

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Seventy-Eight

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Ninth Month, 1987

Dear Friend,

If you are keeping up with the same-sex marriage question mentioned last month, you will want to read the Ninth Month issue of *Friends Bulletin*, the organ of Pacific Yearly Meeting (2160 Lake St., San Francisco CA 94121). It contains long excerpts from a lengthy and heartfelt discussion of related issues at PYM's sessions this summer. Two PYM meetings have labored at great length over specific requests for same sex marriages, so the exercise recounted here was not dealing with abstractions.

And if you are making up an autumn Quaker reading list, let me urge you to put John Punshon's new book, *Encounter With Silence* (Friends United Press, \$6.95) near the top. The book describes Punshon's religious conversion--not to Quakerism but *within* it, which crystallized when he reread most of the New Testament after his father's death.

Punshon had already been a Friend for many years, and was even a recognized scholar and teacher of Quakerism. Yet his religious renewal, or "convincement," in traditional Quaker terms, produced a reexamination of the elements of Society: the patterns of unprogrammed worship, the meaning of the testimonies and Friends' business procedures, the persistence of what I have called the "Quaker-Catholic connection," and Quakerism's Christian character and relationship with other religious traditions.

Further, Punshon offers some of the freshest and most useful comments on the programmed/unprogrammed division among American Friends that I have seen in a

long time. He sees and describes cogently a commonality amid the sprawling range of American Quakerdom that few of us natives have been able to articulate. I am tempted to summarize his vision here; but you should read and consider it for yourself. You have my guarantee that it will be worth it

These are weighty matters; yet he deals with them insightfully in a mere 131 pages; and despite Punshon's great learning, he does so without pedantry. I hesitate to call *Encounter With Silence* a devotional book, because the term chills more secular-minded readers; but that it is, and a very fine one, too.

One last word. By now, I hope you have noticed that something is different about this page. This month I am taking a Friend's counsel, and rearranging the format of this letter into double columns. The advice came from Brinton Turkle, a renowned artist and author, known among Friends as creator of the Obadiah books. He sent me a book excerpt on page design, readability and the length of lines, along with a heartfelt plea to shorten mine, which he said would make them easier on the reader's eye.

So that's what I'll do, pending further advice from you about whether this change seems an improvement. Please let me have your reaction.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

QUAKER MUSIC: IT'S ALL OVER THE PLACE

It is a truism anymore to note how far Friends have moved away from the generations of **Disciplines** which unequivocally proscribed indulgence in musicmaking, either in worship or at home. And this summer, when I set about collecting a sample of music by American Friends, my file folder quickly filled up with cassettes, representing many kinds of music, and of Friends. There's something going on here, for sure. And with the holidays coming on, Quaker musicians are a much better group to consider supporting with some of our gift-buying dollars than many a corporate monolith one can think of.

Music: Welcome Here, Cheerfully

I am hardly a qualified music critic; but I know what I like, and one must start somewhere. Let's look first at some of the music growing out of the programmed stream. This is probably fitting, as these were the first Friends bold enough to welcome music without shame. Credit for much of the activity now underway goes to Barbara Mays of Friends United Press in Richmond, Indiana. She has assembled eighteen songs on the tape **Go Cheerfully**, released last summer by FUPress and available from the **Quaker Hill Bookstore, 101 Quaker Hill Dr., Richmond IN 47374**, for \$9.95 plus a dollar for shipping. (A companion songbook is \$6.95, and you can get both as a set for \$15.00.) Eighteen songs is a lot of music for the money.

Go Cheerfully is a labor of love, and much of it has a homey, church choir sound. Most of the songs are based directly on Quaker motifs or familiar sayings, as the titles suggest: "There is One", "I See A Mighty People", and "Wait in the Light." Not all of these efforts work; but some do, and one, "There Is A Spirit," succeeds very well. This is a setting by Linda Selleck of James Nayler's familiar words. As performed here by Michael Crumley-Effinger, it has a chantlike quality that fits the words and gives them a haunting character that made me want to play that cut over and over.

Linda Selleck is another Richmondite, who with two other women Friends interested in folk music of the Appalachian and Elizabethan style made the cassette, **"Welcome Here!"** Subtitled "A collection of religious folk songs," it too is available through the **Quaker Hill Bookstore**, for \$8.00 plus \$1.00 shipping. **"Welcome Here!"** includes several instrumentals, arrangements

of "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," "Simple Gifts" and a Sacred Medley for harp, hammered dulcimer and guitar, plus several traditional folk songs such as the title tune, "There is A Balm in Gilead," "I Wonder As I Wander," and "I Know Where I'm Going." Overall I liked the playing here better than the singing. But Selleck is onto something: there is a rich store of traditional religious music which is neglected not only by Friends but by many other church people. I look forward to hearing the results of her further explorations.

Flowing Along Under a New Moon

Turning to unprogrammed Friends next, they are, typically, all over the map. Let me first mention a charming tape of piano improvisations, **Flowing River**, by a gay Friend, Mark Beckham-Shirey. Beckham-Shirey is classically trained, and this is as close to a classical entry as this collection gets. **Flowing River** is an example of what is called "New Age" music, non-melodic and meditative, something one can listen to or have in the background. The title track has what are called "ocean sounds," behind the music, but often they were more of a distraction to than an enhancement. The other two pieces, "Rustling Leaves" and "Morning Breezes," are cleaner and more relaxing.

Beckham-Shirey describes this cassette as being mainly "feminine and receptive" in character, and told me he hopes to produce another one which would be more assertive in tone. But **Flowing River** is a very interesting start; if you could put a silent meeting into music, it would often sound something like this. (The tape is available directly from **Mark Beckham-Shirey at 1224 Peralta St., Berkeley CA 94706**, for \$12 postpaid.)

On the other hand, **New Moon** is a strikingly different tape of songs by Patricia McKernon, a Minnesota Friend. There are no gauzy atmospherics here: this is substantial stuff, delivered in a strong, shapely voice. McKernon says her music can be described as feminine, but not directly feminist, spiritual but not explicitly religious, and politically informed but not overtly political. I would add mystical and lively to this list, and still feel inadequate to describe her art.

For instance, the song "Come Forward," which opens the tape, is easy enough to

listen to; yet on reflection, I realized there was a whole, distinctive theology being expressed in it. And sure enough, after we had discussed it, McKernon further elucidated the lyrics by sending me a 30-page paper on the same topic written for a systematic theology class at Harvard Divinity School.

Looking For a Way to Rock the Rainbow

Yet *New Moon* is by no means simply an intellectual exercise, although a few of the songs seem a bit "notional", with lines straining under the weight of their contents. Yet one song, "Take These Hands," is simple, Franciscan-like in outlook and so lively in tempo and tune that my children have all but memorized it. *New Moon* is the product of a unique creative outlook, and I look forward to hearing more of Friend McKernon's music. (Order it from Sound Mind Records, Box 8828, Minneapolis MN 55408, for \$8.00 plus \$1.00 shipping; a disc version is also available.)

Another Friend I've been waiting to hear more from is Susan Stark, along with a growing number of people who enjoyed her first release, *Child of the Nuclear Age*. And just as this issue got underway, an advance copy of her new one arrived. It is *Rainbow People*, and shows that the popularity of her first effort was no fluke.

Indeed, listening to Susan's version of the familiar "Simple Gifts," I found myself thinking, *Here is a voice that has STAR written all over it*. At its best, for sheer loveliness her singing is unmatched in this collection, not to mention in most of what I hear in snatches on Top-40 radio. If she were commercially-inclined, my suspicion is that Susan Stark would be well on her way to pop music fame and fortune by now.

But that is not her sense of her calling. Instead, Susan is following a very Woolman-like path, singing for Friends and peace folk, living simply at the Meeting School in New Hampshire, and raising a young family with her husband Tor. So for now, unless some music-biz tyro blows her cover, Friends are fortunate enough to have her talents pretty much to ourselves.

Susan's family experience sets the tone for *Rainbow People*, which begins with "All God's Critters Got a Place In the Choir," and concludes with a lullaby, "Ship In The Harbor." Children should enjoy many of these songs. But there is plenty here for adults, too; I was especially taken with her version of the familiar "Simple Gifts." This and

the other songs on *Rainbow People* show a considerable loosening up of her singing from that on *Child of the Nuclear Age*. Lovely as much of it was, there was a soberness to that album that seemed almost like Wilburite Quakerism set to music. This loosening is a development I hope she takes further.

Rainbow People will be available by the end of Tenth Month from Susan Stark Music, P.O. Box 339 Rindge NH 03461, for \$9.00 plus \$1.50 shipping. (*Child of the Nuclear Age* is also still available, for \$8.50.)

Let's return to Indiana for our last entry, the work of John Carter, pastor of the Westfield, Indiana Friends Meeting. He has released two tapes, *The Property of God*, and *Rise Up!* along with a "single" cassette featuring only two songs, "Bound Together in Christ's Love" and "Friends Forever;" the former provided the theme for last summer's Triennial of Friends United Meeting, for which he served as music director.

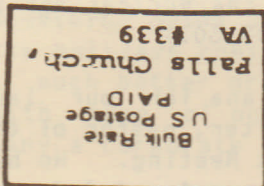
I am familiar with Carter's most recent tape, *Rise Up!* which shows him on the cover sporting his trademark, a tie bearing a black and white keyboard design. Just from such song titles as "The Prodigal," "All Flesh Is Grass," "Pharisee" and "No Other Gods," it is clear that this is an example of what is called "contemporary Christian music." The arrangements, which include heavy use of synthesizers and other electronic musicmaking, reinforce this impression.

Now, given my unprogrammed and East Coast urban proclivities, this whole musical genre is normally not my earthenware mug of (herb) tea, so I doubt my ability to pass fair judgment on his work. But having said that, there is also no denying that Carter has a real and major distinction in this company, and it is this: Where Mark Beckham-Shirey's piano flows, Linda Selleck's harp shimmers, Patricia McKernon's songs occasionally bounce and Susan Stark now and then begins ever so sedately to swing--among all these worthies, John Carter is the only one who sounds as if he knows, well, how to *rock*.

Indeed, his song "Quakin'" is right out of the glory days of early rock and roll, and his tape version of "Bound Together In Christ's Love" comes on with echo chamber and reverb at full throttle. This energy gains my respect, for yes, I like to rock too. (*Rise Up!* and *The Property of God* are available from The Quaker Hill Bookstore, at \$10 each, plus \$1.00 shipping.) We need some more of this energy in Quaker music.

INSIDE: A LOOK AT NEW QUAKER MUSIC

From: Chuck Fager, A Friendly Letter
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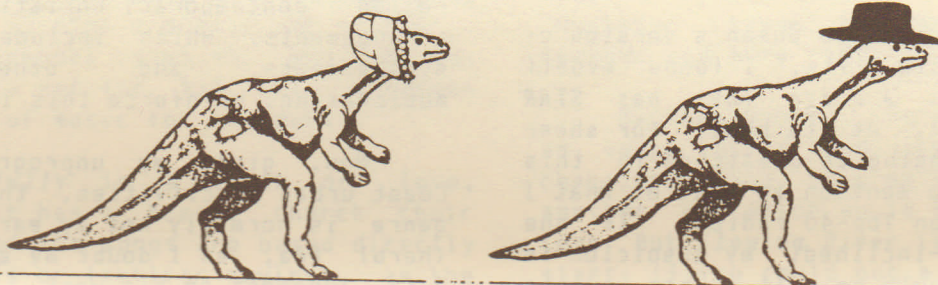


THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

In Ninth Month, 1666 George Fox was released after more than a year of cruel confinement in Scarborough Castle. He had been drenched by storms and nearly starved; his health was severely weakened by the ordeal. But he was not stopped: Soon after his release, Fox

set out on long journeys around England, determined to "settle" the Friends meetings in what he called "gospel order," which is the organizational form that Quakerism has to this day. This was one of his greatest achievements.

QUAKER CHUCKLES



Quakersaurus

Friends whose children are crazy about dinosaurs will want to see a recent issue of *Paleontology News*. It describes the identification of a new species, dubbed Quakersaurus because of the peculiar bone structures on their heads. Professors Wilbur J. Gurney and Elias Woolman-Hicks say the Quakersaurus were plant-eaters, and the main deposits of their bones have been found near Philadelphia and in East-central Indiana, though excavations are also underway at promising sites in Oregon, North Carolina and England. Evidently these animals traveled in small but strongly-defined groups, called meetings, and remains have typically been found arranged in a circular pattern and

in postures suggesting a kind of repose.

Professors Gurney and Woolman-Hicks hypothesize that the placement of the remains may explain how the species became extinct: "It is as if they knew something was going wrong and were trying to figure out what to do about it," they wrote, "but before they could decide anything, the Ice Age had begun and they were frozen in place." However, one other paleontologist, who declined to give her name, countered that the Quakersaurus is not really extinct at all; rather, she said, it only *seems* that way because you can't find them in the phone book.)