



HOMEMADE JAM

by Donna Hébert

A potpourri of regional folk activities in North America & abroad

PLAYING IN THE BAND

Kids love music. From the youngest ages, they move in time, sing in tune and write their own if we give them half a chance. Those of us who love folk music often wonder how to provide opportunities for our children to love it too. What could make more sense, then, including a hands-on instrumental music program for children at a folk festival?

For two years now, I worked on just such a program bringing young players of various abilities and instruments from New York, New England and Pennsylvania into the “Great Groove Dance Band” at the Old Songs Festival, held in late June in Altamont, N.Y. This year we began on Friday afternoon and practiced a selection of contradance music for two hours with musical coaches Liza Constable (backup instruments), Lise Brown (flutes, horns) and myself (strings). Reassembled after rehearsing in sections, the group played together in a slow jam setting over two days, taking the tunes from very slow indeed at the start, right up to dance tempo. Later in the weekend, the Groovers played their new tunes for live contradancers and again with us in concert on the main stage. Players covered a range of skills from low intermediate (1-2 yrs experience), needing more attention from the coaches, to highly experienced players who really only needed help “finding the groove.”

The idea for “The Great Groove Dance Band” came out of my fiddle teaching and band coaching in the Amherst, Mass. area. I began playing fiddle sitting in with New Hampshire caller Dudley Laufman’s Canterbury Country Dance Orchestra in the early 1970s, and students have played with me

at dances for years. This program puts the kids “in the band” and “in the groove” with us. Working first with Northern banjo player Diane Sanabria, and later with guitarist Liza Constable and horn player Lise Brown, we’ve developed a program that can fit just about any group of school-trained instrumentalists – string *and* horn players.

Andy Spence, director of the Old Songs Festival, got excited about this new opportunity for children to participate hands-on as soon as I brought the idea to her. “Today, a folk festival must teach as well as entertain,” shared Andy. “The music we love is only a small part of the music scene today and we *must* preserve it and carry it forward to each generation. The schools require a child to learn an instrument in 5th grade, and they can choose from a selection of band instruments. Most schools do not have orchestras anymore ... and the music learned is mostly classical or band music. Our project with the Great Groove Band provides a chance to take the instrument the kids already play and learn to play fiddle tunes. With fiddle tunes one can play for dancing and in ensembles with others. These two abilities are the ones that promote the playing of music at home ... and for a lifetime.”

Sally Bogardus, the mother of one of our teen fiddlers Jon Bogardus of Greenville, N.Y., added “The Great Groove Band is a great way for kids to build self-esteem by playing in front of large audiences!”

How To Incorporate A Kids Band Into Your Festival Program

Here are the most important things to remember if you want to include a program like “The Great Groove Dance Band” in your local, regional, or national folk festival:

Coaches Are Key

In addition to being excellent “grooving” players themselves, the musicians hired to work with kids must have experience doing just that, and also be musically literate, i.e., write and read music and chord charts, and be able to arrange on the spot. In our case, one young flute player could only play half notes, so horn/flute coach Lise Brown rewrote a waltz part in half notes. My string arrangements come out of years of dance fiddling and teaching, and like Lise’s horn arrangements, are often reworked to fit the group needs. Some were even written by young students at my Summer Groove Camp in Amherst, a day camp for young fiddlers which expands on the festival experience, adding classes in theory and harmony.

Tell People About The Kids Band In All Your PR

Festival committees should include information about the youth band in all their festival PR [prominently, please!] with contact information for registration. They should also send brochures to music departments, and area school and private music teachers; as well as get flyers to area schools’ end-of-year music concerts (for a summer festival). Most young players at Old Songs Festival are registered for our group by parents attending the festival for the weekend as campers or volunteers. They are going to be there already, and they already play an instrument. Voila!

Find Out About Them When They Register

There’s a lot of information you want to get about players when they register. What instrument do they play? How long and how well? How old are they? Get a complete address/

e-mail if possible so coaches can communicate ahead of time with families and young musicians and know what sort of arrangements to prepare, especially for horn players, who require transposed arrangements. Make sure they know to bring music stands, extra strings, reeds, etc. Coaches provide music, and let registrants know time and location of scheduled workshops at the festival.

What Music To Use?

This year, most of the kids at the Old Songs Festival fell into an intermediate level (with seven string players, including viola and cello, plus trombones, sax, flutes, trumpet and ukelele), but I've seen all levels. We begin with simpler versions of dance fiddle tunes – just the reels ... jigs and waltzes are often easier to play unaltered – preparing ahead of the festival using a computer music program to write arrangements in both clefs and also in horn keys – B \flat , E \flat for clarinet, trumpet, saxes, trombone (bass clef) – plus chord charts for the backup guitarists. Given the amount of work, writing the arrangements for 2-4 new tunes each year is really a labor of love. We pick tunes we really love to play ourselves and want to pass along.

Then we create several levels of the melody for players of various skills to play. Then we add harmonies, bass and rhythm lines so it sounds like what you'd hear at a dance, with a good strong offbeat accented. Chord changes are also included.

[**Note about sound:** For performances and teaching with such a limited time available to work with them, young players need to hear your every word. Make sure your festival teaching and performance areas have sound, or coaches could be shouting over 40 kids.]


No Lost Lambs

It's very important for coaches to be dedicated to not losing anyone. We're always looking for strays when we play with the kids, making sure they don't get lost. We'll move around, making sure we help those who need it, and stand next to the waiverers so they can cop our groove, which, is after all, the whole point of this operation.

Groove

What is "groove?" It's the heart of the music, the inner rhythms of the tune that pulse in our veins.

How do you find it? Someone shows you how, usually, and takes you there. That's what we're doing. We know that's why we still play after all these years. Why not show the kids how to find it for themselves? Once they do, they'll never stop playing music!

For more information about including this program or one like it in your festival, you can contact me at P.O. Box 2632, Amherst MA 01004-2632; Ph: 413-253-4058; E-mail: dhebert@crocker.com Web: www.dhebert.com. 

Franco-American fiddler Donna Hébert is a founding mother of the New England contradance renaissance, fiddling with Yankee Ingenuity, Rude Girls and now Franco-American heritage group Chant-erelle. Her songs and tunes may be heard with them on "Soirée chez nous" and on the new "Mademoiselle, voulez-vous danser?" anthology of Franco-American music on Smithsonian/Folkways. Her solo debut CD, "Big Boned Beauty" was released this year on Rudegirl Music. Donna also teaches "Fiddling in the Groove" workshops to string teachers nationwide.



Photo by Bill Spence ©

The Great Groove Dance Band performs at the 1999 Old Songs Festival in Altamont, NY.