



While Friday night at the Vancouver Folk Festival focuses on main stage performances, the rest of the weekend on the sprawling festival grounds of Jericho Beach is as notable for its smaller workshop performances. This was especially true this year. This particular Saturday started with the official public announcement of Joan Baez's cancellation. Perhaps in some kind of karmic sympathy, the day's weather forecast -- originally a bit ominous -- took a turn for the brighter.

There was a notable change to the workshops too. Past years have scattered seven small stages across the festival grounds. This year saw the elimination of the smallest of those, a fact that was quickly noted by longtime festival attendees. That stage served as a showcase for small groups and last year saw three of the best performances of the weekend from [Sam Baker](#), [Del Barber](#) and Jerron "Blind Boy" Paxton. R.I.P., stage seven; know that you were missed.



As a morning starter, I opted to visit a workshop aptly named Carefree Highway and hosted by locals Fish & Bird. With both Great Lake Swimmers and Ashleigh Flynn & the Back Porch, the tiny stage was packed but all eyes were on the Kentucky visitors. Clustered around a single microphone rather than individually amped, the most visually striking thing wasn't even the upright bass constructed from a wash basin. Standing in front was a washboard player with an assortment of small cymbals and cans attached to her washboard. It was pretty obvious that this was going to be something a little bit different.

The workshop unfolded nicely, with the Great Lakes Swimmers' cover of the titular Gordon Lightfoot song a particular standout. As a follow up to that, Miranda Mulholland's voice was paired beautifully with Tony Dekker's for a rendition of Gram Parsons' "Song for You" that would have done Parsons and Emmylou Harris proud. **Ashleigh Flynn and her ragtag band of musicians, clustered around that single microphone, delivered a solid set of southern bluegrass tunes and made this the ideal place to start a day.** That single microphone thing really worked.

Stage 2 was home to a planned tribute to Pete Seeger that was to have included Baez. Predictably attracting a huge crowd, the show unfolded with an emotional response from the audience, as the assembled musicians performed both original work and classic songs. Alejandro Escovedo's cover of Woody Guthrie's "Deportee" was a particularly good moment.

The point of workshops is probably best summed up as "let's put them together and see what happens." This can lead to uneven results at times. Stage 6's Renegades bill showcased one of those moments. Originally billed as a three-band workshop, Toronto's Born Ruffians turned out to be a no-show, leaving only Wagons and Langhorne Slim on the stage. The two acts couldn't have been more stylistically opposed. Slim's quiet, introspective songs were beautiful but stood in stark opposition to the raucous, kinetic energy of Henry Wagons.



Stage 5 serves as sort of a smaller main stage and that's where I spent much of the rest of the day. Rose Cousins loosely led a "Hello Hum" workshop and demonstrated why she's one of the most compelling acts to see live: her stage presence is relentlessly charming and funny, and she has a way of sharing that stage that makes her a perfect host. The workshop was followed by a full hour-long solo set from Wagons, whose morning workshop had drawn a huge audience to the natural bowl of the stage. The hour that unfolded saw Wagons get an extended standing ovation from the amassed crowd. If you've been following the band for a while, that should come as no surprise. It was nice to see, regardless.



With Baez's non-appearance, [Alejandro Escovedo](#) was the most recognizable name on Saturday night's main stage. It's been a few years since the Austin-based guitar legend played Vancouver — that show happened in a downtown club to a modest audience of about 300, by my guess. Escovedo played through a retrospective of several albums worth of material and solidly demonstrated that 63 may be just the right age for a rock and roll star. The set ended with a blistering cover of "Like a Hurricane" that summed up both Escovedo's skills and Vancouver's audiences quite well: when Escovedo threw the song to the audience for the final chorus, he was greeted by the most limpid response I've ever seen. A second try was little better. You go, Vancouver. It's OK; don't bother getting up. Sigh.

In the end, a day that started ominously ended well enough. While some were surely disappointed, I was surprised to find that the dozen or so audience members I spoke to about the cancellation mostly shrugged it off and had a great time. There was a scattering of showers in the middle of the day, but not enough to worry about. One of the biggest problems was one of those blessings in disguise that we're all familiar with: six stages of music running all day long means it's pretty much impossible to catch everything. So much is going on that the most [prominent local review sounds like a completely different show](#) to me. Not a bad problem to have.

In the end, the day can probably be best summed up with a few short lessons:

- Into every life a little rain must fall. If that rain comes in the form of a cancelled headliner, sometimes the audience is OK with it.
- **Sometimes all you need is a lot of talent, a single microphone and a few home made instruments. Well done, Ashleigh Flynn.**
- Don't be afraid to do a few beautiful cover songs. Tony Dekker is a great songwriter, but his choice of covers was as compelling as his own work in the end.
- If you're going to share a stage with Henry Wagons, bring your A-game and maybe pick up the tempo a bit from that quiet little sing-along stuff.
- Skipping your workshops means you may not get seen.
- Don't count on a Vancouver audience for a sing-along.

[CLICK HERE FOR LIVE ARTICLE](#)