

Striking a Chord: Country Roads Celebrates 25 Years



Travelling across the north-east region of Sri Lanka in 1988, Feizal Samath, a journalist and Country singer, was deeply affected by the scenes he witnessed. The plight of those living in the areas where the ethnic conflict was most severe resonated deeply, especially that of the women and children living in IDP camps. Although the stories he wrote about them were published across the world, the need to do something more persisted.

Words Ayesha Inoon

“Returning to these camps I realised that their lives hadn’t changed. Although my own life changed with these great stories I hadn’t done anything for these children,” says Feizal, reflecting that it was this desire which resulted in the creation of the Country Music Foundation and its legendary concert Country Roads. What was initially meant to be a one-time, feel-good event that simultaneously raised money for the needs of destitute children turned into an annual, much-anticipated concert that has over the years transformed the lives of both its participants as well as its beneficiaries.

Today, as they prepare for the 25th anniversary of Country Roads, Feizal looks back at how much the show has grown, the lives it has touched and those who have given of their time and their talents to make it the undeniable success it has been.

In October 1988, the first Country Roads concert raised 30,000 rupees. UNICEF officials present in the audience expressed their interest in joining the CMF in an annual concert and thus began a tradition. Each year Country Roads has brought together an audience that loves Country and Western music, provided them with sparkling entertainment and conveyed to them vital messages on the care and support of needy children in the country while raising money for the same purpose. With the funds they have been able to gather rising in value from that first step to their present target of one million rupees on their 25th anniversary, says Feizal, they have been able to meet a host of needs ranging from preschools to mosquito nets.

[Country Roads is South Asia's longest running concert series, with unique elements of Country Music, Charity and Children](#)

Each year the concert is aimed at a particular project, with sustainability being a key factor, he says, recalling the installation of two tube-wells in an area affected by the conflict and the care taken by the community to protect this precious resource which many of us take for granted. Other projects included the sponsoring of 25 children for a period of three years through the Sevana Sarana Foster Parents scheme, the setting up of libraries, medical centres and the Tsunami concert, which was their highest fund-raiser so far. This year's concert will focus on refurbishing three courts dedicated to hearing cases related to children. These courts will be child-friendly in nature with special provisions to ensure their utmost physical and emotional security when giving evidence.

A medley of performers, both local and international have generously volunteered to perform at Country Roads over the years, says Feizal with bands and singers coming from as far away as Germany, the USA, UK, Italy, Canada, and the Maldives. Among the regular artistes, who will also be present at this year's show, are Dirk and the Mavericks from Germany, Astrid Brook from the UK and Bob Livingston from the USA. Local performers will include Mariazelle and the band Cosmic Grace, one of the show's pioneers, and Feizal himself and long-time buddy

and co-founder of the CMF Jury Majid with the Country Revival Band. "All of their participation is voluntary, this is the principle that binds these people," says Feizal.

The show too has evolved over the years, with some of the events taking place at outdoor venues, with a typical cowboy and carnival atmosphere to add to the Country Music experience. Some years there was a fusion of Country and Eastern with Country and Western music combined with eastern drums and instruments. Another feature is that tickets are always reasonably priced especially for a show of this magnitude. "We don't want to shut anyone out," says Feizal, pointing out that the audience is a cross section of society with fans ranging in age from 18 to 80.

Country Roads is South Asia's longest running concert series, with its unique elements of Country Music, Charity and Children. Feizal recalls with nostalgia, the 'white box' that used to be a part of the concert, with a note which said, "If you want to further help children beyond the price of a ticket, please donate your money". When the box was forgotten one year, a frail old lady approached him and inquired where the white box was, moving him to tears by her thoughtfulness.

"Sometimes the right keys can touch a chord," he says, quoting from a theme message of a previous concert, adding that sustaining this event is not an easy task but he hopes to continue to do so for many years to come, transforming lives through the power of music and the generosity of the concert's many patrons.

Country Roads 2013 is to be held on February 17 at the Hilton Hotel, Colombo. For further information visit <http://countryroadslk.wordpress.com>.

[nggallery id=489]