

Shared Song, Communal Memory

By BEN RATLIFF for the NYTimes FEB. 10, 2008



Sally Rogers at the Mid-Winter Singing Festival in East Lansing, Mich., an annual event featuring group-sings.

EAST LANSING, Mich.

THEY meet on the first Monday of the month at the Universalist Unitarian Church here, not to worship but to sing. Just to sing. There are song leaders, some with a guitar or a banjo or an autoharp, but this isn't a class or a choir; the singers, not the leaders, choose the tunes. Most hold copies of a spiral-bound songbook of folk music called "Rise Up Singing." They perform songs like "Keep On the Sunny Side" and "This Land Is Your Land." No one minds a voice gone off-key.

From Hawaii to Santa Cruz to the Philadelphia suburbs, in living rooms, churches and festival tents, similar gatherings — called community sings, or singalongs — draw together the average-voiced and bring old songs into common memory.

If there is a natural opposite to gold-plated pop irony and faceless file sharing — music as the American majority knows it in 2008 — this is it. These meetings are earnest, participant directed and person to person: a slow-going, folkish appreciation of American vernacular culture.

Much of this impulse descends from [Pete Seeger](#), who has championed the cause of group-singing for more than 60 years. "No one can prove a damn thing," Mr. Seeger said in a recent interview, "but I think that singing together gives people some kind of a holy feeling. And it can happen whether they're atheists, or whoever. You feel like, 'Gee, we're all together.' "

Amateur group-singing has been around forever, of course, at bars, churches, schools, camps and stadiums. Community sings like the one in East Lansing are pitched halfway between the ritual of the campfire singalong and the self-conscious American folk-music movement of the 20th century.

In 1945 Mr. Seeger founded the People's Song collective, which disseminated its own songbooks, thereby helping to popularize songs like "We Shall Overcome." The folk revival of the late 1950s and the subsequent rise of folk festivals, some of which included song-circles as special events, furthered the idea that singing together could reseed a homegrown culture and empower the ordinary citizen to change society.

In 1973 Peter Blood, a Quaker, political organizer, teacher and folk musician in Philadelphia, put together a homemade songbook called "Winds of the People," which quickly took off in the group-sing scene. "There was a demand for it in the circles we ran in, which were religious and summer-camp circles," said his wife, Annie Patterson. In time Movement for a New Society and other nonreligious activist organizations adopted it for singalong events.

A decade later Mr. Blood and Ms. Patterson were envisioning a more ambitious book. They compiled and cleared the rights to 1,200 songs for "Rise Up Singing," which was published in 1988. Mark Moss, editor of Sing Out! magazine, the pre-eminent journal of the folk movement, and also the publisher of the songbook, said it has sold about 800,000 copies, at \$17.95 each.

It's hard to gauge the size of the community-sing movement because by its essentially casual nature it resists documenting. There is no central organization, no comprehensive Web site of regular events. Groups of the kind that use "Rise Up Singing" are not registered with the American Choral Directors Association and have no academic or institutional affiliation.

But Mr. Blood, who now lives in Amherst, Mass., said that by a conservative estimate at least 100 regular singalongs around the country use the book, in cities including Santa Cruz, Calif.; both Portlands; Rochester; Chicago; Milwaukee; and Atlanta. Some of these are easy to find in an online search; some are publicized through regional folk-music society newsletters, church bulletins or strictly by word of mouth.

In East Lansing, Sally Potter, 47, a frank, energetic presence, leads the monthly sing. In early December the event drew about 80 people. Everyone gathered in the rear of the chapel, where the ceiling is low, "so you can get the chills more easily," as Ms. Potter explained. The chairs were arranged around an open square, the better to hear the blend of voices. The singers ranged from teenagers to the elderly; some had strong, penetrating voices, some murmured with wobbly pitch. They sang about 20 songs, including "Star of the County Down" (18th-century traditional Irish), "The M.T.A. Song" (a 1948 update of the early 20th-century American ballad "The Wreck of the Old 97") and "The Rose" (1979, soft-rock radio).

The force of their voices grew during 90 minutes, with harmony occurring in unexpected places. In between numbers Ms. Potter waited for people to raise hands and politely make suggestions.

"Page 117, 'Julian of Norwich'?" someone offered, referring to a selection from "Rise Up Singing."

"Great!" Ms. Potter responded quickly. "One of my favorite songs."

"Is it 'Nor-witch,' " another voice asked, "or 'Nor-rich'?"

"I don't know," Ms. Potter said, shrugging, though she did. "It's your song."

Some sang the word one way, some the other. But Ms. Potter does have a few guidelines, including this: If someone picks a song, and it takes more than 45 seconds for everyone to learn it, let it go. There were no nonstarters on this particular Monday. In general, Ms. Potter said, she believes that people should get to sing what they came to sing.

The combined area of Lansing and East Lansing, which has a population of about 165,000 and is home to Michigan State University, has a perfect sense of scale for community projects: it's not too small, not too big, and despite a perpetually slumped economy, it has a great deal of civic pride. It also has a famous guitar store, Elderly Instruments, a folk-music locus open since 1972; the Ten Pound Fiddle Coffeehouse, a folk-concert producer that has put on events for almost that long; and a popular local folk-music radio show on the NPR-affiliated WKAR.

Ms. Potter teaches high school history and economics in nearby Williamston. She has lived in Lansing for the last 23 years, during which time she has owned a restaurant, run the local farmers' market and a used-sporting-goods store, and toured the Midwest in a folk trio, Second Opinion. Her interest in community sings goes back to the Hudson River Clearwater Festival in 1994, where Toshi Seeger, Pete's wife, led a singalong group in a tent. Ms. Potter saw the same people returning day after day to sit cross-legged and sing, and she realized that participation was folk music's core pleasure.



Sally Potter, who leads a monthly group-sing in East Lansing.

Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times

In 2003 she helped found the annual Mid Winter Singing Festival, a two-day event featuring community sings that tend to draw 400 to 500 people each night. This year's festival, the sixth, was last weekend. There was a blizzard the first night, yet 340 people fought their way to the Hannah Community Center, a large building across the street from the Unitarian church.

In the evening events the singers sat in an auditorium and faced the stage, referring to set lists and lyric sheets. The song leaders were folk singers with longstanding local reputations: Claudia Schmidt, Joel Mabus and Frank Youngman.

"I've watched so many concerts, and I know what works," Ms. Potter said. "When people are singing, you're giving them the power, you're giving them the music."

Peter Blood agrees. "A lot of the experience of music in our culture is listening to someone else sing," he said. "What I find exciting about community sings is that people feel they own the music."

"Rise Up Singing" includes rudimentary chord notations but otherwise gives no indication how to sing a particular song; it is essentially used as a book of lyrics. It is not the only book used for participatory singalongs (shape-note singers tend toward "The Sacred Harp," originally published in 1844), and some singalong groups bring their own songs. But it is the breakaway hit of its kind in recent decades.

Dan Zanes, the singer and popular children's entertainer, used to sell "Rise Up Singing," which he called "the ultimate songbook," at his shows. "We don't have that many songs rattling around in our heads anymore," he said, "so we need a guide of sorts."

BookScan, which tracks sales back to 2000 through traditional bookstores, registers about 12,000 copies sold. But Mr. Moss said that most sales of the book have not come from bookstores. Song leaders order it by the boxful, directly from the publisher, or from the authors at quakersong.org.

Mr. Moss said that although Sing Out! magazine did not map or facilitate the movement, he believed that it is "much broader than 'Rise Up Singing.' "

"Often I hear from people that they hate the book for use in those settings because people keep their noses in it," he said.

Mr. Blood and Ms. Patterson organized the songs in it by theme, including "Ecology," "Sea," "Faith," "Hard Times & Blues," "Men" and "Women." (While the "Women" section is full of feminist vigor, the "Men" section is introspective, with songs like "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother" and "Let the Woman in You Come Through.") The book includes traditional black American hymns; Cuban, Mexican, Irish and Hebrew songs; Stephen Foster; Jacques Brel; the Beatles; Phil Ochs; Bob Dylan; and Stevie Wonder. There are songs for specific holidays and songs from musicals.

With groovy spot-illustrations and hand-lettered calligraphy, "Rise Up Singing" has a 1970s liberal-progressive feel and an obvious bias toward group-singability, although Mr. Blood admitted that some of the songs were included more for lyrical content than for their significance or popularity. (The couple are at work on compiling a 1,200-song sequel that will include more selections from jazz, blues and rock.)

Perhaps the book's greatest strength is its tacit proposal that there are many, many songs Americans should know by heart. In 1943, when he was in the Army, Mr. Seeger conducted an experiment on his fellow soldiers, asking them to write down the names of the songs whose words and tunes they really knew. In his own memory file he counted about 300, but he was impressed by the competition.

"I was surprised how many the average person knew back then," he said. He supposed that the number of songs crossing lines of generation, class and sex would be much lower today, outside of "Over the Rainbow" and "Happy Birthday to You."

At 88 Mr. Seeger is still a song leader, helping to run a singalong at the monthly meeting of a volunteer environmental organization near his home in Beacon, N.Y. "I like the sound of average voices more than trained voices," he said. "Especially kids singing a little off pitch. They have a nice, rascally sound."

After "Edelweiss," and a beautiful run-through of "Song of Peace," adapted from Jean Sibelius's "Finlandia," the session at the Universalist Unitarian Church wrapped up. It was almost 9 p.m., but nobody seemed in a rush to get home. A scattering of regulars stayed, packing up the cider and cookies.

One of them was Marcus Cheatham, 51, who works in public health. Earlier in the evening he introduced one of his own songs, picking a mandolin to teach the melody. Mr. Cheatham started singing about six years ago, when he joined a church choir and later a "diversity choir" at work, performing on Martin Luther King's Birthday and other holidays. The next step, he reasoned, was attending a community sing.

Asked if his knowledge of songs had grown since then, he corrected the question. "My enjoyment of songs has grown," he said. "I'm not much of a musician at all. If you enjoy it, you can jump in and do it."

"In our little community," he added, "the economy is horrible, and people are scared and sad. But you go to something like this, and you think, 'Wow, our community is resilient.' "

Margaret Kingsbury, 67, a nurse who is involved with peace groups, sounded a similar note. "I honestly believe that this is one of the ways to create peace," she said. "You go away from here, and you're uplifted."

Ms. Potter isn't surprised by such reactions. "I think it's all a result of people needing to come together and find some power somewhere," she said. "It's a political need and a spiritual need. How many people left early tonight? It's a Monday night. They're tired. But people didn't leave. That's how you know."

More articles about Community Singing: <http://www.singingfestival.com/v2/press/articles.shtml>

... Can you see singing events all over the country?

Sally: I can see them, and I can hear them. My message to potential producers is that once people in your community discover that they are the ones singing and that their voices make the sound, they will come to this type of event in droves.

People want to sing together. They want to create and sustain shared experiences. At this Festival, folks feel connected, and that feels great!