

In Commemoration of 25 Years at the Folk Club

It seems fitting to add something special to our Silver Celebration this month by way of reminiscing about where we came from, where we are now, and where we're going. There is an excellent article written in December 2004 by **Dave Hurd** which is located on the **Folk Club** website (www.RestonHerndonFolkClub.com) which artfully describes the origins of The Club. Instead of repeating that information, perhaps it's more appropriate to look at more recent history and present conditions in order to gain an appreciation of what **The Club** represents now, and insights on where we'd like to go from here. In that vein, here are presented viewpoints and personal perspectives from some of our current board members:

Laura Schier has been attending The Folk Club with (and without) her mother, board member Sue Schier, since she was about 14 years old. In Laura's words, "The Folk Club has definitely made its mark upon me. The most important of which was to give me confidence in my singing ability. Without The Folk Club I wouldn't have auditioned for any of the musicals or other shows that I've done since then... my life would have taken an entirely different path - sure, it might have been just as good as this one - but somehow I doubt it. Life without song is no life at all." Laura has recently joined us as our newest board member. We look to her and others with her motivation and spirit to help keep The Folk Club full of the vitality that has seen us through the first 25 years (and many more to come, we hope!)

Ellen Kaminsky and her husband Ray (former Folk Club president) have called the Folk Club 'home' since it began meeting at the Tortilla Factory in 1987. As Ellen says, "We connected to its goal of promoting folk music and felt immediately at home with its members. With little exception, our closest and dearest friends are those we've met on Tuesday nights... The Club has changed little over the years - a testament to its almost perfect construct. We continue to see young artists coming through and old friends coming back... It's a rare moment when people disagree and the sense of civility shown to all is cause to celebrate in this ever more contentious world. It's comforting to know that no matter where our retirement plans take us, we can always come home to the Folk Club."

Ron Goad was introduced to the Folk Club by Todd Crowley when asked to sing The Cowardly Lion part in "If I Only Had a Brain" from *The Wizard of Oz*, along with Rex Wood. According to Ron, "...I enjoyed the good-natured sarcastic humor and heckling... and even though Todd, Rex, and I did an imperfect *rendering*, we received a lot of acceptance. I had a great night and have been returning to the folk club ever since... The Folk Club has allowed me to try out all kinds of music projects on percussion and has even been tolerant on rare occasions when I play guitar there... The Folk Club has led me to unexpected great places, and consequently, I've played many hundreds of gigs and have recorded on about 50 CD's, nearly all directly or indirectly through the Folk Club connections..."

"...Ray and Ellen Kaminsky, Dave Hurd, Bill Farrar, and the other leaders, via their unobtrusive (almost invisible) leadership, have made the club seem to run on automatic pilot. But we know that behind the scenes there are many additional volunteers who collectively make this one of the coolest and most significant places to be!"

Bill Davis plays the guitar and is the founder of the *Guys With Monosyllabic First Names Who Play The Guitar Society* – which is so secret it never meets. For years, he played guitar and sang songs in private for his own enjoyment, until one evening at the Red Caboose (sometime in 1986 or 1987), as Bill recalls, “Then there came the Folk Club. We went and we listened (that was the rule) We were asked to turn off our pagers (Cell phones hadn’t been invented yet) The performers took turns - It seemed as though a lot of people were a lot better than we were, but there were some clinkers too. Somebody forgot the lyrics to a song you knew and you weren’t the only one to help them out. Some folks sang along, but everyone was listening and connected - good or bad it didn’t seem to matter - they listened. Live. Not even a microphone back then. Two songs each back then. Only cost a buck (Still? Wow!) Anybody could sign up. Just see the volunteer emcee - they’ll call you when it’s your turn.”

“The next week you sign up. You perform, people listen, they laugh at the funny lines and applaud at the end. This was better than... a lot of other stuff people did. It still is. I can remember my first performance at the Folk Club the same as I remember my first solo flight. Formats, songs, faces, have all changed over the years, but the heart is still beating strong and folks are still listening. All you young Whippersnappers pay attention to what you got; practice, sing, listen, tap your feet, it’s about the music, & the music is us. “

Ben Hamblin first came to the Folk Club in the fall of 1998, after reading an article about Ray Kaminsky in a local newspaper. In Ben’s words, “What I found was a group of music lovers who played for each other and also supported each other. I was struck that everyone actually listened to each performance, and quite often sang along. Through the years I have noticed that at certain times, quite unexpectedly, something very special happens in that room... The room spoils you as a performer, because there is nowhere else where you will get the same attentiveness and feedback... I don’t think there have been many changes in the 11 years I have been going, but that is as it should be - when you've got a good thing, don't mess with it.... there is no better place to hear songs or to make music.

In summary, it would seem that the underlying foundations of The Club: a love of acoustic music, a listening environment (with good food!), an appreciative audience, and a genial and fun-loving atmosphere have created the magic formula for an institution that has stood the test of time for 25 years. Though the music and musicians may change, our membership is still glued to their seats every Tuesday, treasuring the old, and embracing the new.

To put it in the words of our new President, Ben Hamblin: “The future of the Folk Club relies on all of us keeping it going as well as that has been done in the past. Getting new people to come and share their music and/or enthusiasm for music is all we need to do going forward. So keep spreading the word.”

Why the Folk Club Works

Twenty-five years is a remarkable achievement for an organization such as the Folk Club of Reston-Herndon. There has been some magic in getting to this point but mostly there have been the people who come, listen, perform, support and enjoy the experience.

Finding a venue like the Tortilla Factory in Herndon that would allow use of a room four hours a week by such as the Folk Club was a magical thing. After over two years and three “homes” in Reston Chuck Curcio and Ron Fox accepted us with open arms and have continued to support and make the space available for nearly 23 years. The stability of a comfortable “home” opened the gates for the people who are the Folk Club to grasp the opportunity to work together to make a weekly forum for musicians and lovers of musical alike to keep it going and improve it over a long time with only volunteer effort.

In the beginning the Folk Club was the brainchild of a small group (notably **Rose Haskell, Beverly Osburn** and **Susan Schoebel**) that sought to bring a bit of the British pub-based “Folk Club” to Northern Virginia. They set the tone, found venues as necessary (The Acorn, Red Caboose and Jonathon’s Keep Community Center) and elicited the support of people to come out and make it happen. It has always been a volunteer activity with folks pitching in every week to make things happen.

In 1987 with the move to the Tortilla Factory new people found the Folk Club and the scope of activities started to expand. A collective sense of a need for “organization” grew in the people who were regular attendees. Rose (the original idea), Beverly and Susan had family and school filling more and more of their lives and others were accepting more and more of the activities and responsibilities and this “new seed” grew into our own version of a Constitutional Congress which produced (in 1989) a purpose and bylaws.

Jump forward to 2010 and the title of this little essay and the answer is simply “The People.” The people who began the Folk Club were joined by similarly minded others who devised and created the structure. The tenets were simple: Don’t complicate things with rules which must be monitored and enforced any more than absolutely necessary; try not to expand the scope of activities beyond the available ability to support those activities; always operate in a mode of inclusion and supportiveness; remember that if you see something that needs doing you can always volunteer to pitch in and (maybe most importantly) do not openly criticize those doing the volunteer work if you are not willing to take on the task yourself.

Who are these people? In making lists there is always the risk that someone will be overlooked and for that an apology is offered in advance. Over the 20 years that membership in the Folk Club has existed 600 folks have become members at one time or another by paying dues. But in addition to them surely a few thousand others have spent at least one enjoyable evening at the Folk Club. Among the members who currently are regular attendees, three persons stand out as the longest continuous supporters.

Ray and Ellen Kaminsky, started coming in 1987 when the Folk Club moved to Herndon and have given most generously of their time and effort over the years to shape and improve the Folk Club. They were charter members of the Folk Club Board and still serve in that capacity. Ray has been President of the Folk Club and for nearly 20 years the booking agent. In earlier times he brought and operated the sound system regularly. He has also made a small side career as a blues guitarist and singer (having forsaken his Chicago “folk” roots). Ellen is lovingly known as “the Mother” of the Folk Club, was for a long time a primary emcee on a weekly basis and has been a critical link between the Folk Club and the Arts Council in Herndon (where she has played an equally valuable role as well), working hard to keep the communication and cooperation open in the arts. For years Ellen did the Folk Club publicity. Ray and Ellen are taking their show on the road for a few years starting this spring in their new motor home.

David Hurd has the distinction of being the only person obsessive enough to keep doing the same thing almost every week since the first night the Folk Club met at the Acorn Restaurant in May 1985. Some of his Folk Club roles are treasurer (twice and current), emcee, creating the newsletter and editing and publishing it for years, making all of the tickets for all of the concerts over the years, being on the original (and still on the) Board of the Folk Club. Dave's (almost) uninterrupted attendance over the years has made him one of the most recognizable countenances to old and new members alike.

Two others who were on (and still are members of) the original Board of the Folk Club are Bill Davis (emcee, sound guy, gofer, and anything else that needed done) and Lynn Jordan (long-time publicity and liaison with the press).

The other eight members of the Folk Club Board all of whom have been coming for quite a while are: Ben Hamblin (current President, performer and sound engineer); Sue Beffel (publicity, stage striker extraordinaire, album-keeper); T.M. Hanna (sound engineer, performer, and holder of the 'Most Showcases Performed' award); Chris 'Fang' Kramer-Harnage (current booking agent and liaison with the Arts Council, emcee, and occasional performer); Sue Schier (former publicity, call line monitor, performer); Ron Goad (performer, avid promoter of all things Folk Club wherever he is – and he is everywhere); Bob Hampton (newsletter, website, sound engineer and performer); Laura Schier (newest Board member, facebook monitor and logo designer).

Other key roles are currently performed by Bill Farrar (stage manager, timer Nazi, and really good guy), Felicia Strickland (publicity); Dan Grove (showcase feature writer and performer); Dianne LaFleur (newsgroup monitor); Ken 'Harny' Harnage ('irregular' sound engineer and performer). Among these, it seems appropriate to add special thanks to both Bill Farrar and Ken 'Harny' Harnage. The dedication and attention to detail these guys provide goes too often unnoticed, except when they are absent from our Tuesday night gathering.

Where would we be without the performers? The people who come regularly to "strut their stuff", some with aspirations, others with memories, others just "foolin' around." Among them are: Greg Vickers, Nancy Truax, Larry Mediate (past President and former Board member), Tom Bodine, Jane Tatum, Ric Sweeney, Pete Nelson, Ann Granger and MC Williams (both solo and with DM and the Divas), Jim Johnson, Jim Clark, Roger 'Tex' Johnson, Scott Malyszka, David Law, M.C. Williams, Barb Keeler, Don Brown, Lea Coryell, Kathleen Farrar, Eric Forthman, Don Rembert, Dan Telfer, Donna Xander, Jean Bayou, Todd Crowley, Alan 'the Perfesser' Rubnitz, and Ralph Lee Smith.

But even more importantly, where would the performers be without the listeners and the list of long-time listeners includes: Jim Rosenkrans (every week from Fredneck, MD and holder of ticket #1 for all of those concerts), Susan Sommers (folk groupie par excellence), Connee Chandler (emcee and sometimes songbird), Ed Surma, Pam Day, Peg Green, Marty Jenkins, Carlton Vickers (our ticket elf), Ted Moline, Cynthia and Matt Dovens, Beth Drumheller (puts up with Dave and hostess of the campouts), Beverly Mediate, and Holly Towne.

And in memoriam, we salute John McConnell, who arrived early for years to help set up the sound system, hardly ever missed a week, supported music in the area at every opportunity and (sadly) left us in 2008. Visit our web site for a well-deserved homage to John.

Hats off to all who come on out, help set up, tear down and just enjoy the Folk Club – it would not be possible without **ALL OF YOU!**

Disclaimer: If any names or roles were omitted please be assured that with between 40 and 60 people every week this list could be extremely long and omission or inclusion is not a value statement, just an accounting quirk - editors