



This page: Thousands of Folk Festival goers pack East Granite Street, left. Sierra Hull, 16, picks her mandolin during her performance. Facing page: Lead guitar player Bill Kirchen of The Hammer of the Honky-Tonk Gods plays during the band's performance on the stage built at the site of an old mine.

Same Song, Third Verse

National Folk Festival to end its
three-year run in Butte this summer

A sunny, grassy terrace overlooks rooftops and distant mountains. Sip a beverage, tap your foot to exquisite live music coming from a stage built into a monument. Something you've probably never seen. Look around; see toddlers toddling, parents relaxing, picnics, random couples cutting a rug.

It's Europe, right? Italy? Think again. That monument housing the stage is a head frame from mining days. You're in Butte, Montana. It's the National Folk Festival.

For three days last summer and the summer before, thanks to the festival, downtown Butte was a national arts mecca. It will be again, for the last time, this coming July 9-11. The National Folk Festival selects one city for three years, then moves on. In 2008, it drew an estimated 75,000 people to Butte; in 2009, 120,000; more are expected this July. The festival gathers and presents the finest practitioners of American roots music, representing traditions that are centuries old on the continent as well as new arrivals.

The first National Folk Festival was in 1934, so while the 2010 festival is Butte's third, it is the nation's 72nd. The festival is a project of the National Council for the Traditional Arts, based near Washington, D.C. NCTA selected Butte over 21 other

STORY BY BETH JUDY
PHOTOS BY WALTER HINICK

'[In Butte's heyday] 100,000 people lived here and did commerce 24 hours a day. The same number's on the streets during the festival. It's thriving, vibrant—like Butte once was, like it could be again.'

George Everett,
executive director
of Mainstreet
Uptown Butte



This page: Ethel Caffie-Austin, left, and the Austin Singers soprano Delnora Roberts open their set on the Original Mine stage. Facing page: Cang Chin Jao picks the guzheng while playing a Chinese melody with a group of musicians from San Francisco, top. Bob French's Original Tuxedo Jazz Band plays some original New Orleans's Jazz for a packed audience at the Tourism Dance Pavilion.

cities to host the festival. George Everett, executive director of Mainstreet Uptown Butte, the local nonprofit running the festival, says several factors helped, including Butte's years of experience hosting big crowds for Evel Knievel Days and the like; its compelling history, buildings and ethnic diversity; and the fact that the folk festival hadn't been west for 40 years and had never been in Montana. Additionally, the NCTA's mission includes boosting a city's economy and infrastructure. It recognized Butte was poised to catch the economic infusion and run with it.

Hosting the National Folk Festival means that Mainstreet Uptown Butte must raise about \$1 million per year—a huge challenge it is still slogging away at. Organizers must also produce an army of volunteers—about 900 last year. In return, the NCTA pulls off a festival

of the highest quality—with free admission—and leaves behind improvements like the festival's main stage, the transformed site of the abandoned Original Mine. So far, the festival's economic impact has been \$10 to \$12 million per summer, which benefits both Butte and the state as festival goers travel through and stay in other communities.

Music is the main draw. A committee of Montanans in the arts chooses approximately 25 musical groups from a roster vetted by NCTA. In 2008, five stages—the Original plus smaller ones embedded in downtown streets—presented Chicago Blues, Zydeco, Polka, Basque dancing, Celtic fiddling, Gospel, Norwegian folk, Bulgarian wedding music, western yodeling by Montana's own Wylie Gustafson and more. Last year saw Cajun, New Orleans jazz, Mariachi, old-time Illinois fiddle music and ▶



Trumpet and trombone players with Bob French's Original Tuxedo Jazz Band blow the crowd away with jazz sounds from New Orleans at the Tourism Dance Pavilion.

musical traditions of Colombia, Zimbabwe, China and Finland.

But the festival celebrates more than just music. In one area of downtown dedicated to "folklife," practitioners demonstrate and teach regional crafts and knowledge. They included, in 2008, Crow dollmaker Birdie Real Bird, Assiniboine star quilter Annette Linder, saddlemaker Bill Allison, and medicinal plant expert Linwood Tall Bull among many others. Last year, the folklife theme was "The Culture of the Horse," so the area featured cutting and trick roping, mule-packing and horsehair hitching,

plus a display of different horse breeds. This year will showcase Butte's mining heritage, its equipment and techniques—buzz drills, hand drills, even a mucking contest. Both musicians and crafts presenters reach out to kids with special programs. The children's programming is impressive, creatively designed to educate and entertain. Other craftspeople from across the state are at the folk festival to sell, in a curated marketplace.

The big event seems to be a good excuse for reunions. Last year, self-described "Butte Rat" Don McMillan, now a retiree in Polson, lounged in a lawn chair at the Original, surrounded by old friends. Geologist Steve Henderson and his 19-year-old daughter, Sarah, flew in from Georgia to join former college roommate, Butte resident, and festival volunteer Dick Gibson. Sarah couldn't get over Butte's mountains, history and small-town feel. It was Anne Azure's second festival. This time she brought her niece, Mary, and more relatives were due in from Billings and Ashland. Joann Nelson came from Wisdom with relatives. "Wisdom's voting population is 150. This is a lot of people," she said.

The festival has something for everyone. The Azures especially loved the reggae and blues. So did Missoulians Steve and Patti Kent, back in Butte for the first time in 30 years. Retired Butte resident John Clark enjoyed the cowboy poetry, though he and wife, Laura, seemed mesmerized by Zimbabwean performer Thomas

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Mapfumo. Dancing to the Illinois old-time music makers, the New Mules, did it for University of Montana professor Vicki Watson. But the Seattle break-dance group Massive Monkees impressed her too: "I thought they'd be arrested for breaking the laws of gravity." When the Monkees showed up at the New Mules, Watson taught them how to clog.

After its final year in Butte, organizer Everett hopes the festival can keep going regionally, as it has in some other former host cities. East Lansing, Michigan, continues to host what is now the Great Lakes Festival; Lowell, Massachusetts, hosted the national festival in the late 1980s and today has the best-attended folk festival in the nation. "Butte wants to be a festival city," says Michael Marsolek, program director at Montana Public Radio, which broadcasts live from the festival. "Montana's known for its landscapes and national parks. Wouldn't it be great if we had world-class summer arts destinations as well?"

Greg Mallowney knows festival cities. He grew up in Butte, but has lived most of his life in New Orleans. Leaning back on the grass, enjoying fellow Louisianans Michael Doucet and Beau Soleil, he muses, "You never see fights at festivals. It's all happiness and fun. Strangers become friends." Butte's been perfect for the folk festival, Mallowney says, because of the city's reputation for hospitality and food. "Butte people are so friendly," affirms John Lowe of St. Louis, who ventured to the festival after backpacking in the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

Missoulian Patti Holkup agrees Butte was perfect for the folk affair. "It's our truly international city."

Gary Schliebe, also of Missoula, shakes his head at seeing Butte's streets so full of people. "Magic," he says. The same thing strikes Everett. "[In Butte's heyday] 100,000 people lived here and did commerce 24 hours a day. The same number's on the streets during the festival. It's thriving, vibrant—like Butte once was, like it could be again." **M**

Beth Judy, who lives in Missoula, is a frequent contributor to *Montana Magazine*.



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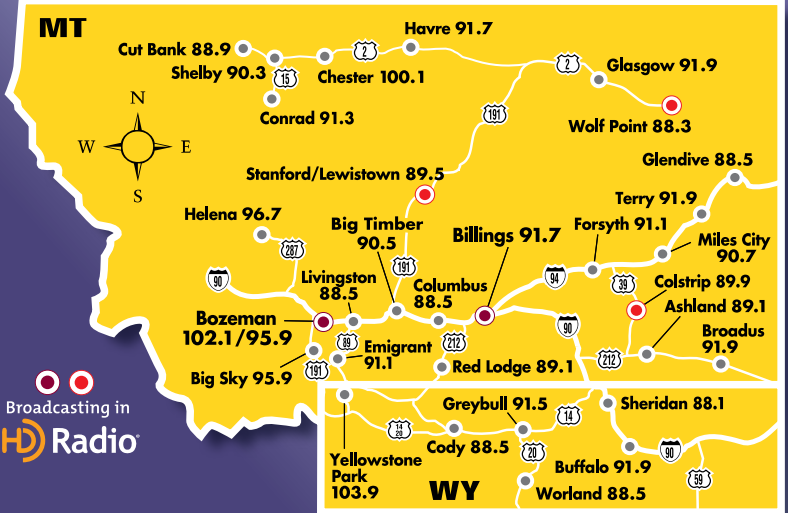
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