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FFOTM Profile: Kari Usher

by Rusty Tweed

Kari Usher's introduction to the Flagstaff Friends of Traditional Music was not a result of life-long passion for the culture of traditional music. Rather, she was looking for community. In 1989, after moving from a "very small town in Vermont that made Flagstaff feel like a metropolis," she saw a FFOTM-sponsored contra dance advertised in the paper. She went, made new friends, found a sense of community, and has been dancing ever since.

"Coming from such a rural setting in Vermont, even Flagstaff seemed overwhelming to me at first. I was looking for a small group to join and gradually get involved in the community. To me, 'small' meant if I didn't show up, someone would come looking for me."

Kari explained that she would sporadically attend a concert or two prior to her involvement with FFOTM, but she had no particular inclination to traditional music or dance. "I was just looking for something new. It wasn't a hobby or a passion...but it definitely is now."

"What makes contra dancing so fun is that it's a social event. At the beginning, we try to get all the new dancers adjusted to the idea that they will be dancing with strangers." So if you're looking for an intimate evening of dancing with only your partner, this might not be the best choice. But for many, that is the appeal. "The community is positive and supportive, which makes it ideal for beginners. Getting lost or out of step becomes part of the fun." Kari went on to say that "beginners are always welcome,

you don't need a partner or dancing experience; the dances are taught. It can be pretty informal."

For many beginners, just when they feel like they're getting it, the night is over. "That it is why if you're a first-timer, we'll give you a 'Second Dance Free' card." (Though the cost of an evening's entertainment is already quite reasonable at \$6, with a \$1 discount for FFOTM members. This includes snacks and beverages, to help keep

energy levels high.) "If you're a beginner, you really need to come back again. Because of your 'body memory' you begin to get it without thinking about it. Then you can really start to enjoy the music, the company, and the whole atmosphere."

Kari has gradually become more than just a dancer; now she's a caller too. For those like me, that have never been to a contra dance, a caller does more than just call out the instructions. They organize the group into a circle, provide definitions and

demonstration, and lead the practice when a new dance is introduced. "The challenge with calling is you have to call ahead of what everyone is doing. It requires good juggling, and makes you appreciate and enjoy the activity that much more. Being a caller really brought it together for me."

"I call probably about four times a year. My introduction to calling came during one of the most memorable contra dances I've experienced. It was New Year's Eve in 1999 at the Bean Tree Barn in Dewey, Arizona." Kari explained that the dancing went on until about midnight.

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Traditional Pickin'

By Ken Clemmer, *The Back Porch Band*

(NOTE: For clarity, the Back Porch Bandits are Josh Tharp, banjo; Karl Maerz, dobro; Billy Parker, mandolin; Joel Dowling, bass; and my ownself on guitar)

Phoe.ni'cian (fu-NEE-shan), n. – One who, having lived sinfully in a past life, was this go-round caused to murk along with the multitudes in a crowded city with dirty air and no open season on snowbirds.

That's me, a restless, repentant Phoenician. And while I'm thankful for certain city opportunities, I don't like living in this or any city.

Still, why would a Phoenix inmate join the Flagstaff Friends of Traditional Music? Flagstaff is pretty and cool, but it's the "Traditional Music", and you friendly folks who practice it, that got me.

"...But living there ties down my spirit, so I'm on my way to TINYTOWN."

-From "Tinytown", by Ken Clemmer

I consider "outta town" a legitimate destination, and I need little provocation to go there. But I've wondered why the rural pull seems so strong in my case. I've lived in cities for almost half my life. Why can't I get used to it?

I'm lately gaining some insight. My 84-year-old mother is recording some of her life stories, at my request. Hearing the re-told anecdotes of her birth on a Texas blackland farm, and of the accomplishments and challenges that followed it, vibrates my soul.

Mother's calm voice describes the joys and trials of the times with not a shred of bitterness. She had a fine time recalling the relationships of people with one another, the land, God, and nature. Though her early life was affected by an era of monumental happenings - the Great Depression, WWII - it was normal. Rural America normal. Traditional.

So it becomes clearer why old songs of the land and its people are important to me. They're personal, the stuff which Clemmers and Jameses and countless others used to power their dances, express their feelings, chase their blues, worship their deity. Music connects me with that Texas-via-Tennessee-and-Mississippi family heritage.

I understand the "Feast Here Tonight" line that says "I'll get me a briar and I'll twist it in his hair". I know why songs of the mines reach some pretty deep places.

Why cowboy songs are not schmaltz or sap, but bittersweet players of my heartstrings.

I don't enjoy all traditional tunes, for certain. The yarns spun in "Knoxville Girl" and "Willow Garden" leave me – well, cold. (There's nothing particularly heroic about Motiveless Girl-murder, in my mind.) I can live without the graphic child-care lesson of "The Little Girl and the Dreadful Snake", having plenty of real-life reptile/kid experience.

While our band doesn't perform many of the deeply sad "Rosewood Casket"-types of tunes, I am touched when they are presented by folks who feel them and show it.

We do perform some gospel songs, particularly in concert venues. When the old shape-note hymnal tells me that "Farther along, we'll know all about it", I'm shored up by the faith of our fathers. And I wouldn't mind crossing over to the strains of "Angel Band".

The traditional tunes that really stir me up are the frisky ones, the myriad fiddle/banjo-driven numbers that start our hearts and our feet. I've risked my life at contra dances (don't EVER think those wimmen won't dance you to death) to listen to the music and observe its wonderful results.

It is tough to sit still when good pickers heat up "Ragtime Annie" or "Black Bear on the Mountain" to a rolling boil. And when a tune spurs impromptu dances among audience members, that's high praise for performing musicians.

Now back to Mother's tape. She told of killing cotton-eating grasshoppers with homemade paddles. Of "shocking" grain, milking semi-wild cows, skating the soles off her shoes on frozen creeks. Toward the end, she declared:

"Ken and Johnny, you boys are gonna think your mother's reeeeeeally country. Well, I am, and I was."

And we're proud of that, and always have been. Long live the traditions of all of us. Long live the music those traditions foster.



The Two High String Band comes to Sedona

Bluegrass and Old-Time Music with a Unique Approach

"Progressive power acoustic string trio," answers mandolinist Billy Bright when asked to describe the sound of Austin-based Two High String Band. "We are rejuvenating the unobvious edges of bluegrass and acoustic music." Two High String Band will perform at Future Studios Live Performance Venue in Sedona on Saturday, March 25 at 7:30 P.M.

Blending influences like Mississippi John Hurt and old time string bands with both the traditional and more modern strains of bluegrass, throwing in a little funk and Latin to spice things up and adding a little bit of a jam band sensibility to the music, The Two High String Band comes across as a completely original acoustic ensemble.

"Bluegrass is the nexus for us," says guitarist Geoff Union, "its the point we're always focused on, though most of our material is original." Billy Bright (who has played with The Peter Rowan and Tony Rice Quartet) and Brian Smith formed the band while attending Berklee College of Music in Boston in 1995, where they were studying guitar and drums respectively. In 1997 they relocated to Austin, where they met guitarist Geoff Union.

The band's debut album for Blue Corn Music, "Insofarasmuch" reflects the diversity of their influences and is a stunning monument to the proficiency of these players.



Old friends Vassar Clements and David Grisman join them on several cuts.

In addition to Billy's originals, "Insofarasmuch" features songs by Guy Clark and Verlon Thompson, Merle Haggard, and the late John Hartford given the 'Two High' treatment. Still a young band, 'Two High' have just recently strapped on their touring wheels and have so far shared stages with, among others, the Tony Rice Unit, Slaid Cleaves, and Yonder Mountain String Band.

With great harmonies, unexpected instrumental twists, and stirring tales, the band's latest CD release "Moonshine Boogie" is a twelve song journey, capturing mandolinist Billy Bright, and

guitarists Brian Smith, and Geoff Union as a trio, quartet, quintet, and sextet with banjo great Tony Trischka (Psychograss, etc.), fiddler Chojo Jacques (Waybacks), and upright bassist Eric Thorin (Open Road) joining them.

The band's website is www.highstring.com.

Doors open at 7:00 P.M. Show starts at 7:30 P.M. Admission is \$10 advance, \$13 day of show. Future Studios is located at 30 Hozoni Drive in West Sedona (mailing address: P.O. Box 4779, Sedona, AZ 86340). www.futurestudios.org. For tickets or more info. call (928) 282-9139.

FFOTM MEMBERSHIP FORM

Date: _____ new _____ renewal _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone - Home: _____ Work: _____

E-Mail Address: _____

Individual Membership - \$12.00 per year

Family Membership - \$15.00 per year

_____ Individual Membership \$12

_____ Family Membership \$15

Make checks payable to FFOTM and mail to:

FFOTM
P.O. Box 23366
Flagstaff, AZ 86002
FFOTM Membership Form

The First Wednesday Vintage Series

the Wineloft presents Tony Norris
and The Arroyo Seco Ramblers



For over twenty years Tony Norris has been a strong presence on the Flagstaff music scene. On the concert stage, in the public schools and on the airways he tells stories, sings songs and teaches the folklore of working people from West Virginia moonshiners to Southwest cowboys. Tony, a founder of The Flagstaff Friends Of Traditional Music, has always delighted in providing a warm and supportive environment for performers of all ages.

The First Wednesday Vintage Series gives him an opportunity to showcase Flagstaff's brightest acoustic lights in a setting as informal as his own living room. Tony's guests March 1st and April 5th will be The Arroyo Seco Ramblers playing Western Swing tunes, folk and cowboy. Dancers are welcome.

Wednesday, March 1 and April 5th, 2006 8:00 PM at The Wine Loft, 17 North San Francisco in downtown Flagstaff. There's no cover. Call 779-9463 or 526-6684 for information.

"Kari Usher", continued from page 1

After midnight it was sort of an open mic for callers; that's when she stepped in as the caller. "We stayed up dancing and calling until about two in the morning. Some of the pickers probably stayed up until dawn."

The community of contra dancers appears to be vast, but yet close knit. It is not unusual for dancers from one community to make a road trip and infiltrate another community's dance. Flagstaff dancers often travel to Prescott, Cottonwood, or Phoenix to join their activities (see the Contra Dance page on FFOTM's website for details on events in the area). Carpooling can often be arranged, and many times nighttime accommodations can be provided by the community of dancers, if adequate notice is provided. Recently while on vacation, Kari traveled to San Francisco and Santa Barbara and joined the regularly scheduled contra dances in those communities.

When she's not calling or dancing, Kari is often applying her talents to her second favorite pastime – making hand spun yarns, as well as knitted and woven crafts. She has also done a lot of spinning, which consists of "taking the fiber off of the animal, and spinning it into yarn." Her crafts are often available at the Second Chance Fair, as well as the United Way Arts and Crafts Fair on the NAU campus. While in Vermont, she tended to a herd of sheep on a farm. One day, she hopes to have her own animals outside of Flagstaff. Hopefully, when that happens she can still find the time to stay involved with FFOTM.

Attendance at the Flagstaff Contra Dance (held on the first Saturday of the month beginning at 7:30 p.m. at Ashurst Hall, NAU Campus) has been steady at around 60-70 people. In fact, there's even been discussion of adding a second dance, though the first obstacle to tackle will be finding a venue. Kari explained that typically there are more women than men. For that reason they bring a basket of ties, and some of the women will wear them to even out the sexes. "Things happen fast, so we needed something to help everyone distinguish between the women, and the women posing as men." The age range of participants is wide, "from seven to seventy. It's been fun to watch the layers of families that have been coming for many years."

With wedding season around the corner, couples looking for something different that gets everyone involved should consider attending a dance to see how it works. Callers and bands are often available for hire, and remember, the dances are taught. Imagine celebrating with family and friends engaged in choreographed dance, rather than with random bodies gyrating to pop hits of the 70s and 80s.

What is it about traditional music that many of us find so alluring? Whether your introduction was gradual or sudden, it seems that once you've had your first taste, you're eagerly anticipating the next serving. Perhaps, in part, it is the sense of community that Kari found. Whether it is a community of dancers, musicians, or devoted fans of the music, it seems to keep us closely knit.

Contra Time

by Kari Usher

Are you tired of the wind? Feeling a little cranky? Why not come out and dance those growlies out of your soul?? There are dances happening in: Flagstaff the first Saturday of every month, in Prescott the first Friday (except in April - it will be the second Friday), in Phoenix the second Saturday with many special dances added, in Cottonwood on the third Saturday and if you have a hankering to go further South Tucson dances regularly too.

Judy Henzler has been organizing carpooling to these great events. There is a small crowd that has been seen in other towns contra dancing - much to everyone's delight. If you have a mind to go and want to share a ride give Judy a call 214-7017.

The next dance in Flag is March 4th. Kari and Ron Barton will be providing the tunes for Kari Usher to call. April 1st will be Cynthia Conn and Ken Nelson calling to Just Desserts. As if this all was not enough fun....June 3rd we will have a contra prom. Come in costume as a prom attendee (heck as your sweetie for a prom date) or dress as a chaperone.

Remember dances are taught and called, partners can be found at the dance (you don't have to bring your own), there are great snacks and visiting opportunities with your cool friends.

Need more info - Kris 526-3020. Dance lesson starts at 7:30 at Ashurst Hall in Old Main on campus. We dance till 11pm. See you there.

Solas Coming to NAU

Solas in Concert

Friday, March 31, 2006 at 8:00pm

Cline Library Auditorium

Living Traditions Presentations is proud to present Solas in concert on Friday, March 31, 2006. Solas is a "five-piece Irish-American band of startling instrumental and vocal firepower" says the LA Times. Solas formed in 1996 and since then, they have been proclaimed as the most popular, influential, and exciting Celtic band to ever emerge from the United States. They have performed at all the major Celtic and Folk festivals, including Philadelphia, Edmonton, the National Folk Festival, and Milwaukee's Irish Fest; but have also performed at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival, and the chamber music summer series at Steamboat Springs, Colorado. These names are just a taste of where Solas has performed.

Flagstaff is lucky to have this legendary band come for a performance in the end of March. Solas has been through once before and impressed audiences by their musicality, energetic sets of tunes, and breathtaking songs. This band should not be missed!! This concert is sponsored by Northern Arizona Celtic Heritage Society and part of the proceeds will be donated to this non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and presenting all things Celtic.

Solas will delight audiences on Friday, March 31, 2006 at 8:00pm at the Cline Library Auditorium. Doors will open at 7:30pm. Tickets are \$20 with a \$2 discount to members of Northern Arizona Celtic Heritage Society, Northern



Arizona Irish Foundation, Flagstaff Friends of Traditional Music, students, seniors, and NAU faculty & staff. Tickets are available at NAU Central Ticketing, Cedar Music, Jitters Coffee, and ticketmaster.com. For ticketing information, call 928-523-5661. For more information call Kari Barton at 928-600-1365 or email:

Kari@LivingTraditionsPresentations.com.

Local and Regional Events

For the most current calendar of events check out our website at www.ffotm.net

Wednesday, March 1, 8:00 PM

Tony Norris and Friends
FIRST WEDNESDAY VINTAGE SERIES
The Wine Loft, 17 North San Francisco in downtown Flagstaff. There's no cover. Call 779-9463 or 526-6684 for information.

Friday, March 3, 8:00

Danu, NAU Cline Library Auditorium \$18/\$20 Kari Barton 600-1365

March 3 – 5

Fourth Annual Bluegrass on the River festival, La Paz County Park, Parker, Arizona www.landspromotions.com 866-463-8659

Wednesday, March 8, 9:00 PM

The Dirty Dozen Brass Band
A world famous music machine, whose name is synonymous with genrebending romps and high-octane performances. They have revitalized the brass band in New Orleans and around the world. The Orpheum Theater - 15 W. Aspen St - Flagstaff, AZ 86001 - (928) 556-1580 \$15adv/\$18 day of show.

Thursday, March 9th, 2006

Chuck Cheesman & Matthew Henry Hall - 7:00 pm
Macy's European Coffeehouse
14 South Beaver Street
Flagstaff AZ 86001
928-774-2243
Price: tips/food/coffee
Chuck is also appearing: Thursday, March 16th, 8:00 pm & Thursday, March 23rd, 8:00 pm at the Campus Coffee Bean and Friday, March 17th, 10:00 am at Bookmans

Friday, March 10 3:00pm

Carolyn Blame, Bookmans Flagstaff, 774-0005

Saturday March 11, 11:00 AM

FFOTM Young Jammers Workshop
11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at the Coconino Center for the Arts, 2300 N. Fort Valley Road, Flagstaff.
For information, 928-522-9269

Saturday, March 11th, 6 PM - 9 PM

Back Porch Bandits
Wild West Junction
321 E. Rte. 66, Williams, AZ
For info: Dennis Shirley, 928-814-9296.

Saturday • March 11 • 7:30 P.M.

Venice Maki. 3-piece band from Los Angeles
Admission \$13 advance / \$15 day of show
Future Studios Live Performance Venue, 30 Hozoni

Drive, Sedona. P.O. Box 4779 (86340). www.futur-estudios.org (928) 282-9139.

March 17 – March 19

ABA All Association Campout, Quartzite Arizona for more information call Paul Wilson at 623-939-2406

Saturday, March 18 – 19 10:00 AM – 5:00 pm

Phoenix Folk Traditions Festival, All events will be held in the Encanto Park Clubhouse and Boathouse located at 2605 N. 15th Ave. (south of Thomas Road). For further information call (602) 261-8991.

Saturday, March 18, 8pm

Campus Coffee Bean & Grill Saturday Folk Night with music by Reno and Sheila McCormick from Camp Verde. Barry Harrison KVNA host

Saturday • March 18 • 7:30 P.M.

Willie and Lobo. Duo—from El Paso, TX and Bavaria
Admission \$13 advance / \$16 day of show
Future Studios Live Performance Venue, 30 Hozoni Drive, Sedona. P.O. Box 4779 (86340). www.futur-estudios.org (928) 282-9139.

Thursday • March 23 • 7:30 P.M.

Incendio. 4-piece Latin Guitar World Fusion from Los Angeles
Admission \$12 advance / \$15 day of show
Future Studios Live Performance Venue, 30 Hozoni Drive, Sedona. P.O. Box 4779 (86340). www.futur-estudios.org (928) 282-9139.

Friday, March 24, 3:00pm

Andrew Libby, Bookmans Flagstaff

Friday • March 24 • 7:30 P.M.

Mystery School. 5-piece band from Albuquerque, New Mexico
Admission \$10 advance / \$13 day of show
Future Studios Live Performance Venue, 30 Hozoni Drive, Sedona. P.O. Box 4779 (86340). www.futur-estudios.org (928) 282-9139.

Saturday • March 25 • 7:30 P.M.

Two High String Band. Trio from Austin, TX
Admission \$10 advance / \$13 day of show
See Article on page 3
Future Studios Live Performance Venue, 30 Hozoni Drive, Sedona. P.O. Box 4779 (86340). www.futur-estudios.org (928) 282-9139.

Tuesday, March 28 8:00pm

Lucinda Williams, Orpheum Theater, Flagstaff \$30

Friday, March 31, 2006 - 8:00pm

Solas in concert. *See article on page 5.*

Ongoing Events

Radio Programs

Every Monday - 7:00 pm:

FFOTM Fiddle Tunes Jam Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, 510 N. Leroux. Host Larry Peterson 699-7068.

Every first Tuesday – 6:00-9:00 pm: FFOTM jam session at the Coconino Center for the Arts.

Every Tuesday, Friday & Saturday night -7:00 pm: The Collins Irish Band plays at Collins Irish Pub in downtown Flagstaff.

Every Thursday – 7:00 pm:

FFOTM Just Desserts contra dance band rehearsal. Open to anyone who wants to play or listen to contra dance music. Any instrument and playing ability is welcome. Rehearsal starts at 7:00pm at the home of Deb Comly and Mike Reddig, 1457 W. Meade. For more information call 774-5936.

Every second Friday – 7:00-9:00 pm:

FFOTM jam session at Bookman's Used Books. For information, call Christina Boyd at 928-522-9269.

Every last Friday – 7:30 pm: UU Coffee House Night at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, located at 510 N. Leroux Flagstaff, AZ. Call Larry Peterson at 699-7068 for more information.

Every first Saturday – 7:30 pm: FFOTM Contra Dance at Ashurst Hall on the NAU campus. Come on out for the 7:30 pre-dance lesson. For more information call Laura at 556-8739 or email her at: laurashearin@hotmail.com

Saturday Folk hosted by Barry Harrison Four-hour show, Saturday mornings 6-10am on KVNA AM 600. A wide range of folk, blues, Celtic and bluegrass.

Thistle and Shamrock, National Public Radio's Celtic music show, hosted by Fiona Richie Saturday evenings at 8:00pm on KNAU, 88.7/91.7 FM. 523-2334.

Celtic Connection, featuring music from the evolving traditions of Ireland, Scotland, North America, and beyond Saturday evenings on KNAU, FM 88.7/91.7 FM. 523-2334.

Under Western Skies, a radio program about Western music and cowboy poetry hosted by Peter Bruce every Sunday morning at 7:00 am on 92.9 KAFF FM and AM 930 Country Classics. For more information contact Peter at 773-1346.

Bluegrass Radio! 24/7 Listener supported bluegrass music stream at: WWW.BLUEGRASSRADIO.ORG. New and old, lots of bands we see at festivals or concerts, no commercials or donation requests... just music!



Backporch Bandits Hit the Northland

Our very own Ken Clemmer and the rest of the bandit boys, Josh, Karl, Billy and Joel are heading north to pick some tunes. Ken has been entertaining us with bandit antics, lore and wisdom for the last few months in this newsletter. Now's a chance to go hear 'em live. Taken straight from banditweb (www.backporchbandits.com):

Mar 11th, 2006 6:00 PM - 9:00 PM
Wild West Junction
321 E. Rte. 66, Williams, AZ

This is a keen old "Old West" hotel in Williams (30 miles west of Flagstaff) that was refreshed and re-opened in 2004. We'll perform 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. in their Typhoon Saloon restaurant - which doesn't serve alcohol yet, by the way. (Hmm. Bandits that don't steal playing bluegrass music in an alcohol-free Old West saloon. That's close to normal for us.) For info: Dennis Shirley, 928-814-9296.

Don't miss this show...and don't forget to bring your own whiskey!



FLAGSTAFF FRIENDS OF
TRADITIONAL MUSIC
P.O. Box 23366
Flagstaff, AZ 86002