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Gainsborough Festival Roundup Online Learning Platforms Spotlight on Hilary Dirlam 2026 Camps

Fancy an on old-time summer holiday in France? Look no further!

Eleonore Giraud walks you through Festival Herbe Bleue

The sunlight is sparkling through the leaves on a calm July afternoon. The scene takes place in the forest at La Cour du Liège, not far from the castle region of France. Annick Odom and Sophie Doco are setting up long wooden planks on sawhorses. They unroll a long sheet of paper that stretches from one side of the plank to the other, about 20 feet. Everything should be ready by 1pm.

After walking around the farm to peek at the improvised jams, I go back to Annick and Sophie's setting. I find a joyous crowd of about eight people, either sitting at the table or just standing, bending their backs to paint a scene on the long paper roll. The crankie workshop has started. Crankies are the distant ancestors of (not so) modern TVs. In this old storytelling form, a long-illustrated scroll is wound onto two spools that stand in a box with a viewing window. The scroll is cranked by hand, as a story is being told either through simple telling, singing, or playing tunes. As Annick says, "socially, crankies naturally encourage collaboration and shared authorship. I was already interested in old ballads, narrative songs, and ways of telling stories that didn't rely on a traditional stage setup." Annick continues. "Seeing the duo Anna and Elizabeth perform a crankie about 10 years ago felt like discovering a missing link; this very old, low-tech, hand-powered form that sits right between music, storytelling, and visual art. It immediately made sense to me as a musician who's always been drawn to stories"

Annick Odom was born and raised in West Virginia. A clarinet, double bass, fiddle player, and square dance caller, she lived in the Netherlands for a few years. While there, she connected to the Belgian and French Old Time community at the Gainsborough gathering.

The previous year at Herbe Bleue, Annick led a crankie matchbox workshop - a "pocket" version of the original crankie that's easy to make everywhere, with minimal equipment. - "I love how accessible and human [the crankies] are. They don't require electricity, fancy gear, or a big budget. You can make one on a kitchen table and perform it almost anywhere. I also love that crankies invite slowness and attention, from both the performer and the audience. There's something deeply satisfying about the hand-cranked motion and the imperfections of the device," Annick adds. These features resonate highly with the old-time world. In 2026, she is organising the first edition of her very own crankie festival in her hometown of Morgantown, West Virginia.

At the 2025 Herbe Bleue Festival, Annick collaborated with Sophie Doco, a French visual artist, who also worked on the festival identity, to structure the team's work on the paper roll. Sophie drew outlines of her artwork to inspire the workshop participants, as each participant took care of one scene in the story. Sophie has her own crankie duet with fiddler Louisiane Beck, called Rosy Posy. They are scheduled to perform at La Cour du Liège in 2026.

After COVID, and with the urge to take a break from their intense professional lives, constantly on the next flight, Laurent Zylberman and his wife Piritta were looking for a haven in the countryside. They found it at La Cour du Liège, a land including a farm and manor dating back to the 15th century, and a forest. Laurent wanted to connect with local actors in a collective project. The Herbe Bleue (blue grass) Festival was born.

And so it all started its journey back in 2019 and peacefully found its way through the years, within a mix of old-time, Cajun and bluegrass music, highlighting the plurality of traditional dance forms - Cajun dancing, square-dancing, flat-footing. From the very beginning at Herbe Bleue, there has been a clear intention to broaden the range of activities rooted in the folk lore ("the knowledge of the people"), where people learn and create together, from each-other. For a couple of years, puppeteer Lydia Sevette served as the festival's master of ceremonies, bringing a burlesque atmosphere to the stage with her incredible costumes and characters. She brought some visual art and some acting to it. In some way, Annick and the crankies carried on what Lydia had initiated.



The first years welcomed the concerts by the barn, amongst rusty antique farm equipment casually left around. But more recently, the evening concerts migrated into the forest, creating a sort of mystical atmosphere, with light patterns in the trees. A big wooden floor welcomes the dancers next to the music stage. The barn stage is now devoted to mini-concerts happening while the big scene transitions from the previous band to the next. For four days, French, European and international bands perform. All day long, one can easily navigate from an old-time jam to a Cajun jam, taking a shortcut to a bluegrass jam, and back round again! Jammers play tirelessly, with a frenzy that unmistakably wins over their sporadic audience of passers-by.

Back in 2024, the Alum Ridge Boys came all the way from Floyd, Virginia to spread their timeless mountain sound. The 2025 edition brought us Tanasi, who carried with them the lush beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the ecstatic spirit of Asheville. Wila Frank and Emily Mann were also part of the lineup, performing as the duet Paper Wings on the guitar, fiddle and clawhammer banjo. The performance was sincere and delicate, building escalating vocal harmonies that resonated in the trees. Their songs invited us to introspection and contemplation.

Ruth Eliza and Jeri Foreman, pillars of the UK old-time scene, have been involved in the Herbe Bleue Festival for a few years now, either leading workshops, hosting conferences, or programming bands. Their old-time duet played Herbe Bleue 2024 on a clawhammer banjo-fiddle basis. In the 2025 edition, they teamed up with another UK duo, Old Spot, to form the One Night Stringband. These four made each other complete. The obvious complicity brought out the mastery of the instruments on the tunes but also allowed smiles and even unapologetic laughter on stage. The show was absolutely addictive and efficient, and the audience was left ecstatic at the old-time frenzy. In 2026, Ruth Eliza will be back in the saddle again, this time with a quintet!

Midnight strikes La Cour du Liège. I hear the clatter of pots being put away in the cupboards. The kitchen staff are off duty. Chef Enzo pulls out his guitar while cook assistants Gino and Mégane tune their banjo and fiddle. Enzo and his family teamed up as Les Vilains Petits Chiens Noirs' (The Nasty Little Black Dogs, named after Enzo's chihuahua) to serve their soul food inspired meals to the visitors and volunteers. Whenever there's a break, they all jam cajun-inspired songs, some of their own creation. Cajun band Maman Roulaillé, scheduled on the big stage, willingly plays along with Enzo's team in joyful harmony.

"Roulailler" in Cajun French means "partying". Maman Roulaillé was the first European all-women Cajun band. Founded by Yanick Nehring (Maman Roulaillé is her nickname) in 1995, it was shaped by chance encounters and saw different musicians come and go over the years, though it always focused on a fiddle-accordion duet. Members have all traveled throughout Louisiana, inspired on the way by artists like Octa Clark, Bois Sec and Morris Ardoin, Lionel Leleu, and Goldman Thibodeau. On the Herbe Bleue stage, Yanick's smile is contagious, and the band happily brings the crowd to dance jitterbugs, two-steps, Cajun Maddisons, and so on.

After all the jamming and dancing, it's already Sunday at La Cour du Liège! Sunday mornings hold their own festival tradition: it's time for the Gospel Hour. Each year, two or three different leaders are picked up to lead that pagan ceremony nestled in the woods. Bodies and voices are warmed-up: simple sentences are transmitted to the crowd and chanted repeatedly, varying in intensity, drawing on the gospel high energy, if not euphoria, of that shared moment. Then, different people step onto the stage to spread their very own gospel through songs.

Now it's time for the crankie rendition mini concert. Annick and Sophie's students put the long paper scroll into the box and install it on a wooden table. Annick wrote lyrics and music that the happy students sing together while cranking out the work of art: "In old stone barns and between tall trees, echo songs from overseas. There's a festival in Baugé-en-Anjou, I'm here, and you should be too. Bring your friends and dance each night, As fiddles sing, circle left then right. Step and spin 'til the hours blur, there's music everywhere at Herbe Bleue!..."

Now you probably know that last-day-of-a-festival-feeling – charged with electricity, yet completely drained. Well, that's when Herbe Bleue's open mic happens. On stage, flashes of brilliance mix with the occasional bum note. Cook Enzo and his team of Vilains Petits Chiens Noirs wrote a song about... cooking at Herbe Bleue, which they share on stage alongside Maman Roulaillé. The crowd chooses its favorite artist by applause, and the winner receives a festival-themed plush toy made by Freddie (who has hand-sewn and knitted all the festival's signage).

In 2026, Travis Stuart and Deb Shebish will come all the way from North Carolina and Indiana for our greatest pleasure. Herbe Bleue Festival is also proud to welcome Mama's Broke (US, Can) – a multi-instrumental female old-time duet, that occasionally uses a range of percussion, either through flatfooting, or playing drums on the fiddle. French quintet Pig Society will show up after their third album release, and The Old Time Wasters (UK, Spain). Many more artists are yet to be announced! Summer will be back again, and we shall reunite.

Eléonore Giraud