

# SIGMA

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## Presidential Musings: From Folk to Filk

### Eric Davin

Americans have long composed and sung “traditional” songs such as cowboy laments, Delta blues, Kentucky bluegrass, and the hillbilly songs of Appalachia with its roots in Elizabethan and Scots-Irish ballads. It was not until the twentieth century, however, that such songs came to be identified as “folk songs” of “the people,” a populist musical genre which cohered in the 1930s and then underwent a major revival in the early 1960s.

Folk music describes the lives, loves, and labors of the common people. Meanwhile, the dominant political ideology of dissent in America has always been a “left populism” which championed common people against the rich and powerful. It is no accident, then, that the two periods which witnessed the proliferation of folk songs, the Thirties and the Sixties, were also the only two eras of the twentieth century which witnessed the emergence and flowering of significant populist and oppositional “counter-cultures.” Dave Van Ronk, an influential Greenwich Village folk figure of the early Sixties, observed that, “If you look at the social conditions of any given period, you can tell without checking *Billboard* or *Cashbox* how well folk music is doing. Every time this country takes a major swing to the Left, folk music goes up.”

The most influential folk singer of the Thirties was no doubt Woody Guthrie. He was born into an impoverished Oklahoma dust bowl family and composed more than a thousand songs reflecting the decade’s spirit of populist protest. Perhaps his most well-known song is “This Land is Your Land,” which declared that “this land belongs to you and me,” not, it suggested, to the rich and the corporations.

In 1941 Guthrie joined Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, and others to form the Almanac Singers, a popular folk group which sang for labor union organizing campaigns and political rallies. After World War II, as America became more politically conservative, Guthrie, Seeger, and other members of the Almanac Singers kept the populist spirit of folk music alive through such groups as People’s Songs. It

was at a meeting of the People's Songs Board of Directors that Seeger and Lee Hays wrote "If I Had a Hammer," which gained widespread popularity in the early Sixties. In it, Seeger and Hays proclaimed that they would hammer out justice and freedom "all over this land."

Pete Seeger and Lee Hays then formed The Weavers in 1948, where they combined traditional songs with their own populist compositions. They achieved brief mainstream success before their leftist backgrounds led to their banishment from the airwaves and a lack of performance venues. Even so, they continued singing until 1963, thus becoming a bridge between the folk music of the Thirties and the folk revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The heart of the folk music revival from 1959-1965 was New York's Greenwich Village, with Cambridge's Harvard Square close behind. There, and in coffee houses which appeared from coast to coast, traditional folk songs merged with protest and topical songs written by a new generation of singers. Strictly "traditional" groups like The Kingston Trio and The New Christy Minstrels achieved widespread success and the folk music style they popularized made more overtly political "protest" songs in the same style more acceptable to broader audiences. Folk songs, along with gospels, also became the music of the Civil Rights Movement, and Pete Seeger composed what became the "anthem" of the Civil Rights Movement, "We Shall Overcome."

Given this lineage, it is understandable that the origins of F&SF fandom's "folk music" also emerged in the Thirties as folk music sung at the earliest SF cons. The earliest proto-folk singers seem to have been the Futurians, a left-leaning group of New York SF fans from whom so many influential writers and editors in the field emerged. Most of them considered themselves to be communists, even if they were not members of the Communist Party. Futurians Fred Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth especially composed protest folk songs which they sang at parties and cons in late-night singing sessions in hotel rooms.

Until the early Fifties, such fannish music was known simply as "folk music," and partook of the spirit of the times. Then fan Lee Jacobs submitted an essay to the Spectator Amateur Press

Society which contained a crucial typo in the title. The title, with the typo, was “The Influence of Science Fiction on Modern American Filk Music.” For unclear reasons, editor Wrai Ballard did not publish the essay, but he enjoyed the typo, and mentioned it repeatedly. The mistake caught on and was adopted as the name for the unorganized amateur singing which happened at SF cons. The first deliberate use of the term “filk” came in June, 1953, when Karen Anderson used it in *The Journal for Utter Nonsense* to describe a song composed by her husband, Poul Anderson.

“Filking” at SF cons continued and, by the 1970s and 1980s, had begun to cohere into a formally recognized activity. The 1979 Chicago FilkCon was the first con to focus entirely on filk music. Today fannish filking is a vibrant subculture of its own, with levels of artistry ranging from rank amateur to polished professional in sound. Folk music may have declined in popularity in the larger world of music, but it continues within the nurturing community of F&SF fandom as “filk music,” a genuine expression of the passions and enthusiasms of “the people” of fantasy and science fiction.

And we have among us one such passionate and enthusiastic filker, past-president Randy Hoffman. Randy was absent from last month’s meeting because he was at Conclave, filking his heart out. This month he brings his heart and voice to our meeting to show us what filking is all about. Sounds like there’s gonna be a hootenanny! Hope the library folks don’t mind! Σ

## September 2009 Meeting Minutes

### Bill Hall

Pre-meeting discussion was particularly loose, as I idly wondered about combining zombies with voodoo dolls while Kira looked up Theodore Sturgeon’s “E Pluribus Unicorn.” In the meeting itself, Barton announced that Virtual Tales should put out his novel “I Will” next February or March. Speakers for meetings look lined up pretty well through March; I particularly look forward to someone named Luokkala talking about the SF in science in January. Speaking of meetings next year, I was nominated for Secretary,

Sarah-Wade is up for Treasurer, Kira once more tackles Vice, Eric is up for a second year's Presidency, and Kira thoughtfully nominated Ann for another term as Commentator. Latecomers dodging what they termed "monkeys with pickaxes" (i.e., road construction) wound up winning the raffle and taking the Exquisite Corpse DVD.

Someone proposed complaining about the Barnes and Noble across the street getting pushed out by a greedy landlord, but we doubted we'd have leverage in that. Speaking of books, it was the yearly book sale, and they went for anywhere from a nickel to a quarter apiece, depending on the seller. This literary activity was bolstered by Kevin Hayes and Karen's daughter Kat Yun demonstrating Castle-Blood-style makeup, concentrating on shading the face and enhancing the eyebrows with Greg and another volunteer from the audience. The art of scars got an honorable mention, as did moustache wax. A laid-back time was had by many. Σ

## Annals of Anime. V. Moon Phase.

### Barton Paul Levenson

This may be the most bizarre anime TV series out there. *Moon Phase* stars Hazuki, a twelve-year-old vampire originally trapped in a German castle. (The Wikipedia article on the series says she's fourteen, but she sure doesn't act or look like it.) She gets broken out of the castle by spirit photographer Morioka Kohei, and winds up living with him and his exorcist grandfather (Midoh Ryuhei) and cousin (Midoh Seiji) in Tokyo. The tone blends horror, dark fantasy, and a lot of humor.

Hazuki, though she can be winsome and charming, is at heart a selfish little egotist who thinks everyone else exists to serve her. Having sucked Kohei's blood in the first episode, she expects him to become her slave, and is surprised when he doesn't. Kohei, who makes a living photographing ghosts, is immune to supernatural influence. Although resenting her presence in the family at first, Kohei accepts responsibility for taking care of Hazuki, and it is primarily his influence that begins to make her a nicer person.

But she never quite loses the idea that he is her slave and ought to obey everything she says. Kohei tries to disabuse her of this notion at every opportunity (line to watch for: “My neck is not an open bar”). In addition, she can be amazingly unrealistic. In one episode, afraid of sunlight as any vampire would be, Hazuki solves the problem of going to visit the hospitalized Kohei by dressing in an immense, head-and-body-covering cat suit.

Unfortunately, the vampire family who trapped her in the castle wants her back; she may have the key to turning regular vampires into “daywalkers” capable of going out in sunlight. Toward the middle and end of the series events become increasingly dangerous for the little vampire and her friend.

Hazuki is usually accompanied by her guardian *shikagami*, or familiar, Haiji. Haiji changes from a catlike appearance (Grandfather: “This cat has no anus!”) to a small, catlike humanoid early on in the series. Other major characters include Count Heinrich von Kinkel, who runs the nest in the castle and is a pretty mean customer; Elfriede, a blonde, female vampire who eventually switches from von Kinkel's side to Hazuki's; Anzai Hiromi, Kohei's female editor and best friend; Midoh Hikaru and Midoh Kaoru, little girls of about ten and eight who are pledged to marry Seiji and Kohei, respectively; Midoh Yayoi, who becomes Kohei's instructor late in the series when Kohei trains as an exorcist in order to protect Hazuki; and Arte, Hazuki's jealous, pink-haired, younger half-sister, who wants to kill Hazuki.

The TV series has the most bizarre opening of any anime out there, and possibly of any TV series anywhere in the world. The sound track is light music with Hazuki repeating variations on the phrase “*Neko mimi modo!*” (“Cat-ear fashion!”) alternating with “Shu, shu, shu,” and other disconnected phrases. The cat ear reference is because Grandfather insists, for no reason that is ever explained, that in order to stay at his house Hazuki must always wear a cat ear headdress. The visuals are even more bizarre—Hazuki imitating a cat, Hazuki sliding down a rainbow, a turtle lying on a beach shooting out eggs, naked Hazuki in the same position shooting out eggs, Hazuki in a space suit on the Moon, Hazuki wearing a bear suit in a moonlit meadow, three of her popping up naked and

praying in a bowl of noodles, Kohei hurting his finger on an unmov-  
ing tennis ball complete with an anatomical diagram of the finger, a  
nicely laid out lunch on a table, etc., etc. If the people who made it  
weren't on drugs, they must have been on something just as good.

And the series itself has a number of aspects that are just  
plain weird. For example, even when the art and action is most  
realistic, a large brass pan will often fall from the sky or ceiling and  
bash someone over the head to emphasize some point, usually with  
no ill effect on the victim.

*Moon Phase* is not a great anime, but it's a good, enjoyably  
quirky one. Definitely worth catching. And for those who are  
interested, the **entire run of the series** (26 episodes) is now avail-  
able for free on <http://www.hulu.com>. Dubbed in English rather  
than subtitled, unfortunately. They edit out the nude scene on the  
beach; for that you have to go to YouTube. Σ

## Runaway Hits: Where The Wild Things Are, That Falcon Heene Business

### Bill Hall

As of this writing, the “balloon boy” hubbub of October 15 is  
boiling down to Richard Heene’s desperate and boneheaded bid to  
pitch a reality show, presumably “I’m an Irresponsible Father and  
an Inept Experimental Balloon Launcher.” Heene’s been called a  
“mad scientist,” which I consider an unfair slam not only against  
scientists but even the mad ones, who at least make positive contri-  
butions. He strikes me more as a classic Big Fish in a Tiny Pond  
type, knowing enough basics to intimidate lay people while actually  
weak and sloppy in his work. Much has been made of “Wife Swap”  
or the kids’ vulgar video, but for me the smoking gun turned up in  
YouTube’s glimpses of “The Psyience Detectives” (sic), a broadcast  
in which Heene and two other “detectives” speculate wildly about,  
say, the planet Nibiru swooping our way come 2012. To my mind  
this “Nibiru theory” smacks as much of a childlike impulse to

abandon responsibility as, say... oh, I don't know... a belief that you can run a block away from home, find a boat, and sail to a land of giant monsters who name you their monarch. Yet Maurice Sendak had the sense to know he was creating a fiction, while more and more these days I worry that my fellow humans are forfeiting that power of distinction.

Let's be clear: the movie is not the book. The book was about getting over a tantrum, whereas the movie raises the stakes and makes Max (appropriately enough, played by one Max Records) a runaway, albeit an unpremeditated one. I think this was necessary because, let's face it, you tell Max "Go to your room!" in 2009 and he'll go up to his cell phone, his computer, his iPod, his DVD player, his Xbox, etc., etc., to a lot of intrusive technology by Sendak wannabes. So Max runs down the street in his iconic wolf suit and there the story begins. I was a runaway (though not very dramatically) myself, so I appreciated the movie's gentle moral, that the frying pan of frustrations at home can still beat the fire of new companions, especially ones with their own territorialities and neuroses. Mom's demands are easier to anticipate than those of people crazy enough to automatically adopt you in the first place – and in this telling the monsters, for all their great costuming, really do come across as metaphorical people, complete with human names and ordinary voices.

A strange tinge of melancholy hangs over the whole movie, but I think that's appropriate to a story of a relationship that's doomed from the start. The parting of Max and the monsters is amicable enough, sad but inevitable. When the monster KW (voice of Lauren Ambrose) tells Max "I'll eat you up, I love you so," it's 180 degrees around from the threat shouted in the book. The movie is in fact a rather inspired expansion of the book, uncanny in its grasp of kids, complete with the immortal line "Wow, he has a double recracker!" (This movie is SO much better a testimony to the magical power of lying than "The Invention of Lying," which has fun with a world where people are drearily incapable of any diplomacy whatsoever, but gets bogged down in Ricky Gervais essentially inventing religion and claiming to be ugly, a tiny violin that was tedious to listen to even back when Jerry Lewis played it.) I

worry that it may not do great immediate repeat business, but it should be worth checking out every once in a long while, when you're in just the right mood. Sort of like the book. Σ

## Announcements

### Go Randy!

Randy Hoffman has launched two more CDs of his vocals, one featuring our vice president, Kira Heston. One of the CDs is a new edition of his past *Scratch These Vocals* release. The other CD, a completely new edition, is titled *Vocals Up a Third*. Rumor has it that yet another CD is in the making.

### Get well Phil!

Phil Klass (William Tenn) has been hospitalized and we all wish him a speedy recovery. Hopefully he leaves the nurses alone and remembers that it's not like when he was in the Army. Shenanigans aren't tolerated like they once were. (Well, if they ever were.)

### House filk after the November meeting

Calling all PARSECians with a song in their heart (whether you can sing or play an instrument or not): After the meeting on Nov. 14, you're invited to a house filk at Martha Underwood's and Robert Stockton's place on Camelot Court in Churchill. We're aiming to get started at about 5:30 p.m., and we'll be joined by Rand Bellavia and Adam English of the Buffalo, NY-based filk band Ookla the Mok. If you're interested in attending – even if it's only to listen – please RSVP (and get directions) by emailing Martha at [ddancer85@earthlink.net](mailto:ddancer85@earthlink.net) or phoning her at (412) 519-5244. Thanks, and we'll see you there! Σ

## More on Einstein's Famous Equation. Henry Tjernlund

In the previous article a big deal was made as to how the energy-mass equation is not that big of a deal. Instead the Einstein field equation of general relativity (GR), or gravitation, was offered as what should be his great achievement. But the Einstein Field Equation is not something to easily recite. According to one Wikipedia article, the GR field equation expands out to ten, simultaneous, non-linear, differential equations, with some parts having dozens of terms. I have seen several graphics of these multiple-page filling, expanded equations. They look quite intimidating, and that is to someone with a degree in mathematics (and who got the highest grade in their class in differential geometry.)

With each advancement tends to come an often surprisingly simple concept. Newton and many others analyzed gravitation as a “force at a distance” between objects. They questions of why gravity happens, and how the force gets from one object to another? Einstein's GR didn't come about in a vacuum of ideas. There were plenty. Not only were people working to try and explain gravity in several ways, but some mathematicians had developed differential geometry, the abstract means to express calculus and therefore curves on surfaces, from within the surfaces. That means coming up with new ways to define length, angle, straightness and curvature all from within the curved surface.

The simple concept that GR provides to describe gravitation, is that it is all about the geometry. No forces from a distance. The Sun does not reach out with a force and pull the Earth into an orbit around it. It's... ALL... about... the... geometry! The Earth's path through space is altered by the curvature of space and time (space-time) where the Earth is. As far as the Earth is concerned, it is gliding along a straight line. But that line, laid on the curved surface of space-time, bends around into a near circle. An analogy that is used is that of an ant walking on a straight path on the curved surface of an apple. As the ant walks its straight path along the dimple near the stem, that path bends around to follow the surface's curvature.

Locally (as physicists like to say) that path seems perfectly straight at the smallest measure within the surface. GR's contribution is that gravity is all about the geometry, the "curviness" of the "surface." The presence of mass-energy curves space-time and that curvature determines the shape of paths drawn along the surface. According to GR, you're not feeling the Earth's center pulling on you, you are feeling the curvature of space-time. Now it's rather ironic that GR is "all about the geometry" when early attempts to explain the orbits of the planets were done using various geometric solid shapes nested within each other.

The really amazing thing about GR is that it wasn't worked out to explain a variety of observed phenomena. It was developed to explain gravitation as it was known even to Newton, but it predicted numerous other more subtle effects. When those effects were tested for, they were found, exactly as the theory predicted.

Now, Einstein's GR is not, and has never been, the only contender to explain gravitation. The mathematics of curved surfaces can get quite involved. A spinning object tends to add an additional slight twist to the curvature around it called "frame dragging." A mass that accelerates should generate a small disturbing ripple or wave that spreads out in the surface (gravitational waves). The details as to how curvature interacts with matter differ subtly between various proposed theories. These very subtle effects are some of the ways in which GR has still not been fully verified. For example, in some alternate theories, the speed of light is not a guaranteed constant, but is a local effect of the curvature of space-time. Is the overall surface of the Universe constant, spreading out, or contracting? Some of the differences between GR and its alternatives are so slight as to be beyond current ability to test them. This is the reason some scientists have tried conducting elaborate, and sometimes expensive, experiments (such as the Gravity Probe-B) to see if some measurement can be made that would either further confirm GR or not. So far GR has passed every test put to it. This is why Einstein is still such a famous name. And on T-shirts GR's message should be, right under the field equation, "it's ALL about the geometry," or a for a more catchy phrase, "Objects Attract Because the Universe is Curvaceous." Σ

# PARSEC meeting schedule

**November 14, 2009 - 1:00 PM to 4:45 PM**

Topic: Filking! with Randy Hoffman. (And 2nd round of officer nominations.)

**December 2009**

PARSEC Holiday Party! (At the PARSEC House in Dormont.)

**January 9, 2010 - 1:00 PM to 4:45 PM**

Topic: Using Science Fiction to Teach Science, with Dr. Barry Luokkala, CMU.

**February 13, 2010 - 1:00 PM to 4:45 PM**

Topic: Artists' Show & Tell, with an All-Star Cast!

All meetings held at the Squirrel Hill branch of the Carnegie Public Library, unless otherwise noted.

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## **SIGMA** is published by **PARSEC**

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