

# MadFolk News

## Singing Story Songs

By Cindy Mangsen

What is it that I love about traditional ballads and story-songs? It's a question I've tried to answer for myself for many years, and I can't pin it down to just one thing. It has something to do with that sense of entering another world, another time, another reality. There is some magic for me in singing words that have been sung for a couple of hundred years. There is some comfort in singing a very old song and realizing in a visceral way that the essential emotions and humanity of the story are as vivid now as they were when the song was first sung. The first ballads I heard were from the folksingers in

the 1960's. There was that wonderful album by Joan Baez, with "Mary Hamilton" and "The Great Silkie". When I first heard those songs, I fell under their spell and was fascinated by their long lineage. When I started to sing them for myself, I found that they transported me even further. On a good night, a couple of things happen when singing a ballad in front of an audience. For the first couple of verses, there is some restiveness, as both I and the audience settle into the tune and the pace of the song. We both need to get past the "What's the point of this?" modern-American mode. But if we're lucky, there's a sense almost of stillness

that creeps in, as if we're being allowed to breathe the air of another time. It's very much, for me, like watching a movie and reaching that point where you truly believe in the reality it presents you. It doesn't surprise me at all that the really great ballads, like the great myths, have survived through many cultures and centuries. I know that I am never tired of singing them, and if I allow myself, I still find their stories moving after twenty (or fifty) years of singing. The stories are so rich that as I change and grow older, deeper meanings are revealed and I always feel there's another layer of understanding to be reached.

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**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.**



Review by Kiki Schueler

I've been anticipating the release of Shadow Land since February of last year, when Ben de la Cour arrived at the house in the middle of an ice storm for his second show here. A little worse for wear, he was on his way home to Nashville, having recorded the songs for this record in Winnipeg, courtesy of a Canadian arts grant. The wonder of it, he's not even Canadian. He played many of them that night, and they were stunning, his addictive voice unspooling tale after tale. The music industry being what it is, it took until mid-May of this year for that record to be officially released. It is worth the wait. Shadow Land is the best book of short stories you've ever read, and you'll never tire of rereading it. His vivid characters aren't just sketches, they are fully realized and deftly painted. In the course of just three or four minutes, you know these people. Perhaps because they are familiar to begin with: the guy in rehab, the girl next door, the black sheep relative. Fitting for a genre he calls American noir, the body count here is high, and every story is darkly fascinating.

If you thought the black soul at the center of "Tupelo" (from his last record, the excellent The High Cost of Living Strange) was disturbing, wait until you meet "God's Only Son" in the opening track. Much like Robert Mitchum's depraved preacher in The Night of the Hunter, this Son believes he's talking to God, but it's certainly not the one we learned about in Sunday school. Exhibit A, the opening line, "I first heard the word of God when I was eight years old, he told me to take a carving knife and hold it to my brother's

throat." A bank robbery gone improbably awry and a getaway car rolled in a Texas ditch account for the first two casualties. As unsettling as the lyrics are, it's the music that's truly haunting. Acoustic guitar and a rattling snare drum make for the primary melody, but under that lies a sinister mandolin and a truly otherworldly whistle. Is it a fiddle? Clarinet? Theremin? I only know because I asked him. On "In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash," he takes a diner cash register slogan so worn you can see the yellowed scotch tape curling at the edges, and turns it into a Dylan circa Shot of Love style blues, complete with powerful backing vocals from Manitoban Andrina Turenne. The hyper-caffeinated "Basin Lounge" pairs barroom piano with manic lyrics for a laundry list of offenses at what might be the worst club ever. Though he confesses when playing it live that it's an amalgam, and none of it actually happened at the titular venue.

I'm torn between revealing the tragedy of "High Heels Down the Holler," and making you work it out yourself. It plays like the bastard storychild of "Boys Don't Cry" and "Psycho," the pieces slowly falling into place, backed by a frenzied cello. "Amazing Grace (Slight Return)" uses a similar tactic, giving you all the information you need, but never saying it outright. The details are exquisite, from the "lime green Duster, stripes on the side, and a red bumper sticker reading Rebel Pride," to the cop who's "been fighting with his wife hasn't slept for days," to the old man who "throws on yesterday's clothes," lets the trash pile up, and his yard go to hell. The accordion swept waltz "Swan Dive" opens with a dreamily witnessed suicide, "I watch him go silently all the way down, an angel in freefall wearing a hospital gown," but it's just the framework for the narrator's reflections on his own life. Three songs, three more bodies (four if you count the guy "angel" Joey most likely shot). One might think "From Now On" was a recent addition, so perfectly does it depict the world we currently inhabit. But it's only coincidence, or prescience. "Through an

empty world I drift along," he sings before the ultimate question, "is it going to be this way from now on?"

I was looking forward to celebrating the release of the record with de la Cour at the house Memorial Day weekend, but, like every other show I had planned for May, it's been postponed. I can tell you with certainty that he will be playing the House of Righteous Music as soon, and as often, as possible. Until then, support him, and other artists who find themselves cut off from their main source of income, by buying the music.

But buy Shadow Land first.

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.

Contact us at [madfolk@charter.net](mailto:madfolk@charter.net). Learn about concerts, membership, scholarships, and volunteer opportunities at [www.madfolk.org](http://www.madfolk.org).

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# My Highway Home

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## Road Dog, New Tricks

I have to say honestly that the second half of April and the first half of May were Technology Boot Camp for me personally. I have not worked that hard for a month straight, since I was an undergrad student. I pulled one 19-hour day, many 18-hour days, and 12-14 hours of work a day was just the new normal. What was not normal was waking up in the same place every blessed day. I woke up on the 3rd consecutive Sunday – in my own bed – and my first thought was, “Something is terribly wrong. I’m still here!”

I pull 14 to 16-hour days while on tour regularly enough. From the time I start working on email and correspondence in the morning in a hotel room or a home-stay (billeting as they say in Canada), through my day’s drive (on which I am making business calls and doing admin with a hands free cellular device), to arriving at a venue, setting up sound and doing a soundcheck, grabbing a quick bite, setting up the CD table, grabbing a moment to tune the instruments and write a set list, on to the show for a few hours, and then visiting with people after, and then tearing down the sound rig, packing everything up and heading off to wherever I need to be for the evening... That is usually a 14 or 15-hour workday. And it is a joyful one. It is a day filled with being in the world, talking with my people, hugs, laughter, and good music... an honest day’s work. I sleep satisfied. Wash, rinse, and repeat.

You get into a routine on the road. A rhythm emerges to your days that is a push to maintain, and still there is something meditative about it. Something nearly monastic, ascetic, simple in the order of things. The job is clearly defined. Get from here to there safely, and in a timely fashion. And the day is filled with it’ own little routines. A Thermos full of herbal tea; on long road days, a second filled with coffee. Light food – trail mix and fresh fruit in the car. NPR. Tossing song ideas around in my head while I drive. I usually don’t write them down. If they’re good enough, I will remember them. And if I don’t remember them, well, maybe they weren’t that interesting to begin with. Just improvisational process for

its own sake. And that too has a place on the creative journey.

Once at the venue, there are plenty of other routines. I always pack the vehicle the same way. I always pack the car in such a fashion that I can tell at a glance if something is missing. I always pack my bags and road cases the same way internally as well and for the same reason. I know if something is out of place I should go do one more “idiot check,” before I leave the venue. It all gets set up with subtle variations on the same theme, and it all gets packed away again some hours later with the same diligent precision. It’s how I know I have everything I need to do the work well. It may seem a little OCD, but it is my office space. I like it set up a certain way so I can do what I do to the best of my ability, and concentrate 100% on the music, not every other thing in the universe.

There is no normal anymore. Everything is different. Every Live-Stream show I offer is different, and frequently on a different platform that requires specific knowledge. One day I might be making a music video for someone. The next day offering a concert from my studio. The day after I might be singing for an online Zoom Service for various spiritual communities or sharing music with some activist or advocacy organizations. On-line Song circles, production meetings, union meetings, virtual festivals... and each one requires something different. There is no normal. I tear down and set up my small studio space (8x12 foot), several times a week. And there is no rhythm to it day after day, not like there is on the road. It is unsettling.

I got in my car a few hours before one of my online concerts, and I headed down to the interstate and drove for about ½ and hour west, and then came back. I needed to shake off the anxiety and find my mojo. And I knew that an hour or so behind the wheel would at least begin to put me in the right mood to offer a concert. (Not joking.)

And even during the online concerts, there is this astonishing bifurcation of consciousness. Because one is now the audio engineer, videographer,

production manager, lighting specialist, set designer and props manager, producer, director, and performer and frequently host, all at once. Smile for the camera, check the meters, sing a little closer to the mic, look at the camera again. Damn. Missed a transitional chord position while I was checking to make sure I was not peaking-out the broadcast software’s sound meter. Back to the camera – there’s people out there – we trust? That’s right. I know how to do this. Wait, did I sing the 2nd verse already? Damn, missed another transitional chord. OK. Next song. And so it goes.

But this week has been different. I have finally gotten on top of the various bits of gear, software, cameras, lighting, levels and parameters, and I just had fun with my most recent live-stream broadcast. And I remembered again what it feels like to be a musician. I have been practicing new material, working on new songs, and cooking some good meals.

I have returned to an awareness that while other people take a weekend on Friday night -Sunday, my weekends are usually Monday night -Wednesday. Even at home I seem to be tied into this rhythm. And so I am taking a slower pace midweeks, and making more time to create music. Column continued on next page

*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](http://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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Just music.

I have no idea what the new normal will be, or if there will be a new normal any time soon. And I am incredibly grateful that I have at my fingertips the capacity to work from home – even as a performing artist and musician. I can do what I do adaptively, and give what I have to the world to the best of my ability. I can write, record, share, perform, and create new forms of art. As I work with new mediums, and show up in the world in MANY places as a musician, I remain ready to give and serve.

I get to do all of this, because of the technology and some mentors who have been helping me make sense of it. And I am so grateful. Is it strange? Yes. Do I miss live performance with rooms full of people? YES. Will this hold us all until that is possible again? YES!

And I get letters and emails from fans and Folk community people expressing how much the music means to them, and what a comfort it is to be able to link into shows presented by myself and scores of colleagues and compadres. They express how listening to songs that help them deal with the innumerable ways in which their own lives have changed, is helping them cope and adapt and keep thriving. The letters express how much the music is transcending the medium - fickle as it is, and the spirit of what they get out of listening to a concert is being preserved in some real and useful ways. I am honored and filled with gratitude.

Technology Boot Camp was a slog. But, it was worth the weeks of hard work and learning. I am doing things I would never have before imagined possible. And I have no idea where this new skill set will lead me, what these new creative tools will invite me to explore next. But it is good. I can say that for sure. Even if it was like cramming for Finals and Juries, all at once. (Just like I used to do in April and May every year when I was at conservatory.) Even if it was an insane amount of work to get caught up with so many new skill-sets all at once.

It is worth it. And bringing healing and joy and hope and release into the world in whatever ways are possible – that is still the job of the artist. To be a soothsayer, song weaver, bard, balladeer, and prophetic voice; that is still the job of the folksinger. And the world still needs all of us to be offering our unique contributions. We each weave a thread through the tapestry of Folk.

So... I have traded the routines of the highway for the routines of the home. I have traded the meditative art of keeping my ducks in a row from a suitcase, for actually using the same dresser drawers and closet and desk, every day. It was genuinely unsettling at first. I have not spent this much time in one place in more than 21 years. But there is a gentle beauty to watching spring happen from one place. There is a certain serenity to walking the same path in the local park almost every day, and noticing the advancement of the seasons incrementally. I see my house plants change daily. I see myself change as well.

What seemed outside my capacity only weeks ago, I now do as a matter of daily course. And while I miss our community fiercely, I miss the home-stays and the late-night conversations with hosts and colleagues, I miss the campfires at the festivals and the late-night jams, and I REALLY miss making music WITH other people in real-time, I am immensely grateful for the abundance of capacity and technology that allows us to keep Folk music and the Folk community thriving.

I hope you are all adapting and finding ways to connect. I am hearing about song circles in fields, socially distanced but connected. I am hearing about back-yard house concerts, where people bring all their own food and beverage and all stay appropriately distanced. I am hearing about songwriting collaborations, new albums, and all sorts of creative ways of staying connected while staying safe. I hope you are embracing what is possible with your own music and communities. And I hope you are letting some of the magic of the music in, no matter what. I hope you keep playing, singing, laughing, crying, shouting, and

creating as your soul calls you to. You are FOLK. You are the reason Folk music exists. Music of the people, by the people, for the people.

Maybe you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but you can teach a Road Dog new tricks.

I'll keep learning, if you keep learning with me. That's a promise!

~ Joe Jencks  
5-20-20

\*If you want to help support Joe's music and writing directly during the Covid-19 era, please visit his website to check out new "virtual" concerts, recording projects, broadcasts, and / or make a direct contribution to Joe in any amount via PayPal: [joejencks@hotmail.com](mailto:joejencks@hotmail.com)



Okay here's something to try, if you know even just the rudiments of making music. My music partner Lou and I came up with this as one way of keeping ourselves musically involved with each other and interested in the songwriting process despite stay-on-couch directives. Incidentally, it sounds more complicated than it really is.

**One:** Write a simple rhyme. Best if it has a consistent meter (same number of syllables and same stresses in each line):

JEAN went TO the STORE to SHOP.  
THERE she BOUGHT a LEM-on DROP.  
STUCK it WAY back IN her CHEEK.  
MADE it LAST for ONE whole WEEK.

**Two:** Assign some very easy chords to it. Just goof around with your ukulele. At this point you may find it easier to come up with a simple melody too, to help you find chords that sound okay. Let's say you choose the key of C:

C                    G7    C  
Jean went to the store to shop  
F  
There she bought a lemon drop  
G7    C            G7    C  
Stuck it way back in her cheek  
F    C            G7    C  
Made it last for one whole week.

**Three:** Give it a tempo, using a metronome. There are many free online metronomes if you don't have one (google "online metronome") and free metronome apps for your smartphone. When you find a good tempo, note its number.

**Four:** Send this to your co-conspirator. Just as a document; don't send a recording of yourself singing it yet. Don't tell your pal anything about the melody, if you've come up with one already. Just send them the lyrics, the chords, and the tempo.

**Five:** record yourself singing and playing your version of the song. Meanwhile, your cohort should be making up a melody using the chords and tempo you provided, and should record it.

**Six:** Have them send you their recording. You can send them YOUR recording too, to keep the whole thing honest. There are

a number of ways to do this, as an audio recording or as a video.

**Seven:** Combine the recordings. You can do this with various audio editing programs like Garageband, or with video editing programs like iMovie (these both come free with Macs). If you don't have such capabilities, you can just play their version while SINGING your version, while recording the whole shebang on your smartphone or tape recorder or whatever.

And voila, you will end up with a song sung in two-part harmony. It probably won't be clear which part should be considered the melody and which part the harmony, but who cares?

This can get as complicated as you want. If your melody ends up having a sort of swingy feel (Lou and I call it a gallop) like the song "Pop Goes The Weasel," you should let your cohort know. You can try something with a waltzy feel ("JEAN went back DOWN to the STORE in her CAR"), and so forth, but again, let your co-conspirator know. It might even be a good idea to write the stressed syllable in CAPS as I've done here.

Lou and I tried this and found the result to be a pleasant surprise. We did it using the video capabilities of our smartphones and combining the results in iMovie, as a split-screen thing. (We still have lots to learn about video, as we didn't realize until later that Lou was actually reversed on the screen. She discovered this by seeing the keyboard on the wrong side of the accordion!)

So anyway. This all reminded me of the popular Surrealist doodle they called "Exquisite Corpse." Chances are you have played with this at some point. It also involves contributors contributing while not knowing what the co-contributors are doing, the final result being a big surprise. The most well known is the drawing version. A piece of paper is folded into four panels. Bob draws a head on

panel **A-1**, extending neck lines just beyond fold, then folds the panel under so Barb can't see it. Barb starts at neck lines and draws torso and arms (**B-2**), extending lines just beyond fold; folds panel under, gives to Jim, etc. When done, the entire figure (**E**) is revealed!

This reminds me of the folk process. Consider this quote by Andre Breton, major surrealist, in 1917, about Exquisite Corpse drawings and poems:

*What exalted us in these productions was indeed the conviction that, come what might, they bore the mark of something that could not be begotten by one mind alone and that they were endowed, in a much greater measure, with a power of drift that poetry cannot value too highly.*

Same with trad folk music! With writing, it's the same idea as the drawing, but instead of line-hints extending beyond the fold, a verse's last line is shown. My good friend Maury Smith, great Madison musician and songwriter and one third of the New Orleans styled **Trio Soleil**, tried this out with me last year, me writing a verse then Maury, only showing each other our last lines. I'll leave you with the stupid result. Not great literature, but as Lynda Barry says, "Dare to suck!" You should try it! Great quarantine fun! One of us wrote the 1st and 3rd verses, the other the 2nd and 4th:

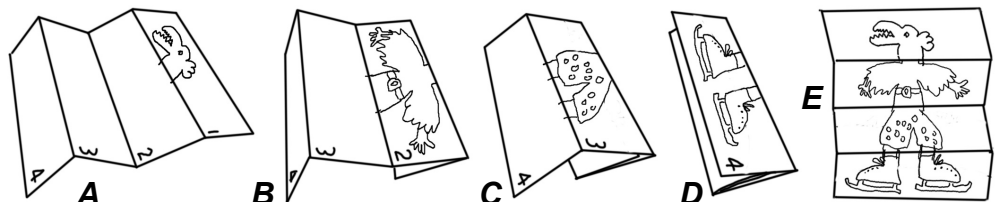
*So down the ravine it kerplunked and kathumped  
And onto the road but it still didn't stop  
Until off riparian riprap it bumped  
Right Into the river with one little plop*

*she could have been my sister so I dove right in  
grabbed her by the scales of her shivering fin  
out with the bad air, in with the good  
looked like a favor from where I stood*

*Suggestions are heavy and certainly drown  
Admonishments float for a second then sink  
Encouragements founder and quickly go down  
But favors can bob for awhile I think*

*a man gets thirsty, a man's gotta drink  
a gal needs to freshen, she heads to the sink  
if you wanna lend a hand, though, please take heed  
it's hard to know what some folks need*

WZ June 2020



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The date shown on the mailing label is NOT your membership expiration date! There has been some confusion lately, and we apologize for that. The date is just the date the labels were printed, as new cost-saving postal procedures do not allow us to include expiration dates there anymore. When it is time to renew, we will send you a personal notice by mail or email. At that point you will be able to either mail a check or renew online at [www.madfolk.org](http://www.madfolk.org). If you have questions about your membership in the meantime, send email to [info@madfolk.org](mailto:info@madfolk.org). Thanks for your membership and support of Mad Folk!

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