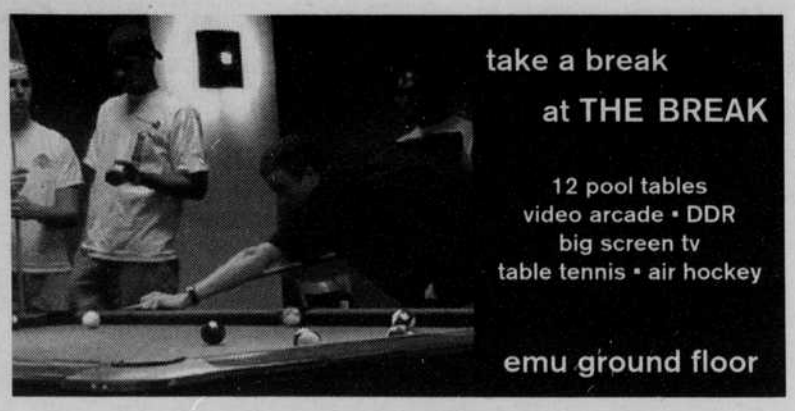


Festival to present variety of emerging folk musicians

Celebrating its 34th year, the Willamette Valley Folk Festival serves a healthy combo of music and food

By Natasha Chilingerian
Pulse Reporter

When the first Willamette Valley Folk Festival was held in 1971, a transition occurred in the on-campus folk music scene. Instead of just exhibiting folk musicians sporadically throughout the school year, the University began devoting an entire event to promoting new folk musicians.

The first festival — sponsored by the UO Cultural Forum, as it still is today — lasted just one day and took place behind the School of Music. It has since blossomed into an annual three-day extravaganza of music, crafts, food, massages, workshops and children's activities that fills the EMU east lawn and spills onto the south lawn.

Even with the addition of new features over the years, the festival aims for the same goal it did 33 years ago — to give lesser-known singers and songwriters a chance to express themselves in front of an audience.

"It started as a venue for local singers and songwriters and a way to get local talent exposed, and that element remains today," Willamette Valley Folk Festival co-Coordinator William Reischman said, who is producing the 2004 festival with Ariel Zimmer.

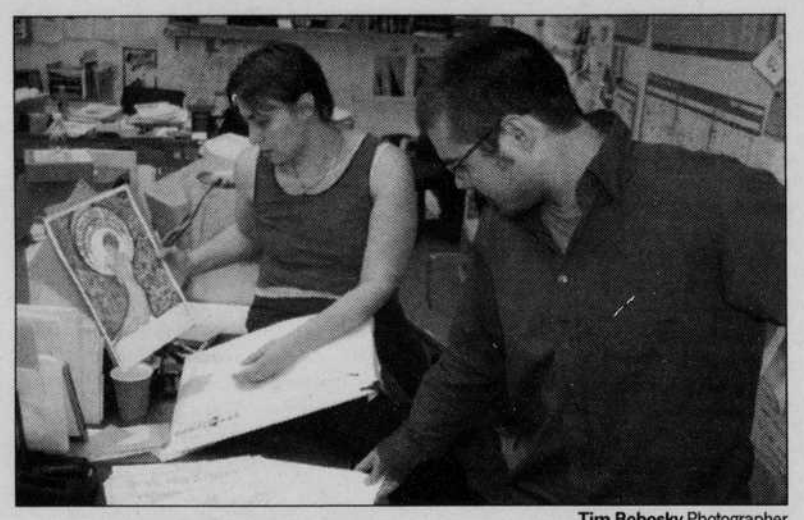
As the festival grew, some activities reappeared and turned into traditions. One example is the workshop stages, which have included songwriting instruction, short classes on drumming styles and a how-to on constructing a drum. Cultural Forum Office Coordinator Mandy Chong said each festival usually focuses on one category of music style or origin.

"During the year that we have a blues focus, the workshops might be on bluegrass or banjo playing," she said.

Food and craft booths are also part of the Willamette Valley Folk Festival's heritage. Chong said festival attendees can count on finding Chinese, Indian and Latin American cuisine, plus pizza, ice cream, beverages and espresso. Some food booth vendors are devoted to bringing their ethnic fare to the festival yearly, such as Afghani Cuisine, which Chong said has been returning for 19 years. Booth shoppers usually comb through and look at candles, blankets, jewelry, knickknacks, and other items typical of the University's street fairs.

One standout event at a past festival was what Chong calls "the mud bowl" in 1998. That year, heavy rain ruined the grass and created a mass of mud, which attendees used to jump, dance and slide in.

With so many activities occurring at once, the festival requires some serious planning. The Cultural Forum traditionally hires one coordinator, but this year, Reischman and Zimmer are sharing the time-consuming job.



Tim Bobosky Photographer

Ariel Zimmer and Will Reischman, shown here in the UO Cultural Forum office, are co-coordinators of the upcoming Willamette Valley Folk Festival.

PART 1 OF 2

Today: A historical and behind-the-scenes look at the festival

May 20: An in-depth preview of the 2004 Willamette Valley Folk Festival

Both coordinators said they have a passion for programming and discovering new music. Zimmer said she "fell in love with the local music scene" during her programming work.

Reischman's interest in producing on-stage events stemmed partially from his family — his father is a concert promoter, and both his parents performed bluegrass at the Willamette Valley Folk Festival in the 1970s.

"I wanted to book an event rather than just be a stage monkey," Reischman said.

Planning the festival is a yearlong process. Reischman and Zimmer started brainstorming for the event before the 2003-04 school year, then quickly moved on to planning fund-raisers and finding sponsors and advertisers. This year, they raised money by putting on two music shows and by receiving sponsorship from the Smith Family Bookstore, University Bookstore and Emerald Valley Kitchen. Advertisements for the festival appeared in Eugene Weekly and on KLCC radio. Then, the coordinators recruited performers and craft and food vendors to fill slots.

"Throughout the year we are investigating different acts and getting a sense of what people would be interested in," Zimmer said.

On top of fund-raising, booking and getting the word out, coordinators must organize smaller details of the festival, such as amplified sound for the acts and renting out tables and tents. Zimmer said all members of the Cultural Forum help coordinators during the year.

Working with a budget is a central focus of planning the festival, and Reischman said coordinators rely on fund-raisers and donations to help pay for the event. Zimmer said she is pleased with how much can be produced with limited funds.

"It's a free event, so the bottom line isn't to make a profit," she said. "We would like a larger budget in order to bring in the best music possible, but we've done a great job with the budget we have."

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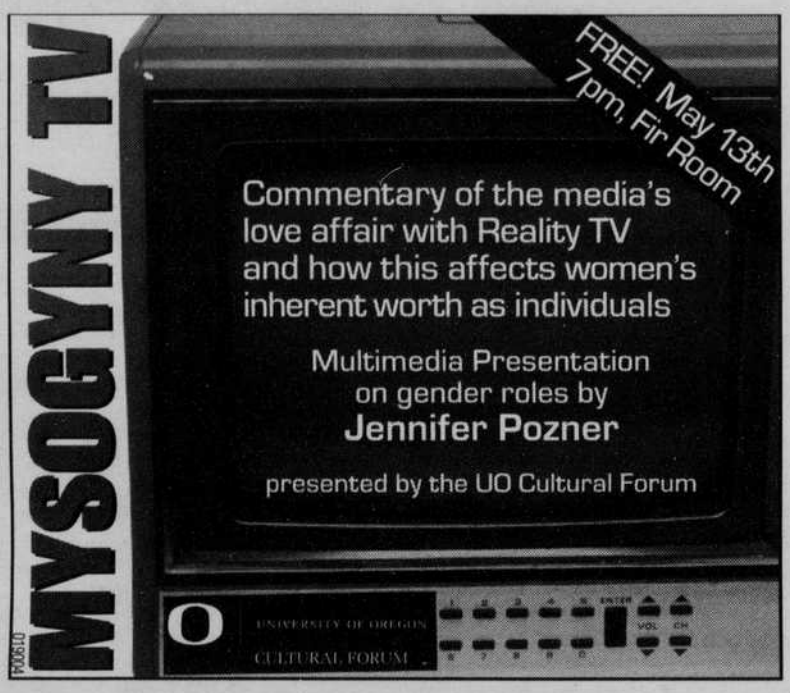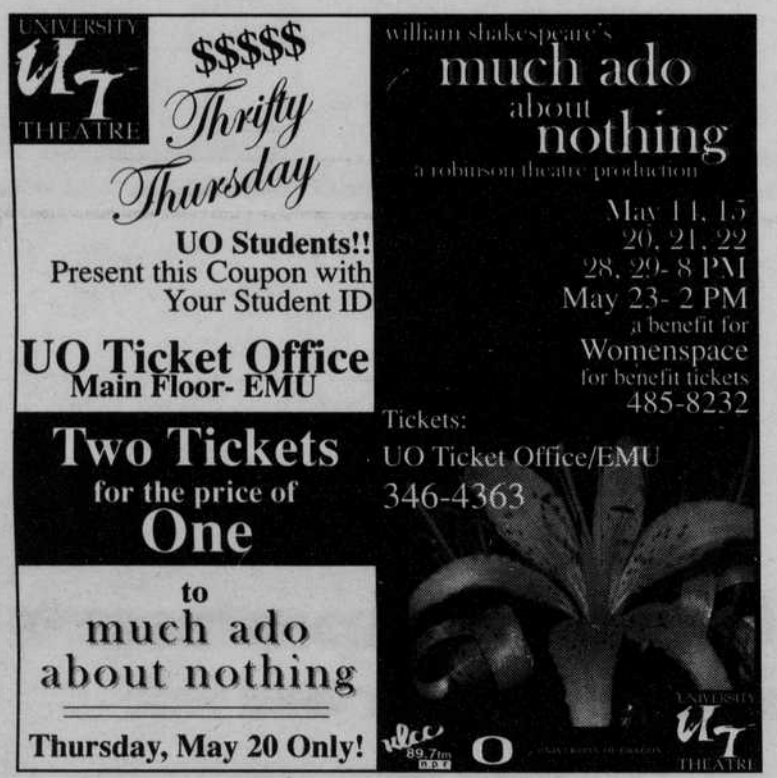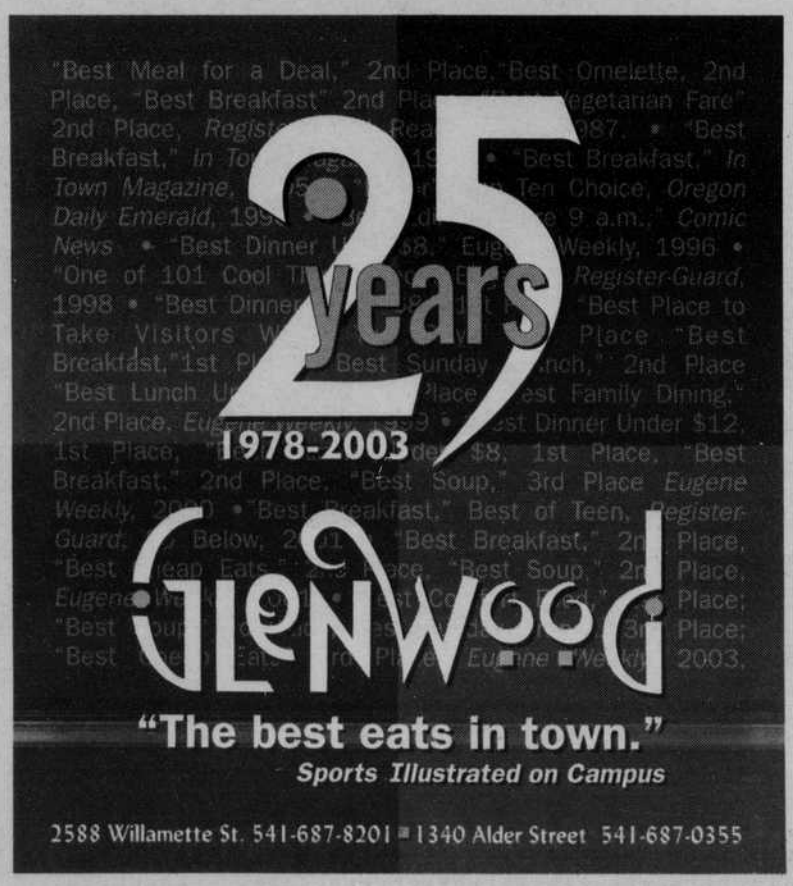
Will Reischman and Ariel Zimmer, both graduating seniors, take a break from festival planning in the UO Cultural Forum office.
Tim Bobosky Photographer