

MUSICAL TRADITIONS

MEMORIES OF STAN

By Stewart Hendrickson

After breakfast on Sunday morning, November 2nd, I got a call from Bob Nelson saying that our friend Stan James had died. He was found dead in his cabin near Granite Falls on Saturday, and most likely had died of a heart attack the previous day, Halloween Friday. That kind of news is always a shock, and it takes a while for the reality to sink in.

A Seattle folksinger from the early 1950s, Stan was one of the mainstays of folk music here. He was one of a group of young folksingers who sang at the UN Pavilion during the 1962 Seattle World's Fair. In 1962 he bought "The Place Next Door," a coffeehouse in the Wallingford District, redecorated it and renamed it "The Corroborree." It was one of the best coffeehouse folk venues in Seattle at that time.

Stan was a ship builder. He was involved in some of the early restoration of the Wawona, and lead many chantey sings at the NW Seaport on South Lake Union. He was also the second president of the Seattle Folklore Society, and was active in the Seattle Song Circle.

Rather than make this an obituary, I would like to reminisce about my association with Stan. You can read more about Stan's life and involvement in folk music in Percy Hilo's "Folking Around" column of August, 2006 (available in the Victory Review Archives on the Victory Music web site, victorymusic.org). There is also a page on Stan with pictures and audio recordings on the Pacific Northwest Folklore Society web site, pnwfolklore.org.

I don't remember exactly when I first met Stan. It may have been seven or eight years ago, but I remember very distinctly the occasion. It was at a Seattle Song Circle on a Sunday evening at Bruce Baker's home. I recall exactly where we were sitting, and that he was someone I had never seen before. He looked like an old sea salt with a neatly trimmed beard, very distinguished.

When his turn came, he removed his guitar from its case and began his song, "Peter Street" ("Oh, you New York gals, Can't you dance the polka?"). He sang like he was the young sailor telling the story of how he met his fate. And he accompanied himself on guitar with a sort of Calypso beat that greatly enhanced the song. I was very impressed! I thought to myself, "who is this guy?"

A short time later, I met Stan at a Chantey Sing on board the Wawona. We talked a bit, and then with great pride he showed me the deck cabin where he had done some early restoration. As I recall, the interior was pine, but he had applied a faux finish to make it look like mahogany. And he explained in great detail how he had mixed the stain from a variety of different materials to get just the right appearance.

After that I began to see Stan at various 'hoots', song circles and Rainy Camps. He always met me with a big smile and an easy-going conviviality. He would tell me about things he had done and things he was planning to do. And he was always able to surprise me with the most obscure, funny and interesting songs that he sang.

Later I got a call from his ex-wife Jan inviting Stan and I to sing at the retirement home on Vashon Island where she worked. I picked him up at his old house in the Wallingford neighborhood of Seattle where he had lived for many years. It was a small house at the back of a large lot. I knew right away that it must be Stan's house because of a half dozen derelict cars in the driveway and various pieces of machinery and other artifacts in the front yard.

We had a great time singing at the retirement home. It's a very relaxed atmosphere, they love anything you sing, mistakes are unimportant, and you can sing the same song again and they think it's something new. Stan related very well with the folks there in his 'stage patter' and they loved him. Afterwards we had a nice dinner together at a restaurant on the island.

Stan, my wife, and I played at the retirement home several other times, and it was always a very enjoyable thing to do. During the drive from Seattle, waiting for the ferry, and at dinner afterwards, Stan would tell us stories about his life and about the long checkered history of the Wawona. Stan was a great story teller.

Stan was often at our house for the occasional house concert and jams. I remember once that he came late, at the intermission, to a concert (one never knew when Stan would arrive). When we asked him why he was so late, he said that his car was having transmission problems and he had to drive it all the way from his boat shop in Everett down to Seattle in first gear. That was Stan!

Then there was the time last year that I got a last minute call to do a gig at an Irish bar in Everett on St. Patrick's day. Much against my better judgment I said I would come with a friend. I called Stan and he was game to come. When we arrived at the bar it was jammed full of not-very-sober people and the noise level was so high you could hardly talk to the person next to you. We finally got the manager's attention and were given a table, some Guinness and dinner before our gig began.

After that we attempted a couple songs, but realizing no one could hear us or even paid any attention, I suggested we leave. So we quietly packed up our instruments and snuck out the back door. Never again will I play at an Irish bar on St. Patrick's Day! I learned a good lesson then.

The last time I saw Stan was about two weeks before he died. He came to our house for a house concert (he was late again), a potluck dinner and a jam afterwards. He seemed in good spirits at the jam. He sang several unique songs and told some stories, some true and some plainly bogus. But when he left, he looked tired and appeared to me older than his 73 years. I guess that was a sign.

As I said at the beginning, after the death of a good friend the reality takes a while to sink in. Against all rationality, I half expect to see Stan coming through our door again with a big smile on his face, saying "you won't believe this, but I had the most extraordinary experience just a few weeks ago..." The memories will remain for a long time.

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