

Folks:

*This Month, November the 20th, we are privileged to have J. W Sparrow join us at the Kennewick Highlands Grange. J.W. Sparrow has been making music, telling stories, and writing songs for decades. He has recorded many albums of his material, and his songs are making their way into other artists' repertoires. His sly wit, eloquent storytelling voice, and versatile musicianship have made him a favorite of audiences all over the Northwest and beyond.*

*He lives perched on the side of Mount Rainier, with his own recording studio, where many other Northwest musicians have recorded CDs. His songs are constantly evolving; he never seems to perform them the same way twice. JW has sent us an article about the last Victory at Sea Concert {VSS}——  
A group whom we will surely miss.*

Harry {doc} Babad for eTALK

### The Final Trawl... A Farewell To Victory

The notes of the last chantey song hung over gently rocking boats moored to the Fisherman's Terminal dock. After twenty years plus of keeping alive the old tunes, *Victory Sings at Sea* was done at last. On a stage set against the boats outside of the Northwest Maritime Center on the south-side flats of Lake Union in Seattle the group gathered from scattered places like Gig Harbor, Eatonville, Hainesville, Mossyrock, Port Orchard and Vashon Island.

The core of VSS was founded around the efforts of a young Carolinian named

Philip Morgan to make a CD of local maritime music. He formed a singing group that eventually included as many as 12 to 15 voices to make the recording in 1982. The result was a double boat load of nautical music that sold a respectable number of copies for its folkways style sponsor, Victory Folk and Jazz label, and also spun off a number of other northwest music acts.

Popular recording and festival artists such as Pint & Dale, Dan Roberts, The Shifty Sailors, Kat Eggelston and Tanya Opland all participated in or were influenced by that first VSS recording. They have given several years of memorable performances as part of the Folklife Festival each May the Seattle Center. They also made appearances at dockside festivals all over Puget Sound, north and south.



One interesting gig brought the singers together to do a weekend show, onstage with a troupe of young ballet dancers in the Tacoma Pantages Theater. They stood as part of a shipboard backdrop and sang dolefully sweet songs while the dancers turned to the tune.



Now they were ready to drop the travel to the shows. The singers are twenty years older now and one of the original voices, Rob Kotta, died in Colorado a few years ago, of heart attack. Their voices have grown in character and depth but the logistics of gathering a chorale like that has grown as well. In the end it came down to this last gathering of a few score singers down by the docks on a fine summer night. Tonight was the finale, for the band, and for the audience as well.

One of the best features of VSS shows was always the amount and quality of singers in the audience. People who loved to sing, loved the band. The music, built of spacious open major chords, begged for harmonies and audiences responded everywhere. In fact, one of the more curious traditions about VSS is the number of nautical singing groups that sprung up like mushrooms in the wake of one of their performances in some small port or town.

On the last night the voices were ready. People like Captain John Burke of Burton, a tiny village just on a point of

Vashon Island, mingled in the crowd with sailors and students, fishermen or accountants, singers nearly all. Captain Burke lives in an old house with a widow's walk on top of a hill overlooking the bay at the foot of town. He earns a living taking large ships on long voyages across the sea and back. When he is not at sea, Burke will usually come to sing with the band.

Until, and unless, you are ever in a room being held in the spell of harmonies from every corner on some bittersweet tale of sea or had your funny bone given a tickle by a salty ballad, you can only rely on recordings give you a hint of the amazing power of those moments. With audience firmly in tow, the band coalesces and breaks into multiple combinations behind lead singers for different songs. This is hands on music and there is room for all hands.

Philip Morgan and his wife Teresa form one of the bedrock teams aboard VSS. He has a great ability to apply his talents with the pennywhistle, banjo and guitar to tasteful touches behind great singing. She has one of the best voices in the region. Another pair who often lead songs on stage with the group is William Pint and Felicia Dale.

Pint and Dale were practically spawned by VSS. In 1982 when the first recording was made, Felicia was a friend of Kat Egelston, a founding member, and met William who also sang with the band. Dale was so taken with the music she formed a partnership with Pint, learned to play an archaic instrument, the Hurdy Gurdy, and is currently one of the best performers of the music in the world.

William Pint has a long history in northwest music performance circles.

Several years before joining VSS he and fellow member, Rob Kotta, were part of a Celtic band that toured the region, playing in such places as Ashford, WA, a village high up on the slopes of Mount Rainier. His contribution to VSS has been to elevate the playing field with crisp clean guitar and mando-cello work.

Backing up performers such as Pint and Dale and the Morgan's is where the band really hit their stride. Studio quality touches from Steve Akerman, a multitalented instrumentalist, and Mariide Widmann, who plays concertina and guitar, latch onto punchy rhythmic work by Tanya Opland or Dan Roberts.

Carrying the tradition on behind those strong lead singers was one of the best combinations of voices ever put together in the Northwest. Singers such as Mike James, Hank Kramer and Steve Guthe are rare enough to find individually, but together their vocal work was outstanding. Guthe is particular is adept at capturing an audience while no heart in the room is safe when James sings *The Final Trawl* or *Shenandoah*.

Much of the music sung by these erstwhile sailors is of the preservation

class. A large influence on the various singers in the group over the years has been the recorded work of Stan Hugel and another English boatman, Archie Fisher. These two represent some of the last survivors of the music from the days of sail on the world's oceans. Hugel recorded in the later years of his life and is credited with saving from oblivion a large body of 19<sup>th</sup> century sea songs and chanteys.

English sea songs were just the starting point for the musicians who made up the band for the two decades. They found French songs and a strong maritime culture in Canada and a new body of American sea songs, many of them written in by Pacific northwesterners.

And the last song at this final evening is, fittingly, *Sammy's Bar* a ballad of lament for things past by Archie Fisher. The audience stands and sings with closed eyes the refrain, '*Say the last boats a' leaving,*'. After the concert the singers wait awhile in the lobby of the center, saying goodnight and thanks to many old friends here tonight. They shake hands with each other, hugs are exchanged and they drift off singly or in pairs, promising to keep in touch.

——— JW