



Sam Hinton Farewell

On the road near Boston a few days ago, my music partner Lou and I received word from famed folk singer Sam Hinton's daughter Leanne Hinton:

"Sam Hinton passed away on Thursday, September 10, at 4 p.m., surrounded by family and hearing his own songs. It was a peaceful end to a long, creative and beloved life. There is a sweet tribute to him at www.samhinton.org, the web site kept by his grandchild Katrina Cooper and her husband Danny. Please feel free to send this notice on to others..."

I first met Sam almost exactly twenty years ago, in early October of 1989, when the folk music magazine **Sing Out's** board members held their annual meeting in Madison. In conjunction with the meeting, a stellar concert was hosted by **WHA Radio** at the **Barrymore Theater** on October 7, 1989. On the board, and featured in the concert, were such folk music legends as Pete Seeger, Michael Cooney, Cathy Fink, Faith Petric, and the amazing Sam Hinton, among others. I remember being astounded and inspired by Sam's performance, which included his playing an intricate multi-voice harmonica solo expertly, using no hands!

The various board members stayed with folkies around town, and my wife Kristi and I were fortunate enough to host Sam Hinton. Our little shack, which we had recently acquired, was not all that comfy a hotel for visitors, I'm ashamed to say, what with a rascal of a dog and no real guest room. We bought a foam pad and fixed it up as a makeshift bed and I installed a bifold door at a pivotal intersection to keep Hildy the pooch in her place. Sam was completely game about these sleeping arrangements. To this day the bifold door we call the "Sam Hinton Memorial Door." But Hildy, a dog who knew just how far to push the limits, would wait until the door was left open a crack, and would slink in and steal a sock from his suitcase, which she would wave and parade proudly

around the place. Fortunately for us, Sam saw the humor in the situation.

It was during this visit that I began to become aware of Sam Hinton's vast talents and of his kind and gracious manner. I remember sitting at our little kitchen table and talking about illustration, for example. Sam humbly, almost sheepishly, offered us a copy of the book "**Seashore Life of Southern California**" which he had written and beautifully illustrated. I had spent a few years working as an illustrator myself so we had plenty to talk about besides music; I dragged out some of my own old work -- no match for his, of course -- and we yakked about technique. And of course we talked about songs. Sam Hinton was a lover of music in general, but he always impressed me as being devoted to the idea of the SONG as his favorite musical unit. And to my delight, he loved goofy songs just as much as serious ones.

At the end of the weekend, I was asked to drive Sam to the airport, along with Pete Seeger. I jumped at the chance but until dropping them off I was a nervous wreck, imagining the headline "Local Nervous Folkie Drives Beloved Icons Hinton and Seeger Up a Tree."

I saw Sam a number of times after that down through the years, and always felt honored to renew our friendship. For my very first Whither Zither column, as a matter of fact, I wrote to Sam to ask him if I could quote him. I had come across a discussion on the **Mudcat Forum** (mudcat.org), which he had contributed to in his customarily knowledgeable and friendly style. The discussion was about alternative and less controversial names for the instrument often known as the "Jew's Harp." Sam wrote me back immediately: "I'm flattered that you might use my comments on the [instrument] in your newsletter: please feel free to quote me as you see fit!" Flattered! That's the way Sam Hinton came across; he made you feel very good about yourself at every opportunity, while filling you with the most amazing amount of information:

"It's interesting to note that many European languages use a pejorative term for the instrument: German 'Maultrommel' ('mouth drum') uses the word for mouth that is usu-

ally applied to mouths of animals; French 'guimbarde' is also applied to any rattletrap non-working machine; Italian 'scazziapensieri' (sp?) means 'thought-scatterer.' Asian names, on the other hand, referring usually to bamboo instruments, tend to be onomatopoeic; 'Koo-ling,' 'shong-nong,' etc..."

The web site mentioned by Sam's daughter has a nice overview of his amazing life. A few snippets: He wrote three books on Marine Biology. He was a cartoonist and illustrator. For almost twenty years he was Director of the Aquarium-Museum at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego. Throughout his career as a naturalist he simultaneously worked as a part-time teacher of college-level courses in music, folklore, art, science and geography. He recorded over a dozen solo albums and had more than 1,000 songs in his repertoire. He hosted his own radio and television programs, and wrote over 1,200 weekly installments of a column called "The Ocean World" for the San Diego Union newspaper. In 1957 Sam founded the San Diego Folk Song Society. And there is so much more.

Even those in the folk music community who are not familiar with his singing or song collecting are probably familiar with Sam's calligraphy. It is his calligraphic work that helps make the favorite sing-along book, **Sing Out's Rise Up Singing**, so visually beautiful.

The last time I saw Sam was about two years ago, when his daughter Leanne -- not surprisingly, a world-renowned linguist and another kind soul -- brought him to a concert of ours in Berkeley. At about 90 years of age, he had only a few years earlier given up touring, but was still fascinated by songs.

Goodbye, dear Sam Hinton, and thank you. May you catch up with Hildy and finally get your socks back.

More on Sam Hinton:

- Many of Sam's books and recordings are available. Google for Sam Hinton. Also see:
- www.samhinton.org
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Hinton
- [mudcat.org/\(search for Sam Hinton\)](http://mudcat.org/(search%20for%20Sam%20Hinton))
- M. Watroba interviewed Sam in the Spring '02 *Sing Out!* (www.singout.org)

--WZ OCT '09