



HOOTENANNIES IN SEATTLE - 1950s - Don Firth

Introduction by Stewart Hendrickson: This is the first of a series of articles on the early Seattle folk music scene taken from the personal reminiscences of the late [Don Firth](#) – this one from the [Mudcat forum](#). Here Don writes about the nature of [hootenannies](#) (or "hoots" for short) in Seattle during the 1950s – “For some time I have been writing personal reminiscences of the folk music scene in Seattle and elsewhere during the Fifties and Sixties. Not a history. That, I’m afraid, would be a ‘four blind men and an elephant’ operation, so what I’m doing is more of a memoir—my own personal observations.”

Hoots in Seattle – 1950s – Don Firth

The scene opens in The Chalet, a restaurant (no longer in existence) half a block off the University of Washington campus. The year is what? Late 1952 or early 1953.

A fencing compatriot and fellow folk song enthusiast named Chuck Canady and I sat in The Chalet one evening with Walt and a couple of other people, when Ken Prichard came over to [Walt \[Robertson\]](#) and said, "I just had a great idea. Let's have a hootenanny. A good, old-fashioned hootenanny. We can have it right here at The Chalet."

Walt broke into a huge smile.

"Fa-a-a-antastic!" he responded.

Let's have a . . . what?

I had heard the term before, along with thingamabob, gizmo, whatchamacallit, and other expressions you use when you can't think of the word you really want. Obviously there was some further meaning attached to the word to which I was not privy.

"What, pray tell," I inquired, "is a 'hootenanny?'"

"It's a sort of free-for-all folk sing," Ken explained. "Some of the old time hootenannies were rallies or union organizing meetings, but basically, you just gather a bunch of folksingers and other people together and a whole lot of singing happens."

Chuck Canady was familiar with the term. He further explained, "The dictionary definition of 'hootenanny,'—that is, if you can find the word in any dictionary—is 'a noisy contrivance of questionable utility.' That just about sums it up," he grinned.

They allowed about a week or ten days to spread the word, and then we had a hootenanny at The Chalet. The first of many.

About fifty to seventy-five people came. Most came to listen and/or sing along. Many people brought instruments of one kind or another. There was Walt with his 12-string, Claire with her Washburn, and me with my Regal. Bob Clark brought a guitar. This surprised me at first. His left hand was missing a thumb, and first and second fingers. He had reversed the strings on the guitar and held it pointing the other way. Mirror image. He played chords with his right hand, and with the two remaining fingers of his left, he deftly managed a pick. Chuck Canady brought the first 5-string banjo I had ever seen. He wasn't sure how to play it, but he whacked away at it inventively. There were a few other six string guitars of various kinds: steel string guitars, f-hole jazz guitars, nylon string classic guitars, and a couple four string tenor guitars. An autoharp or two showed up, along with a few musical contraptions that no one could put a name to.

I got the pattern fairly quickly. Someone would just launch into a song, and almost everyone else would sing along or play along or both. On some songs, like quiet love songs or ballads, people usually just listened. These songs were generally better suited to a solo voice. I knew enough chords to at least play along with many of the songs, if the person who led the song also accompanied it on the guitar and sat where I could watch his or her left hand.

There was one song I knew all the words to and was sure of: *The Fox*. I was waiting my chance to jump in.

Then someone yelled, "Hey, Walt, sing *The Fox*."

He did. I couldn't even follow along. The 12-string was tuned about a major third below the other guitars (I didn't know that then) and I didn't have a clue as to what chords Walt was playing.

That's the way it goes.

Bob and Ken had laid out several kinds of bread, along with a variety of cheeses and cold cuts. There were bottles of different kinds fruit juice, and always a fresh pot of coffee. No price tags on anything, just a small basket for contributions to the good of the house; self-service and honor system.

As I recall, people began drifting in at about seven-thirty. We started singing at eight or so. And we didn't finish up until well after midnight.

Again, I heard many songs I had never heard before. Wonderful stuff. My guitar playing took a quantum jump after that night also. Several hours of playing along and trying to follow what more accomplished guitarists were doing really stretched my ability. But the following day, I could feel every molecule of air that passed over my left hand fingertips.

The hootenanny at The Chalet in 1953 was the first of many

Some of them were in sizable halls. Back then, the University Friends Meeting House was on 15th Avenue NE, south of Eagleson Hall, and since Claire and Walt and several others were Quakers, using the place for some of the big ones was no problem. Others were held in the big lounge on the main floor of Eagleson Hall. Both the Friends Meeting House and Eagleson Hall were suitable for small (and some not so small) concerts as well as hootenannies. Another location, particularly for concerts, was the auditorium cum meeting room in the basement of Wesley House.

There were other available locations. Smaller ones held in private homes began happening with greater frequency. As time progressed and the number of enthusiasts grew, rarely would more than a few weekends pass without someone offering a place and declaring a hootenanny.

Some of the ones we referred to as hootenannies (or "hoots" for short) might not have met somebody's strict definition. Often they were unannounced and spur-of-the-moment. Three or four people, who happened to have their instruments with them just in case, would run into each other at The Chalet, or at Howard's Restaurant, or at the Blue Moon Tavern. After a phone call or two, some benevolent soul would volunteer a living room. An instant phone tree would form

and calls would be made to find out who else was game. Shortly afterward, a dozen or so people would gather at the specified location and the singing would start. As the evening progressed, more people would show up. All of this may have been hatched up and implemented in the course of forty-five minutes.

The cork had been pulled. The folk music genie was out of the bottle

At the time, I was twenty-two years old and I'd been playing the guitar and singing for about six months. Good times!

To respond to Mark Clark, as long as you had something to wet your whistle with, booze didn't seem to be that essential. Nevertheless, except for the hoots at the Friends Meeting House, Wesley House, and Eagleson Hall (the U. of W. YM/YWCA), drinkables were usually in good supply. Bob Clark brewed his own beer and he usually brought large quantities of that (I've written a whole separate piece about Bob's home brew, but that's sort of off the subject here), and there was plenty of the store-bought stuff—wine and/or beer, rarely the hard stuff. With very few exceptions, I can't recall anyone ever getting smashed. Not did I see any evidence of drugs—until well into the Sixties when the whole thing started to fizzle out.

“It Was Pleasant And Delightful – Personal Reminiscences of a Singer of Folk Music by Don Firth” will be edited and published in book form by his widow Barbara and his son Don sometime in the near future.