

Mad Folk News

My Highway Home

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Why Some Songs Endure: Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!

As we approach the holidays, we become slowly inundated with “Christmas” music. Some of it is beautiful and heartfelt. Some of it is terrible, cliché, or robustly innocuous - as if someone had to work really hard to make something that overtly bland. And in fact, they did. Some of it is just about making money for someone, and some of it is so well worn it no longer holds meaning. But then there are those special holiday songs, the ones that get us every time. The songs that are so profound, that the song will outdistance the singer every time, no matter how good or bad the delivery is. For me, Silent Night is just such a song.

Written two-hundred and two years ago this Christmas, Silent Night remains a magical piece of music, even for those who do not ascribe any particular meaning to its theological roots. One that invites people’s hearts to open, because of its sheer unadulterated beauty.

Franz Xaver Gruber took words written by Fr. Joseph Mohr, and penned one of the most beautiful melodies that has emerged in the western musical traditions. Gruber was an organist by training, and a music teacher in a town near to where Fr. Mohr was serving at St. Nicholas in Oberndorf bei Salzburg, Austria. The church organ had been damaged by flooding, and Fr. Mohr was eager to have new music for his Christmas Eve Mass. (He was serving St. Nicholas parish after all!) So Mohr took a poem he’d written a few years earlier and brought it to Gruber, asking him to write a Christmas hymn for voice and guitar. Gruber took up the challenge with enthusiasm. From that point forward, the song travelled across Europe and Russia, to the Americas, and by the mid 1840s was known in countless places around the world.

It is a personal peeve of mine that some artists feel a need to overly stylize “covers” when they sing them. They feel compelled to put their unique spin on a piece, sometimes to a fault. I’ll grant that “variations on a theme” is a widely respected and reasonable compositional method. But it is done by most composers with great care to se-

lectively quote with precision, a set piece of existing melodic work, and then travel down a pathway of musical and rhythmic exploration. Many Jazz greats follow this idea when taking solos in an ensemble setting. They lift a theme from another work and play with it, like a deft juggler. Unfortunately many modern pop, rock, country artists will take a beautiful song and, in my opinion, vandalize it for profit. (Yes, I am being a music snob. I own it.)

There is a fine line between interpreting and outright changing a song. Ruthie Foster for instance, took Pete Seeger’s song, If I Had A Hammer – and put it in a minor key. That was brilliant! She preserved the structure and cadence of the melody and words. But in a minor key (Aeolian Mode for those that care) with a few “blue” notes, the song rises as a lament, a song of yearning, an entreatment to make real the vision of a world that has Hammers of Justice, Bells of Freedom, and Songs of Love between people.

But if you are going to alter a piece of music that significantly, the end result had better be brilliant. The people who were busy dedicating their lives to music long before radio, television, the internet, and billboard charts... they knew what they were doing. They devoted a lifetime to understanding music and its many complexities, nuances, and capacities to move people. And many of us still devote our lives to understanding the beauty and wonder of music. So to presume that composers don’t do their homework, or that the way they write a piece of music is just their style, as opposed to a deeply intentional compositional choice, is arrogance or ignorance. Maybe both. Or maybe it’s just the difference between composers and poets.

A poet writes words and then seeks to put them to music. A composer almost always starts with a melodic idea and carries that forward to its fullest measure, as an expression of emotion and idea unto itself. In the case of Silent Night, Franz Gruber wrote an inspired melody. And indeed some of the cadence was dictated by the words. Of course

it would be in six-eight time. The poetry in German leans that way already.

Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht,
Alles schläft; einsam wacht
Nur das traute hochheilige Paar.
Holder Knabe im lockigen Haar,
Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!
Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!

But without the melody and changes Gruber wrote, Fr. Mohr’s words would not have travelled across the world in just a couple decades, in an era even before the telegraph. But Gruber would not have written that precise melody without the cadence and content of the words inspiring its general flow. It was the pairing of music and word that made it truly inspirational. And of course it was meant as a lullaby. It was a song, sung though time to a baby in a manger, a fatigued and likely frightened new mother, and father who was overwhelmed. Mohr, dipping deeply into his faith, wrote words that were both of praise and tenderness. And Gruber, understanding this sentiment, took up the challenge of musically cradling the words of 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.*

*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/ 8:00 PM CT. And rebroadcast on the following Sundays at 1:00 PM ET/ 12-Noon CT. 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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a devout mystical poet, with the same tender care one would hold such a newborn baby.

It is this tenderness that makes Silent Night durable across time and culture. I have Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim friends who say that this is the best Christmas song ever written. It is because it reaches across the divide of theology, and reaches into a quintessential human experience: birth. Joseph Campbell, famed professor of global mythology would say that this song speaks to the "Mono-Myth." It is part of a deep human archetypal understanding that transcends culture, time, and place. There is universality to the narrative, and in the tenderness it evokes.

There is not a songwriter or composer alive, who does not hope to pen at least one piece like this in their lifetime. Even one piece of music that outlives a composer by a few centuries, is a gift for that musician, and for the rest of us. And it is in that spirit that I am very careful as a songwriter and composer, and equally careful as a song interpreter. I will inevitably put a little spin on any song I sing. I may elaborate ever so slightly on a melody, or play with the rhythm just a touch for emphasis. This is to be expected. But if I am singing a song written by another writer, it is because it moves my soul. And it is precisely how they wrote it, the tension and juxtaposition of melody, verse, and chord changes that draw me in. I am unlikely to change that very much. To do so is to alter what drew me to that specific piece of music

in the first place.

I wholeheartedly endorse experimenting with songs. Especially the ones that have become chestnuts... The songs that once had something to say, but are now lost in layers of interpretation and cliché. But a good song, it will keep speaking its truth centuries later. Who am I to tinker with that truth? Who are you?

There is nuance and wonder on the journey of musical discovery. I set Silent Night to an Electric Bouzouki accompaniment, and I even bring in a little digital delay and fuzzy overdrive in for dramatic moments, much the way an organist like Franz Gruber would have used various "stops" on his organ. Gruber was playing in his time, the most technologically advanced mechanical musical instrument that had ever been created. But when it broke, he went to a simple guitar, a brilliant melody, and a gentle six-eight lilting waltz. I have to believe that if he had access to a pedal-board with some bells and whistles (a phrase we get from pipe organs by the way, which do in fact have bells and whistles), Gruber would have employed my pedal board artfully. But he would have written the same kind of melody. Even with modern instruments, that set of words would almost surely have led Gruber to the same emotive place of gentleness, tenderness, awe, and wonder.

So, by all means, experiment with the oldies. Play with the way we hear these songs. Help

us hear something new in a melody or song, but also preserve what is quintessential is its timelessness. Remember that the pieces of music that have been around for centuries have survived the test of time for a reason. They are incredibly well composed pieces of music. And before you go deconstructing them to see how to make them better, be sure to also note how they can make you a better writer, composer, singer and player. Because those songs and those composers have already made their mark, they have already withstood the test of time.

I'm not at all sure that people will be singing much of the late 20th Century pop-Christmas music in 200 years. But I bet on its 400th anniversary, Silent Night will be just as powerful and tender as it was on candle-lit Christmas Eve in 1818, in a small town in Austria. Or as sung by soldiers in the trenches of WWI during the Christmas Truce of 1914 (Joyeux Noël). A song that can stop a world war, even for a day, is a song that should be revered and respected, just as it is.

Wishing you all Happy Holidays,

~ Joe Jencks, 12-1-20

*Tune in to Joe's YouTube channel on **Saturday, December 19th at 8:00 PM CT** for a special seasonal concert broadcast: **On A Midwinter's Night**. More details at: www.joejencks.com

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Review by Kiki Schueler

Andrew Bird may have a complicated relationship with the “dubious motives that might lead an artist to craft a holiday record,” but he has crafted a magical, as well as timely, ode to the season by combining classics, originals and a few inspired covers only tangentially related to Christmas. And this record is all the better for it. An expanded version of the six song EP of the same name released last November; HARK! the full length hits all the right yuletide notes.

The recording sessions for last year’s six songs were prompted by Bird’s re-enchancement with Vince Guaraldi’s ageless Charlie Brown Christmas. “Skating” glides on Bird’s pristine violin. Meanwhile, “Christmas is Coming” reimagines the piano and jazzy drum classic as a whistling, pizzicato celebration. The high-hat leaning percussion, thankfully, remains (courtesy of Ted Poor, a University of Washington assistant professor of drums). It will leave visions of Peanuts characters dancing in your heads. I can never say enough about Bird’s preternatural whistling. It is an instrument unto itself, perfectly toned and capable of the most complicated of melodies. Usually a thing to be used sparingly, I wish for it on every song. It renders his instrumental version of “Oh Holy Night” surprisingly emotional. Bing Crosby would certainly smile at the breathy whistle interlude in Irving Berlin’s immortal “White Christmas.” While the song is already drenched in melancholy,

Bird imagines it lonelier and emptier, making it even more appropriate for this year’s holiday.

One of three originals, “Christmas in April” was penned at the onset of the pandemic, when so much was unknown. He captures that uncertainty in his lyrics, whether pondering, “Oh, my love, when will you know? If we can meet under the mistletoe,” or confessing, “Yeah, I’m writing this song about Christmas in April this year, so I’m not sure what to think about that.” The lovely, clip-clopping waltz recalls cowboy trail songs of yore, all that’s missing is a yodel. Lyrically, “Alabaster” isn’t a song of the season, but its references to shorter days and longer nights place it solidly post winter solstice, while the chorus of “Keep your lamp on” conjures a welcoming light in a snowy window. The similarly themed “Night’s Falling” is an elegiac lament toggling between reassurance and remorse, “Night’s falling, but you’re not alone, no you’re not alone,” becomes “Take courage, ‘cause night’s falling and you’re on your own,” by song’s end.

Of all the tragic losses this year, perhaps none feels as unfair as the passing of John Prine, who survived two battles with cancer only to lose to COVID. All it takes for his “Souvenirs” to qualify for HARK! are the opening lines, “All the snow has turned to water, Christmas days have come and gone. Broken toys and faded colors are all that’s left to linger on.” It’s an imaginative and affecting tribute. Perhaps even more inspired is “Greenwine,” his mash-up of “Greensleeves” and the Handsome Family’s dark “So Much Wine.” (Admittedly, calling a Handsome Family song “dark” is redundant.) Again, the mere mention makes it eligible, “I had nothing to say on Christmas day when you threw all your clothes in the snow, when you burnt your hair, knocked over chairs, I just tried to stay out of your way.” It’s the effortless way that

he transforms the common time dirge into a waltz that makes it the standout track. Apologies to “What Child Is This,” I will never hear you the same way again.

The whimsical and nostalgic album cover was painted by Bird’s mother Beth, who instilled a love of art in him through visits to the Art Institute of Chicago. It is appropriate to the season that the record is a family affair. It remains to be seen what this year’s gatherings will look like, but HARK! will certainly be part of mine. In fact, it just might be the only Christmas record I need.

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. Learn about concerts, membership, scholarships, and volunteer opportunities at www.madfolk.org. www.facebook.com/pages/Madison-Folk-Music-Society/34497984835

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Joe Jencks



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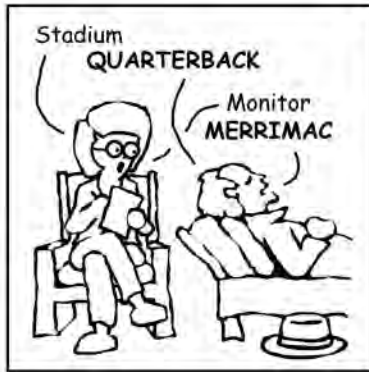
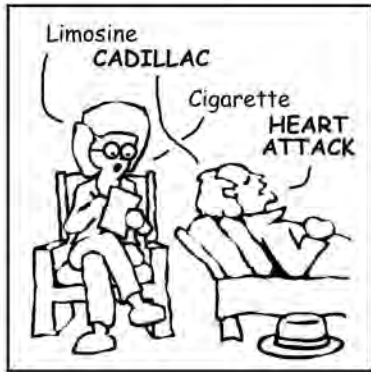
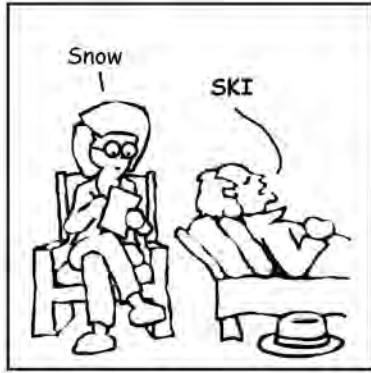
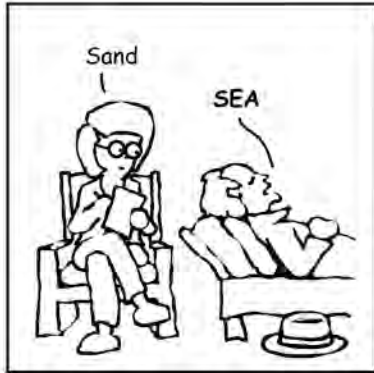
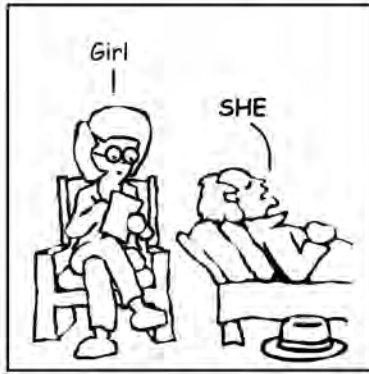
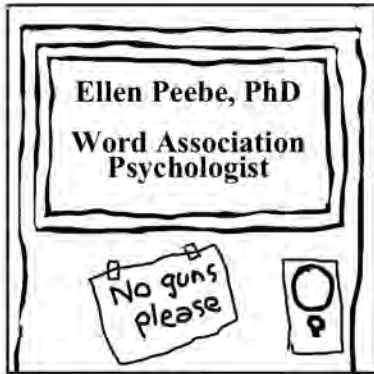


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The Songwriter & the Shrink



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