

Exceedingly Good Song Night

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by Zoë Madonna



"And I bid you good night" (Zoë Madonna)

What do you get when you take a back room of a New York bar, fill it with singers coming out of varied folk traditions, sell them some food and beer, and then give them five hours to sing what they will? That's Exceedingly Good Song Night, a monthly event in New York's East Village run by acting coach Ken Schatz. Professional musicians and amateurs, experienced singers and first timers: generations mix and join in on the choruses at Exceedingly Good Song Night in a way I rarely see at any other traditional song event.

I went to my third EGSN last Sunday as part of a trip to New York which I wasn't sure was going to happen until about a half hour before it did. There's a loose theme every month; this month, the theme was "noise." Ken serves as unofficial master of ceremonies, constantly looking around the room to make sure everyone who wants to sing gets a chance to sing, calling on people who might be shuffled into a corner of the small stage or otherwise not in the center of the room. One of Ken's songs of choice for the night was "The Fox," not to be confused with "What Does the Fox Say." Most of my generation knows the story in that song through Peter, Paul and Mary's kid's album, but Ken's version was set to a different melody with the relevant line "up jumped John, ringing on his bell."



Spontaneous blues dancing (Zoë Madonna)

Hunting songs were plentiful that night, probably because of all the hunting horns that usually appear therein; someone sang "Dido Bendigo," and then Heather Wood, formerly of the Young Tradition, followed it with a parody version, as she sometimes does. Charlie, from Maine but visiting family in Brooklyn, sang "West Indies Blues." There was a whole contingent down from Massachusetts at this Song Night; Nicole from Amherst sang a bluegrassy murder song ("ain't nobody knocking at the door"), Mel from Boston sang "The Heavenly Aeroplane" ("this old world's going to reel and rock") and Laura from Williamsburg sang a version of "Mary Had a Little

Lamb" with a chorus borrowed from the Civil War ("shouting the battle cry of freedom") and some decidedly not kindergarten-safe verses.

Most of the songs at Song Night have choruses or opportunities for harmonies, but most people are glad to take a little break from singing when someone wants to sing a story song or a ballad without a chorus. After Ken announced the next month's theme, "Romance Or Lack Thereof," I asked if it would be apropos to lead one that fit both themes and sang "The Little Duke Arthur's Nurse," a rare ballad with a happy ending about a man who hears his sweetheart singing (fitting both themes) and then escapes would-be killers by...listen to Frankie Armstrong's version and find out.

Other songs I heard that night included a bunch of mountain spirituals, a handful of shanties, and one "Cherokee deer song" which is apparently supposed to travel through the ground into the leg of the deer and make the deer come to you so you may eat them. No deer showed up; they must have been stuck in the traffic on the George Washington Bridge.

In addition to all the singers, there was a healthy contingent of people with instruments who could improvise, so most of the songs ended up having a few instrument notes behind them. There were guitars, a banjo, a concertina, and a Shruti box present; the latter only came out to accompany its owner as a haunting drone under a ballad. Some people got up and waltzed during a song in 3/4 time, and during a blues number a few people got up to blues dance. Most of the songs were traditional or have been folk processed enough that they could be, but near the end of the night Ken requested a decidedly modern song and Will, from Montague, sang the "Ballad of the Button Box." ("If you can type, you can play the concertina...") Though I had the longest journey home (three and a half hours) this time out of any of my visits to Exceedingly Good Song Night, I was able to stay till the end for the first time; when I was living with my family, I always had to catch a train home well before closing, but this month, I was present to sing the last song, and joined in for the choruses on "And I Bid You Good Night." I bundled myself into Will's car and slept most of the way back to Massachusetts, tired, happy, and full of new old melodies.

Zoë Madonna is interning with us this month; her blog last week, about her first dance experience, is [here](#).