

## Youth Traditional Song: The New Kid's Tale

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by Zoë Madonna



*I was the Doctor in the mummer's play. My role was a) to use the tiny flask and revive the Soldier and the Sailor after they had fought and killed each other, and b) make a glaringly obvious Doctor Who joke. (Photo by Suzanne Mrozak)*

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “youth” as “the time of life when someone is young” or “the early period of existence, growth, or development.” Something or someone is “youthful” when it “[has] or [shows] the freshness or energy of someone who is young,” or is “in an early stage of development.” With that in mind, was Youth Trad Song, which took place during the first weekend of January, a “youth” event? To encourage young people to attend Youth Trad Song, admission was balanced 80% “young” (under 50) and 20% “young at heart” (over 50). Still, 40 or 45 years old is not considered a “youth” under most definitions; what, then, makes Youth Trad Song a youth event?

The answer to that question is involvement and openness. Before the weekend, a schedule of staff-led workshops was posted on the website, but the directing committee also actively sought submissions for camper-led workshops, with the reminder that anyone could schedule one at the last minute at the weekend; all that a would-be workshop leader had to do was write the location and the theme of the workshop on the giant schedule on the dining room wall. The result was a delightful, spontaneous hodgepodge of song (“Around the World in 80 Songs,” “the anti-pub sing,” “Georgian and Ukrainian harmony singing,” “camp songs with Jillian and Eevy!”) filling up every corner of the handful of buildings YTS occupied. There was room to create, and share creations and ideas; the only thing that everyone was asked to do for the weekend was learn “West Indies Blues” to sing together at the first dinner. The crowd didn’t even make it ten feet before breaking into “Bringing in the Sheaves,” kicking off a song circle that lasted till three AM.



*Sam Kleinman leads a song from the new shapenote tune book, The Shenandoah Harmony. (Photo by Zoë Madonna)*

A perfect example of the kind of organic creativity YTS’s environment cultivates: I participated in a mummer’s play during the open mic on Saturday night, in honor of Twelfth Night. The idea of doing the play had been brought up just that morning at breakfast by Marvin Warren, who had seen a good number of Twelfth Night plays but had yet to take part. After a bit of tossing ideas around at lunch (St. George? Sarcastic dragon?), we gathered enough people (Soldier, Sailor, Doctor, Chimney Sweep) to perform the stock play in the song “Rise Up, Jock.” We picked parts, added parts where they were needed (Old Father Christmas made an appearance in the guise of Brad from the Foggy Bottom Morris Men), we gathered and made props (most out of paper bags and duct tape, in keeping with the Paper Bag Mummies of Waltham’s tradition), learned the chorus to the song, found stock lines and insults thanks to Lynn Noel’s iPad, and found a willing stooge whose open mic performance Marvin (playing the fool) could interrupt by shouting “Room! Room!” and banging on a pan, announcing the

arrival of the mummers. Five minutes before we went on, a woman named Rose volunteered to be Beelzebub and pass the hat at the end of the play, and we ended up raising some money for next year's Youth Trad Song scholarship fund.

What does it take to be young at heart, or youthful? Some of the attendees, like myself, were at very early stages of our lives as folk singers. But then there were people at the event who have been singing for 50+ years, who have well established identities as performers and singers and leaders in folk and traditional music communities. I wouldn't have been too surprised if the veterans had cliqued up and did their thing while us kids did our thing, as I sometimes see at contra dance events. Instead, everyone sang like they were new and youthful and open to everything they heard, celebrating each contribution alike.

*A singer, dancer, musician—and Oberlin junior—Zoë Madonna is interning with CDSS this month.*