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Hunting for a Song

BY DAN BERGGREN

Living on the edge of a village, one can experience lots of critters exploring backyards. Here, in Saratoga County, I've seen squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, and the occasional skunk foraging for grubs or worms. Growing up in the Adirondacks, I was used to all sorts of wildlife wandering freely between state land and our family farm. It was fairly common to watch deer, bear, woodchucks, and porcupines in the apple orchard, and ruffed grouse, snowshoe rabbits, coyotes, and foxes a little further away in the fields.

My mother, who had grown up on that farm, was willing to let the wild animals take a portion of the harvest, but she also wanted her fair share of the apples and berries. I did, too, especially if I was ever going to enjoy another apple pie, blueberry muffin, or a taste of strawberry jam again. One August when I was seven or eight years old, my mother sent me out to pick wild blackberries. On that hot and still summer afternoon, I found a good crop growing next to a juniper bush that must have measured 15 feet across. Standing in one spot, I could pick and pick and . . . suddenly, I noticed I wasn't the only one getting berries. On the far side of that bush was a black bear. I'd seen bear before but never so close. It might have been because I was downwind of the bear, or maybe it was so focused on its own technique for freeing the berries that it ignored me. Its mouth went over each thorny branch; then, drawing its head back gingerly, let the ripe ones fall into its mouth before releasing the branch. I stood there dumbfounded, remembering my parents' advice about bears: don't run, and don't get between a mother and its cub. Still ignoring me, the bear turned, walked to another bush, and began its process again. Slowly, I took a few steps backwards while keeping my eye on the bear. When I felt I was a safe distance away, I turned and walked as quickly and quietly as I could.

Several years later, I had another close encounter that sticks in my memory. Coming around the barnyard corner, I found myself face to face with a deer. Without forethought, I started speaking to the doe, as one would to a dog. "Hey, how you doing? What are you looking for, hmm? Something good to eat?" It raised an ear, turned its head this way and that,

then bobbed its head down to check out the ground while keeping its eye on me. I stood still, so as not to spook it.

That scene, along with the blackberry-picking bear, probably lasted no longer than a few seconds, but they are preserved in my memory as lasting moments of wonder. When I was old enough to get a hunting license, I loved the excitement of tracking, but shooting one of these creatures had no appeal at all. That's probably what prepared me for writing "Johnny Hunter."

One autumn while walking in the woods with my nephews, we made up a song. I told them that during hunting season it was best to wear a red or some other bright-colored jacket and to make some human sounds, so hunters would not mistake us for wildlife. Just then, we surprised a grouse and as it took off, its wings a-drumming gave us a surprise in return.

Partridge, partridge you'd better stop drumming,
Look behind you, who's that coming?
Johnny Hunter will find you quick, and
you'll wind up in a stew.

And so the impromptu song began, in the oral tradition of thousands of songs—long before the Internet, television and radio, before jukeboxes, record players, and sheet music—when all music was folk music; when the only way to share a song was in real time, and the only method to learn it was by ear. Variations can creep in, depending on memory, geography, and other influences, or the urge to modify the song to a suit a new situation. My childhood memories kicked into gear.

Old black bear you'd better not wait.
If I were you, I'd hibernate.
Johnny Hunter will find you quick, and
you'll wind up in a stew.

White-tailed deer, you're young and strong,
But if you're not fast, you won't have long.
Johnny Hunter will find you quick, and
you'll wind up in a stew.

There we were the three of us in the woods singing to every animal. My nephews and I were on a roll, and there was no stopping us in our oral tradition experiment.

Snowshoe rabbit, your trail is narrow.
Can you beat the speed of an arrow?
Johnny Hunter will find you quick, and
you'll wind up in a stew.

Hey red fox, you sly old thing,
Can't you hear them hound dogs sing?
Johnny Hunter will find you quick, and
you'll wind up in a stew.

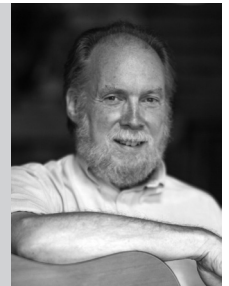
Back home, while the boys were taking a well-deserved nap after our outing, stories of flatlander hunting accidents came to mind, along with a moral to the story.

Old moo cow that means you, too.
They got the goat and they'll get you.
Johnny Hunter will find you quick, and
you'll wind up in a stew.

Whenever you're in the woods alone,
Sing this song with hearty tone, or
Johnny Hunter will find you quick, and
you'll wind up in a stew.

My nephews are now grown men with children of their own. They know Johnny Hunter, even though they may not remember that particular fall day when we walked and talked, singing and making up a song the old-fashioned way. A few years ago I was visiting an elementary school to sing with children and introduce them to songwriting, when a young teacher said something that made me smile and feel especially happy: "Johnny Hunter—that's a traditional song, isn't it?" ▼

Dan Berggren's roots are firmly in the Adirondacks, but his music has taken him throughout the United States 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 songwriter 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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