

## **Joe's Jottings #12: The Folksmiths Summer of 1957: Part III**

By Joe "The Songfinder" Hickerson

Our last column found The Folksmiths in Maine in August 1957, having completed our seven-week tour of summer camps and resorts in the Northeast. We had one more engagement: making an LP for Folkways Records in New York City. We had one week to plan and prepare our selections. Since one of our group, Bo Israel, was not involved with the musical numbers we had been performing and teaching, he returned to his home in Cincinnati, with many fond farewells.

The rest of us (Joani Blank, Chuck Crawford, Joe Hickerson, Sarah Newcomb, Ricky Sherover, David Sweet, and Ruth Weiss [Bolliger]), headed for Beacon, New York, to stay at the home of Pete and Toshi Seeger. They provided us with meals and a place to rehearse and sleep in a barn next to the log house they had built about ten years previously. We spent two days selecting and reviewing seventeen songs for the forthcoming recording session.



Folksmiths at the Pete & Toshi Seeger home in Beacon, N.Y., August 1957. David and Joe are sorting our instruments while Pete Seeger looks on.

The songs we selected were "Oh Lord, I've Got Some Singing To Do;" "Hava Na Shira;" "John Henry;" "Old Hannah;" "Glory Be To the Newborn King;" "Come Up Horsey;" "Three White Gulls;" "Amen;" "Oh Sinner Man;" "Blood Strained Banders;" "Hold On;" "Kum Ba Yah;" "Wade in the Water;" "Run To Jesus;" "Helan Gar;" "Tina;" and "All Night Long." Two incidents during those two days were particularly memorable.

"Come Up Horsey" was an African American children's song we had learned from Peggy Seeger. Each verse was about an animal, culminating in the appropriate noise ("woof" for dog; "croak" for frog; "meow" for cat; "baa" for goat, etc.), which campers enthusiastically joined in on. Naturally, we had no campers at hand, so we had a designated Folksmith for each animal sound (Ruth was the beautiful cat's "meow"). For the giraffe verse, there was no animal sound, just a pause. When we got to that point in our rehearsing, Pete Seeger walked in from his office across the hall with a large plant leaf in his hand, which he started to loudly chomp on for an appropriate giraffe noise.

The other memorable moment occurred when we were singing "Tina," a song from Basutoland (now Lesotho), which had appeared in songbooks published by the Cooperative Recreation Service. The words are "Tina, singu, leluvutaeo, watcha, watcha, watcha." It happens that the Seegers' youngest child, Tinya, was approximately two years old at the time. Pete reported to us that when The Weavers were recently rehearsing at the Seeger home, Lee Hays came up with the verse, "Tinya Seeger shit in her diapers, wash 'em, wash 'em, wash 'em." Oh dear, another diaper song.

On August 17, we arrived at Folkways Records and Service Corp., 117 West 76th Street, New York City. We were greeted by the owner, Moses (Moe) Asch, and his assistant, Marian Distler. They took us across the hall to Cue Studios, where Moe set up the microphone and operated the controls. We recorded the seventeen songs we had chosen; ten of them in only one "take." I don't recall how many hours it took, but it wasn't many. As Treasurer of the group, I signed a contract giving us 32 cents per LP sold, with an advance of \$80.00 due when they received from us "all materials (notes, cover, etc.)." They also gave us \$15.00 which they called "beer money."

We bid our goodbyes and went our separate ways, never to perform again as a group for the next 47 years. I headed out to Bloomington, Indiana, to begin graduate work in folklore and ethnomusicology. The remainder of the group resumed their studies at Oberlin College. On August 28, I sent a Treasurer's report with a check for the amount owed to each one. In all, we had netted \$892.68 (over \$111.00 each). Not bad for a bunch of amateurs, eh?

But our work wasn't over yet. David, Ricky and Sarah at Oberlin and myself in Bloomington were busy writing commentary and textual transcriptions for the six-page booklet to accompany the LP. The Oberlin folks arranged for the cover artwork with the assistance of art professor Paul Arnold. David drove to Delaware, Ohio, to negotiate with Lynn Rohrbaugh about four of the songs which had been published in his Cooperative Recreation Service songbooks, although we had not learned them directly from these books. Sarah sent the completed copy to Folkways sometime in the fall of 1957, and we waited patiently for the LP's release, which occurred in February 1958. Numbered FA 2407 in the Folkways catalog, it was titled *We've Got Some Singing To Do: The Folksmiths Travelling Folk Workshop*. (After the Smithsonian Institution purchased the Folkways enterprise in 1987, this LP became available as a custom cassette and compact disc.)

We then busied ourselves with sales of the LP, primarily at Oberlin through Ricky, and to a lesser extent, in Bloomington, where I was selling Folkways records on campus and by mail order. And there were eight sets of parents whose friends wanted to obtain copies. In all, one might say that the LP sold like tepid cakes. Of course this was minuscule compared to the success of the Kingston Trio that also began performing in 1957 and released their multi-million selling recording of "Tom Dooley" in 1958. At least we could say that our LP was the first published recording to contain the song "Kum Ba Yah" (aka "Come By Here").

I have only one review of the LP in my files. The Sunday October 12, 1958, issue of *The New York Times* ran a review titled "Folk-Songs and Singers" by Robert Shelton. Tacked on is "Brief Reviews" with comments on five recent LPs, including *We've Got Some Singing To Do*: "Eight Oberlin students pour youthful zest into seventeen songs of various lands with convincing results... Excellent arrangements of such songs as the African 'Tina' make for an attractive disk."

Over the next 44 years, I maintained contact with all the Folksmiths, with the exception of Ruth. Ricky passed away in 1988 of cancer (“too soon” Ricky, “too soon”). In 2001 I learned of Ruth’s whereabouts from her Oberlin dorm-mate, Ruth Blau. In 2003 I was able to persuade the folks at Oberlin College to plan an alumni reunion on the theme of folk music, which they scheduled for October 29-31, 2004. They specifically invited the seven remaining Folksmiths, offering us meals and lodging at the Oberlin Inn. This began a flurry of e-missives which resulted in six of us attending the event (Bo was unable to go). We had a great time reuniting, talking about our experiences, and singing some of the old songs. Thanks to students Eli Smith and Julie Friend and Advisor Tom Reid for arranging the weekend. Oh lord, we had some singing to do!



David, Joani, Chuck, Ruth, and Joe at our Oberlin College reunion October 2004. Sarah is taking the picture.

As a postscript, I was invited by Michael Kearsy to do two programs for the Portland Folklore Society the weekend before the Oberlin event: a concert at the Community Music Center on the 22nd and a workshop at Artichoke Music on the 23rd. I notified Ruth and she was able to attend both events. This was our first meeting in 47 years! The rest, as they say, “is history.”