

Dandy Yankee tunes Musician turns Northerners' songs of the South into a revue

PEGGY LIM, Staff Writer

RALEIGH - It started off as a wisecrack. A professor of Southern culture asked a banjo-playing friend from the health club to do some songs for a guest talk at UNC-Chapel Hill.

"I don't do bluegrass. I don't do country," said the friend, Chapel Hill resident Bob Whyte. "Why don't we do Southern songs by Yankees?"

It was a joke.

But Whyte backtracked, his mind running through a list of songs that might fill the bill. Maybe they were onto something. And "Southern Songs by Yankees"? That could be a catchy name for a real show.

Whyte ran with the idea. After his first solo gig before UNC students and faculty about two years ago, he has performed his repertoire of songs with Southern themes written by Northern composers and lyricists -- at his wife's company and twice at a jazz festival in Oklahoma. This month he did an ensemble version for the Harvard Club of the Research Triangle, an alumni association of which he is president.

"Southern Songs" borrows from the style of Broadway revues, such as "Smokey Joe's Cafe," which exist to showcase the music. Instead of connecting the tunes with an overall story, Whyte weaves in stories about Tin Pan Alley songwriters and their predecessors -- who crafted such classics as "Georgia on My Mind" and "Swanee River."

The show may lack the polish of a fully developed revue, but Whyte is working on it in hopes that it might have commercial appeal in the Triangle or other Southeastern cities: Charlotte, Atlanta and Charleston, places where "Yankees" is still a bit of a dirty word," he says.

Whyte, 69, calls himself a Yankee, although he has a bit of the around-the-bonfire-songleader type in him, too. Born and raised in California, he fell in love with directing and writing musical shows while a student at the University of California-Berkeley. He sang and played at banjo band nightclubs and family summer camps and in Dixieland bands.

After graduating from Harvard Business School in 1965, he settled in the Northeast, working in venture capital in Connecticut and New York City for about 30 years. But he found a place for music even while making a living at Payson & Trask, GE Capital or Paine Webber. He recast lyrics to "There's No Business Like Show Business" to parody the venture capital business and liven up sleep-inducing investment seminars. Outside work, he formed a banjo, gutbucket and washboard band called the Whyte Laundry

Company, which made the circuit at parties, political campaign rallies and the Lincoln Center plaza.

"The guy ... [on the] washtub bass could get an octave and a half of notes on a G-string," Whyte recalls fondly.

Eight years ago, Whyte moved to the Triangle to help start a venture capital project. When it bit the dust, he decided to devote his life to what he enjoyed the most -- writing shows and songs. He picked up gigs, doing customized musical comedies for groups such as the Duke Management Co. and Inspire Pharmaceuticals in Durham. He started volunteering at Charles House, an elder-care center in Carrboro, to help make people laugh.

Then he got the "Southern Songs by Yankees" bug.

In the land of Dixie

Bill Ferris was the professor whose conversation with Whyte got the whole idea rolling. As senior associate director of the UNC-CH Center for the Study of the American South, he instantly grasped the tension in "Southern Songs by Yankees."

In popular song, literature and movies, the South is generally viewed with a romantic eye.

"It represents a world that was not the capitalist, industrialized world that the Northeast represented," Ferris said. "The South ... was an agrarian culture and deeply rooted to rural traditions. For many Americans, that was and continues to be a very appealing connection."

The region's musical heritage encompasses gospel, country, blues and bluegrass, genres rich enough that Southerners didn't really need to look for songs elsewhere to enrich their culture. So it might surprise some that Southerners embraced Northern creations to the extent they did.

Take "Georgia on My Mind," written in 1930 by Northern songwriters Stuart Gorrell and Hoagy Carmichael. Neither had ever been to Georgia. It's now the official state song of Georgia.

Likewise, Stephen Foster, who never visited Florida, incorporated the Suwannee River into his song "Old Folks at Home," also known as "Swanee River." It's Florida's official state song.

"Over time, ironically, it became emblematic of the river," Ferris said. "There's a whole museum [The Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center] dedicated to the music and culture of the Suwannee River." Every January, residents of White Springs, Fla., have a festival in the composer's honor.

It's like kudzu, Ferris says. We think of kudzu and the South as synonymous, forgetting that the plant was imported from Japan in the 20th century to control erosion. Nowadays, he says, "you have to close the windows at night to be sure it won't get in."

"Music is a universal language, and Southerners have always been open to music, no matter where its origin, whether it was traditional in the South or popular music heard on the radio or on a record and then picked up and performed."

On Tin Pan Alley

For the Harvard Club performance, Whyte culled about 11 songs from binders filled with hundreds of songs -- sheet music or pages with chords and lyrics he'd jotted down from listening to recordings. He also decided to expand the act to a trio, rehearsing with jazz pianist Dan Wielunski and classically trained singer Laura Jones for months.

But finding an entertaining way to tell the story of Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths between 1900 and 1940 and how they got their notions of the South -- that was a challenge. Whyte had to pare down his research, leaving out trickier subjects such as the complicated and sometimes controversial influence that black-faced minstrel singers had on Northern songwriters. Still, when Whyte went onstage, he had no fewer than 13 pages of notes.

More than a place on New York's Lower East Side, Tin Pan Alley had been an industry, a style of music, a golden age of popular song. Whyte wanted to introduce his audience to the scrappy, brilliantly creative and shrewd businessmen -- many of them Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe -- who drove the industry as music publishers and songwriters. He wanted people to understand how the mass production of pianos and the commercialization of sheet music led to an explosion in compositions with sophisticated lyrics and easy-to-sing or hum-to tunes.

Most of all, he wanted people to understand how the Northern songwriters' romantic notions of the South had produced some great music.

Whyte played snippets from Foster and other influential Tin Pan Alley predecessors. Despite the Southern tinge of many of his songs, Foster visited the Deep South only once, taking a tour down the Mississippi River to New Orleans in 1852 on his honeymoon. Known as the father of American popular song, the Pittsburgh native gave us tunes still heard today:

"Oh, Susanna, Oh don't you cry for me,

For I come from Alabama, with my banjo on my knee..."

"Way down upon the Suwannee River..."

"The Camptown ladies sing this song, Doo-da, Doo-da.

The Camptown racetrack's five miles long, Oh, de doo-da day."

Whyte devoted more show time, however, to playing complete Tin Pan Alley-generated numbers. From cocky to sweet, some of the songs celebrated the weather of the South; others, Southern women. He also shared more languid songs that reflected the somber mood of the Depression years, standards such as "Georgia on My Mind" and "Stars Fell on Alabama."

As Whyte closed his show with one last Southern song by a Yankee, the music's universal appeal was on display.

It was a singalong, for which Whyte had sealed lyric sheets in an envelope at each dinner table. Janet Devore, 63, a retired banker, didn't need one. On family car trips between Maryland and Pennsylvania, she had grown up singing almost all the songs in Whyte's program. Her kids had refreshed the tunes in her mind when they staged student productions at Stephen Foster Elementary near Pittsburgh.

Devore said she didn't think all the historical narration was necessary. She would've liked simply to have heard more music. She sang the final tune by heart -- down to the last line:

"Nothing could be finer than to be in Carolina in the mor-ning."

Staff writer Peggy Lim can be reached at 836-5799 or plim@newsobserver.com.



Bob Whyte performs his 'Southern Songs
by Yankees' show for the Triangle's Harvard Club
Staff Photo by Chuck Liddy