

The Anatomy of the North Coast Folk Festival

By Jim Portillo and Harry {doc} Babad

Like many "folkies" over the years, when younger, I sought out new festivals (or old) that I could tune into. The news of a new festival, The North Coast Folk Festival, that Hank Cramer was part of would have been an obvious target for my attention.

This is what got publicized:

The first annual "North Coast Folk Festival" will take place at the Ocean Shores Convention Center on Saturday and Sunday, September 23 -24, 2006.

Songwriter Tom Paxton <<http://www.tompaxton.com/>> will headline the first North Coast Folk Festival in Ocean Shores on Saturday and Sunday.

Tom will top a varied bill that also includes the Canadian Celtic music sensation, Tillers Folly <<http://www.tillersfolly.com/>>; Mary Flower <<http://www.maryflower.com/>>, a renowned blues artist from Colorado and New Orleans; Tom May <<http://www.tommayfolk.com/home.htm>>, host of the nationally syndicated radio program "River City Folk" and a veteran of shows with Alabama, Willie Nelson and Gordon Lightfoot; Hank Cramer <<http://www.hankcramer.com/>>, a Northwest favorite from Winthrop, WA with his compelling songs of the sea and his entertaining stage show; and True North, an award winning bluegrass duo from Salem, OR.

There will be concert sets, workshops and an open mike for emerging performers and singer songwriters.

All performances will take place at the Ocean Shores Convention Center or Galway Bay Restaurant and Pub.

These days with the advent of the Internet, besides leaning about an event, it is easy to Google the various participants, that is if you're not already one of their fans. So what more could one ask for then a great mix of Celtic, Blues, Nautical, and the best of the singer-songwriters. Now I didn't get to the festival, but thanks

to a heads up from Hank Cramer, eTALK has a first hand report on the festival.

I picked this up to share with you, our eTALK subscribers, after not only reading it, which made me wish I'd been there, but also Hank Cramer's comment that its writer is Jim Portillo -- you may remember him sitting in at the Kingston Trio and Gordon Lightfoot workshops at Tumbleweed. He's a good singer and guitarist, and did a nice job of summarizing the first-ever North Coast Folk Festival.



This is, mostly, Jim Portillo's account of the North Coast Folk Festival, sharing not only the event but of his response to being able to participate and jam with the headliners. Jim, thank you for sharing!

This is a festival that, if repeated, should be on our travel agendas.

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The Northcoast Folk Festival
Festival Memories by Jim Portillo
Edited and annotated by Harry {doc} Babad

It's hard to believe that something I've been anticipating, planning for, and even helping to spread the word to folks for the past couple of months is now over. Wow! It is true that time flies when one is having fun. This weekend's Northcoast Folk Festival, held in Ocean Shores, WA. It was a great deal of fun for everyone involved, whether one was a performer, a worker, or an attendee.

Thanks to Tom May and Peter Jordan (the two visionaries responsible for this first festival) it was a weekend packed with fantastic live music, workshops, and an overall opportunity to engage with people in the Northwest Folk community.

The Venues – For the festival, Tom and Peter had booked the Ocean Shores Convention Center as its main location. In the convention center, there was a room that held the main stage,

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another smaller room used for workshops, and finally a third room that for an open microphone [mic] stage.

A second location for the festival was the nearby Galway Bay {Irish} Pub, which had a stage for acts, as well food and beverages to satisfy all tastes. That pub ended up being a great setting for smaller and more intimate concerts.

Ocean Shores is 135 mi from Seattle, about 3 hours 25 minutes drive. It's a mere 328 mi from Richland, taking about 7 hours to get there – you do drive the speed limit don't you?

The rest of this *blog* will be slanted from my point of view as a festival attendee and casual participant.

Saturday Doings – For me, the festival started off by catching the opening act of the afternoon. They were a husband/wife duo from Salem Oregon (Dan Wetzel and Kristen Granger) called True North. A few things that immediately stood out about this group were Dan's outstanding guitar picking and Kristen's striking vocals and lyrics. Dan's guitar picking was very crisp and always right on! From what I understood, Dan had recently had a thumb injury that was rather serious, but that still didn't stop him from continuing to play. I believe that this weekend was the first time he was able to use a thumb pick and go back to picking the way he'd been used to doing before his accident.

Dan Wetzel used to play with several Bluegrass bands back in Bozeman, Montana and continued finding opportunities to play music once he moved to Salem. It's hard to describe his picking though. He definitely flat picks, but sometimes, it's as if he's doing both flat and finger-picking. As for Kristen, not only were her lyrics and vocals powerful and evocative, but she also has a superb ability to deliver the songs that she sings and writes. One minute, Kristen is belting out a song like "Luck In My Eyes" with all the gusto in the world. Then the next, she's singing a beautiful love song, like "September Rose." Anyone who listens to Dan and Kristen can't help but be drawn to their brand of Country/Americana music.

Hank Cramer and the '60s Folk Revival

After having heard True North, I attended the first workshop of the festival, which was led by Hank Cramer. It dealt with the

songs and some of the events of the '60s Folk Revival. Hank's workshops are similar to song circles – he likes to engage his participants and gets them singing. If people have instruments (and even if some don't), he invites people to play and lead songs related to the workshop topic. As is usual for Hank at events like the Tumbleweed Music Festival [TMF] and Seattle's Folklife Festival, he had a good and enthusiastic turnout. There were plenty of people that led songs, and Hank also was able to tell the history of some of those songs, especially if they were songs of the Kingston Trio.

As a performer and workshop leader, Hank Cramer is very engaging; one might say almost addicting. The musical focus of his concerts and workshops are unpredictable. In a set, one might hear a few cowboy songs, some lively Celtic songs, plenty of love ballads, and perhaps a song or two dealing with the life of soldiers fighting in wars. Hank of course is also a nautical music expert so that will sometimes be part of a workshop or set. Of course, Hank's jokes and stories to go along with his music as is his high audience catching energy. One never knows what will occur with Hank Cramer's shows or workshops. All you can be sure of is that they're well worth our time and that everyone will have a great time!

Blues Pickin' with Mary Flower

A second workshop was lead by Mary Flower. It dealt with blues finger-picking and accompaniment. Mary Flower is an accomplished guitarist who plays a lot of blues and a lot of music done in the Travis style of finger-picking. She is from Portland, Oregon, and is considered a Northwest treasure.

[Unfortunately, due to going to check out part of another act, I didn't get to attend all of her workshop. The little I did hear was excellent.] Mary was demonstrating a few different finger-picking techniques and answering questions from the audience. From talking to some of the folks who attended the workshop, it too was a great one! [Editors note: I'd love to see Mary Flower and Hawkeye Herman trading licks at some festival - talk about a dueling blues riff moment.]



The Songwriters Special, Tom Paxton and Bruce Coughlan

One of the moments several of us had been waiting for happened at the third workshop, which dealt with songwriting. This was going to be the workshop that would be led by the headliner of the Northcoast Festival, Mr. Tom Paxton. Tom's co-presenter was Bruce Coughlan of the group Tiller's Folly. The workshop was wonderful. It was done in more of a conversational tone rather than in a lecture format. Both gave us some advice, tips, and strategies on song writing, and they were perfectly willing to answer questions as well.

The main message to us from both of these accomplished songwriters is that in order to be a good songwriter, one needs to write a lot and write every day! Yes, there was more to it, and with any luck, the tape came out OK to where I can go back, take notes, and make a good summary. However, the main jist was that no matter how good or bad the lyrics are, people just need to write and keep on writing!

Tiller's Folly, Celtic Songs and More

Before the final evening concert, which was Tom Paxton's, Tiller's Folly took the stage for an hour long set. Tiller's Folly is a group from Canada who does a mixture of Celtic, songs of the Northwest, Americana, and anything else that fits their style of playing. I think that if it weren't for Tom Paxton being the headliner, these guys would have been the stars of the show. Wow!!! They had an incredible sound to them. All three are accomplished musicians.

Bruce Coughlan is the guitarist and singer/songwriter of the group. He has a marvelous voice that personally reminds me of John Cowan's (Of Newgrass Revival). His lyrics are also powerful and eloquent! Bruce is versatile in his song delivery. At first, he might sing a beautiful love song like, "Irish Rose" with plenty of conviction, and a while later, he'll completely change modes and sing a lively Irish tune like, "Water At The Bar."

Nolan Murray is the fiddle/mandolin player. The way he plays both instruments is just incredible. He can start a song off by playing the mandolin, and during a brief instrumental break done by a band mate, he gets his fiddle, begins playing it –knocking one's socks off!

Finally, Laurence Knight is not only the producer of the band, but he is the one who lays down the foundation with his bass playing. The things one will see/hear him do with the bass will leave one awestruck! Tiller's Folly was a hit during each set they played throughout the weekend. Wow!!

...And Now Here's Paxton

I guess it goes without saying that the high point of the festival was being able to enjoy Tom Paxton in concert. At first, it seemed as if he was not going to make it due to a flight cancellation. He was able to rebook a flight from Washington DC for early Saturday morning and still make it for his 4:30 workshop. Tom had jetlag and was tired, but he still put on a wonderful concert.

Hank Cramer shares: *Jim mentions the screw-up on Tom Paxton's flight from Dulles to Seattle. What he didn't mention was that my wife Kit saved the day by driving from Ocean Shores to SeaTac at 7:00 am to pick Tom up and deliver him to the festival. Tom's performance on the Saturday night main stage was superb.*



Paxton told us that what kept him going was the adrenalin and the great feeling he had in being able to play for us. Tom played so many of his classics, and of course, in typical Tom Paxton style, he had the audience singing right along with him on several of them. He got a standing ovation and did come back to do an encore.

He played a song he still felt was very poignant in modern times called "Peace Will Come." As tired as Tom was after the concert, he hung around for a little while to sign CDs and say hello to people. I found him to be a very personable fellow who still believes in what he does and who is willing to share his knowledge, thoughts, and songs with anyone desiring them. [As an aside, we're trying to get Hank Cramer to a Paxton workshop at TMF '07.]

Saturday Night After the Concerts

Once the concerts and workshops were over for the evening, Hank Cramer had a little musical gathering at his hotel suite. One of the great things about festivals is how they move from the formal to the informal. If you can get invited to a party, actually a song and licks swapping jam session, do it... It's as much fun as any part of a festival and you actually get to meet the musicians.



Green Room Paxton Jam - Hank Cramer, Dwight Holmes & Mark Iler



The Tiller Folly Band

A friend of mine named Carl Allen had been hanging out with my friend (Bill Rose) and I, and when Hank came up to invite Carl, he saw and invited us as well. I found it pretty cool being able to hang out and play music with Hank and some of his musician buddies. My friends, Michael Guthrie, Mark Iler (who also plays with Hank) and Rob Folsom were also there, along with other people I didn't know.

Rob Folsom is one of the most respected soundmen around the Northwest. He has helped Tom May with organizing music and workshop events in the past, and it was only fitting that he took care of the sound for this festival. [Talk about being a critical, yet often unheralded, asset to a festival.] In addition to doing a spectacular job at running sound equipment, Rob is a fine musician in his own right.

Back to the Party – People came and went for a while, but there were a good ten to twelve people there at any one time. We all took turns playing songs and joining in on others. It was just more of the way Hank likes doing music!

Some Great Personal Moments – I thought that one of the neatest parts of the party was toward the end, when several people had left, and Hank asked if I had a song to share. He and I both love the song “Chilly Winds” by John Stewart. So, since Hank recorded it on one of his albums, I asked if he’d do it. I was just initially doing some simple finger-picking, and then, it ended up that I was adding some nice accompaniment to what Hank was doing. Nobody else was playing but Hank and me. It sounded so sweet! The same thing happened when Rob Folsom played one of his original songs and I caught on to the chord structure and joined him. I think Bill Rose came in at the very end with some more guitar work, but for the most part, it was just Rob and I playing that song. It was such a confidence boost to have people like Hank Cramer and friends encouraging me to sing a song or have me playing their songs with them! It really helps one grow as a musician. I was on cloud nine by the end of the evening. I held my own pretty decently. Mark Iler (who I know from other open mics) would sometimes join me on some songs and do some excellent lead work! That was great as well!

Sunday Doings

Sunday afternoon was spent watching these same acts at the Galway Pub. For those of you who never attended anything but a formal concert venue, a pub is a break-out place to listen and share music. Just the venue itself livens up the players and loosens the audience.

The Galway Pub was fantastic place for having some fun and listening to good music. The first act was my good friend, Tom May. Tom played with the rest of his trio made up of Donnie Wright and Fuzzy Purcell. Tom had a good balance of lively songs (perfect for that particular setting), songs related to Historical events or places, and of course, ballads, which he does incredibly well. Tom ended his set with a neat song called “Blue Roads, Red Wine.” It’s a song that talks about four of his favorite things in life. Overall, his set was well received by the people at the pub.

True North, Tiller’s Folly, and then Hank Cramer followed Tom May. I certainly didn’t mind seeing more of all of these acts. In fact, I personally liked the way things worked. Saturday was devoted mainly to workshops and the main concert at the

convention center, while Sunday was spent at the less formal venue that raised the spirit of the festival even higher.

Something neat happened once True North finished their set. I was intending to introduce myself to both Dan and Kristen. I had e-mailed them after having heard their music, a week ago Saturday, on "River City Folk." I thought it was perfect timing. Anyway, after saying hi to Dan, Kristen came up to me (I was sitting almost at the very front, near the stage) and introduced herself to me. At that time, she didn't know who I was until I gave her my name.

Right away, she got excited to know that I was the person who had e-mailed her and Dan the week before. I guess they had been seeking me out throughout the festival because they wanted to meet me as well. Kristen and I talked for a little while, and we will definitely be in touch to see if we can make some Seattle gigs happen. Ah, the power of networking! I found both Dan and Kristen to be very approachable and genuine folks!

The festival finale was just what I'd expected. Tiller's Folly was already tearing it up with their lively music. Then, Tom May and Donny Wright came up to join them. Tom wanted as many of the performers as possible to do some songs together. Tom had obviously done songs with all of them on previous occasions. He, Donnie, and Tiller's Folly did a couple of songs before they brought up Ol' Hank Cramer to join them on the last three songs! Of course, we all joined in and had a blast! After all, that's expected at an Irish pub, right? There was even an encore, and Hank Cramer took that one and ended the Northcoast festival on a high note!

Festival Summary – There was not a huge turnout for this festival; however, there were enough people to make it a good one. I think there were some problems and glitches before things got started, which Tom May had mentioned, but they were invisible to the attendees. However, for being Tom's first festival, and considering the festival's location, I'd say that things went very well. Of course, Tom wants to make it bigger and better next year. One needs to start somewhere though, and this was a great start.

This was yet another weekend for the books, or at least, for my books. It was definitely a successful weekend for Tom and a very fun weekend for all of us who attended the Northcoast Folk Festival!