

## “The Best Laid Plans of Marx and Men” Mitch Podolak, Revolution, and the Winnipeg Folk Festival

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Volume 30, numéro 2, 2008

Hommage à Peter Narváez  
In Honour of Peter Narváez

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/019946ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/019946ar>

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### Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

### ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)  
1708-0401 (numérique)

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### Citer cet article

MacDonald, M. B. (2008). “The Best Laid Plans of Marx and Men”: Mitch Podolak, Revolution, and the Winnipeg Folk Festival. *Ethnologies*, 30(2), 73–91. <https://doi.org/10.7202/019946ar>

### Résumé de l'article

Mitch Podolak déclara que « Pete Seeger et Léon Trotsky déterminent tout dans ma vie, et surtout le Winnipeg Folk Festival ». Cet article analyse la création du Winnipeg Folk Festival (WFF) en 1974 comme étant la première tentative de Podolak de marier ses dix années d'endoctrinement politique trotskiste avec sa passion pour la musique traditionnelle. Son intention était de créer un festival folklorique canadien qui incarnerait la résistance politique du mouvement international trotskyste et permettrait de mettre le système démocratique capitaliste canadien au défi sur le plan culturel. Très largement influencé par l'utilisation que le parti communiste étasunien faisait de la chanson traditionnelle, Podolak était convaincu que cette dernière ainsi que sa mise en spectacle étaient socialement importantes. Cette importance croyait-il venait de la cohésion sociale qui pouvait se créer dans l'espace performatif du festival. Une fois soigneusement organisé, cet espace était en mesure de créer du sens. Les rapports entre le directeur artistique, le chanteur traditionnel, la chanson et le public du festival s'entremêlent pour donner de façon dialectique un sens à la chanson et à l'espace qui simultanément définissent la musique traditionnelle.

## “THE BEST LAID PLANS OF MARX AND MEN”

*Mitch Podolak, Revolution, and the Winnipeg Folk Festival*

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Folk music festivals are found in major centres across the Canadian west.<sup>1</sup> According to the Western Roots Artistic Directors' (WRAD)<sup>2</sup> website, fewer than 100 people organize festivals with annual budgets totalling over 13 million dollars, which are supported by 13,000 volunteers, and hire more than 860 artists and groups who perform for around 500,000 spectators. While much of the scholarship that deals with the North American folk revival situates it in the past tense (Cohen 1995, 2002; Mitchell 2007; Rosenberg 1993; Weissman 2005), folk music festivals remain alive and well.

Western Canadian folk music festivals, loosely organized in WRAD since 1999, began in 1974 with the Winnipeg Folk Festival. The present work, as a first step to situate what have become WRAD festivals,

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1. This article was adapted from a paper presented on 29 May 2006 at the FSAC conference at York University in Toronto in a panel dedicated to Peter Narvaez. It is my hope that this work will provide Peter Nárvaez with some modest support in his new role as Artistic Director of a music festival in Newfoundland.
  2. <http://www.wrad.ca/home.html>

focuses on interviews with the WFF founder, Mitch Podolak. I outline some key issues which inspired him to start the WFF, the organizational strategies he employed, and the political dimensions that brought these strategies to the fore. Not a historical outline of the early years of the WFF, this article is instead a critical exploration of how one crucial individual lived, received, and understood various fragments of history and how, informed with these understandings, he synthesised a practice in the form of a folk music festival. I contribute here both to academic studies exploring Canada's place in the folk revival, following the work laid out by Neil Rosenberg (1993) and Gillian Mitchell (2007), and to examinations of revival folk festivals, including the WFF (Greenhill 1995 and 2001; Greenhill and Thoroski 2003).

Podolak helped to develop folk festivals across Canada. He founded the Winnipeg Folk Festival, co-founded the Vancouver Folk Music Festival and the Calgary Folk Festival, and was instrumental in founding the Edmonton Folk Music Festival and the Stan Rogers Folk Music Festival in Nova Scotia. He is a highly sought-after consultant on festival operations. He is vocal about his oppositional political beliefs, and thus my exploration of his organizational concept for the WFF opens a window into how political activism has acted as a stimulus for the development of Western Canadian folk music festivals (Greenhill 2003).

### **This Machine Kills Fascists<sup>3</sup>**

Podolak credits his secular Jewish-Communist upbringing in post-World War II urban Toronto with his introduction to folk music. Political Jewish organizers developed a series of labour groups which in turn supported community cultural organizations. According to Podolak, mandolin orchestras and singing groups emerged everywhere there was a Jewish community. Centres were opened to teach children Yiddish and Hebrew. He recalls that when he finished "English" (public) school, he went to Jewish school for an additional hour each day. Songs and games were part of his experiences there. Even thirty years before Podolak encountered them, Jewish cultural institutions were influencing young people. In her biographical account of Jewish Canadian composer John Weinzwieg in the 1920s, Elaine Keillor comments:

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3. A handwritten caption on Woody Guthrie's guitar.

In the early 1920s John and his younger brother Morris were learning Yiddish and Jewish history, after public school hours, at the Workmen's Circle Peretz School and its summer Camp Yungeveit, just outside Toronto. This was the boys' first real opportunity to gain an understanding of their Jewish heritage, since their father did not attend synagogue. Joseph Weinzweig was like many of the Jewish immigrants who came to Toronto after the Revolution of 1905, who carried with them the latest ideological and cultural developments in the Pale and represented the entire spectrum of Jewish political radicalism (1994: 6).

As a "red-diaper" baby — someone with Communist parents — Podolak was very comfortable with Communism. As a child, he was not formally instructed in the political ideology; he lived with it daily. He grew up with Lenin's books lying around the house. Before coming to Canada, his father was a member of the Red Army under Trotsky and his mother was also an immigrant Communist. As Podolak says:

The Communist groups were started by these immigrants because of their experiences in Europe. Nationalism was a dangerous thing for Jews. Every time somebody decides to get patriotic, Jews ended up getting killed. So, internationalism was very important. Nationalism is a very bad disease. Whether the early Communists articulated it that way or not, that's essentially what the reaction was. These early Communists didn't escape from Communism; they escaped from a variety of forms of Fascism. Communism was a reaction to the treatment of people. It didn't come from aristocrats or religious orders; it came from the workers, the regular people (interview: 6 October 2005).

Podolak grew up in a Jewish enclave near Spadina Avenue in Toronto and has many memories of his early years: "I remember my father wielding a baseball bat protecting the Progressive Party sign that we had on our door" (interview: October 6, 2005). His later experiences with Pete Seeger brought his familial and personal relationship with the Left into focus. As he remembers: "The leadership of the Communist Party has a very European outlook on culture. There was always folk singing and dancing around. When we went to camp, we saw these adults singing these songs, these folksongs! I liked these songs and thought about them as camp songs and then I saw these guys on stage singing them" (interview: 7 October 2005).

Podolak explains that, "Jews were very radical of every persuasion. It was a natural order of things, working class people coming up with a sense of themselves mixed with internationalism. Workers of all countries

unite!” (interview: October 2, 2005). According to Podolak, the quiet Jewish elements in North America were in the minority before U.S. Senator McCarthy’s infamous Communist hunts. Before the 1950s, being political and outspoken was socially and culturally encouraged. As well, the programming at summer camps like Neivolt, outside Toronto, by the Communist Party (CP) brought elements of the social and political movement involving traditional music, People’s Songs, to children.

People’s Songs (1946-1949) was a short-lived organization of folk singers, choir directors, and labour activists under the leadership of Pete Seeger. Its overt goal was to collect, produce, and publish music for singing; its included goal was to act as a political movement to create a better world. Seeger brought his personal beliefs in the value and political use of folk music, and the relationship between music and political action is very clear in People’s Songs. Many of its members also belonged to the CP. The relationship was forged by CP members like Irwin Silber, who ran the business affairs for People’s Songs during their three and a half year life span. Silber would become the founding editor of *Sing Out! Magazine* in 1950, which took over the work, started by People’s Songs, of linking politics and song.

People’s Songs worked within labour circles, at rallies, and at strikes, to educate unions to use folksongs in their struggles. This work brought both welcome and unwanted attention. When the McCarthy committee started watching the group, many American members left. But the Canadian government’s reaction was similarly censorious: “In June 1948, Montreal city police confiscated copies of *The People’s Song Book* during the course of a raid on a number of Marxist and progressive bookshops, citing the famous Hayes Robinson composition of ‘Joe Hill’ that was often found in the books for sale” (Reuss 2000: 195).

Yet Seeger’s influence nevertheless made its way to Canada. As Podolak relates, “when my sister was at camp, Pete Seeger was brought to sing. She came home and took me to a concert and that was my introduction to folk music. When I came home from the concert I sold my clarinet and bought a banjo. All of the things I had been thinking about at the time, Pete Seeger clarified them for me on stage” (interview: September 5, 2005). He clearly traces his initial interest in folk music to this 1960s Toronto concert. While he had heard many of Seeger’s songs at summer camp, when Podolak found himself at Massey Hall,

Out came this guy with a banjo and a guitar! That was it for me. I was gone. That was a pivotal moment in my life. Pete takes the stage and sings, "Oh what will you give me, say the sad bells of Rhydney," all the way home I'm asking my sister what the song meant. That was the bait. It was about the bells that ring in the miners' town and the bells that ring in the merchant town. It was a Welsh song. It was one of the things that got me going about politics. As much a part of my education, that song is, as anything I know. All that stuff started to happen right there. It was a life changing experience. I've never had one like it since (interview: 5 September 2005).

Podolak was thinking about how the world worked and what his position in the world was going to be. His desire to find a way to merge his heritage of political resistance with a contemporary medium found a voice with Seeger, whose sensibility resonated with Podolak's. He understood the importance of such expression on an emotional as well as an intellectual level and equated Seeger's versions of folksong with political resistance and worker culture.

After the Massey Hall concert, Podolak, now in his early teen years, spent his summers at Camp Northland, a Jewish summer camp just outside Toronto. In 1963, the Mariposa Folk Festival was in its third year at Orillia while he was at camp. He heard about the festival and, still inspired by his Seeger experience, asked the camp counsellors for a couple of days off to attend. When his request was denied, the 15 year-old left and went back to Toronto and hitchhiked to the festival.

I went up to Orillia and stayed at a little hotel by myself, the first time ever in my whole life. I remember seeing Alan McRae, Alan Mills, the Chanteclaires and Al Cromwell and Klaus von Graft. I remember people throwing beer bottles at Champlain Park. The organization didn't have any sense of how to control people. They probably didn't have any idea of what was happening outside of their grounds. I was at Mariposa five or six times I guess (interview: September 4, 2005).

When I asked why he kept attending despite these problems, he answered: "Pete [Seeger], and the Clancy Brothers, Dylan and Baez, and Paxton, and the Kentucky Colonels, and Mississippi John Hurt, and Hobart Smith and on and on; that's why. This whole fuckin' thing just opened up and I was like, how much can I learn, how much can I learn" (interview: September 4, 2005). This list of performers is a fascinating indication of the level of contradiction that the folk fans of the day embraced. At Mariposa, middle class urban singer-songwriters like Dylan were lumped in with ballad interpreters like Baez or the

Clancy Brothers, combined with older rural performers who first recorded hillbilly records for the burgeoning music industry in the 1930s. These contradictions and combinations are informed by some of the historic fragments that have come together to inform the popularly understood genre of “folk music.”

### Folk Culture or Fragments of the Folk?

Folk has become a standard term that seems to include everything from Bob Dylan to Iranian ritual music, Russian wedding music, Scottish fiddle music, English ballads, and Ghanaian drumming. It comprises roots music, world music, traditional music, and popular music. Evidently, the term “folk” calls up a number of conscious and unconscious assumptions which influenced Podolak and his particular vision of the WFF.

Early academic uses of “folk music” included most European forms excluded from the canon of art music. As well, it included the non-art musics of North America that existed prior to the advent of the recording industry. The term, however, has grown to include a remarkable number of forms which exist between art music and popular music (Myers 1993: 438-452).<sup>4</sup> Yet always the process of inclusion and exclusion is a politically charged enterprise. Whether folk comprises music produced by a disenfranchised group for the purposes of raising political support for their cause, or the absorption of a rural working identity by the intelligentsia for the sake of proving their connection to the common people, by the early to mid twentieth century, as Canadian historian Ian McKay describes, “to visit the Folk and enjoy their songs and tales was to transcend class divisions and to live the truth of a pastoral vision of society — one in which rich and poor were bound together by ties of love and understanding” (1994: 12-13). During this period, two distinct movements related to folk music were launched; Podolak would later assimilate elements from both.

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4. The term folk music appears to have undergone the same transformation that Jean Baudrillard observes in his discussion of the social, moving from radical to reactionary: “when the idea of ‘the social’ appeared, it represented a break with all religions, all transcendent orders: it had a certain radicalism. And then ‘the social’ became an absolutist concept — even an imperialist one” (2004: 48).

With respect to the first movement, Marius Barbeau, the famous collector of French Canadian folksong and First Peoples' music, and John Murray Gibbon of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) are the founders of the first generation of folk festivals in Canada (McNaughton 1982; Kines 1988). They used the notion of the folk for nationalist purposes and as a tourism promotion scheme for the CPR's rail lines, hotels, and property across the country. Barbeau and Gibbon's first folk festival was at the Chateau Frontenac in Quebec City in 1927.

Gibbon argued that "the encouragement of Folk Festivals is a good thing, as these remind the younger generation of New Canadians that they have a heritage of music and handicraft which is worth preserving" (1938: 424). But as McKay retorts: "As the director of propaganda for the Canadian Pacific Railway, [Gibbon] had a clear interest in creating tourist extravaganzas, and for him, tourism, commerce, and 'the Folk' were inextricably bound" (McKay 1994: 58). Gibbon used the language of nationalism and culture to encapsulate the folk.

With Gibbon and Barbeau's support, folk music and folksong entered the school system and were deeply embedded into the curriculum of Ontario schools (Green and Vogan 1991) by the time Podolak enrolled. Rural sonic postcards from Canada's past would stand in contrast with the folk music he heard at his Hebrew after-school classes, summer camp, or the influential Pete Seeger concert.

While Gibbon and Barbeau were interested in staging a nostalgic rural nationalistic folk, a second and quite different movement was picking up steam in the U.S. The organized left embrace of folk music came, as did Podolak's, when politically inspired 1930s era revivalists mapped the Marxist interest in the masses onto the folk. Activists inspired by Marx began to see the folk as a synonym for the masses. Instead of seeing them as romantic primitives close to the land, these activists regarded the folk as members of an oppressed class as described in Marx's *Capital*: "[t]he great riches of a small number are always accompanied by the absolute deprivation of the essential necessities of life for many others. The wealth of a nation corresponds with its population, and its misery corresponds with its wealth" (1976: 800). Charles Seeger, the famous American founder of ethnomusicology, wrote under the pseudonym Carl Sand in the 1930s that "music is propaganda — always propaganda — and of the most powerful sort. The special talk of the Workers Music League (WML) is the development of music as a weapon in the class struggle" (Seeger 1934: 5).



Gillian Mitchell describes the musical landscape within which Podolak gave up his decade-long quest with the Trotskyist Party to start the WFF: “until the advent of punk rock, with its harrowingly direct social messages, much of popular music of the 1970s would provide escape for the audience into quasi-mythical worlds” (2007: 165). Podolak took the old left belief in the political power of folk music and fused it with the folk music festival event so that he could further his political organizing work.

### **From the Russian Revolution to a Community Picnic**

Podolak was a member of the Trotskyist Fourth International when he started the WFF. He wrote: “I was still an active member of the Fourth International started by Leon Trotsky in 1938. If anybody asked that’s exactly what they heard” (personal communication). The statutes set out by its founders describe its purpose as follows: “In its platform the Fourth International concentrated the international experience of the revolutionary Marxist movement, and especially that which rises out of the socialist conquests of the October 1917 Revolution in Russia. It assimilates and bases itself upon all of humanity’s progressive social experiences, which lead to the expropriation of the capitalist class and to the ultimate abolition of classes” (Encyclopedia of Trotskyism Online). Podolak was also a member of The League for Socialist Action, the Canadian section of the Fourth International. The League was far to the left on the political spectrum of the time, and wrote of the NDP in 1961 that, “[t]heir program is reformist when the task is revolutionary — that is, socialist” (Socialist History Project).

Podolak was dedicated to the goals of the Fourth International and genuinely felt that revolution was a possibility. He and his contemporaries had seen political lines redrawn more than once: Russia, China, Cuba, Korea, and Vietnam had embraced some version of socialism, and the globe had changed over the course of Podolak’s and his parents’ generations. By 1972, however, he became disillusioned with the Trotskyists. In a series of internal disputes, the growing Trotskyist organization in Canada fragmented over the questions of Quebec independence, partnership with the NDP, and nationalism. With a decade of political organizing behind him for a party that essentially self-destructed, Podolak seems to have taken a step back to reflect on his early introduction to expressive politics at the Toronto Seeger concert. Tired of the political party structure and the lack of success he had in

Winnipeg while organizing for the Trotskyists, he moved his political energies towards cultural programming.

With the WFF, Podolak would use the Communist definition of folk music propagated by Charles Seeger — that music is propaganda — to create an organizational structure for a folk festival consciously guided by a political philosophy. Podolak built upon what he saw as a Communist, activist, social music-making tradition to create an activity which he imagined more as a community picnic for fellow workers than as a showcase for star performers.

The WFF, which had its debut during the Winnipeg Centennial, was designed to celebrate the people of Winnipeg. Podolak believed that people brought together had the ability to re-imagine themselves and their community and to create change, provided there was a concentrated and guided foundation on which this experience could be constructed. Folksong became the central focus for this social grouping, and the celebration of folk music an occasion of and for the attendees — the folk — of the festival. Within this framework, folksong reflects the folk and the folk festival celebrates the folk and belongs to them.<sup>5</sup> Podolak did not believe he was taking part in a folk revival as much as providing a platform for a form of music that was already being used. In 1974, when he turned his attention toward organizing the Folk after ten years of organizing the masses, he looked back on his early experiences at the Mariposa Folk Festival for inspiration.

The first generation of Canadian folk festivals, as propagated by Barbeau and Gibbon, from 1927 to 1931, focused on nationalism and tourism. The second generation began when Ruth Jones, Dr. Crawford Jones and Pete McGarvey founded the Mariposa Folk Festival in 1961 in Orillia, Ontario. Estelle Klein, Artistic Director from 1964 to 1979, pioneered the now-standard workshop stage. The workshop stage began as a way for artists to teach their specialty to audience members. Over the years it transformed into small themed concerts where multiple artists or groups performed together on daytime stages. They contrasted with evening concerts mainly featuring better known performers and a more formal atmosphere. According to Podolak, Klein was the most influential member of the Mariposa team and had a great impact on his

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5. This idea is exemplified in the advertising for the 2006 Vancouver Folk Music Festival. The Festival advertising uses the slogan, "This is your festival. You are the folk."

understanding of what a folk festival could do. Mariposa became a transitional Canadian outdoor folk festival model, taking the outdoor folk festival structure of the Philadelphia Folk Festival and Newport Folk Festival but adding workshop stages. Unlike the WFF, which has retained most of its original qualities from its earliest years, Mariposa went through many changes. It was forced to move locations numerous times, and suffered many personnel and financial difficulties that, according to Podolak, never plagued the WFF.

Podolak used organizational principles developed by earlier American folk festivals, as well as by Mariposa. The important difference between his vision and his predecessors', however, was that he changed many operational aspects of the festival's organizational structure. Drawn from his theoretical position as a Trotskyist, these modes were intended to introduce the power of socialism to the cadre of volunteers required to operate the festival.

### **The Status of the Volunteer**

Podolak describes Mariposa as, "just about all there, it was almost a completed idea. Estelle just about had everything figured out. She didn't have the theory though that allowed me to see aspects of the festival that just didn't work" (interview: 4 September 2005). In a conversation with Mariposa volunteers, he discovered that they were not invited to the festival's after-hours party which was only for paid staff, musicians and invited guests. He saw this oversight as one of the biggest weaknesses in the organization and a possible explanation for their historic financial hardships. Podolak explains: "You have to understand that the output of a volunteer, the worker, is not the task that the person is doing. Their output is the enjoyment of the audience. The workers' output is the enjoyment of the audience. Pretty cool, eh! What's the surplus value? I don't know...maybe a better question is: why do you do this? Because it's fun. That's why...it's fun. That's the surplus value" (interview: 4 September 2005).

According to Podolak, stressing fun is part of what makes the organization of the festival successful. Fun, which can be understood as an unspoken or non-measurable indicator of social inclusion for everyone, especially the volunteer, was the biggest difference between the earlier Mariposa model and Podolak's WFF version. Though participants, including volunteers, may have had fun at Mariposa,

Podolak stresses that inclusion or, in the negative, exclusion is deeply felt by volunteers. In order to remain genuinely grassroots — a not-for-profit, community-based operation — an organization needs to avoid being directed from above. When it was created, the WFF inversion of the top-down approach was the fundamental distinction between it and other festivals. Podolak's model was intended to engage the volunteer as the central component of the festival, which meant moving away from relying on professional organizational staff to engaging a large body of volunteers. The intent was to transform the individual volunteer into a member of the party or Party. The volunteer structure created to put on the festival corresponded with the Bolshevik party model. Thus, all people gathered together to celebrate folk music are educated in the methodology of workers' organization.

Fun is one pillar of Podolak's model. Without fun, he felt that it would not matter how unique the organizational structure was or how good the musicians were, the festival would not be able to continually exist. A folk festival must create a significant experience so that operationally, economically, and socially, it supports an audience large enough to in turn financially support it. It must satisfy a complex variety of needs and be socially significant enough to engage the attention of a volunteer base and a paying public. Thus, according to Podolak, the second pillar of a successful folk festival is the community factor.

### **Community Factor**

The community factor, a term that Podolak coined, is based on a statistical representation of all the people who work at the festival in relation to the number of people who pay to attend the festival. The community factor allows for a projection of attendance based on the number of individuals who work at the festival. For every worker, four people should attend. Podolak claimed to have worked out this one to four proportion during his time as AD of the WFF. It began as a hunch that having community leadership would inspire community participation. The base of workers at the festival includes all of the volunteers, the organizers, the food vendors, and local artists. Podolak explains:

In the second last year I was the AD of the festival we set out to take statistics to get a sense of who the audience was and how my theory of the community factor had played out. We got these marketing students

from the University of Manitoba to help us collect stats. We put together this questionnaire and had volunteers walking around the festival collecting these stats. They asked every tenth person that passed why they came to the festival. We had these categories: folkie, peripheral folkie, meaning somebody that was interested in progressive music and didn't totally live off of Tin Pan Alley,<sup>6</sup> and "eventer". The eventer category means that the individual comes to the festival because of the human event that happens there. The music doesn't matter that much to them. We expected about 15% of the audience would be folkies, some percentage would be periphery folkies and about 70% would be "eventers". When the stats came back though, only 3% of the surveyed people called themselves folkies, 97% described themselves as "eventers". This is the extraordinarily loyal audience of the folk festival and they didn't listen to folk music during most of the year, but they were loyal to the event. That was a bit shocking. Generally speaking you can describe the community factor in this way. If you add up anybody on the site: a crafter, food concessionaire, volunteer, local entertainer, by year two of them being there they become the chief propagandists for the event. There is not enough people to make up a paid base for the event, I mean from loyal fans of the music. It is the human event that makes the difference (interview: 10 February 2006).

The community factor is about more than just the marketing of the event, it is another pillar of Podolak's revolutionary festival. In Trotskyist theory (Trotsky 1931, 1973, 1976, 1986), the Vanguard Party is a small group of highly trained and dedicated agitators who are essential to the revolution. Social ideals are promoted, not in abstract documents, but through a demonstration of what those ideals can create. In Trotskyist theory, the central organizers, who are directed by information received from the party, would support the vanguard element of the festival.

Ideally, all volunteers work in small groups. Each such group, or cadre, elects a leader. Leaders from similar departments (garbage cleanup, for instance, which could have six teams) select one individual to represent their needs. One more step up the line, a representative of all section leaders is chosen to work with the central committee. Thus, volunteers would be directly involved with the planning of the festival.

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6. Tin Pan Alley is a historic term which refers to the industrial production and publication of songs in New York City in the late Nineteenth and early twentieth century. Podolak uses the term in a derogatory manner to distance folk music — produced by people for people — from Tin Pan Alley songs — production line tunes produced en masse strictly for an entertainment industry.

In this model, everyone who is immediately implicated with the operations of the festival is a member of the party. In addition, the crafts people, electrical staff, and food vendors are also seen as having a stake in the festival. Podolak attempted to ensure that all of these people would become dedicated members of a revolutionary body, a member of the party. The festival leadership is in the hands of those who make up the first number in the community factor so that they can transmit its goals to everyone who attends. This group, the vanguard, is led by the Artistic Director, the General Manager and the Volunteer Coordinator; they help to direct the actions of the party. Podolak claims that party members must not lead by coercion but rather by a shared goal or focus that is transmitted by the Artistic Director, who functions as the visionary leader and spokesperson of the festival, in personal communication with each of the committees of volunteers. He explains that:

In order for the festival to work properly, the AD has to sit down with every committee or cadre on the grounds. Their goal is to transmit the meaning of the event so that the volunteers can understand how they are connected to fulfilling the goals of the festival. You have to tell them everything. They have to know that their membership in this activity is vital. That's not bullshit. People know bullshit. You have to tell them the truth. When I was at the Stan Rogers Festival I sat down with every volunteer group and said: "This time next week, people just like you will be getting together in a place like this in Winnipeg. They are going to have a discussion just like this one. One week after that it will happen in Vancouver". So it goes. All over the country people are getting together to have this discussion. So they know that they are volunteering for something much bigger than just this festival. When we first started and WFF was the only one, the speech was different but it was the same idea. We are moving towards something and your part in this makes a difference. We are building a social revolution (interview: 10 February 2006).

The largest section of the community factor is made up of volunteers who show up for the event and put in hours of unpaid time to make it happen. In return, they receive social benefits on the festival grounds. Volunteers receive a free pass to the festival, get fed, and are admitted to the after-hours parties. The only way to access these latter events is by being a volunteer, organizer or performer. (This model differs from Mariposa, where organizers created parties for the staff, performers, and paying public and excluded the volunteers.) The opportunity for song-sharing is emphasised at parties. While impromptu jam sessions happen

informally all over the site during the festival, the opportunity to play music with the performers is crucial to the volunteers' experiences. The Volunteer Coordinator invites all to bring their instruments and to jam at the parties, a process which brings everyone together socially. The emphasis is on creating bonds in a shared space which is of the community's making and made exclusively for them.

The transition from volunteer to vanguard is essential. In Podolak's model, the members of the community factor are themselves transformed into members of the party and then potentially into members of the vanguard. He believes that the commitment to create the event put volunteers in line with his philosophical position concerning folk music and their place as the folk. By way of example, he explains that:

At the Sudbury festival this year [2005] I had a volunteer who was doing only one shift on the entire weekend and that was doing a survey for me. I asked her why she was volunteering and she didn't have an answer to that. In contrast a couple of years ago I was in the shuttle van in Edmonton and I got to overhear two volunteers from different crews and who had never met explain to each other about why they volunteered. I sat there listening and pretending not to notice and all I could think about was James P. Cannon [founder of the American Trotskyist Party] and how much I owed him. Common purpose was what they were talking about and the trust was implicit. Good festivals don't allow their leaderships to substitute themselves for decision-making by volunteers (personal correspondence).

The vanguard element, who returns every year,<sup>7</sup> helps to promote the festival event, to educate each other, and to transform the public space into one celebrating folk music. Most importantly, the volunteer must have such a positive experience that they will want to trade their labour for their part in the event.

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7. In conversation with numerous volunteers from the early years of the WFF, many of whom are still active in other Canadian folk festivals, it was clear that the event was meaningful because of the role they played. Many WFF volunteers were recruited to travel to Vancouver to help start the Vancouver Folk Music Festival. In the conversations I have had with those who chose to volunteer at VFF, the cost of travelling for the purpose of volunteering was never raised. The status of being a knowledgeable volunteer within the structure itself seemed to take precedence. Further, volunteers are recognised and appreciated. For example, on a research trip in 2006 to the VFF, I had the opportunity to watch a 15-year volunteer tech being given an award.

Communication with the volunteer groups, according to Podolak, must be genuine, articulate, inspirational, and direct. They are informed of the hopes and fears of the festival organizers, the problems they face, and the challenges they hope to overcome. The ground rules are laid out: each group is represented by a crew boss and the crew bosses report to a section boss, who in turn reports to the site boss, who reports to the Volunteer Coordinator and the Artistic Director. Each working group is given a different coloured T-shirt. Solidarity is promoted within each working group or cadre and the emphasis is on doing the best job possible. The goal of the Artistic Director is to transfer decision-making down the line. Each person who volunteers at the festival knows what his or her job is and what is expected. They work together to come to decisions for the benefit of the festival. Podolak calls this process the "devolution of authority".

### **Devolution of Authority**

Podolak claims that the central strength of the Leninist model of social organization is the devolution of decision-making to the ranks of the workers. He translated this philosophy into his organizational model and expected that his cadres of volunteers would make decisions that affected the running of the festival within their field of responsibility. Authority can come from any location in the system, from the Artistic Director to the volunteer worker on the festival ground picking up the trash. As Podolak says, "people on the ground making the right decisions affect the festival, so the decision-making itself doesn't have to go back up the line. Decisions can be made quickly and by people" (interview: 11 February 2006). According to Podolak, this process allows for a reduction of the alienation experienced by the labour force at the festival. Personal ownership of the festival experience is the intended result. He believes that money can alienate people from their work and that people working for the prestige of being a part of the creation of this community event experience less alienation.

What if you took all the people that volunteered their time at the festival and you paid them. What do you think would happen? It would fall apart. All of a sudden people are working for you instead of working for them to make the festival happen. People would be alienated from their labour by the money that you paid them for the job. The volunteers are doing this because of the pride that they have in seeing the festival happen; the benefits they get from it count more



than not getting paid. If this weren't the case we wouldn't have volunteers. The festival can't handle the number of people that want to be volunteers. I've said this before, if anyone wants to be a volunteer just to get in free, I'll give him or her a free ticket. I don't want people who will trade in their time for a ticket. I want people who want to make this happen (interview: 11 February 2006).

An economic analysis of the Stan Rogers Festival supports Podolak's claim:

The festival relies critically on the effort of volunteers, effort that is not included in a purely financial accounting of the festival. What is the cost to society of the volunteer labour expended? It is likely that this ties in with other areas, as [a] common theme of discussion (and jokes) at the festival was that you couldn't pay people enough to do the jobs that they volunteer for. Volunteers feel a type of pride that comes from participating, and doing what needs to be done without being paid, as if the pay itself disassociates one from the external benefits (King 2003: 57).

Podolak remarked that inspired volunteers add to the positive environment and create many features of the subsequent festivals:

Most of the cool things about the festival weren't created by me. Volunteers started them. People who thought, "wouldn't it be cool to have this". So they called me and mostly I said "do it". Sometimes I thought it was stupid but I'd let them try it anyway. Like massage at the festival. I thought that was stupid; the woman who brought it up tore a strip off of me. She was right; I [was] just being an asshole. Now, massage is at every festival. That's how good of an idea it was. You have to trust the people that you're working with. That's what makes the festival work so well. You have to let people do the thing that they are good at (interview: 11 February 2006).

Podolak translates his experiences within the Trotskyist movement into folk festival organization in order to provide an opportunity for Winnipeggers to see the power and humanity of a socialist organization at work. The vanguard is prepared to take on the responsibility of the event by making decisions based on consensus and initiative within their working groups. Taken directly from the Bolshevnik model, this idea promises to put the power of experience into the hands of the participants and to eliminate alienation. The subsequent social inclusion, according to Podolak, leads volunteers to realize that the world in which they live and work can be changed. This transfiguration happens when members of society, at any level, choose to work together for the good

of the entire group, in this case the festival. The festival as imagined by Podolak is a social case study in revolutionary politics, where participants work together to create a politically and socially transformative experience while learning skills he believes are necessary to change the world.

### **Playing Folk**

The performances organized by the Artistic Director must enact the same type of completeness. The Artistic Director must have a good sense of the expectations of the audience, know the work of the performers, and be able to put together a show that challenges the audience socially and musically. The goal is to bring the audience on a journey celebrating their membership in this created community. Every effort is made to present the artist in a way that highlights the interaction between her or him and the audience to further the connection between the two. The experience should actively push the boundaries of presentation to blur the roles that each understands. The stage is set for the performer, who walks out onto the stage and starts playing folk music.

In Podolak's mind, the WFF is a synthesis of social unrest and political movements. In such a model, the performance of folksongs should have become statements of the inclusive sentiment, "we are the folk." The volunteers should gain the experience that he planned for them. In this sense, the WFF is the personal expression of an organizer who found his identity commingled with historical forces that treated songs as weapons (Lieberman 1995). But despite the WFF's operating within this framework, the revolution didn't come.

But it became a tradition. The structure that Podolak created worked to put the driving force of the festival into the hands of the attendees. At this point, it is impossible to know if this process occurs as he claims. Nevertheless, members of WRAD have indicated in informal conversation that volunteers, artists, and attendees turn out in larger numbers each year. Many of the older folk music festivals have year-round professional staff and offices. Perhaps the folk festival has not become the harbinger of revolution that Podolak had planned but it has nevertheless turned into a good family and community time. Ah...the best laid plans of Marx and men.

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