

The Renaissance of Folk Music in Boston: After the '60s

By Marilyn Rea Beyer and Lisa Hickler

WUMB presented a symposium on April 27 on the Boston folk music scene “after the '60s” as part of a week of activities leading up to the inauguration of UMass Boston Chancellor Dr. Michael Collins. Mark Schlesinger, Associate Vice President for Academic Technology at UMass Boston, moderated. The panelists were Scott Alarik, folk musician and *Boston Globe* folk critic; Kari Estrin, '80s folk music promoter, now an artists' consultant in Nashville; Bill Nowlin, co-founder of Rounder Records; and Dick Pleasants, host of Folk Radio WUMB's *The Morning Express*, and long-time host of *Folk Heritage* on WGBH-FM.

The growth of a folk culture

Scott Alarik described the process by which a new folk culture was cultivated in the 1970s. This culture had its roots in the 1960s. The '60s were “anomalous” because for a brief period, the commercial music industry “embraced folk music as part of the larger world of pop music.” When the music industry began to turn its back on folk music in the 1970s, many fans looked for ways “to keep this music going on their own.”

Lovers of southern mountain music began holding bluegrass festivals (“bluegrass” after Bill Monroe's band, the Bluegrass Boys). These fans realized that “they had to do more than just cultivate stars, and get them on records, and get them in concert; that they had



Photo by Harry Brett

From left to right: Dick Pleasants, Bill Nowlin, Kari Estrin, Scott Alarik

to create a culture, a modern culture, in which this music could flourish,” including passing the music on to the younger generation. “Instruction was always a big part of what happened at bluegrass festivals... Alison Krauss is a great example—a kid who grew up in this new bluegrass culture, going to fiddle contests, and falling in love, not just with the music, but with the social culture of the music.” Similarly “Celtic” music communities came into being, as well as communities around African music and women's music.

Three important developments in Boston included the founding of Rounder Records and Club 47, and the launch of the Me & Thee Coffeehouse in Marblehead by Anthony Silva. The Me & Thee was “absolutely the archetype for the community coffeehouses that are flourishing in Boston now.”

The role of independent music promoters

After performing at Sanders Theatre

in 1978 as part of a chorus, Kari Estrin “vowed on that day to produce a show” at the 1200-seat hall at Harvard despite the fact that there were few women in the field. Estrin launched Black Dog Productions with Len Rothenberg in 1980. Their first show, with members of England's Pentangle, sold 900 seats. By the end of the year most of their shows were selling out. The following year, Kari continued on with Black Dog Productions and launched a newsletter, *Black Dog Rag* which had a distribution of 7,000. Success morphed this newsletter into a 32-page magazine, the *Black Sheep Review*. Over all, Estrin produced around 70 shows between 1980 and 1986.

Estrin pointed to the importance of a constellation of individuals and venues, folk reporters and radio personalities, that were a key part of the fabric that nurtured a lively folk scene. “By 1983, the Boston folk scene was vibrant, and Boston had one of the most unique markets in the country. And that was

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