

ARTICLE



BRING BACK AMERICA SINGING

By Stewart Hendrickson

When was the last time you sang as part of a community? In a baseball stadium during the seventh-inning stretch when everyone belted out "Take Me Out to the Ballgame?" At church when everyone mumbled through a lugubrious hymn with their noses buried in the hymnal? Americans don't sing together. The music industry has convinced us that only professional singers can sing, so don't even try – music is only for listening. However in some communities group singing is making a comeback. In Seattle we have sea chanty groups, song circles, and other informal community sings. How do these groups function and what is the best way to encourage and conduct these activities?

Long before the "music industrial complex," recordings, iPods and streaming audio, families would gather together around a piano – most parlors had one – and sing for their own entertainment. There were songs that everyone knew – when people gathered together they had a shared repertoire. Singing happened not only in families, but in pubs, schools, community halls, union halls, patriotic gatherings, around campfires, and even at street corners. Today Whitman would not "hear America singing," he would write, "I see America listening."

During the folk revival of the 1950s and beyond Pete Seeger inspired us to sing together. During the "folk craze" of the 1960s someone always had a guitar and would be surrounded by a group of people singing. But that diminished with the advent of singer-songwriters. Few singer-songwriter songs – other than those of Tom Paxton, Bill Staines and a few others – lend themselves to group singing. The lyrics, if you can understand them, are too complicated, and the melodies are often uninspired. Most popular songs now don't even have tunes – Jerome Kern, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and others of that era wrote songs with real tunes that people could sing. Songs for group singing need simple understandable lyrics and tunes that people can readily sing.

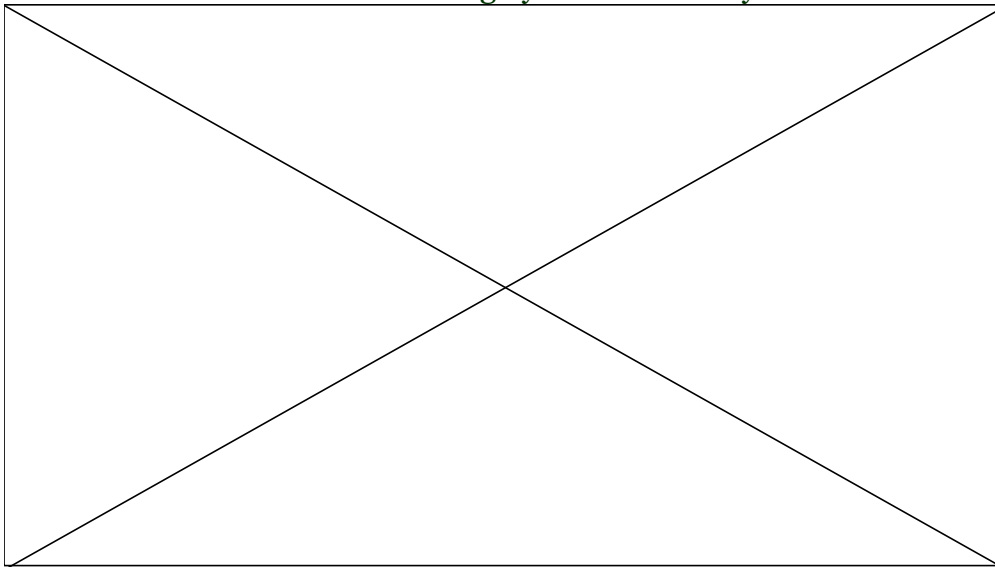
A common repertoire of songs is necessary for spontaneous group singing. Sea chanty groups are popular because the songs are call-and-response, repetitious, and easily learned. [Rise Up Singing](#) has become the "bible" for song circles. It is a vast collection of lyrics of songs for group singing, although one needs to know the tunes or obtain them from other sources. It is a good source for learning songs, but it does not lend itself to use *in the song circle* – [songs need to be](#)

[learned](#) before they can be sung. This and other song collections are a good start, but they also tend to be limiting. There are many more songs to be found and collected, and people need to be encouraged to find and collect other songs – their own songs – that they enjoy singing, songs that are “[not in the book](#).”

I will lead a workshop at [Dusty Strings](#) on Saturday, Feb. 21, on “[Song Collecting - A History of Folk Songs](#)” for those interested in learning where songs come from, the stories behind the songs, resources available for researching songs, and how to go about collecting songs. We will also sing together some of my collected songs, and you will have the opportunity to take home a copy of [my song book](#).

KEEPING THE OLD SONGS ALIVE

Written and sung by Steve Donnelly



One of the pleasures of song collecting is finding a vast reservoir of old songs that have stood the test of time. Many of these songs are no longer known by the present generation of young people. We need to bring these songs back and keep them alive. They have been sung together by people over the years and are some of the best songs for group singing.

Community sings are different from choral groups. These sings have no rehearsals, no auditions, and no over-riding agendas. They are simply groups of people from many different backgrounds who simply enjoy getting together to sing. They are not about performance, but welcome anyone regardless of vocal ability – if you only sing in the shower and are afraid to sing in public, you are most welcome to come. It is a way to gain confidence in singing with others, meet new friends and become involved in community affairs.

The slogan of [Minnesota Community Sings](#) in Minneapolis is “Sing More, Worry Less.” According to its leader, Betty Tisel, a Minneapolis native/singer/activist, “Maybe there is a time and place for worrying; as you know, there is a heck of a

lot to worry about... But community singing feeds us so that we can go out and keep on trying to make the world a better place. Singing brings me joy and a sense of vitality that is the essence of what I think of as good health. Singing in a group also [raises your level of oxytocin](#), which makes you feel good and trust others." This is "not a bad meditative approach at a time when the human race is worried about everything from potholes and poverty to natural disasters and nuclear meltdown." It is also an antidote to our political divisions, constant complaining and bickering.

Community sings can take various forms. The [Seattle Song Circle](#) meets weekly on Sunday evenings at various homes. Everyone is welcome to come. Singing goes around the group in a circle. There is no official leader. When your turn comes, you may choose to sing something (solo or with the group), request a song from the group in general or from a specific person, or pass (and those—aside from those of common courtesy—are all the rules they have). There's no official body of songs, though a lot of people bring Rise Up Singing or other songbooks. Some people accompany themselves on various instruments, some don't.

[Sing!](#) is another group that meets every Wednesday from noon until 1 pm at [Dusty Strings](#) in the Fremont neighborhood of Seattle. Everyone is welcome. It is lead by a song leader, Alice Howe, accompanied by a "house band," and uses a notebook of lyric sheets contributed by the song leader and any others who wish to bring songs to the group. Again, there is no agenda other than enjoying group singing of all types of songs.

The [NW Seaport Chanty Sing](#) meets every second Friday from 8-10 pm at a maritime site on South Lake Union to sing sea chanteys and other maritime songs. There is a designated leader, but anyone is welcome to request or lead a song, sing along or just join in on the chorus.

There are other informal sings around Seattle such as [The Seattle Pub Sing](#), which aims to unite lovers of British and American traditional folk song for a relaxed evening of singing at [T.S. McHugh's Public House](#) in lower Queen Ann on the third Thursday of each month. There are also private house jams. These are just some of many opportunities for community singing in and around Seattle.

What makes for a good community sing? Here are some ideas.

"[Freestyling](#) - The joy of making an unexpectedly beautiful sound together with friends," is used by Brian Eno, an electronic musician, music theorist and record producer in England. His sessions involve some drinks, some snacks, some sheets of lyrics, a strict starting time, and a short vocal warm-up. Singing is a capella. The choice of songs is critical. "It can't just be songs that you like – because a lot of those types of song are actually quite hard to negotiate. The songs that seem to work really well for us are those based around the basic [I-IV-V] chords of blues and rock and country music... because the sequences are so ingrained in us, they invite easy harmonisation... A second consideration is to choose songs

that don't have big empty spaces between vocal lines... You want songs that are word-rich, and also vowel-rich because it's on the long vowels of a song...that your harmonies can express themselves... A capella singing is not only about harmonisation of pitches: it has two other important dimensions. The first is rhythm: it's very thrilling when you all get the rhythm of something tight and sing it well together... The second is tone: to be able to hit exactly the same vowel sound at a number of different pitches seems unsurprising in concept but is beautiful when it happens.”

I believe that learning to lead a song is just as important as singing along. Participants should be encouraged to lead their own songs. This first requires that you [learn to sing the song](#) well – memorization is preferred. Never try to sing a song that you don't know. It is also good to know something about the song – where it came from, what it is about, and if not traditional, who wrote it. This helps in your interpretation of the song and how it is received by the other singers.

Singers should be encouraged to learn the songs so that they don't have to keep their eyes glued to the song sheets. Again, memorization is encouraged, but singers can at least learn to scan a line ahead so that they can look up and enjoy visual communion with other singers – it is after all a community experience. Some songs, particularly those with a lot of repetition, can be taught by ear – this is a preferred way of learning, song sheets are not always necessary.

“Nowadays the absence of singing defines our lack of communal identity, our national apartness, our aloneness,” [said Russell Baker](#) in a New York Times Opinion Column. “It speaks too of our submissive relationship with machines, a relationship in which the machines do all the talking and all the singing and we do all the listening. To be sure, the typical rock concert generates an intense sense of community. It is the community of people overpowered by amplifying machinery, which is the destiny of a nation of listeners.”

Community singing is a community-building activity. In our compart-mentalized lives, both politically and socially, we need to bring people together. Singing is the universal language. Community singing brings together people of many different backgrounds, social status, and even musical abilities, people who we might not otherwise encounter. Get to know your neighbors. “Sing More, Worry Less.”

[Stewart Hendrickson](#)