

## Record crowds for Folk Festival

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The biggest party in Richmond just got bigger. Much bigger.

More people flocked to the three-day National Folk Festival this weekend at the Richmond riverfront than have been to any other in the 69-year history of the multicity event, organizers said.

A whopping 175,000 people attended the festival, said Lisa Sims, director of events. The figure, nearly twice as large as last year, was determined by flyovers and by sales.

"We doubled our shuttle ridership, we doubled the water sales, we doubled the beer sales and we sold out of all our merchandise. And that had never happened before," Sims said.

One of the food vendors, the International Grill, began the festival with 400 pounds of potatoes to be used in its butterfly chips and french fries, said employee James Williams. It sold out of those and brought in another 400 pounds. By the end of the weekend, only 25 pounds were left.

"It's a very special event for Richmond," said Steve Gullet of Richmond, who has attended the festival all three years it has been here. "It doesn't come to every city."

What he liked about the festival are "the surprises.

"You're on your way to see one thing that you know about, and all of a sudden, you stop to see something you've never seen before," Gullet said.

Local musician Robbin Thompson said, "It takes a lot to get Richmond out to see art and movies. Now that's changed. Look at this [crowd], this is fantastic."

Unmissable in a T-shirt reading "It ain't rocket surgery," Thompson said he was particularly taken with such acts as The Madison Hummingbirds, Virginia blues legends Cephas and Wiggins, and by a workshop featuring hammered dulcimer players from Persia (now Iran) and China.

"But I haven't seen anything I haven't liked," he said.

Plans are well under way to spin off a continuing version of the festival in the coming years here, to be called the Richmond Folk Festival. The idea thrills Cassandra Cossitt, the lead singer in the classic country band Buttercup.

"I play music in Richmond, Va., and I see a lot of live music in Richmond, Va., and it's great to see this many people come out to see live music," Cossitt said. "There's a vitality that you don't get when you're listening in your car."

When asked what she would like to see in the coming Richmond Folk Festival, she said, "Buttercup!"

"I hope national acts still continue to come, but there is a lot of great music in Richmond, too, and Virginia," Cossitt said.

The sentiment was echoed by Terry Long, who said she would like to see such local artists as Susan Greenbaum perform in the festivals to come.

One local act did perform at this year's festival, the powerful family gospel band Maggie Ingram and the Ingramettes. Its set included a Richmond-specific song about being prepared with enough drinking water, presumably during Hurricane Isabel.

The ability to hear one kind of music one minute and something completely different the next is what drew Gullet to the festival and will bring him back for more.

"If they can keep the level of diversity, this level of variety, I don't think there's anything they can do to improve it," he said.

Late Saturday night, the diverse musical styles came together in an after-show party at the Doubletree Hotel. In one room, folk legend Mike Seeger was playing old-time string music with four or five others, while other performers looked on. In another room, members of Big Country Bluegrass jammed with members from several other groups.

And in the most diverse room of all, the Latin dance band Grupo Fantasma rocked out with help from New Orleans pianist Henry Butler and, later, members of the go-go band Junk Yard Band.

The party, and the music, lasted well into the early morning.

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