The Richmond Folk Festival

A review of the popular annual event

By EMMA NORTH

The 13th annual Richmond Folk Festival took place October 13th through 15th on Brown’s Island and adjacent areas, including Tredegar Street. The popular festival has been known to attract more than 125,000 people during its one weekend run. Despite its high volume of activity, however, it is completely free to the public.

Bands performing this year included Eddie Cotton Jr., The Green Fields of America, Paulin Brothers’ Brass Band, Wild Ponies, and many more. The constant twang of music could be heard all throughout the festival, ranging in genre from electric blues to traditional Irish- a selection as diverse as the artists themselves. After all, folk art is shaped by the artist’s community. Artists’ ethnicity, language, religion, or profession all influence their work. Contrary to popular perception, folk music also consists of a diverse set of instruments. Anything from vocals, to fiddles, accordions, Japanese taiko drumming, and much more is represented in folk music worldwide. It’s more than an old white guy with a fiddle.

Folklife is not just restricted to music. Virginians with a passion for the culinary arts showcased cooking from all corners of the globe, including traditional Indian cuisine, Mexican cooking, and baklava baking. Festival-goers also demonstrated the process of creating classic Virginia foods such as oyster shucking and Brunswick stew making.

There was also food you could actually eat. Continued >>

A musician plays at Richmond Folk Festivals of the past. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.
Food trucks all over the venue served up staple fair foods such as fried Oreos, fried corn dogs, and, of course, fried mac and cheese. There were seafood and barbecue food trucks, and trucks that served gourmet style and diverse food such as Goatocado, Island Noodles, The Hungry Turtle, Boka Truck, and India K’Raja. Any food you wanted, you got at the Richmond Folk Festival.

The festival itself set up drink tents that carried water, soda, beer, and wine. In fact, a special beer (monikered the Folk FestivALE) is brewed specifically for the event every year. The beer is exclusively available for purchase during the festival and is made by local brewery Champion Brewing.

No one was left out when the festival was planned! Children enjoyed a section full of fun crafts, games, and entertainment for all ages. The National Park Service also sponsored junior ranger projects, including completing a booklet full of fun tasks that would result in gaining a Junior Ranger patch.

With all these activities, one has to wonder how the festival is kept free. Local organizations including The Community Foundation, CarMax, Atria, Union/Richmond Times Dispatch, CoStar, and Dominion Energy have all donated to keep it running. The festival is also largely funded in part by donations from festival goers themselves. Throughout the day, volunteers called the Bucket Brigade roamed the festival with large orange buckets to accept donations. Each attendee is suggested to donate ten dollars to help keep the festival free the following year.

The Folk Festival draws large crowds every year and is an event essential to the city of Richmond. With the 13th annual festival finished, the only thing left to do is to look forward to next year.

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Honors Topic Classes

Want an interesting, eye-opening Honors experience outside of the core curriculum? Read on.

By NIKHITA PUTHUVEETIL

Instead of waiting until your senior year to indulge yourself, how about taking exciting and interesting classes now? The time for class registration is fast approaching and Honors students now grapple with the lengthy process of creating the perfect class schedule.

Many students still have an Honors credit requirement to complete. You might think you’re on track, and you just need to sign up for the honors section of one of your core classes. But...wait! You were a mere second late to register, and that Honors section already filled up. But fear not—you don’t have to wait another four months to take an Honors course! Why not try registering for an Honors Topics class?

Honors Topics courses are a fabulous way to branch away from the required classes for your major. No matter what class you choose to take, you’ll still get the Honors credit so it’s a great way to budget your time.

Honors Topics (listed as HONR 398 in eServices) are a wide range of classes in topics from Theatre to Molecular Biology. They are all worth three credits and encourage participation in subjects that might not be a part of your curriculum. Perhaps you’ve always wanted to improve your art or writing skills, try exploring an Honors Topics course in that particular subject. This past semester, you could’ve taken The Art of the Narrative to enhance your creative writing skills and craft a compelling story. The Honors College also offered Contemporary Art, Museums, & Interpretation; in this class, you would’ve learned how to lead tours at the Institute of Contemporary Art and how to interpret the works of several talented artists. For both of these classes, no prior experience is needed and beginners are welcome.

HONR 398 offers many other classes that appeal to all student interests. This semester, classes on the psychology of sexual diversity, the history of civilizations, and social media research were offered. A presentation skills class was also available for students looking to improve public speaking skills.

If you do want to take a course that can be applied towards your major, there is most likely an HONR 398 class that fits your needs. For example, many biology majors enrolled in the Molecular Basis for Human Disease, a course focusing on genetics, biochemistry, and clinical applications of biology.

Before you stress about your long list of degree requirements, how about exploring an Honors Topics course? HONR 398 might offer the perfect classes for you by encouraging you to explore other fields and offering Honors credit for students.
By LINDSAY CUNNINGHAM

Richmond is known for many things: its art, its history, but especially, its music. The city has grown into a hub for emerging artists. VCU itself has no short history of musical alum, including (but not limited to) members of GWAR, Dave Matthews Band, Car Seat Headrest, and solo artist Iron & Wine. This week I got the chance to sit down with one of Richmond’s newest artists, Cameron Smith of the band Bonne Chére.

Cameron is a sophomore in the jazz studies program at VCU and is majoring in performing arts with a focus in saxophone. His deep passion for his band is clear when he speaks. Cameron formed Bonne Chére three years ago during his senior year at Cox High School in Virginia Beach. As a native of Virginia Beach, not only have I heard of Bonne Chére before, I’ve become a huge fan of their music. Cameron has been writing songs for the band since its inception, garnering his musical inspiration from both popular artists and family members. According to Cameron, his biggest musical influence has been The Strokes, something that is clear when listening to any one of the band’s latest tracks about love and loss.

For our audience that isn’t fluent in French, “Bonne Chére” is a term that translates to “Good Cheer.” Cameron and the band’s drummer, Connor Harrington, decided on the band name after first seeing the phrase in a French class. Immediately, Cameron liked “what it meant, how it sounded, and even how it looked”, noting that “It reflects my band’s persona very well.” Bonne Chére is one of those bands that makes you feel cool just listening to it. The band itself a mash of musical styles—think The Strokes, Wine. This week I got the chance to sit down with one of Richmond’s newest artists, Cameron Smith of the band Bonne Chére.

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New Rock Climbing Gym

By LUKE CAMPBELL

...And it's a lot bigger than the wall at the Cary Street Gym. The steel skeleton of this massive climbing and exercise complex within the Sports Center of Richmond (SCOR) currently stands nearing its realization, with welders hard at work. Soon, the cutting-edge, geometric wall faces will begin to go up as well. Once completed, the gym will boast over 16,000 square feet of climbing wall space, 5,000 square feet of bouldering, an enclosed fitness and yoga room, and weight and cardio equipment.

This new rock climbing gym in Scott's Addition serves as a second location to Peak Experiences, the climbing gym out in Midlothian. Peak RVA, as this new location will be known, aims to count itself among the foremost indoor climbing facilities in the region, doubling the size of Peak’s Midlothian location.

Peak’s unveiling of this new location coincides with the spectacular collision of rock climbing with the mainstream, observable over the last several years. Indoor climbing gyms provide a veritable paradise for the honing of the unique system of movement offered by rock climbing and opens up what was a fringe adventure sport thirty years ago to an audience of much broader backgrounds. If you’ve ever considered trying rock climbing, now would be the time. The Cary Street Gym offers a great foray into rock climbing, and if the sport captivates you as it has me, this new gym will provide the perfect avenue for advancement, just a ten-minute bike ride from campus.

For those of us who have only vaguely noticed the rock climbing wall at the VCU gym while we do real exercise, I raise you the strongmen I’ve witnessed flailing once a rock wall tends upside-down. All kidding aside, rock climbing offers a real, intense workout that simultaneously exerts the core, arms, back, and legs of the climber and requires both power and endurance to complete a climb. Additionally, rock climbing pits the athlete against only themselves and the rock, one of the beauties of this sport, creating the community of support rather than competition for which rock climbing is known.

To arrive at this new climbing center, once completed, will be to first arrive at SCOR, to walk past athletes playing soccer on the outdoor fields. Once inside, you turn down a hallway and continue until you reach a lively bar, with people playing foosball and table tennis among the seating set up there. This bar area opens up on one side into a vast, well-lit warehouse boasting an array of unusually panelled blue and white walls covered in brightly-colored, plastic holds. From the bar you may either descend a full flight of stairs to the front desk, or continue straight out into the cavernous openness of the gym on catwalks stretching onto the tops of large, artificial bouldering centering the facility.

From your vantage point on top of the sixteen-foot-tall boulders, both beginners and muscly experts beneath you struggle to conquer specific paths up the sides of these shorter walls, with nothing but the padded mats beneath them, some venturing totally upside-down in a complete arch between the base of two boulders. To your left you observe cardio and free-weight equipment similar to that of a conventional gym, as well as a completely enclosed and air-conditioned yoga and fitness space. To your right a gigantic, overhung prowl climbs nearly forty feet up and continues across the ceiling of the gym, allowing athletes to climb almost over your head, yards from the base of their climber. Rope climbing walls like this one expand out from this notable feature, with both climber and the person known as their belayer attached to a rope for protection, allowing the climber to ascend to the top of the 38-foot-tall walls. A solely instructional climbing wall and a lounge also attract those visiting the gym.

There exists no firm opening date for Peak RVA at this time, but the current hope is for construction to be complete by the end of the year.
By LINDSAY CUNNINGHAM

One of my favorite things about VCU is its diversity; not just its diversity of race or religion, but its diversity of passions. The students at VCU all seemingly have a myriad of interests that inhabit every discipline. This week, I had the opportunity to speak with three of VCU’s outstanding alumni. Rabia Kamara has always been passionate about baking. She started baking while in grade school, but it wasn’t until her years at VCU when she reigned this passion. From then on, Rabia knew that she wanted a career doing what she loved. After graduating from VCU with a bachelor’s degree in Business, Rabia attended L’ Académie de Cuisine, a professional cooking school located in Maryland. Since then, Rabia has created a life around cooking and baking. In 2014, she created her own dessert business. Rabia describes herself as the “founder/CEO/executive chef/owner of all hats” for Ruby Scoops, her pastry and ice cream business. Ruby Scoops Ice Cream & Sweets has grown tremendously within the past few years. Currently, Rabia’s signature desserts are being sold in multiple D.C. based grocery stores and restaurants. Rabia’s favorite part of her job? Seeing people’s reactions to her flavorful creations. “I LOVE watching the way people react when they try a flavor,” Rabia says, “their eyes nearly popping out of their heads, exclamations of how good it is, being known as ‘the ice cream lady’, and being able to build connections with like-minded individuals that understand the madness that is food entrepreneurship.” Clearly, Rabia loves what she does, and she notes that she couldn’t have done it without VCU. The friends that Rabia made at VCU encouraged her to pursue her passion for baking “mostly because they wanted to eat,” she added, chuckling. “They saw how much joy food brought me overall, and they pushed me to pursue my passion when my family wasn’t completely on board.” Additionally, the education that Rabia received gave her skills that she uses every day in her career. She says, “I took a lot of service & personal selling classes, which I think have really helped shape the way I approach and conduct business as a service based company.”

Kelli Lemon made Richmond her home after graduating with her Master’s degree in Sports Leadership in 2001. Since then, she’s played many roles in both the VCU and Richmond community, working as everything from a sports radio host to a restauranteur. Kelli describes herself as a “social-entrepreneur.” She makes it her duty to create connections between the citizens of Richmond through food, sports, art, and education. One of the ways that she does this is through her segment “Coffee with Strangers RVA.” Kelli has been the host of Coffee with Strangers RVA for all of its five seasons, which hosts a new person every week for coffee at a local Richmond spot. Her guests on the show come from a variety of different backgrounds with careers in all of the disciplines that Kelli is passionate about. Most recently, Kelli had the opportunity to interview Governor Terry McAuliffe. After asking her about the experience, Kelli simply replied, “He wanted to talk politics and I wanted to know where he ate dinner at- I’m nosy!”

Kelli credits her time at VCU for many of the aspects of her career, saying “VCU shaped my career. It allowed me to emerge myself in the area.” Kelli’s next career venture will combine all of her interests. She is opening up “Urban Hang Suite” in April, a grab-and-go café that will focus on connecting people in Richmond. Kelli describes it as “your typical coffee and tea café but on steroids.” Urban Hang Suite will offer snacks and drinks that are all locally sourced from the state. Christine Haines Greenberg graduated from the School of Humanities and Sciences in 2009 with a bachelor’s degree in English and a concentration in political science and women’s studies. Like many students, Christine was attracted to VCU because of its diversity and urban campus. During her time at VCU, Christine played an active role exploring what she was passionate about. She was a member of Young Democrats, Food Not Bombs, and a coordinator for Students for Barack Obama. Christine found her passion by accident. She began to plan weddings in her free time shortly after graduating and fell in love with it. Today, Christine owns and operates two special event-themed businesses. She and her family opened up Urban Set Bride, a bridal dress shop, in 2013. Since then, Christine has launched a second business, Wood Grain & Lace Events, an event-planning business located in Christine’s bridal shop.

Christine’s favorite part of the job? Her work environment. “The best part of my job, and the wedding industry in general, is that it is dominated by women,” Christine told me, continuing, “we are surrounded by self-starting, powerful women who get to run their own businesses and make people happy. It’s an amazing feeling.” In fact, Christine has dedicated her career to promoting women in the Richmond community. In 2014, Christine founded Boss Babes RVA, a group of women entrepreneurs in the Richmond-area. Though Boss Babes RVA first started with 15 members, today the group has over 3,100 participants. Christine credits much of her business prowess to VCU, noting that the school helped her become “well-rounded, adaptable and ready to take on any challenge.”

It’s clear that VCU has become a springboard for many to launch their future careers. Who knows what VCU alumni will be inspired to create their own business in the future! If VCU graduates are anything like Rabia, Kelli, and Christine, they are sure to be heading steadfastly towards success.
Profile: David Robbins

How did our favorite Honors College professor rise from being a local Richmondite to an accomplished writer?

By TARYN HAINS-KARMILOVICH

Growing up in the 50’s in a majority Christian locale was tough as a Jewish child. For Professor David Robbins, however, it helped him appreciate people’s differences at a young age. Professor Robbins was born in Richmond and raised in Sandston, the city’s East End. His parents were World War II veterans. When asked about his unique upbringing, he insists that he experienced nothing but kindness.

Middle school, however, was a rude awakening where he discovered racism and violence for the first time. By high school Professor Robbins was 6’6” and an accomplished basketball player. His talent netted him an athletic scholarship at Middlebury College, but excessive drug use forced him to transfer to William and Mary. Professor Robbins, though, states this was ultimately a positive experience. His time at William and Mary led to a degree in theatre and speech (as well as the pleasure of being classmates with Glenn Close).

However, the newly earned degree was not enough to keep Professor Robbins satisfied. He yearned to do more. Next came a law degree from William and Mary where, in his third year, he was able to procure a job with the Department of Health and Environmental Control in Columbia, South Carolina. But even this wasn’t enough. Still searching for that satisfaction that had eluded him so far, Professor Robbins left his legal career and was accepted. During this time he had been making a living writing ads for billboards and advertisements, and his work was getting notice.

Grad school eventually went to the wayside and he decided to pursue writing full time. As a freelance writer he was able to apply his creativity across many platforms including radio commercials, magazines, and advertising agencies.

Then, one day in 1989, Professor Robbins saw a picture of Isaac Sisman sitting on a chair mode entirely of his own novels. And just like that, David Robbins finally realized what he wanted for himself. From this point on he dove headfirst into writing books. Finding story ideas was difficult because he was so picky (and still is), but once he latched onto an idea, it was impossible to let it go. As an unestablished author he had to work six months of the year to support his writing- but he was persistent. His first book, “Enemy at the Gates”, was finished in two years.

He admits that the early 90’s was not the most successful period of time for him. However, a contact he made in 1996 with Harper Collins led to the publishing of “Souls to Keep”, which quickly became a bestseller. From this point on Professor Robbins focused solely on his writing.

Currently, Professor Robbins works at VCU’s Honors College, where he’s been a teacher for over ten years. While he has taught at William and Mary in the past, Professor Robbins has always enjoyed teaching Honors College students because he believes they are eager to learn and make the best students. He has enjoyed working with the talent and creativity that siphons through his class from semester to semester. For Professor Robbins, teaching is not just a job, but it is an enjoyable part of his life which he conveys to his students through an open classroom setting. Initially, some may be intimidated by his largeness of presence; soon, however, that evaporates as students realize he is a gentle giant. Everyone learns whether they realize it or not.

While he enjoyed teaching students and writing, Professor Robbins wanted to do even more to give back to the community. Growing up with veterans and writing many of their stories led to him starting the Mighty Pen Project. Here, he offers classes for veterans to write about their experiences in story and poetry form. He also co-founded a writing program for the youth of Richmond, the Podium Foundation. Many of his volunteers and interns are from students at the Honors College.

When asked about learning and what advice he could offer students, Professor Robbins offered this: “Perhaps the greatest asset any learner can have is to be open and humble before their subject. If you come to a subject like writing and you bring forth an ego; you won’t learn as fast as the empty vessel.”

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