

MUSICAL TRADITIONS

FOLK MUSIC IN SEATTLE

By Stewart Hendrickson

The folk revival of the late '50s and '60s had its Seattle beginnings in 1953. Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger had sung at union halls and other venues here in the '40s. Around 1950 Walt Robertson, a young folksinger who grew up on Bainbridge Island, and fresh out of Haverford College, began singing around the University District. A few years later he had his own show, *The Wanderer*, on KING TV. Influenced by Walt and some nationally-known folksingers such as Burl Ives and Pete Seeger, a few university students became seriously interested in folk music.

In 1953 Ken Prichard, Bob Clark, Walt Robertson, Ric Higlin, Janice Tennant, Dick Landberg, Don Firth and several others decided that they needed a folklore society, an organization charged with collecting and preserving the folk music and folklore of this area before it disappeared. They considered several names, including *The Washington State Folklore Society* (there might already be such a society), *The Seattle Folklore Society* (too geographically limited), before they decided on the grandiose name, *The Pacific Northwest Folklore Society*.

Although the main purpose of the Society was academic, to collect and preserve folk material, they also presented concerts, workshops, and even street festivals in cooperation with *The East 42nd Street Arts Association*, an organization made up of many of the same people. Some of the concerts featured Walt Robertson, Northwest Indian dances by Bill Holm and his wife, Marty, programs by the *Scandia Folk Dance Club* organized by Gordon Tracie, and *Dance Circle*, a local group interested in Balkan Dancing.

The Society came to an abrupt end about 1955, after Pete Seeger came to give a concert. This was at the height of the anti-Communist McCarthy era, and anyone involved in folk music was suspect of having Communist leanings if not outright membership (Pete Seeger was black-listed by the HUAC). The membership dropped almost to zero overnight as students and teachers were worried about their careers. The Society, however, still had some presence, because a concert in 1962 at Seattle University sponsored by a student United Nations Association was cosponsored by the *Pacific Northwest Folklore Society*.

In 1966 the *Seattle Folklore Society* was founded by John Ullman, Phil and Vivian Williams, and several others. This was a different group of people, more interested in source musicians, those who got their music through the oral tradition, than in the home-grown folk revival singers of Seattle who learned their songs from books and recordings.

A few years later the *Seattle Song Circle* formed. This group was made up of some of the former members of the *Pacific Northwest Folklore Society* and some younger folk singers. They first got together at the early *Northwest Folklife Festivals*, singing in stairwells and other acoustic spots at the Seattle Center. They were influenced by members of the Vancouver, B.C. Song Circle who suggested that they form a similar group in Seattle.

Over the intervening years many of these older Seattle folk singers dropped out of the *Seattle Song Circle* and went their different ways. And the *Seattle Folklore Society* became more a concert-producing organization for mostly out-of-town singer songwriters. More recently a few local singer songwriters have performed at their concerts, but mostly it has been musicians from outside the area, who can bring the largest audiences to their concerts.

After I came to Seattle from Minnesota about twelve years ago, I became involved with the *Seattle Song Circle* and met some of these older Seattle folksingers. I also joined *Victory*

Music and met many local musicians as I did sound for weekly *Victory Music* concerts at the Youth Hostel near Pike Place Market (1998-99), and then helped organize an open mic and ran a monthly concert series at Valdi's Ballard Bistro on Ballard Ave (2000-2001).

As I become acquainted with more local musicians I am increasingly impressed with the level of talent we have here. *Victory Music* open mics give these musicians a chance to be heard, and also allow new talent to develop. And live music is now heard more in local coffee houses, pubs and other venues.

But there has also been big change in the type of music heard here. Those local folksingers in the early '50s sang mostly the traditional songs that had come from Europe and developed in rural America. In the *folk craze* of the '60s folk music became more of a commercial product with traditional songs rearranged and rewritten for a popular audience and new songs written in an urban setting and for anti-war protest. And in recent years the singer-songwriter era has blurred the line between pop and folk music.

About a year and a half ago I became involved with the *Haller Lake Community Club* and its Arts Council. After being invited to do several gigs for them, how could I refuse to join the Arts Council? I did so because it was a good opportunity to contribute and to bring our talented local musicians and the community together for the benefit of all. As chair of the performing arts I have put together a diverse series of monthly concerts featuring local artists. I hope to see this develop into a major focus for the local music community.

As my musical interests have grown, I have also become more interested in the traditional music of the Pacific Northwest. I have discovered that we have a rich folklore in our region that goes back to the native Americans who were the original inhabitants here, and forward to those folksingers of the early and mid 20th century and people who are even now writing songs about our history, people and environment.

Because this folklore and these folk songs are in danger of disappearing and no other group seemed interested in preserving and growing the tradition, I decided to revive the *Pacific Northwest Folklore Society*. With Bob Nelson and Don Firth, two original members, we recently put together a web site, pnwfolklore.org. Last spring I produced a house concert for Bob, and this fall a reunion concert for Bob and Don, all under the banner of this old Seattle society. We plan to do more in the future.

I have also met with the Traditional and Ethnic Music Committee of the *Seattle Folklore Society*, and together we would like to preserve and share our folkloric heritage. I do not view traditional music as a museum piece from the past, but rather something continuously evolving. The term I like to use is *in-the-tradition*, which means it might sound like a traditional song, but it was written only recently.

In an era where music is considered a commodity to be purchased, I would like to make music something that we create for ourselves and we do in close association with other musicians. Homemade music and live local music is the best in my opinion.

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