

A Letter from Joe Jencks to the PMN Community



In the early spring of 2002, I met Pat Humphries at a Phil Ochs Song Night in Cleveland. I had just moved east from Seattle, and had launched my solo touring career only a few years earlier. Pat told me about the People's Music Network, and invited me to attend the summer gathering. I remain deeply grateful. For as I look back, it is easy to see the significance of that moment. Many of my most cherished musical and activist friends are all people who have had connections to PMN, past or present. The diaspora of PMN are a noteworthy lot that have had a significant impact on my life, art, music, political views, and on my heart!

My own path to PMN

actually began in 1980, when my sister Jean gave me a double album set: Pete Seeger and Arlo Guthrie, *Together in Concert*. Those two records literally changed the course of my life. I was all of eight years old at the time, but I knew exactly what I wanted to be when I grew up: a Folk singer! Amazingly enough, the path between my eight-year-old self and the musician I am today is far less winding than it seemed in real-time. And it is a path that winds solidly through the deep community associated with PMN.

An itinerant musician needs community as much as anyone. But we often have a hard time finding it because we are always on the move. PMN gave me a foundation and a connection to activist music and musicians that was life giving. I can trace so many threads in my life to PMN including a connection to the Great Labor Arts Exchange, and more engagement with my union: AFM Local 1000. Through PMN I got to know so many people who have become genuine friends and mentors including Charlie King & Karen Brandow, Pat Humphries, Sandy Opatow, Colleen Kattau, Jon Fromer, Faith Petric, Pete Seeger, and so many more.

Among my favorite memories of my first summer gathering is the Men's song circle. I was so moved to sit in community with good men, singing, sharing, opening our hearts, and "keepin' it real." To be in the company of men I barely knew, and still feel enough safety to weep, was an extraordinary thing to me as a young man. I will forever remember singing "I can't help falling in love with you," with Fred Louis and crew! I also recall a powerful presentation on the songs of Malvina Reynolds, and an amazing multi-media performance about Sacco and Vanzetti, offered by Charlie King.

At the summer gathering in 2003, I was having a hard time. It was near the anniversary of my father's death. Pete Seeger sat with me for nearly two hours one afternoon and he and I

spoke of life as musicians, husbands, sons, brothers, and men. It was not our first meeting, nor the first time we sang together. But it was the first time for me that one of my heroes became fully human.

I was only 19 when my dad died, and there were many things I wished I'd had the chance to share with my father. Pete assured me that regret is a two way street, and that if he had a do-over as a father, there are things he would do better the second time around. My conversation with Pete that day was pivotal. He listened lovingly, as I played a song I had written posthumously for my father – pondering how his participation in the Korean War impacted our relationship as father and son. Pete, for his part shared some memories both tragic and humorous about his time in the Service during WWII. And he played a song for me about forgiveness, and applied music like a salve to a wounded heart. He also offered some suggestions about my music and work, and challenged some of my preconceptions about myself, and the world in which we live. He did for me what he did so well for so long, he lessened the distance between people and helped me look through the lens of commonality rather than separateness.

After Many years away from PMN, I dropped in for part of a day this past summer and listened to a fantastic program presented by Terry Leonino & Greg Artzner (Magpie) about music and the civil rights movement. I was welcomed home like a long lost cousin, and received with open arms. I've missed PMN!

And so it was with great joy that I received the offer to be PMN's 2016 Artist In Residence. And, I am honored to say yes! I am delighted to have a chance to give back to a community that helped set me on a good path, and inspired me personally, musically, and professionally. I have been on the road full-time now for nearly 17 years and have performed throughout the US, Canada, Ireland and the Caribbean. And everywhere I go I think about how music is a birthright, the way we celebrate, mourn, educate, protest, contemplate and pray. Singing is how we connect to our souls. And sharing those songs with each other is a healing, uplifting, and necessary part of life.

I look forward to helping PMN consider how to keep evolving, reaching out to new artists, welcoming old friends back home, and keeping the music of the people alive and well. Ironically, even though one of the prime goals of PMN is to help foster and celebrate music of social consciousness, it is where I learned that there is nothing more healing than beauty. A song need not be political to be revolutionary. Any song that connects us to our humanity – helps us see each other as more fully human. And as we break down the barriers to that sense of connection and community, we take one step closer to a world reborn. Bread and roses, bread AND roses!

-Joe Jencks
PMN Artist in Resident, 2016