

MUSICAL TRADITIONS

Musicians, Venues, Audience

By Stewart Hendrickson

The concert starts at 7 pm. You've just finished the sound check at 6:25, the musicians have retired to the "green room," and you have a little time to relax before the audience, hopefully, begins to arrive. Yes, "hopefully" is the key word. At 6:45 the first couple of people arrive to an empty house. They have their choice of seats. And very slowly a few more people begin to arrive. This is the most trying time for any concert producer.

How many people will show up? You did your best to promote the concert, but could you have done more? What *could* you have done more? What are the musicians going to think if they come out to a mostly empty hall? And where are all those people you thought were coming?

At 6:55 some more people show up. They slowly start to trickle in. At 7:05 you decide to wait five more minuets as a few more people might come. Finally at 7:10 you introduce the musicians. That's a fashionably late time to start, and at least you have a not embarrassingly small audience. It would have been nice to have more, but at least you will have something to pay the musicians.

Does this sound familiar? As a concert producer it's all too familiar to me.

A musician friend who is a regular Pike Place Market busker and full-time musician recently had a coffeehouse gig. When the gig began, he outnumbered the audience. He gave his concert to only the sound man, but later refused the \$20 offered by the sound man from his own pocket. My friend could have easily earned \$50 for an hour's busking in the Market, and even sold a few CDs. Needless to say he was quite discouraged and probably won't try that again soon.

Musicians like to perform. They may even be addicted to performing. And if they're full-time musicians their livelihood depends on it. Fortunately there are more venues around Seattle that are available for live music, and more musicians performing. These range from coffeehouses, pubs and restaurants, open mics, to various concert venues run by community organizations and music societies. But this growth in venues and performers has not been matched by a growth in audiences.

So what is the solution to this problem? If anyone knows, please tell me. I don't know, but I have a few ideas that might be worth considering.

One solution already used here, is to invite only well-known musicians from out of town, accompanied by a lot of hype about how good they are. With sufficient publicity, people will come because they think that anyone from out of town must be good. Certainly better than any local musicians, if in fact they even know of any. But that doesn't solve our problem of connecting local musicians with good audiences. And often, the out-of-town musician is not as good as our local talent.

Another solution is to only book unique acts, ethnic music and types of music not often heard by the general public. This often works, particularly if accompanied by good promotion and perhaps radio interviews, so the public's interest is aroused and the ethnic communities come to hear their own music. But that doesn't address the majority of local musicians who wish to be heard.

A good part of the problem is that people's lives are stressed from working long hours, coordinating their kids' many activities, and listening to the depressing news of our poor

economy and ridiculous political campaigns, that they have no energy or desire to go out in the evening rather than relax at home with their TV or computer.

Going out for an evening of live music should be an enjoyable, low-stress diversion. It should involve a sense of community – getting together with friends and neighbors, enjoying some food and drink, and maybe even joining in with the music.

Creating a sense of community, I think, is a way to bring people and live music together. In rural communities before the time of radio, TV, and now computers, people would gather on a Saturday night at the community hall or even in someone's kitchen (the largest room in an old farmhouse) to sing, play music, dance and tell stories. There wasn't much else going on.

So here's an idea. Let's create a sense of community again. The neighborhood coffeehouse should open up to the community on a Friday or Saturday evening, or Sunday afternoon with music and conversation (no laptops). If people can walk or drive a short distance they may be enticed out of their homes to meet other people and listen to some local musicians or even join in the music.

Likewise, concert venues should concentrate on their local neighborhoods. People don't want to drive all the way across town in Seattle traffic to a place they don't know. Promoters should make an effort to acquaint the neighbors with great music that is only a walk or short drive away. And people should be aware that there is music by local musicians that they'll never hear on commercial radio, TV, or at those mega-hall over-priced rock concerts. And it's a lot better, for a lot less money.

Here are some examples of what I'm involved in now.

Our revived Pacific Northwest Folklore Society (pnwfolklore.org) has begun a series of 2nd Friday coffeehouse concerts at Kaffe Shachor (kaffeshachor.com, formerly the Greenlake Espresso). On Friday, May 9th we will feature Morgan & Graves and Chris Roe. These concerts will feature two or three acts by local musicians mainly in the traditional genre. This music, both traditional and newer in-the-tradition, representing the roots of folk music, is disappearing under the onslaught of pop-folk-lite. We hope to attract many neighbors in the residential community west of Greenlake to Kaffe Shachor.

The PNWFS sponsors occasional house concerts. In the past we hosted NW Balladeer Bob Nelson; Jed Marum, in-the-tradition singer-songwriter from Dallas, Texas; the internationally-known New Hampshire folklorist and musician Jeff Warner; and the Van Norstrand Brothers with their creative blend of Celtic, Scandinavian and Appalachian music, co-sponsored by the Seattle Folklore Society committee on ethnic and traditional music. Some of these concerts concluded with a potluck supper followed by an open jam.

On Saturday May 3 PNWFS will present Reggie Miles in a house concert in the Broadview neighborhood (NW Seattle). Reggie is a regular Pike Place Market busker, singer, songwriter, storyteller, slide guitarist... and sawplayer. But he is not widely known outside the Market. He fuses early blues, ragtime, and folk with original songs to create humor, stories, fantasy and social comment. And he plays on vintage and handmade instruments ranging from a hand-built resonator slide guitar ("nobro") to harmonica to musical saw. A one-of-a-kind, unconventional musician, he deserves to be better known in the community.

Bob Nelson will produce for PNWFS and the Everett City Library a series of Sunday afternoon concerts in the Library auditorium on May 4 (Bob Nelson & Reggie Miles), June 1 (Flip Breskin & Zeke Hoskin), July 13 (yours truly and my wife Betty), July 20 (Mike Nelson & Chris Roe), and August 2 (Nancy Quense & Jerry Middaugh). They will revive a tradition of community folk music concerts in the Library of several decades ago. Libraries are good centers

for community events like this as they already attract a good cross section of the community. It would be nice if our newly-remodeled Seattle branch libraries could host such events.

With the Haller Lake Arts Council I will produce the final concert for the season on May 10 – Ken Waldman, Alaska's Fiddling Poet. Ken has drawn on his 20 years in Alaska to produce poems, stories and fiddle tunes that combine into a performance uniquely his own. A traveling minstrel, "he brings his instruments, a few fellow musicians, and his poems about surviving a plane crash, watching grizzlies feed in a garbage dump, and other adventures in the forty-ninth state." Although Ken lived in Seattle before his move to Alaska and the beginning of his career as an itinerant musician, he needs to be re-discovered here. This concert is a unique, not-to-be-missed event.

And finally, Victory Music open mics have created a strong community of local musicians and provided a welcoming place to perform and grow performing skills. They are well attended by musicians, but we need to encourage more listeners to come, discover and enjoy our local musical talent.

Stewart Hendrickson is Chemistry Professor Emeritus – St. Olaf College, Research Professor Emeritus – University of Washington, and in his new career, an unemployed folk musician (voice, fiddle, guitar; <http://stewarthendrickson.com>).