



Swedish hip-hop swing band Movits! performs at the 2011 Lotus Festival. They will return this year. Photo by M. Elizabeth Hershey

(below) Lotus Dickey performing at Spring Mill State Park in 1981. Photo by Nan McEntire

the Lotus Festival

BY Elisabeth Andrews

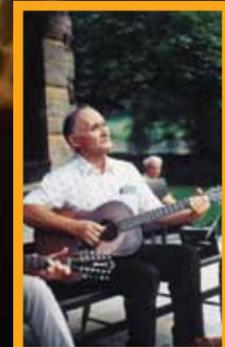
When music of the world fills the night air, something magical and indefinable takes hold in our town.

Ancient Sanskrit texts were not common in turn-of-the-century southern Indiana—certainly not within one-room log cabins housing families with five kids. But in a particular Orange County home on Grease Gravy Road in 1911, a farmer came upon a passage of Hindu scripture:

A man who relinquishes attachment and dedicates actions to the infinite spirit is not stained by evil, like a lotus leaf unstained by water.

Moved by the image of the unblemished lotus, the farmer gave the name to his newborn son: Lotus Dickey.

Many decades later, when a group of people met in Bloomington to plan a world music festival, the image of the lotus would surface again. It began with reference to Lotus Dickey himself, who by this time had lived and died, writing and performing songs throughout nearly



all his 78 years (though he was only “discovered” —by IU folklorists—in his late 60s).

For the festival organizers, though, it wasn’t only Dickey and his heartfelt, guileless music that argued for the name. It was also that same

association between the lotus flower and an “infinite spirit” unbound to any culture, time, or place. When the group created the Lotus World Music & Arts Festival in 1994, it was in both recognition and anticipation of the unlikely connections between small-town Indiana and the most inspiring traditions from around the world.



The 2012 Lotus team includes (clockwise from top left) Loraine Martin, outreach director; LuAnne Holladay, marketing and communications director; Tamara Loewenthal, volunteer coordinator; Lee Williams, executive and artistic director; and Kristin Varella, development director. Photo by Lynae Sowinski

Now in its 19th year, the Lotus Festival is arguably the town's most cherished event. For one weekend each fall, downtown Bloomington is transformed into a global village thrumming with creative energy. The main draw is the music, of course—seven venues filled with the world's best musicians representing a wild array of approaches and styles. Brazilian samba-reggae might give way to Celtic fiddle while Nordic joiking and

Australian didgeridoo resound around the corner from old-time Americana and Tibetan pop.

It's not just the Friday and Saturday night lineups that reflect the appeal of Lotus, though—nor any of the other festival components that include free offerings such as an opening-night parade, a Lotus in the Park concert with kids' activities, and a downtown Arts Village filled with colorful multimedia spectacles.

There's something else that seems to happen during Lotus—something no one can define but everyone can feel. Lotus is not just a festival, or even an atmosphere, but something more akin to a cosmic occurrence. James Combs, one of the festival's founders, likens it to an eclipse, which for a short period shifts the borders between night and day. Lotus, he says, also dissolves borders, bringing people from around the globe closer together.

"All this culture descends in one place," he says. "The world's most extraordinary musicians hit you with their best stuff and you're left in an ecstatic state. There are so many ideas and you become aware of how music is alive all over the world."

LuAnne Holladay, marketing and communications director for Lotus, calls the festival "intense and intimate." Shahyar Daneshgar, a Lotus performer and founder, says, "There is nothing more pleasant" than what the festival offers. Local musician Robert Meitus says, "I am rarely as inspired as I am at Lotus. It's one of the best things about Bloomington."

Though insiders and attendees speak of the event in glowing terms, they all give the same caveat to their descriptions: "I can't put it into words," they say. "It's just something you have to experience."

'As if it had always happened'

There are other world music festivals, but Lotus is distinct in several ways. As one of the first world music festivals in the country, it inspired other, larger festivals that followed. Michael Orlove, who founded World Music Festival Chicago, says he committed to creating his event only after he witnessed Lotus' success.

"I was very moved by the fact that Bloomington, which is a very small town compared to Chicago, was hosting such an impressive festival," he says. "It reaffirmed what I was thinking in terms of audiences being ready for something devoted solely to international music."

In Bloomington, though, there had been little hesitation. It was June 1994 when Combs, an indie rocker, saw Daneshgar, a professor of Central Eurasian Studies, perform traditional Iranian music at the IU Art Museum. Combs complimented Daneshgar on the show and was surprised to learn Daneshgar was familiar with his own band, Arson Garden. The two musicians immediately hit upon the idea of a world music concert that would showcase the diversity of Bloomington music and bring in artists from all over the globe.

They persuaded Lee Williams to meet them at the Runcible Spoon restaurant to discuss the idea. Williams was a staple of the live-music scene in Bloomington, securing top performers for the popular nightclubs Second Story and Jake's.

"We formally shook hands and said we were going to produce a world music festival," Williams recalls. The planning process was shockingly quick. "We put together an eight-person organizing committee, and less than four months later, in October, we had the first Lotus Festival."

That first night included 14 acts from 10 countries performing in three downtown venues. Local Bloomington musicians joined bands from New Orleans,



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Nicaragua, Nigeria, Ireland, Latvia, Puerto Rico, the Czech Republic, and East Turkistan. The show sold out.

"There were lines around the block from the word go," says Steve Volan, a member of the original organizing committee. "Everyone was excitedly waiting to get in. It was just joyous. It felt natural, like it fit perfectly there in downtown Bloomington. The feeling was, 'Sure, yes, of course, we're all at the Lotus Festival.' As if it had always happened."

'To stay true to our principles'

Eighteen years later, the event has not changed substantially, which is the second way in which it is not like other festivals. Although there are now about twice as many performers spread out over four days, the Lotus Festival is still held downtown in small venues that are all within walking distance of one another. A handful of musicians each year will have played Lotus before, but the majority will be unknown to local audiences.

"Go to most any other major music festival, and you'll be outdoors in giant venues. You're looking at one stage, with maybe six artists, and they are going to be the biggest, most well-known names, because that's what



Bloomington-based Jefferson Street Parade Band leads Lotus attendees through downtown streets in 2009. Photo by Jeffrey Hammond



TOP:
2012 Lotus act Deolinda, a Portuguese group that plays upbeat music inspired by mournful fado, will be traveling from Portugal. Photo by Rita Carmo

BOTTOM:
Riverboat soul musicians Pokey LaFarge & the South City Three, from St. Louis, will perform at the 2012 Lotus Festival. Photo by Paul Nordman



OPPOSITE:
Taj Weekes & Adowa, a reggae groove band from St. Lucia, are also in this year's lineup. Photo by Monica Hoenig

For videos of Lotus performers featured here, go to

magbloom.com/lotus

generates ticket sales," says Williams, who is now the executive and artistic director of the Lotus Education & Arts Foundation that organizes the festival and related events and programs.

This "go big" strategy would be far more profitable, he says, but it would take away the essential qualities of intimacy and discovery that characterize Lotus. "We are mission driven," he says, quoting the foundation's pledge, "to create opportunities to experience, celebrate, and explore the diversity of the world's cultures through music and the arts."

Lotus has also resisted the common festival strategy of pursuing a big corporate sponsor. Instead, it's been local businesses, private donors, Indiana University, and granting agencies that have kept the Lotus mission intact.

"The festival would never have happened without our sponsors and supporters," says Williams. "The community has really embraced this vision from the start. That support is what has allowed us to stay true to our principles. If our mandate were to make as much money as possible, it would be a very different event."

Combs, who now lives in Los Angeles, says that he can see all kinds of live music any day of the week, but he can't replicate the experience of Lotus.

"There's great music in L.A., but you're going to be seeing it on big stages. It's really different when you're just six feet away," he says. "There's also something about being in Bloomington spaces that you are already familiar with. You're encountering these artists in your own realm, in your home town."

Nice people only

The method by which those artists are selected is another distinguishing feature of the festival. Not only is this selection process devoid of financial analytics, it is also—quite intentionally—irrational.

"It is always an emotional decision," says Williams, who is solely responsible for the lineup. "I do make an effort to represent different regions and styles. Ultimately, though, it gets down to the question: Am I moved? The more it moves me, the more I understand that it will move our audience. Fortunately, I seem to be pretty well tapped-in to the tastes of Bloomington. Every artist I've ever brought turned out to be someone's favorite."

These decisions can't be rushed, he says. No musician performs at Lotus without Williams first spending hours "sweating them out." He'll listen, watch, think, and dance for months in order to craft each year's Lotus.

"I concentrate on these artists very deeply," he says. "Most artistic directors like to get something booked six months out and promote the heck out of it, but I'm waiting for the perfect festival every year."

The process begins when the artists or their agents contact Williams, which they do in droves. He hears from some 800 groups each year. When he gets the

email, he immediately stops what he's doing to check out their video and audio clips. If he's intrigued, he'll request a full-length album and listen to it from start to finish. For those few CDs he loves, he'll throw himself into reading everything he can about the musicians. He's also known for interrogating agents to determine precisely who will be playing which instruments when the band arrives in town.

Williams' most unusual criterion, though, is that the artist must have a reputation as a nice person.

"Before I book, I'll talk to as many people as I can about their experience with the performer," he says. "If they are known for being difficult to work with, I'm not interested. I'm not going to risk having somebody yell at our volunteers."

Volunteers are the backbone

The welfare of the volunteers is an important consideration, because they are in fact the primary means by which Lotus takes place. The entire staff of the Lotus Foundation comprises two full-time and three part-time people, which means that the bulk of work associated with running the festival is done by volunteers. This is another way in which Lotus is different from other festivals: the volunteer-to-attendee ratio is approximately one to ten.

"We have around 600 volunteers each year, and about 6,500 attendees," says Tamara Loewenthal, volunteer coordinator. "The volunteers do everything from serving on the committees that choose the venues to setting up and tearing down the festival itself. The people who manage the sites, who sell the



The Festival doesn't happen unless 600 Bloomington volunteers show up each year.

tickets, who set up the Arts Village, who transport the artists—those are all volunteers."

Put another way, the Lotus Festival doesn't happen unless 600 Bloomington volunteers show up each year to cover at least one 6- to 7-hour shift. Surprisingly, though, Loewenthal never worries about having enough help.

"We try to take care of the volunteers and let them know they are valued," she says, explaining that each shift earns volunteers a free ticket for one night of the event. "They also get a Lotus T-shirt, and the artwork on the shirt is always terrific," she adds. "I think those shirts are associated with a certain cachet."

'Opening their hearts to each other'

Between the downtown setting, the small venues, the necessarily open-minded attendees, and the sizable chunk of the population that contributes their time to volunteering at the festival, Lotus also becomes an unusual experience for the performing artists.

"Playing at the Lotus Festival was unforgettable," says Ori Kaplan of Balkan Beat Box, an American-Israeli funk/electronic/Gypsy-punk group that returned to the festival for three consecutive years. "I think I might have heard the loudest screams I've ever heard there. People were so enthusiastic. I remember [lead vocalist] Tomer Yosef stage diving and being carried away by fifty Midwestern girls. It was an incredible sight."

The quieter venues offer a different type of audience interaction. Anwar Yusuf Turani, a master dutar player and the founder and prime minister of the





‘During the Lotus Festival it seems that the whole world is in Bloomington opening their hearts to each other.’

Panorama Jazz Band, from New Orleans, will perform at this year's festival. Photo by Alexei Kazantsev

East Turkistan Government in Exile, says that playing at the first Lotus Festival in 1994 gave him a rare chance to share the story of his people.

“First I played my music, then I told the audience something about the music and who I am and what is happening in my region. They liked the music so much they

wanted to know more. I was able to share my feelings about the oppression we are experiencing. The audience connected to my music and had empathy and wanted to help,” he says.

Many musicians comment on the friendliness and hospitality of the festival, though few have been as bold as Swedish hip-hop/swing band Movits!, who remarked from the stage last year about how much they enjoyed drinking with the locals at the invite-only artist party that takes place after hours. Joakim

Nilsson, the group's saxophonist, says he was equally impressed with the multigenerational attendees, some of whom broke out their swing moves, to the band's delight.

“It's not very common for people to start doing the Lindy Hop to our music, but we always love it when they do,” he says. “It was great to see that diversity in the audience, where it wasn't just young people. We had a really, really great time in Bloomington. It was one of the best experiences we've had playing in the States. We've been talking about it ever since.”

For her 2005 book about Lotus, *Bringing the World to Our Neighborhood*, Holladay gathered recollections from a number of performers. The comments range from Irish guitarist John Doyle's description of Lotus as a “treasure” to American singer/songwriter Rachael Davis' remark on the incredible breadth of music she was able to sample while in town.



Fatoumata Diawara, a folk musician from Mali, will also perform at Lotus this year. Courtesy photo

Perhaps most poignant, though, is the comment made by Québécois folk musician Benoit Bourque, who observed, “During the Lotus Festival it seems that the whole world is in Bloomington opening their hearts to each other.”

Hopes for the future

Next year will be the 20th Lotus Festival, and the team is already planning a number of special events. In addition to the established month-long Lotus Blossoms school-outreach program and the annual Edible Lotus fundraiser, they are putting together a concert series that will keep the spirit of Lotus alive all year.

They will also be turning their attention toward their endowment, as the first two decades of Lotus have relied on year-to-year contributions to keep the festival afloat. Says Williams, “We need to be an organization that people can trust to be here in ten or twenty or thirty years. We want to be able to

ensure that your grandchildren will see the Lotus Festival in the same way that people do now, where we can afford to keep it intimate enough that you can see the artists' faces.”

After all, despite the hundreds of international musicians who have made their way to Bloomington over the years, the festival recalls the memory of Lotus Dickey first and foremost, who was beloved not for filling arenas but for forging a connection from the soul.

“I saw him several times playing, and it was beautiful,” says Daneshgar. “He had this grandfatherly voice, and he would stop between the songs and talk about the music. We have always had something during the festival to honor Lotus Dickey, because he represents what we have wanted to do from the beginning. Our hope was that through music we could bring people together.” ✨

For insiders' tips on making the most of your Lotus weekend, visit:

magbloom.com/lotus

THIS YEAR'S PERFORMERS SEPTEMBER 20-23

Movits! (SWEDEN)

Swedish hip-hop & swing

Pokey LaFarge & the South City Three (U.S.)

American roots & riverboat soul

Canteca de Macao (SPAIN)

Flamenco; world music

Deolinda (PORTUGAL)

Contemporary fado

Fatoumata Diawara (MALI)

Original folk music & dance

Fishtank Ensemble (U.S., FRANCE, SERBIA)

Gypsy jazz fusion

Galant, Tu Perds Ton Temps (CANADA)

A cappella music from Quebec

Global Rhythms (INDIA, U.S.)

Indian & world music

JPP (FINLAND)

Finnish string folk music

Daniel Kahn & the Painted Bird (GERMANY)

Yiddish punk-folk cabaret

MC Rai (TUNISIA, U.S.)

Arabic urban rai

Panorama Jazz Band (U.S.)

New Orleans brass & world music

Keith Terry & Evie Ladin Duo (U.S.)

Body music & old-time traditions

Trio Brasileiro (BRAZIL)

Choro

Vida Reunion (U.S.)

World a cappella

Taj Weekes & Adowa (ST. LUCIA, U.S.)

Reggae

(subject to change)

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Hoosiers Outrun Cancer has an exciting component to fundraising for the IU Health Olcott Center - Friends Asking Friends. Participants can fundraise, encourage participation and raise awareness for the Olcott Center by reaching out to friends and family using simple online tools. Visit hoosiersoutruncancer.org for more information.

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Register online at hoosiersoutruncancer.org or use this form.
All participants must submit a completed entry form.
PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY. Form may be duplicated. Children under age 6 are free, but must have a completed entry form.

SELECT EVENT

5K Run 5K Walk 1-Mile Kids' Run 1-Mile Family Walk Spirit Runner (In Memory Of)

First Name Last Name

Age on race day Male Female

EMAIL ADDRESS (for confirmations / updates / results for timed events)

Street Address

City State Zip Code

Best phone number to reach you

Are you registering to be on a team? Y N

Team name:
Team registration deadline is Wednesday, September 19. For prepackaged team material pick-up call 812.353.5000 by September 21.

PLEASE CIRCLE SHIRT SIZE

ADULT: S M LG XL XXL

YOUTH: 4T S M LG

T-shirts are given to all pre-registered participants. Individuals registering after Sept 24 are not guaranteed a shirt or correct size.

HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT THIS RACE?

Email Newspaper

Friends Bus Ad

Social Media Other

Are you an IU Health Bloomington employee? Yes No

Would you like to be recognized as a cancer survivor by receiving a red t-shirt? Y N

WAIVER, MUST BE SIGNED: In consideration of being permitted to participate in the Hoosiers Outrun Cancer Run and Event ("Event"), I hereby waive and release the Bloomington Hospital Foundation, Inc., IU Health Bloomington Hospital, their affiliates and their officers, agents, employees, and representatives (collectively, the "Foundation") from all responsibility or liability for injuries or damages to me resulting from or arising out of my participation in the Event, including all injuries or damages to me resulting from or arising out of the negligent act or omission of the Hospital arising out of or in connection with my participation in the Event. I understand and am aware that running, walking or participating in a road race or activity such as the Event is a potentially hazardous activity involving a risk of injury and even death. The stress and exercise from an event of this nature can cause many types of injuries including cardiac injury and even death from cardiac or other medical emergencies. Additionally, I understand that there is a risk of injury from the condition of the course and premises where the Event takes place such as pot holes, cracks, bumps and other natural and manmade conditions. I understand these and other potential risks and I am voluntarily participating in the Event with knowledge of the dangers and risks involved. I hereby agree to expressly assume and accept all risks of injury or death associated with my participation in the Event. I understand that the Foundation without reason can at anytime remove me from or not allow me to participate in this Event. I further give my full permission to the Foundation to use any photographs, videotapes or other recordings made of me the day of this Event.

Signature of Participant or parent/guardian if participant is under the age of 18

Date

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I want to give an additional donation of \$

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Or hand deliver form(s) to 405 N Rogers Street, Bloomington