

MUSICAL TRADITIONS

Don Firth & Bob Nelson In Concert Again

By Stewart Hendrickson

Don Firth and Bob Nelson are two of Seattle's best folk singers from the late '50s and '60s. They will be singing together again in a reunion concert at Central Lutheran Church in Seattle on October 14th at 2 pm. They last performed together at the 2003 Northwest Folklife Festival's Seattle Coffeehouse Reunion Concert with other old-timers from the early Seattle coffee house days.

To give you some idea of their long-term musical relationship, I asked Don and Bob to write short reminiscences of each other. But first, an introduction by Don:

"We began singing together early in 1959 at *The Place Next Door*, one of Seattle's first and finest coffee houses. Television appearances and concerts followed, and in summer of 1959, we went to the San Francisco Bay area where we performed in a wide variety of venues."

"Back in Seattle, we sang in the weekly concerts at the U. N. Pavilion during the Seattle World's Fair in 1962. The following year I performed in the Seattle Center Hootenannies and traveled with the tour group, while Bob, working in California, was a regular singer at *The Catalyst*, a coffee house in Santa Cruz. Since the '60s we have continued to perform, singing occasional concerts and at various events such as folk festivals."

Bob Nelson As I Know Him – Don Firth: I first met Bob Nelson and shared a stage with him in 1953. He was sixteen, I was twenty-two. We'd probably been actively interested in folk music for about the same amount of time: both relative beginners. As young as he was, Bob's singing voice was a rich, mature-sounding baritone. His guitar accompaniments were tastefully straightforward, and his performances in general were rock-solid.

For the next few years, we kept running into each other. In 1959, I was singing at *The Place Next Door*. Bob dropped in occasionally and sang a guest set. One evening, we tried a couple of duets. The audience response was so enthusiastic that we decided to form a duo, and we sang there for several months. This exposure led to a television appearance and our being asked to do a number of concerts.

At *The Place*, rather than retiring to the back room between sets, Bob would "table-hop," chat for a moment or two, then move on to another table. Easygoing and friendly, he was an expert "schmoozer." Following his example, I stayed out front as well. The audiences seemed to like this kind of accessibility. This wasn't Bob putting on any kind of front, he's just that way. He likes people. (Well . . . most people.)

We kept hearing that fame and fortune awaited us in the San Francisco Bay area. So in fall of 1959, we packed up our guitars and headed there. We sang in a lot of places, made some wonderful friends, and had a lot of fun. We also learned that many of the famous places we'd heard about were really holes compared to where we'd been singing, and that the two most famous clubs in the area were more interested in comedy acts than featuring folk singers. We decided we were better off in Seattle, so we came home.

The exigencies of making a living intruded, so we dissolved the duo. Bob took a "day job" working for his father and I began teaching guitar. But we both continued singing,

following our separate paths, in coffeehouses, concerts, television, at the Seattle World's Fair in 1962, at the Seattle Center Hootenannies, and at folk festivals. But we also sang together often.

One thing that has always impressed me about Bob's singing is that I am never in doubt as to the words he sings. He doesn't use "stage English" or seem to make any noticeable effort at diction, but the words are always crisp and clear. Would that the same could be said of more singers, some nationally famous!

Gifted with an occasionally wacky sense of humor (a mutual friend once referred him as "a bit of a scamp") and the forthrightness to be outspoken on matters he cares deeply about, he is also a very caring person. I recall how, when a friend was dying of cancer, Bob took a ferry across Puget Sound every Sunday to visit him at his bedside, to chat and joke with him.

For nearly sixty years now, Bob Nelson has been—and still is—one of this area's finest singers of folk songs and ballads. He is also an old and dear friend.

The Don Firth I Know – Bob Nelson: It's not often one can say they know a living legend. I not only know one, but I'm proud to have him as my friend.

I first met Don Firth in 1953, when I was a brash kid of 16 and he was six years older than me - he still is. When I first shook his hand I was impressed with the strong grip and powerful presence. With his first song, "The Fox" as I recall. I knew he was a force. Over the many years, he has demonstrated that force often.

As a guitarist, Don is all about precision. He takes him time tuning, until it's just right. The joke at hoots has always been: "Don't tune now. Wait until Don gets here. You'll just have to re-tune anyway!" Even the simplest guitar lick is played extremely well.

And his singing is equally good. He has a booming voice that carries well. He knows the value of diction. "You should never require your audience to work to enjoy you," he often says.

During the '50's we became close friends and teamed up. It was then that I really started learning from him. He was a master guitarist, studying both Classical and Flamenco. He also was a serious researcher of folk songs. He taught me chord patterns, picking patterns, and how to canalize and present a song. We spent countless hours planning our programs: no two songs in the same key, vary the tempo and the mood, tell the story well.

Then we had our month of fame and fun in the San Francisco Bay area, living off our guitars. We sang anywhere and everywhere: nightclubs, colleges, hoots, coffee houses, parties, taverns and strip joints. You name it, we did it.

During those days, Don was very disciplined. We had to practice three hours a day. We had to learn twelve new songs each week. He located one of the best Flamenco guitarist around and studied him. He found Rolf Cahn and took lessons from him. He drove himself to improve.

I married and moved away for several years in the early '60's But when I returned to the Seattle area in 1967, we picked up where we'd left off. You can do that with special friends. We've continued singing together since at countless hoots, gatherings, the occasional TV or Radio show.

Don is now 76, and yes, I'm still 5 years behind him. I know I'll never catch up to him. His voice is a little deeper now, but even more robust than ever. And the years have taken their toll. He is now using a wheelchair exclusively.

As I write this memento, Don and I are preparing for a concert. Last Sunday we went down to the Central Lutheran Church to check out the acoustics. While I climbed into Barbara's car, Don zipped along the sidewalks and streets, in his electric wheelchair, for the eight blocks to the church. As we drove off, I asked Barbara if we shouldn't follow him. "Follow him," she said, "We won't be able to catch him!" And then I saw him a block ahead of us, zooming up this street, across that street, up the ramp, down the next sidewalk. He beat us there, grinning all the way!

After our rehearsal, he wasn't ready to go back home. He fixed his Greek sailor's hat at a jaunty angle and told Barbara, "I think I'll stay out and play a while."

I hope I'm half as good as he is when I'm 76.

Don Firth & Bob Nelson In Concert Again. Sunday, October 14th, 2 pm, Central Lutheran Church, 1710 11th Ave, Seattle. \$10, kids half price. Info/reservations: <http://www.stolaf.edu/people/hend/bobnelson.html>.

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