

Report: Voices from the Cultural Battlefield's Folk Alliance Forum

Folk Alliance International Conference, Memphis, TN

Saturday, February 21, 2009

Introduction – For five days in Memphis, TN, The International Folk Alliance conference brought together 1700 music industry professionals from throughout North America for workshops, panel discussions, showcases, and award ceremonies. This *Voices* Forum was one of the sessions offered. It drew a rich mix of musicians, producers, leaders of nonprofit organizations, DJs, and others. Please see the attached handout for more detail about how *Voices* framed its session.

Context – **Culture** is the distinct intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and material traditions and features of a people. Equitable is fair and just. Thus, **cultural equity** means that any culture, as a matter of principle, has the right to develop, expecting fair and just treatment in relationship to all other cultures. This is evidenced by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, 1948: “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.” Next, we defined hyper-capitalism. **Hyper-capitalism** is putting profit before people; market before community. We asked participants: *How is hyper-capitalism affecting your community?*

A Sampling of Responses

ART MENIUS, FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE FOLK ALLIANCE AND CURRENT BOARD MEMBER: In 1993, the seminal *Voices from the Battlefield: Achieving Cultural Equity* was published (Africa World Press). The publication made Phyllis Barney, then President of Folk Alliance, aware of the struggle for cultural equity and *Voices*' ongoing international conversations. So we invited Marta Moreno Vega from the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute in New York City to give the keynote at our conference. After that powerful presentation, for several years Folk Alliance co-convened with the Network of Cultural Centers of Color. Though we met at the same time and the same place, to me, it always seemed like we were two separate meetings. We never explored the power we could have in unity, and then we stopped co-convening. Events of recent years have pushed the cultural equity struggle to the forefront. Perhaps most dramatic is in New Orleans, where we witnessed a failure of our democratic safety net. International struggles for cultural equity continue, challenged by global hyper-capitalism. I've seen hyper-capitalism negatively affect the Folk Alliance community. In the old days of this conference, we had a balance of commerce and meaning. The commerce happened – artists could showcase their work and connect with labels, agents, and presenters – but there was also meaning. To me, when Marta Moreno Vega gave the keynote at Folk Alliance, it was a high point of a Folk Alliance that was a balanced “both and.” The conference included conversations about the greater meaning and purpose of our work, and how art could be used to advance social justice. In recent years, we've fallen away from that; just like we've fallen away from having greater participation in traditional music. It's time we reversed that course.

GRETCHEN PETERS, SINGER-SONGWRITER: I'm from the belly of the beast where success is quantified by chart number and, primarily, financial gain. When I arrived in Nashville in 1987, it was a relatively innocent place. Country music was not for making profit, and as a result, the artistic

community was healthier. Now, Nashville's a microcosm of our country that is suffering from hyper-capitalism. During the 2008 Presidential campaign, Sarah Palin used my song "Independence Day." She completely ignored the context; the song is about domestic abuse. I had no legal recourse, but as personal retaliation, I donated the royalties during the election cycle to Planned Parenthood. In my community, Music Row, the reaction was complete bafflement. My friends asked, "Why would you do that?" I gave up a fair amount of money, but more than that, it was the idea that I gave up potential customers. I got a lot of hate mail, and what surprised me – besides the terrible spelling – was this theme of, "country music is conservative, you just lost a lot of fans, and you're going to pay." In the place where art and commerce meet, there have to be soldiers to fight. It's an unholy alliance, and there has to be a pushback from the artistic community. I guess that's why I'm at Folk Alliance and not the County Music Awards anymore!

KELLY MULHOLLAN, STILL ON THE HILL: I've been a life-long critic of runaway capitalism. It is a huge force in homogenizing culture, which is a frightening thing for us. For me, the Ozark culture is hanging on by a thread, rapidly becoming this goody hillbilly thing. We've been in a search and rescue mission in the last ten years to champion what's left of our heritage.

DONNA STJERNA, STILL ON THE HILL: We've also been playing in schools. The most shocking thing is, we'll play in a high school in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and we'll bring in our folk instruments and we hold up a banjo and say, "What is this?" Literally only one student will know.

JOE JENKS, TOURING PERFORMER AND SONGWRITER: I went to a conservatory in Illinois and studied opera, musical theater, and jazz. One professor taught the commercial component, and he was teaching an archaic model of getting a record contract and having the label take care of us. Even if that model works for some people, I know they aren't going to be interested in what I'm doing. I'm singing songs that say your machine sucks. People don't help you sell and distribute songs about our country's broken system. I never tried to dig into the industry, because I always presumed that there was nothing in it for me. I produced my own records; I found Folk Alliance. Even in the last ten years that I've been coming to Folk Alliance, I've seen a shift that makes me nervous in this community. Ten years ago, it was more about the conversation we're having now; people were asking things like, "How do I promote my craft in a way that stays true to the tradition?" There's been a transition. There are a lot of people chasing stardom, and they're going to have broken hearts. What's important is finding a piece of the puzzle that means something to you. For me, it's been the music of the labor movement. It's the culture of my factory hometown of Rockford, Illinois. In the work songs of my working class people, I found a sense of liberation and purpose.

DENISE WILLIAMS, INDEPENDENT PRODUCER: My husband and I were family farmers in rural Minnesota who washed out in the mid-80s when family farmers went down the tubes. We auctioned off our livelihoods and started over in Nashville because of a love of music. A friend invited us to a house concert in Texas, and we fell in love with the concept. We couldn't believe that real musicians would come to play. We started a house concert series in Nashville for artists of conscience and traditional artists. We have a good time, we have community, we have potluck. We try to honor the artists. Last year at Folk Alliance, we went to a panel on house concerts. They were talking about

revenue and mailing lists and sound systems. They said you had to be careful because you'd be bombarded with artists bothering you all the time. I didn't belong there.

CHANA ROTHMAN, SINGER-SONGWRITER: This is my first time at Folk Alliance. This is also the first time in the past four days that there has been a conversation in a circle – thank you. It's so important to have these discussions. I am concerned because all the sessions on justice issues have been placed in conflict during this afternoon slot. This afternoon, there was also a session on women and music and one on immigration. There have not been many other sessions like this, and they are all happening at the same time.

RICK WILLIAMS, INDEPENDENT PRODUCER: To me, in Nashville, it doesn't seem like the artists support one another.

GRETCHEN PETERS, SINGER-SONGWRITER: It's a fear-based culture. It should be that if I include you in my world, it enhances me – it doesn't diminish me. It's not like that. It's been turned into a competitive and fear-based culture by the machine. The artists privately support each other; one mainstream artist commended me for what I did with Planned Parenthood, but she would never be able to say it in public.

Strategies

Counteract fear with small acts of courage, such as engaging in a new collaboration or artistic exchange.

Remove false ideas of competition: folk musicians are allies, not competitors.

Make connections with like-minded arts organizations, such as Alternate ROOTS and People's Music Network of Songs of Freedom and Struggle.

Don't polarize the issue by demonizing those who play music to make money. Rather, let the audience judge authenticity.

Ask the 2010 Folk Alliance conference planning committee to better space the sessions related to justice. (This year, all justice-related sessions were placed in conflict with each other during the same afternoon time slot.)

Advocate for nonprofit government support, and generally encourage Folk Alliance to advocate for its members.

Change the conception of what a teaching artist is. A teaching artist is not a failed musician! To do this, bring music educators into our artistic community. For example, Folk Alliance could have a parallel delegation at the Music Educators National Conference.

Don't tacitly support this country's celebrity culture. Convene more conversations about values at Folk Alliance, so we don't forget who we are and where we came from.