

Thank You Larry Penn



I don't think the legendary Wisconsin songwriter and performer Larry Penn, who died on October 7, would have minded my telling here of the time that he and my music partner Lou and I were trudging along on a hot day at the Shawano Folk Festival, hauling our instruments and equipments from one far workshop to another, when he mumbled to me in his charmingly growly voice, "And to think it will all end with a coronary on stage."

As it turned out, that is not how it ended for Larry, who "caught the Westbound" at his home on October 7th, at age 87. I hadn't heard this saddening news until a full week later, catching up on the various folk music postings that normally keep me more or less informed of happenings in the homegrown music subculture.

Lou and I had been on the road on the east coast, and when I came upon Larry's obituary, I was still vibrating from the 1100 mile drive from Shrewsbury MA to Madison. We had divided the drive into two legs. For our second day, it was pouring rain all the way, which always makes that run along the southern edge of Chicago particularly crazy. That stretch of I-80/I-90 is almost always a nightmare of trucks, construction barrels, closed

lanes, and hot doggers doing ninety. Larry talks about this road in the song **East Chicago Run**, written for a truck driving friend:

*Wishin' that my woman
 was beside me in the cab
 Countin' every pothole
 on an endless concrete slab
 Thirty years of haulin'
 on that East Chicago run
 Everything from gasoline
 to Puerto Rican rum
 Listenin' to the swearin'
 of mechanics in the rain
 Thirty years of Aspirin
 for the achin' in my brain...*

As we white knuckled that road, Lou and I talked about what we imagined to be the horribly difficult lives of truck drivers, who have to do this sort of run every day then turn right around and do it again and again and again, all for fifty cents a mile. Until retiring at age 58 and going full time with his music, Larry Penn was a truck driver for the Ladish Company of Cudahy, a large scale industrial forging outfit. Sometimes he would drive the wild roadways for nine hours then go out and play a coffeehouse show that night. I don't know how he did it; my adrenaline banks would have run dry two thirds of the way through such a day. And in his spare time, he and his wonderful wife Pat raised five children, so Larry not only knew the difficulties and joys of being a father and husband, but the rewards and drudgeries of the blue collar worker, as well as the peculiarities of being a songwriter and performer.

And in my opinion, he was one of the greatest songwriters of our state and of our times. He sang and recorded many traditional works, but because I'm a songwriter, his original songs are what really blow me away. They seem so naturally constructed, it's as though they developed effortlessly on their own, but I know that such a natural flow can only come from long hours wrestling with words and ideas. Because of his empathetic perspective on a day in the life of a working stiff, and the songs that resulted, he was discovered by the late great labor bal-ladeer Joe Glazer (*Whither Zither June 2001*) in 1976. Joe produced Larry's first LP, **Workin' for a Livin'**, one of my favorites. That album

helped Larry establish himself as a career songwriter and performer.

Larry's populist empathies and skillful songwriting abilities naturally led to an informal membership in and enduring friendship with that crusty gang known as the Rose Tattoo, the wildly creative and loosely knit band of train-loving, union-boosting, hobo-admiring musician friends of Utah Phillips.

As with his Rose Tattoo friends, Larry was driven by the same perceptive compassion for the struggling individual that inspired the works of John Steinbeck, Mark Twain, and Woody Guthrie.

And Larry was humble. At one of the many memorial events that were held in honor of Utah Phillips after his death, Larry sat beside me with a beer in his hand. He told me he had been asked to play for three other Phillips memorial concerts and for one reason or another he had had to turn them down. I wish I could remember exactly how he put this, but it was something like: "I had to turn them down. But you know how much they'll miss me? (*He stuck his thumb in his beer and pulled it back out.*) As much as I'll miss that thumb-hole in my beer."

Larry was not right about that assessment, I know. And now, his presence *will* be dearly missed by those of us who loved this humane and sympathetic artist when he was alive, and by all those down the road who will discover his songs and recordings, and feel blue about not having had the opportunity to see him in person.

This Whither Zither is by no means meant to be a comprehensive overview of Larry Penn's life or music. I sincerely recommend researching the man and his music further.

According to a memorial notice in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel of October 15, "Memorials to the Larry Penn Memorial Fund at Tri City National Bank to keep Larry's music alive and for the care of Larry's son and would be greatly appreciated."

Goodbye and thank you, Larry, and all our loving sympathies to Pat and the rest of your family, friends, and fans.