



**WALT ROBERTSON**  
**“Dean of Northwest Folk Singers” (Part 1)**

by Bob Nelson

Walt Robertson (1928-1994) was known as the “Dean of Northwest Folk Singers.” His impact on the Northwest folk scene was immense and spanned nearly 50 years. Starting in the early 1950s with his television show *The Wanderer* on KING-TV, Walt introduced folk music to an entire generation of followers.

I met Walt in Seattle when I was 16 and he was 25. Little did I suspect that he and I would become lifelong friends. It was not a smooth journey as we both had lot’s of rough edges, which needed softening. In the 12 years since his passing I realize just how much I learned from this man.

It was always amazing to watch Walt take over a ‘hoot’ (hootenanny, first used in Seattle for a folk song session). He would arrive late, hang in the background to pick his spot, sit down next to a pretty girl, strike a chord on his guitar, throw back his head ... and the performance was on!

To understand the impact Walt had on Seattle you have to understand what Seattle was like in the early ‘50s. We were still just a friendly community of neighborhoods. World war II with all it’s deprivations had recently ended. The air was full of promise and hope. Jobs and growth were everywhere. And Seattle nightlife was exploding. Supper clubs, after-hours clubs, coffee houses and new restaurants were beginning to appear. All these places needed entertainment and we were the folksingers to provide it.

Folk music was in. By the late '50s we were all performing around town. If it wasn't at this coffee house, it was at that college concert. While we competed for these gigs, we were also fast friends. And we hung out together at hoots.

These hoots became legend. They were invitation-only gatherings, usually in someone's living room. It was here we practiced our best songs and performing skills. They often started well after midnight on a Saturday night, after we finished our earlier club dates. We let our hair down and sang our best songs for our best friends. Then we would often all go to breakfast together as the sun came up. It was during those days that I often found myself studying Walt, trying to understand just what made him so magical.

It certainly wasn't his appearance. He was a small man, thin and kind of frail looking. He was more striking than handsome. But it was the look in his eyes and his powerful voice that grabbed you. He certainly had a presence. And time and again I noticed many of his performing tricks. He would keep his guitar tuned a little lower than standard pitch to prevent other guitars from playing along. If he wanted you to join with him, he'd let you know. He had impeccable diction. And he was dramatic. When he sang "Rich Gal, Poor Gal," you knew exactly who was his favorite ... "MY GAL!"

In 1959 I had many chances to watch him perform in the San Francisco area. One night he joined Jesse Fuller on stage at "The Blind Lemon." It was a fascinating performance that clearly showed his past acquaintance with the likes of Josh White, Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and many other giants of the day.

It was during the late '60s and through the '70s that Walt came into his own as a stage and film actor. Seattle had developed a vital and active legitimate theater scene. He starred in many roles and I could see just how seriously he took his art. I saw the intense work and preparation he did. It was also during the '70s that his years of smoking started to catch up with him, "hissself" as he used to say. I watched his health start to decline.

At one point he took "hissself" to Tonga to die on a warm beach. Then his health improved and he returned to Seattle for another couple of years. During his last summer here, he starred in a film titled *Island Bound*, then he left for Honolulu .

There he continued to have success on stage while working as an editor for the University of Hawaii . By then he had developed emphysema and required oxygen therapy. Even so, he danced the role of Alfred Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, while ducking behind a stage set to suck oxygen. When I visited him in Honolulu I was aware of just how much of his energy was spent in just staying alive. But he kept his struggles to himself.

Walt returned to his beloved Northwest in 1993. One year later he told me that he had a diagnosis of terminal pancreatic cancer. When he told me, I found it

interesting that his concern was for me, not for himself. He knew that I'd lost two friends in the previous year. He said, "Sorry, but you're 'gonna lose another friend." I found that very telling.

He asked me to help prepare a list of the things necessary to do before he passed on. We spent several days working on that list. One of the first items was to re-establish a relationship with his daughters. This he did with great satisfaction. I was again amazed as he spent that Summer tying up the loose ends of his life.

On the day of my last visit with him, I brought a \$100 bill with me. This was a "marker" that had floated back and forth between us for many years. We'd lost track of exactly who owed it to whom, but I thought I owed it to him. On his deathbed, he got very upset with me, saying that he was certain that HE owed me. I let the matter drop.

As I remember his life today, I am struck by two things: his astounding talents and his complete loyalty to his friends. He was a very private person and he liked it that way. And he was a true Scotsman in that he never wanted his left hand to know what his right hand was doing. Yet, if he accepted you into his life as his friend, his generosity and loyalty knew no bounds.

Walt died at his home in Kingston on September 23, 1994 . He had said all his farewells to his dearest friends and his family. At his passing, he was in the presence of two of his most loyal friends. That was as it should have been.

Walt wrote his own epitaph:

*"SING RAUCOUS, SING JOYFUL,  
SING SAD AND LONELY,  
SING WORK AND PLAY AND SWEAT AND LOVE,  
SING RAUNCHY, SING SWEET, SING HARD, SING GENTLE,  
SING SEA AND SKY AND BUCKING BRONCOS,  
SING QUIET NIGHTS, SING RIVERS AND DAMS,  
SING CHILDREN ASLEEP AND LOVERS AWAKE,  
SING BATTLES AND HEROS, BETRAYALS AND FAITH,  
SING MOUNTAINS AND VALLEYS AND MULES AND SHIPS,  
SING WARS AND REUNIONS AND FAERY QUEENS,  
SING BOSSES AND FLEA AND IMPERTINENT CATS ,  
SING LIFE , MY FRIEND, SING LIFE  
DON 'T MOURN FOR ME, SING!  
AND JOIN IN ON THE CHORUSES!"*

Don Firth wrote about [his remembrance of Walt](#) in the April, 2002 issue of Victory Review. For more reminisces about Walt see [Tales of Walt Robertson at Mudcat.org](#)

Walt recorded two LPs (now available on CD):

1. [“American Northwest Ballads,” Smithsonian Folkways FW02046 \(1955\)](#)
2. [“Walt Robertson,” Smithsonian Folkways FW02330 \(1959\)](#)

In the next issue I will tell more about Walt as a performer and how he created his special magic.

Reprinted from the [June 2006 issue of the Victory Review](#).

[Bob Nelson](#)