



Coffeehouse of Yore

The first "paying gig" my music partner Lou and I ever played never paid us! We were stiffed! This was in a coffeehouse in a Lutheran church in Appleton WI in 1965. The paster decided our music wasn't appropriate and withheld our money. You don't suppose it was because we played **Black Dog** as done by Koerner, Ray, and Glover, do you? *"Well now you call me dog when I'm gone now baby, it's black dog when I'm gone; But when I get back with a hundred dollar bill, it's honey where you been so long?"* The good news is, not only was that the FIRST time we were stiffed by a venue, it was the LAST time we were stiffed by a venue, and probably had something to do with why we started writing our own songs.

Many of the venues we have played over the years have been coffeehouses. Stand-alone coffeehouses, coffeehouses in barns, in university buildings, in strip malls, in grange halls. The word "coffeehouse" is defined pretty loosely these days, describing everything from a folk society gathering which materializes sporadically in church basements, for the sake of presenting music, to, of course, national chains like Starbucks, which usually feature piped-in music, if any. It seems that ever since the 16th century, this loose description of "coffeehouse" has been the case. Now, a digression:

I subscribe to a marvelous email newsletter called **The Public Domain Review**. On their website, their introduction begins:

Founded in 2011, The Public Domain Review is an online journal and not-for-profit project dedicated to the exploration of curious and compelling works from the history of art, literature, and ideas.

In particular, as our name suggests, the focus is on works which have now fallen into the public domain, that vast commons of out-of-copyright material that everyone is free to enjoy, share, and build upon without restriction...

Being a songwriter and sometime visual artist, I have had many reasons to deal with

the concept of copyright, and finding work in the public domain has always been a challenge. The newsletter and the website feature articles written by various interesting people about amazing old resources (illustrations, books, audio, films) that exist (mostly) on the web, at such fabulous free online treasure troves as archive.org and gutenberg.org. Links to the sources are provided.

The articles all feature glorious illustrations from the reviewed works. The current topics as of this writing are a piece on the formative years of sound recording, a book of Japanese wave and ripple designs, coverage of reports of a 16th century narcoleptic walrus that sleeps while hanging by its teeth, a piece called **The Secret History of Holywell Street, Home to Victorian London's Dirty Book Trade**. Then there's **Cat Pianos, Sound-Houses, and Other Imaginary Musical Instruments**, and so forth. All with links to the original sources! It's amazing!

So. In the latest issue I was drawn to a recent piece called **The Lost World of the London Coffeehouse**, by Dr. Matthew Green. I was especially interested in the place music has played in coffeehouse history. And I found, by reading this article and following some of the links provided, that music has been associated with coffeehouses frequently throughout history, sometimes outraging the conservative authorities. This is from a referenced book, **All About Coffee**, available free on **Project Gutenberg**, regarding the governor of Mecca:

"Being resolved to put a top to the coffeehouse abuses," he called together a council and related that 'in these places men and women met and played tambourines, violins, and other musical instruments,' and played chess and so forth "done contrary to our sacred law."

This was in the year 1511! So music in coffeehouses has been a factor for over half a millennium. As a matter of fact, as Wikipedia says, there is a lot of overlap, especially in France, of the cabaret (which dates back to the 1600s), the music-hall, and the café chantant (singing café), which was born in the 1800s as *"...originally an outdoor café, where small groups of performers performed popular music for the public. The music was generally lighthearted, sometimes risqué, even bawdy but, as*

opposed to the cabaret tradition, not particularly political or confrontational."

Incidentally, I couldn't help but notice a fundamental difference between commercial coffeehouses of yore and similar establishments of today. From the 1500s on (during hours with no performers), these joints were hotbeds of conversation, with everyone participating. Not like today's coffeehouses where we sit in booths or huddle around tables with a few friends, or alone with a computer. I'm not against this new arrangement, and enjoy it myself. But it's different than it used to be, apparently. The closest contemporary venue I have found for these conversation free-for-alls is the dog park, and in an odd way, **Facebook**.

Anyway, not only was the coffeehouse the place for occasional music, it was the subject of music, too, as in this 1675 song quoted in Volume 2 of **Club Life of London**:

*You that delight in wit and mirth,
And love to hear such news
That come from all parts of the earth,
Turks, Dutch, and Danes, and Jews :
I'll send ye to the rendezvous,
Where it is smoaking new ;
Go hear it at a coffee-house,
It cannot but be true.*

*There battails and sea-fights are fought,
And bloody plots displaid ;
They know more things than e'er was thought,
Or ever was bewray'd :
No money in the minting-house
Is half so bright and new ;
And coming from the Coffee-House,
It cannot but be true.*

Sources:

Lost World of the London Coffeehouse
publicdomainreview.org/2013/08/07/the-lost-world-of-the-london-coffeehouse/

All About Coffee, William Ukers, 1922
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