Los Angeles Times
SATURDAY, AUGUST 17, 2002
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Folk-Bluegrass and Family Fun

Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer, performing Sunday at Skirball Center, find ways to entertain kids of all ages.

Arts Zone

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They're virtuoso multi-instrumentalists, tight harmony experts, multiple Grammy Award nominees, independent record producers, teachers of teachers and National Public Radio-featured artists. They also yodel. And do rope tricks.

Maryland-based, veteran folk singers and cowgirls at heart, Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer are making a rare Southland appearance. They're doing two concerts at the Skirball Cultural Center's "Food Festival" on Sunday, a day-long event exploring the international cuisine and cultures of Los Angeles with tastings, demonstrations, music and arts workshops.

Marxer and Fink are part of an entertainment bill that also includes members of Los Angeles Opera in a family musical based on Tim Egan's book, "Friday Night at Hodges' Café," and the Susie Hansen Band.

Fink and Marxer, a folk-bluegrass team since 1983, will sing a few new songs from the album they're working on, which "just so happens," said Fink, "to be about food and nutrition for children." They'll include selections from their CD "All Wound Up," a 2002 Grammy nominee for best musical children's album, and their most recent CD, "Pocket Full of Stardust."

"But we've got a pretty giant repertoire," Fink said.

"We go from something that's emotional," Marxer said, "to something that's crazy fun, to something topical, so kids and parents have a lot to talk about when they go home. I love that."

Community Music Inc.

Cathy Fink, left, and Marcy Marxer: "a pretty giant repertoire."

The pair's lively family concerts, a mix of folk, pop and old-time jazz and swing rhythms, are highly participatory, with silly songs, story songs, sing-alongs and hand-signing.

Writing songs for children is "a wonderful, open-ended topic," Marxer said. She and Fink find inspiration in "listening to kids and reflecting back something that's relevant to their lives," mixing just-for-fun tunes with songs that use humor and reassurance to help children cope with common concerns and fears.

Performing for children is a skill that they began honing as musician-teachers in schools and day-care centers in the 1970s; both began instructing teachers in the use of music in the classroom during the 1980s for the Virginia-based Wolf Trap Institute of Early Learning Through the Arts.

Folk music, a children's music staple, is an especially resonant way to deliver a message to young listeners, who don't care that it isn't the usual Top 40 fare.

"When people say oh, that's passé," Fink said, "I think what they're thinking of is the folk music that became the pop music of the '60s. But it is a living, growing thing."

"It carries across hundreds of genres," Marxer said. "It's really just music that speaks the mind of people. It can encompass African music, European music, Cajun, bluegrass—all these kinds of music have survived for a reason, and that reason is not mass marketing. The reason is that folk music speaks to people on a gut level and a heart level. It's music that's alive because people have kept it alive."

Their crowd-pleasing rope tricks and yodeling just sort of happened. Marxer was introduced to roping at a convention of the Las Vegas-based Wild West Arts Club a dozen years ago by "a bunch of old guys talking about the last time they fell off Trigger for Roy Rogers in the movies."

The pair's yodeling expertise—they teach it around the world—began early in their career when they performed with yodeling cowgirl singer Patsy Montana, the first woman country music star to sell a million records.

"It works well with kids' shows," Marxer laughed. "It really grabs the attention of the fifth- and sixth-grade boys. If you can win them over early, you're doing great."

Watching children and parents relate to each other during a concert, however, may be their greatest satisfaction.

"Sometimes, it's a discovery for both of them," Fink said. "We've seen parents who didn't know that their kids had the coordination to do one of our sign-language things, or they didn't know that their kids had listened to the CD so much that they knew the words backward and forward. Or we ask kids questions and the answers are a pleasant surprise."

And then there's what happens when they teach an audience to sing one of their signature lullabies, "Give a Little Love Away."

"We tell kids, this is not just a song for your parents to sing to you," Fink said. "This is for you to sing to your parents too. And this unbelievable thing happens. They're looking at each other and they're smiling, and as they sing, they're saying something very important to each other. If they can take that home with them, we've done our job."

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