

# Part I: Music and Song

Nils Fredland has made a name for himself as the trombone-playing contra dance caller who loves to call singing squares. I've been working with Nils and Ralph Sweet over the last year and a half on a book of Ralph's squares, On the Beat with Ralph Sweet, which will be published this spring by CDSS. Over the course of that time, I've learned that Nils is also a wonderful leader of songs. My own participation in his song workshops showed me someone with a strong emotional attachment to singing, and a fluid leading style. I was curious about this combination of interests and talents and asked Nils about his musical upbringing.

 $\sim P.M.$ 

I grew up in the same house my dad grew up in and went to the same Episcopal church that he went to with his family when he was young. It was in the same part of downtown, with deep family Fredland roots in Annapolis [Maryland] and in that

church community. The first singing that I have a memory of doing and being part of was singing in church.

Ijoined the church choir at St. Anne's when I was eight. I remember singing for John Cooper, the choir director—it was my first audition for anything and I remember going in and feeling really scared. He would say, can you sing this? (sings) I was actually quite a high boy soprano. Mr. Cooper had the loudest, earth-shattering sneezes I have ever heard. He would be up in the choir loft and it was this great big organ, with all the foot pedals, and sometimes his sneezes would rock him down onto the keyboard and if the bellows were open, the whole church would just fill with the sound of his sneeze, and this honking sound from the organ!

I had started playing piano when I was in the second grade and had started to be able to read music at that point and actually do a little bit of creating of my own sounds on the piano. My older brother Lars was part of the choir too, so that probably had something to do with the reason that I wanted to join. As a younger brother should, I wanted to do the things that he did, and I remember we joined together. I was by far the youngest one in the choir. I have a lot of really strong memories of singing in that church choir. I keep coming back to my experience singing with John Cooper and the important role that he played in my musical life, because he was the first ensemble director that I ever worked with.

## What do you think you learned from him?

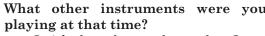
Well, passion first of all. I don't remember him as being a particularly gentle person. I was never afraid of him but he also wasn't a father figure to me. He was sort of distant and he was really all about the music. That's a fairly profound experience for an eight-year old. I think the fact that I remember that with fondness and that it didn't color my musical experience in a negative way but rather feel like it really opened up my eyes, speaks to my interest in music but also to his ability to communicate to me, through his demeanor and his relationship to the music he was bringing to us. I remember having those intensive hour and a half rehearsals, then playing tree tag with my friends and then going every Sunday morning and donning the red choir robe.

# And the feeling of wanting to make that commitment came from John Cooper?

Absolutely. I remember being surprised at the way that it hit me when I heard that he was sick and then that he had died. I really felt that I had lost of major part of the history of my relationship to music in him. I did not have a continuing relationship with him after I left the choir when I was fourteen.

# What other instruments were you playing at that time?

I picked up the trombone when I was eleven; piano all the way through until when I was a senior in high school. I got very serious about playing the trombone a couple years after I started playing, around seventh grade. I was taking lessons and when I got to the eighth grade I announced I wanted to be a trombone player.



#### Did you stop singing when you left the choir?

My schooling at specific schools has some bearing on the journey that I took to get to singing again. I was in a great public junior high school that had an exceptional instrumental music program and a mediocre choir program. I had nothing to do with the choir program there and my lifeline as a junior high school student was the band, because I didn't have a great junior high school experience, but who does, right? I went to the public high school and I did the marching band. A very good friend of mine, Karl Erik Johnson, who had been a friend on swim team. had left the public school that he was going to in favor of going to an arts magnet school in Baltimore. He



Above: Piano recital, 1984; left: On accoustic/electric bass, with Mock Turtle Soup, 2004;

would call me up every day and say, you have to go there, they need you; there are no trombone players there. This was when I was in the tenth grade. I was not happy in the high school I was going to; my arm didn't need to be twisted very much to be convinced that was where I needed to be. I started bugging my parents and it took me a year and a half and they eventually did let me go.

At the school for the arts I continued to do a lot of instrumental music but there was a choir requirement there. Unfortunately it happened opposite the only opportunity to do calculus; as much as I wanted to sing in the choir, I ended up taking calculus. But I did do some singing with that group in preparation for big concerts, when I wasn't playing in the pit orchestra. Even if I wasn't singing in the choir, the experience of being that close to a group that sounded that good, with lots of people that were my age or younger, taught me a lot about the power of singing in a group. Singing with that choir, though it was only occasionally, had a profound effect on me as a musician and as a singer. All the music students, other than the kids taking calculus and there were only three of us, grades nine through twelve, instrumental,

choral, the whole school was in that great sounding group.

### What material did they sing?

It depended on the show they were preparing for. They would do large scale choral works and gospel. It was an eclectic mix of material. At the time I wasn't so tuned into the repertoire, but in retrospect I wish that I had been paying a little bit more attention because I do remember the choice of material being really potent and as I have evolved into a teacher of this kind of singing myself, it would be nice to be able to draw on that material.

Another outlet that I had for singing during that period from ninth to mid-eleventh grade—my brother was very heavily involved in the children's theatre of Annapolis which put on at least two musicals a year and did summer workshops as well. Similar to the experience with joining the choir when he did, I got interested in doing these theater productions and my friend Karl Erik and I did a lot of this children's theater stuff together. He was sort of a star in that he got a lot of leads and did a bunch of solo singing; I was often in bit parts or the chorus. But I did spend quite of bit of time on stage singing in that capacity.

So you've told me of two really meaningful experiences you've had with singing. As a young person these kinds of experiences can be much more influential in your life than they may be when you are older. Were you influenced by them towards leading song?

I've never really made a conscious connection with those two experiences. But because I've been drawing up the emotions I experienced as a very young person in singing with Mr. Cooper I would say that, even though I can't honestly tell you that it's conscious, I'm going to be passionate about music the way that John Cooper was with me when I was young. It obviously has had a profound impact on my musical being. I'm sure that all of the experiences that I have as a song leader do connect to that in some subconscious way.

I'm going to use two conflicting words here—to me at least they make sense together and actually continue to be a way that I communicate songs to people when I have the opportunity to lead a group—"raw" and "polished."

[The high school choir was] just kids that were really passionate about music. Not all exceptional musicians but they just wanted to take music by the neck of the shirt and shake it up. That's just the way that a lot of these singers approached singing,

especially the ones that weren't trained as singers. You throw these trumpet players into the choir and say, "OK, you're going to sing tenor," and they just go (hollers high note) and you have these sopranos that go (vibrato soprano sound). You have beautiful sound over there but then you've got your tenor section and they're like, "You want us to sing this?" and they're like (arrrggggg sound). When I'm faced with a group that is feeling sort of tentative about something, I try to draw that same sort of spirit out of them in some way.



Annapolis, MD, 1990

### How do you do that?

I do that by being as courageous with my own singing in front of them as I am asking them to be with their singing in front of me. In a lot of registers I'm very comfortable and I feel that I have a nice voice, the lower the better. When I stretch up to tenor and soprano it often sounds ridiculous and I know that. I used to ask people, "Could you sing this part and be my demonstration person?" But now I have basically given up on that as a technique in favor of sometimes sounding really bad. That doesn't always deliver the best model because I don't want people to be straining their voices, but I think what it does do is give everyone permission to try things that they might not otherwise try. Because if the guy that's standing in the middle of the circle that's supposed to have his act together is standing there cracking these notes and he can't quite get up to that tenor note, then you know what, I'm going to give it a whirl.

That's gets to the raw part. The polished part is I think where I have a really good ability that makes me a song leader with that "John Cooper" energy. At some point, for me, it becomes about the sound that we're able to cultivate as a group and through cultivating that sound we also develop all these others parts—people's emotional relationship to the music and this community developing around being in a group and singing together. I'm recognizing the relationship between what I do now and those first two experiences that I had as a singer that have obviously lived with me and travelled with me. And I think that it's a combination of those two things that informs the way I approach song leading now.

Nils found himself, after a short stint as a trombone major at Southern Methodist University, back home in Maryland. I asked him what happened then in his singing life.

During that period of time I was auditioning for transfer schools, because I was not going to go back to SMU. I decided to go to Indiana University and I am so glad that I did because Indiana did a lot for me. I'll tell you that my experience as a trombone major at Indiana made me realize that I didn't want to play trombone a professional classical musician. That happened about halfway through my junior year and I called my father and he said no, you're too close and you

have to finish your degree. I'm glad I did but I was twenty, twenty-one and I didn't know what I wanted to do. I just knew I wasn't going to do trombone as I had always thought.

So, this is really when my career as a singer started. I remember walking around in the music school, pretty early in my time there, and I looked at a flyer posted up on one of the lockers and this flyer had these words scattered all over the page, "Do you sing or think like a bass? If so, call Daniel." My voice at the time had changed twice—once around the traditional time of fourteen or so and then it changed again when I was in high school in my senior year, when it went from baritone to super low bass.

I saw this flyer and thought, I have no idea what this is all about but I should call this person. I remember going to meet him and having really great rapport and long story short, eventually this

five-voice a cappella band formed and we were called Monkey Puzzle. We sang that whole time that I was in Bloomington, both as a student and beyond, for probably six years. During that time we became one of the most popular live original acts in Bloomington, which is saying something because it's a really vibrant original music scene there. In this group were Daniel (Reed), the one that formed the group with his then girlfriend now ex-wife, unfortunately, Nicole (Kousaleos) and then another friend of theirs, named Jerry (McIlvain), all part of the same folklore department [at Indiana University], and the three of them found me and another fellow named Dan Schumacher. Are you familiar with the a cappella group The Bobs? Dan is the newest Bob.

Monkey Puzzle opened my eyes to music that I didn't even know was out there. The five members drew from so many different musical experiences. Dan had a huge background in vocal improv and jazz singing. Daniel was an '80s rocker really, so he drew from that whole body of material. When I was young I

was listening to classical music and I just didn't have any kind of pop music experience, so Daniel was my teacher in that way. He was also a folklorist and an ethnomusicologist. He had done some traveling in Africa and drew a lot on African rhythms and his experience being part of mask rituals in Cote d'Ivoire. Nicole had a stunning voice and had done a lot of musicals, onstage singing and a little bit of singing with Daniel. Jerry was a big theatre guy too. I was like a sponge; just so

excited to be with these older people. I was nineteen when I joined when I first moved to Bloomington and was the youngest by ten years in that group. Every time we got together it was like magic what we would come up with to sing.

At the beginning, I didn't really have a huge part of the creative process. I was just so excited and I would do anything that they asked me to. Just tell me what to sing! This is awesome! And as the group evolved we all became a little more a part of the creative process. Initially it was more heavily weighted in the direction of covering Jackson Five tunes, or Todd Rungren. I knew the Jackson Five obviously but I didn't have any idea who Todd Rungren was, or Sly and the Family Stone or the Talking Heads. I didn't know! As the group evolved we started writing a lot more of our own material and that was really my first experience writing any music. We would collaborate



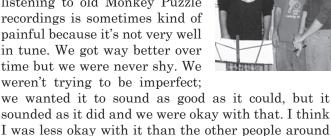
Monkey Puzzle, Bloomington, IN, 1993

on arrangements; we would each come up with our own part and the shows were just hysterical fun.

The group also helped me to think outside the box about what a voice is! We did a lot of vocal percussion and vocal mimicking of instruments and things. The singing that I had done up to this point was all just put this music in front of you and sing it. Or here's this lovely melody and sing it back to me. Or here's your part of this four part choral arrangement; sing it. Now it was—alright, you're going to be a bass drum and here's the sound that I want you to make (makes sound). You're going to be the bass guitar in this part and you're going to do this (makes sound). All of a sudden I'm using my voice in all these different ways. Freeing myself of all the conventional ways that I would think about choral singing also translated into the way that I thought about my overall relationship to music, because as a trombone player, and particularly as a classical trombone major at a fairly high powered music school, I had never been asked to create music without having something sitting in front of me.

I never regret the fact that I studied in that way but I feel really lucky to have discovered what I discovered through Monkey Puzzle and subsequent experiences that has allowed me to broaden my relationship to music. And that broadening happened because of this group.

The other thing that it did was to teach me about how imperfection is okay. Because we did a lot of performing and especially early on the group was super fun; we had an incredibly good time singing together and it was always fun for the audience, but going back and listening to old Monkey Puzzle recordings is sometimes kind of painful because it's not very well in tune. We got way better over time but we were never shy. We weren't trying to be imperfect;



fun performing music. Monkey Puzzle took a year off right after I graduated. My first job out of college was as a trombone player in a ska band.

me. But they were older and I was taking their lead

because I was learning; it meant that I could let go of

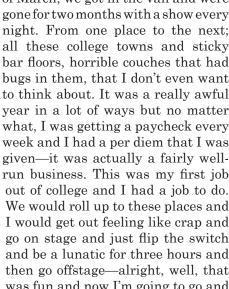
whatever baggage I brought in and learn how to have

Ska is sort of like sped-up reggae. It's really

aggressive, plugged in, loud, hard rocking bar band music. I was in this local band that was founded in Bloomington. They had become one of many nationally touring, but essentially unknown, bands. Next time you're driving on a freeway around here and you see a van with tinted windows and a trailer, I bet that it's some band that has played seven shows over the last seven nights and they're driving nine hundred miles to do another show tomorrow. I joined the band in January of 1997 and I was with them until January of 1998; the band was called Johnny Socko and we played two hundred fifty shows that year. I had a green Mohawk and at one point my hair was purple and I had dreadlocks in it.

That horribly unhealthy year taught me a lot; it continued to open up my eyes musically speaking to a whole other punk, hard rock style of music that I never would have found if it hadn't been for those guys. And that experience of playing in that band REALLY taught me how to perform. I remember two months after I joined the band, somewhere around the first

of March, we got in the van and were what, I was getting a paycheck every week and I had a per diem that I was given—it was actually a fairly wellout of college and I had a job to do. We would roll up to these places and I would get out feeling like crap and go on stage and just flip the switch and be a lunatic for three hours and then go offstage—alright, well, that was fun and now I'm going to go and



get a terrible night's sleep and get up and drive eight hours tomorrow and do the same thing in some other smelly bar. I knew that these people paid their money to see a show and most of them knew this band and the band had a certain reputation and even though it didn't really feel like ME, I was going to perform in service of upholding that image. I would say being on stage now would be much harder for me had I not had that experience in the band. I'm not pretending in the way that I did then but I have the ability to get up night after night after night and do this performer thing.

I came back from the year with Johnny Socko, and sang again with Monkey Puzzle. But right before joining the ska band, something happened vocally speaking that was very significant.





Malcolm Dalglish lives in Bloomington with his family and Malcolm was a fan of Monkey Puzzle. He came to a show once at this place called the Wild Beat, and approached us afterwards and said, "I'm putting together this group to record some of my new choral music that has percussion and hammer dulcimer (because that's his thing) accompaniment. I'm flying in all of these singers from New England these young female voices that are sort of fitting for the sound that I want to accomplish—but I need men's voices to fill out the sound for the pieces that require tenor and bass parts. Would you be interested?"

"Well, sure! What's the commitment?" So, it was a month of intensive rehearsals preparing for the recording and also for a performance at the Lotus Festival, which is a big world music festival that happens every year in Bloomington in September.

All these beautiful, young singers came in from Vermont and I met Suzannah and Rosie [Georgia Rosel Armstrong-Park. Rosie taught me how to do the contra dance swing on Malcolm's back porch. I sang

my first shape note song with them, sitting on the floor in Malcolm's kitchen. I eventually [later that year] went to my first contra dance with them.

This was a kind of magical month that, at the time, I knew was a really profound and emotional experience. I got to sing in a way that was different from what I had done with Mr. Cooper and anything I did in high school. It was very different from what Monkey Puzzle was doing. It was this shape note sound; powerful and emotional—I can't even really put in into words; somehow it would make it less potent if I tried. I hear the voices in my head and it brings out the emotions in me that I can't even explain. So, even though I wouldn't have been able to articulate it at the time, that month totally changed everything. So, I went off and had

my rock experience and I came back and I sang with Monkey Puzzle, but what I'm doing now is so tied in to what I was exposed to during that period of time with Malcolm.

#### What was the recording?

There were two—"Hymnody of Earth," which he recorded first with a boy's choir; we re-recorded it and I think he added a couple of things to it; and we also recorded a CD called "Pleasure" which is the name of one of the songs on that particular record. The Ooolites was the name of the group.

Through that experience I met two other very influential people in my life as a singer and as a song leader—Larry Gordon and Patty Cuyler [of Village Harmony]. Suzannah, who was fifteen at the time, insisted that Larry ask me to be part of this recording project. So my first experience singing shape note music was in this particular recording project called "Endless Light" by Village Harmony.

And then fast forward through the Johnny Socko year and into my time that I finished up in Bloomington, and Monkey Puzzle. Larry calls up and says we have this group that tours the world called Northern Harmony and we have a spot open for a bass. And I said, lemme think...yes, of course! So, I went on tour with them for three months. We toured in England, and we went to Denmark and Germany; we toured through Canada and we came back to the U.S. and did a big loop through the States and that was were I really started to develop a repertoire of the kind of music that I lead now: a lot of South African

choral music, a certain amount of

bigger classical works, other folk and choral traditions. Larry and Patty draw from a lot of different things. I don't really do a lot of the Balkan music, which is a staple in their repertoire, or the Georgian music which constitutes a lot of the material that they do. I made a particular connection to the shape note and South African choral music that I learned from them.

I do some of the South African material from Monkey Puzzle. If there's time in a vocal workshop I'll often do material that relates to the "outside the box" thing that I was talking about with Monkey Puzzle, where you're using your voice in a different ways with a lot of vocal mimicking of instruments and vocal percussion, which is sort of a novelty; but if there's enough time for people to actually understand how to use

their voice in that way if can be really fun. I've done whole workshops on that, actually.

End of Part 1 of the interview; go to our website after mid April for Part 2-www.cdss.org/currentissue.html.

Above: First time calling, Phoenix, AZ, 2001