

A few words about "What I Do"

by Don White

Folksingers, poets, storytellers and comedians all suffer from the same incurable disease – they think they have something to say.

To me each of these artists has the exact same job description. They stand alone on the stage and try to communicate their view of the world to a room full of strangers. However, each group brings a completely different set of skills to the task. When I began performing at open mikes in the late 80s and I was spending an equal amount of time studying the finer points of these communities, I was surprised to learn how little interaction there was between them.

I was getting a lot of well-intentioned but unsolicited input at the time from other folksingers and club owners essentially stating that if I were by some miracle to persevere in the entertainment world it would certainly not be on the strength of my guitar playing or the vocal style I was developing which has since come to be known as the approximate pitch method. They were right, of course. And after a reasonable amount of time mourning the out of hand dismissal of my dreams by my peers I took a good hard look at my prospects for success in the folk scene as a person who emphasized in equal portions comedy, storytelling and songwriting over guitar wizardry and vocal prowess. All the data I was subsequently able to gather indicated that a dramatic change in my career path was imminent.

Then I went to the Olde Vienna Kaffeehaus to see some old cranky union guy from out west named Utah Phillips. He came out, sat down and started talking. Twenty minutes later after he had completely disarmed the audience with a brilliant combination of comedy, storytelling, unforgivable exaggeration and pure personality, he lifted his guitar into his lap and played a song about a hobo. – Simple chords, adequate vocals and as effective as anything I had ever seen. When the song was over the room had melted into his hand.

Throughout the next hour he transitioned seamlessly from poet to comic to folksinger to raconteur. And then at the end of the concert he sang "Hallelujah I'm a Bum" and seemed to use it as a vehicle by which to condense and encapsulate in one song all the creative transitions he had led us so effortlessly through over the previous hour and a half. He sang a verse and a chorus, sat the guitar beside him and recited a poem, another verse and chorus and then a long funny story, A third verse and chorus and then an a cappella original anti war song. He then ended the song and the concert with the audience all joining in and singing the last chorus and presumably all willing to follow him out of the building and off into battle. It was masterful.

Two thirds of the way into this concert and long after he had broken down all the emotional defenses of the audience with his surgical use of humor and charm, he told the story of being a

soldier in Korea toward the end of the war when much of the country had been blown to bits. There were ditches, he said, outside the barbed wire of his base where children who were orphaned by war would sleep at night. In the morning, Mr. Phillips said that he would often bring tea out to the refugees. On this day he found that a young boy had frozen to death during the night. After getting a response from his commander that was racist and dehumanizing regarding what to do with the body he took it upon himself to carry it to a Catholic orphanage.

The description that Utah Phillips gave those of us in attendance that night of the moment where he found himself handing the body of a frozen child to two nuns in an orphanage while wearing the uniform of the country that in all likelihood had dropped the bombs that killed this child's parents and his description of the look in their eyes and the effect it had on his sense of humanity as they silently took the frozen young body from him, created an image so vivid in my mind that at times I feel that it is not something that was told to me but something that I experienced myself. It was far and away the most deeply moving ten minutes I had ever witnessed on stage or anywhere.

After I peeled my emotional self off the floor I thought, "This is what this guy came here to do." Everything that he did in the show before this – all the wild stories about Moose Turd Pies and egg sittin' horses was done to make sure that the room was completely in the palm of his hand for this story. It was brilliant, perfectly executed, and divinely manipulative.

Utah Phillips became a pacifist and an anti war veteran in the 1950s. Think about that. How many anti Korean War bumper stickers do you think you would have seen on a road trip across America in 1953?

When you break it all down it's really about courage, conviction and heart. Maybe that's why he's having heart trouble – the thing might just be too big.

He reminds me of Muhammad Ali who would rather go to jail and relinquish his title in the prime of his career than to live contrary to his heart. People like that have their own gravitational pull and I always feel uniquely privileged to be riding around the sun on the same rock with them.

So do you think you have something to say? Are the people who care about you gently encouraging you to play it safe to spare you the inevitable pain and suffering that awaits you and your undeveloped talents? Well, before you let your well-intentioned associates convince you to put your dreams to bed forever and dive into a no nonsense career in the high tech sector, I recommend that you take a good long look at the work of Utah Phillips and see what communication, attention to detail and a gigantic heart in collaboration with three chords, pure courage and a tireless sense of mischief can do in the world.