

CDSS Sings — Lucy Picco Simpson's "What's in a Song"

by Peter Amidon

What's in a song that helps me to heal? And why can a song allow me to heal? Oh, I can't explain the joy or the tears though I've been a singer for years.

~ Lucy Picco Simpson, from "What's in a Song"

Mary Alice and I first sang with Lucy Simpson on top of the wooded hill between the Dining Hall and Camphouse at the 1976 CDSS-sponsored Pinewoods Folk Music Week.

The year before, I had traded in my viola da gamba for a fiddle as I leapt from my early music studies to the world of traditional music and dance in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I had gone to the 1975 CDSS Pinewoods Folk Music Week with hopes of becoming a fiddler, but after a week with John Roberts, Tony Barrand, Tony Saletan, Michael Cooney, Jeff Davis, Jeff Warner, Jerry Epstein, Jean Redpath, Edna Ritchie, Almeda Riddle, Margaret MacArthur and more, I left Folk Music Week a singer.

I returned to Folk Music Week in 1976 (Tony Saletan again, plus Jean Ritchie, Gale Huntington, Louis (later Louisa Jo) Killen, Lorraine Lee (now Lorraine Hammond), Richard Moss, Tommy Thompson, and more) with my new girlfriend (now wife) Mary Alice. That is where we first met Lucy Simpson, and where Lucy, Judy Drabkin, Mary Alice and I got together on that wooded hill every day at noon to sing gospel songs by ear: "This May Be the Last Time," "Woke Up This Morning," "Little David," and more. After that, Mary Alice and I sang with Lucy whenever we could.

Lucy Picco Simpson lived in New York City with her husband Barry Simpson and their daughter Shelley. Lucy was deeply involved in the Pinewoods Folk Music Club of New York. Google "Lucy Picco Simpson obituary" (she died in 2006 at the age of 65) to find out more about her.

Mary Alice and I were honored to be invited to sing with Lucy on her classic 1980 Folk Legacy album *Sharon Mountain Harmony: A Golden Ring of Gospel* (which you can order directly from the Folk Legacy website and iTunes. You can hear many of the cuts on YouTube). To get a sense of Lucy's extraordinary singing I suggest listening to her "Done Found My Lost Sheep" from that album.

Lucy collected 19th century and early 20th century American hymnals and gleaned great old hymns from them (many of which had fallen out of common usage), most famously, "Angels Hovering Round," but also "Prodigal's Return," "Blessed Quietness," "Climbing High Mountains," and many more.

In 2015 I got a call from Wendy Ritger of the First Congregational Church in Blue Hill Maine where Lucy lived the last 20 years of her life. The church had inherited Lucy's collection of four hundred hymnals and wondered whether Mary Alice and I would like to have them. Of course we said yes, and soon we received four big boxes filled with all of Lucy's hymnals, no two the same. Later I saved out about thirty, the ones that had any notations or notes from Lucy; the rest we donated to the Drew University Cramer (hymnal) Collection which Mary Alice's mother Alice had helped maintain when she had been a Drew University librarian. Lucy was always apologetic about inadvertent changes she had made from some of these hymns' original notation. I noticed, however, that her changes were always improvements.

Around 1993, Lucy made a cassette tape for us that was like a letter: Lucy talking to us and singing songs she thought we might like, including "What's in a Song." Here is what Lucy told us on that tape about writing the song:

"I was in my car in 1991, the day of Hurricane Bob, driving home from a little Adirondack gospel folk festival, after having a wonderful weekend there with some really nice people and staying overnight with Margaret MacArthur. I headed off on Monday morning, all the way across and up the coast. Hurricane Bob was coming behind me; chased me up the coast, but this song just came out line by line out of that feeling, that glow of having had such a nice weekend of singing."

Lucy was a gifted singer, a quintessential singer. Lucy particularly loved group singing and harmonizing by ear. She had exquisite taste in choosing songs; much of her repertoire became and remains an important part of the foundation of Mary Alice's and my singing. When I think about what I might write about what singing means to me, I realize I don't have to; Lucy Picco Simpson's "What's In A Song" says it all.

Peter Amidon, a founding member of New England Dancing Masters, is a nationally recognized leader of traditional dance for children. He is co-Music Director of the Hallowell Hospice Choir and the Guilford (VT) Community Church Choir. His choral arrangements are being sung by hundreds of choirs across the US and the UK.

words & music by Lucy Picco Simpson © 1992 Lucy Picco Simpson
 Harmonization transcribed by Peter Amidon from the performance of Mary Alice & Peter Amidon, Emily Miller and Jesse Milnes at their 2016 Brattleboro Last Night performance:
<http://amidonmusic.com/images/mp3s/WhatsInASongmp3>

What's In A Song

melody in alto - Chorus

What's in a song that helps me to heal? why can a song al -

low me to feel? Oh, I can't ex - plain the

joy or the tears, Though I've been a sing - er for years.

Verse
 There are times when the folks are hav-ing a ball, and the drinks and the jokes could fill up a

hall; but give me a song, a cho - rus, or more, and that's when I'm like - ly to

soar. Oh they say that there's no-thing like hav - ing a feast to bring

folks close to - ge-ther from north, south, west, east, but give us a song when the

feas - ting is done, and that's when the ma-ny are one.

2) There's a time and a place for sorrow and woe
 When the pain and the tears are expected to flow,
 But give me a song and voices close by
 And that's when I'm likely to cry

There've been times when my heart has wanted to weep
 But the pain and the tears were buried too deep.
 Then out of the blue in a roomful of song
 The locked-inside feeling was gone.

3. There are places where pleasure is wrapped up and sold
 And you purchase a moment with silver and gold;
 But the pleasure of singing's a blessing to me
 'Cause I know it by heart and it's free

Oh, the times I remember and cherish so much
 When we reach with our voices - it's almost like touch,
 And we pull in the circle and banish our fears
 And we try to keep singing for years.

WEB EXTRAS:

PDF of the tune above; Links to recordings/YouTube videos for "What's in a Song," "Done Found My Lost Sheep," "Angels Hovering Round," "Blessed Quietness," "Climbing High Mountains," and "Prodigal's Return." cdss.org/news