



**Good Practice Story Title:** Viljandi Folk Music Festival: Championing Sustainability Through Youth Engagement

**Destination:** Viljandimaa / Viljandi County

**Country:** Estonia

**Submitting Organization:** SA Viljandimaa Arenduskeskus / Viljandi County Development Centre

**Category:**

- Destination Management
- Nature & Scenery
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing

**Destination description:**

Viljandi, a beautiful county centre, is notable for its historical and cultural richness. The town, with its 14 000 inhabitants, is a member of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, reflecting its dedication to promoting culture. Viljandi Castle Hills, a green pearl in the middle of the town, offer picturesque views and plenty of recreational opportunities. Viljandi is also known as a cultural capital, hosting the prestigious Viljandi Folk Music Festival every summer. The University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy plays an important role in the town's cultural life, giving education and organising various cultural events. The ruins of the Viljandi Order Castle and the streets of the old town reflect the town's rich history and offer a joy of discovery to every visitor. Viljandi County, known for its scenic landscapes and rich cultural heritage, has many hiking trails, stunning lakes, and forests that are perfect for enjoying nature.



## Summary of Good Practice Story:

Viljandi Folk Music Festival was born from a student initiative and has grown into one of the biggest music events in the Baltic and Nordic countries. Since 1993 it has been continuously working to preserve and promote the living music tradition. The festival is an annual meeting point that holds a firm place in the calendar of Estonian summer events. It is the strong belief of organisers that only young people can ensure the vitality of traditional culture, and that is why their strategic aim has always been to engage young people with the help of natural role models. Foreign journalists who have visited the festival have often noted that, while in other parts of the world, especially in Western societies, the majority of the audience at folk and world music festivals is middle-aged and older, the ambience of the Viljandi festival is shaped by young people.

What model is used to continually inspire young people to become excited about traditional culture?

## Issues faced:

In the late 1980s, when the prospect of Estonia's re-independence seemed attainable, the predominant Soviet-era pseudo-folk expression was no longer acceptable to the traditional music students of Viljandi. They began exploring ways to move towards contemporary high-level education in folk music. But where to find role models for this?

In 1991, the international youth camp Falun Ethno in Sweden gave the traditional music students of Viljandi the understanding they had longed for that folk music could be part of modern life, not just an ancient heritage. They realized that the best way to spread this perspective was through living role models, a festival, and a youth camp. However, how could they organize a festival in Viljandi, which at that time was a periphery where organising a major festival seemed mad, especially considering the students' complete lack of experience in event management?

## Solution:

The students started by organising the first one-day Viljandi Folk Music Festival in 1993. Over time, the festival has been skilfully expanded into a four-day event, featuring 4–6 outdoor stages and 3–4 indoor stages during the last weekend of July and offering more than 75 concerts alongside additional programmes.

The participation of young people is encouraged by free entry for children up to 12 years old, also, young people aged 13–26 can buy festival passes at a discount price. Since 1995, young musicians and bands have been given the opportunity to perform in front of a big audience on the festival's Green Stage.

In 1997, the first international youth folk music camp Ethno Estonia was organized alongside the festival. The approach used at the Falun Ethno camp has been successfully adopted.



The organisation of the festival was transferred from students to the town of Viljandi and the NGO Estonian Traditional Music Center. In 2008, a concert house and educational centre Pärimusmuusika Ait was opened in a restored building next to the Viljandi Castle Hills. Pärimusmuusika Ait regularly hosts popular nationwide competitions for young solo players and folk bands.

The well-functioning model has made the Viljandi Folk Music Festival the most renowned cultural event in Viljandi and an integral part of the town's identity. The popularity of the event has had a significant economic impact on the town and county of Viljandi, consistently bringing people to hotels and restaurants from both Estonia and abroad, and inspiring thousands of young people who come to the festival.

## Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:

### 1. *How to organise a festival in a small town?*

Organising a festival was a major challenge for the students, as they had no experience in organising large events and budgeting. Nevertheless, they boldly embarked on the task and asked for assistance from local cultural entrepreneurs who had experience in organising fairs. The first folk music festival took place with the support of private-equity capital, and without the generous donations at the time, the festival might not exist in its current form. At the first Viljandi Folk Music Festival on May 15, 1993, nearly 200 people bought the ticket and gathered to the Viljandi Song Festival Grounds – enough to give the organisers the encouragement they needed to carry on. The next step was to develop more ambitious plans: the festival was to become a multi-day event and have more venues. They also needed to find good national media partners.

In 1994, head of the festival Ando Kiviberg wrote a letter to the editor-in-chief of Eesti Ekspress: "By supporting us, you help to establish a wonderful summer event tradition, whose fame will spread far beyond the borders of Estonia in the future." This sentence reflects well the organisers' fanatic and enthusiastic belief in the chosen path. Andres Soosaar, mayor of Viljandi from 1993 to 1996, recalls: "I remember when Ando Kiviberg came to me to talk about his idea. His words painted a convincing picture, and the town government agreed to fund the plan."

After the second Viljandi Folk Music Festival in 1994, a headline in newspaper Postimees announced: "Three days that shook the world." The organisers had managed to create a delightful atmosphere for enjoying music by using Viljandi's charm and beautiful nature.

### 2. *What model is used to continually inspire young people to become excited about traditional culture?*

The idea that began in 1991, to organise a children's camp and promote folk music through that, became a reality in 1997. Viljandi Folk Music Festival sent two folk music students to the Falun Ethno camp in Sweden, and the first similar folk music camp took place in Viljandi from July 20 to 24 of the same year, inspired by the experiences gathered in Falun. Today, Ethno Estonia is one of the largest and oldest ethno camps in the world. The two-week international camp involves 50–60 youngsters aged 18–30, half of them local. They learn traditional music of different countries from each other, by ear, with the help of top-level artistic leaders. The last four days of the



camp are spent at the Viljandi Folk Music Festival, where they give concerts and get to experience the rest of the festival programme in the audience.

In order to ensure the continuity of traditional music from generation to generation and to provide inspiration through living role models, the Noorte Moosekantide Selts (Young Musician's Society), initiated by the students, developed into the NGO Estonian Traditional Music Center. The founding parties included the Viljandi Town Government, Viljandi County Association of Local Authorities, Viljandi Culture College, and several individuals. In collaboration with the Viljandi Town Government, the ruins of a granary in the castle hills were reconstructed and turned into the headquarters of NGO Estonian Traditional Music Center, a concert hall, and an educational centre. With the support of many organisations and individuals, a miracle happened, and in 2008, the Pärimusmuusika Ait was opened. Today, it hosts workshops for all ages, and regular nationwide competitions for young solo instrumentalists and folk bands.

## Achievements and Results:

### 1. Involving youth and promoting traditional music

Viljandi Folk Music Festival, showcasing Estonian and international artists, has managed to engage young people year after year and therefore keep the audience youthful. The initiative, that started in the 1990s, has exceeded all expectations, because no one dared to imagine that so many folk bands could emerge among the youth. Many of them have transitioned into mainstream music, received music awards, and even performed at the Eurovision Song Contest.

### 2. Impact on the town of Viljandi and the community

All the mayors of Viljandi since 1993 have confirmed the powerful impact of the festival. The current mayor of Viljandi, Johan-Kristjan Konovalov says in 2024, that the Viljandi Folk Music Festival is the best-known cultural event in town and an integral part of its identity. "Many people in Estonia and abroad know Viljandi because of this festival. The folk music festival has an important economic impact on the town and county of Viljandi. Hotels and restaurants fill up with visitors during, before and after the festival. Although the load of visitors to Viljandi during the festival is substantial, the negative impacts on the community are minimal. This is due to the festival organisers, who have minimized the environmental impacts of the event and involved the community into the organisation."

### 3. Cultural capital and attracting youth

The festival, which attracts over 20,000 visitors to Viljandi every year, has made the town a well-known cultural capital both in Estonia and abroad. It brings young and creative people to the town, many of whom choose to make Viljandi their home, contributing to its lively community spirit.

### 4. Sustainability and environmental protection

The festival upholds principles of sustainability, such as environmental protection, care, openness, and tolerance. Recycled materials and zero-waste design practices are used to create decorations for stages and festival area. Most of the leftover materials are provided by companies who are trying to find more environmentally friendly



solutions for their production waste. Since 2018, the quantities of separately collected waste have decreased from 24 tons to 6 tons, which in 2023 meant 0.38 kg of waste per visit, instead of the previous 1.31 kg. Mixed municipal waste, biodegradable waste, cardboard and paper packaging, film, mixed plastics, plastic packaging, glass, deposit packaging, oil, and cigarette butts are separately collected.

#### 5. Environmentally friendly solutions

The festival provides free tap water, avoids using plastic bottles and offers food in reusable dishes. Visitors can use their own dishes and wash them at the dishwashing stations. Generators run on biofuel, and food oil residue is repurposed for fuel production.

### Lessons Learned and Advice:

**Involve the youth:** festival organisers are convinced that the interest and participation of young people is required to keep the folk music viable. For that reason, they have tried to make the festival as inspiring and appealing as possible for young musicians and audiences. The energy and genuine joy of the youth infect everyone and therefore attract older audiences as well.

**Involve the locals:** the festival organisers have understood the importance of local people to the success and ambience of the festival, and has therefore always sought their approval and cared for their well-being. In order to balance the impact of big crowds, the festival has brought some concert venues to the old town. Townspeople can enjoy performances at the Green Stage and the Village Musicians' Stage, free of charge. The gesture has been warmly embraced by the locals, who are pleased to be included and valued.

### Recognitions and Additional References

The President of the Republic of Estonia, Alar Karis, said at the opening of the festival in 2023: “The Viljandi Folk Music Festival is a significant force in our cultural landscape. Its existence and growth has given powerful momentum to our folk movement. It’s clear that without “Viljandi Folk”, our cultural heritage would not resonate as deeply within the hearts and lives of our people. It is crucial for Estonia and Estonians to remain connected to our roots and the legacies and our past generations – our story. This gives our small nation remarkable strength to weather any storm. It remains our secret backup and hidden treasury.”

In 1996, Ando Kiviberg, the head of the festival, was awarded the Annual Award of the Folk Culture Foundation of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia and the Culture Award of the Town of Viljandi for organising the Viljandi Folk Music Festival.

In 1998, the Annual Award of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia was awarded to the Noorte Moosekantide Selts (Young Musician’s Society). The head of the festival was named the Person of the Year of Viljandi and received the town’s Sign of Honour.



In 2001, the head of the festival, Ando Kiviberg, was awarded the Order of the White Star, Fifth Class.

In 2003, the organising team of Viljandi Folk Music Festival was awarded the Estonian State Cultural Award. The Culture Award of the town of Viljandi was awarded to the festival's programme manager, Piret Aus. Viljandi Folk Music Festival was named the most successful tourist attraction in Southern Estonia.

In 2005, the Estonian Traditional Music Centre was awarded the title of "Kultuurivedur" ("Culture Locomotive") by the readers of Postimees.

In 2008, the Estonian Traditional Music Centre was awarded the Annual Award of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia.

In 2009, the Annual Prize of the Folk Culture Foundation of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia was awarded to the August Pulst School of the Estonian Traditional Music Centre for teaching and promoting traditional music.

In 2021, the Estonian Folklore Council awarded the annual folk culture prize "Teotugi" to Tarmo Noormaa, the director of the Estonian Traditional Music Centre.

In 2023, the grand award of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia in the folk culture field was awarded to the Estonian Folk Music Centre for the 30 years of organising the Viljandi Folk Music Festival and for valuing and preserving the Estonian musical mother tongue for future generations. The Recognition Award of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia in the music field was awarded to the long-time organisers of the Viljandi Folk Music Festival for their consistent professional organisational work and artistic programme: Ando Kiviberg, Tarmo Noormaa, Anu Rannu, and Peedu Põld.



