Music festivals strike an ecological chord

Edmonton – Music festivals are a summertime tradition, and you don’t have to look hard to find one. A quick Google search brings up over 100 to choose from in western-Canada.

“Music festivals are now the fastest-growing area in the music industry,” say Dr. Michael B. MacDonald, associate professor, Bachelor of Music in Jazz and Contemporary Popular Music program. “The story behind these festivals and the counterculture that nurtured them is an interesting part of western-Canada’s history.”

While researching his book, Playing for Change: Music Festivals as Community Learning and Development, MacDonald discovered that the success of many festivals—especially the smaller ones—is tied less to the headline acts and more to what’s going on behind the scenes. “When I began this research, I thought people were organizing festivals because of the music,” he says. “But that wasn’t it.”

“They were doing it to build a village, to create a community. The experience at a camping music festival, in particular, isn’t anything extraordinary,” adds MacDonald. “It’s sitting down with people, eating together, and seeing the looks on people’s faces when they realize that they are working and living together in an environment that is more open and social than anything they have experienced before.”

These music events—for many of the communities that host them, the people who organize them and the audiences that attend them—also have deep ties to sustainability and to ecology. “The reason that folk festivals all happen in the grass is because they are intentionally ecological. Folk festivals in western-Canada all emerged from an early response to ecological degradation,” he says.

MacDonald will be returning to the festival circuit again this year as both a researcher and filmmaker, digging further into the connections between ecology and music, and looking for an effective way to communicate the complex conversations, relationships and experiences that unfold in these temporary communities.

“I would encourage people to go to as many music festivals—especially the out-of-the-way ones—as they possibly can. “They’ll see local artists doing fantastic work, and see and hear people expressing themselves in completely different ways.”

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