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**FOLKIE DIVERSITY**

Strictly bluegrass got old. So they've added zydeco, R&B and (gasp!) even rock music.

*Folksong Society gives new twist to an old festival*

By David S. Rotenstein  
SPECIAL TO THE INQUIRER

After 15 years of throwing a bluegrass and old-time music festival each March, the Philadelphia Folksong Society has decided that the times they are a changin'. To the tune of rhythm and blues, zydeco, acoustic folk music, Native American music and, of course, still a little bluegrass.

The switch from a highly focused bluegrass format to a more eclectic offering was intended to reflect changes in local and national musical tastes.

"We sort of thought the bluegrass festival might have been running out of steam," says Andrew Braunfeld, chairman of the Philadelphia Spring Folk Festival, which runs tonight through tomorrow night at Haverford College. "We were not getting quite the demand for that particular kind of music to warrant doing a whole festival just devoted to that."

Although the diverse musical lineup for this weekend's festival looks a lot like a pared-down version of the huge Philadelphia Folk Festival held each August in Schwenksville, Braunfeld says the two are distinct. "This kind of event is fairly uncomplicated compared to that one. And basically, we do it just to provide some music. We put on kinds of music that are a little less available commercially."

Braunfeld also suggests that the spring festival represents a departure — it's a bit less traditional — from other Folksong Society events. "There is going to be a little bit of an introduction in this festival of the 'R' and 'R' words," he says. Rock-and-roll. "We don't say them out loud, but that's what it is."

The festival begins tonight with a 7:30 concert featuring Texas troubadour Townes Van Zandt. Unless you're a folk music aficionado, it's not likely that you've heard of Van Zandt. And he knows it, as the title of his 1989 album — *Live and Obscure* — suggests.

There's a strong blues timbre underlying most of Van Zandt's songs that harks back to the 1920s, when folk music still belonged to the folk — and labels such as country and blues had not yet been coined.

Few contemporary songwriters are as versatile as

Van Zandt, whose country standards like "Pancho and Lefty" have been recorded by Merle Haggard and Willie Nelson, and whose blues, including "Gone, Gone Blues," would have made fellow Texan Lightnin' Hopkins proud.

Also on tonight is C.J. Chenier and the Red Hot Louisiana Band. At 34, Chenier is a seasoned veteran of zydeco music. When his father, Clifton Chenier, died in 1987, he inherited the Red Hot Louisiana Band.

With one of the tightest bands to come out of the Louisiana bayous, Chenier has successfully combined the traditional sounds of zydeco with rhythm and blues, creating a sound that is packing urban dance floors across the country.

Rounding out the opening concert are Native American singer-songwriter Bill Miller and local folk-rockers Jim Femino.

Tomorrow's events begin at 1 p.m. and include dance workshops highlighting square dancing, 19th-century social dancing, contra dancing and waltzes. An afternoon coffeehouse features performances by Jamie Watson and Jim Femino and an open-microphone session.

Underscoring the fact that there's something for everyone at this festival, Dave Fry — banjo player, guitarist, mandolinist and singer — will entertain the younger crowd during a children's concert Saturday afternoon.

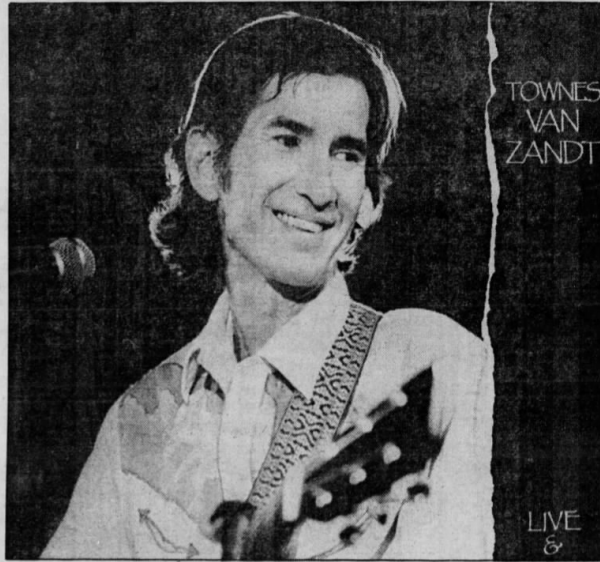
If all this isn't diverse enough for you, tomorrow night's concert features a new-wave string band called The Horseflies and the acoustic bluegrass duo Robin and Linda Williams, regular performers on WXPN's *Mountain Stage* and Garrison Keillor's late National Public Radio series, *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Also appearing are the Holmes Brothers, a New York rhythm and blues and gospel trio, and Cheryl Wheeler.

Wheeler is an expert songwriter and a polished performer. Her songs take you from the inner depths of personal experience to the margins of absurdity. All of Wheeler's material has the power of a well-timed joke: It can take the edge off a painful situation and it can make you laugh.

On stage, Wheeler weaves through songs like "Estate Sale," in which she sings about poking through the belongings of dead strangers — "All you need to have an estate sale is a dead person" — and "Arrow," a soft lyric song about yearning for the lost emotions from a crumbled love affair.

Also this weekend, the Philadelphia Folksong Society is holding its monthly concert Sunday at the Commodore Barry Club in Mount Airy. Making their Philadelphia debut are the Cassidys, five brothers from County Donegal on Ireland's west coast. The evening of traditional Irish music starts at 7:30 at the club on Emlen Street and Carpenter Lane. Tickets are \$8, members get in free.



Heard of Townes Van Zandt? Maybe not, so he named his album "Live and Obscure."



A bit of zydeco will be provided by C.J. Chenier and his Red Hot Louisiana Band.



The songs of Cheryl Wheeler sometimes have the effect of a well-timed joke.

**IF YOU GO**

**Where:** The Philadelphia Spring Folk Festival is at Haverford College's Marshall Auditorium off Lancaster Avenue in Haverford.  
**When:** Tonight: 7:30 concert with Townes Van Zandt, Bill Miller, C.J. Chenier & the Red Hot Louisiana Band, Jim Femino. Tomorrow afternoon: 1 p.m. Children's Concert with Dave Fry, and coffeehouse with Jamie Watson, Jim Femino and others. Also, dance with Jim Morrison, Jean Drake, the Chestnut Hillbillies and Bob Pasquarello: 1 p.m., 19th-century social dancing: 2 p.m., squares and contras: 3 p.m., waltzing workshop: 3:45 p.m., more contras and squares.  
**Tomorrow night:** 7:30 concert with The Horseflies, Robin & Linda Williams, The Holmes Brothers, Cheryl Wheeler.  
**Cost:** \$19 for each evening concert; \$8 for tomorrow afternoon's events, including the children's concert; \$5 for the children's concert alone. An all-festival ticket costs \$41. Adult and children's prices are the same.  
**Phone:** 215-247-1300.