

Crankies

When you start obsessing about something, suddenly reminders of it are everywhere. You muse about green hats and everywhere there are green hats. From above, the human race is transformed into a bowl of peas.

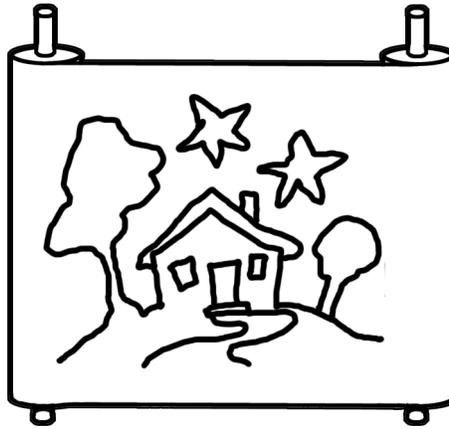
This happened to me recently regarding song illustration. I wrote about that subject the month before last, and now I can't get it out of my sights. But that's okay. I'm glad I hadn't obsessed about the sound of diesel trucks.

At the recent 36th Annual Fox Valley Folk Music and Storytelling Festival in Geneva, IL, a few weeks ago, I saw a bunch of people, including my music partner Lou, crowding around a performance which I couldn't see because of the throng. Lou later described the scene for me: two young women from Kentucky telling a story while illustrating it by turning the crank on a frame containing a backlit scroll with cutout silhouetted illustrations. I wasn't quite sure I understood, so later when they performed on the main stage, I made sure and found a spot on the grass up front.

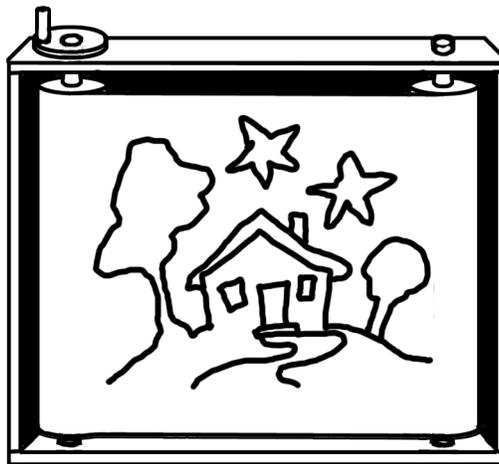
And I'm glad I did. What a spectacular old fashioned multi-media experience it turned out to be. Anna Roberts-Gevalt and Elizabeth LaPrelle of Southwest Virginia, both in their mid-20s but each already a veteran of countless festivals and venues across the country, met in 2010 and soon began collaborating. According to their website, Anna and Elizabeth are "trying to engage themselves and their audience with traditional art in all the forms it can take..." and from what we saw of them at the festival, they are wildly successful at it.

The device that Lou described and that I later witnessed is called a "crankie," because it has a crank. I couldn't exactly picture the gizmo as Lou described it, but that's only be-

cause though it's simple, it's hard to describe without an illustration. And going with my theme, I now need an illustration to illustrate a means of illustration.



Basically, the thing is a scroll, as in the top picture. The scroll material is usually paper or cloth. In the case of the one I saw, the scroll was backlit, which isn't always the case. But I like the backlighting; it gives the whole thing a nice glow. Lit this way, translucent paper or cloth is very effective, though many backlit crankies are mainly opaque silhouettes, cut out and affixed to the scroll.



The scroll is mounted in a frame, as in the above picture. Their particular frame measured about 3' wide by about 2' high, though you can find examples on the web of tiny crankies and huge crankies. Sometimes both rollers have cranks so the thing can be rewound. Sometimes the crank is made to be removed and fitted on the other roller for that reason. The spectacular variety of crankies is endless.

Sometimes, particularly with backlit crankies, extra figures can be made to appear and disappear by manipulating silhouetted cutouts behind the crankie. For example, you could have a story or song about a ball bouncing down a street; the street scene could scroll by on the crankie, and the ball, a circle of paper stuck on the end of a length of wire, could be made to move up and down while the street scene went from right to left, creating the appearance of a bouncing ball.

There are videos on the web of Anna and Elizabeth and a few of their amazing crankies. I also found that there was a whole "Banners and Crankies" festival in Chicago in 2010! Google it!

One thing I want to say before I get to the end of this episode. Anna and Elizabeth perform in a kind of sparse and raw traditional style that is one of my favorite kinds of music, and even without crankies they would have had me mesmerized. I hope we can bring them to town.

So, if this episode of Whither Zither interests you at all, I STRONGLY recommend Googling Anna Roberts-Gevalt and Elizabeth LaPrelle, and, of course, "crankies." There is even a fledgling online museum of crankies.

I'll sign off this issue with a picture of a truly huge 1848 crankie (notice the cranks) of a trip up and down the Mississippi by John Banvard, which traveled the world and made Banvard rich and famous. These stage-sized scrolls were called in those days "Moving Panoramas," which you can read all about in Wikipedia. Oh, and expect more about song illustration in coming WZ's!

