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Mad Folk News

Concertina 101

By Cindy Mangsen

The first concertinas I remember hearing were used to accompany songs: Wendy Grossman (on Archie Fisher's "Man With a Rhyme" CD) and Michael Cooney with his wonderful baritone-range concertina. I was intrigued by the possibility of having something besides a stringed instrument for accompaniment. But when I saw and heard Alistair Anderson play, I was hooked. With a twinkle in his eye and a smile on his face, he dances with the instrument, and coaxes an astounding range of emotions from the humble little box. Take a listen to some samples from his "Steel Skies" recording, available on the web.

When people ask if it's a difficult instrument, I have two comments: do you love it enough to put some time in? And can you type? I'm not kidding. Touch typing is very similar to playing concertina. You absolutely cannot get help by trying to peek over the side and see what your fingers are doing. The player must develop a sense of the keyboard, and operate by feel. This is a good idea with any instrument, but an absolute law with the concertina. Be brave! There is only one other law: never never try to open or close the bellows unless a button (either a note or the "air release button") is depressed. You will hurt the instrument.

Think of the English concertina as a keyboard: each button is equivalent to the key on a piano. The same, dependable note, whether the bellows is being expanded or contracted. You can generally recognize an English concertina by its thumb-strap (as opposed to the wrist-strap of the Anglo), little-finger rest, and its grid-like arrangement of buttons on each side.

The Anglo concertina (originally called Anglo-German, being a hybrid of English and German instrument styles) is a different animal: each button sounds a different note depending on whether the bellows is being pushed or pulled. (This is due to the concertina being a double-reed instrument: one reed sounds during the expansion, and the other during the contraction, of the bellows. This is true both on English and Anglo instruments, which explains why you might have a perfectly in tune "C" when pulling out, and a very out-of-tune "C" when pushing the bellows back in on an English concertina.) The Anglo is similar in character to the harmonica (think of the different notes sucking and blowing the harp), and in the same way, is a diatonic instrument, limited to playing in just a few keys. I know a few geniuses who can play both English and Anglo concertina. I'm not one of them.

The English concertina was patented in 1829 by Sir Charles Wheatstone (for you electricians: yes, the same man who invented the Wheatstone Bridge.) Since that time, there have been experiments with different fingering systems, but most of us still play the basic English that Sir Charles came up with. For a good introduction to the history of the instrument and the different fingerings, just search "concertina" in Wikipedia. For lots more, take a look at <www.concertina.com>.

Back to the English, my instrument. It is chromatic, which enables me to play in any key, although some are harder than others. The arrangement of notes sounds more confusing than it actually is in practice: the left-hand two inner rows of buttons play (ascending) C-E-G-B, and the similar right-hand rows play D-F-A-C. So, using the index finger on one row and middle finger on the other, you can quite easily play a one-octave C-major scale by walking your fingers up the two rows. The outer rows of buttons provide the accidentals, the black keys of the piano. When I first got my instrument, I spent a few years getting comfortable with the key of C before I dared to branch out. I am now quite fearless and will tackle most any key, given enough time to practice.

Which to play? As a singer, I want the range of my voice to determine the key of a song. So, no contest. The English allows me to sing in any key. The Anglo does not. Dance-tune players, who don't need chromatic instruments (big generalization, only partly true), tend to favor the Anglo concertina. It's a more driving instrument, due to the percussive nature of all that bellows action.

How to get started? All I had to go on was a fingering chart and a background as a pianist. If you have an ear, you'll be able to teach yourself. If you're more comfortable starting out with some guidance, a good source is The Button Box in Sunderland, Massachusetts (www.buttonbox.com). They buy, sell, repair, rent, etc. and are wonderful people to know. They also have CDs, instructional materials, and books available for all sorts of accordions.

I have two instruments. I bought my 30-button (2-1/2 octave) Bastari

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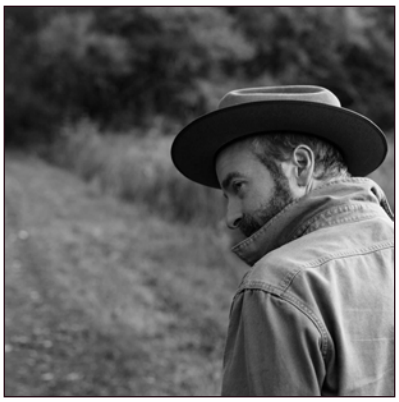
During these times where we can't go out to listen to music, many musicians are putting concerts every week thru the web.

We at Madfolk are trying to post some of them on our Face Book page each week. So if you part of the Social Media world of Face Book, please "like" the page for Madison Folk Music Society and keep watch here for some great music. Looking forward to the future where we can all gather in public for music again.

Red Tail - dave simonett
dancing eagle - 2020



Review by Kiki Schueler

Dave Simonett released his first effort under his own name on March 13. A date I'm unlikely to forget because it was the last time I saw live music. In a club, with other people, many of them my friends. I remember thinking then how happy I was to be there because it may be the last time for a while. I had no idea how right I was. When things started shutting down in the following days, I don't think any of us expected that the only live music on our calendar three and a half months later would be virtual. Simonett's home state show in St Paul, MN at the historic Fitzgerald Theater, home to Prairie Home Companion for many years, was originally scheduled for the beginning of May, and is one of only two tour dates that has been rescheduled. Fingers crossed that I will be able to see him play these bewitching songs from Red Tail in November.

Simonett is best known as the leader of the popular bluegrass band Trampled by Turtles, though I prefer to think of him as the force behind Dead Man Winter, a side project I'm a little obsessed with. Despite the intensely personal nature of the songs on DMW's near-perfect 2017 release Furnace, it is a definitely a band record, with a full cast of players both on record and live. In contrast, the personnel on this new record is extremely limited. Three of the record's eight songs feature only Simonett, while half add three players: Lars Erik-Larson on drums, Al Church on bass, and DJ House on fiery electric guitar. These are guys with three AllMusic credits between them, though not for this record, and names so ambiguous I can't even Google them. All I can tell you is that House tours with Turtles as an instrument tech.

The songs Simonett recorded as a one-man band, the reflective pair, "It Comes and Goes" and "Pisces, Queen of Hearts," and the gentle strummer "By the Light of the Moon," all feature nimble acoustic picking wed to atmospheric slide guitar. The aching lyrics are often echoed by layers of his voice. All three bear the influence of nature, moon and stars, wind and water. It feels like the north woods. "It's cold where I come from, but I don't mind" he says like a true Minnesotan on "Moon," and that northern stubborn comes out in "Pisces," "I'm gonna lie here until I want. And I might die here and I might not." It's often simple, but it's also heady and mesmeric. Luckily, the spell isn't broken when the others join in. A brushed snare rattles behind an oscillating guitar on opening track "Revoked," and only hints at what's to come. On the epic "In the Western Wind and the Sunrise," Erik-Larson's piano cozies into the melody while House's guitar soars, fuzzes and eventually crackles out. Six minutes counts as epic on a record that only just breaks a half hour. You can almost feel Simonett give House the nod at the two-minute mark on "You Belong Right Here," as a guitar that's been pawing at the dirt breaks loose in a whammy bar fueled charge.

If the propulsive and straightforward "Silhouette" seems out of place on a record that's been for the most part hauntingly moody, the final track destroys that illusion completely. Recorded in the studio on House's birthday, "There's a Lifeline Deep in the Night Sky" credits the birthday boy with "drunk piano" and a gathering of friends with vocals. The count-in could have easily been to "Happy Birthday," and it takes two takes to get started. It's a refreshingly silly moment that says no matter what came before, Simonett is not taking himself too seriously.

Mad Folk News is published monthly by the Madison Folk Music Society, a non-profit, volunteer-led society dedicated to fostering folk music in the Madison area.
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My Highway Home

What Is Our Job Right Now?

Most of us have been watching, listening, considering. Some of us have been marching, demonstrating, protesting, giving what we know how to give. Some of us have been donating food, medical supplies, time, and attention to various branches of the current Civil Rights Movement. Some of us have been writing checks, some of us have been writing songs, and others have been singing those songs. All of us are affected. None of us are untouched by the long legacy of racism in this country, and none of us are immune to the long-term impact of the unanswered questions, the half-truths, the partial peace, and the myths about equality.

I grew up in Rockford, IL. I went to a mixed-race elementary school. A school where fully half the student body were children of color. And it was indeed my kindergarten music teacher Dorothy Paige-Turner, who first introduced me to songs from the Civil Rights Movement of a different era. And I am so very grateful to this day for her kind and ardent fervor for pedagogy. And for her deep adherence to giving children the truth, couched in the cultural medium of songs, hymns, anthems, and ballads. A gift that keeps giving.

Dorothy remains an iconic figure in the music scene in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. As a young black music educator, she moved north from Arkansas in the late 1960s and brought with her all of the amazing music of the movement, as well as her deep knowledge of history and political struggles. She was committed to continuing the artistic and cultural work of the Civil Rights Movement into the 1970s and 80s and 90s… and even still. Well into her 70s, she remains a force to be reckoned with. And her passion for all music, Jazz, Opera, Folk, Pop, Soul, R&B, Classical… is as profound as any musician I have or ever met, or expect to meet.

In the mid 1980s, Dorothy founded the Black Theater Ensemble in Rockford, IL. She asked a 14 yr. old me to be a part of it. She asked me to take on some difficult roles as the only Caucasian member of the ensemble. But she put me face to face with aspects of the "Black" experience that I would NEVER have otherwise had occasion to know so intimately or painfully. Will I ever really understand what it is like to grow up and live as "Other" in the way the so many of our nation's inhabitants do? No. Can I still be an informed ally and a devoted member of the community working for racial justice and true equality? ABSOLUTELY. So can you.

I remember one night early in high school, after a tough rehearsal with the Black Theater Ensemble, I was particularly devastated by the material we had been working on. I had been asked to portray a slave auctioneer. It was hard. I was so absolutely and instinctually opposed racial discrimination. And yet, here I was being asked to reenact one of the most unconscionable actions imaginable, selling another human being as property. It was in violation of everything I had learned from my parents, from the faith of my childhood, and from my deepest sense of humanity and justice. But it was the part I was asked to play. It was what my director had asked me to do. So I did it.

After the rehearsal, I sat on the edge of the stage and began to weep. The pain of the moment rising in my heart. My own anger that anyone had ever been treated this way stuck in my throat. The idea that this was the history and remembered family story of most of the members of the Black Theater Ensemble sharing that stage, was devastating to me.

Dorothy came over to me and placed her hand on my chest – over my heart. One by one, other members of the ensemble came to me, and placed their hands on my shoulders, back, head, and hands. Dorothy looked me firmly in the eye and said, "We have asked you to do a difficult thing. We have asked you to shoulder a heavy burden so that we can tell a story that needs to be told. But make no mistake, no one here is confused about who you are. We see the truth of who you are, separate from the role we have asked you to play. We see you, for who you are."

I wept even harder. It was one of those rare gifts of the theater, of the stage, where pain is shared and lessened by its sharing. A place where the social poison or hatred is diluted and diminished in the collective experience. And it is where I first understood as best I can, what it is like for people of color to live in a way that aspires to transcend such unimaginable atrocities.

But how few people are ever told this critical piece of information: "No one here is confused about who you are. We see you for who you are."

What would change in this world if every person who had ever experienced racism and bigotry and hatred could be surrounded by a community of kind and loving people, assuring them that they were really seen for the "content of ones character, not the color of one's skin," as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said?

It was a true kindness on the part of my theatrical colleagues of color that night, to counsel me through that tough moment. I was 15 yrs. old, and we were swimming in the deep end of a shameful pool of our nation's tragic racial history. And it broke my heart wide open. What I would learn in consecutive years was that this history was still current news. The Emancipation Proclamation and a century later the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, these did not solve the problems of racism. And every generation needs to keep addressing these issues. It is not a choice, it is an obligation.

And in those songs that Dorothy

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Joe Jencks is 20-year veteran of the international Folk scene, an award winning songwriter and vocalist, and a contributing writer to numerous publications. His column ***My Highway Home*** *is a recent addition to the Mad-Folk newsletter. For more information please visit:* ***www.joejencks.com****.*

Joe Jencks continues to host a monthly radio show called ***My Highway Home*** *on the new Folk Music network –* ***Folk Music Notebook****. This show features interviews with people Joe meets in his extensive travels along with music by many artists from the big tent that is Folk Music. Tune in on the first Monday of the month at 9:00 PM ET/ 6:00 PM PT. And rebroadcast on the following Sundays at 1:00 PM ET / 10:00 AM PT. Several past episodes are archived through* ***Folk Music Notebook*** *including shows about the Kerrville Folk Festival, Old Songs Festival, The Great Labor Arts Exchange, Ireland, and an interview with Sonny Ochs.*

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taught me from Kindergarten through High School, she laid the foundation for me to be a life-long ally in the struggle. And she did it with story and song. She handed me the musical and cultural tools I use daily to be a part of reaching for a world that is more transformed, more hopeful, more equal, more just. And there is a long way to go.

So… What is our job right now? How do we respond? Where is our place in the movement? How do we shape a more hopeful legacy in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and so many other people of color? Singing songs is a powerful thing. Songs have helped frame so many powerful moments in history and in the movements. But there are now whole generations of brilliantly dedicated activist and leaders who don't yet know how truly useful a tool music is in the struggle. So… the singing history of the movements can and should be reinvigorated and celebrated. Those songs hold within them the keys to hope and connectedness. We need those characteristics in the struggle. And if we sing the songs, "the Folk process" will have its way and new verses will be written to older melodies.

But we also need to make room in our hearts for new songs about what is happening now. I encourage you to look up the following song on YouTube. My friend and treasured colleague Tom Prasada-Rao wrote this in late May. It is a beautiful new song for today. I will be recording it, and dozens of other colleagues and friends are also recording and singing this song.

$20 Bill (for George Floyd)
© Tom Prasada-Rao 5/28/20

Some people die for honor
Some people die for love
Some people die while singing
To the heavens above
Some people die believing
In the cross on Calvary hill
And some people die
In the blink of an eye
For a $20 bill

Some people go out in glory
(Yeah) with the wind at their back
Some get to tell their own story
Write their own epitaph
Sometimes you see it coming
Sometimes you don't know until
You run out of breath
With a knee on your neck
For a $20 bill

O Brother, I never knew you
And now I never will
But I make this promise to you
I'll remember you still

So now let this be our communion
It's time to break the bread
Do this in remembrance
Just like the good book said
Sometimes the wine is a sacrament
Sometimes the blood is just spilled
Sometimes the law
Is the devils' last straw
The future unfulfilled
Like the dream they killed
For a $20 bill

Another dear and talented friend of mine, Ricardo Levins Morales has been making beautiful human-centered art for decades. And he is also a gifted thinker and keynote speaker on dismantling racism. Ricardo is Latino and Jewish, and was born in Puerto Rico. He lives and has his Art Studio in Minneapolis, quite near where George Floyd was killed. If you have been to a Folk Festival, protest, or progressive event in the last 30 years, you have likely seen Ricardo's amazing art somewhere on display. Even if you don't know his name, you would recognize his work (https://www.rlmartstudio.com). He has created album covers for dozens of artists as well, including three of my CDs. And I would like to share some of his words with you, because I think they are important, and because he sums up what the job is now for those of us in the struggle and endeavoring to be allies in this renewed Civil Rights Movement.

From Ricardo:

"Note: I was asked by SURJ (Showing Up for Racial Justice – a group which organizes white folks against racism) to write a few paragraphs offering a perspective on white solidarity. It was to open a national organizing conference call. What I wrote follows:

White people are taught that racism is a personal attribute, an attitude, maybe a set of habits. Anti-racist whites invest too much energy worrying about getting it right; about not slipping up and revealing their racial socialization; about saying the right things and knowing when to say nothing. It's not about that. It's about putting your shoulder to the wheel of history; about undermining the structural supports of a system of control that grinds us under, that keeps us divided even against ourselves and that extracts wealth, power and life from our communities like an oil company sucks it from the earth.

The names of the euro-descended anti-racist warriors we remember – John Brown, Anne Braden, Myles Horton – are not those of people who did it right. They are of people who never gave up. They kept their eyes on the prize – not on their anti-racism grade point average.

This will also be the measure of your work. Be there. No one knows how to raise a child but we do it anyway. We don't get it right. The essential thing is that we don't give up and walk away. Don't get me wrong. It is important to learn and improve and become wise in the ways of struggle – or of parenting. But that comes with time. It comes after the idea of not being in the struggle no longer seems like an option.

One more thing. You may not get the validation you hunger for. Stepping outside of the smoke and mirrors of racial privilege is hard, but so is living within the electrified fences of racial oppression – and no one gets cookies for that. The thing is that when you help put out a fire, the people whose home was in flames may be too upset to thank and praise you – especially when you look a lot like the folks who set the fire. That's OK. This is about something so much bigger than that.

There are things in life we don't get to do right. But we do get to do them." ~ RLM

So, this is the job now. However imperfectly, please keep showing up. Listen to the voices of color all around us. Ask questions, and question answers. March and demonstrate. Write letters, give money to legal defense funds, paint rocks with hopeful messages and leave them on walking trails. Make Covid-19 masks to give away to people at various Civil Rights gatherings. Ask leaders of color in your community how you can be most helpful, and then follow through. Learn how to help celebrate and uplift leaders of color in your community. Even if the work is not glamorous, it needs to be done. And if you have a specific skill and time on your hands, offer that skill to the movement. But also keep singing. Keep singing the songs. Sing the old songs, write the new songs. Historically, the movement has never been stronger than when we were a

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On the Air

Simply Folk on Wisconsin Public Radio w/ Dan Robinson, Host

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- Tue - Another Green Morning w/ Mac Robertson & Brian Hirsch
- Wed - Back to the Country (country music on a theme) w/ Bill Malone
- Thur - Diaspora (folk and international) w/ Terry O'
- Fri - Mud Acres (bluegrass and acoustic) w/ Chris Powers

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(which later became the Stagi company) around 1982, and it's still the instrument I sing with. My other instrument has 56-buttons (4 octave, with D# and G# in each octave duplicated on both sides, for ease of fingering), made by the Wheatstone company in 1878. Both instruments are "treble" concertinas: the Bastari's range is G below middle C to a soprano's high C. The Wheatstone goes from the same G (below middle C) and has a 4-octave range into the stratosphere, a G one-and-one-half octaves above that High C. Notes only dogs can hear. At one time (turn of the 20th century) there were concertina orchestras. My instrument was the "extended treble", the piccolo of the family. You may notice a few people (Michael Cooney, for one) playing a larger instrument, the lovely cello-like baritone concertina. Just remember, as the instrument gets larger, it gets heavier, and creates more potential strain on wrists and hands.

Why do I have two? The Wheatstone is my Porsche. I take it out to play instrumental pieces, as it has a lovely rich sound due to its steel reeds, rosewood ends, and leather bellows. It plays like a dream, with a light touch enabling me to drop in quick little ornaments and trills. The Bastari, though clunkier, also has its strong points: an airier tone (bellows like cheesecloth) that blends well with voices and other instruments, even when I play chords rather than single notes (by pressing in more than one button). The Bastari is a team player. The Wheatstone is a star.

Intrigued? You may want to think about attending NESI, the annual Northeast Squeeze-In (http://squeeze-in.org), where all types of people converge to play all types of music on all types of squeezeboxes. Enjoy!

Cindy Mangsen spent her younger years in Chicago, although she didn't pick up the concertina until she relocated to the Northeast. She and her husband Steve Gillette tour the country with their songs, guitars, and concertinas.

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singing movement. Let's get back to being a singing movement.

I was privileged to go on a retreat a few years back at The Highlander Center in Tennessee – one of the true birthplaces of the modern Civil Rights Movement. While there I had an amazing conversation with Bernice Johnson Reagon, one of the original Freedom Singers and founder of Sweet Honey In The Rock. She said, "In community a song is not just sung, it is raised up! A song leader needs to understand the difference between singing for themselves and singing for the community. A song leader cannot lift a song and the weight of its meaning and intentions alone, they lead a community in raising up a song, together."

Whatever our song, may we learn better how to raise it up together, to heal what is broken and build a more hopeful future for all of us. Racism, bigotry, and anti-Semitism are problems that belong to all of us. And healing the wounds of these deep hurts can and should be the work of us all.

~ Joe Jencks
6-21-20

"WHEN IS MY RENEWAL DUE?"

(Hint: It is NOT the date on the mailing label!)

The date shown on the mailing label is NOT your membership expiration date!
There has been some confusion lately, and we apologize for that.
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