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No other North American folk festival does box office business quite like Edmonton. A sellout every year since 1995, all 9,500 of its \$80 advance weekend passes were bought in a matter of hours in June for the four-day event that begins tonight and runs through Sunday.

Really, Edmonton is just good news, "borderingly good news," said festival producer Terry Wickham.

And if that sounds like a boast, consider the facts: the budget for the Edmonton Folk Music Festival now tops \$2-million, of which 10 per cent comes from a combination of federal, provincial and municipal government grants. The remainder is provided by sponsors, and sales of tickets and merchandise. Indeed, such has been the good fortune of this festival of late that it purchased a new three-storey 4,000-square-foot office for its staff and 1,700 volunteers and doubled its artistic budget.

This year, Wickham will spend \$500,000 in anemic Canadian funds on such diverse performers as Paul Kelly, Australia's genial

singer-songwriter, and Thomas Mapfumo, Zimbabwe's dread-locked maestro of the mbira (thumb piano). More familiar names among the 65 acts appearing in Gallagher Park — a beautiful, natural amphitheatre situated on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River — include Joan Osborne, Billy Bragg, Emmylou Harris, Jann Arden and Ashley MacIsaac.

"The U.S. dollar is hurting us. Bands like Capercaillie from Scotland, are booked through U.S. agents and paid in U.S. dollars. . . . But we've spent more on talent than any other festival. We have the largest artistic budget. We've gone out of our way to put the money there. . . . It's like, if you build it they will come. It sounds corny, I know, but that's my attitude. A festival is always a leap of faith, but I always figure if you spend the money on the music it'll come back. . . .

"I've found the more money you spend the less risk there is. I know that sounds like an

oxymoron but it's true. . . . And if the festival can deal with the low Canadian dollar and still thrive, it will only get stronger."

Ten years ago, the Edmonton Folk Music Festival relied on charity bingos to pay staff wages. It was \$50,000 in debt and barely solvent despite endorsements from Rolling Stone magazine for its eclecticism. Artistic director Holger Petersen left to host CBC Radio's *Saturday Night Blues* and to develop Stony Plain Records. Petersen recommended Wickham as his successor.

Not surprisingly, the Irish-born Wickham, who had previously booked acts for the Calgary Centre for the Performing Arts initially turned down the offer. A long talk with his brother Kevin, however, convinced him otherwise.

"I turned it down at first because I was stupid, really," says Wickham. "Kevin said, 'You're a fool. That's the best show in Alberta. It would be a great place to work and it

would be good for you.'"

Wickham's first effort turned an oppressive debt into a \$55,000 surplus. Within two years, he had added the manager's position to his portfolio and the Edmonton Folk Music Festival has never looked back.

Incidentally, in 1996, he also took over as artistic director of the Calgary Folk Music Festival and immediately turned its ledger from \$65,000 in the red to \$45,000 in the black.

As Edmonton grew healthier financially, Wickham put his economics and business administration degree from Dublin's Trinity College to good use. He gradually increased ticket prices and plowed the money back into the artistic budget. He brought in quality world music for the first time, increased the Celtic content and hired bands like the Violent Femmes to attract a younger audience for the long-term benefit of the festival. He added Thursday night main-stage con-

certs with artists with beneficial name recognition. Then, in 1994, he hit the jackpot.

"Landing **Joni Mitchell** for her first concert in five years was the biggest shot in the arm we got. Joni did two things. First of all, she accelerated our growth by a couple years. . . . Second, she not only helped us build our local audience, she also put us on the map internationally. A lot of industry people at other festivals went, '**Joni Mitchell!**' We started to get noticed after that. It helped us get Elvis Costello and others."

Costello headlined the following year and for the first time Edmonton sold out its advance passes — an accomplishment not achieved by a Canadian folk festival since Mariposa in its heyday a quarter-century before. The box office run had begun.

"We've gotten bigger but I don't think we've lost our friendliness. I don't think we've crossed the line from confidence to arrogance," said Wickham.

"It's a \$2-million festival now. I'm going to predict we'll be the first folk festival to do a million-dollar box office."

The Edmonton Folk Festival runs until Sunday. For information: 403-429-1899. This year's event is sold out.