



Cooney's Colorado Chronicle

My music partner Lou and I met the legendary folk singer Michael Cooney when we opened for him at a nightclub called "Bunky's" on the corner of Park and Regent Streets in Madison. Bunky's, then a music hotspot, began as a restaurant in the 1930s, was reborn as a restaurant and nightclub in the 70s through the 80s, and exists today as a restaurant on Atwood Avenue, run by the original owner's great granddaughter and her husband.

The date of our gig with Michael was Tuesday, October 20, 1981. That week in Madison we also played a Simply Folk (public radio folk music show) fundraiser, the good ol' Club de Wash, and a chili bake-off, way out by the Beltline in the parking lot of what was Phillips Department Store, in a blizzard. Our career has always been a farrago. Now most of it is a long-ago farrago.

We immediately formed a mutual admiration society with Michael that night. He helped us in a thousand ways soon afterward, by encouraging us to tour nationally, and by introducing us to venues he thought would be appropriate for us. Best of all, he began singing some of our songs on his tours, which helped build our audience even before we showed up anywhere. Though he now lives happily and somewhat reclusively with his wife Margot on an idyllic little farmstead on the coast of Maine, we do keep in touch.

Michael doesn't tour much these days, having found his personal shangri-la which he hates to leave. But the last time we played on the same stage as Michael, at the Old Songs Festival in Altamont NY in the summer of 2009, we were all reminded that though he may have curtailed his touring, he is still the same amazing musician and performer that he was when we met him.

This year he was contacted by the re-

vered Denver Folklore Center and asked to join in their 50th anniversary celebration in 2012. He couldn't pass this up as he had been on the scene there in 1962, when the center had its beginnings. Michael wrote to us an "abbreviated tale" explaining his adventures at that time and justifying his sudden rare eagerness to travel, wondering if he and his wife could drop in for a visit on the way there or back. Well of course we said sure. I can't believe where the time goes, that we met Michael 21 years after his Colorado adventure, and it is now 30 years beyond that night in Bunky's.

I read his quickly jotted memoir of those courageous and footloose days with glee and asked him if I might reproduce it in Whither Zither. Here are his informal recollections, quoted with his permission:

"In February 1962, Grady Tuck and I decided to hitchhike from San Diego to Seattle and see if we could make some money around the World's Fair. Between us we carried three instruments and two duffle bags; only got one ride, from a guy in a pickup truck. Ended up riding freight trains. Got a bum steer from a freight-yard guy in (Roseville?), CA; he directed us to a train going EAST. We almost froze to death going over the Sierras. Ended up in Reno in the middle of the night. Sang in a bar where a patron said we could sleep in his room, he was staying up.

"Next day, for reasons totally unknown to me, Grady went to the employment office and got us jobs as busboys at Squaw Valley ski resort (home of '61 Winter Olympics). After one month, Grady was head busboy and I was fired. (Honest work is not for me.) I got a job singing in a neighbor resort; it included free lift tickets. We were kind of going with two Swiss girls who worked in the kitchen at Squaw Valley; one of 'em said she'd teach me to ski; took me up on a lift (first time on skis!). I broke my leg in two places.

"A friend of ours showed up to visit

and gave me a ride to Riverside, CA where my (rightwing fundamentalist) brother had moved from Tucson with his new wife and our mom. After two or three days I couldn't stand it and left, on crutches, with a cast on my whole leg, a banjo and 70 cents. (We call those The Good Old Days.) Went over the Rockies (Wolf Creek Pass) in a blizzard, at night, with a forest ranger; he dropped me at the top (clear sky) in the middle of nowhere, in the dark. I got to Denver in the morning, with \$1.30 (don't remember how).

"Was directed to a coffeehouse (The Green Spider) in an old storefront place where I played a few songs and told my story. Some people took me in -- they seemed like three strange gay high school boys ruled by a really weird girl. I was there for a day when they mentioned the Denver Folklore Center. I said, "WHERE?" and they took me to it, in a storefront a few doors down from the Green Spider. Harry was still painting the place, preparing for his eventual opening. I whispered "Save me!" to him and he offered me a place to sleep on the floor. So I spent two or three weeks there, sleeping on the floor while Harry slept on a platform (where he would later store instrument cases). We existed on yummy black bread and water. Harry TRIED to get me a job or two but I wasn't very enthusiastic about this. He finally lent me a guitar and put me on a bus to Boulder where there was a coffeehouse (The Attic) in the basement of some building. The two guys who ran the place hired me very occasionally but let me sleep on their couch.

"Many other stories from there, but...Harry opened the Folklore Center and it became a Big success. At one time he owned five or six adjoining storefronts on that block. So Harry and I go way back."

---Michael Cooney

Congratulations to the Denver Folklore Center, and deep thanks to Michael for allowing me to reprint this gripping remembrance of his Colorado days.

www.michaelcooney.com
www.denverfolklore.com
www.bunkyscafe.net