. We used to offer free camping at our local campground in Kennewick but it is now shut down so we can only offer camping in our backyards and driveways or suggest other local RV parks. We even offer on-site massages to our performers and volunteers!

Our greatest gift to our participants is our gracious, friendly and appreciative audience. Our audience has grown over the years as local people as well as Northwest regional folks discover Tumbleweed. Once they have experienced this festival, they come back year after year and wouldn't miss it. They get hooked on the ambience, the family feeling and the music. I don't know how many people (mostly local folks) have told me, "We didn't know we liked folk music!"

At its heart, Tumbleweed is still a folk festival even though we conceived it as a broader thing-a *music* festival which includes a broad spectrum of music and dance genres as well as arts and crafts.

We have drama by the Academy of Children's Theatre and we have had opera and classical music. What we haven't had is hard rock music, though we have some folk/rock and reggae and pretty rockin' "Youngblood old-time music" with bands like Seattle's Creeping Time. Some folks want to stay a strictly acoustic music festival and others feel it doesn't hurt to be a little broader in scope. When we first started Tumbleweed, we accepted almost everyone who applied and scheduled people once or twice just to fill in the slots. Now that we receive many more applicants than we have space for, we can afford to be more selective and weed out the acts that don't seem appropriate for Tumbleweed. Our first criterion is quality, but other considerations like technical needs and volume also come in to play. We have a committee of five people who each listen to all submissions and give each one a numerical score on a scale of 1 to 5 (a pretty subjective process). These scores are averaged and then all performers are ranked in order according to total score and the top 80 or so are scheduled for the festival. If there are openings later on, some of those on the waiting list are scheduled in. It is difficult now because it is hard too turn down people who have appeared regularly at the festival and new ones who we wish we could have but just don't have room for. We are trying to figure out how to add a fifth outdoor stage so we can accommodate more acts or eventually go to three days instead of just two, but none of this will happen this year. In choosing our four acts for the evening concert we consider ranking and score, but also history, draw and a balanced program. We have had some repeat headliners but we have instituted the three-year rule so we won't schedule the same act if they have headlined in the last two years.



The Red-Haired Stepchild (3 or 4
Players)



The Pyrate Band

Since the beginning, one special feature of Tumbleweed has been the songwriting contest. Our

contest is somewhat unique because each year we have a different theme and we ask that the submitted songs fit the

theme. The theme is a challenge, but we try to pick themes that are pretty broad like "Peace", "Energy", "Songs for Working Folk", etc. This year's theme was "Journey or Journeys" which was supposed to be sort of tied in to our regional emphasis on Lewis and Clark. We got a lot of road songs and songs about travel and inward and outward journeys, but none about Lewis and Clark! We actually got 47 entries, which was the most ever! We had an impartial pre-judge who narrowed the selection down to 10 finalists and three alternates. The 10 finalists will perform their songs at the festival for 3 judges. The winner of the contest will receive a monetary prize and a special copper wire trophy made by my husband John, and they will perform their song at the evening concert. My dad, who was a metal sculptor, made the trophies for many years, but now John has taken over the job. 2nd and 3rd prize winners will also receive checks and mini-trophies.

Another special event at the festival is a band scramble which is open to everyone at the festival. Names are drawn from a hat and *ad hoc* bands are put together. They have one hour to pick two songs or tunes, practice and then perform. It's crazy, but a good time is had by all and there are prizes for all participants. Our free Sunday night nautical concert will be back by popular demand with about 20 or more nautical singers on stage trading songs with the audience joining in on

the choruses and refrains. More nautical singing follows at the participants' party at a local pizza parlor. This party is supposed to be exclusively for participants and groupies, but the "groupy" category keeps expanding as we all become one big happy family and no one wants the festival to end.

Tumbleweed is a great participatory experience. Performers not only entertain, they also teach. We have about 40 free workshops for musicians, singers and dancers. There is an open mike stage where anyone can sign up to perform. Jamming is encouraged and flourishes around the Community Center. Our dance venue has both performances and participatory workshops. We have all sorts of dancing from international folk to line dancing, modern dances, Ballet Folklorica, Irish dancing, swing, waltz, square dance and contra dancing. The Sunday contra dance at the Community Center ends the festival for those not singing shanties at the pizza party.

Tumbleweed Music Festival is a labor of love. It is entirely run by volunteers. Over 100 volunteers work at the festival itself, manning the information booth, doing sound, cooking and serving food, being stage managers and emcees, gofers, button sellers, etc. Most of these volunteers are local folks and members of Three Rivers Folklife, but even our performers are getting involved as volunteers. About 20 core people do the bulk of the

planning and pre-festival work like fundraising, publicity, performer selection, scheduling, graphics, logistics, volunteer recruitment, meal planning, etc.

No one gets paid, not even the Director/Coordinators. Janet Humphrey was coordinator for 3 years followed by Kendal Smith for 2 years. This is my 4th year and I am hoping to find someone to mentor into the job, but I am not burnt out yet. We volunteer because we love and believe in Tumbleweed. Our performers don't perform for the money either. They are also dedicated volunteers.

One of our goals in designing Tumbleweed was to build community. Tumbleweed is our gift to our local community. We offer a broad based easily accessible musical experience with something for all ages and musical tastes. Our local

community has supported us with sponsorships, grants, and lots of in-kind donations. We receive grants from the City of Richland's hotel/motel tax funds to do out-of-town and regional publicity, and some of our local hotels and motels offer significant discounts to performers and attendees who indicate when they register in advance that they are coming for Tumbleweed.

Our local audience affirms that we are doing the right thing and they love our festival. The festival strengthens a sense of community in our folklife society as we all work together to put on the festival. Finally, Tumbleweed builds community among Northwest musicians and dancers as we gather at the end of summer to meet and interact and reunite with the folk family.



The Mid-Columbia Regional Ballet – Peter and the Wolf



Artists and Crafts Booths

In many ways, Tumbleweed is like a family reunion. Many people have told us it's "like Folklife used to be". We are not trying to replicate or compete with Folklife, but we are a very shrunk down version of our mother festival. We do dancers as we gather at the end of summer to meet and interact and reunite with the folk family. In many ways, Tumbleweed is like a family reunion. Many people have told us it's "like Folklife used to be". We are not trying to replicate or compete with Folklife, but we are a very shrunk down version of our mother festival. We do admit to wanting to be an alternative to Bumbershoot and in many people's minds we definitely are. But that's a whole other story.

So, if you like small crowds, appreciative audiences, participatory music and dance, great hospitality, riverfront parks, sun and shade, good food, arts and crafts, family fun, meeting and greeting the folk community, and a heck of a good party,

come on down to Richland on Labor Day weekend. As they used to say to that little kid Mikey, "Try it!" You'll like it!

To find out more about Tumbleweed Music Festival, check out our web site at www.3rfs.org or call 509-528-2215.

Micki Perry is a founding member of 3 Rivers Folklife Society. She is the 3 RFS concert booking

agent and Coordinator of Tumbleweed Music Festival. She is also a songwriter whose parody songs are infamous, plays autoharp, and has performed with her husband John for almost 40 years.

