



HTMA President's Notes

I hope that everyone in the HTMA extended family had a terrific holiday. As I write this I'm still enjoying some vacation time away from work, though the darkness at the end of the tunnel is becoming more perceptible.

We've had some structural changes in HTMA program chairs lately, and as I've met with each new volunteer to talk about the responsibilities each of our volunteer chairs takes on, I've had to formulate more precise thoughts on what those jobs ought to entail. As usual, thinking is dangerous territory. Sylvia Williams has generously offered to take over as HTMA publicity chair. This is a job that has languished for some time, and the predictable result is that attendance at HTMA meetings and productions has suffered. The drop in audience size at coffeehouses is especially disappointing because it has gone on in parallel with Jim Holland booking exceedingly good talent to play at the coffeehouse gigs. It's frustrating for everyone involved to see great musicians coming into Huntsville to play for us, and coming up with a half-empty house, or worse.

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Next Meeting
January 15th
 2:00 P.M.

Huntsville/Madison Public Library

HTMA COFFEEHOUSE MUSIC SERIES

PRESENTS

JANUARY 26TH
7:00 PM



OLD COUNTRY CHURCH

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January Area Events

New Hope Saturday Night Jam

Every Saturday night in January beginning at 6:00 PM
New Hope Senior Center, New Hope Alabama

Elmcroft (Hearthstone) Assisted Living Gig

January 7th 3:00 PM
8020 Benaroya Ln., Huntsville, Alabama

Second Saturday Old-Time Jam

January 14th 1:00 - 4:00 PM
Constitution Village, Huntsville Alabama
<http://www.earlyworks.com/the-museums/constitution-village>

Harbor Chase Assisted Living Gig

January 14th 10:30 AM
4801 Whitesport Circle; Huntsville, Alabama

HTMA Member Meeting

January 15th 2:00 PM
Huntsville/Madison Public Library

Huntsville Bluegrass/Gospel Jam

January 15th 2:00-5:00 PM
Contact Brian Curtis for details

Keel Mtn. Fire Dept. 3rd Friday Night Jam

January 20th 6:00 PM
Keel Mtn. Fire Dept., Gurley Alabama

Regency Retirement Village Gig

January 21st 3:15 PM
204 Max Luther Drive; Huntsville, Alabama

HTMA Coffeehouse

January 26th 7:00 PM
Burritt on the Mountain Old Country Church

Huntsville Bluegrass/Gospel Jam

January 29th 2:00-5:00 PM
Contact Brian Curtis for details

Executive Board

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**Yearly HTMA Membership
renewals are due January 1, 2012**

Go to www.huntsvillefolk.org and
click

SIGNUP/RENEW

Visit our website

www.huntsvillefolk.org





The Berry Patch

Some songs seem to wear a face, a human face that appears when the song is heard. When one hears the words of *How Great Thou Art*, the face of George Beverly Shea clearly comes into focus; at least it does with me.

The words of the song, written as a poem in 1885, and the face of Shea first met in London in 1954. Did the two meet by chance or design? I leave that question to others. For certain, the two met and in my mind's eye became one, inseparable from each other.

The words that now seem to belong to the face of George Beverly Shea were originally penned by a Swedish minister as a poem. This poem was published in 1885, attracted only a little public attention and then seemingly was forgotten. A few years later, it was heard being sung to an old Swedish tune and thereafter seemed to die again.

Like the phoenix of mythology, the words, now set to music, seem to disappear, only to rise again. Not only did the words go into hiding, they reappeared in different languages, the next time in Russian. In this tongue, the words are heard by an English missionary, Dr. Stuart Hine. Hine, liking what he heard in a foreign tongue, made his own arrangement and changed the language to one that George Shea would understand.

The song, in its modified version, made its way to America where it was copyrighted in 1953. But it did not immediately take root and grow. It had not found its American face in Shea.

During a 1954 Billy Graham Crusade in London, Shea obtained a leaflet containing the song. He liked it, but did not sing it at that time. A year later, at another Graham Crusade, this time in Canada, Shea introduced his version of *How Great Thou Art*.

In the 1957 New York Crusade, Shea sang the song ninety-nine times. The song had come to the United States to stay. It had found its home, but not, in my mind, without the face of George Beverly Shea. Shea did not have a particularly handsome face, but it was strong, forceful, determined, and convincing. When singing that song, it was a distinct face with a large mouth voicing the greatness of God. It was a face that seemed to believe the words that came from it.

In my mind, I cannot separate the words from the face. They seem to fit together, to be a part of each other, welded into one image that sincerely proclaims in a most pleasing way "*How Great Thou Art*"! The image I see is not a boastful one, rather one that simply says "*This is the way it is with me*".

I am pleased (when able to hear that song) to see the face of George Shea, When I see his face, my now unhearing ears, still hear the words.

Joe

So what does being the "Publicity Chair" entail? Unfortunately, I don't have a simple answer. I have some ideas about the results I would like to see from an effective publicity campaign, but I'm not really able to detail the components that would create such a campaign. There are a few items that seem pretty obvious:

- Get our coffeehouses and general meetings announced in local publications, including the Go magazine, the Huntsville Times, the Huntsville Event magazine and the Valley Planet.
- Extend publication into media outlets with a broader reach, such as Dirty Linen, The Folk Alliance newsletters, and the Alabama Bluegrass Music Association Newsletter
- Maintain an active Facebook page for our coffeehouse series
- Make sure that the event information on the HTMA website remains current and correct, and ask our performers to add links to the HTMA events page on their websites
- Create public service announcements for area public radio stations to alert the general public to our production offerings

At this point you may be saying to yourself "Boy! That Sylvia Williams must really be a whirlwind to keep up with all that stuff every month." That's only partly true. Sylvia is a real whirlwind, but no one without years of public relations experience could possibly accomplish the list above singlehandedly, especially when this is a list that needs doing over pretty much every single month. The job gets a little harder if we don't have bookings for coffeehouses WAY in advance, since most publications require our listings two or more months before the scheduled events. Even WLRH prefers to record our public service announcements four to five weeks before they will air.

The point to all of this is that Sylvia can really use some help, and I'm hoping that one or two kindly HTMA members will offer to pick up a portion of the publicity management load with her. This is a case where one member committing to spend no more than an hour a month to help with publicity can really benefit the entire organization, and the music community in Huntsville. Please take a minute to give Sylvia a call and ask how you can help.

Our other new volunteer is the Program Committee chair. Jerry McGough has taken the lead position for booking coffeehouse artists for the coming year from Jim Holland, who has served ably for several years and deserves a break. Jim Holland is a tough act to follow in the booking department. For the past two years he has consistently brought incredibly talented performers to the HTMA stage. Jim's fine ear for musicianship combined with his ease playing with and talking music with musicians across the full scope of traditional music let him invite many players to our stage who would not have ever heard of Huntsville if not for his efforts.

The HTMA booking committee has operated under so many limitations over the years it's somewhat amazing that we get anyone booked, ever. Thursday night gigs, limited budgets, and Huntsville's small market size all combine to really put a damper on the musicians we are able to book. This is no job for the faint of heart. After Jerry McGough wrestled the job away from Jim Holland, he asked me for a briefing on just what it is that he needs to do. I had to think about that question for a while – a bad sign. If we were properly organized, I'd be able to hand Jerry a crib sheet to give him the basic operating concepts, rules, contacts and sample contracts in a heartbeat. Instead, I've had to make it up as I go. I'd like to share my thoughts about the coffeehouse booking and the series with you, the HTMA membership, for a reality check. Here are my ideas about what we should be doing, and why. If you disagree, or can offer improvements, please let me know. None of this is set in stone, and I'm avidly interested in finding ways to improve our operations. My theory is that the principal goal of the coffeehouse series has to be to entertain (and amaze??) our audience. This seems pretty obvious – if we don't make it worthwhile for the audience members to make the trip up the mountain, they won't be coming back. No audience, no show. It's as simple as that. What do we have to do to be sure we meet that principal requirement?

I think we have to make sure that the performers we book have genuine talent, and are prepared to give our audience a good show. There are a few musicians out there who can get away with never rehearsing and doing every show on the fly, but my experience is that the best musicians are usually pretty careful about fine-tuning their acts. They may make changes in the set list, but they have every song they are going to perform down cold. My thinking is that we need to book artists who care enough about making a professional presentation that they work on it to make the show really happen. Casual performances are better reserved for our living rooms and porches.

In our small performance venue, we need to bring in performers who will engage the audience. We have to take advantage of the intimate performance space that is both a significant limitation and strength for us.

(PRESIDENT'S NOTES continued)

Performers need to be able to reach out to the audience – and I think that the small-room atmosphere a real positive discriminator for HTMA coffeehouses.

What responsibilities do we have to the performers we book? I think that we must show the performers we bring to HTMA stages respect, pay them in accordance with the commitments we make, and deliver them to a respectable (and respectful) audience. We need to make sure that we present their music as acoustically faithfully as possible. That means that if they want to use microphones or pickups, we make sure to provide accurate sound reinforcement and no feedback, so the artists don't have to fight any losing battles against an impossible sound system. It's hard enough just doing the performance job, and we need to make sure that the rest of the production activities go smoothly. We need to represent the artists' interests in helping them sell any merchandise (CDs or other stuff) that they bring to the event. Those merchandise sales can be a make-or-break part of the itinerant musician business, and he need to help the musicians who come to our stage survive financially.

Are there other things we want to accomplish with the coffeehouse series? Certainly, I think one point of the coffeehouses, for as long as I've been around HTMA, is to give our members performance opportunities. Many of our members are highly capable and interested in playing for our audiences, and I think we have to take advantage of that wellspring of talent. Just don't forget the first imperative – the audience has to be rewarded for coming to see us. We need to show our best talent, and our best side.

How does all that play out? Over the years, we've evolved a system that, though not perfect, appear to work. We tend to bring in outside talent as much as we can, but try to pair each out-of-town performer with a local opener, often an HTMA member. This pairing does two things. First, it provides an outlet for HTMA members to play. But of equal importance, the opener/feature act show design allows us to pair a feature performer who might have little to no name recognition in Huntsville with someone local, who may draw in a bigger audience. Pretty much any performer we will book can easily play for the entire duration we have allocated for coffeehouse performances. They aren't running out of material. We put on openers because they tend to enhance the production experience for everyone, by enabling us to draw in a bigger audience. I think any of our artists would rather play 90 minutes to a full house than two hours to a largely empty room. That's a matter of economics for them. Bigger audience – more CD sales now, and more name recognition later.

Economics... is that a dirty word? Aren't we all playing for the love of the music? Well, actually no, and no. Many of the musicians we bring in are playing music as their sole source of support. If they don't make enough money performing, they have to quit touring and move over to a day job, and then everybody loses. The coffeehouse series has been an expense item on the HTMA budget for most of the past five years, supported by other income (mainly membership dues and additional donations from HTMA supporters). Occasionally a coffeehouse brings in more in donations than we pay to the performers, but that has been a sadly rare event. It's amazing to me that today I still see about the same average donation per coffeehouse attendee that I did ten or fifteen years ago – a lot less than five dollars a head. Can you think of anything else that hasn't increased in price over the past dozen year? You do the math. If we are only averaging three or four dollars per audience member and only bringing in forty or fifty attendees on a good night, how are we supposed to provide a living wage to our artists, who often have substantial travel expenses just getting to Huntsville? We really need to work harder to educate our members and audiences about the hard reality of our small corner of the music economy, where nobody is getting rich and so many are just barely getting by. I'd appreciate any advice our members care to offer on how we might improve this important education campaign.

Please join me in wishing the best to our new Publicity and Performance chairs, and if you get a call with a request for help from Sylvia or Jerry, please see if you can't lend a hand. This volunteer-run association has to be a team effort to work.

I'd like to wish the entire HTMA extended family all the best in 2012, and I hope to see and hear from a lot of you in the coming months.

Best wishes for the New Year!

Jerry Le Croy

HTMA President