



WALT ROBERTSON
“Dean of Northwest Folk Singers” (Part 2)

by Bob Nelson

*I've been a-wanderin', early and late,
New York City, to the Golden Gate,
And it looks like
Ain't never gonna' cease my wanderin'*

In my first article I described how I met the late Walt Robertson in 1953. He became an early icon of the Seattle folk scene as well as a pivotal person in my life. It's been twelve years since his passing and I'm enjoying remembering many times and lessons.

Walt Robertson. So just what was it about Walt's performing that caused so much attention? It was a combination of many things.



Photograph of Walt Robertson by Gary Oberbillig

Taken alone, his voice was not great though it certainly was pleasant. He could sing on pitch. And he could sing with great power and force. And he knew how to

make himself, "hissself" as he used to say, easy to listen to. He did this by singing very clearly. His diction was excellent. He knew how to spit out the final consonants. You never had to struggle to understand the words he sang. Never!

His guitar work was clean and simple. He never let the guitar get in the way of the song, but it always added with it's strong and clean rhythms. And could use amazing chords to surprise and delight you, chords you wouldn't expect, but you knew were a perfect fit when you heard them.

He looked you directly in the when he sang. No staring at the ceiling, struggling to remember the words. He was fully prepared or he wouldn't sing that song. If you were giving him your attention, he felt an obligation to perform well. I was often amazed to watch as his eyes seemed to make contact with every person in the audience. You were left with the feeling that he was singing just for you and you were the only person in the room.

He had a certain vitality. His eyes would fairly sparkle and shine. He could mesmerize you with a look. And when he had you in his grip, there would be a twinkle in his eye, as if to say, "I've got you, don't I? And ... ain't it fun!"

His energy was something to behold. When he sang of a love lost, and looked inside you, your heart bled. When he sang "Sam Hall," with the line

*And those bastards down below,
Said Sam, we told you so,
God damn their eyes!*

you felt a chill.

Whenever he picked up his guitar, whether on stage or in a room, I always felt a sense of excitement. I knew something wonderful would be coming. He never picked up his guitar casually. If he reached for it, it was because he had something to say and he was worth the listen. He never played his guitar when someone else was playing. He felt this would be disrespectful to the other performer.

This total combination of voice, guitar, diction and acting made a powerful presence. He could sing loud and robust and yet, within a verse, bring the volume down to a whisper that would have you on the edge of your chair. Another telling aspect of his performing would be the total silence that often followed his songs. Many times we just sat there stunned at what we'd seen and heard.

Early on, in the 1950's, Walt became so closely identified with particular songs that they became "his." Even his closest friends wouldn't sing them. "What? You can't sing 'Wanderin', that's Walt's song!" Other such songs were "Life Is A Toil; Rich Gal, Poor Gal"

*I'm 'goin' cross the mountain, sweet Betsey,
'Goin' cross the mountain, Cora Lee, poor girl,
And if you never ever see me again,
Poor gal, remember me!*

And he had a Pennsylvania Dutch version of "There's A Hole In My Bucket, Dear Liza, Dear Liza", that would put you on the floor with laughter, no matter how many times you'd heard it.

As I think back on those hours we all spent together, I smile to remember the dynamics of a typical hoot. Someone would start a song. Slowly others would get out their guitars and start to tune. Someone might set a jug of wine on the floor. Then perhaps Don would sing, and maybe Moose would follow him. Dick, with his tenor guitar, might add something. Stan might follow that one, and that would trigger something to remind Walt of one. And on and on it went, all night long.

Toward the end of Walt's life, when he knew his time was short, he sent me a letter suggesting the songs and singers he'd like to hear one more time. I quote from that letter:

... songs I'd like to hear ... Bob, 'La Llorna'; Don, 'Bonnie Dundee'; George, 'Ramblin Boy' and 'Minstrel Show'; Gary, 'Ayree Peaks'; Patti, 'Come A Landsman'; Stan, 'Handsome Cabin Boy'; Richard, 'Sully's Pail'; Nancy, something French; Larry, 'Moon Man'; Utah, 'I Have Led a Life'; Guy, 'Old Blue'; Don, 'MacPherson's Lament' ... let there be plenty of cheap red wine, and let there be a joyful noise. Still let the amenities and courtesies of the old hoots prevail. honor each other and let the music honor all ..."

Those of us that knew him well often tell "Walt Stories" when we get together. And we still wonder where his drive and energies came from. He was a man of incredible talent: an actor, a dancer, a singer, a world traveler, a storyteller and a writer. He knew how to get the most out of a piece, be it a song or a part in a play. One hint of his talents came from a conversation I had recently with his sister. As we were remembering him, she mentioned that one of her more vivid memories of him was when he was just five years old. "He had a part in a children's play at church. When he made his entrance, he did it in spades. He ran up the aisle toward the pulpit, brandishing a sword and dressed in a Roman toga, yelling at the top of his lungs. I guess he learned early on!"

[Listen to some old Walt Robertson recordings](#)

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](#).

Walt recorded two LP's (now available on CD):

1. "American Northeast Ballads," Smithsonian Folkways FW02046(1955)
[Track list and sound bites are available on the internet](#)
2. "Walt Robertson," Smithsonian Folkways FW02330 (1959)
[Track list and sound bites are available on the internet](#)

[Bob Nelson](#)

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