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The Culture of Upper Peninsula Jam Sessions

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Abstract

The culture of Upper Peninsula jam sessions is presented through an overview history and interpretation of music's importance to the participating community residents. The jam session founders opened their doors to strangers, allowing them to find pleasure in learning and sharing musical tastes. With no set expectations from the jam session organizers, this paper portrays the reality of success. Wannabe musicians and professionals gather with more than a little, enthusiastic audience, forming longtime friendships while encouraging the newcomers. The opening poem tells what is to come and what has come to be the norm for Friday and Saturday nights in the Keweenaw peninsula. Good smells from the kitchens give away the potluck, and country western tunes tell the listeners that old styles are the majority. No doubt, a lot of effort was put forth to set up a stage area and ample room for the audience, one that keeps growing and bringing more people to the stage. Various performers and audience members were interviewed, and all had the same responses, that jam sessions were good for them and the community. So, come on in and enjoy the music!

Tags: Jam sessions, country western music, modern barn dances.

Music Ethnography
Field Research Project
The Culture of Upper Peninsula Jam Sessions

World Music 325 (2019)
Northern Michigan University
Instructor: Carrie Biolo

Music Jams

Music jams
are cultural traditions
with no rehearsals
or scary auditions

They entertain
all who attend
a joyous time
that has no end

Starts at dusk
the crowd comes in
familiar faces
like home again

Potluck nights
just because
an added touch
everybody loves

Just like the music
there's food of choice

doesn't really matter
Jams are one big voice

Make new friends
learn a song
pert near everyone
gets along!

Y'all come out
Music's in the air
share in the fun
it's a community fare

It's a Jam Session!

Traprock Valley and The Milkman Jamborees:

The History and Its People

Reflection

Music is to the community what our senses are to our body. The entire body of music, all music, its varied instruments, its virtuous and sometimes seemingly peculiar sounds, and its voices function as the sensory core of every community, every ethnic group, of any age. What we hear, what we feel, what we taste, what we see, and even what we smell, is a reflection or background of family and community music. It is the root of our very being, affecting our perception of the immediate surroundings, if not our world. Music is a language for everyone. It speaks, leads, and drives us.

Music Sensory

We embrace music through hearing, whether silent reflection in memory of the sound or in real life at any given moment. Subtly, it touches us, generating emotions, as we are affected by its capabilities, all the while tasting the familiarity that bonds our ethnic heritage. Distinct genres tell us who we are, yet their origin lets us see other ethnic peoples experiencing those same senses. We can smell the aroma of sound emitted through creative inventions of music around the world, bringing us full circle to music's phenomenon of uniting people, sometimes in war or mourning, but more often in celebrations shared in their community. It is but an efficacy of what God desires in humanity.

Humble Beginnings

Music jamborees in the Upper Peninsula are a community of mixed ethnic groups, sharing and expanding their repertoire, attentively listening to lyrics and sounds that bring joy to the heart. Golden threads of benevolence weave success throughout jam sessions in the western end of the Upper Peninsula. In the unique area there is a subtle pattern of ethnic groups finding one another through the language of music. Originating with an idea, a thirst for knowledge, chance meetings, dreams, and compassion alike, community music sessions were created in the

most unlikely places. They meet a societal need of belonging, seaming their interests with entertainment in various townships. If ethnic groups are genetically tied, then we can presume from this world culture music project, that jam session members may possess a musical genetic code!

Traprock Valley

In 2008, Traprock Valley's Pete Anttila, determined to learn guitar, and Pete has SISU- a word for persistence or determination! No stranger to the valley, Pete, an army veteran, is "a hundred percent Finn." Though not a first-generation Finn to the states, he *is* a first-generation musician with a heritage of grandparents migrating to Mass City from Finland, interjecting that "All farmers in Mass City were Finnish." He talked about music in school and an unfortunate temporary illness that kept him from the band, but not from music. He listened to country and western music on the radio at night. "I heard a variety, but "country music was what I always liked" he is adamant about that!

Pete liked Carl Smith, Kitty Wells and Patsy Cline. He has been to the Grand Ole Opry. He reflected on his trip to Detroit where he had front row seats with his two brother's-in-law, "right next to the stage." Pete said he saw all the big stars, "Johnny Cash, Hank Snow, Buck Owens, Charlie Pride, and Minnie Pearle were there, it was a big program." He also went to the Iowa State Fair where he saw, "Randy Travis and Holly Dunn. He was excited to say, "She had just written, Daddy's Hands" which is a favorite of mine. Some of Pete's favorites are any tunes by Hank Williams, like 'Your Cheating Heart' (also one of my favorites), 'Mansion on a Hill,' 'Faded Love,' 'Danny Boy,' and 'For Baby.'

Pete reminisced that he "had a collection of 45's." He also has more instruments than I could count, but he mentioned that he has a Martin D 35 guitar. Pete's genre is old country and western, and..... old country and western! Classic of course. If he finds any other music aesthetically pleasing, he hides it pretty good! He's all country, and rarely seen without his

cowboy hat. He was reflective and sincere while speaking about his desire to learn guitar and share his love for music with others.

I observed Pete's expressions; they ranged from seriousness to smiles. He remembered that on a stormy day, when he was 66 years old, he had an idea to start playing guitar. Buying his first one soon afterward, he ventured into lessons. He described those lessons as "overwhelming." Too much information discouraged him, but not for long, remember the SISU! Mastering any instrument is challenging, if not intimidating, but Pete began meeting with a few friends who helped him along. Then he reflected on Traprock Valley jam session beginnings, "They started with get-togethers and jams in my shop." Pete says, "We were having fun" so we kept "jamming" he related, using that musician term for practice get-togethers.

But he admits that it was Cathy Isaacson who suggested that they have practice sessions more often. As word got around new people started coming. Pete got Mary Lou Pesola started on guitar, and he sang with Cathy Isaacson during their 'debut' at Agate Beach. With guitar and other musicians in tow, Pete established the first jam session across the bridge, you know, the low water bridge going to Traprock Valley! He bought the best sound system that he could afford. There were no weekly jams at the time he started Traprock Valley, though there were the annual Aura and Agate Beach weekend jamborees.

Pete's basement is the destination for Traprock Valley jam, with the initials, "TRV," painted on a homemade sign. Our family commutes an hour and a half to jam sessions; it is a trip worth making. Cross the Houghton/Hancock bridge and stay right. Follow the highway to the right until you get into Lake Linden. Turn right at Bootjack Road, cross the little bridge and turn left on Traprock Valley Rd. Pete's is two miles down the road on the right.

Pete's house sets up on a hill, back from the country road with a flock of cars surrounding it. Jams are every other Friday night. Upon arrival you know you're at Pete's; the music is pleasant, the voices fun and inviting. You are hearing friends and family; if they aren't your own family now, they will soon seem like it. Lights shine through the narrow basement windows giving you visibility to the basement door; it's homemade down to the whittled handle. A few steps down a narrow passage, decorated with up-north farm collections of days gone-by,

is the main entrance. The simplicity is just like the good old days when people appreciated necessities and homegrown music. These jam session nights are not too dissimilar to the much-loved and remembered barn dances.

The aesthetics are homegrown. Pete himself is as homemade as they come; a self-made businessman and father of four with a passel of grandkids. Through the second door you will see the work that Pete put forth renovating his basement into a music 'hall' for others to enjoy. It's cozy and quaint, and full of art, reflecting his family's talent. The walls are covered with guitars and other instruments, and slogans about music, with a guitar chord chart hanging by the stage. Musicians usually invite newcomers to sing, with the audience often joining in. Praises keep everyone feeling special.

Mistakes, forgotten lyrics and such, are a part of the learning process even for the 'pros.' If you don't play an instrument, beware, Pete is known to thrust a guitar at the most unlikely candidates; most start playing when they are well beyond their senior years. But music has no age barrier, just like learning anything else, except, maybe bull-riding! You can tell the regulars; they have chronic bursitis from carrying around their ever-growing three-ring binders of music, most of which is kept in clear document sleeves adding to the weight. Books are marked alphabetically for the real addicts and hauled in suitcases, depending on the years of jamming experience!

In the corner is a chalk board telling the date of the next jam with encouraging words that make you smile. Pete needs a lot of encouragement now as his sweet wife, Sue, passed away last year. She held a place in everyone's heart and a special spot in the audience. After preparing the kitchen area, Sue would make her way to a choice seat and greet everyone coming in. Often her children and grandchildren came; you knew they were there by the way Sue beamed.

Low ceilings add to the warmth of a basement divided into two main rooms, one for the stage and audience, the other a kitchen area where a table is filled with potluck dishes. Coffee is always brewing not far from the woodstove, positioned conveniently across from the big stack of wood Pete cuts. Your heart *and* behind, will get warm at Pete's! All the while, the

country-western genre plays. The sounds are from rank beginners upwards to local professionals who come for the music, they say, but surely, it's as much the atmosphere of the community.

Take your seat amongst the rest of the audience where rows of chairs are separated from the stage by a hitching post. There's a sound board and a tangled web of microphone cords, music stands, and bar stools for the musicians. Homemade numbered signs let the control board keeper 'git' the right cord turned 'on' or 'off' before that obnoxious disconnect noise is made! It happens! There's a piano anyone is welcome to play. All instruments that speak 'country-western' are especially welcome. The regulars set up and each person is given a time spot with help coming when needed. Musicians alternate and many are eager to play even for the singers who haven't had Pete give them a guitar (Yet)!

The number of jamborees has grown as a result of Pete getting his jamboree going. Pete gives the following facts: "It's been fun. Older people like it also because there is no drinking. Keeping the old country going is my goal. Biggest percent of country music has a good story."

The Milkman Jamboree

Howard Hart is the milkman for the Upper Peninsula, hence the name, Milkman Jamboree. The large renovated store is his business location in downtown Ahmeek, right off the highway on Third Street. Howard and his wife, Diane, started the jamboree in 2013, after attending Pete's, Traprock Valley Jamboree. They already owned the vintage store, the upstairs serving as a spacious living area, so naturally, the first floor became the music hall. What else would you do with it?! Jamboree's alternate weekends, every other Saturday at Howards brings in a crowd from 50-100. Music starts at 6 p.m. and ends when everyone is too tired to stay, or midnight, whichever comes first!

Howard played music as a kid and grew up in a musical family. His oldest brother wrote songs and sang. He related "While driving semi one day I thought of a song and called Diane to write it down." He said that was his first time to write a song, then he did the next logical thing; he "bought a guitar." He said, in almost a surprising voice, "When I was 48 years old!" Everyone

stops to listen when Howard sings the songs that bring tears, from true-to-life stories of truckers and little boys, to stories of legends. He strums and the audience is moved.

Once he learned to play, he was invited to the annual Agate beach jamboree. He and Diane were on stage for the first time, but he was so appreciative how everyone encouraged him. I understand that encouragement, it's one thing to sing in the shower, and another to sing in front of a crowd! That is one of the common threads I find in these groups; it is not competitive, but just fun-loving. "People liked my voice" Howard related, and soon he found himself at Pete's.

"I was shocked that people would actually give up their home," referring to Pete's renovation of his basement for the music hall. "We had the store and the room," he said, "It made perfect sense to start one at our place. Music is wonderful; people and talent amaze me" he continued. Howard spoke about being "Amazed at all the instruments people play." I doubt that when they bought the building that they could have predicted how well-known they would become! After all, it's not every day that you buy a guitar and then design a music hall around it!

Howard's preference is Johnny Cash and country tunes. He says that Johnny Cash is his brother's idol. Of course, Howard "likes the Highway Man." He much prefers, "classic rock and roll, but easy listening," though not music like that from Jimmy Hendricks. Howard and Diane don't have to tell people that they are "pretty easy going," that is something you will sense right off. Howard says that they want to "keep it fun." Howard said that he "would like to be able to do a live feed." Diane said that Howard "does tell jokes and they are thinking it would be fun to do a Hee Haw version of jams." Diane said that Howard "does tell jokes and they are thinking it would be fun to do a Hee Haw version of jams."

Music varies from classic country to rock, and anything in between. There is a sign-up list on the table; first come, first sing! Kenny O'Connor is a near permanent fixture as a bass guitar player; he has a regular spot. Howard says that "Kenny can accompany any talent, but he never cared to be the front man." Others sit in too with their instruments as well as an occasional drummer. Piano players come in bringing their own keyboard. When kids show up, they are encouraged to sing or play anything that they can. Kids really enjoy the mic and coming to jam sessions.

Once the jamboree started, Howard talks on, “Then a local family came who are the grandparents to Paulina Jayne.” Howard relates that he “hosted Paulina” and there was quite the crowd. She was a joy to meet and quite the entertainer; I consider her a rising star. The place was packed again this year when she came to The Milkman. Paulina is not the only ‘star’ that Howard and Diane have met from that lone guitar purchase, not that many years ago. Diane manages their Facebook page, putting videos on from the jam sessions, “Snowbirds enjoy it, Diane said.” Soon Howard was introduced to Doc Holiday through social media; he still produces talent like Willie Nelson, another personality that Howard met online. Howard shared that Willie “started in his garage.” He talks about people in the country starting in music through barn dances in Wisconsin relating that he attended those, “Since I could walk . . . whatever happened to the barn dances?” he asked. That’s a good question, and the solution is being fulfilled by the jamborees.

Howard is enthused, “We love to do the jamborees and we try to be fair. No money is involved. Cool thing is that people bring in supplies for potluck,” and the tables, which Howard said spanned “30 feet” are usually pretty full. Newcomers are sure to return, and willingly bring a dish to pass. “The music family is more than friends. We love the UP and the people; we moved here because of the people.” He adds, “People are amazing.” Howard and Diane are notably humble which makes them that much more endearing to me and I am sure everyone who meets them. They are amazing too. “Any kind of music is welcome,” Howard says. You can get involved through social media on The Milkman jamboree online. He stated that readers “Request to be friended” and then come out to share their talent or be a part of the audience.

The main entrance faces their road bringing you immediately into the music room. The long stage is on the left with established seating for musicians across from it. Speakers, mics, music stands, a piano, and often a set of drums are there for anyone to use. Across, and perpendicular to the stage, is more seating. A sound board is on one end, donated by one of the regular guitarists. If you entered by the back-side road you have come to the kitchen replete with the original store’s oak food cases. This is the most likely room to meet new people; there is

much chatter, hugging, and general talk. The pool table is covered with guitars and heavy manuals (music books!) as musicians turn pages to select their pieces for the night.

I am writing this in December, so the Christmas tree is lit and decorated with special effects by jammers. The stage is full of seasonal decorations, the back wall endowed with instruments of choice and a sign to vote for Willie Nelson for president. Who else?! Diane oversees décor. Howard says, "I leave that to my better half" along with costume nights. She must spend hours on the decorations; the stage is always lit up too. If you are looking for a fun night out or want to try singing in front of a friendly crowd, you need to follow the highways to jam sessions!

Follow Highway 41 North, cross the Houghton/Hancock Bridge and stay to the left. Continue past Quincy Mine for about 20 minutes, until you see the sign for Ahmeek. Take an immediate left and you are there. The sign is out front, and cars are plentiful, but so is parking. See you there!

Kenny and Brenda O'Connor

Kenny and Brenda have seldom, if ever, missed a night at either jamboree. Kenny is the bass player and a more permanent fixture on stage, having been one of the original musicians at The Milkman. Rarely a song is performed that a musician doesn't turn to him and say, "Take it Kenny." He and his sister, Mary (who he taught to play guitar) 'own' the guitar, meaning they are hard to beat for talent. Kenny plays strictly by ear and Brenda (who was happy to announce that they have been married 51 years) is one of his many admirers. Kenny had to win Brenda's father over before he could get hitched. Her father appreciated good music, so the rest is history!

Kenny is self-taught on guitar; he wanted to play after hearing Johnny Cash sing "I Walk the Line." He doesn't read music but started playing with radio personality, Dick Storm and Chuck Gauthier, friends from Houghton High School. They would jam together playing country western favorites and light rock. He lists Chet Atkins as a favorite along with Johnny Cash, but Kenny can play anything. He plays at other jamborees, like Aura, and Agate Beach and has been in bands. The ice rinks were a favorite place years ago in Baltic where music played; one of the churches was turned into an ice rink! Another song Kenny listed was "Don't Ask Me How

Many” and I would not want to ask *how many* songs he can play as the lead guitarist; he is like a walking radio!

Donna Ruohonen

Donna Ruohonen, another 100% Finn, is a favorite at both jam sessions, known for her Finnish songs and favorites to sing like, ‘Paper Roses.’ In fact, any time I hear the name of the song, I automatically hear Donna’s voice. She is also one of the original singers, along with Cathy Isaacson, at jam sessions. She has an interesting and fortunate background in music. Donna related, “My whole family has been musical,” her father was the song leader in church. “Singing has been a big part of our lives. I have always been attracted to music,” her voice, determined. Seven years ago, someone Donna knew invited her to Pete Antila’s. Pete saw Donna and invited her to come up to sing.

Next stop was The Milkman, and like the other recognized musical talent related, “It evolved from that.” She first started singing with Howard strumming on guitar, and Chris, on the piano. If you don’t play an instrument you have to find someone who will play for you. She explained that, “People who play the keyboard can more easily play for you.” She started singing more including singing Finnish music with Pete. It was Pete Anttila who, according to Donna, “Translated, ‘Blue Eyes Crying in The Rain,’ to Finnish. This has been a favorite for the two of them to sing together. No doubt special friendships have developed through these music sessions.

Donna also sang solo Finnish Christmas songs at school. She had a lot of Finnish music at home and went to a Finnish service at church. She sang the Finnish hymns at church and speaks fluent Finnish. She is definitely the person called to carry on traditional Finnish singing; she has a real gift. Donna has another unique family association, though; she brings Finnish music to the Upper Peninsula after visiting her two sons and grandchildren in Finland. She makes the yearly trips count double! She related not only the efforts she makes to bring music home, but she tells what songs she enjoys singing. I will let her tell her own story:

“On my yearly trips to Finland to visit my two Sons & their families, I would go to their local library with my granddaughters & make copies of Finnish songs (lyrics & music notes) to

take home & sing at the Jams, like "Are You Lonesome Tonight" by Elvis, & "Home On The Range" & some Christmas favorites like "Silent Night" & "Jingle Bells." Some of my other regular Jam Session's music included "Candy Kisses," "Paper Roses"(Marie Osmond), "Love Me Tender"(Elvis), and songs that Howard & I did together like, "Dear John"(Jean Shepard & Ferlin Husky), "Golden Ring" (George Jones & Tammy Wynette), "Waltz Across Texas"& "King Of The Road"(Roger Miller)."

What I found fascinating was her ability to switch languages and continue in the same song. Her singing is a real treat. The ethnic groups have found a common bond and many attendees were eager to say that they have met people from the community that they never knew were in the area, prior to jam sessions.

Donna continues her family history on the home front, "My brother was in a country western band from the early 50's." Consequently, she "had a lot of influence," explaining, "My brother played guitar and my oldest brother played the drums." Her oldest sister, "Played for a funeral director and another sister plays music." She added, "Both sisters play organ and piano by ear." Cathy Isaacson asked her to be one of the female voices of Amazing Grace for her first (and not likely the last) CD. Donna was excited to be part of the production of Cathy's CD, commenting that it was a very "Memorable experience."

The enjoyment from singing is what Donna values. "What kept me going," she shared, was her thinking of where you could go to get food and hear the "fantastic music?" She said, "the talent was phenomenal." She praised the "benefits of the area."

If you think about the feeling the musicians have toward these special jam sessions, and the response from the communities, you can see the similarities to the old-fashioned barn dances that Howard mentioned. The efforts made by Pete and Howard have reverberated throughout the community. With everyone contributing to the success of these musical encounters they will surely continue to attract more of the same. There is no telling what 'big' music star will be found tucked away in the cozy Upper Peninsula music halls! We do know though, that only the best can come from such humble beginnings.

Cathy Isaacson

Cathy Isaacson was singing one year at the Chassell High School band fundraiser. I met her there while auditioning; she invited me to The Milkman. Cathy is unique in that she is poised, easily relates to the audience, and is very versatile. She alternates playing guitar and singing with various other members and encourages others by offering to play for them. She must have a genetic code for music; she had musical relatives who played in country bands and she herself took right to guitar. She was raised in a military family, spending several years overseas. She describes her music listening as that from “The military radio” and laughs. She was adamant in saying that hard rock is not her kind of music. Howard will be happy to know that, Ha!

Cathy had a brief introduction of one year with guitar years ago, but then started playing again after college. You would never know that she had no public performance prior to jam sessions and no singing in public. She started with Pete at least 10 years ago. Pete got her into the Chassell Country show one year and now she plays for nursing homes, and fundraisers. She told me that she, “Has played at St. Anne’s church, Daniel Park, Mohawk in the Park, Agate Beach jamboree, and the Covington Concert series.” Guitar is her only instrument; hers is a Dean. She also has her first CD that includes musicians from jam session all singing together in one fun performance.

Cathy listed, ‘Stand By Me,’ ‘Crazy,’ and songs by Emmylou Harris, Kathy Mattea, bluegrass songs, 60’s pop, more modern music and specifies country and western from the 1940’s to the 1980’s,” which seems to be a good cut-off point for many of the diehard classic country music lovers. But when Cathy is on stage, she engages the audience and gets people moving to sing with her. She is a real natural for music performance. I think most would agree that she is one of those hidden stars of the Upper Peninsula. She is often on stage with Mark Davis, another original jammer who also performed at the Covington Michigan Summer Concert Series held eight times on Tuesday nights during July and August. Summer concert series in the Upper Peninsula are a testimony to the music entertainment happenings for community

enjoyment, but that would be another story. Many of the jamboree musicians also play at the concert series. The area is one big musical culture all its own.

Mark Davis

If you're not fond of country western music, but your spouse is dragging you to jam sessions, stick around for Mark Davis tunes. Mark has many years of music under his belt, or I guess you would say, on his guitar. He even told of taking a jazz history class at Michigan Tech. Growing up he enjoyed rock and roll, The Dave Clark Five (I remember having one of their albums myself!) The Doors, Paul Revere and the Raiders, and The Shondells. Of course, no musician list like that would be complete without the Beatles as part of your repertoire, who Mark says he was, "Exposed to when he was 10 years old."

Mark was in the Galveston area during his earlier years where his stepfather regularly played jazz with famed artists like Al Hirtz. Mark said that his stepfather knew all the big names of the day. But his stepfather was unwilling to share his own instruments, so he bought Mark a guitar when he was 13 years old. Mark is self-made, learning guitar from a Mel Bay book, and learning electronics so he could repair his amp! He also said that he "listened to piano for tuning." He suggested that learning "off records" was another method that worked.

Mark stayed in Galveston until 1971; he then gravitated to the Upper Peninsula through his wife Tammy. He took a break from music to be with his kids, but he appears to be back full swing and most often at The Milkman. He was advising that his repertoire includes Moody Blues, Pink Floyd, Henry Chapin, and Crosby, Steels, and Nash. He's very versatile but with limits on playing country western; he said that he likes some Johnny Cash songs. Mark is a member of the Dark Mavis Trio. And, I have had the pleasure of hearing him sing, The Cats in the Cradle.

Like many of the 'jammers' he has an assortment of instruments, including three acoustic guitars. He has a Breedlove (that has custom rare wood), an Alvarez DY 58 which he says is a, "9-string acoustic guitar that came out in 1988," and a France brand with a snazzy name of Chey

LAG. I soon got lost in the ‘strings’ of things, as in, my brain was ‘lagging’ by then. No doubt these musicians know their stuff!

Mark continued rattling off musician expertise, telling about an electric Fender 78 Stratocaster, for instance, so I cut the interview! Seriously, I was impressed with these ‘jam setters.’ Mark's final remark was, “Music has to change,” indicating that he didn’t want to play the same thing over and over, and that overtime it would just be natural that music would change or evolve.

And, as I soon learned in my World Culture class at Northern Michigan University (taught by the well-known and professional percussionist, Carrie Biolo) using instruments from all over the world is how music becomes so versatile. Different cultures embraced instruments and styles from other countries and intermixed those in their own country’s band and ensembles. No doubt, there is more to music than just hearing tunes and beats; there is a whole world of communication out there for the learning, and for the sharing.

Mary Lou Pesola

Mary Lou is also a native of the area and all Finnish as well. As a child she played piano and her father played string instruments. She remembers her mother and father singing at home, “with six kids around the piano.” She sure painted a nice family gathering visual, and her sister, Sue, has been on stage with her often. Pete is her cousin and was instrumental in getting her going in the jam sessions and on guitar, which Mary Lou started playing just seven years ago. Like many of the jam-setters, she is self-taught.

Mary Lou is the first person (outside of my oldest daughter) who I have heard close-up, yodeling. I love when she brings that talent to jam sessions. Like Cathy Isaacson, she lists Mary Lou Harris as one of her favorites. Hank Williams was right in there with the other favorites. She has many songs that she brings to music nights, including, ‘Hello Stranger,’ ‘Homesick Blues,’ and ‘Blue Kentucky Girl.’ She strums away on a variety of personally owned guitars like the Ibanez, her Seagull, and she owns a Zager. I noticed that most musicians have multiple instruments; it must come with the territory!

Mary Lou does not limit herself to jam sessions; she can be heard at the Aura Jamboree, Agate Beach, and she sings at nursing homes, and in the historic parks in the community. That was another common trait with the performers; they love to share their music and make people happy. Mary Lou and her husband, Al, enjoy meeting people at jam sessions and see it as a nice social event. She has the right idea, and ended her interview by saying that jam sessions, “Help improve playing and singing.”

New Jammers and the Audience

I wanted to snag interviews from the newcomers and the audience to get their input. Attendees range from 30 to 100 in number, all smiles, all eager to talk to me too. Not long into interviews, it became quite clear that these music gatherings were an answered prayer for many; people had an enjoyable place to go, and a place to learn music too.

Lana Lassanen

I met another native of the Upper Peninsula, Lana Lassanen, at a Toastmasters meeting. She mentioned that she wanted to get up the nerve to sing in front of people, so I encouraged her to come to jam sessions. She is a regular now after two years of jamming. Everyone enjoys her lovely voice; she also plays guitar and has been known to bring a few of her sweet singing children with her. Her tastes in music goes beyond country and western. With a background in family music singing in church, she has been playing guitar for three years. Her instruments include an Eastman guitar and a Washburn guitar; she also played piano for two years.

Lana sings a variety, including country and easy listening either at jam sessions or at nursing homes. Her repertoire includes songs by Dolly Parton, ‘Love is Like a Butterfly,’ ‘Here You Come Again’ and ‘Islands in the Stream’ by Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton. She is also practicing, ‘The Power of Love’ by Celine Dion, and ‘The Reason,’ by Calum Scott. Her music must be infectious because now her siblings are playing guitar. Her girls were a delight, and both had their own microphone!

Clifford and Barbara Junttonen

Upper Peninsula natives Clifford and Barbara Junttonen hail from Mason and Calumet respectively. Like most attendees, they've been hitting jam sessions for about four years. Clifford, a Finn with a 'touch' of Swede, is a retired equipment and maintenance technician, and Navy veteran. He reflected on his two cousins playing accordion and guitar at the farmhouse and learning harmonica as a kid. He also sang at church by the pump organ but now takes banjo on youtube using his, "Recording King brand banjo." This will be a nice addition to jam sessions, but Clifford may need some coaxing from Barbara to get on the stage!

Barbara met Clifford after he got out of the Navy. She had a similar music background with accordion Polka music in the family. The teen center was a fun place with rock-n-roll and country and western tunes. Like Barbara, Clifford enjoys Doo Wop which was popular at the malt shops in its day (and still the ultimate music with me and our daughter, Laura!). They were invited to Pete's by a chance encounter, relating that they have made new friends. Clifford listed gospel music as a favorite, like, 'I'll Fly Away,' 'The Old Rugged Cross,' in addition to the ever popular, 'Red River Valley,' and the fun tune, 'Mountain Dew.'

Lee and Diane Jurva

Diane Jurva is a Tapiola native, and with her husband, Lee on the guitar, she sings more non-country, admitting an aversion to 'twang.' She can't help it, so as a southerner, I forgive her! All fun aside, she enjoys a musical variety and sang Bette Midler's, 'The Rose,' one Friday night. She loves another one of my favorite singers, Dionne Warwick, as well, The Beatles. Though she had no specific memories of music as a child, she enjoys old church hymns and related that they have "Met a bunch of wonder people," at jam sessions; she also sings at the senior center.

Rob and Janet Olson

Rob Olson and his wife, Janet, invited Lee and Diane to jam sessions. With their newfound friends they cluster on the back row, visiting, and are all smiles when you walk in the door. Rob really likes the old country classics and sings at both jam sessions. Despite our southern 'twang,' the Finns let us in and encourage our daughter, Laura, as she sings with Pete. It is a nice mix of ages, but seniors are prominent. We exchange language barriers and poke fun at

each other's ethnic words, like, 'Eh' and 'Y'all.'" We get a kick out of Yankees trying to sound 'country.' It's all in fun, and fun for everyone who walks through the doors.

Gordon Newman

Scandinavian, Gordon Newman, is an Army Korean War veteran who started coming to the jam sessions eight years ago. He remembers country western music growing up, along with the big band music. He sings a lot of Hank Williams, including a favorite of mine, 'Cold, Cold Heart'. He also likes George Jones's, 'He Stopped Loving Her Today.' His other favorite professionals are Johnny Cash and Stonewall Jackson. Gordon takes the stage at both jam sessions like most of the jammers!

Closing Remarks

This music ethnography field project was conducted during the fall semester for World Music Culture 325 class at Northern Michigan University. I attended six jam sessions specifically for this project, including Traprock Valley and The Milkman. I personally interviewed all participants and recorded the original interviews of Howard and Diane Hart, Pete Anttila, and Donna Ruohonen, in their homes.

All the text is my original reporting information. I wrote the poem specifically for this project. Due to time constraints I was unable to interview all the participants at these jam sessions; however, I appreciate the opportunity to have conducted this project and to have a chance to share the music culture of the Upper Peninsula. Stealing a line from Howard Hart, "People are amazing."

I want to thank my instructor, Carrie Biolo, for assigning a music project and thank all who participated. May the jam sessions continue! Or, "Rock on baby!" as Laura would say.

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