

## Ontario Council of Folk Festivals Conference

Keynote Address – Loreena McKennitt – Saturday, October 15

(introduction)

Thanks very much for those kind words.

And thank you all for welcoming me. I've really looked forward to being at this gathering.

I know there's a great spirit of fun and community whenever 'folk festival people' meet together. And the music and song always enriches and inspires.

This conference, as I understand it, is a place where you can share ideas, learn new things, hear some great performers, and renew a sense of commitment to the path that we all share.

And this gathering also gives us a chance to discuss some of the things that I believe have made working in music and creating the festival experience more challenging. In a few minutes, I'll touch briefly on one of those challenges that has become an important cause for me.

(So 'thank you' for inviting me to speak. And, no, don't worry, I don't plan to offer my own 'two cents' on 'what is folk music?'. I'm happy just knowing that 'folk music' is what you hear at a folk festival. And that continues to change and grow as it should.)

I see some familiar faces here – people I've known and worked with over the years. I also see a lot of people I haven't met and who perhaps don't know much about me and my journey in music.

So I thought that what I'd like to do is to share with you a bit of my story – as an independent musical artist trying to make her way – yes, by performing and recording, but also by taking on the day-to-day task of managing my own business.

It wasn't that long ago that the popular belief was that women weren't really capable of handling a business. Some have said that about performing artists too. But if I have a message today, it's that people working in a creative capacity *must* give time to business. And I believe that's especially true if you want to go down the path that leads to a life in music.

For the organizers and presenters of our Ontario Folk Festival, I know there are challenges too. But I hope you also feeling some well-earned satisfaction in the work that you do.

Folk Festivals matter a lot. And wherever they are in Ontario, these annual celebrations – with their magical mix of camaraderie, community and great music -- have become an important of the cultural fabric of our country.

I first found myself in the world of folk festivals when I was still a teenager – as both as a performer and a volunteer. This happened at the Winnipeg Folk Festival, which was just starting to establish itself in the mid -1970's as a leading event in the folk music revival.

I didn't have to travel far to get involved. Though I've lived in Stratford, Ontario since the 1980's, I grew up in Manitoba, in the lovely prairie town of Morden, about an hour's drive west of Winnipeg.

My father was a livestock dealer; my mother a nurse, and my brother and I were raised there in love with the open country, the farm animals and the big sky. For a while I dreamed of becoming a veterinarian. But like many of you here today, I suspect, music always called me.

After high school I spent 4 months studying Agriculture at the University of Manitoba and then I "changed my course" and left. I took a job in the stockyards that was anything but glamorous, but which allowed me time to follow my fascination with theatre and the arts and music. I also became a fledgling singer-songwriter and joined what was a pretty vibrant local folk music scene.

I guess I was beginning to be noticed a bit, because Mitch Podolak, the artistic director of the Winnipeg Folk Festival, invited me to one of the early Festivals as part of the Manitoba contingent and plugged me into a few workshops. It was really thrilling to be part of that experience – out in the big fields at Birds Hill Park playing to welcoming crowds and meeting and sharing the stage with so many interesting people.

I have to tell you though, I was a little different than most at that Festival.

And that was because I played my guitar upside down. (act our positioning?)

It's something that left-handed people do. You hold a right-handed guitar upside-down, playing bass lines with your fingers and picking out melody with your thumb. When you do that, I'm told, it's called "Cotten-picking", named for the great Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten, a folk music legend from the American South who was also a self-taught left-handed guitarist.

Libba Cotton was just a youngster when she started writing great songs like "Shake Sugaree" and "Freight Train, Freight Train...goin' so fast", a tune she wrote as a teenager watching trains go by her house in Carrboro, North Carolina.

(Over the years her songs have been covered by musicians from Peter, Paul and Mary to Bob Dylan, from Devendra Barnhart to Taj Mahal.)

Amazing things happen at Folk Festivals – as you all know. And so as a teenaged volunteer at the Winnipeg Folk Festival I was given an extraordinary job. My assignment, as directed by Mitch Podolak – maybe because he knew I was an upside-down guitar player – was to help out a special guest performer: Elizabeth Cotten herself, who was by then well into her 80's. Mitch said:

"Just keep her company, and carry her guitar and bring her water when she needs it."

I was more than happy to do it. And so I became an aide-de-camp to the legendary lady herself as we walked the large acreage of the Festival.

Over the years I found out more about Libba Cotton.

Though playing her guitar and writing songs had been her passion, she married young, and actually gave up music in her twenties to work and raise a family. For years she would only play occasionally in church. Finally, in her 60's, divorced, with a grown family, an accidental meeting led to her being hired as a maid in the house of Charles Seeger, Pete Seeger's father, who had remarried and had a second family. There she picked up her left-handed guitar and started to play some of her own music for the family. And that was how she was 'found again' by Mike and Peggy Seeger and became one of the great discoveries of the folk revival of the 1960's.

So there we were, an unlikely duo perhaps, Libba Cotton, an 80 plus Afro-American folk music legend from North Carolina and Loreena McKennitt a ginger-haired teenager from Morden, enjoying each other's company on the plains of Manitoba. I just remember feeling privileged to accompany and support someone such as her. And I appreciated the fact that Mitch gave me the opportunity to do something like that. It wasn't performing, but it fell into the part of learning the culture, paying your dues.

That memory has stayed with me. And it reminds me, first of all, how 'paying your dues' is part of what we all must do. It's also so important to have mentors, people who see something in you and support you. And that story reminds me of what wonderful mixing bowls Folk Festivals are – and how inspired organizers and directors and willing volunteers are such an important part of the mix.

A sense of community, the excitement of great new music, the fun of hearing tips and stories and the tricks of the trade from fellow performers -- those wonderful experiences were truly an important building block in my ability to feel at home in music.

Those positive feelings stayed with me as I sought out my own path.

I moved from the prairies to Ontario. I settled in Stratford and worked behind the scenes at the Stratford Festival, eventually contributing music to several productions. I also traveled to and lived in Ireland where I absorbed the culture, read the Irish writers and discovered the depth and richness of Celtic music and history.

As performers we all have to find our passion, something that captures us and inspires us. Celtic music became that for me. And inspired by Alain Stivell, the great musician from Brittany, I began to play and accompany myself on the Celtic Harp – a beautiful, if extremely heavy, instrument. I began to build my own life and career around this music I had fallen in love with.

Many of you will know the pleasure of recording your first CD.

Well, back in the 1980's, inspired by the new music in my life and with financial help from my mother and father, I recorded my first *cassette*, called "Elemental" on my own label, which I called Quinlan Road, after the street I lived on.

As you know, it doesn't stop with recording. You have to get your music out there. The place to be heard was Toronto. And so early, early each Saturday morning, I would load that very heavy Celtic Harp into my fairly reliable Honda Civic and drive the ninety or so miles to the big city, setting up in first light at a favoured spot on the sidewalk outside Toronto's St. Lawrence Market. And there I played, and sang and sold my cassettes. I also left my harp case open for coins and the occasional windfall of folding money. Busking isn't for everybody, but it was fun

for me. I played through into the afternoon, returned home weary, but felt, at least, that I was getting my music 'out there'.

Of course, there were some speed bumps.

I always recall when an old friend from Winnipeg surprised me as I was playing, looked down at the scattered coins in front of me and cried out "Oh, Loreena...has it come to this!"

It had indeed had come to this -- I was learning how to run my own business as a working musician. I was learning how to get my music "out there", how to support myself and manage my own career so that it could grow. I made that decision consciously, to work the business side myself. Perhaps I even thought a bit about Libba Cotten, who didn't have that choice and had to give up music for years.

Managing myself, and working the business side would, I knew, take time away from the creative side. But I also felt it would ensure that the creative side was somehow more protected. I was finding my nice, but I wasn't going to rush it. And any wrong decisions made would be my own.

I now had a foothold in music. That means what you learn and earn from your first recording you put into your next one. Hopefully you've grown. And on the business side, it was all about keeping in touch with your audience, giving them good value, personal service. I developed a mailing list, stayed in touch with people. I began selling cassettes by mail order, worked on building contacts in the music business, looked for good showcases for performing.

(more detail/story here?)

I wasn't truly sure where it was all going, but I can say that somehow it worked. Cassettes gave way to CDs, small gigs gave way to bigger ones. Music and the depth of the Celtic journey continued to inspire me. I was managing my own business and beginning to have a real career in music.

Things really broke out in 1991 with my 4<sup>th</sup> album, called "The Visit". I had signed a licensing deal with a major label -- Warner Music -- for distribution, which allowed me to retain control and ownership and to get my music 'out there' in a way I'd never dreamed of. And ultimately it went around the world.

In the years since then, I've seen my career in music grow in ways that I could never have dreamed of. I've continued my journey searching for the far-flung roots and influences of Celtic Music and I've performed for audiences grow in the kinds of far-away places I used to read about as a child out on the prairies.

(I've been hugely inspired by the musicians that my success has allowed me to gather around me. (details/names here)

I've also had the thrill of performing in some amazing settings (detail/names here from...to....

Quite simply, I would never have thought what happened to me was possible.

As one begins such a journey, it's simply impossible to know where it's going. You have to move forward in good faith. And, as I've said, I believe to keep that journey going, you need to take some control on the business side.

I'm not sure I've even perfected that balance between the two poles, but I always work at it

Of course, some people don't need a business plan. Fluky things happen. Some would cite the rapid rise of my fellow Stratfordite, Justin Bieber as an example. But nobody should bank on that happening.

For the performers and musical artists here today, then, I simply offer words of encouragement -- to which I would add my belief that if you build a viable, realistic business plan that can support and nurture your creativity, your chances of following your passion, finding your niche and living a life in music can only grow.

The world is changing at such a pace, there's no point in trying to predict anything about the future. I think the best thing one can do is to be really true to your music, feel passionately about it and strive to make yourself somehow different.

And then secondly, I think it's important to continue to learn about all the multiple things that come to impact your career path. Learn your business.

Your musical community -- that of folk festivals and folk music -- is a truly flourishing ecosystem. That ecosystem, like your musical career, needs tending.

To tend that ecosystem means learning about the issues impacting it. So I would urge the performers here to get involved in some way, because you can write all the most beautiful, interesting stuff in the world, but if you don't have a viable ecosystem within which to operate it's going to be all the more difficult.

That's why a conference like this is a terrific forum. It's a chance to honour the ecosystem we all share with some creative thinking.

That brings me to one final, larger theme that has come to matter a lot to me, and that's the question of whether or not our recorded efforts should be commandeered by a third party and given away.

First let me tell you that Quinlan Road, my company which also manages my career, has grown wonderfully, thanks to the dedication of many, many people. When it began, Quinlan Road, had one employee -- me. Eventually it became a thriving small business with an infrastructure -- comprised of musicians, tour managers, publicists, sound and lighting technicians, visual artists, admin staff, drivers, translators and many more.

We've been fortunate to see Quinlan Road grow. Over the years our team has built hand nurtured connections with our audience to the extent that today our website offers translation into German, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Turkish, Dutch, Polish, Greek (add oriental languages here)

Contrary to what some people think. It's not live performance that drives growth. Though I've done a lot of touring over the years, it's costly and not a great profit source. Mostly we've been able to grow thanks to sales of recordings.

But things have changed in 'what used to be called the music industry'. And the wonders of our digital age are at the heart of it. And I don't find it a pretty picture.

What I'm seeing in the music right now -- in my view -- is catastrophic. We all see there are fewer and fewer record companies, fewer retailers, and that an industry's entire business model has in fact collapsed. Rescue seems far from certain.

As a result, I've devoted a lot of my time in recent years to trying to make people understand the impact of 'free internet content' on creative artists. And so I write letters and testify before committees and try to explain what is happening. Some people call it 'sharing'. I see it differently.

One striking example came not so long ago when someone in our office introduced me to a website called Mini Nova, which, I was told, "boasted a calculator (installed for the purpose of attracting advertising dollars) which indicated that my full catalogue of CDs and DVDs had been downloaded over 4,100 times in the previous 53 days." Well, as you know, that may have helped Mini Nova, but it was tough on Quinlan Road. As such endeavors have been tough on countless creative operations.

That site is gone now. Others have popped up. And the problem is still eroding the underpinnings of music every day. The Canadian government is tabling Bill C-32 to reform our copyright laws and I'm hopeful. But the ability to find loopholes by those who deal in 'free content' has been astounding.

I've been speaking out on this issue and I hope you don't mind me voicing my views on it here today. Certainly my business, Quinlan Road, became a success story. But could that kind of success happen again in today's environment? As I wrote to one parliamentary committee:

**"Given the present state of the music industry (struggling with rampant file sharing, illegal downloading and piracy) I can unequivocally say that were I to start out in the business today, I would not survive for long. Nor would I be able to achieve the level of success I have enjoyed, including providing employment (directly and indirectly), supporting local businesses and sub-contractors, and enabling a variety of philanthropic projects. "**

Yes, illegal downloading hurts me. It also hurts the sound engineers, musicians, studios, travel agents, graphic designers, printing and pressing companies, photographers, performance crews, trucking companies, equipment companies -- so many people that I work with.

**Digital technology makes copying recordings easy. And that's fine for personal use. But it's not fine to profit from it. As I tried to explain to one of the committees I spoke to:**

"...just because a closed door is unlocked (or a glass or screen window easily breeched) it does not mean that strangers can walk in and avail themselves of the facilities. (And) even if a friend or

neighbour has permission to pass ‘the threshold’, it does not make it lawful or acceptable for them to throw a party or pass out the silverware as favours to passers-by....”

In the old music industry infrastructure there was potential and I’m living testimony of that. But what happens next? Should our laws be protecting us as artists?

I don’t presume to tell you what to think on this issue. But I urge you to give it some thought. We’re all part of the same ecosystem, and something that nourished creativity is, I believe, quickly disappearing.

Let me wrap up with a few final thoughts.

The world is changing at such a pace, there’s no point in trying to predict anything about the future. But we can learn from the past. Folk music has a wonderful tradition of speaking out on issues of conscience. I know enlightened advocacy is one of the main goals of the Ontario Council of Folk Festival. One great hope I have is that the folk music movement will get itself actively engaged in fighting the erosion of the music industry and in finding new ways to support creative artists. The history and culture of the folk music movement has always been one of active engagement. It has taken on many battles. And I believe we’re in one now.

We also always remember that there is something truly great in this music, something that links us to a long tradition of people who created song to ease their load as they worked days as spinners or sailors, or field workers or miners. Generations before us found the joy in music and in the sharing of music. It somehow lightened the burden and brightened the day.

That is something that will never change. Nor will the camaraderie and community spirit that happens when singers and musicians come together to share their spirit and their talent.

And so to all of you here whose efforts are so important to music and to the folk festival movement I applaud your work, your themes, your commitment to advocacy to help you reach your goals.

There is no other medium like music. And folk music is one of the most rewarding musical genres to be in. We enjoy it, we explore it -- folk music can belong in your life forever.

People need the nourishment of music and song and the companionship of others at their best. It seems to me that that’s what you’re all about.

I’ve talked enough. I know we are all here because we love the music.

Let’s work together to enhance the ecosystem that allows the music to thrive.

I’m grateful to have been a part of it – and for your kind invitation to be with you today to share some of my story and my thoughts.

Once again, I thank you.

END

