



## Write About Dogs

Well, my wife Kristi and I had to have our dog Isabel euthanized last Thursday. Her kidneys had finally decided to call it quits and to make a long story short, Izzie had stopped eating entirely and was begging to bow out (bow-wow out?), you could tell. It's a tough decision, to put it mildly, based eventually on one more of those heartbreaking lines you have to draw yourself in this world.

A thousand articles, a thousand web sites, probably whole books and entire lifetimes have been dedicated to the idea of songs about dogs, and here's another one, as a sort of catharsis for yours truly.

A dog song had something to do with my learning about the concept of the folk song as being malleable and without fixed lyrics or melody. I think I've mentioned before that my mom worked as a writer for a radio station and used to bring home albums that had been sent to that station but rejected. WHBY in Appleton was very middle-of-the-road, so she brought home a LOT of music, even including that incendiary genre, folk music. Fortunately for me, even Burl Ives and Jimmie Driftwood were too mind-blowing for the early 1960s ears of Appleton. And it was from a Burl Ives album that I learned to sing, and to play on my baritone uke, his version of Old Blue.

*I had an old dog, his name was Blue  
& I bet you five dollars he's a good dog too  
Sayin' come on Blue, you good dog you...*

The dog croaks in this sad song, a nice depressing twist for a glum teenager like me:

*I dug his grave, with a silver spade  
I lowered him down with a golden chain  
Saying go on Blue, you good dog you...*

Gosh, it still makes me misty, typing those lines now as an old geezer. But anyway, my brother Jeff, who was ahead

of me in the exploration of folk music, already playing a Gibson guitar and listening to more obscure sources, played and sang a version Old Blue for me that was not my Burl Ives version, and I remember actually saying, "That's not how it goes." Even as I said it, I realized at that moment there is no "how it goes" with true folk music in the traditional sense. "How it goes" is "how you go it," you might say, or how you remember it, or how you last heard it, or how you read the lyrics in an old British gum wrapper from 1768, or how your tone deaf babysitter sang it to you in the kitchen in Louisiana in 1956.

I have always wondered if when you vividly remember some seemingly insignificant and mundane moment in your life, it might indicate that the moment was actually NOT that insignificant and was actually one more little kick up the slope of enlightenment. I may have read about or otherwise been superficially aware of the idea of folk music as a collection of ever-developing works, but if so, I never really felt it in my guts until I made a fool statement like that to my smarter older brother. From that moment on I knew: there is no "how it goes."

As a boy I never had a dog. We had cats, we had birds, we had a few depressed fish, we had a hamster who chewed his way through 3/4 inch pine to escape and eventually die beneath the strings of the baby grand (maybe during a rousing version of Toot Toot Tootsie Good Bye as played by my mom, accompanying my tone-deaf dad on his tenor banjo).

But I never had a dog, and never lived with one until Kristi and I got together in the late 70s. She had a Doberman named Tara, whom I learned to love surprisingly quickly, and I haven't been dogless since. Even now, we still have Sophie, our second Rat Terrier, a bit lonesome now for her pal Izzie but still keeping us in perspective and in stitches.

There's a George Booth cartoon that says it all. Booth is one of my all time favorite cartoonists. In this one, a worn down middle aged frumpy man sits at his

typewriter on the weatherbeaten porch, arms folded, a blank piece of paper in the carriage. His equally frumpy wife stands in the doorway, looking out at him, while dozens of dogs of infinite and scuzzy variety hang out everywhere. The wife says, "Write about dogs!"

That's pretty much how I came to write about dogs, during one of those don't-bother-me-Sophie-I-have-to-think-of-something-to-write-about moments. I have written half a dozen songs about dogs, and am probably one of only a few songwriters who has had a dog song featured on a cat album.

A dog becomes like a compartment of your brain that stands back and eyeballs the whole situation somewhat but not totally dispassionately. I like the way Daisy the dog is portrayed in the Dagwood strip, as reacting with a related but secondary perspective to the main action. The use of dog in this strip reminds me of the use of a bridge in a song; it takes you away just far enough from the main action to give you a second philosophical peek at the situation, putting it all in perspective. George Booth often uses dogs in his cartoons in that same way. This particular cartoon notwithstanding, the dogs in Booth's cartoons are usually not necessary to the main action, but contribute greatly to the impact. Which is, in a way, how dogs figure into real life, at least on my weatherbeaten porch.

So to try and tie this all together, a dog's perceived perception is one more version of "how it goes," and so is one more reminder that there really is no fundamental "how it goes," and that things are what you make of them. How some situation appeared to Izzie was often not how it appeared to Sophie. And what is a song but, like a pet, one more version of "how it goes," which, you might say, is the whole reason for art in the first place: Perspective.

Or at least that's one old dog's opinion of how it goes.

*In loving memory of Isabel, 1997-2011*

*WZ, Feb '11*