



Tico Tico

Driving home from a weekend of gigs a couple Sundays ago, my musical partner Lou and I tuned in to Wisconsin Public Radio's grand old folk music show, Simply Folk. Host Tom Martin-Erickson was playing a live recording he made thirty years ago, in the University of Wisconsin Union's Great Hall, of the incomparable duo of John Roberts and Tony Barrand, singing in their glorious harmonies the bizarre British chanteys and music hall ballads they render with enough spirit to give me goosebumps. This frisson reminded me of a similar thrill caused by a Simply Folk of a couple months ago, which featured a flabbergasting, crazy, dizzying instrumental by Minnesota's mandolin genius, Peter Ostroushko.

Sometimes I go through periods of time in which NO music drives me batty in that good way. I like some stuff, still like the old stuff I used to like, and dig certain new stuff I come across, but I'm not wildly enchanted by anything. But other times, -- and I don't know if it's the moon, the season, the pills, the banana popsicle, hormones, epigenetics, a good sleep, a bad sleep, or new shoelaces -- I am awestruck by music either I have heard before, or, even better, by a brand new (to me) gem. Recently, I'm glad to say, I've been in this giddy mode.

What triggered this receptive condition, I think, was the recent one hour show put on by Andy Cohen of Memphis TN, one of the absolute best country blues singers and guitarists I have ever known. Andy played at the Willy Street Festival here in Madison, thanks to the Madison Folk Music Society. His instrumental interpretation of country blues songs represents them as not only complicated mixtures of melodies and counter melodies and scampering ascending and descending runs and all that showstopping technical stuff, but, in conjunction with his theatric and powerful vocals, Andy presents them at the same time as wild, guitar slapping, joke studded, sexy and joyful explosions of song. I have known Andy for over

30 years and he never ceases to dumfound and elate me with his work.

Anyway, then came Simply Folk and Tom Martin-Erickson and my memory of the Ostroushko piece, which zonked me in much the same way. Too often I let things like this slip by, but this time, for some peculiar reason, I got myself to sit down and write to Tom, asking him if he could remember the name of the piece. Tom wrote back, not sure at first, but then remembering: It was **TICO-TICO!!!** Now, I've heard Tico Tico (written in Brazil in 1917 by Zequinha de Abreu) before, years ago, but this Peter Ostroushko version is really a killer. And not only that, Tom sent me a few links to OTHER versions of the song. My gawd! If you have access to YouTube, do a search for Tico Tico. The classic one to start with is, of course, Carmen Miranda singing it to Groucho in the movie **Copacabana** (URL below).

But there are versions on accordion, ukulele, organ... Real true goofy stuff. Though I love the Peter Ostroushko rendition, and bought an mp3 download of it which I'll drive everyone nuts with, I keep coming back to Carmen Miranda for the video version. It's such a dazzler that though it's in black and white, my memory of it is in color. Can you imagine slogging through the slush of a Wisconsin February twilight, walking into a theater, and having Carmen Miranda and company smack you in the eyeballs with fruit, flower, and feather headgear, layers of jewelry, and impossible gowns, while twisting your earbones with Tico Tico?

I know it's weird to throw Carmen Miranda's show and Andy Cohen's country blues into the same pot with Peter Ostroushko's mandolin, Roberts and Barrand's singing, and a whirlwind of autumn leaves, but it all simmers together nicely in my overheated skull.

Thinking about all this reminded me of a particular pivotal scene in Woody Allen's **Hannah and Her Sisters**. That's the movie where he is told he may have a brain tumor, and he's freaked; then he's told he doesn't, and he is ecstatic, until he realizes that **SOME** day he'll have **SOMETHING** that will do him in. He becomes deeply

gloomy and wonders about the purpose of it all. Wandering the streets, he glumly turns into a theater featuring **Duck Soup** by the Marx Brothers.

Gradually he begins to come out of his funk and watch the movie. As Allen is narrating this experience, on the screen is one of the totally whacked pageants with the Marx Brothers playing the helmets of a line of soldiers like a human xylophone and everybody grabbing banjos and running around, a hundred people on stage... The whole thing a lot like Carmen Miranda's wardrobe... And Woody explains that he is coming to the realization that, so what, so what if we croak, why shouldn't we enjoy things while we're here, and not glom around trying to figure it out all the time? I know this is banal, and I'm sure he does too, but it's all so appropriately underscored by the orchestrated pandemonium in the background that it feels almost viscerally enlightening.

The feelings Allen portrays in that movie theater, of letting himself be set free by extreme zany art, is the feeling I have listening to Andy Cohen's blues, and to Peter Ostroushko's and Carmen Miranda's Tico Tico, not to mention the barmy British songs of Roberts and Barrand that began this episode's goosebumpy ride. It's one of the reasons I like the accordion, the Sergeant Pepper album, and two of my neckties.

I should add that though this ultra-zany shimmering kind of performance is one of the larger allures of music (and art in general) for me, of course it's not the only one. And its dynamics are illusive and inexplicable. I can't pin down why I suddenly like Carmen Miranda's act so much but the somewhat similarly festive Lawrence Welk Show leaves me cold and gives me the creeps.

So, I'm happy to add, on top of everything else, it's all still a mysterious road for me. Meanwhile, one more tip of the hat goes to both the Madison Folk Music Society and to Simply Folk for being my GPS devices when I lose my way.

-- WZ, Nov '09

- www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7UgkjTKZks
(carmen miranda in copacabana)
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftiIPJky_Vs
(the scene from Hannah and her Sisters)
- mp3.rhapsody.com/peter-ostroushko/buddies-of-swing
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roberts_and_Barrand
- www.andycohenmusic.net/