

The impressive finale of Førde's Anniversary Gala concert



DORIS JAVAY

Førde Traditional and World Music Festival

Førdehuset, Norway, July 5

The opening night of this year's edition featured a film reflecting on the festival's first 25 years. "The unknown is not so unknown any more," said one festival interviewee. Another commented that the festival had made Førde less xenophobic. All worthy claims that were accentuated come Saturday morning, when after an early morning downpour, the festival parade kicked off the weekend's proceeding. It's become a much-loved Førde tradition – a vibrant blast of colour and sound as musicians amicably jostled and tried to out-play each other as they made their way through the grey streets on horse-drawn carriages, lined with curious locals doing their weekend shopping.

In contrast, the evening's gala concert in the municipal sports centre was a slick extravaganza, hosted by Norwegian singer Unni Løvlid. In between introducing the various acts, she described how Grieg and his *Norwegian Folk Songs, Opus 66* was instrumental in the development of Norwegian music's national identity. The gala featured around half a dozen groups who have all played over the last 25 years. Local talent was provided by the virtuosic Hardanger fiddle brothers, Gjermund and Einar Olav Larsen. Festival favourites, Taraf de Haidouks followed, with their fiery frenzy of *cimbalom*, fiddle and accordion music. The Palestinian Trio Joubran entertained with their party trick involving all three brothers playing one *oud*. More intimate moments came via exquisite *a capella* singing from Serbian star Divna.

The festival has been the source of some great musical partnerships, including the String Sisters who formed having met at previous editions. They led the finale – a monumental gathering of all the artists, including Bassekou Kouyaté and Ngoni ba and JPP – quite a feat just to get them all on stage, let alone playing together. It was a joyful conclusion and reunion, laying down solid foundations for the next 25 years.

JO FROST

Read more about this year's Førde Festival at <http://bit.ly/forde2014>

The April Verch Band

Mendocino Music Festival, California, July 17

"Are there any bluegrass fans in this big old tent?" April Verch asked early into her first set at this annual event's biggest venue, on a cool Thursday evening. There were plenty such fans of all ages. But over the festival's two weeks, set in a mix of sun and fog in a charming northern California coastal village, there was also a heady mix of jazz, country rock, and quite a lot of virtuosic Western classical music.

Verch's strain of bluegrass was itself eclectic, hybridising both American and Canadian folk styles with country ballads and introducing original songs steeped in these traditions. Verch was joined by guitarist and mandolin player Hayes Griffin, and bassist and claw hammer banjo player Cody Walters, both of who appeared on the Verch's most recent release, *Bright Like Gold* (reviewed in #94), and also on an album being recorded this autumn.

Her energetic and richly ornamented fiddling on CDs has been praised in these pages, but the live

performance also showcased Verch's award-winning step dancing. The Ottawa valley style she learned in her native Ontario seemed not altogether unlike *ceilidh* dancing, but with wider articulation of legs and arms. With the sweet delight of Verch's high, girlish vocals, evocative of country diva Dolly Parton, and her gracious and grateful praise of the welcome she'd received from the festival and the audience, you felt you'd joined a love fest. Griffin and Walters, apart from their top-drawer instrumental back-ups, solos and original songs, layered delicious close vocal harmonies with Verch, around a single mic.

JEFF KALISS

Dom Flemons and Martin Simpson

Cecil Sharp House, London, July 23

It was a genius idea, bringing Dom Flemons, formerly of the Carolina

Chocolate Drops and Martin Simpson, the greatest guitarist, songwriter, interpreter of traditional song and bluesman ever to emerge from the badlands of, er, Scunthorpe.

The aim of the collaboration, organised by EFDSS (the English Folk Dance and Song Society), was to explore the songs from England that Cecil Sharp collected on his travels a century ago, in the Appalachians. But these two weren't going to let that constrain them. Simpson opened with a fine account, all slide guitar, of that sad song of death by syphilis, 'The Soldier Cut Down in his Prime'. They segued into what it metamorphosed into in the US, the 'St James Infirmary Blues', sung by Flemons with a nod to Satchmo's version.

Flemons is fascinated by English music hall and minstrel songs: Simpson loves old blues. What followed was a cornucopia



Dom Flemons and Martin Simpson performing at Cecil Sharp House

Jeremy Skettle