

ARTICLE



COLLECTING SONGS By Stewart Hendrickson

I've been coming to the community [SING](#) at [Dusty Strings](#) for over a year now and usually bring a new song to share each time. Kate Power, director of the [Dusty Strings Music School](#), calls me a "song caster." I think of myself more as a "song catcher," but neither of those terms describes what I do.

Song casting is more about commercial broadcasting or publishing of songs, while a song catcher is someone – like Cecil Sharp or Alan Lomax – who collects songs from "source singers," traditional singers who have learned their songs entirely through the oral tradition. I simply like to collect songs from whatever sources I can find, and I enjoy sharing them with others.

Several years ago I started to put my songs on my website ([Hendrickson's Song Page](#)) as a way of organizing them and sharing them with others. My collection of songs involves no particular theme or genre, it is simply a collection of songs I like to sing, which I have collected in a rather haphazard way. I have been singing and collecting songs for over sixty years, but only recently have I organized them in this way.

I began singing songs in my early teens during the '50s when I appropriated a guitar from my older sister. The songs I sang came mostly from the radio, 78 rpm records, and songbooks such as the [Favorite Folk Ballads of Burl Ives](#) and the [Fireside Book of Favorite American Songs](#).

The Los Angeles area where I grew up was not exactly a hot bed of folk music (it

was probably illegal there at that time), and I encountered very few other folk singers. I listened to the Grand Ole Opry Saturday evenings with my dad on the radio (after listening to the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts with my mother earlier in the day) – that was the closest thing to folk music on the radio then in Los Angeles.

In college in the late '50s I met a few other students who enjoyed singing folk songs. Our main songbook was [Song Fest](#), by Dick and Beth Best. It contained some great old songs, with both words and music score but no attributions to authors or where the songs came from. Other books I had were [Folk Songs of North America](#) by Alan Lomax, and [The American Songbag](#) by Carl Sandburg.

In the '60s I started subscribing to [Sing Out!](#), the folk song magazine, and bought [Reprints from Sing Out!](#) (several volumes from 1960 to 1970) and other song collections from [Oak Publications](#), and songbooks of [Malvina Reynolds](#), [Pete Seeger](#), [Woody Guthrie](#), and others. The “Great Folk Scare” of the '60s brought a revival of traditional and more contemporary folk songs by [Joan Baez](#), [The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem](#), and others on the radio, LP records, and in their songbooks. Those were my main sources then.

Living in Dallas, Texas from 1965-68 I listened to a folk music program, *Folk Music USA*, on a Fort Worth radio station that regularly played all the popular folk songs of that time, including the war protest songs and Arlo Guthrie's *Alice's Restaurant* in it's entire 20-min cut. Then the station was bought out, I suspect by conservative Dallas interests and the program ended. I recorded entire programs on reel-to-reel tape. Those tapes are a real snapshot of '60s folk music. There was also singing around the campfire while camping in Texas and Colorado.

After moving to Northfield, Minnesota in 1968 we had spontaneous folk music jams – “hoots” – in various kitchens and living rooms through most of the '70s. After that people got too busy and there was little time for that sort of thing.

And then moving to Seattle in 1996 I joined the [Seattle Song Circle](#). [Rise Up Singing](#) was the song circle “bible.” This led to a revolt by some of us under the slogan “[not in the book](#).” Not only was this “blue book” too restrictive in the choice of songs but people buried their heads in the book and singing became more like a reading than a group interaction. The book is a fine collection of songs to sing in groups, but not to be used in group singing.

As the internet came into operation in the late '90s the [Mudcat Café](#) with its discussion forum and Digital Tradition database of songs became a great source of folk songs and information about the songs. Now when someone asks me where I get my songs, I have to say “mostly from the internet.” That is a far cry from the oral tradition up through the early 20th century.

I have several hundred CDs, most purchased in the past twenty years. At the

height of my CD-buying addiction I probably bought one a week from Dusty Strings' then vast collection. But now Dusty Strings no longer sells CDs as they are becoming passé. Much against my desire to have a real physical item in hand, I have begun to buy single-track digital downloads of songs, and I listen to streaming audio on the internet. [YouTube](#), [SoundCloud](#), [Pandora](#) and other such sites have become the new way to listen to music. All this has taken the place of real people getting together to play music and swap songs – that's too bad.

A big source of learning about new songs is the [Mudcat Forum](#). On my website I have a list of [traditional song resources](#), which includes various other internet sites. I often find just the lyrics but not the music; then there is the problem of finding the tune. My first approach is to [google](#) the title, look in [YouTube](#), [iTunes](#), or [Amazon](#). This requires real diligence. If I can't find the tune, as a last resort I will make up my own.

When I collect a new song I try to find out as much as I can about its origin, background and author (if known). [Attributions are important](#) – the author and source should be acknowledged. Background information is interesting from a historical perspective and is also helpful in interpreting the song.

On [my song page](#) I post the lyrics, author, origin, background information and links to recordings. I also post the musical score for most of the songs and in some cases a midi sound file of the tune.

Still the best way to enjoy songs and learn new ones is to come together with friends in informal jams, singing mostly from memory – no books or song sheets – with a few musical instruments. In the absence of all the new technologies, this brings the joy of singing songs back to its basic roots.

[Stewart Hendrickson](#)