

Folk Festival Here—Newport

Frank Dedenbach

1966

Newport, Rhode Island is an old, almost dingy New England town whose saving graces are a beautiful Atlantic beach and the music festivals held every year there. The weather is hot in the day and cold in the night, but the inhabitants are cold almost all of the time. However, when a few thousand folk fans decide to bask in the afternoon sun for some musical workshops and to warm up the night and the town with some evening concerts and quite a few sleeping bodies in the park, folkies usually do it right.

This year's Newport Folk Festival, on Wednesday, July 20, tried to please the middle-aged tourists and the townspeople (who are all either middle-aged or children or both) with a children's concert. This was more interesting than expected, with many folk artists in attendance and demonstrations of several folk-crafts (sheep — shearing, flute-making, etc.)

The fun officially began on Friday at nine p.m. when the first concert got off the ground, an hour late. I remember listening to the sounds of the Southern Fife and Drum Corps, (two drummers and a fife player), that people still dance to in Mississippi, and being surprised how much it was like primitive African and at the same time modern jazz flute. I was surprised, too, at the size of Festival Field (capacity: 28,000), at the excellent P.A. system, and at the high quality of production in general. The Preservation Hall Band contributed some of the best New Orleans Jazz ever played. It came to me while listening to Phil Ochs that someone should write a social commentary song about 9,000 people sitting out in the cold listening to Judy Collins.

Everybody without a room, nearly everybody there, got about two hours sleep that night but came pouring back to the grounds at 11 a.m. for the afternoon workshops. These are Newport's biggest attractions for the serious fan, a chance to get close to some of the best entertainers in folk music. Each of the two workshops are five hours long and as many as four different things' are happening at different places at the same time. Big hits were Howlin' Wolf and his band and Son House, at urban and rural ends of the blues scene, the Jim Kweskin Jug Band, and most of the country bluegrass-old-timey pickers and fiddlers.

Friday evening's concert featured the fantastic South Sea Island Children (Negro girls doing children's songs and games), a 'fiddler's contest, and a Son House — Bukka White-Skip James blues carving contest. The idea of a contest, judges, etc. seemed pointless but the music was great.

The Saturday afternoon workshop will be remembered best for the contemporary and protest song bags. There was the weird vocal genius of Tim Hardin, the exciting original and rock 'n' roll adapted songs of Jimmy Collier and the Freedom Singers, from Chicago's End the Slums movement; the wit and bottleneck guitar playing of Julius Lester; Buffy Sainte-Marie; Paxton; and Ochs.

By Saturday night there were 30,000 in the Newport area, many of whom had been attracted by the billing of Chuck Berry, who unfortunately missed the whole festival for unknown reasons, and the Lovin' Spoonful who, despite bad microphones and such, produced some of the best rock ever heard and did' three encores with standing ovations. George Wein, Technical Producer of the festival, asked everyone who didn't have a place to stay: "Don't go into Newport, but please get in your cars and go home." (Interesting if you hitchhiked!) But no, mother, there

was no riot. Some fences were trampled, though, and a few SNCC workers beat up by out of town cops. Mr. Wein later announced there would be no more rock groups at future festivals.

Sunday afternoon's important "New Directions" concert was probably the festival's most popular single event. There were: Long Gone Miles, blues; Eric Anderson and Tom Rush, working with electric bands; The Blues Project, jumping, funky folk-rock; and Richie Havens, doing beautiful song stylizations.

The Sunday evening concert at least showed the diversity of Newport—children's games, host Pete Seeger's anti-Viet Nam broadside: "If You Love Your Uncle Sam," Jimmy Driftwood, and Really Hip Thing Ali Akbar Khan playing ragas.

That was Newport, 1966. A recreational and educational experience that was sometimes inventive and surprising, at others, pedestrian and boring; it was a long weekend that one won't forget for a long time, anyway.

fifth Estate

Frank Dedenbach
Folk Festival Here—Newport
1966

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/12-august-15-1966/folk-festival-here-newport>
Fifth Estate #12, August 15, 1966

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)