

# Higher Ground

Rona Altrows

Joe Adams did an important job for our Singers' Circle. He was the guy who phoned everyone to say when and where the next Circle would be held. Joe excelled at his job. When he called, he'd immediately give me the date and place of the next Circle. He'd wait while I marked my calendar. Then he'd say, "How are your daughters doing?" or "How's the writing coming?" That would launch us into a delicious ramble about Joe's life, my life, music, politics, people.... Before you knew it, we had talked for an hour and a half.

I figure, at that rate, it must have taken Joe a week of full-time work to tell our 30-odd members the where and when of the next Circle.

It's a Saturday evening in 1995. The Singers' Circle is in full voice. Squeezed into a living room, instruments perched on knees and set under coffee tables, we take turns leading songs. We sing Child ballads, turn-of-the-century dance hall numbers, Slavic laments, Geordie lampoons. Someone says, "I can't possibly take my turn; I was exposed to asbestos earlier today." Someone else says, "Just do as-best-as you can." The recording secretary writes down both the excuse and the retort. When we sing choruses, sometimes the harmonies work and sometimes they don't. People are always anticipating the next round, so there is an undercurrent of paper-rustling with every song. The Circle has a rhythm all its own.

Joe's turn comes. He starts to sing. What is this song? The mental preparation for the next round stops. The paper-rustling stops. All ears are on Joe. Here we are, a room full of song nuts, and Joe is bringing us a song which is not only great, but new to all of us. Where on earth does he get this stuff?

From time to time over the years, Joe would treat us to a rendition of a song he had written. There was a freshness to his work, both in the choice of subject matter and in its treatment. In Joe's songs, the here-and-now kind of blends naturally with the way-back-when.

Joe lived with arthritis for a long, long time. He endured unrelenting pain with dignity and without bitterness. Because of his thorough understanding of pain, and because of his generous nature, he could reach out and help another person learn to deal with pain. He helped me, and I am sure I was not the only one.

When the last herd of wild horses in Alberta was rounded up, I felt that the sad event should be remembered in song. I talked to Joe, and to my delight, he was interested. The song is written in the voice of a prescient horse. And now, a week after Joe's death, the chorus he wrote brings me solace:

Just let your spirit soar,  
And head for higher ground.



*Joe Adams,  
Peace River Country, late 40s.  
If Joe appears grumpy, perhaps  
it's because the mail-order guitar  
did not really have a resonator  
under the plate  
bolted on the plywood face.*