

## MAKING MUSIC CREATES CULTURAL COMMUNITY

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My life revolves around music. I grew up with it in my family, and it followed me all through college and beyond. Even though it's always been the thread that's held me together, I never expected to make a career out of it. But now I find that music has woven itself into my life in a way that's brought all my different life paths together. Teaching music to elementary school children, performing with several groups, writing about music, and hosting a locally-produced WUFT folk music radio program--these are all part of what I now see as my major mission—using music as a tool of individual expression while creating a sense of community and healing. This realization comes into its sharpest focus during my ongoing tenure as musician in residence and music coordinator for Shands Arts in Medicine.

Working as a musician in a hospital setting, I try to remind people—patients, staff, visitors, everyone—that music is a participatory activity, not just something to watch on MTV or the internet. Singing songs together creates community, whether it's at the bedside in a room with two people, or at a concert with thousands of people. Pete Seeger knows this better than anybody. He literally set the stage for the folk revival of the sixties by inviting, involving and including the audience in the performance. He removed the barrier between performer and audience by performing WITH the audience rather than FOR them. He also gave people permission to sing other people's songs and make them their own, like he does, rather than trying to pretend to be a cowboy or a coal miner, or, in today's world, a supermodel or teenage diva.

His grandson, Tao Rodriguez-Seeger, who has his own band, the Mammals, says that Pete believes “and always has—that through the communal experience of music, people and the world will be made better.”

It's always a surprise to me to see what songs can do in various settings. In the hospital, I let the patient set the tone, make a request, and choose whether they want to join in the singing or just be sung to. Ninety percent of the time they join in, even if they are bedridden, barely able to move or speak. Once a lady who had been in a coma for two days started responding to her favorite hymn, first by moving her feet under the sheet, then mouthing the words. On the Bone Marrow Transplant Unit, patients and their families sing together in the hall, led by a guitar, songs ranging from "Row Your Boat" to "Lean on Me."

Pete Seeger knows that children's songs are always great for a singalong. In a recent performance at Carnegie Hall, he had the whole audience singing "Skip to my Lou."

I had a chance to interview Arlo Guthrie a few years ago, and asked him to describe his thoughts about folk music and community.

"I think a lot of people have the idea that folk music is a bunch of people sitting around playing traditional instruments and singing whaling songs or "John Henry" or something. Well, that's certainly a big part of what folk music is all about," he conceded. "But folk music is an inclusive term. It includes blues and bluegrass, and country music and rock'n'roll, even some classical tunes. It's the music that we as a culture adopt and make our own."

Using this definition of folk music, then along with standards like "Blowin' in the Wind" and "This Land is Your Land", we surely have to include Beatle songs, Elvis, and classic rhythm & blues. How many people can hear the opening guitar riff to the Temptations' "My Girl" and not start singing "I've got sunshine...on a cloudy day"? Immediately, a community is created and people smile as they remember shared experiences.

Even before the days of the internet, music had an amazing ability to travel all over the world. Some individual songs actually leap across cultural boundaries and become adopted by

not just one, but many cultures. At a hotel lobby in Amsterdam, I heard two beginning guitarists playing "House of the Rising Sun"-- one of the first songs every guitar player of my generation learned to play.

Arlo talked about performing in Berlin with Pete Seeger at a celebration after the Wall came down. The most incredible part of the concert, he said, was when Seeger started playing the Elvis Presley hit, "Can't Help Falling in Love."

"It was amazing--thousands of people swaying, drinking great German beer, and singing '... but I can't help falling in love with you.'"

Christine Alicot is a classically-trained flute player from France who has made her home in Gainesville for over ten years after falling in love with the local music scene. "There's looseness in the American music that's very attractive to me--it's not stiff, and it's more rhythmic, more physical." She especially enjoys the intimacy and connection of playing with other people. Christine entered the local folk music scene in Gainesville by way of the Wednesday night pickin'--a loose conglomeration of strummers and singers that gathers at someone's house every week to play bluegrass, swing, country, traditional, original and popular folk music. Though they now rotate among different houses every week, these Wednesday night gatherings have been going on since their inception nearly thirty years ago!

The original sessions were held at the Baldwin Brothers' abode, a cracker farmhouse on the outskirts of Melrose. Groups of pickers would gather on the front porch, in the pasture, out by the barn, and inside the house. There was a coffeepot, and you could sweeten your coffee with honey fresh from the hive. Originally, the music was traditional with an emphasis on fiddle tunes. Now each home lends its own unique flavor to the mix.

Mike Boulware, vintage guitar collector and member of several north Florida bands, sees

the acoustic music movement as one sign of the search for community in today's world. "Lots of groups have moved back to the acoustic sound, partly because it offers a more intimate venue. You also see kids tracing the evolution of new bands back to the folk-rock movement of the seventies, where bands like the Byrds and Buffalo Springfield combined electric and acoustic instruments with great vocal harmonies.

"Nowadays kids have the opportunity to cross boundaries in ways we never did, so their tastes are more eclectic."

In searching for music that lends itself to the communal experience more easily than much of today's commercial pop, many young people turn to rock songs by the Beatles, folk songs by Peter, Paul and Mary, and bluegrass tunes that can be shared at instrumental jams. "The bluegrass and folk festivals seem to be the Woodstock for the new generation," notes one North Floridian performer, adding that "some festivals, like the Suwannee Springfest, are a sea of tie-dye!"

Once considered a "youngster" and now fast becoming one of the "elders" of the folk movement, national recording artist John McCutcheon is of the opinion that the folk scene has never been healthier. "Everybody might not be selling a million records, but there are more people picking up banjos and guitars, sitting around singing with their friends, and writing songs at their kitchen table," he reports. "And that's what folk music is really about—community."

In our culturally diverse statewide community, the musical boundaries are few, and the options are many. We have the longest continuously running folk festival in the country, every Memorial Day weekend at White Springs, and we have the Friends of Florida Folk ([www.foff.org](http://www.foff.org)) which allows us to exchange information and ideas with fellow folkies

throughout the state. Weekly jam sessions, open mic nights, radio programs, upcoming concerts and live music venues—we've got it all.

Whether you're rooted in the traditional, utterly eclectic, or somewhere in between, Florida is a great place to enjoy and participate in the community of music.

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*Born in St. Petersburg and a resident of Gainesville for 30 years, Cathy DeWitt is the host of "Across the Prairie", a traditional folk music program broadcast on WUFT-FM Sundays at 5:00P.M. She is a member of several bands, including the all-female bluegrass band, Patchwork, and the jazz quintet, MoonDancer. She directs the Music in Medicine component of Arts in Medicine at Shands Hospital at the University of Florida, and presents national/international seminars on Music & Healing.*

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