

## **Doc\_Babad's Intro**

Although I dearly enjoy our 3RFS concerts, there are times when *it's late out* and the otherwise great performers just don't get my full attention. This was not the case when I heard, on Saturday, 1 April 2006, them alive in song. Not only was I all ears, as poor as they are, but I moved near the front of the hall to better hear them sing and play and to watch them interact with one another and the audience. This article shares what I learned about them.



## **Curtis & Loretta - Just Sing Me One More Song**

By Harry Babad and Loretta Simonet

### **A Chance Meeting:**

When folk singer Loretta Simonet first encountered Curtis Teague on a California beach in 1977, she was less than impressed with his approach. "I was sitting there practicing my guitar, and he walked up and told me he was a musician too," Simonet said. "I was in my early 20s then, and when you're that age, guys come up to you a lot and start taking. I figured he was just another creep on the beach. But this guy was different. He ran home and came back with a mandolin," Simonet said. "We sat down and started singing Leonard Cohen's 'Suzanne,' and we discovered we harmonized really well." Then they started jamming and even with that first song, the harmonies surprised them both. Their voices fit together so effortlessly.

Loretta invited Curtis to sit in at her gig that night. Soon she quit her nursing home job and joined him at his "gig," playing music on the street. A few months later, they were hitchhiking up and down the West Coast, playing at coffeehouses and cafes. They backpacked through Europe for six months, busking on the streets and in subways, and picking tulips in Holland when they ran out of money. Eventually they ended up back in Minneapolis.

For Teague and Simonet, the meeting was the beginning of a personal and professional partnership that has lasted nearly 30 years. From that chance meeting in the late 70s, when Curtis Teague and Loretta Simonet were walking down the beach in Santa Cruz and crossed paths, picked up a conversation and spoke about their love for music.

...And became one of the finest folk duos; I've heard in many a year folkling around.

**Their Musical and Personal Wanderings:**

Now over 30 years later, the married couple blend traditional Celtic hooks with their unique and acclaimed American folk sound. The two are also virtuosos with the mandocello mandolin (see picture), clawhammer



banjo, ukulele and harp. They have a special knack for weaving intricate harmonies with touching lyrics in a blending of the old and the new. Their connection and dedication to each other musically and emotionally only enriches their intimate and dynamic stage presence. They have released seven recordings since 1989 and perform more than 350 shows a year at festivals, clubs and other venues. "We have to work constantly in order to manage to make a living from our music,"

The first songs they performed together were sixties folk songs. In the eighties they found themselves drawn to Celtic music, especially when Loretta started playing harp. An exciting step in the evolution of their music was starting to write their own songs. The duo's originals are absolutely influenced by their traditional background, but they're not afraid to tackle tough, contemporary issues.

Between the duo's gigs at local and regional folk clubs and festivals, writing songs, and learning new instruments, the couple found creative ways to supplement their music income. Curtis earned a degree in Musical Stringed Instrument Repair at Red Wing Technical College in Minnesota. It's one of a few such accredited classes in the country. He has built a national reputation for identifying and dating rare vintage pieces. Loretta built a cottage industry making and selling glass beaded jewelry at Renaissance Faires across the country while Curtis repaired instruments at local music stores. In 1987, they were married in Santiago, Mexico (near Manzanillo), and have been on the road in their mini van ever since.

They've played at folk festivals, folk clubs, concerts, universities, on national and regional public radio, and on national cable television. They've shared billings with Arlo Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Jez Lowe, Greg Brown, Anne Hills, Bill Staines, Tanya Savory, and Vassar Clements, to name just a few. In 2000, they were honored to be

included on an NPR holiday special hosted by Judy Collins, "Do You Hear What I Hear: A Holiday Folk Tour." In concert, the duo mixes traditional- American and Celtic Ballads with old-timey tunes and original material, often playing vintage stringed instruments Teague ferrets out in antique shops and flea markets.

### **Singing Songs of Caring, Love and Daring:**

Loretta Simonet uses staunchly traditional folk forms to write intensely personal songs. The warm but painful title track to Curtis & Loretta's new CD, "Gone Forever," about her dad's battle with Alzheimer's; is a perfect example of her craft, So is "Jean's Song," which mates ages-old Celtic harp glissandos with lyrics about grocery stores, broken toasters and oxygen machines. The harpist sees her songs as tools that can empower people to face life's challenges. "There's no point in writing a really sad song, unless there's something you can do to help the situation and look at it differently," she said.



Simonet's father lost his mind to Alzheimer's; her tribute, "Gone Forever" is the happiest song you'll ever hear about the hollow pain a child feels for a parent blown away by the disease. "If I think of all the things that I've lost, I can simply not bear the thought," she sang in her liquid trilling alto. "I am gone forever from his memory." The poignant song,

the title track on an album of the same name, "Gone Forever," says Simonet, is "a true story, autobiographical about my father who had the disease for 10-11 years. I would go over to care for him for a day, to give my mom a break for a day, and then go home in tears. Then one, day I realized that we were having a good time when we were together no matter what skills he lost. I began to see that I was lucky to be with him no matter what." "The song," says Simonet "celebrates the good times we had as father and daughter before and after the Alzheimer's." "I wrote it before he died, but I never sang it for him, ... he never would have understood it," says Simonet

Folksinger/songwriter Loretta Simonet marries the strains of her Celtic harp with tales of everyday heroes and their struggles. Ms. Simonet pens lyrics and, music for the folk duo, Curtis and Loretta. An example is the haunting "Angel of Bergen-Belsen," a lyric tale of Luba Tryszynska-Frederick; a Polish-Jewish woman spared an Auschwitz death only to nurse wounded Nazis at Bergen-Belsen. [Album: Just My Heart for You.] She rescued 54 children who were left to die one night in the snow and kept them alive until the Allied forces arrived.

More recent songs reflect their passion and compassion. Songs like "Elza and Branko (The Siege of Sarajevo)" from the duo's 1994 album *It's Where You Hang Your Hat* show how one can reach out to Loretta's musical core. She based the song on a newspaper account of an elderly couple sustained only by love in their struggle to survive the privations of the Balkan wars.



On a more contemporary note, Curtis, a prodigious multi-instrumentalist, also chips in a new tune about the lure of the ocean, "Don't Keep a Sailor Away from the Sea," and revives the Merle Travis/Tex Williams country classic "Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! That Cigarette" - on ukulele and kazoo, no less.

#### **Thoughts about music they collect - An email Interview:**

Question - *Are there themes for what you chase or is this a matter of the heart?*

Loretta - It's a matter of the heart, but themes naturally grow out of that. We search for songs, and write songs, that make a difference to us, and the themes we're often drawn to, or write about, seem to be ones of caring for others, searching for the good in people and the world, and focusing on the big picture in this crazy world.

Question - *How do you and Curtis pick the new songs your going to learn, when they're not things you've written?*

Loretta - We find the traditional and contemporary songs that we perform and sometimes record, more often than not, from other musicians that we encounter in our travels, at festivals, jam sessions, etc. Sometimes an old melody just draws us to it. Then you hear the words and realize that even though they may be a hundred, or two hundred years old, they still deal with a current event. They're still relative today! Songs are really tools that people use to build things, or explain things, or to fix or repair things of the human condition. Some tools wear out or become obsolete, but some remain (for better or for worse), useful for hundreds of years.

A couple examples of this are "Hard Times Come Again No More," and "We Be Soldiers Three."

Question - *Have you favorite places that you travel to for gigs or inspiration?*

Loretta - People in many occupations and professions get "bennies;" things like health insurance, year-end bonuses, and paid vacations. The benefit that we get in our line of work is getting to play our music at acoustic venues across the country. They are all amazingly unique, delightful, special places. And almost without exception, they are dependent upon wonderful people (often artists and musicians themselves), volunteering their energy and time to keep these venues in existence. These places we're privileged to work at, are labors of love. The fringe benefit we receive is to be surrounded by this energy so often.

The United States is a beautiful country to travel, with countless places for inspiration, from Maine to Florida, from Manhattan to tiny Gregory, South Dakota, from the redwoods of northern California to the tumbleweeds of eastern Washington State!! Every place has its own beauty, but we have to say the venues are our favorite place to be.

Question - *Do you also explore the food as well as the music and culture where you visit?*

Loretta - The song "Lutefisk for Supper," from our latest CD, is our Minnesota adaptation of an old southern traditional song, "Fish for Supper." For a couple of years we used to ask the audience to fill in the blank with their own culinary oddity. (xxxx for supper) There are some interesting ones - scrapple, hoagies, etc., etc. We, being vegetarians, haven't tried them all! But we have a lot of fun with things local. It's so great; people are so good to us.

People help us out, put us up for a night or two, and feed us some good, good food! People treat like you like you grew up with them in their small town, or their big city. Without this down home hospitality, it would be nearly impossible, financially, for us to tour as much as we do. We are astounded by and indebted to the great people we meet!

We've also been welcomed into the home of one of our inspirations, Luba, the Angel of Bergen-Belsen," several times. She lives in Pembroke Pines, a suburb of Miami. She introduced us to the whole Jewish culture, from singing us old Yiddish songs, to feeding us (and feeding us, and feeding us!!) She made us potato latkes and lox and bagels. She took us to her favorite restaurant, Katz Deli, for matzoh ball soup, The first time we went to Miami, the folks from the



Folk Club of South Florida took us out for Cuban food, a first for us. Friends we often stay with in "downeast" Maine make us all things blueberry, from jam to scones.

We've gotten to hear sea shanties in Seattle (double bill with Hank Cramer at the Center for Wooden Boats), and songs of the Great Lakes in Chicago (hanging out with our musician friends Tom and Chris Kastle).

In what other occupation do you travel to a place you've never been before, get invited home by people you've never met before, and get treated like family? We love our job!!

**Reminiscing** - doc's Days Gone By:

"Curtis & Loretta are as good an argument as any for the preservation of a space within the current acoustic scene for, you know- folk music. Not that there's anything wrong with coffeehouse singer-handwringers or collegiate rockers with mandolins. And not that space shouldn't also be made for Indonesian *gamelans*, Nordic roots, or anything else.

It's just that the perfect, ringing Celtic harmonies of Loretta Simonet and Curtis Teague represent one of the purest and most accessible pleasures in local music. They provide a perfect showcase for the lyricism that a longtime couple can discover with vintage traditional instruments (Teague on mandocello, Simonet on Celtic harp). Forgoing the duo's fine originals, *Sit Down* is a collection of traditional songs from the British Isles, sung with confidence and feeling. Some of these tunes were picked up, with a new flair, from their now rare cassettes. The tunes are restorations as surely as the vintage instruments upon which they're played.



But if subjects such as whales or heartbroken maidens don't particularly speak to you, the voices recalling them will." [From: CITVpages.com/, The News and Arts Weekly of the Twin Cities. May 1, 2002]

As an old folknik, who haunted Washington Square Park in Manhattan (NYC) every Sunday afternoon during my high school and college days, my

favorites are the tradition songs the duo breathes new life into. No it's not perfect, I know almost all of the tradition songs Loretta and Curtis sing, but I sang and played them to other melodies and tempos... but when they play "my songs" in concert, the feeling of familiar-unfamiliar goes away as I let myself be subsumed by their music and voices.

Songs like The Minstrel Boy, Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye, One Morning In May, Greenland Whale Fisheries, No, John, No and my long time favorite Finnegan's Wake still take me back. Back to the 50-60's, to Washington Square Park and to the Illini Folk Arts society [graduate school University of Illinois] to all the song circles, hootenannies and Friday night lift your glasses high and sing at the Godsey's home. Singing until you had no voice, fingers were numb, and likely you had a wee but too much lab alcohol made gimlets or the keg of beer. [Thank G\_d, I did not know how to drive those days.]

#### **In Closing:**

An evening with Curtis & Loretta, as I learned at an April 1st 2006 3RFS concert, is a captivating experience. It runs the gamut of rolling with laughter, to holding back tears, with plenty of side trips in between. Their thought-provoking originals and timeless traditional songs are seamlessly woven together by their tight harmonies and their array of stringed instruments. And their years of performing and touring together have honed their comfortable stage presence to a delightful edge. So I invite all of our reader to tune in. Check out their website at <http://www.curtisandloretta.com>.

I've some great folk duos in my music collection(s) - almost all of the Ian and Sylvia albums, Theodore Bikel's albums (alas on vinyl) with Israeli Folk Songs, A Young Man and a Maid (with Cynthia Gooding) Folk Songs From Just about Everywhere (with Geula Gill.) Also among my favorite dues, but in Jazz vein are the duo of Rebecca Killgore and David Frishberg.

After hearing them live and almost wearing out their CDs, I've added Curtis and Loretta to that limited group.

Based on listening to their albums, I agree with Adam Granger that Curtis and Loretta have become mature and comfortable in their musician skins. There is neither anything tentative or manic on their albums or- alas - the one performance I attended.

I'll keep sending them an occasional, mostly abandoned song I love, mostly Yiddish and from the Spanish Civil War, that seem to fit their style and interest, including the song of the Warsaw Ghetto called "Zog Nit Keynmol" in which we remember those lost in the Holocaust. Perhaps I'll get to hear them sing it... some day soon.

PS:

**Discography:** [CDs]

- o Just My Heart For You 2006
- o Sit Down Beside Me 2001
- o Gone Forever 1999
- o It's Where You Hang Your Hat 1994

Cassettes:

- o The Parting Glass 1993
- o Christmastide with Curtis & Loretta 1991
- o Haymarket Minstrels 1989