

AN EGOCENTRIC AND CONVOLUTED HISTORY OF EARLY "FILK" AND FILKING

by Lee Gold, Copyright March, 1997

This essay originally appeared in the ConChord 12 Songbook.

I found organized SF fandom in 1967 at Westercon XX. Filksinging was a two hour afternoon program item, with Bruce Pelz and Ted Johnstone singing out of Pelz's FILKSONG MANUALS (recently republished in a one-volume version, \$13 including shipping and handling; contact Bruce Pelz at bep@mail.deltanet.com or 15931 Kalisher St., Granada Hills, CA 91344-3951). Bruce and Ted sat at a table in the front of the room, with Ted playing guitar. They chose what songs to sing, and audience members sang along if they felt like it. There were songs from John Myers Myers' Silverlock set to music and "The Orcs Marching Song" to the tune of "The Ballad of Jesse James" and Tom Digby's "Little Teeny Eyes" about a very strange computer -- and many, many others.

A month later I attended my first LASFS meeting with copies for sale of THE THIRD FOUNDATION #76 (the fanzine's first issue), containing my first filksong: "Oh, What a Beautiful Martian." One of the LASFSians who sang it that night was a fellow named Barry Gold, whom I married two years later.

In turn, I bought Pelz's first three Filksong Manuals (published for the 1965, 1966 and 1967 Westercons). A couple of years later, I bought his fourth Filksong Manual -- and also an old fanzine, THE STF & FSY SONGBOOK, edited by Hal Shapiro, dated 2060 (which Pelz informed me had been brought out for the 1960 Worldcon).

A few years after that, Ted Johnstone sold me a copy of WEST BY ONE AND BY ONE, an anthology of Baker Street Irregular pieces published by Poul Anderson in 1961. The last piece was "An Introduction to Filk Singing," by Karen Anderson. It begins:

In the first place, "filk song" was a typographical error. That was obvious to everybody who read the essay in whose title it appeared. Besides it had no meaning. Who ever heard of a filk?

Since the essay appeared in an amateur publication circulated among science fiction fans, though, there was only one thing to do. Rather than waste a phrase like "filk song," something must be created to which the name could be applied. Now, some eight years later, it means "a topical song borrowing the melody and structure of a well-known folk or popular song." And there are hundreds of them.

Despite Karen Anderson's definition, there were already filksongs with original tunes. Of course, back then the only ways to learn a new tune were reading sheet music (Pelz's Filksong Manuals had sheet music for many songs) or picking it up from a recording (phonograph record, wire recorder or reel-to-reel tape recorder).

Eventually I got around to asking older fans about just what fan had originally typoed "folk song" into "filk song" in just what "amateur publication." The culprit turned out to be Lee Jacobs, a LArea fan who had died shortly before I entered fandom. Back in the 50s, he'd submitted an essay to SAPS (Spectator Amateur Press Society) entitled "The Influence of Science Fiction on Modern American Filk Music" about supposed science fiction incidents in folk song, which was a straight-faced analysis of a number of thoroughly filthy "dirty songs," taking various metaphors in them as if they were meant literally.

Wrai Ballard, the Official Editor of SAPS, rejected the essay on the grounds that the songs would get the APA in trouble with the Post Office, by violating the laws against mailing pornography. But he did notice that LeeJ's title had an interesting typo: FILK SONG. He told his friends about it. And he had a lot of friends.

Lee Jacobs eventually published his essay elsewhere (this time getting the title spelled accurately), but by that time most of the people in organized SF fandom had heard about "filk songs." They decided, as Karen Anderson wrote, to apply the term filk to the already long-standing tradition of SF/fannish songs and music.

Most pre-cassette recorder filk falls into two basic categories: 1) Melodies written for poems from professional fantasy and science fiction (with lyrics by such authors as Myers, Tolkien and Heinlein), and 2) Lyrics written by to well-known melodies (folk songs, show tunes, Gilbert & Sullivan, popular songs).

A number of such lyrics appeared in professionally published F&SF including Tolkien's "Troll Song" (to the tune of "The Fox Is on the Town-O") and Heinlein's song in "The Roads Must Roll" (to the tune of "The Caissons Go Rolling Along").

Other lyrics were published in fanzines, both by pros and fans -- the distinction wasn't as great in those days. Shapiro's 1960 filkbook included "Pore Stf is Dead" by Damon Knight and "The Author's Ordeal" by Isaac Asimov, as well as a number of pieces by Charles Tanner and Randall Garrett summarizing various F&SF books' plots, inspired by Newman Levy's poems devoted to plays and operas. (Levy wrote the lyrics of "Thais"; I have no idea who wrote the tune. I reprinted one of Tanner's filksongs in Xenofilkia #1. Garrett's filksongs appear in THE BEST OF RANDALL GARRETT and the trade paperback anthologies TAKEOFF! and TAKEOFF TOO!)

Early incidents of what we'd now call filk are chronicled in Harry Warner, Jr.'s excellent histories of fandom: ALL OUR YESTERDAYS and A WEALTH OF FABLE. Warner notes that "'Filksong' was a term that had not yet been invented, but songs were sung [at the 1940 Worldcon] that consisted of new lyrics with a science fiction theme set to familiar tunes." Filthy Pierre aka Erwin Strauss gave me photocopies of two sheets of these songs that he'd picked up, and I reprinted them in Xenofilkia #18 and #19. They were by John Bristol, a pseudonym of Jack Speer. The one that puzzles me is a short piece which is said to be to "the obvious tune." I'll print it here just in case someone can recognize it.

We'll build a tempo-ship
And we'll take a little trip,
And watch a million years go by.

At the third Michicon on Halloween weekend of 1943, to celebrate the opening of Battle Creek's Slan Shack, "Some 22 persons drifted in and out over the weekendA SCIENCE FICTION SONG SHEET was published, containing fan parodies suitable for group singing." Warner notes that Jack Speer was there (blowing up black balloons), so perhaps some or all of the songs were his.

"The first respectable publication of music in fandom was Jim Blish's setting of Kornbluth's poem "Cry in the Night," distributed in the May, 1945 VAPA [Vanguard Amateur Press Association] mailing....

"Just after World War II, Blish and Robert W. Lowndes got outside funds for their attempt to found a firm producing 78-rpm discs. One fan composition, Chandler Davis' 'Song of Worlds Unseen,' performed by pianist Bertha Melnik, was among the works on Vanguard discs that actually got distributed....The company collapsed after it lost an angel [backer]."

The 1947 Worldcon had what Warner says was "Perhaps the first of the big drunken worldcon parties...in the Hadley [Publishing Co.] site....Fans gaped in disbelief at [John] Campbell sitting on the floor, helping Hubert Rogers and Benson Dooling to sing a variety of bawdy ditties." The next night saw Mary Mair singing "a vocal setting of Sturgeon's 'Thunder and Roses' [and] Chandler Davis playing his own compositions on the piano; [Joe] Kennedy, Fred Burgess, George Fox and Algis Budrys

singing as a quartet a ditty about Amazing ("We shout to the skies the praises of Shaver,/ We wish that he were a moldy cadaver"); and Milton Rothman playing the piano."

At the 1952 Worldcon, "everyone joined in 'Glory, How We Hate Ray Bradbury' (to the tune of 'John Brown's Body' during the ball." (Also known as "The Bradbury Hate Song," this was written by Ray Beam, Jack Natkin, Lewis Forbes, Jerry Hunter and probably others. It appeared in Shapiro's STF & FSY SONGBOOK and was later reprinted in a Pelz Filksong Manual.)

A year later, in 1953, the Worldcon's last event was "Gordy Dickson...with his guitar and science fiction ballads." And the year after that, in 1954, the Worldcon program included an operetta adapted from Ray Bradbury's "A Scent of Sarsaparilla," narrated by Anthony Boucher. At the 1955 Worldcon, a fan choir sang a number of Damon Knight's songs written to Richard Rodgers' tunes.

Meanwhile, the Liverpool Science Fiction Society of England acquired a used tape recorder in 1953. It did a number of taped productions which, says Warner, "were done with professional éclat, were hilarious to anyone who knew the peculiarities of both fandom and the BBC, and achieved such miracles as a full symphony orchestra accompanying what sounded like a choir of hundreds of voices singing fannish words."

And in 1959, the Worldcon saw everyone present who had ever sold anything to John Campbell gather together to sing "Oh, No, John," written by Randall Garrett to the tune of the folksong of the same name. Randall later wrote, "We sang the song to him, and he just stood there, looking superior, which he had every right to do, and when it was over, he looked around at all of us, and said, 'Thank you for your stories.'" (This filksong appeared in the 1960 SAPS mailing and was reprinted in a Pelz Filksong Manual with the note that "A fifth verse, added by Karen Anderson, is apparently lost." This verse finally appeared in FILKER UP #1.)

In addition to writing filksongs sung at the 1940 Worldcon, Jack Speer was also responsible for Fancyclopedia I in 1944. In 1959, Richard H. Eney enlarged this into Fancyclopedia II, which included the following definition of Filk Song credited to [Nancy] Share: "A type of music which, if it weren't fannish, would be called a folk song; fan parodies or pastiches of this or other types of mundane chansons." Fancy II's definition of Poetry also bears on Filk:

Fantasy poetry, of course, dates from earliest times. Science-fiction has not seemed such a good subject for poetic flights, but efforts have been made by fans (some worthy), and among famous poets scientific pieces are found -- notable in Tennyson and Kipling -- tho some with stfnal themes are actually anti-science.

In fandom and the pros we have: ballads, usually of rather simple appeal; a couple of epics; such semi-narrative and descriptive pieces as "Passing of the Planets"; store of poetry expressing personal feeling with no connection with fans save that fantasy fans have written it or Red Moon, Martian Lover, first space flight, ktp [Esperanto for "etc."--LG], are substituted for mundane themes; dadaistic and metaphysical jingles like daffy poetics; and a great many parodies of various types of poems and songs.

A year later, in 1962, the National Fantasy Fan Federation published Donald Franson's A Key to the Terminology of Science-Fiction Fandom. Its definition of "filk song" was "Fannish folk song, often a parody of a mundane folk song."

It's a bit frightening to realize that THE HACKER'S DICTIONARY's definition of "filk" isn't as up to date as Franson's. It defines "filk" as "[from SF fandom,

where a typo for 'folk' was adopted as new word] n.,v. A 'filk' is a popular or folk song with lyrics revised or completely new lyrics, intended for humorous effect when read aloud and/or to be sung late at night at SF conventions." I'd suggest that filkers send the person(s) responsible for this dictionary a better definition if I hadn't recently seen weeks of (enjoyable but futile) controversy as to how to define "filk" during the creation of the rec.music.filk newsgroup, all of it ending up in resigned agreement on the minimal statement that filk was a genre of music that had originated in science fiction fandom.

I entered SF fandom in 1967, about the time that filking -- on the West Coast, at least -- began to wither away. Some of us connected this to the growing popularity of artistic rock, played to sophisticated tunes that required more than just one singer with the ability to strum half a dozen guitar chords. Whatever the cause, Pelz published one more Filksong Manual in 1969, but that was the last of them. Ted Johnstone and I wrote a few more songs together (such as "Eating Crottled Greeps") but essentially new filk in the LArea came to a halt with the end of the 60s.

In 1973, I came across what was then the NESFA filksong collection: fifteen pages of songs, some of them college dirty songs like "Seven Old Ladies." But there was also "The Ballad of Gordy Dickson" by Ben Bova ("FIRST PUBLICATION ANYWHERE" trumpets the claim at the bottom of the page) and "The Ballad of John W. Campbell" by Joe Ross (to an original tune but without sheet music).

In February, 1976, in time for Boskone XIII, the first edition of the NESFA Hymnal came out, edited by Craig R. McDonough. It had a pink cover and 61 pages of songs. The editor's introduction noted that "Part of the activities at past BOSKONES have include the singing (and otherwise bandying about) of a most peculiar type of composition known as the Fannish Folk-Song or "Filksong." As there is always a shortage of readable copy of some of these songs (to ensure, amongst other considerations, that everyone is at least trying to sing the same song), it was deemed by NESFA that There Would Be a NESFA SongBook for Use at The BOSKONE."

The book was called a "hymnal" as a reference to the style of filking then popular in the Boston area, in which all audience members expected to have access to the words of the song that the song leaders were singing, just as church-goers expect to be able to turn to the correct page in their hymnal and sing along with the choir.

Later Boskones held Filksong Contests, whose entries were photocopied at the convention into Filksong Books distributed in the filking room. The Boskone 14 Filksong Book was edited by Joe Ross with the assistance of Lisa Raskind, and so probably were the uncredited filksong books at the next two Boskones. Boskone 14's Filksong Book had 27 pages; 15's had 57 pages; 16's had 32 pages and an announcement of "the forthcoming NESFA HYMNAL." I don't know how long this tradition of instant Boskone filkbooks continued, but it eventually died out and I have not heard of its rebirth.

In 1976, Ruth Berman and Ken Nahigian edited THE MIDDLE-EARTH SONGBOOK, over a hundred pages of songs set in the world of JRR Tolkien, including (with her permission) Marian Zimmer Bradley's melodies for Tolkien's own songs (recently recorded by Annwn -- at long last).

THE HOPSFA HYMNAL came out about the same time. Its editors printed all the F&SF songs they could find, often neglecting such minor issues as proofreading, copyright, and obtaining authors' permission. THE NEW YORK CONSPIRACY SONGBOOK used similar tactics. Both eventually encountered legal difficulties.

In fact, it was a longstanding fanzine tradition to feel free to reprint short pieces of copyrighted material without consulting the authors -- as long as the

editor made sure to credit them and to send them a copy. Hal Shapiro's 1960 collection included pieces from many copyrighted F&SF works. But it appeared at a time when a Worldcon had less than a thousand members. As fandom grew, its publications took on more commercial and legal significance.

The second edition of the NESFA Hymnal was over 200 pages, edited by Joe Ross with the assistance of Lisa Raskind, in 1979. It's still in print, thanks to NESFA. The editor's introduction notes:

It was at the NESFA meeting of 10 December 1972 that Richard Harter first proposed that NESFA produce the 'ultimate' filksong book. According to the minutes, Jim Saklad suggested the title The NESFA Hymnal....From that brief exchange, the word 'hymnal' has entered the fannish vocabulary....

While many mourn the passing of much of the old informality of fandom, we feel that the custom of copying filksongs without consulting their originators is no longer a viable practice, if ever it was. We have sought permission to use all songs of known authorship whose authors were still living, regardless of whether the songs were legally covered by copyright....Many writers have had the opportunity to correct errors that have crept into their songs over the years.

In 1978, Filthy Pierre aka Erwin Strauss printed FILTHY PIERRE'S MICRO FILK, over four hundred filksongs, most of them fairly old, in print so tiny that the only way to sing from it was to retype the songs.

In 1980, just in time for sale at Westercon XXXIII, the first Westerfilk came out: eighty-eight pages of new songs, many with original tunes, soon accompanied by commercial *cassettes* of the songs. Only afterwards did I begin to hear references to "bardic circle," let alone to "chaos circle." Modern filk had begun. I'd welcome any further information on pre-modern filk.

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