

MUSICAL TRADITIONS

WANT TO PRODUCE A CONCERT?

By Stewart Hendrickson

After producing two different concerts on successive nights or three in one week, I am asking myself, why? And how did I get into this? Those are very good questions. I need to go back to the beginning to answer the how and whys.

I came to Seattle from Minnesota in 1996 and joined Victory Music (VM). Soon after that VM opened a new weekly concert venue at the Youth Hostel at the south end of Pike Place Market.

In preparation Mark Iler, a professional sound engineer and VM volunteer, did a two-day workshop on sound reinforcement. That seemed like an interesting thing to learn, so I signed up and soon found myself volunteering for sound at that venue. Oftentimes I was the MC in addition to sound man, and a few times even did the door when a volunteer didn't show up.

It was a good education and an opportunity to meet many local musicians. However, it wasn't a good venue, and folded after a year. But I was probably bitten by the music bug, and wanted to continue as a volunteer for VM.

VM wanted an open mic in the north Seattle area, and I scouted out a possible venue in Ballard, the old Julia's restaurant, then Valdi's Ballard Bistro on Ballard Ave. I put the owners in contact with VM and we soon had an agreement for weekly open mics and monthly concerts.

VM board member Heidi Muller took charge of the venue and I helped out. After about six months Heidi decided to move back east and asked me if I would like to take over. Gulp! "I guess so," I said, not knowing exactly what was involved. She told me I would be booking and producing the monthly concerts and would work with a couple other volunteers running the open mic.

I asked her if I should have a committee to work with on concert bookings. She said, "no, you should do that yourself, the way you want to." She gave me a detailed check list of things to do at various times before the concerts. In retrospect, that was the best advice I could have had.

I soon learned that it wasn't that hard to do since I had already met many local musicians. I had already learned some of the ins and outs of producing concerts, and continued to learn as I went.

I had produced about six concerts and had four or five more booked when suddenly VM dropped the venue. The restaurant was losing money and wanted to impose a minimum food charge on everyone including the musicians. That was an absolute "No!" for VM. It was difficult to cancel already-booked musicians, but they were understanding. However, that's one thing I don't want to do again.

A few years later I produced my first CD for Paddy Graber, an Irish traditional singer from Vancouver, B.C. To promote his CD I produced a concert for the Seattle Folklore Society. To do that I had to work through the Concert Committee. That was frustrating because I already knew about concert production and promotion, but had to work under their rigid guidelines. Very different from my experience with VM where I was given full control and responsibility.

And a few years after that I produced a second concert for the Seattle Folklore Society. This was to promote my second CD "Songs of the Pacific Northwest," which grew out of a workshop with the Seattle Song Circle at Rainy Camp. This was not done through the Concert Committee, so I had a little more freedom.

A couple of years ago I was asked to serve on the Haller Lake Arts Council and produce their monthly concerts. Although this involved more work, I agreed because I knew how to do it and had the freedom to do it the way I wanted. There were only two other people to work with, Desiree and Larry Smith, and as long as they were happy I had the same sort of freedom that I had with VM.

Recently I revived the 55-year-old Pacific Northwest Folklore Society (pnwfolklore.org) to preserve and promote the more traditional folk music of our region, because no one else was doing that. So I have added another unpaid concert production activity with our new monthly Coffeehouse Concerts. And I do the occasional house concert when I find a musician that I like in need of a venue.

That's the "how," the easy part of my story. The "why" is more difficult to understand. Since I'm retired, I tell people that it keeps me out of the bars and other vices. But that's not entirely true. I actually have spent more time in bars playing my music than I would have ever done otherwise.

I guess I do this for several reasons. First, I get to meet some great musicians, and I hope I am doing them a service in the process. And in doing this my own way with the freedom I have, I can choose the music and musicians I really enjoy. However, I don't want to be too narrow in my choices, and I enjoy exploring new areas of music.

Secondly, I feel a need to give what I can back to the music community. I am fortunate to have a good retirement and can be happily unemployed. And this is much better than doing nothing. I enjoy the contact and friendship I have with a diverse group of people.

And finally, those two- and three-concert weeks don't occur very often. In the meantime I forget about all the work involved and after a few weeks I am foolish enough to do it again. Like any masochistic behavior, it feels so good when it's over.

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