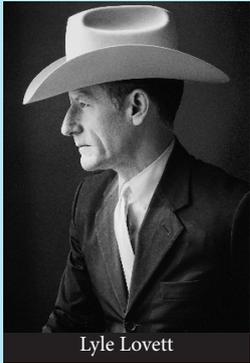


# KERRVILLE FOLK FESTIVAL

## NEW FOLK

### SONGWRITING COMPETITION



Lyle Lovett

This is a series about the competition at the Kerrville Folk Festival and its rich history of songwriters that has become a part of the festival during the past four decades. The list includes names like Lyle Lovett, Nancy Griffith, Lucinda Williams, Lynn

Langham — whose song ‘Old Yellow Moon’ just won a Grammy for Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell, Steve Earle, Hal Ketchum, Robert Earl Keen, James McMurtry and Shawn Colvin.

I am beginning with the birth of it written by the Kerrville Folk Festival’s founder, Rod Kennedy, to give everyone a way to understand how and why this event came to be so important to songwriters and fans from all over the world.

#### THE BIRTH OF NEW FOLK COMPETITIONS AT KERRVILLE

(Part 1 in a series by Rod Kennedy on the History of New Folk)

By December of 1971, the Kerrville Folk Festival’s first line up for June 1-3 of 1972 was complete. I received a phone call from Newport producer George Wein asking me to tour with Peter Yarrow as his tour manager to three or four Texas cities. The tour was to promote his first solo album for Warner Bros. following the breakup of Peter Paul and Mary in 1970. My meeting Peter Yarrow would change my life and the life of many others. The many hours of traveling by car together were filled with long conversations about our respective careers, and we quickly became friends.

One of the things that happened on that tour was that after every one of Peter’s concerts a handful of young writers would show up at the stage door to ask Peter to listen to their

songs. He always took the time to listen and to encourage them. Later on the road, Peter learned that I would be producing the first festival at Kerrville in 7 months and he asked to be added to the roster.

Our conversations turned repeatedly to the plight of the unknown songwriters, none of whom had any music industry connections. Peter asked me if my new festival had any opportunity for songwriters like those we had met on our tour. I told him we had no planned mechanism for this, and Peter described his New Folks Concerts that he had started at the Newport Festival. Then he asked if I could provide that kind of opportunity at Kerrville. He said, “Simply put a story in the newspapers on your publicity list and the writers will come”. At that point Peter offered to help host the concerts.

It was too late to add Peter to the posters that were already printed, but immediately following the release of our New Folk story, the responses started coming in and I had two dozen writers who were totally new to us. Included in that first year’s crop were Bobby Bridger (who we later learned already had two LPs on RCA), The Flatlanders (Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Butch Hancock, and Joe Ely, who were picked to play on a main stage spot at the Municipal Auditorium), Bill Oliver and Kurt Van Sickle.

Peter and I were joined in hosting by Carolyn Hester and Allen Damron while the spectators sat on hay bales surrounding the small stage at the first Texas State Arts and Crafts Fair on the Schreiner College campus.

Peter’s loving spirit began to pervade the festival and really planted the seeds for the ambience that became the festival’s trademark. The three days of main stage performances, the New Folk competition and the Folk Mass celebration filled the hearts of 2800 ticket buyers and the pages of three major metropolitan dailies with the pure joy of the first Kerrville Folk Festival.

As the years passed, the “New Folk” rules were refined and carefully spelled out targeting excellence and fairness so that the song-



## *By Dalis Allen, Producer*

writers' competition would not become another talent show.

By now, the New Folk winners had become widely celebrated and the number of annual entries to be screened ran from 500-800 writers. The number of finalists was trimmed to 32 to allow a less hurried competition with 16 writers per day of the 2- day event. To this day, the New Folk competition at Kerrville remains among the most honored and respected events of its type in the world having assisted hundreds of writers with recognition, self-assurance and networking at a time in their young careers when they are most vulnerable.

Among the perks for qualifying entries are scholarships for the Foundation's Songwriting School, a rich networking experience with their peers, complimentary admission to many days of the festival, the chance to win the title and financial assistance for being a Kerrville New Folk Award Winner.

- Rod Kennedy  
January 20, 2007

A huge contingency of past New Folk Finalists that have honed their craft and continued to be full time touring artists still play the Festival on a regular basis. Jimmy LaFave, Tish Hinojosa, John Gorka, David Wilcox, Bobby Bridger, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Butch Hancock, Butch Morgan, Ray Bonneville, Chuck Pyle, Tom Russell, Jon Ims, Johnsmith, Slaid Cleaves and dozens more. The relationships that are forged and the community found are many times the most important thing that the artists gain from participating in New Folk.

Following is a letter from one of the six 2012 award winners who describes the importance of the award to him.

*"My name is Korby Lenker, and being part of the New Folk Winners in 2012 was a game changer for me. I have won songwriting contests in the past, but this one was different. In terms of tradition (what other festival besides Newport can trace it's beginning to the folk singing tradition of*

*the 50s and 60s?) Kerrville's contest stands alone. And apart from festival founders like Peter Yarrow, some of my heroes — Lyle Lovett, Nancy Griffith, Lucinda Williams — participated in New Folk in years past and went on to have important careers. I'm very excited to be part of that story.*

*"Practically speaking, New Folk opened doors to me that were previously closed, and allowed me to become a full-time touring musician. Elements of my career have been brewing for a long time, but it seems like New Folk helped turn a corner for me. I got a booking agent dedicated to developing my audience both inside and out of the folk music community (I'm looking to play some 200+ shows this year). And even in Nashville where I live, more industry people know (and care) about what I do. I've even received a lot of radio airplay on the commercial triple A station in town!*

*"Apart from the practical aid, being a New Folk winner made me feel like there is a community of people who 'get me.' I have been an aspiring singer-songwriter for almost 15 years — not quite country, not quite pop, not quite folk even — but in Kerrville, I found listeners and artists who didn't think I was crazy to write songs out of my personal life experience and to tell stories with those songs that weren't necessarily groomed for the mainstream. In short, I found a musical home.*

*"I look forward to developing my relationship with the Kerrville story, and I hope the festival continues grow and foster talent for years to come. Thank you, New Folk!*

- Korby Lenker

The New Folk Chronicles will continue in the next issue with interviews from some of the past finalists about what it meant to them, how it affected their careers and where they are today. I am so delighted to have the opportunity to tell the New Folk story in Texas Heart Beat.

*Dalis*