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NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
<http://www.nyfolklore.org>

The Gift of Song

BY DAN BERGGREN

My parents told me about my first trip to the Adirondacks, riding the train to the North Creek station. I was too young to remember the Delaware & Hudson, but I do recall when we switched to all-night rides in my brother-in-law's Oldsmobile that took us from Brooklyn to Trout Brook Road. At the age of seven, I didn't know the farm was my mother's home before she married my dad, or that it would be my home when I turned 12, or that some day I'd be writing and singing songs about my grandfather, Harry Wilson.

We would arrive before the sun rose over the mountain to the east. The waist-high grass soaked my sneakers as we walked to the back door. Unlocking the farmhouse meant unleashing familiar smells of woodshed, cellar, knotty-pine kitchen, and screened-in porch. Even more exotic, but just as comforting, were the tales the barn told with its hay, old manure, horseshoe forge, grease from a tractor, and the smell of thyme crushed underfoot in the barnyard. It didn't take long to renew acquaintances with the trail to the river, giant boulders, summer toys, dusty books, secret hiding spots, and the pump organ whose wheeze was as familiar as the smell from its leather lungs.

One summer my great uncle Eric Van Norden visited for a week. He seemed as old and fragile as his sister, my grandma Ella Wilson. When he played the reed organ, I had to pump the pedals for him. After that week, I never saw him again, but he gave me two things I still have to this day. One was a 78 rpm record that held two of the many Tin Pan Alley songs that he'd written: "I Couldn't Tell You From An Angel" and "I Love to Go to a Ball Game." The other was a joke he told me:

This conductor found an old man asleep on the train with a ticket sticking out of his mouth and thought he'd have some fun at the old man's expense. So he woke him up, shouting, "Where's your ticket? If you don't have a ticket, I'm throwing you off of this train!" Well, the old man got all flustered and searched all of his pockets at least twice and couldn't produce the ticket.

Finally, the conductor snapped it out of the man's mouth, punched the ticket, and walked down the aisle laughing at the old man. As he left the car, the old man said under his breath, "He thinks he's so smart. I was just licking the date off of last year's ticket."

The joke became public as I told my friends, but the record remained a personal treasure. It fascinated me that someone could make up a melody and words, and then record it, too. Until that point, songs just existed. Uncle Eric was my first encounter with a songwriter, my introduction to the concept of songwriting. I decided to take piano lessons, but they didn't last long. The next year my brother John came home from college and, like magic, he knew how to play the guitar. Not only did he introduce me to the music of folks like Pete Seeger and The Weavers, but he taught me my first chords.

Four years later, I met Ralph Rinzler at a private family camp where I was a chore boy by day, singing folk songs by night. Ralph had just returned from a hectic week at the Newport Folk Festival (the year Bob Dylan "went electric"), where not only had he performed as one of the Greenbriar Boys but was also the festival's talent coordinator. Instead of treating me like the teenager I was, Ralph made me feel like a fellow musician. After some song swapping, he let me hear some old reel-to-reel recordings of Uncle Dave Macon and gave me a new record of songs by a North Carolinian he'd been working with—Doc Watson. Two years later, I met Doc and his son Merle at their performance in Schroon Lake's Boathouse. They were friendly and full of encouragement. Overwhelmed, I watched them perform, bringing the songs to life. It's times like this when you either want to burn your guitar or practice harder.

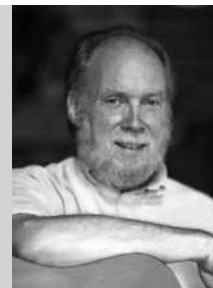
I practiced harder, and it helped prepare me for my next and most significant encounter with a songwriter—Townes Van Zandt. When he performed at St. Lawrence University in the winter of 1971, I was running lights and sound for the event. Afterwards,

I asked him about one of his songs, and he invited me to his hotel room. "Stop by tomorrow morning—bring your guitar," he said. I did, and for several hours we played old folk songs that I knew and new songs Townes had written. It was a personal workshop in writing new songs that sounded old.

Not long after that I left home and served three years in the army with the American Forces Radio Network in Europe. During my time in Germany, thousands of miles from Trout Brook Road, I wrote my first Adirondack song: a tribute to my grandfather, a gentle man who loved the land. Thank you Townes, thank you Doc and Merle, thank you Ralph, thank you brother John. And thank you Uncle Eric for sharing a joke, for asking me to pump the reed organ while you played your own sweet songs, and for giving me the record to remember you by. And most of all, thank you for helping a small boy dream songs, so that some day he could write one about your brother-in-law Harry.

Harry twitched his moustache as he
walked along,
Wearing a wide-brimmed hat and singing
a song.
He looked at the mountains and knew
he was free.
Oh, how I wish that were me.
He always did the best that he could.
He never forgot the earth was good. ▼

Dan Berggren's roots are firmly in the Adirondacks, but his music has taken him throughout the US and abroad. Dan has worked in the woods with a forest ranger



and surveyor, was a radio producer in Europe, professor of audio and radio studies at SUNY Fredonia, and owner of Sleeping Giant Records. An award-winning musician and educator, Dan is also a tradition-based songsmith who writes with honesty, humor, and a strong sense of place. Visit www.berggrenfolk.com to learn more about Dan and his music. Photo by Jessica Riehl.

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