



illawarra FOLK FESTIVAL

12-15 JANUARY 2012

BULLI SHOWGROUND, WOLLONGONG, NSW



Presented Illawarra Folk Club Inc. PO Box 5289, Wollongong, NSW 2500

info@illawarrafolkclub.org.au www.illawarrafolkfestival.com.au FESTIVAL HOTLINE 1300 887 034

Illawarra Folk Festival 2012 - Review

By Nick Hartgerink

Acclaimed Scottish folk singer Dougie Maclean summed up the 27th Illawarra Folk Festival when he praised the festival's emphasis on the musical experience, saying the performers were "just the icing on the cake".

Maclean had just played to a packed crowd at one of the biggest of the festival's 12 performance stages, the Black Diamond Marquee, where the audience had given him a rapturous reception.

However, he said what had impressed him most about his first visit to the biggest folk festival in NSW was not so much the stellar quality and variety of the performers, but the festival vibe.

"There is such a lovely atmosphere here – a great community feeling," Maclean said, who stayed in a campervan in the festival grounds. "So many people come with their instruments to participate in the workshops and play music together. The emphasis at this festival is on the musical experience – the gigs are just the icing on the cake."

Maclean, who is married to an Australian, has been coming to Australia for 25 years combining performances with family visits. This was his first time at the Illawarra Folk Festival, held at Bulli Showground in Wollongong's northern beaches from 12-15 January, but he hopes it won't be his last.

Young Melbourne-based singer Mandy Connell – one of the quiet achievers of the festival – agreed with Maclean's assessment of the festival "experience" for performers, describing the jams she had with fellow musicians in the grandstand in the early hours of Sunday morning as the best she had ever experienced. "I couldn't believe I was singing harmonies at three in the morning with Mongolian throat singers," she told people at her Sunday gig.

There is no doubt that the music experience is at the heart of the Illawarra festival's "cake" – from its summer school program that leads in to the festival to the extensive workshops that run throughout, and the grandstand jam sessions. But there is also plenty of the "icing" Maclean was talking about.

He was part of arguably the strongest line-up of international, national and local Illawarra artists in the festival's history- 150 acts who helped attract around 9500 people to the Bulli Showground over the four days.

Legendary American folk singer Peggy Seeger played four times at the festival as part of her farewell tour of Australia, with retirement from touring pending. However, she belied her 76 years with performances of great

quality and grace, charming her audiences with her engaging style, still beautiful voice and playing skills with guitar, banjo and keyboards.

At her second gig, in the intimate Chapel venue, Seeger's set list included folk songs about the battles between rich and poor, like "Loving Riley", while she gave classic protest songs like "Doggone Occupation" and "The Progress Train" a contemporary edge by including 21st century issues.

Every festival has a "must see" act that has everyone talking. At Bulli that act was unquestionably George Kamikawa and Noriko Tadano.

The dynamic Japanese duo had crowds flocking to their four performances, as word quickly spread about the power of their music and their enchanting presentation. With Kamikawa playing lap slide guitar, harmonica and foot-drum, and the striking Tadano on a traditional shamisen (Japanese banjo), the pair produced a fusion of traditional Japanese music with heavily blues-influenced western music (although they also did an interesting cover of Van Morrison's classic "Crazy Love").

Speaking of covers, young Adelaide band The Bearded Gypsy Band performed the classic country ballad "Long Black Veil", joining a long list of performers including Johnny Cash, The Band, Bruce Springsteen and the unlikely combination of Mick Jagger and the Chieftains who have covered the song. Bearded Gypsy singer Tom Boehm, who at 21 is the oldest member of the band, did a great job with the song and demonstrated the versatility and maturity of this talented quartet.

Other popular acts included Australia's first lady of folk Judy Small, in one of her last festival appearances before a planned year-long "sabbatical" from performing, and comic genius Pete Denahy, who in two years at Bulli has established himself as one of the festival's real favourites with his hilarious songs about Australian life.

Denahy was one of the hardest working performers at the festival, with five individual shows as well as appearing in the Funny Concert, where he, Judy Small, Martin Pearson, Bernard Carney, Jim Haynes, comedians Glover and Sorrensen and bush poet Gregory North had a packed house in raptures with a combination of gags and funny songs. North's multicultural rendition of "The Man From Snowy River" in 15 accents laid 'em in the aisles.

Haynes may be well-known for his funny songs, but he is also an acclaimed historian and author, with a particular interest in poet Banjo Patterson. He teamed with "Waltzing Matilda" expert Dennis for two sessions on Patterson – a look at the poet's "secret life" and a performance of his "greatest hits".

The Illawarra has a rich musical scene, and the festival always supports local talent. This year's local highlights included bush band Wongawilli's 25th anniversary concert, some punchy performances by blues band Big Erle, and the sheer exuberance of The Con Artists – an all-ages community ensemble from the Wollongong Conservatorium of Music.

Bulli Showground was hit by a significant downpour on the Saturday night, with nearby suburbs recording over 100mm of rain. However, while the festival campsites were affected by the rain, the festival's 11 performance venues were under cover and the show proceeded uninterrupted.

"Artistically, this festival was undoubtedly one of the most successful we've ever staged," said Russell Hannah, president of the Illawarra Folk Festival which runs the festival. "We had an incredible variety of music, bush poetry, comedy, dance, workshops ... you name it.

"And the festival site handled the wet weather really well. We had very heavy rain on Saturday night and Sunday morning, and while it did affect the campers it didn't affect the performance stages."

Organisers had hoped this year's stellar line-up would push attendances past the magical 10,000 mark, but were thwarted by the weather. "By Saturday afternoon we were looking at a record crowd figure for the weekend, but the

wet weather on Saturday night and Sunday morning definitely affected our Sunday crowd and we ended up very close to last year," Mr Hannah said.

"Overall, we are delighted with the response to this year's festival. It is now a genuine four-day festival, with strong attendances on Thursday and Friday as well as the weekend. Incrementally, it is edging towards becoming a five-day festival, with bigger crowds at our summer school and events on Wednesday as well."

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