

# Boston Songwriters Workshop *Newsletter*



January 2006

## SONGMAKING

By Peggy Seeger

All my life I have been singing traditional Anglo-American songs, many of which are hundreds of years old. Why have they lasted so long even though many of the social values and practices described in them are moribund? How have they managed to survive the tests of time, of acculturation, of being transplanted geographically? Why do they appeal so strongly to a modern audience, to people who take for granted such features of civilisation as e.mail, space travel, shopping malls, Gary Larson, presidential elections, home pages, fast food, gun lobbies, dating agencies, etc.?

The situations described in the folk songs and stories are, of course, universal: jealous siblings, unfaithful lovers, nagging wives, violent husbands; the endless war between property and poverty; dramas of religious fervour and industrial strife; humorous scenarios of all sorts; murders (mostly within the family circle); in other words, the eternal human tragedy and comedy. I believe

the linguistic and melodic idioms in which the songs are cast are linked closely to the spoken language, the history, the gender/social/economic relationships of each particular people or nation. Our traditional songs express our system of values in the code of poetry-set-to-music. Perhaps this is why we feel at home with them, often without knowing exactly why.

I like to think of each language as a pool of cultural genes, which we pass down from generation to generation. Spoken language and sung language are directly connected, even if we may be unconscious of this relationship. The ways in which words and tunes are linked in folk songs are not arbitrary. I believe that the folk melodies take their form, their cadences, their scales from the way in which we speak, thus explaining why the musics of different nationalities are so varied. I am convinced that the songs have survived because people felt as familiar with them as they did

### *Editor's Note...*

Luke McNeil has graciously come forward to take on the job of newsletter editor. Thank you, Luke! We are in the midst of transition right now, so this issue of the newsletter is a joint effort. I look forward to his ideas and creative input in the future. It has been a pleasure and an honor to put together the newsletter over these years.

May the Muse serve all of us abundantly. ♪

Martha Rogers

with conversational speech and passed them on almost as a matter of course to the next generation.

I would like to make songs that will last, that not only speak for my time but that are sung past my lifetime. I would like to make songs that will lie easily in the mouths of other singers. That is why I usually write in what is known as a folk idiom. I usually make tunes that sound like folk tunes. I try to use language as folksongs do. Sometimes I even use a particular traditional song as a 'jumping-off point' towards a new song (and there are so many genres of folksong!). I am not alone in this way of

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*Mark Your Calendar - Upcoming BSW Meetings:*

**January 10 and February 14<sup>th</sup>**

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working. Many modern songmakers are doing this, utilizing the subconscious appeal of the folksong to make their new creations immediately subliminally recognisable to the listener. And so many of the new songs are so good . . .

One technique in songwriting is to use the words and ideas of other people. For instance: Supposing I want to write a song about what it feels like to spend your life in a wheelchair - but I know nothing about it. So I take my recording machine to someone who is spending life in a wheelchair and who does know all about it. This not only gives me ideas but it often provides whole phrases and terminology that go directly into the new text. Occasionally, the lilt, pitch and speed of speech of the person being recorded will suggest the way the new melody should sound. A further spinoff: occasionally the recorder will feel that she or he has had a chance to say exactly what they want. Their feelings and the lessons they have learned will be communicated to the world in a new and unexpected way. I take the finished song back to them for their comments. The best comment I ever had on a new song was: I hear myself speaking.

When I teach songwriting, I sing quite a lot of folksongs first, followed by some new songs, showing how songwriters have used the lessons that tradition teaches. I find that people work in the folk idiom quite easily. The songwriting seminars are not really 'taught' - they are facilitated, for almost everyone has the ability to make songs. It is often just a matter of liberating them and polishing them up. We may start by making parodies of songs we already know. Or perhaps rhymed couplets - a short song! Then perhaps one verse - a longer song! Then we graduate perhaps to songs whose verses are dispensable and can be arranged in any order. We maybe start by making a chorus. There are a lot of 'maybes' and 'perhapses' because there is no set course. Everything depends on who is there, what their talents and expectations are and how much time we have. There is nothing quite so exhilarating as being with a group of people who are in the throes of creation - unless it's watching the proud parent leave the workshop with the new baby. ♪

*(Editor's Note: This article is from Peggy's website: [www.pegseeger.com](http://www.pegseeger.com))*

### BSW Newsletter

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Contributions from members are welcome. Deadline for the next issue: On or before 15<sup>th</sup> of the preceding month. Send submissions via E-Mail to: Luke MacNeil: [luke@lukemacneil.com](mailto:luke@lukemacneil.com) or phone Luke at (774)573-8963

### Congratulations...

Mark Stepakoff's second CD, "There Goes The Neighborhood" was recently released, and hit Number 21 on the National Folk Airplay Chart for the Month of November. The CD can be ordered from [cdbaby.com](http://cdbaby.com).

Congratulations, Mark!



### WRITER'S ROOM, *con't from p. 4*

Example: During the first week of December, John Michael Montgomery called the publishing company and requested a hold on "Home To You". He said he was going in to the studio the following week and was going to record 3-4 songs. He wasn't sure whether he would record "Home To You", but he was definitely considering it. We all started getting a little excited at this point since this was a strong hold, but we weren't buying champagne just yet. ♪

*(Editor's Note: Due to space limitations, the remainder of this article will appear in the February newsletter. The original article - from [www.craftofsongwriting.com](http://www.craftofsongwriting.com) - provides hyperlinks where the reader can listen to actual examples on the internet.)*

## From The Writer's Room...

By Danny Arena and Sara Light

Many people asked for sound clips of "Home To You" and wanted to know the stages it went through in getting recorded. So we thought we'd use "Home To You" as an example of the typical stages a song may go through from the writer's room to the radio.

**The Work Tape** - After a song is written, the professional songwriter(s), make what is known as a "work tape" to play for their publisher(s). This is usually a rough recording, often done on a boom box in the room with just guitar/vocal or piano/vocal. Sometimes, if there's handy access to a 4-track recorder, a slightly better recording may be made (with maybe some harmonies). The publisher(s) will listen to the work tape and decide whether or not the song warrants a demo. Generally speaking, unless you have an established relationship with a publisher, A&R person or producer, it is better to play a fully produced demo rather than a work tape. Example: The work tape of "Home To You" is simply Sara's co-writer, Arlos Smith singing and playing into a boom box in the writer's room.

**The Demo** - If the publisher decides that a song is marketable or pitchable, a demo session is scheduled. Often the demo session occurs several months after the song is written since the publisher will usually wait until there are at least 4-5 songs that can be scheduled on the "session". This helps to keep the costs down. Some publishers have in-house studios and simply hire in the players and singers. Other publishers go to a studio. The typical demo generally consists of the following instruments: bass, drums, keyboards, guitars. Often in country demos, a pedal steel or fiddle is added for effect. Occasionally, a stripped down demo is done for ballads. The general cost of a demo in Nashville runs anywhere from \$300-\$800 per song. If you are a songwriter not currently working with a publisher, try to get professional feedback on your song BEFORE investing in a demo. Also, make sure you get a copy of just the instrumental tracks once the demo is done in addition to the instrument/vocal version. This will help save a lot of time and effort in the studio in case you rewrite the lyric and want to re-demo the song. Example: The demo of "Home To You" was one of five songs scheduled during the demo session, and includes both pedal steel and fiddle and came out to around \$600.

**Pitching The Song** - Once the demo is completed, the songplugger at the publishing company hits the streets with the song hoping to get it recorded by an artist. They generally look at the pitch/tip sheets they have of who's looking for material and who's going to be recording in the near future. They then try to schedule meetings with someone connected to the project. These meetings may be with any number of people connected to the artist, including: the producer, someone in A&R at the record label, the artist's manager, or even the artist themselves. Hopefully at one of these meetings, someone will like the song well enough to put it on "hold" (see below). Some songs go on hold right away while other songs, take months or years. Many never make it to the hold stage. Example: "Home To You" was pitched to head of A&R at Atlantic Records sometime in November. He liked the song and said that he would send it to John Michael Montgomery who was on the road at the time. This is what he did with any songs he thought John Michael might be interested in recording. He did not however ask for a "hold" of the song. We didn't get overly excited at this stage, since there was still a long way to go.

**The Hold** - A hold can be very confusing. Generally speaking, a hold is simply a verbal agreement that the publisher grants to someone connected to the artist's project. The general understanding is that the publisher agrees not to pitch the song to anyone else. This gives the person who put

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