

"What's the Life of a Man?" Recording with Barry Luft

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Barry Luft started thinking about a new recording project a couple of years ago. He hadn't figured out all that was going to be included, but he knew that he wanted to record "What's the Life of a Man?" with a group of men singing the chorus.

Recording can be a big deal these days. Even in the informal world of folk music, having a recording may be the sign that you are a "real musician." There can be a great deal of pressure to get the perfect recording with every note in the right place and each instrument and voice perfectly in tune. Recordings of folk music have evolved more and more toward multi-tracked and over-dubbed productions: making it possible to have recorded bands in which one person sings lead and harmony and plays three different instruments on the same tune.

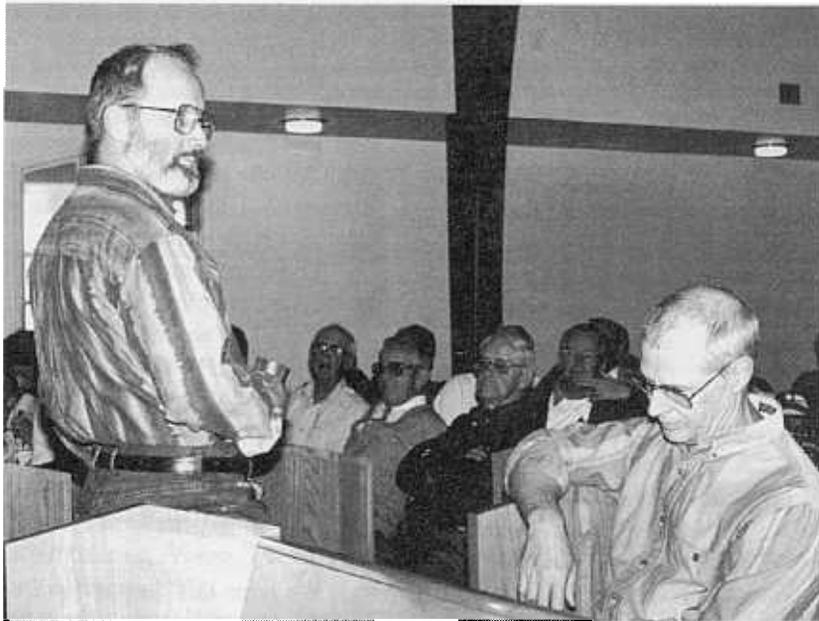
Barry had a different idea. A good idea. It grew into a wonderful music event in the fall of 1994. He did not scratch his head for the 8 best singers he could think of to make a hot "session" chorus. He did not decide to sing all the harmony parts himself. No. Instead, he thought of the men who have been important to him and asked them to come sing with him. Barry has lived in Calgary most of his life but also done quite a bit of travelling. Once he started thinking about it, the list of friends was long. There were friends from music, of course, but there were also classmates from elementary school, men who had been his teachers and others who were his students. There were co-workers, his doctor, his father and some of his father's friends.

He first told me about the idea at the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop in the summer of 1993. He had not set a date, but I told him I would be there just the same. By the spring of 1994 a date was picked and his list of possible men was pared down to an invitation list of 165. The song was new to most of the men—singing was new to many of them. To make things easier, Barry sent a tape to those who planned to come so they could learn the song. No rehearsals were possible. It was hard enough getting everyone together once. The recording session was set for the early afternoon of Saturday, October 22, 1994 with a pot-luck to follow that evening.

The recording was done at the church Barry attends in

Calgary. One hundred planned to come, but last minute cancellations reduced the number to 88. Most were from around Calgary and other places in Alberta. Two came from Victoria, and Larry Hanks and I came from Bellingham, Washington. The youngest was 22, and the oldest, Barry's father, Sandy, was 85. Microphones were set up toward the front of the room; but, no one, not even Barry, had any idea how we would sound.

As men arrived, they found places for their coats and just milled around looking for a familiar face. Conversations seemed to focus on trying to figure out who else was here and guesses about how the recording would be done.



Barry called us in, and we all sat in the pews. Larry Hanks described it well, "I remember feeling hesitant because I didn't know many people and Barry's comments were so minimal and casual. He just welcomed us, made a joke about no dinner until we finished—he hoped that would be before 10 that night—and suggested we sing it to see how it sounded. Then, the song was just there: full bore. There was a huge and great feeling of all these men becoming a group."

A wonderful, surprised look came over Barry's face. Later, describing the group, he told me, "Perhaps a dozen were performing musicians. Another 20, maybe, who were closet musicians. The rest had little music experience." But there we all were, feeling the solid connection of making real music together. People had obviously practiced on their own. I imagined them listening to the tape over and over and singing, full voice, while driving in their cars. We ran through the song a second time just to be sure that the first time wasn't some kind of weird accident. But, no. Again, the wonderful feeling of coming together through music and the big, full sound of 89 men's voices joined in song. It was a sound that few of us had heard before. Twice through the song and rehearsal was finished.

Barry had us stand at the front of the room for the recording. He faced us so that he could be recorded with his own microphone. His only instructions to us were, "People who want to sing harmony stand on the left side. Those on

melody on the right and those of you who have never sung in a group stand to the far right, near the wall, so you won't even hear the harmony." The words of the chorus were written in giant letters on paper stuck to the back wall. We had not needed them in our trial run, but there they were just in case. Some of the older men had written out the chorus on small pieces of paper that they held carefully and read as we sang. Recording is a big deal.

We sang the song twice more and recorded both times through. Everyone was awake to the sound. We were singing and listening and finding ways to blend. There was no problem forgetting our parts since we didn't have fixed parts we had to remember. Both versions felt great. Were we done already? The engineer was happy. Singing was too much fun to stop yet. Some of the group had brought refreshments, so we took a short break. Visiting was different, easier and more open, now that we had shared the singing. We sang it twice more. We knew instantly that we had two more keepers.

Barry had brought us together, but the gathering clearly had a life of its own. When I asked him about it recently, he told me, "I wanted an event that had a lot of men-energy. Male energy sharing the food and the music. The recording was just part of the way of focusing the event. It took off and became something bigger and different than I imagined."



Recording was finished and we all pitched in, putting the room back together for services the next morning. Seventy-four of us met that evening for the pot-luck dinner at a local community hall. The room was long and well-lit with tables placed against the walls. By the time I got there, the long table in the center of the room was filled with food people had brought. Small groups were busy talking about the afternoon's activities and catching up on the years since they had last seen each other. Several of the men were tending a small bar with beer and soft drinks. You could buy a ticket and trade it for a drink. The money helped pay the cost of the hall and was another way that everyone helped make the weekend possible. Five or six men were in the kitchen heating up more food for dinner.

Gradually, everyone seemed to know it was time to eat and a long line formed round the table. I joined a table with some friends from past years at the Puget Sound Guitar

Workshop: Chuck Rose; Don, Keith and Tiger Williams. They told stories that were full of the history of the men who were at this gathering and, more specifically, the Calgary folk music community.

Through these stories, between the lines, I understood how this kind of event grew through years of effort and community building. Barry and Don had been the central energy for folk clubs, music gatherings, music classes, and organized expeditions to music camps in Canada and south of the border. But, there was more than music that held this group together. There were sports teams, conferences, birthday parties, trips and the simple fact of living life in the town in which you were born. Perhaps this bond of community and culture was clearer to me, a visitor who was new to the place. Barry was our one, sure commonality; but, beyond that, these were mostly men who had lived in the same city and who shared an understanding of community, collaboration, and the rituals and details of life. It didn't

matter that they might not have seen each other for years.

After dinner, Barry had hopes for a music circle. He enlisted a couple of us to set up some chairs and stir up some tunes to see what we could get going. We moved a few chairs; and, quickly, everyone was helping. We made a giant circle at one end of the room. Barry did the first song and passed it along to the next person. It took hours to get once around the circle since it turned out almost everyone had something to share—even

those who had only expected to listen at the start of the evening. We heard obscure ballads, cowboy songs, fiddle tunes, a song in Spanish, and joined in on many choruses, including old favorites like "If I had a Hammer" and "Four Strong Winds." There were stories about elementary school pranks, practical jokes, war, life and work. The focus moved slowly around the room and stopped at each individual for a time. One more singing of "What's the Life of a Man?" joined our voices in a powerful sound that filled the room differently from any other chorus of the night.

Since then, I have told the story of the weekend to many people. It was a wonderful, surprising thing to be part of. Barry speaks for those of us who were there when he says, "I don't even need to have the recording to feel satisfied already."