

MUSICAL TRADITIONS

CARRY IT ON

By Stewart Hendrickson

Go to any folk music concert now, and what do you see? A sea of grey-haired old folkies, myself included. This is the music we grew up with in the late 1950s, '60s and even early '70s.

Back then we were young, unmarried, and had lots of time to hang out in coffeehouses and other folk venues. There was not much else to do – no computers or iPods, and TV wasn't that interesting. In the dorm rooms at college there were always guitars and you could always get a few friends together for a 'hoot.' We'd even take our songs and guitars out on the barricades to protest the war and other injustices.

Now in our graying years we don't go out as often and certainly not as late as we used to. It's more relaxing to stay at home, watch TV or a DVD, sit at the computer, maybe even listen to a CD or read a book and get to bed early.

Those of us who do like live music, perhaps even produce shows or enjoy performing, wonder "where have all the audiences gone?". The young people are not there; they have their own music, which we don't much understand. And they're not inclined to hang out with us old folks and our old music, whatever that is. And many of *us* are not there. That's where the audiences have gone.

At Seattle Song Circle's Rainy Camp recently we mourned the old stalwarts of our folk music scene who had passed away the previous year, and wondered who would carry on the folk music when we passed on. We were quite aware that we are an aging group of people.

We need to get more young people involved and turned on to our music to "carry on the tradition." But how can we do this? Many of our kids who grew up in the '70s had turned to rock music, the music of their generation. A few have since rediscovered the folk music of their parents, but not enough to carry it on.

Many of the young people who grew up in the '80s and '90s have no idea what folk music is. How many know about Woody and Pete, or have even heard the song "This Land Is Your Land"? They certainly don't learn this in the schools where arts programs are first to be cut to balance the budgets.

An exception to this is the folk-rock acoustic group "The Mammals" (myspace.com/themammalsband). They represent the 2nd or 3rd generation of some of our well-known folk singers – Tao Rodriguez-Seeger, grandson of Pete Seeger; Ruth Unger, daughter of Jay Unger and Molly Mason; and others. I first heard them at Folklife a few years ago when they shared the stage with Jay and Molly for the Benefit Concert. They were well received, but afterwards I heard some old folkies grouching that they "just weren't traditional."

Well no, they weren't traditional, but they did have *respect* for the tradition. They just put it in their own style and sound. They took the old songs and tunes and made them their own, with respect and knowledge of what went before. I enjoyed it. But it *was* different.

If the tradition is to be carried on, it should also grow and be allowed to change. Isn't that the history of folk music through the years, the "folk process"? If the tradition stays static it will turn into a museum piece.

Here are some other examples. Eliza Carthy (myspace.com/elizacarthy), the daughter of Martin Carthy and Norma Waterson, grew up immersed in the world of English traditional music. But in her 19-year music career "she has become one of the most dazzling and recognized folk musicians of a generation. She has revitalized and made folk music relevant to new

audiences and has captured the most hardened of dissenters with intelligent, charismatic and boundary-crossing performance.” Some of her music is ‘far out,’ but when she sings a traditional song it is exciting to hear her new take on it and at the same time her respect for the tradition. She also looks and sounds more and more like her mother, except for her ever-changing hair colors and styles, and her body piercing.

The Tallboys (thetallboys.com), a local string band of four young people have made old-time music a hot item here in Seattle. They run a monthly square dance at The Tractor Tavern and a weekly old-time jam at Conor Byrne Pub. They are very popular with the younger crowd. Did you ever think square dancing would be hip?

The Infamous Stringdusters (myspace.com/stringdusters) are the latest and hottest group of young people to hit the national bluegrass music scene. A local bluegrass/old-time string band is The Loose Digits (myspace.com/theloosedigits). Five young people who all live in the Phinney Ridge neighborhood, they play some very tight acoustic music. They will be disbanding to go their separate ways this summer, so catch them while they’re still here.

Pint and Dale (pintndale.com), while not exactly young any more, have taken the traditional maritime music and put their own upbeat style into it. They certainly attract a younger group of people and at the same time maintain an integrity and respect for the tradition that we all enjoy. Crookshank (cdbaby.com/cd/crookshank), a local folk-rock band of older musicians steeped in the tradition, has done the same thing with the traditional music of Europe, the British Isles and beyond.

We need to encourage our young people and bring them into our musical groups. We can teach them about the tradition and they can grow the tradition, and bring more young people into it. Maybe then we will find our audiences.

Yes, things will change, that is inevitable. But hopefully the changes will be gradual, not radical, and the tradition will be passed on. If this doesn’t happen, the tradition may be lost by the present young generation. Then eventually, the following generation may rediscover our old traditions, but much may be lost in the intervening years.

We need to invite the younger generation to join us and have a role in growing the tradition. We should be tolerant and willing to grow with them. We should include them in leadership roles and be receptive to their new ideas. We can guide them and tell them about the traditions. We can learn from each other. In the end it will be up to them to “carry it on.”

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