

The Wanderers: an Interview by Harry (doc) Babad

By Carl Allen and Bill Murlin © 2007

Doc's Introduction

The first time I heard the Wanderers, I was doing my button vampire thing for the Tumbleweed Music Festival, drifting from stage to stage, hustling folks to shell out a buck or three to promote next year's festival. I vaguely remember wandering up to W stage where this great big guy and grey haired little fellow were singing to a guitar and a banjo. What they were doing was a Woody Guthrie song. I hung around and was rewarded by a Paxton song, something by Gordon Lightfoot, and a bit of something that seemed to be of 60s-70s Kingston Trio vintage.

All of these songs I love and have continued to sing to this day. These guys were singing the songs I learned when I first got involved in folk music in NYC when going to High School/undergraduate school. A quick check of the program showed that one of them, Carl Allen, was scheduled to give a workshop on Woody Guthrie that weekend. I attended and was hooked. So fewer TMF buttons were sold that day, and in the Wanderers TMF gigs in years to follow, but I have no regrets. I've been a Wanderers fan ever since — it's probably as much about déjà vu than their wonderful performances, but who needs a reason.

The Wanderers, Carl Allen and Bill Murlin <<http://www.thewanderersfolk.com>>, have a long history full of songs and stories that reflect the growth of Folk music from it's 60's revival days to the present. As Carl noted "Generally we look for good harmony since dueting is our bag. We look for songs that have good natural harmonies and at the same time tell a story. For us the story is paramount, but it has to have good harmony too." They'd rather talk about their music than themselves so I'm picking that piece up; it's mostly there if you want to Google for it.



Bill shared that in 2009 they will celebrate 50 years of singing together. "We formed The Wanderers in 1959," he said. "In addition to "open" gigs, we have been telling the Woody Guthrie Columbia River Songs story since 1985 so that effort is now 22 years old. It's amazing to think that the Guthrie songbook and album of those songs are still around and still in circulation after 20 years of being on the market. The current edition of the songbook will not be reprinted once all copies are sold. The folks at Woody Guthrie Publications, Inc., say they want to publish an updated version of the book but they have given no timetable for the project."

Although CDs don't wear out, I've given their *It's About Time* album lots of play time, something that in the old vinyl days would have added a bit of wear to the record.

I'm also rather fond of their *Woody Guthrie Columbia River Collection* – CD, which I alternate with reissues of Woody's albums. My album is a Rounder CD 1036 released in 1987. To tell the truth, it ain't ethnic, but I like listening to Bill and Carl better.

Now if we could get them to do a CD of their favorites songs from the 3RFS Concert they gave on May 19, 2007, I could add that to my collection too.

===== **The Interview** =====

Who are your influences and your idols or heroes, in music or the world?

Carl: Our biggest influence is, of course, Woody Guthrie. We have made a study of his life and times and it is amazing how current he is. He died in 1967 at age 55, spent most of his last 15 years in a mental hospital, had a productive musical life of about 15 years, and in spite of that is one of the most influential figures in the folk scene. Many of his songs are as relevant today as the day they were written 50 years ago. We have traveled to his birthplace in Okemah, Oklahoma, to his growing up place in Pampa, Texas; we have met his friends and offspring and have celebrated his songs throughout the Northwest.



[Check out this month's music talk about ***How I Became a Woody Guthrie: Who's Woody Guthrie and Why Should You Care.*** It's all about Carl Allen in his alternate persona.]

You can't be influenced by Woody without being influenced by his friends and by people he influenced. Top of the list is Pete Seeger. A close second is Ramblin' Jack Elliot. Arlo is right up there too, along with Tom Paxton. Groups Woody gave birth to include Peter, Paul and Mary, The Limelighters, The Easy Riders, Hoyt Axton, and the Kingston Trio. During our years together following the Woody Trail, Bill and I have met most all of the above, some fleetingly, some in depth.

Before we knew much about Woody we were heavily influenced by the folk groups of the 1960's, starting with the Kingston Trio. We saw them in Pullman in 1959 and it looked like they had so much fun on stage and made it look so easy that we decided to try it too. The rest is history! Terry Gilkyson and the Easy Riders, Bud and Travis, The Brothers Four, and Peter Paul and Mary were strong influences as well. As we worked with the music we began to hear more about Pete Seeger, the Almanac Singers, Cisco Huston, The Weavers, and Leadbelly.

Bill added: I continue to be influenced by those who have stood their ground against untruth, injustice and greed in our country and the world. The lyrics of songs from Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Tom Paxton, Phil Ochs, Joan Baez, Odetta and other such singers and writers for peace and justice are messages I hear and listen to. I also am influenced by singers and song writers who continue to offer inspired works that have the feel and sound of longevity. Many of their songs will live long after they are gone. Those people include Bill Staines, Bob Dylan, Gordon Lightfoot, and many more.

But here we go, name dropping for a second time in less than a page. Folks, take a hint check out the fine music these folks have written and the themes they sung about. Much of it is still in print, but alas gets too little attention when, to make a living, musicians need to focus on their own copy written music. Traditional, on a CD, is not a dirty word, but at time feels like it!

Likewise, Bill noted, "I seek heroes in the media— Bill Moyers, Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite and others who continually fight to preserve free speech, free press and free thought. Dissent is one of the greatest gifts of a true Democracy. Having once been a member of the electronic media, I know and respect its power and cringe at the power presently muzzling the media."

Are There Themes For What Kinds Of Music You Chase, Learn And React To, Or Is This a Matter of The Heart?

Carl: Murlin and I have often discussed the fact that much of our chosen music is slow love ballads and we have to look for songs that are up beat and faster paced than we would naturally pick. We run the risk of putting an audience to sleep with our favorite ballads if we don't consciously look for faster stuff.

Also we are heavily influenced by anything that was done during the 60's folk era, anything that requires a blend of voices. One quirky thing that happens: We will

rehearse something to perfection then go on stage and one of us (either one!) will do something completely different than has been rehearsed. The other will pick up on the change as if by magic and the audience is none the wiser.

Bill: There are some constant themes. I chase songs about traveling, songs from the 1960's, etc. for The Wanderers to perform. I chase songs that have or offer the potential for good harmonies with relatively simple accompaniments. Those songs are beautiful and they are memorable. I chase good sing-along songs because they are engaging and help everyone around have a good time. I like good ballads. What songs say is very important especially if Carl or I am sending messages.

How do you {individually or as a group} pick the new songs you're going to learn, when they're not things you've personally written?

Carl: All of the above comments about harmony apply to this question. We both constantly look for new material and will both bring songs that we like on first listening. Many times we will find a song that was done in the 1960's era by some of our favorite artists that hasn't been heard in a while. Recently we started doing some Chad and Jeremy and some Bud and Travis tunes that were good then and are still good.



Anything new that comes from the Guthrie archives is something we automatically consider doing. Woody wrote lyrics to several thousand songs which have never been heard due to lack of melody. Occasionally Nora, Woody's daughter, will release some lyrics and someone will write a melody and we will pick up on that, like "Way Over Yonder in a Minor Key".

Bill: Since few of our songs are those we have personally written we pick songs from the wide world of writers and we sometimes modify them to suit our ends. Each of us reacts to a song and brings it to the other. We work on it for a while. If it doesn't gel or one of us doesn't like it, the song is usually tabled. Some songs have instant appeal and we will work on them until we get them down.

We listen to the radio, to CDs, to concerts, to the Internet; we listen at festivals, song circles and jams. I have one advantage in that I am a community radio folk music programmer so I have access to a great many CDs in the radio station

library. As I listen, I am attracted to many songs, some of which we get to wander with.

Have you favorite places that you like to travel to for gigs, music or inspiration? Do you also take time to explore the food as well as the music and local culture where ever you visit for a gig?

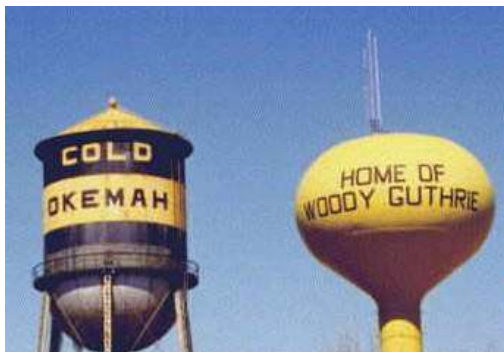
Carl and Bill: Generally, most of the places in the Northwest are favorites just because the Northwest is one of the best places in the country to live. We love the coasts of Oregon and Washington; we love most of the communities in the two states and we have not visited enough of them. For musical experiences we love folk music festivals and concerts.

We'll go nearly anywhere for a gig! Just about wherever we are at the moment becomes a favorite place to be as long as we are there to do the music. We have taken time to explore more than just the music when we travel and we are more able to do that now that both of us are retired.

Since we feature Northwest history in some of our programs, we seek places where that history is on display. Often those end up meshing into programs.

Like our tours of Woody Guthrie's Oklahoma and Texas sites, places and events we have been singing about for years take on new meanings when we can see and better understand those places and experiences.

One of our recent favorites is Carmel, California, where we traveled in June to honor Steve Kahn, the man who hired Woody to work for the Bonneville Power Administration in 1941. Steve passed away at age 96 in April and we went down to celebrate Steve's life. We turned the whole thing into a sing along and had a great time.



Pampa, Texas last October was a highlight. Pampa is Woody's second hometown after Okemah, Okla. and Pampa celebrates Woody's life the first week in October each year. We were the festival headliners in 2006. It was awe inspiring to walk where Woody walked, play where he played and to talk to his people.

Ditto for Okemah where we were invited in July 2000. We played on the stage of the Crystal Theater where Woody played, walked through the ruins of the old Guthrie home and paled around with Arlo and Pete Seeger.

All the festivals we have visited have their particular charms but we generally agree that The Tumbleweed Music Festival in Richland over Labor Day weekend is the best. It is the right size, right atmosphere with the best setting along the Columbia River and the best and friendliest people running it.



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If not a full time professional musician, how do you integrate your professional lives with your music?

Neither of us is a full time professional musician, but both of us are retired from the professions we once held. Before we both retired we squeezed in the music, now happily it's not a problem. We both want to do more shows that we are currently doing, but not so many that it becomes 'work.' The shows we do are a way to supplement retirement incomes, travel and have fun!!

Our lives are different in that Bill is married, has a house and some activities outside of doing Wanderers music. Bill lives in the Portland area, Carl is in Seattle.

Our music is a larger slice of our lives than it used to be. We are more active in seeking gigs, attending festivals and getting the word out there that we exist and we have something to offer. But neither one of us wants the amount of commitment that being a full-time professional musician can entail.

We have a unique subject to offer in our programs – a peek at the history of the Northwest through the eyes of one of the country's greatest troubadours, Woody Guthrie. We have studied Guthrie's Columbia River song cycle and have developed expertise beyond anyone else for this little segment of Guthrie's life. In keeping that music and those stories alive, we contribute to the culture of the region and that's pretty special.

How does the everyday happiness and anguish of the world around you affect your music?

Bill: A great deal these days. Some political and social justice messages are getting into our music. This is especially true with my duo *The Unpaid Bills*. But *The Wanderers*, too, are more attracted to songs with messages these days. We have not strayed away from our core music that came with us from the 1960s and that core includes a collection of social justice songs from the Vietnam era that easily apply to today as do the songs of the Weavers and the Almanac Singers.

Carl: As we get older and the world seems to get more messed up we find that we react more to world events, particularly political events. We will sing songs and write a few that reflect our values. It has always been the folksingers duty to sing and write about how screwed up the government is and we currently have no shortage of material.

On rare occasions one or both of us will write a new song to fit something we think needs to be said. Anti-war songs need to be written and sung; 'green' songs need to be written and done. We do that from time to time.

That's all for this month. Thanks guys.

One gripe, why do you sing songs slower than I learned them; it's hard to keep up with you at concerts.

Bill's Answer: *Because you and we learned those songs from or as kids who sang high and fast. Those singers can't do that now, and neither can we!*