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The Open Mic Experience: Why Do We Do It?

BY SUZANNE ERNST

In the March issue of the ISS Newsletter I wrote about my own experience performing at different open mic venues, and that gave me an idea to ask other ISS members about their own experiences.

This month I am privileged to share the responses to a few questions I posed to fellow songwriters about their experiences at open microphone performances. Some of the responses are probably easy for any of us to relate to. Other ISS members talked about experiences that most of us would like to have, or perhaps have fantasized about in years gone by.

What did they all have in common? I believe the common denominator was connection and recognition. When these songwriters performed, they wanted to feel a connection to the audience, and they wanted to be appreciated for sharing something they enjoy so much.

The first question: **What was your most significant open mic experience?**

Steve Lieberman, ISS songwriter/musician whose songs are popular on the Internet, wrote about a once-in-a-lifetime experience: "I waited in the boiling summer sun for a good spot. I got spot No 3. The MC made a big deal out of me because five months ago I had the cover of a section in Sunday Newsday. After my performance, for some reason, the crowd went wild. I will spend the rest of my life hoping to play a show that even comes close."

I bet a lot of us would have liked to catch Steve at that open mic night.

Tony Tedeschi, a songwriter and frequent contributor to this newsletter, had this to share: "On one of my fact-finding trips for www.naturaltraveler.com, the web site I edit, I wandered into an Irish Pub in St. John's, Newfoundland. Purely by

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Walter Sargent's Song To Be Performed at Coliseum

ISS webmaster Walter Sargent won the competition for Dowling College's theme song with his "We Stand Taller." The song will be performed during the college's commencement ceremony on May 22, 2007 at Nassau Coliseum.

Walter got some writing help from Dowling student Olivia Marie and the arrangement was done by Paul Michael Barkan. To see or download the sheet music, go to www.iss.org.

NEXT ISS WORKSHOP: June 4

ASTA OPEN MICs: May 9, 24, and June 6

BORDERS OPEN MIC: June 1

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happenstance, it was the night of the weekly open mic. After a few Irish whiskies, I signed up. By the time I got to go, the place was packed with maybe 300 people, and the front row literally pressed up to the stage. All of the performers before me were terrific, so I really needed the support of the Bushmills.

“They’d all done Irish ballads or pub tunes. I was unsure how my bluesy rock ‘n roll would go over, but it did, big time. I guess it was the change of pace. ‘Your music is awesome,’ one of the barmaids said when I’d finished. ‘Let me buy you a round of whatever it is you’re drinking,’ I replied, ‘because, clearly, you have been drinking.’ She laughed. ‘I’m on duty,’ she said, ‘No can do.’”

And what songwriter doesn’t want audience members to come up to them after their performance and tell them, “Hey, I could really relate to that song you sang about.”

This happened to Amy Golden Uleis, an ISS member who sings and accompanies herself on keyboard. Amy cited the most significant open mics as those that lead to paid gigs and give her the opportunity to meet with other songwriters. Also important to Amy is “sharing the bond of bringing one’s original songs to the public”.

Tim Huss, the Tornado Alley member who delivers powerful and emotionally rich vocals, related an experience of performing at the local Hard Luck Café in Huntington: “One night, as luck would have it, I was scheduled last and did a song I wrote entitled ‘Soldiers.’ With what’s been going on in Iraq, it went over well. Guess you could say I closed the open mic session out with a bang. I even sold a couple of CDs!”

Guitarist Richard Stein shares: “My most significant open mic experience was in 1997 when I rejoined the ranks of performing musicians. It was also my first ISS experience and I was bowled over by the level of talent performing that night in Huntington. I’m not taking advantage of open mics these days as the music I’m writing doesn’t lend itself to solo performances, but the charge of hearing a wide variety of dedicated people is something I dearly miss.”

Maria Elaina DiFalco, a new-but-frequent open mic attendee, shared these words: “I only started playing out in December 2006, so I am still a relative newcomer on the open mic scene, but I would say as of now, (my most significant experience) would be at the Folk Music Society sponsored feature of the Kennedys. There were about 200 people in the room so it was my largest audience so far.”

Experiences like these abound with faithful attendees of the many open mics now sprinkled across Long Island.

So imagine walking into a café, bar, bookstore, restaurant. The microphones and speakers are all set up. You survey the folks in attendance. The MC is looking for you, wondering if you are tuned up and ready to give it your best.

What are you thinking? This brings us to a second question: **How do you set up your songs before performing them, given the assumption that the audience’s first impression of you will affect how or if they continue to listen.**

Amy Golden Uleis: “I set up my songs by giving a one- or two-sentence intro to build some intrigue towards the song, such as what inspired me to write the song – enough info to pique interest without giving the punch line.”

Tim Huss: “I try to read the crowd, what mood they seem to be in. Is it an excited night for an “up” tune, or a sing-along? A more pensive crowd might be receptive to a more emotional song. Often it depends on what other performers may be doing.”

ISS member Michael Solomon: “The first tune is always an up-tempo ‘attention getter,’ as is the final one. I believe a set list should move from up-tempo to softer, back to up-tempo

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*“Guess you could say I closed the open mic session out with a bang.”
—Tim Huss*

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to softer, back to up-tempo, back to a softer tune, etc, etc. — a roller coaster ride, creating dynamics in the set list, to carry the audience on a ride.”

Another performer said: “My strategy is to play my next best song first; to lure the audience in, then hit them with my best, which allows me to exit gracefully with my last. I may vary the tempo of a song depending on my mood and the vibe from the room.”

The last question I posed: **What do you want to get out of the open mic experience?**

Singer/songwriter Dave Drew: “When I would go to an open mic, I wanted to feel welcomed. It's hard to get up in front of a group of strangers. If the host was cool and the other musicians listened, then I would come back. If the host was preoccupied and nobody cared about new performers, then I would not go back and the open mic ultimately failed. We all want acceptance. That is what I want from an open mic experience (and to be invited back and maybe get a gig).”

ISS member Mike Svezia's enthusiastic words: “The open mic experience: A number of artists performing their songs live satisfies the need for the familiar *and* the unexpected. I've been so blown away by so many of my fellow ISSers. Their talent and professionalism by example speaks volumes. A single performance of a great song and/or vocal will stay in your mind for a lifetime. Keep 'em comin'!”

Lora Kendall, another ISS member who plays both solo and band gigs with the confidence of a professional, has this perspective: “I've always approached an open mic with the assumption that my songs are good and certainly worthy of performance. I was a performer before I wrote anything, and I'm comfortable performing. I go to open mics that precede concerts where people are listening raptly and I go to open mics in bars where, if you're lucky, you can hear yourself over conversation and crowd noise...”

Frank Gambino, a long-time ISSer who has an audience-grabbing style, responds in this way: “I now enjoy going to open mics because I see other songwriters I have come to know, and I'm interested in what they have to say. I also enjoy playing in front of those songwriters. But the challenge in performing is capturing the other people's attention. The first song, the first lines of the first song, are key. It is very rewarding if the audience listens to what you have to say, if only for the first song.”

Walt Sargent, another longtime ISSer who recently won the Dowling College song competition: “I go to hang out with songwriters, get some practice in front of an audience, and hear live music.”

This sentiment is echoed by Denise Romas, a relatively new ISS member, but an experienced performer and songwriter with a relaxed style of delivery.

Says Denise: “It is nice to have places such as the Folk Music Society of Huntington, Huntington Library, Eclectic Café, Cool Beans, Asta Café, Soul Growth Café and Batata Café, that welcome open mic-ers to come and share their music. It has helped me tremendously to sharpen up my skills. I am continually inspired by my fellow musicians to write better, turn a phrase better, play better. Most rich and rewarding is the spirit of community that builds on the open mic circuit. We support each other's growth and successes while building the trust that would enable hearing a suggestion or two.”

I found that most everyone who responded to the questions above seemed to want the same things from their open mic performance: A chance to share their art, their ideas, themselves. My gratitude for help in composing the questions for this article goes to Pedro Pereira, Frank Gambino, and Tony Tedeschi.

Many thanks to all of you who shared your thoughts and experiences for this article. See you at the next open mic!

Who Played What

Here's a list of songwriters and songs from last month's ISS workshop:

Tim Huss

Smith Island

Mark Hussey

Ain't Questioning a Thing

Randy Black

Automate

Mike Dedora

Seventh of September

Walter Sargent

We Stand Taller

Fred Blumenauer

Three Monkeys

David Bailey

Walls of a Wishing Well

Maria Elaine DiFalco

I'm Going Country Tonight

Mike Svezia

Cover Me

Phil Kennelty

In the Big Easy

Bill Goldsmith

Is My Heart Really

Broken?

Bill Mega

I'll Never Walk Alone

Estelle Henrich

That Glorious Sing-along

Frank Gambino

Pa, Your Goose Is

Cooked

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We're on the Web!

See us at

www.islandsongwriters.org

Writer's Choice: Gambino Wins with 'Cooked Goose'

BY WALTER SARGENT

The Writer's Choice winner for April was Frank Gambino's "Pa, Your Goose Is Cooked" by Frank Gambino. The concept was cute, the song was well-written and the performance was strong, but it was the humor that brought the house down. While Frank's cooking is a consistent winner, April was anybody's month. Several ballots came in for a three-way tie, making it very crowded to the top. Here are some of the songs and comments about them:

- Smith Island (Tim Huss) "Heartfelt song!" "Expertly conceived and delivered."
- Ain't Questioning A Thing (Mark Hussey) "Lyrical...very original." "Really interesting stuff."
- Automate (Randy Black) "This is 'art'. What can you say?" "Disturbing, but great"
- Seventh of September (Dan Dedora) "Loved the unexpected twists..."
- Three Monkeys (Fred Blumenauer) "Ambitious and lyrically complex." "Loved it"
- Walls of a Wishing Well (David Bailey) "Absolutely moving."
- I'm Going Country Tonight (Marie Elana DiFalco) "Very catchy...jukebox ready!"
- Cover Me (Mike Svezia) "great stuff from planet Mike"
- In the Big Easy (Phil Kennelty) "very natural...authentic"
- Is My Heart Really Broken? (Bill Goldsmith) "one cool tone poem with a groove"
- I'll Never Walk Alone (Bill Mega) "honest and heartfelt"
- That Glorious Sing-along (Estelle Henrich) "I always enjoy your music"

ISS Open Mics

Don't forget: The next open mic at **Borders Cafe**, Route 25, Syosset, is June 1. This gig is monthly, on the first Friday of the month. Signup is at 7:30 p.m and the music starts at 8 p.m.

The **Asta Wine Cafe and Art Gallery**, 334 Main Street, Huntington, open mic is May 9 and May 24. Sign up is at 7 p.m. and the music starts at 7:30 p.m. Look in this space in future issues of the ISS Newsletter for news about the Asta open mic.

Monthly Workshop

Test out your songs in front of a crowd by playing them for fellow musicians who will provide constructive feedback with the goal of helping you improve as a songwriter.

The ISS workshop takes place the first Monday of every month, except if it falls on a holiday, at Five Towns College, off Burrs Lane in Dix Hills. Run by ISS Director Sonny Speed, the workshop starts at 7:30 p.m.

Bring a guitar if you wish to perform your song live, or you may bring a

recording on CD or tape. A piano is available for those who write their songs at the keys.

Be sure to bring 25 copies of your lyric sheets so the other workshop attendees can follow along while listening to your song. It is much easier to provide constructive criticism when people can read the lyrics.

The ISS workshop is at the center of the organization's mission to help songwriters perfect their craft. Many performers on Long Island got their start at ISS.

General Information

For general information about ISS or how to join the organization, contact ISS Director Sonny Speed at mcspeed@optonline.net or 631- 462-3300.

To submit items for publication in the newsletter, contact Pedro Pereira at pedropereira@verizon.net.

Visit our web site at www.islandsongwriters.org.