Frank Hamilton and the roots of the Old Town School teaching method

Chicago, 1956. Al Grossman, owner of The Gate of Horn—the first folk nightclub in the country—had just hired two young musicians as his house performers. Frank Hamilton and Bob Gibson got off the bus. Frank Hamilton brought more than his guitar with him from California. He had picked up some innovative teaching techniques from Bess Lomax Hawes, anthropologist, folklorist, musician, and grande dame of the LA folk scene, as he explains:

"The Old Town School may have had its beginnings as far back as the early 1950s, miles away from Chicago. The Kingston Trio were business majors at Menlo College in Northern California. Tom Dooley was a little-known song collected by Frank Warner, a folk performer who sang it to a small select audience. He had learned it from Frank Pro试试, a North Carolina banjo maker. Meanwhile, Elvis wriggled below the camera on the Ed Sullivan Show as three-chord rock and big band ditties filled the state airwaves. But she knew how much it meant to me, so I passed that evening sitting on Dawn's floor, listening to Pete talk with Studs Terkel and Win Stracke. What a wonderful thing to do for someone she hardly knew! She knew every single student, and which performers they liked, and she would make sure that they got tickets to see those performers, anywhere in town, whenever they appeared...I don't have many heroes, but Dawn Greening is most certainly one of them." — Fred Hoitie

(Excerpted from Come for to Sing)

because as far as I know she was the first person to gather classes together to teach folk singing and accompanying folk instruments...

"Win Stracke had a vision of a school of folk music, a giant meetinghouse for musicians, storytellers, folk dancers, folklorists and professional folk entertainers who would gather to share their knowledge with the public. Teacher and student would be partners in learning. Kids from the poorer sections of the city could afford music lessons there. Chicago was the right place at the right time. The guitar, banjo, and stringed instrument classes could be the vehicle for making it happen."

And, as Steve Romanoski adds, Frank's first group lessons at the Greenings' house established another Old Town School tradition: the "second half" gathering:

"Dawn devised a schedule that included a refreshment break and group singalong after the sessions. In New York she had been at the house of a friend who had passed out printed lyrics of simple folk songs. She'd had such a wonderful time that she wanted to share that feeling with the students and friends at her home. And so this format became the backbone of the Old Town School's unique method of teaching. Frank would go from room to room teaching the same tune at different levels of difficulty, then it would all get put together and everybody would end the evening with a singalong."

Frank Hamilton served as the unofficial dean of teachers at the Old Town School until he left to join the Weavers in 1962. "During the first few days of the School, I ran around from one room to the next, juggling classes like some kind of nutty professor," he recalls. "This wore a little thin and we developed a teaching team to bail me out."

At the very beginning, then, the School had its main ingredients in place: group lessons taught by different talented musicians, with all students and teachers gathering together for a hootenanny/jam session after class. The recipe still works today.

Frank Hamilton stories

"Invariably, some of the highlights in our lives were stories about Frank Hamilton," laugh's Valucha de Castro, his former student and performing partner. "Frank and I teamed up and performed at the Gate of Horn. I believe we opened for the Kingston Trio and a couple of other well-known acts at the time...He's one of a kind, you know. A genius — with all of the stuff that went with it."

Jo Mapes explains, "I met Frank when we were both folk babies! He was already a legend. He played the banjo then, and an organ at that was a bad suit in his guitar that enchanted me. Lyrical, with a superb hand and a master's heart and mind, he's one of my idols. He's also a very dear, funny man with his own personal style. The TV show that Bob Gibson and Frank and I did, when we were supposed to sit on a fake log, facing the camera. Gibson and I faced the camera. Frank felt more comfortable facing the backdrop. Or the time, years ago in Los Angeles, when I followed the trail of the music, and found Frank scrunching up inside of a big wooden icebox playing the banjo. He said he liked the acoustics. Or some of his funny, Freudian fill-ins of lines of songs that he'd sing. A little of the 'absent-minded professor' — but a brilliant, sweet man."

"Picture Frank as the ultimate caring teacher, often not on time but the students no objecting because when Frank entered the classroom he would take total chaos and turn it into order."

Frank has performed with, and accompanied, the leading folk styers in the United States, read the notes on the back of The World of Frank and Valucha, "Partially all of them, including Pete Seeger, acknowledge him as The Country's Leading Folk Instrumentalist." In box, Frank with Valucha and Sandy Patton.

Down Greening on Frank Hamilton: