

This month, John and Micki Perry have provided us with the long awaited updated version, of the article written by Patrice O'Neill that was published in the September 2001 Victory Review. This reprint contains a few clarifications of the times of some of the events in their lives, and corrects a few factual errors.

Harry Babad
eTalk Editor

P.S.

TMF 2005 needs someone to help in writing grants to help keep the festival solvent... and if you like reaching out, helping raise money from local firms would doubly bless you!

...And Here's John & Micki Perry

"Don't tell John and Micki Perry you are reading this article. They get the prize for "most reluctant cover features" ever. When asked if I could interview them, I could hear the wheels screeching into reverse right through the phone line.

"Oh, no, don't write about us. There are all kinds of people you should be writing about." Micki named several. "Oh, let me talk to John." She groaned. I promised to call back later, and got waylaid by several batches of baking cookies when the phone rang. It was John. "Well we talked to our board and they said it would be okay to go ahead and let you interview us. I guess it's okay with us too, just so long as you talk about other people too." Sheesh.

"Does this kind of humility actually still exist in the world and can it be believed? In this case, there is no doubt in my mind that the legendary folk way lives on in these two genuinely lovely people. If you've ever sung a Woody Guthrie song, if you've ever ventured over the mountains to Eastern Washington and heard the strains of folk and dance music, then you would have

to know John & Micki. They've sung, they've organized, they've produced, hosted, cooked, cleaned, and made friends for twenty-five years in the Northwest and really, they are just fine hanging out in the background, thank you very much.

"John and Micki met at a college age church camp in 1963. "It was in the Lake Tahoe area," John explains. "No, it was at Twain Heart," Micki corrects him. "I was with a girlfriend," John continues. "No, that was Lake Tahoe. The next year we were both at Twain Heart, and you were still with that girlfriend. But in the summer of my sophomore year, we got together." Micki is the keeper of the family history. You just can't achieve this kind of perfect bickering unless you've been married for 39 years, as have the Perry's. Four daughters, four grand daughters and a couple of careers separate John & Micki from their first brush with the *folk scare* of the 1960s. Tom Paxton was the first person I ever heard use the phrase and many people allude to it, but John and Micki were there.

'Singing together was an important part of their lives from day one. John laughs, "I got kicked out of colleges, but Micki graduated. We'd have friends over to sing and eat food. Some people called these things hootenannies, but we just called them parties, where we sang instead of doing other things. It was fun." John's work took him to New York in the early '70s where he worked for the Con Edison Power Company. In a glorious twist of expectations, he and Micki got hooked up with an environmental action group headed by Pete Seeger and others. The group had adopted a dump and was determined to clean it up. The Clearwater was a replica of an 1850s boat, and it was moored at the dump. The Sloop Club was an old diner at the entrance of the dump, and it became the first of several folk music clubs up and down the river that supported what came to be known as the Clearwater project. "Working on the clean-up in those days was like pouring water into a sieve," sighed Micki. The Seegers and the Perry's, along with many others, organized clean-up days, concerts, and festivals. The dump finally became a park in 1979 but during those years of fervent volunteerism, the Perry's learned some important life lessons.

"Pete was a guy who had an intense vision of what needed to be done. Toshi, his wife, knew how to get things done. We are about the same age now as they were when we worked together. We discovered that our idols were just regular folks. You don't have to worship them. You just get to know them." John explained. What John did not say was that they probably learned that when you see a thing that needs to be done,

you ought to jump in and do it. Their first hands-on experience in the folk music world has been repeated time and again over the years as the pair has simply done what needed doing. John continued, Pete always used to say that if you loved the music, you shouldn't try to make a living at it. "I guess we adopted that philosophy. We like to perform, but it's not our big thing. The payback for me comes when I've helped to produce a concert and I'm standing in the back watching the audience having a good time. When somebody's music reaches past all the barriers we put up and makes someone else react emotionally, that's just good. When I realize I helped to make that happen, I'm happy.

'Micki chimed in with a favorite memory. I had taken the girls down to the park' and were part of a group that was going for a sail on the Clearwater. The ship filled up; Pete stayed on the dock and waved everyone off. My youngest asked our oldest why Pete wasn't going with us. Beth replied, "Well, I think he has to go back to Sesame Street now."

They just knew him as the guy who occasionally sang with puppets and figured he lived there. We just knew him as our friend. Over the years, my big reward always comes as we sit around the table with all the friends we've made over the years. *We talk and sing and share the wee hours, and I just love that.*

'Another career move brought John and Micki to Richland where John took a job working for WPPSS now called Energy Northwest where John taught engineers

(he is retired now). Not bad for a guy who kept getting booted out of college. They found a church, got involved in the community, raised their girls, and sang with friends when they could make the opportunity. They organized their first concert with the help of some friends and brought Dan Maher to the Tri-Cities. The Perry's were the opening act.

'It took about another year before we started producing concerts in earnest,' says Micki. Eight or nine people gathered in the Perry backyard and formed the Three Rivers Folklife Society. We didn't really aspire to be any big organization. We just wanted to do concerts and have contra dances. As long as we could use someone's mail permit, we were happy." she said. And all the folkies who have been there said, "Amen." Mark Horn, who has since moved east, joined the group and got all the I's and T's dotted and crossed accordingly. He made sure 3 Rivers got their 501(c)3 and took care of all the business and legal matters so frightening and foreign to more timid souls. "It takes another kind of mind to do all those things going. Mark was really good at it." For their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary present, the Perry's bought a sound system and used it for the Three Rivers Folklife Society Coffeehouse open mike and concerts. We're talking serious commitment here.

"The first regular venture for the Three Rivers Folklife Society was monthly contra dances. For a time, John & Micki performed with the Contradictions, but true to form, were primarily interested in seeing to it that a regular dance was created in their neck of the woods.

Three Rivers still hosts a monthly contra dance at the Kennewick Highlands Grange and a dance is always part of the {Tumbleweed Music Festival} Three Rivers Festival. After the dances were established, the group turned their attention back to concerts and began bringing in a wide variety of performers every month.

"From the beginning Micki was the booking person. She still is. She's friendlier than the average bear, so the job suits her well. It wouldn't be unfair to say that she's thinking about the after concert hang-out around her dining room table as much as she is about the concerts themselves. "We've probably hosted someone at our house twice a month since 1989. In all that time, only two or three {performers} were overly impressed with their own abilities, but the rest were just regular people." Micki explains. Her house is filled with paintings and replicas of the Peaceable Kingdom, the ubiquitous depiction of every kind of creature in a state of calm and happy coexistence. The message of the picture obviously occupies a large part of the heart of the household.

"The first Tumbleweed Festival came about as a direct result of the 3 RFS concert series. There just weren't enough months in the year to host all the concerts the group wanted, so they made a festival. Part of the reason for holding the festival on Labor Day weekend was to create an alternative to the other festival happening that same weekend. Seattle's Bumbershoot extravaganza is a marvelous exercise in artistic excess. Sometimes you're in the mood for that and sometimes you just want to hear your friends play music.

"Tumbleweed definitely provides that option and this year's festival features a slew of Northwest favorites appearing on the five stages nestled in Howard Amon Park along the river in Richland. "We've never been in charge of the festival, but we've always been involved," says John. Mickie Chamness is volunteer coordinator for Three Rivers and has provided an invaluable service to the group and its goals. Janet Humphrey was chairperson for the festival for three years and was instrumental in securing much needed grant funding for the event. Kendall Smith was the chairperson for two years. Micki has been the chair for 3 years and is trying to spin off duties to other volunteers.



Performers Extraordinaire

"Tumbleweed features 70 local, regional, and national acts, is free and family friendly. Three Rivers Folklife Society has wrestled hard with the question of how to treat performers, i.e., pay them. To their great credit, they have found ways to feed and house all festival performers. In addition, Tumbleweed does not take any percentage of artist CD sales. That reflects a commendable effort to community of acoustic performers.



John and Micki to whom we all owe Tumbleweed - TMF 2004

"One of the features of the festival is the Dave Oestreich Band Scramble. Dave was a great friend of John and Micki's. He played harmonica and always found his way to the stage when John and Micki played locally. He loved to participate in band scrambles. Dave died in 2001 and is sorely missed.

"It is not uncommon for folks who find themselves delving deeper into the production end of music to lose time to actually play music. Not so for the Perry's. Micki swears John is a guitar magnet and is often given guitars. Nice affliction. His current favorite guitar is made from a Michael Lorang Koa box with a spruce top and a standard sized Taylor neck. It's got a high voice, which works well with John's tenor singing voice. Michael gave John the box in 1994 when he transformed himself from luthier to stained glass artist. John collected the other parts and eventually found someone to put it all together for him. This has to qualify as a true folk guitar. John also plays banjo "...and autoharp, but never in public." Micki plays autoharp and writes songs. She is especially proficient at parody songs, one of which, The Wreck of the Lady

Washington was recorded by William Pint and Felicia Dale on their disc, *Hearts of Gold*. The pair have done numerous children's performances drawing on Micki's vast experience as a pre-school teacher. "I don't use fingerpicks and have my own sort of strum. It's not that bad and I can keep up with Phil & Vivian Williams doing fiddle tunes" Micki explains. They find time to play for Alzheimer patients at a local Adult Services and continues her work with kids this summer at the local Children's Theater. The two have enjoyed serving on song panels focusing on the music of Bill Staines, Phil Oches, and Woody Guthrie.

"Music for John and Micki is all about friendship. It is about sipping a beer and munching some chips while swapping songs and stories. It is about maintaining bonds formed thirty years ago, celebrating and mourning as friends marry, give birth, succeed or fail, live and die. When they attended the Folk Alliance conference earlier this year the high-light for them was not a particular concert or a brilliant workshop or some connection or another they made with a VIP. Rather it came when Sunny Oakes, Phil's sister, asked a song circle to sing "The Thresher," Oakes' song about an underwater submarine tragedy. John was in the Navy for 9 years. This was the first time he was able to sing the song. It had always been far too close to home for him. This time, borne up by the circle of friends new and old, he was able to swim in that sea of emotions and emerge with a memory to be cherished rather than feared.

"As we said our good-byes, Micki laughingly referred to herself as a music resourceress. 'Come again?' I said not quite sure I had heard her correctly. "People call me all the time asking for musicians and I try to hook them up with someone. So, that makes me a resourceress." Gotcha. It's just about a perfect description for this pair that has worked tirelessly, sometimes thanklessly, through a couple of decades of making music happen in their corner of the Northwest. But please, don't tell them I said to say thanks. I think they'd be far more pleased to see you start driving your end of the folk train and keep the process rolling along.



So as we plan for TMF 2005, we daily thank the efforts of John and Micki both for being the dynamos of our festival, sparking our volunteers; and for all they gifts they given both to their fellow musicians, lovers of acoustic music and to our community. John, Micki — Live long and sing and laugh on!
HB



**Welcome Strangers
Strangers No More...**

...We come for to Sing!