

Mad Folk NEWS

Newsletter of the Madison Folk Music Society

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Johnsmith performing at MadFolk Annual Meeting on Oct 25

The Madison Folk Music Society will hold its Annual Meeting 7 pm Saturday night, October 25, at the Wil-Mar Center, 953 Jenifer Street, followed by an 8 pm concert by Wisconsin's own Johnsmith. Members who attend the meeting at 7 will learn the identity of the 2008-09 recipients of the Helen Schneyer Folk Music scholarships, and get to choose MadFolk officers for the coming year. Those members who attend the meeting will get to choose from a selection of folk CDs sent to the Society, and reserve the best seats for the Johnsmith concert.

Non-members who attend the concert only (for a mere \$10 at the door) and who fill out a form, will be given a complimentary MadFolk membership until the end of the year, which includes a subscription to the MadFolk Newsletter, containing a centerfold "refrigerator cover"

with all the folk music happenings in the Madison area. Johnsmith is a Wisconsin-based singer-songwriter who has won the New Folk competition at the Kerrville Folk festival. He was a featured performer at August's Great River Folk Festival, where he sang selections from his latest CD, Break Me Open, (please see review on page 6.) He was occasionally joined there, and on the CD, by his daughter Elisi Smith-Waller, who is soon to make Johnsmith a grandfather. The CD is dedicated to his mother, Evelyn Blanche Smith, who gave birth to 10 kids in as many years. Please join MadFolk in celebrating another year of Folk Music with one of Wisconsin's Finest.



MadFolk presents Claudia Schmidt in concert on November 22

On Nov. 22, MadFolk will welcome the incomparable Claudia Schmidt. She describes herself as a "creative noisemaker", which seems as good a description as any for a musician from whom we may expect folk ballads new and old, hymns, torch songs and everything in between. Claudia accompanies herself on 6-string and 12-string guitar and on dulcimer, but she's also comfortable putting aside the instruments and lifting her rich contralto in unaccompanied song. Recent forays into jazz and spoken word demonstrate the breadth of Claudia Schmidt's talent. Claudia's live performances are energetic and joyful. November's MadFolk News will explain further why you should mark your calendars now for what will be an extraordinary concert! More information as well as directions to the event can be found at www.MADFOLK.ORG. Tickets are \$14 in advance and \$16 at the door. They are available at Spruce Tree Music, Orange Tree Imports, and Border Books East & West.

Please remember to bring a non-perishable donation for the food pantry.



Storyhill at Brink Lounge on Oct 9

Acoustic duo Storyhill began in Bozeman, MT where Chris Cunningham and Johnny Hermanson grew up and started performing together as teens. Both were musical from the get-go, singing with choirs, playing in bands and mastered many musical instruments---piano, guitar, trumpet, violin, harmonica, bass and accordion. Although their 7th grade world geography class is what ostensibly brought them together, it was their musical passions that made them close friends and lifelong musical collaborators. They recorded their first tape as Chris and Johnny in 1989, upon graduating from high school. Although they then temporarily parted ways---Chris going to Spain and John to Minnesota for college---they continued to play music. Chris, who had previously played piano with John, took up the guitar and focused on his songwriting, soaking up the Spanish culture. Meanwhile, John was making a name for himself on the campus of St. Olaf College, where he was pursuing a music degree for violin performance. He got regular gigs in town, performing his own original material. He encountered such success selling the “Chris and Johnny” tape, that he encouraged Chris to come out and join him so they could play together. Chris did, and together they developed a strong fan following on campus and in the nearby Twin Cities as an acoustic songwriting duo. After graduating from St. Olaf in 1993, they toured the country, playing the college circuit. For three years they toured constantly and recorded several self-released albums, selling an impressive number at their shows. However, exhausted from the travel, and finding themselves pulled in different directions, Chris and Johnny, or Storyhill as they were now known, embarked on a series of farewell concerts---much to their fans’ dismay. For four years, 1997-2001, Chris and John pursued their own ventures.

Meanwhile, Storyhill fans continued to support the duo through CD sales, and spreading the word to others who had never seen them perform. In 2001 Chris and Johnny played sold-out reunion shows in Minnesota and Montana. Discovering the old chemistry was still there, along with new creative energy, they re-formed Storyhill and fully committed themselves to touring and recording as a duo, releasing three more CDs. They enlisted the help of rock/pop songwriter and Grammy winner Dan Wilson (Semisonic, Dixie Chicks, Trip Shakespeare) in early 2006 to produce Storyhill’s new album, their first to be released on independent roots label Red House Records, simply named Storyhill. The album was released in early 2007, to great reviews across the country. The duo, later that spring, won the prestigious Kerrville New Folk Songwriting Award. They continue to tour, and are beginning the process of recording their sophomore release on Red House Records.

Storyhill will be appearing at the Brink Lounge Thurs., Oct. 9th at 7:30 PM. Tickets are \$12 and can be purchased at B-Side Compact Discs, 436 State St., or at the Brink Lounge, 701 E. Washington Ave.

Jim Schwall: Madison's own So Dang Yang Cajun Stranger and Bar Time Lover

If it seems that Jim Schwall is in more places than our ubiquitous presidential candidates; don't worry, you're not imagining things! Jim is currently involved with several projects because as he noted in his last e-mail, that's what you do if you want to stay busy in Madison. He has a regular Thurs night gig at Bab's French Quarter, 1353 Williamson. He plays his own songs for part of the evening and then turns the mic over to a guest. His past guests have included his brother Chico Schwall, Nancy Rost, Stephen Lee Rich and Jeff Hickey. He also currently plays with SoDangYang, a five-piece band featuring the songs and vocals of Marques Bovre with Jim playing electric lead and occasional accordion. Then there is Cajun Strangers, a five piece Cajun band with Jim playing bass. His newest project is Bar Time Lovers, a four piece band featuring Jim's songs, vocals and lead guitar. The Jim Schwall Band is a four-piece blues-rock jam band featuring Jim and Andy Ewen on vocals and leads. In addition to all of that, he still plays with the Siegel-Schwall band from time to time. No matter what your musical preference, one of his projects is sure to please. His recent live solo CD “Getting Old” includes 14 mostly-original songs for \$12 plus \$2.50 shipping in US. You can order it from www.uvulittle.com or get it from Jim at gigs and save the shipping.

Send a message to jschwall@sbcglobal.net to get on his e-mail list or go to myspace.com/jimschwall for show dates.

Join Mad Folk in 2009

Help promote folk music and dance in Madison in 2009 by joining the Madison Folk Music Society. Annual memberships start at \$8 for seniors and family memberships are only \$15. You can join anytime, you'll get an entire year of newsletters regardless of when you join. In addition to the newsletter, members get a \$1 discount off of the door price for all MadFolk concerts. If you join at the family level, the discount applies to all members of your family. There are three different ways you can join (or renew your membership.) 1) Fill out the form on the back of this newsletter and mail to the address indicated. 2) Go to madfolk.org to download a membership form or 3) join online.

"A sense of adventure and integrity in every song she does."



CLAUDIA SCHMIDT

with special guest Tom Kastle

Saturday, November 22

8:00 pm

Immanuel Lutheran Church, 1021 Spaight St.

Presented by The Madison Folk Music Society (www.madfolk.org)

Tickets \$14 advance, \$16 day of show

Available at: Borders Bookshops East & West,
Spruce Tree Music, Orange Tree Imports

Non-perishable donations of food will be collected for local food banks.

WORT 89.9 FM

Rosalie Sorrels**Strangers in Another Country, the songs of Bruce "Utah" Phillips**

By definition, tribute albums are a labor of love. But more often than not, the artist who is being honored is worshipped from afar and is not well-known to the people who pay homage to them. This is certainly not the case with 'Strangers In Another Country', Rosalie Sorrels tribute to Utah Phillips. Sorrels had a long friendship with Phillips; they met in the late 1950's, before he left to fight in the Korean War. The fact that they were close friends creates a decidedly different feel to the cd. She doesn't interpret the songs, she sings them with an authenticity that wouldn't be possible if she hadn't known him so well.

The cd contains the classics 'Mountain Valley Home' and 'Green Rolling Hills of West Virginia.' Songs such as 'Old Buddy Goodnight', 'Jesse's Corrido' and 'Schofield Mine Disaster' convey the heart and soul of Phillips' work with migrant workers, the poor, the homeless and other marginalized people. Her rendition of 'I Had A Mule' is delightful; she sings it with a group of performers who make it so lighthearted and playful that it sounds almost like a children's song. She also included songs that Phillips sang about his heroes, 'Ashes On The Sea' was written for Woody Guthrie and the intro is as moving as the song. 'Eddie's Song' is about Ed Balchowsky who worked as a janitor in one of the clubs that Utah and Sorrels performed in. Her intro to the song is very amusing, Sorrels is a great raconteur. She intersperses the songs with spoken word poems and reflections. All of the spoken pieces are very powerful but 'Revolutionary mandate #1' is electrifying. The liner notes are an added treat, they have a lot of great info about her friendship with Phillips as well as some phenomenal artwork. The cd is available thru Red House Records, go to redhouserecords.com to order on-line or call (800) 695-4687.

Sorrels is one the defining voices of her generation; she played her first major gig at the Newport Folk Festival in 1966. In 1990 she won the World Folk Music Association's Kate Wolf award. Her 2005 album 'My Last Go 'Round' was nominated for a Grammy award. Go to rosaliesorrels.com to find out more about her musical career and other achievements.

John Smith**Break Me Open**

Johnsmith's gift for writing eloquent, heartfelt songs helps everyone who listens to his music feel more at ease with the complexities of life. He shares everything with his audience; joy, sorrow, uncertainty, anger, love, loss, nostalgia and most of all, a profound gratitude for all of the beauty that life has to offer. He mines his innermost thoughts and feelings and when you hear his songs, you are both comforted and energized. The soothing effect of his music is best summed up in this quote by his fellow songwriter Buddy Mondlock, " I feel like every time one of Johnsmith's songs gets heard a little healing happens to the world." The title of his most recent cd is "Break Me Open" and that is also a perfect way to describe his approach to life. He is receptive to whatever experiences life brings his way, the title track describes how he sought inspiration while visiting a town where the famous blues musician Lightin' Hopkins once lived. 'Back to The Mystery' urges us not to let the day to day minutiae of life overshadow our sense of wonder. He is especially astute at capturing the ebb and flow of relationships.

'Messy Thing' recounts the trials that love can put us through and he reminds us of the basis for any solid relationship in 'Honest Truth'. The song 'Cold, Cold Ground' is in memory of his brother Davey Smith who was murdered several years ago. He has sung about other painful family experiences as well, including his father's struggle with Alzheimers. But even when singing about difficult times, he exudes a sense of inner strength and calm. He is a native of Iowa but currently lives in northern WI and will be playing at the MadFolk Annual Meeting on Oct 25. Please see the article on page 1 for more details and mark your calendar now.

Not only is he a singularly beatific artist, he also leads tours to Ireland. He and his fellow travelers visit ancient ruins, castles, small fishing villages, the Aran Islands, the horse races, etc. by day and by night they share music in the local pubs with Irish players. Go to johnsmithmusic.com to learn more about his tours and to order his cd's.



Tweak

At a folk festival recently, a fellow folkster asked me if I could help him out. He said he was good at writing parodies, but couldn't figure out how to write an original song. Here are my two cents on the subject, with apologies to those not interested in songwriting.

My folkster's question is one we hear quite a bit, and it's not hard to figure out why. Staring at a blank paper or screen is daunting. It's less overwhelming to begin with a completed song and tweak it. Musically, the melody is written already; the time signature is set and so is the meter. Lyrically, the meter is established; the rhyme scheme has been decided upon; the fundamental "device" or angle of the song has been invented; many of the minor internal rhymes and metaphors are in existence. The gender, the tense, all those grammatical components have been figured out. Writing a parody is actually an act of editing; if you want to move beyond parody, one way is to intensify this tweaking.

(Incidentally, for a song to be a parody, it has to poke fun at the original song. A song using the form of an original song to poke fun at, say, a political party, is not technically a parody, but is more accurately called a "takeoff". Takeoffs are MUCH more common than parodies, which they are often mistakenly called.)

Fortunately, for those good at writing takeoffs, beginning with one is a good way to start an original song, because this eliminates the blank page monster. The secret is to continue with the editing process, both musical and lyrical, way beyond where you would have stopped previously. Using an existing work as a beginning template is perfectly ethical; it is used by writers and artists everywhere.

So. As an example, I'll use the first verse of **Amazing Grace**:

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That sav'd a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Here's a (not very good, I know!) takeoff of this verse:

*Amazing pie, how sweet and hot
That caused my girth to grow
I once was thin, but now I'm not
Was fast but now I'm slow*

There you have a takeoff. Now, what's the most obvious way to begin to turn this into an original? First, change the melody. Since the meter of the lyric has already been decided by the duration of the notes, you should start by not changing the time signature or the durations of the notes. In other words, looking at the notation of the song, move the notes UP or DOWN only. A quarter note shouldn't be changed to a dotted quarter note, for example. Goof around with this for awhile. You don't have to be able to write notation; just sing the song with notes going down where they used to go up, and other such manipulations (it might even be best to sing the original lyrics for this, and not your takeoff lyrics, to keep the meter right).

That may be enough in itself to erase the link from the original song to the takeoff, but probably not. At the risk of making the lyrics sound strained, you CAN try changing the melody further by changing the time signature. **Amazing Grace** is a waltz (3/4 time) but as has been shown thousands of times on the web, it can be sung to the theme song from **Gilligan's Island**, which is in 4/4 time. Also you can sing it to the first lines of **God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen**, then change THAT melody. You can even try a syncopated melody as an idea (one that goes taDUM, taDUM instead of DUM DUM DUM DUM) such as **Sink the Bismarck**, though this may sound unnatural, if the original lyrics aren't syncopated.

Now, about the words. This first verse of **Amazing Grace** has a few identifying lyric characteristics. The first word, "amazing", is such a unique word with which to begin a song, it's the obvious first choice for replacement, if you want

your song to be your own. You could use another similar adjective, like "astounding", or even better, take a different tack and, for example, substitute "a pound of" or maybe "persimmon." "Persimmon Pie, how sweet and hot." But don't stop there. The secret to all this is to keep editing. "How sweet" is still left over from the original song. Try "Persimmon Pie, so rich and hot." Note the word "how" is changed to "so", which changes the line's structure a bit.

Keep going! Edit! Edit! Look in a grammar book and find out all the things you can change. How about putting it in the past? How about changing it from a first person singular song to something else?:

*Persimmon Pie, so rich and hot
Did wreak its wrath on us
We both were quick but now we're not
That's why we missed the bus*

Sing **THAT** to **God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen**, and it won't sound much like **Amazing Grace** any more. Not only are the words changed but the structure is too, in a few cases. The original song had its third and fourth lines with the structure of "We once were this but now we're that", and the fourth line now does not have this structure. The third line could be changed more, too, in this regard. Maybe to "We're slow because we ate a lot", getting rid of that "but now", which still echoes the original.

So now you have a song with a new melody, new words, and a new structure. In other words, you have a new song! Sing it to a few people and ask them if it reminds them of any other song. If someone says "**Amazing Grace**", you might want to go back and do yet more editing.

Once you get the hang of this, I think you'll find yourself writing initial "takeoffs" that are more conducive to eventual editing, and less dependent on the original song's idea.

There are many ways to overcome the blank page problem, of course, but if you're good at writing takeoffs, this may work well for you. Happy tweaking!

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A black and white photograph of a man in a suit and hat playing a banjo.

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Please check your mailing label and see if it's time to renew so you'll know about all the great music coming in 2009! THANK YOU!

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dbuhler@charter.net
Norbert Wodke, secretary.....836-8422
nfwodke@chorus.net
Dede Goldberg.....246-4332
Speedydd99@yahoo.com
Bill Fiore.....256-4687
fior@charter.net
Tracy Comer.....276-8192
tracy@tracycomer.com
Ron Dennis.....226-9472
rondenpho@adol.com
Meg Skinner.....238-6950
askinner@wisc.edu
Vicky Jones.....238-4661
vickyjones@aol.com

Committee contacts

Concert: Darlene Buhler, 846-9214
Festival: Bill & Mary Fiore, 256-4687
Newsletter: Dede Goldberg, 246-4332
Newsletter/Calendar: Judy Robinson
Phone: 469-1218/ E-mail jbella@merr.com
Advertising: Darlene Buhler, 846-9214
Membership: Tracy Comer, 276-8192
MadFolk e-mail: MadFolk@charter.net
MadFolk web site: www.MadFolk.org

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