



## Commie Zithers

Because of the name of this column, I receive countless unsolicited zither news tidbits. I'm a lucky man.

A few days ago the amazing Joel Mabus of Michigan ([www.joelmabus.com](http://www.joelmabus.com)) sent me an "automatic translation" of a German article about the Zither. If you've had the dubious pleasure of reading certain earlier Whither Zithers, you know how I love these strange translations. This one is titled: "The zither -- from firewood to the world hit," and explains, "The name zither comes from the Greek cultural area and is derived from the Kithara, to one since the 7th century v. Chr. covered, the lyra similar stringed instrument. The demarcation to other instruments is liquidly." Joel repeated that last line so I wouldn't miss it.

In another unexplained reference to the unexplained title of the piece, it says, "However, the current concert zither developed itself from the medieval firewood." A later sentence, referring to an empress named Sissi from Austria, says, "To her unidentified for their game in an alpine pasture economy of a farmer given guilders she fulfilled as an only self deserving money with pride."

Pure poetry. Then came this e-mail from my dear pal Paul Suino in Riverside CA: "And the world loses another harpist-zitherist. Thought of you as I read the LA Times obit of Susan Reed, a woman who favored Irish ballads and clung to her old battered zither. I especially liked the part where it mentioned that she was blacklisted in the 1950s for having 'the temerity...to actually believe in something'. HA. You go, girl."

And how. Anyway, I had never heard of Susan Reed I am ashamed to say, and was doubly ashamed that my boyhood home of Appleton's native red-baiter, Tailgunner Joe McCarthy, might have played a part in my ignorance of her. So I Googled.

As with almost everybody who is any-

body and most of the rest of us too, you can find out quite a bit about Susan Reed online. Her obituary in the May 1, 2010 New York Times, written by Dennis Hevesi, explained that Susan was born in South Carolina in 1927, the same year Carl Sandburg's big folk song volume, *The American Songbag*, was published. As it happens, Susan Reed's father, the entertainer, screenwriter, director, and actor Daniel Reed, due to his artistic career became close friends with Sandburg as well as Leadbelly and many other musicians and entertainers who used to drop by the house. Well, to make a long story short, impressed by these influences Susan took up the zither, the autoharp, the lute, and the Irish harp in her teens. She happened to have a beautiful voice and an expressive and charming singing style, as can be heard on YouTube (search for Susan Reed). The Reed family moved to New York where Susan, still in her teens, began performing at "at private parties and fund-raisers for wounded World War II soldiers recovering in Manhattan hospitals. Barney Josephson, the owner of the Cafe Society nightclub, spotted her in 1944 when she was (16) and gave her her big break."

She appeared in a musical about Billy the Kid on Broadway at age 19, and two years later was featured in the movie "Glamour Girl" with drummer Gene Krupa. During this time she had also become very popular in Manhattan clubs and was soon playing dozens of concerts around the country.

McCarthyism put an end to all that. She was blacklisted, according to her son, the interestingly named Reed Karen (she was married for a time to the actor James Karen), because her father had been a communist at some point and she was interested in civil rights. "She was pretty much relegated to whistle-stop engagements in Podunk towns," he explained.

While I should say from experience that such a career isn't the worst fate in the world, it is a heartbreaking shame to be yanked down from loftier heights to this level by the fear-mongering of the likes of McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover. In her obit, she is quoted as saying, in a 1971 New York Times interview, "I was singing at the Palmer House in Chicago when I thought, 'This is a rotten busi-

ness.' And I just turned off."

I'm assuming that this quote had a lot to do with her being blacklisted -- though why was she at the Palmer House if so is puzzling-- and how that could indeed make the entertainment business "rotten." It's odd how the entertainment sector was focused upon by the McCarthyites, with such strange results as Marilyn Monroe -- married for a while to playwright Arthur Miller, another blacklisted artist -- being a major contributor to Wisconsin's Progressive magazine.

Joe McCarthy was born on the outskirts of Appleton, now the world headquarters of the ultraconservative John Birch Society. Ironically, Appleton is also where I saw Pete Seeger in concert for the first time in the mid 60s. I've always wondered how he felt about playing in the teeth of McCarthyland, where, up until 2001, a bust of McCarthy was still on prominent display in the county courthouse.

Anyway, an article about Susan Reed by John S. Wilson in the May 24, 1971 NY Times, reported that since she was 16 she has started her concerts with the simple declaration, "This is a zither." Try saying THAT three times in a row. Online I found a recording of an interview and short performance by Susan, and I have to admit I downloaded it and copied out the sound bite of her saying, "This is a zither." It's charming. I used to have a Donald Barthelme quote stuck up on my wall, "Fragments are the only forms I trust." It's a bit of a stilted way to say it, but I like the idea. And "This is a zither" is a wonderful little fragment. Sound bite, I guess they are called now. I'll play it to myself every now and then and tip my hat to Susan Reed whose music I may have known sooner had it not been for Tailgunner Joe.

Two more fragments:

"One of the things I'm most proud of about my country is the fact that we did lick McCarthyism back in the fifties."

-- Pete Seeger

"Is this your sister's sixth zither, sir?"

--trad tongue twister