

MUSICAL TRADITIONS

Hootenannies in Seattle

By Stewart Hendrickson

Hootenanny was a term you used if you couldn't think of the right word, like *thingamabob*, *gizmo* or *whatchamacallit*. Its use to describe a folk music jam originated in Seattle.

Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie came to Seattle in 1941. In *The Incomplete Folksinger* (Seeger, Pete; *The Incomplete Folksinger*; Edited by Jo Metcalf Schwartz; University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1992; p. 327) Pete tells how he encountered his first *hootenanny*:

“In the summer of 1941 Woody Guthrie and myself, calling ourselves the Almanac Singers, toured Seattle, Washington and met some of the good people of the Washington Commonwealth Federation, the New Deal political club headed by Hugh DeLacy. They arranged for us to sing for trade unions in the Puget Sound area, and then proudly invited us to their next *hootenanny*. It was the first time we had heard the term. It seems they had a vote to decide what they would call their monthly fund-raising parties. *Hootenanny* won out by a nose over ‘wingding’.”

“The Seattle *hootenannies* were real community affairs. One family would bring a whole pot of some dish like crab gumbo. Others would bring cakes, salads. A drama group performed topical skits, a good 16-mm film might be shown, and there would be dancing, swing and folk, for those of sound limb. And, of course, there would be singing.”

Pete then took the term back to New York. “Woody and I returned to New York, where we rejoined the other Almanac Singers, and lived in a big house, pooling all our income. We ran Saturday afternoon rent parties, and without a second's thought started calling them *hootenannies*, after the example of our west-coast friends. Seventy-five to one hundred Gothamites would pay 35 cents each to listen to an afternoon of varied folk songs, topical songs, and union songs, not only from the Almanacs but from Huddie Ledbetter, Josh White, the Mechau family, and many many others—including members of the audience.”

Hoots became a staple of the Pacific Northwest Folklore Society in the early '50s. Don Firth describes them: “Most of the *hoots* I attended in the Fifties and Sixties were held in somebody's private home, but they were basically open—come one, come all, sing or just listen. Solo singing, group songs, whatever the people who came wanted to do. Some of them were held in halls of one sort or another and were more like informal, free-for-all concerts. They were mostly unstructured, with no formal program.”

Later in the '60s the term *hootenanny* was used for commercial performances. Don Firth recalls, “In summer of 1963, a Los Angeles promoter came to Seattle, recruited a bunch of local folksingers, and started ‘The Seattle Center Hootenanny’ series modeled after ‘ABC Hootenanny.’ The whole idea was to promote the new Seattle Center and draw people in. They were held every Wednesday evening throughout the summer, ran for about two hours, drew huge audiences, and some of them were televised. I sang in many of these, as did most of Seattle's folksingers.”

Despite the commercialization of *hootenannies* into staged productions, some original-type *hoots* still take place around Seattle. These are usually informal gatherings in private homes. There is no structure or planning involved. People just get together with musical instruments, food and drinks.

After a while someone starts a song, others may join in if they know the words or back up the singer with instruments if that seems appropriate, or just listen. Someone else may follow with a song on a similar theme. There is no order as to who follows who, it is just random. A good host will try to prevent one person from dominating and encourage everyone to participate. Some interesting threads develop as someone may say, “that reminds me of another song.”

It’s not always just songs, but instrumentalists may play tunes. Sometimes someone may sing unaccompanied while others just listen. Conversation may also take place, stories may be told and humor exchanged (what the Irish call *craic*). Not all the participants are musicians, some may be there just to listen. But the essence of a *hoot* is community and spontaneity.

For more about early folk music in Seattle visit the Pacific Northwest Folklore Society web pages at pnwfolklore.org.

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>).