

Welcome...

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to the SummerSongs website!

The art of songwriting is an important mirror of our culture.

Many divergent points of view and experiences can be expressed in a song, which may not find expression in any other way. Songwriters give us valuable insights in to the evolution of our values and our direction as a culture. Left only to the vagaries of the marketplace, there is no guarantee that we will hear the best of what our way of life has to offer in the world of songs and songwriting.

read more

We welcome you to read about

- the camps,
- about the staff who teach at the camps,
- and about how you can support our mission.

At the store you can

- listen to a cd, Including our SummerSongs West Compilation CD!
- register for camp,
- pay for camp registration, in full or in installments,
- or make a donation.

You must be at least 18 years of age to attend a SummerSongs camp unless accompanied by a supervising adult.

Suggestions and your photos from past camp sessions are welcome. Please select and send only your best 3 photos! Email barb@summersongs.com You can also let us know if you have any problems using the site.

See the little symbols in the upper right corner? Try them out to customize how this site works for you!

Read these great articles about SummerSongs and SummerSongs West to get an idea of what camp is like:

WinterSongs 2011 by Tom Boyd:

The place where we gather is a nature education center just down the road from the Ashokan Reservoir, Ulster County's deep pool of New York City drinking water. We meet and eat and play and bunk in a cluster of modest buildings, not quite as old as George Washington's Fort Shokan (now under water in the reservoir) but sometimes

the

camp beds make you believe you are living in colonial times.

We don't spend much time sleeping, though. Ours is a community of motor mouths and flash mobs and pickin' parties and instant ensembles and trading licks and writing and teaching and sharing, all of which goes on from approximately six in the morning until more or less three the next morning. There are meal breaks, and raffles, and a few other distractions, but mostly we come together to make music. At night, after a full eight-hour day of classes and workshops and spontaneous jam sessions, we

assemble ourselves for a coffee house – everybody performs a song, and we hunker down on chipped chairs and battered benches from about seven in the evening until maybe midnight. THEN we stumble into the dining hall for the folk jamming and the Beatles medley and six-guitar Eagles covers and amazing harmonies, and by then our voices have cracked and our eyes have gotten glassy and the snacks are down to crumbs and all that sustains us is the music.

WinterSongs just happened over the past weekend (the bigger, longer, dustier original, SummerSongs, will erupt in August). This was my sixth or seventh camp, summer and winter, and some of my pals there have been coming to every camp since Penny Nichols launched it 11 or 12 years ago. Penny is a veteran of the Los Angeles folk-rock scene, a member of Jimmy Buffett's Coral Reefers, and oh, yeah, along the way she earned a Harvard doctorate in music and education. So imagine a multiplex curriculum, a series of personal challenges, a lively understanding of the ways adults learn – and add layers of pranks, costumes, glitter, frog masks, instrument cases piled in the corners, charts for sidemen to follow, miles of cable and mic cords and the artifacts of club life and gigs. Then sing and play all night.

Why in the world would we put ourselves through such an experience? Very few of us plan careers as singer-songwriters (the faculty is made up of people who already have such careers). We bring CDs for sale, but most of us already have most of us in our collections. Sometimes we get tips or pointers or technical suggestions that

move our craft forward, but often, we get home with notes and ideas that get swallowed up in the great maw of 'daily life.'

So why? I offer two answers. First is from the 'war poet' Siegfried Sassoon:

Everyone Sang

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;

And I was filled with such delight

As prisoned birds must find in freedom,

Winging wildly across the white

Orchards and dark-green fields; on – on – and out of sight.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;

And beauty came like the setting sun:

My heart was shaken with tears; and horror

Drifted away. . .O, but Everyone

Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never
be done.

The second answer is my own. I think we gather to make music because there, we discover, or rediscover, our best selves. In the act of finding and presenting our own

words, and music, we take that huge airless silent leap into that-which-was-not-there-before. And our best selves – our creative, expressive, communal selves – come out to play. The community gathering to sing; an idea and a practice as old as those drowned villages at the bottom of Ashokan.

SummerSongs West 2007

by Severin Browne, October 2007

My name is Severin Browne and I am a song-write-aholic. It started when I was very young and has stayed with me my whole life. I know there are many out there with this same affliction that might benefit from having the friendly and supportive songwriting community that I've found at SummerSongs. This article will tell you a little bit about the SummerSongs family and about the June 2007 SummerSongs West, specifically. If you're inspired by any of this, please join us at our next camp.

Why SummerSongs West?

I've tried to understand what it is about SummerSongs that makes it so magical for me. I've written songs and attended functions for songwriters since the early seventies when I was a staff songwriter and artist for Motown. Being from a music industry center like Los Angeles, I've been to many songwriter groups and industry seminars that don't even begin to capture the warmth and support that I feel at SummerSongs. They can't touch this! And the reason is clear: they are about business and SummerSongs is about personal growth and community. I don't mean to say that SummerSongs ignores the music business, but rather that the priority is to help the writer dig deep into his or her songwriting craft. And when you add in the community, it's just magic!

Tom H. says:

"Summersongs was a bit like cleaning a window that I hadn't realized was so dusty. Things appeared more clearly and seemed closer to me than they had before. I've thought of myself as primarily an audience member and support staff kind of guy. My experience at Summersongs has given me a real push. I'm much more interested now in showcasing my talents as a solo performer. It's (in the) early days still, but I can feel my life taking a new direction."

Jerome Y. says:

"Another moment for me happened in the harmony singing class. We had worked for several days on Penny's special arrangement of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot". We had all enjoyed watching Penny work her magic with layer after layer of arrangement, but this time through we all knew we had "nailed" it. We were looking at each other's faces, and almost at the same moment we all noticed that Penny had slumped down in her chair and was crying. She told us she was moved to tears with what we had created together."

Susan M. says:

"I look forward to camp every time it comes around and it has created lasting friendships and relationships and support for me as an artist in the community at large. I feel very loved and cared for and nurtured and equipped to come back to my own world and continue my journey as a singer/songwriter in life."

Rich P. says:

"I've been to all of the SummerSongs and WinterSongs camps held on the west coast these past four years. Attending camp has enormously influenced my music and profoundly enriched other aspects of my life. Penny manages to create such a special environment at camp where music is the common language, but where a spirit of community and genuine kindness somehow spontaneously emerges. By the end of camp each of us is wondering what we can do to share this spirit and help it grow."

The students at SummerSongs (both East and West) span the range from beginning songwriters who have never performed for anyone to experienced writers with loads of gigs and recordings. Many of these experienced students have helped with tutoring too. The performances each night of camp at coffeehouse or in the song circles are a great gauge to show everyone's growth too. And the support that naturally comes from being in the same boat together makes it easier to risk and grow naturally.

Rebecca T. says:

"Watching people grow and blossom over time as artists is as great an experience as growing and blossoming myself! I got tears in my eyes many times at coffeehouse, seeing people get up and sing despite difficult journeys on their artistic path. There is so much beauty and healing available to us as songwriters. I have so much respect for the courage and support it takes. To be a part of Summersongs is a great honor to me."

Janice S. says:

"With the support of the teachers and the others at camp who share my passion for writing songs, I have come to recognize a deep bond of kinship and community that is beyond words. No matter what level you are at with songwriting, beginner or professional, at camp the playing field is leveled and everyone becomes a willing participant in their own personal journey to risk, to learn, to trust, to share. Having attended five camps now, with one positive experience building on the next, I feel I have grown not only as a songwriter but as a person too."

Marie J. Says:

"Summersongs West 2007 was my 1st Summersongs and it was the best vacation ever in my life! I learned to transfer my guitar chord skills to the piano; I put to rest my inner critic that said I wouldn't dare improvise in public; I swam in the lake and toned in the dome -- and then there were all those unfinished songs that received much needed direction and gentle persistence. Most importantly, I learned where I fit into the songwriting circle. I found my voice in more ways than one. Without that, I would have remained offstage. I sang my first original song onstage at Summersongs West 2007! Potential and infinite possibility all mixed in with hugs and laughs -- what a blast! I am so grateful to all the teachers and fellow songwriters."

Sabine B says:

"I am in the corporate world where my left brain is consistently engaged. Summersongs for me is a retreat of the most delicious kind. It permits me to retreat from the world and get in touch with my creative side. Sometimes I attend classes, sometimes I prefer to just sit in my cabin, by the lake or under a big shady tree, writing pad in hand, doodling with my guitar. It's a perfect way to take a vacation by yourself while having the option to be with people or not. It's impossible not to become part of the group at Summersongs. The evenings are filled with no-pressure performances, camaraderie, good food and plenty of fun. Now that Zaca Lake has become the permanent home of Summer and WinterSongs, I will attend twice a year without hesitation. Summersongs 2007 was such a peaceful, fun filled, interesting, stimulating, joyful week, that I know it will stay with me for the rest of my life."

Jayne T. said this on the SummerSongs West yahoo group:

"Summersongs, with the variety of classes, coffeehouse, song circles, frequent jumps into the lake, and one-on-one instruction teaches that songwriting need not be a solitary business. Songwriting is as much a community affair as it is a vehicle for an individual to express his or her inner voice. And it is the community of Summersongs that I so deeply embrace because I have been void of this kind of love and genuine caring and support for almost all of my life. Summersongs has truly been a Godsend for me on so many levels. I feel so blessed to have stumbled upon this family of Summersongers] that I am humbled and forever grateful."

Matt B. wrote:

"Since coming back from SummerSongs West I have been dancing with my creative spirits and the pleasure has been such that I feel like I am flying through some uncharted creative territory high up in my songwriting stratosphere. These creative avenues sometimes seem elusive or blocked when dealing with the every day weight of the world. SummerSongs breaks down the writers block and helps me to relocate my own individual creative process."

There is room for you to join us if you like the idea of singing and laughing and growing as an artist. So visit the website at www.summersongs.com and enroll early. I hope to meet you there!

(you can read the whole article at www.severinbrowne.com)