



Learning while you laugh ... and dance and sing and play

by Jan Nary

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In a recent interview Director Phil Spring spoke about the learning and educational experiences offered by his organisation. The twist is that Phil isn't the Director of an august institute of learning or a major college; he's the Director of one of Australia's leading cultural events, the National Folk Festival.

Held over four-and-a half days of the Easter break, in the comfort and convenience of Canberra's EPIC showgrounds, the National attracts leading folk performers and participants from all around Australia and the world for a deep- immersion celebration of people's culture. No matter how much you knew about music, community and life before you walked through the gates; it's a sure bet that you'll know a whole lot more when you - reluctantly - walk out again.

For those who want to start with a burst of structured learning in a laid- back, informal atmosphere, for three days prior to the Festival proper there's the Pre- Easter Music School. The School offers classes in a variety of music/ song/ dance styles for differing student skill levels and classes are taken by teachers who are the cream of the crop. This year's teachers include renowned fiddlers Chris Duncan, Nancy Kerr and Liz Doherty, Irish - Italian bodhran player Gino Lupari, voice teacher Mal Webb and Japanese drummers Taikoz, as well as teachers in dance, flute, whistle bouzouki and concertina. Students are plunged into a three- day intensive learning experience that results in a feature concert at the Festival itself.

For those who love to play / sing / dance and want to acquire or polish their skills there are many, many opportunities outside the classes. The National is renowned for the high level of audience participation built into its program. Mingled throughout the Festival's performance programme (over 1200

performers in seventeen venues) there are workshops on everything from tango, bellydance or Breton step-dancing, learning to yodel, caring for your aged accordion or playing a giant Japanese drum.

If you don't have a drum - or an accordion - or a flute or an autoharp or a banjo - you can buy one from the wide range of stalls in the instrument- makers' pavilion. Having acquired your instruments and done the workshops you can then settle into one of the session bars where people just play, play, play - and where better to learn from other musicians? The experience is vast, the information boundless and the atmosphere is almost embarrassingly welcoming.

There is also learning to be had of a non-musical variety. The festival runs largely on volunteers - nearly 900 this year - and the benefits are legion. For a requisite number of hours of work before or during the Festival, volunteers can earn a free ticket - and the opportunities for gaining enhanced skills are many. Volunteers are given supervision and support while they expand their expertise and knowledge, in areas as varied as working in the tickets office or in a bar, stuffing envelopes, patrolling carparks, supervising gates, doing surveys, cooking meals, checking in and transporting performers, minding children, publishing newsletters, massaging other volunteers, collecting garbage, entering data - honing existing skills, learning new ones or stepping into a different persona for a while.

And on a more spiritual level, the learning curve at this event is phenomenal. It's like a massive tribal gathering that reminds us all of the important things in life - and leaves everyone who's taken part feeling that much better about the world and themselves.

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