

FM² – Folk Monthly Conference Report

In March 2010 the Traditional Arts Team received a grant from Arts Council England to undertake a mapping exercise, conference and to develop a report outlining possible routes for support and development of traditional performance arts activity across the Midlands.

On 16 October 2010 The Traditional Arts Team held the FM² – Folk Monthly Conference at Nettle Hill Conference Centre, near Coventry. Invitations to the conference were based on replies to the Folk Monthly survey.

Thirty four delegates from organisations across the Midlands and from the traditional performance artforms of folk music, song, dance and storytelling attended. Festivals, clubs, PR companies, producers, artists, agencies and event managers were represented.

We were delighted to have Katy Spicer, the CEO of the EFDSS (English Folk Dance and Song Society, who sponsored the conference) give the inspiring key note speech. This was followed by presentations about training and renewing the tradition from Ray and Bev Langton, collaborative programming by Graham Langley and marketing and PR from Pete Willow. Pam Bishop also presented the interim results of the Folk Monthly Survey which maps the extent of traditional performance arts activity across the Midlands.

This report outlines the presentations and summarises discussion and evaluations from the conference day.

Keynote speech – Katy Spicer, EFDSS

Katy outlined the EFDSS's long term and recent organisational development. The EFDSS has moved from having regional officers and representatives as well as running regional festivals, to having a new team with a remit of introducing a broader range of activities particularly between music and dance. The EFDSS seeks to engage with other organisations around the country, including the wider arts community and education community. They have been running a pilot phase, trying out ideas locally to see if they work. The next step has been to run projects outside London in partnership, within and outside the folk community. The projects include 'Take Six' – a schools and community project and artist development initiatives in partnership with Sidmouth and Cambridge Folk Festivals. The main areas of development are with artists, schools, education and through developing archive work. A short version of the talk can be heard in an interview with Hermitage FM.

Folk Monthly Survey – interim results – Pam Bishop

The survey was launched in May. 540 organisations had been identified as undertaking folk activities in the Midlands, and anyone with an email address was asked to complete the online questionnaire. By September some 170 had replied, and a further 171 with a postal address who had not completed were sent a printed questionnaire with a Freepost return envelope, resulting in 242 replies by 13 October. We estimate that 250-300 organisations are still not overtly represented in our survey, although a proportion of these may be run by the same people. A survey of individual musicians, singers, storytellers, dancers and promoters was promoted through websites, folk media, postcards to organisations and at festivals etc. and 307 responded by 13 October.

The presentation slides with the interim results are displayed on the website. The key findings of interest to the conference were:

- over 200 organisations are interested in collaboration of some kind, including a Midlands Folk Directory, joint marketing initiatives, training for artists and workshops for beginners
- almost 200 individuals are interested in receiving training

Training, tradition and young people – Ray and Bev Langton

The presentation was contextualised through suggesting a focus on involving young people and providing a quality experience in order to leave a legacy. Projects could include a clear sense of planning, direction with clearly identified benefits for young people and progression routes. The presentation slides are available on the website.

The purpose of working with young people: Should we be working with young people? When is it appropriate? Who will benefit? Our overarching aim is to invest in the tradition that we believe in and create progression from participation to performance.

They asked the question: When young people leave our events what can we offer them in terms of progression routes - a next stage, training, a new event - something for them to look forward to?

Performance support: This can sometimes involve considerable expenditure.

Young people may need support if they are to develop, eg instruments, dance kit etc. Once they perform they can become ambassadors, taking their progression forward.

Experience of promotion: Taking responsibility for their own promotion will develop the young people in many ways. Can we give them work experience? Internships? Ray and Bev gave us two case studies to illustrate young people's development projects:-

- Towzer!, the children's ceilidh band was developed in three 90-minute sessions at the Towersey Festival. Particular project needs included advance publicity, a team of young tutors and high expectations.
- 'Squeezing Shropshire' commissioned school students to organise a workshop day for adults, as part of their Creative and Media Diploma, including compering the evening concert.

Ray and Bev concluded that young people can undertake any challenges, if we believe in them and give them the right framework and support.

Breakout Groups addressed headlines and developments: the responses fell almost equally into four groups:

Teaching and training e.g.

- Training in sound tech, broadcasting, club organisation, lay out, presentation, MC, back office duties.
- Shadowing trainees/teachers (EFDSS)
- Volunteer tutors from recent graduates.

Working directly with young people e.g.

- Making sure children are introduced to folk music at an early age.
- Younger groups conference – local level (schools)
- Get kids to sessions

Signposting/profile raising e.g.

- Being a visible and inspiring point of contact – ‘I saw what you did, how can I get involved? Who will train/support me?’
- Trainers, location availability skills – Folk Arts directory
- Database of contacts.
- Directory of available artists and trainers.

Other e.g:

- Folk festivals to invite folk clubs to programme a small stage.
- Mainstream arts organisations partnering with folk organisations to target market for learning and participation.
- Special needs awareness

Collaborative programming – Graham Langley

A presentation was given by Graham Langley from Storytelling Café describing a model of collaborative programming. The English Storytelling Network was a series of storytelling venues that started in Birmingham and operated regularly in the Midlands before becoming a national network funded by the Arts Council for a total of nine tours – see www.englishstorytelling.net. The performers included international guests and emerging and young performers being given a platform for their work.

Overall about 30 venues were involved and tours were developed through learning about the needs of artists, eg the need for a ‘minder’. Finding performance opportunities and presenting new artists at venues they wouldn’t normally be booked at was a key way of supporting artists. Venues benefited from professional support, good publicity as well as quality guests, and resulted in audience growth. It raised awareness of the artform of storytelling and identified the need for effective PR and quality marketing.

The presentation was followed by a whole conference discussion on collaborative programming that might support folk activity in the region. There was a mixed response to the idea, some felt that the agents already do a pretty good job and the networks are so well developed that artists can pretty much look out for themselves. Sessions wouldn’t be interested as they value the spontaneity of the event and some smaller clubs value their independence.

However, others felt it that such collaborations were an opportunity to enhance what is already happening and could be used to raise the profile of folk through publicity, web sites etc. Also they would be a vehicle for gaining funding, something which most folk small organisations shy away from yet it is the bigger events and programmes that raise the profile of folk in general. A lot of folk events are unpublicised and therefore under the radar of potential audiences. There was a sense that there was a need to preserve the opportunity for spontaneous performance opportunities as well as a more organised approach.

Other suggestions to support development were: more local networks, an organised network of club swaps, more opportunities for young performers (this could be linked to mentoring) and touring linked to training. It was thought that more support for artists to be given platforms and opportunities away from their own club would be useful and valuable.

PR and Marketing – Pete Willow

The presentation slides are available on the website. Here are the main points:
Communication, especially with the media and online.
Marketing, advertising and PR are not the same thing
Marketing is aimed at the consumer - think in commercial terms
Marketing mix (product, place, price, promotion)

He gave some tips and advice in the following areas:

Press releases and advertising: Make a statement that draws attention and gets people interested. This can persuade people we have something for them, and to take action. Developing your communication skills is important as is choosing the right media channels. We must become more aware and more consistent about what we say about ourselves.

PR: the focus shifts to reputation. Build up relationships with consumers, artists, stewards, suppliers, sponsors, advertisers, public bodies, and media. The emphasis here is what other people say about us.

With PR you lose control but it boosts credibility, advertising gives control but not credibility. These two need to be integrated – the experience must match the message.

Not all communicators are effective. We need to work in a timely way, e.g. a summer festival has to publicise its programme at a time when people are booking their summer holidays.

Media people don't see it as their role in life to give you free publicity. Pete's job as a columnist is to write something that will make people buy the newspaper. We need to think about creating a good news angle, a peg to hang a story on; e.g. one act at a festival did some busking on Chiltern railway stations which were sponsoring the festival. Journalists also want good background information, photos and good press releases in plenty of time.

The web is a meeting place, not a channel for promotion. It's a platform or a forum, a stage for mp3s etc. Facebook can announce events, and report back on them. If we

are concentrating effort on these channels, we have to keep it up – blogs have to be kept up to date. People who read this are users, and they look away if not relevant. Pete has set up a discussion group on his Facebook page.

Marketing and PR Breakout groups – headline issues and concerns

Delegates believed that marketing and PR priorities should include:

- Event pages (on website) which includes a year calendar that enables promoters to upload event details in order for everyone to be aware of what events will be taking place over the year. This also enables promoters to take note of any clashes that could occur when contemplating collaborating with other promoters for future/new events.
- Mailing list and leaflet drops were discussed as being most effective, however, the issue of data protection was raised and audience agreement to data being passed on must be submitted when collecting email addresses via mailing lists at events etc.
- National event website www.simplywhatson.com is new but will probably become the most popular national folk events calendar. There was a suggestion it could be filtered down to a local level.
- A discussion arose regarding the types of audience members that attend Folk sessions and events and there being a sense of little crossover – is this an area to be developed?
- Bookings — clause in performing contracts limits artists at a given venue from playing within a certain distance and time of that venue – audience members are more likely to choose a venue closer to them. Should venues communicate more with regards to this?
- Shared “advertorial” – combining folk clubs and gig venues eg on a one-page advert within Acoustic magazines so that readers and audiences are given the information about a range of venues rather than the most successful.

Press and PR: Delegates moved on to discuss the use of social networking. Most found that:

- Training would be needed in order to show promoters how to use Facebook and twitter to their advantage, although it was also stressed that social networking sites should not be relied upon as a venues main source of advertising.
- Print media was also highlighted as an important form of getting seen and heard.
- Churnalism – writing press releases that include the story and sending them into newspapers and magazines is a good way of possibly getting your event/venue in to a magazine – it halves the editor/journalist’s workload.

PR Stunts:

- Folk flashmobs
- Storytelling flashmobs
- Pseudo events – events that wouldn’t happen if the media wasn’t there. Tip off the media with regards to any stunts planned.

Collaborative marketing ideas:

- Meetings/training/mentoring for online presence.
- Media prejudice with Folk – making folk cool – rebranding

- Collaborate with different styles of businesses and organisations.
- Exchange materials.
- Folk Monthly covers the whole region and could be a vehicle for joint marketing

Conference Evaluation

50% of delegates filled in evaluation cards.

Are there any ways that the conference has spurred you on to new or different action?

People were spurred on to to develop their new ideas or work in the following areas: Networking marketing and collaboration (the most popular) business development, young people and audience development.

Did you find the conference valuable?

The majority of people felt that the conference had been valuable. The conference provided a useful networking opportunity for many people. Delegates appreciated finding out what other organisations were doing and enjoyed new information and ideas exchange.

Promissory Notes

Delegates were invited to make a promise to do something concrete based on the development areas covered in the conference -75% of commitments contained elements of linking in or collaborating.

The majority of people were interested or able to make commitments in the area of collaborative marketing, networking or new media. Overall there was a sense of people feeling they wanted to reach out and be part of the sector and communicate more effectively with different aspects of it. This ties in with the conference evaluation, where delegates prioritised being inspired by the marketing and PR sections of the presentations and enjoying the opportunities for networking and ideas exchange. This is also backed up by the enthusiasm with which people have joined in the presenter Pete Willow's Facebook forum.

What next?

There were a number of suggestions around what we could do now that wouldn't cost money - club swops, floorspot exchange or showcasing performers from the other traditional performance arts. Please let us know if you would be willing to try something new with a different club, event or location even if it is not a specific idea but a willingness. One of the options might be to recommend a floorspot for other people to host, as we need to ensure these first exchanges are at a quality people are happy with.

Conference attendees could also go directly to one of the other delegates. If you haven't got a specific idea we can take names and let interested parties know. We can work together to promote these events to make them media friendly.

Ideas can also be discussed on social media forums and in the page of Folk Monthly.