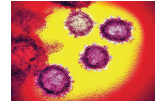




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The Down Hill Strugglers will perform this weekend at the Second Annual Northeast Fiddlers' Convention at Hancock Shaker Village.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE DOWN HILL STRUGGLERS

Hancock Shaker Village to Host Second Annual Northeast Fiddlers' Convention

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By Nicolas Davidoff, The Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD — The strum of banjos and the thumping of dancing feet have lured Americans from North and South to the warmth of a campfire for centuries. This weekend at Hancock Shaker Village, musicians, dancers and listeners alike will play an equal part in honoring this jovial tradition of folk music and bluegrass.

Oldtone Productions will host the Second Annual Northeast Fiddlers' Convention from Friday, June 14, through Sunday, June 16. The event's organizers hope to build on the success of last year's convention by prolonging the festivities through the entire weekend and making camping available on site this year.

"Sleeping under the stars, surrounded by great music, will really be fantastic," said Karl Mullen, music curator at Hancock Shaker Village.

John Cohen, a widely recognized musicologist specializing in old-time folk music and a successful musician in his own right, will lead a film screening Friday night. The Down Hill Strugglers, a Brooklyn-based, old-time string band and mentees to Cohen, will then headline the square dance on Saturday. There will also be workshops led by the musicians in attendance, as well as band and instrument contests throughout the day before the convention comes to a close with a gospel performance Sunday.

Eli Smith plays the banjo and guitar for The Down Hill Strugglers. He believes that old-time folk has as much of a place in today's world than it did before.

"We live in a very alienating time for so many reasons. The kind of down home, grassroots music we want to play and hear seems to offer an alternative vision of culture that feels good and right," Smith said.

Avid guitar player Jim Wright — one of the three founders of Oldtone Productions and the annual Oldtone Roots Music Festival, which is held in Hillsdale, N.Y. — said he is excited to keep this "more Southern style fiddlers' convention" going. On the strong partnership with Hancock Shaker Village, he said, "it really is a perfect setting for this kind of music."

The Shakers' ideals of communal living and sharing will extend to nearly every aspect of this convention. Aside from the workshops, where people with any level of experience can learn from professional musicians and bond over their love of old-time music, participation will be at the core of every event.

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"It's not necessarily a concert, it's more of a gathering," Wright said. "People can go up on the stage, they can bring their own instruments, and of course — square dance to their hearts' content." Mullen added that "the beautifully built barns are perfect acoustically for this kind of music."

Smith said that growing up in Greenwich Village greatly influenced his love for folk. In the 1960s, the village was host to a folk revival with musicians such as Bob Dylan walking its streets.

"It was the music that spoke to me," Smith said. "I picked up folk records lying around the house and instantly realized it was the human music I was looking for. It does what music should do — and it hasn't been distorted by the extreme pressure of the entertainment industry."

His bandmate, Jackson Lynch, who plays the fiddle among other instruments, had a similar experience to Smith while he was growing up in the East Village. They connected through Cohen and added Walker Shepherd from Virginia to form their old-time string band.

"Old-time folk isn't just limited to the South," Smith said. "It really spans across all of rural America, from Appalachia to the Northeast."

Folk music has greatly evolved, but its old-time variety still resonates with listeners who want to bask in the nostalgia and the warmth of the community it fosters.

"I like to think of it as old music in the new world," Smith said. "And I'm very proud that The Down Hill Strugglers can act as ambassadors to it."

Mullen highlighted the underlying sentiment that will bring all these different people together this weekend.

"The Shakers had this belief that whether you were peeling an onion or dancing, you immersed yourself in the task and did your absolute best at it," he said. "I think this music speaks to that. There is an authenticity and sincerity that is echoed in that kind of music."