

Filksongs as Modem Folk Songs

Edith Fowke

Volume 7, Number 1-2, 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081323ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081323ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Fowke, E. (1985). Filksongs as Modem Folk Songs. *Ethnologies*, 7(1-2), 85–94.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1081323ar>

Filksongs as Modern Folk Songs*

Edith FOWKE

Filksongs are songs sung by science-fiction fans at the numerous science-fiction conventions—or cons, as they are termed. Usually their texts are inspired by SF or fan-related activities and are set to borrowed tunes. The origin of the term “filk” is obscure: one explanation attributes it to a typographical error adopted as a form of esoteric humour; another postulates an unknown punster who said “A filksong is a fannish song in the ilk of a folksong.”¹ However the term originated, it is now a familiar part of SF fandom’s vocabulary.

Sung by an enormous body of fans, filksongs are much closer to folk songs than the compositions of professional singers like Gordon Lightfoot and Joni Mitchell which are commonly referred to as folk. SF fans are a definite folk group with their own special language, and filksinging is a folk activity that has developed definite patterns.

Most fans learn the filksongs orally from hearing them at cons, and many copy the songs in notebooks as some traditional singers did. Others record them on cassettes and learn them that way. The texts acquire variations, lose stanzas, and have new ones added. The singers who pick up the songs from hearing them sung often do not know who wrote them.

Filksinging had its start back in the 1950s but did not become prominent until the 1970s. Then various filksong authors and groups of fans began to publish the songs. The authors started to circulate them through private mimeographed magazines (always referred to as *zines*). This may be compared to the spreading of ballads by broadsides, except that the broadsides were published for commercial reasons and most of the filksong publications are not. The Amateur Press

**Earlier versions of this paper were given at the AFS meeting in Pittsburgh, 1980, and the FSAC meeting in Winnipeg, 1986.*

1. “I Had One Filksong, but the Guitar Played Over There. . .,” *Kantele* 1 (1978), 3.

Association—the APA—includes various non-profit cooperative periodicals, one of which is *APA-Filk*.² It consists of some eight to ten sections ranging from two to ten pages, contributed by different fan composers. These present not only newly composed songs but comments on previous issues, questions, suggestions, arguments, and reports on the filksinging at various cons. Another small magazine called *Kantele*³ reproduces songs that are already popular, along with news, reports, and articles about filksinging. The little magazines have small mailing lists—*APA Filk* normally ran off only 50 copies—and the price was little more than the cost of paper and postage. No one is paid for the work that goes into them: they are clearly labours of love.

Some of the cons produce their own filksong books, and the New England Science Fiction Association (NESFA) published a more ambitious *NESFA Hymnal*.⁴ The largest compilation is *The Hopsia Hymnal*⁵ which contains over 300 songs.

Gradually the filksong publications are becoming more professional. Where *APA-Filk* and *Kantele* were mimeographed, the two hymnals were reproduced from typescript. More recently a California group has begun publishing better quality songbooks, the latest of which are in regular type.⁶

While most songs originally had a single author, some have multiple authors and innumerable verses: a situation that would have gladdened the hearts of the proponents of communal composition. The most voluminous of the widely sung numbers is “Real Old Time Religion”⁷ with over 250 verses by more than 50 authors. More interesting is the one known as “Young Man Mulligan”⁸ which combines the pattern of two familiar songs: “I Was Born About Ten Thousand Years Ago,” and Woody Guthrie’s “The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done.” One compiled version runs to 68 verses by 29 authors, and it’s still growing. The verses alternate between the two

-
2. Woodmere, NY., Robert Bryan Lipton, 1979—.
 3. Ann Arbor, MI., Upset, 1978-1979; Little Rock, AR., Filk Foundation, 1979—.
 4. *NESFA Hymnal*, 2nd ed. n.p. New England Science Fiction Assn., 1979.
 5. *The Hopsia Hymnal*, 4th ed. Baltimore, MD., Hopkins Science Fiction Assn., 1978.
 6. *The Westerfilk Collection* Berkeley, CA., Jordin Kare, 1980; *The Westerfilk Collection Volume II* Berkeley, CA., Off Centaur, 1982; *Minus Ten and Counting: Songs of the Space Age*. Ed. Teri Lee, Jordin Kare & Catherine Cook El Cerrito, CA., Off Centaur, 1983.
 7. “Anakreon,” *APA Filk* 6 (1980); 1-9; 8 (1980), 1-6.
 8. *Kantele* 1 (1979), 15; *NESFA Hymnal*, 2-15.

patterns, as Odetta and Larry sang the originals on an old record,⁹ only this time the references are to science fiction rather than to Biblical and historical tales. The song incorporates so many SF and fantasy references that a condensed key of 150 items is needed to explain them. Another lengthy communally-composed production is "The Orcs' Marching Song"¹⁰ based on the Tolkien books: it has some 40 verses by at least 15 authors.

Many fans use the term *filksong* very loosely, apparently meaning any modern set of words with a familiar tune. For example, Juanita Coulson, a well-known singer-composer, referred to *The Bosses' Songbook*, a small typescript pamphlet produced by Richard Ellington in the 1950s, as the earliest *filksong* collection.¹¹ It contained satirical verses parodying familiar labour songs but had nothing to do with science fiction.

Of course at *filksings* one hears many other types of song besides those composed on SF themes. Most fan collections include some traditional folksongs, with the emphasis on the bawdy ones. "The Bastard King of England," "The Ball of Kerriemuir," "Roll Me Over," "Eskimo Nell," and "Gang Bang Lulu" are all popular. So are some pop songs that turn up in folk circles, usually somewhat unusual items like "Woad," "Rum, by Gum," "Completely Round," and the Tom Lehrer compositions. Kipling's songs also rank high, along with some contemporary songs like "Barrett's Privateers" and "The Band Played Waltzing Matilda." This broad repertoire should be kept in mind, but such standards are not termed *filksongs* even by those who term all parodies *filksongs*. There is, however, a tendency to narrow the category. As Margaret Middleton, editor of *Kantele*, put it:

Defining *filk* is nearly as hard as defining SF. I've always assumed that a *filksong* was a song written roughly in the present and referring to anything non-mundane, be it historical or futuristic, or just strange. Things written in the distant past are folk or straight ballads, things written in the present but referring to mundania, while they may be thoroughly entertaining, are not really *filksong*—parodies, perhaps, but not *filk*. Used as a verb, however, "to *filk*" means to mangle an existing usually mundane song into a *filksong*, as in "Poul Anderson *filked* 'Waltzing Matilda' and got 'Bouncing Potatoes.'" As such it usually involves frivolous songs. Serious songs are rarely *filked*; they are usually written from scratch, perhaps to an extant tune.¹²

9. *The Tin Angel Presents Odetta and Larry*, Fantasy 3-15 [c. 1954].

10. *NESFA*, 128-33.

11. *Kantele* 1 (1978), 4.

12. "Hemidemisemiquaver," *APA Filk* 5 (1980), 2.

When we start to classify the more specific filksongs we find that they illustrate nicely the folk pattern of threes. Most of them are inspired by one of three groups of imaginative literature: straight science-fiction, fantasy, or the medieval themes celebrated in the Society for Creative Anachronism. There are three types of filksong: parodies of familiar songs, songs with original texts set to familiar tunes, and songs with original tunes as well as texts. In subject matter they include songs expressing general concepts about science-fiction, fantasy, or the Middle Ages; and fannish songs about cons, writers, or zines. (It's remarkable how the three-fold pattern persists!)

The filksongs will be interpreted more narrowly here and the concentration will be on those dealing with some aspect of science-fiction rather than with fantasy or medieval themes.

As with traditional folksongs, some tunes are used for various sets of words, the most popular being "Greensleeves" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," each used for more than 20 songs. There are over a dozen parodies of "The Twelve Days of Christmas," and several laments in "The Unfortunate Rake" pattern. Also, as with folksongs, particular texts are sometimes sung to different tunes.

Typical of the parodies is "The Asteroid Light" by John Boardman:

My father was the keeper of the asteroid light.
He slept with a Martian one fine night.
Out of this match came children three:
Two were mutants and the other was me.¹³

Also close to the original pattern is John Brunner's "Lullaby for a Mad Scientist's Daughter":

Hush little baby, button your lip.
Papa's gonna build you a rocket ship.
If that rocket ship abort,
Papa's gonna build you an aquanaut.¹⁴

Equally obvious is "The Spacewreck of the Old 97":

They gave him his orders at the satellite station
Saying "Steve, here's the course that you must use.
The asteroids are tricky and the solar storms are sticky.
But we've other volunteers if you refuse."¹⁵

13. *Sing Out!* 8:11 (1959), 24; *NESFA*, 44; *Hopsia*, 179.

14. John Brunner, *The Book of John Brunner* New York, Daw, 1976, 33.

15. Brunner, 119.

And there's also "Spacey Jones":

Come all ye spacemen if you want to hear
The story of a great planeteer.
Spacey Jones was the pilot's name;
On a fuel-burning rocket, boys, he won his fame.¹⁶

I particularly like "Centauri Fair" patterned on "Scarborough Fair":

Oh, are you going to Centauri Fair?
Starship flight and travel in time.
Remember me to *one* who lives there,
For once she was a truelove of mine.

Tell her to take from a comet its tail. . .
And sail the stars on a great silver sail. . .

Tell her to find me a planet of gold. . .
A world where men need never grow old. . .

Tell her to follow the second's swift way. . .
And change the pattern of yesterday. . .¹⁷

Other typical parodies include "What Shall We Do with the Drunken Spaceman?" "This Planet's My Land," "The Space Opera Goes Rolling Along," "The Man Who Never Returned," "The Lament of the Dor-sai Warrior" to "The streets of Laredo," "Where Can the Matter Be?" to "Johnny's So Long at the Fair," "Star Dance" to "Lord of the Dance," and "The Talking Science Fiction Blues."

Those are all adaptations of well-known songs. In the second group the words are not direct parodies but they are set to familiar tunes. They include "The Green Hills of Harmony" to the tune of "The Banks of Sicily," "Jacques Chretien" to "Roddy McCorley," "The Sands of Arrakis" to "The Streets of Laredo," "Stranger in a Strange Land" to "Bring Back My Bonnie to Me," "The Dying Robot" to "The Red River Valley," and "Time, Boys, Time" to "The Oak and the Ash." Others use the tunes of "Home on the Range," "The Irish Washerwoman," "Waltzing Matilda," "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," "John Peel," "The Titanic," and "Clementine." One nice Canadian touch is "The Star Wars Round" to "Frère Jacques":

R2D2, R2D2,
C3PO, C3PO,
Obiwan Kenobe, Obiwan Kenobe,
Han Solo, Han Solo.¹⁸

16. *Sing Out!* 8:3 (1959), 23; *Hopsia*, 162.

17. *Kantele* 6 (1980), 18; *Westerkilk*, 5.

18. *Hopsia*, 170.

There is a third group in which both tunes and texts are original. Some of these are song texts that appear in science-fiction stories which some filksinger-composer has set to music. Particularly popular are verses that appeared in stories by Robert Heinlein and Poul Anderson. Then there are those for which some filksinger composed both text and tune. Among the best-known of these singer-composers are Anne Passovy, Juanita Coulson, Leslie Fish, and Clif Flynt. Some science-fiction authors also write songs apart from those incorporated in their stories.

When we look at the classification by subject matter, we find a number of songs based on general concepts associated with science or science-fiction: space ships, robots, bug-eyed monsters, time travel, and the like. These are not related to specific stories but to motifs that occur in many stories: for example, "The Dying Robot," "Radiation Blues," "Where Can the Matter Be?" and "Clone, Clone of My Own" (to the tune of "Home on the Range"):

Oh give me a clone of my own flesh and bone
 With its Y chromosome changed to X,
 And when it is grown then my own little clone
 Will be of the opposite sex.¹⁹

The second classification related to subject matter covers those inspired by particular novels, short stories, or films. This is probably the largest group: there are literally dozens of songs about Gordon R. Dickson's Dorsai series, some of which he wrote himself and many written by fans. The best known are "The Ballad of Jacques Chretien," "The Ballad of the Shoshonu," and "The Lament of the Dorsai Warrior." Several are based on the Fafherd and Mouser series by Fritz Leiber, and others were inspired by Frank Herbert's *Dune* series, E.E. Smith's *Lensman* series, Poul Anderson's *World without Stars*, and Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. There are also several inspired by the television series, "Star Trek," and some about such movies as "Darkstar," "Star Wars," "The Empire Strikes Back," and "Silent Running."

Of particular interest are the Rhysling songs. One of Robert Heinlein's stories, "The Green Hills of Earth," features Rhysling, "The Blind Singer of the Spaceways", and quotes some of his songs. Several of these have acquired tunes and become part of the filksinging repertoire. The best known is the title song:

19. *Hopsia*, 161.

We pray for one last landing
 On the globe that gave us birth.
 Let us rest our eyes on the fleecy skies
 Of the cool green hills of earth.²⁰

Less inspiring but closer to the folk idiom is “The Skipper Is a Father to His Crew” which retells a well-known hillbilly joke in a space context: the girl who can’t find a husband because her father claims all the men she meets are her brothers—but then her mother tells her:

Well tidy your antennae, girl, and comb your hair so blue.
 I’ve taught you that a skipper is a father to his crew.
 He may have made each female in the galaxy, but still,
 He’s not the critter that fathered you, so marry whom you will.²¹

The third classification by subject matter includes fannish songs about writers, fans, cons, and zines. There is “The Ballad of Gordy Dickson”²² which emphasizes his renowned drinking capacity; “Bowl Me Over, Mr. Bova,”²³ about the difficulties of getting the said editor to accept a manuscript; and “The Bradbury Hate Song”²⁴ which condemns that pessimistic writer as “The Poe of modern times.” Then there are the songs inspired by certain cons which were notable for their deficiencies. Particularly popular is the afore-mentioned “Bouncing Potatoes” to the tune of “Waltzing Matilda”:

Once a jolly trufan went to join a Westercon.
 He had duly registered and paid every fee,
 And he said when he saw what the waitress put before him there,
 You’ll come a-bouncing potatoes with me.²⁵

There are also laments of those who organize the cons:

Mine eyes have seen the horror of the coming of the fans.
 Oh they came in cars and buses, even some in moving vans.
 They were sleeping in the elevators and on all of our divans,
 But the con is o’er at last.²⁶

Others harp on the problems of filkers who find that the other hotel guests don’t appreciate their singing—a problem that is not unknown at folklore meetings:

20. *Kantele* 3 (1979), 15; *Hopsia*, 152.

21. *Kantele* 2 (1979), 20.

22. *Hopsia*, 22; *NESFA*, 10.

23. “They’ll Sing in Someone Else’s Room Next Time,” *APA Filk* 2 (1979).

24. *NESFA*, 51; *Hopsia*, 18.

25. *Hopsia*, 106; *NESFA*, 74.

26. Robert Osband, “The Worldcon Lullaby,” *NESFA*, 66.

About midnight when we're getting noisy
 They move in some gent from Boise.
 We'll soon be hearing music in the halls.
 Then thirty voices hit the chorus—
 Whoops, the plywood must be porous,
 The little guy next door is climbing walls.²⁷

Other ditties crack down on the quality of the singing:

When singalongs start in this gathering of friends
 The hotel staff screams, "Dear God, when will it end?"
 The drunks and the tone deaf add spice to the blend
 Of what we have the gall to call singing.²⁸

Songs about zines take aim at their deficiencies:

We printed crud, we printed trash,
 Our fiction really smelled.
 Some detrimental painful words
 Were said by Name Withheld,
 And every other word in half
 The fanzines got misspelled
 As fandom plods along.²⁹

The pattern of the filksinging varies in different regions and at different cons, and the fans spend much time and many words debating the proper form. Some argue for a special room and organized singing; others prefer the spontaneous unorganized sings that were originally the general pattern. They argue the merits of private vs. public and big vs. little sings, group vs. solo singing, and rotation vs. free-for-all participation.

Eastern cons lean to public sings with mimeographed songsheets and singalong leaders; most real filk fans abhor that pattern, insisting that the singing should rotate to give each performer a chance, and that the audience should not join in unless requested. Juanita Coulson, one of the best singer-composers, outlines "The few basic rules":

Don't hog the time. Take turns. Vary the materials. (If you get into a run of we're stranded in space and we're all going to die filksongs for example, half the audience will get so depressed you may never get them in an upbeat mood again.) And be willing to try something new. If you come to a filksing and you don't sing, OK—but don't talk. Between songs is okay, but not during them, I beg of you.³⁰

27. Anne Passovoy, "Marcon Ballroom," *Westerfilk II*, 178.

28. Mark Bernstein, "All of the Filkers Are Singing," *Kantele 2* (1979), 21; *Westerfilk*, 45.

29. Nate Bucklin, "The Teenfan Tyranny Marching Song," *NESFA*, 109; *Hopsia*, 116.

30. *APA Filk 3* (1979).

And then John Hall gives “Tips for the Neo-Filker” on “How to Become a Big-Time Filksinger.” These include:

If a fellow singer screws up a song (doesn't sing it the way you do), always correct him loudly. He should appreciate constructive criticism. On the other hand, if someone tries this on you, a superior look and a knowing reference to the folk process will cow all but the most obstinate heckler.³¹

With the increasing popularity of filking, most cons now assign rooms for the singers—sometimes two, one for individual singers and one for group singing, and unscheduled sings also flourish. One filker wrote:

Noreascon II held in the Boston Sheraton this past Labor Day weekend had a great deal of filking. I was at the main ‘individual’ sing for over thirty hours in four days, and I still missed a good deal. . . but with over five thousand fans and several hundred parties going each night, one can hardly expect to meet everyone.³²

The filk movement has become so strong that special filkcons are being held in addition to the numerous sessions at the regular cons. When the first filk con was held in Chicago in July 1979 a Filk Foundation was organized as a non-profit “educational, cultural, and scientific organization dedicated to the furtherance, encouragement, and preservation of filksinging as an art form and a form of oral history peculiar to the science fiction field.”³³

There is intense interest in the various space flights, with pride in the successes and sorrow for the failures. At Bayfilk III held in the spring of 1986, there was a memorial service for the lost space shuttle *Challenger* and her crew of seven. A dozen of the best filksingers each sang a song expressing their feelings, and at the end Leslie Fish led the members in singing her “Hope Eyrie,” which has become the unofficial anthem of the filkers:

Worlds grow old and suns grow cold
 And death we never can doubt.
 Time's cold wind wailing down the past
 Reminds us that all flesh is grass
 And history's lamps blow out.
 But the Eagle has landed! Tell your children when.
 Time won't drive us down to dust again.³⁴

31. *Kantele* 4/5 (1980), 12.

32. Jordin Kare, “A Random Report on Noreascon II Filk,” *Kantele* 7 (1980), 9.

33. “Agreed Upon Guidelines for Filk Foundation Bylaws,” *Kantele* 4/5 (1979), 10.

34. *Kantele* 6 (1980), 14; *Westerfilk*, 40.

With the passage of time there is a shift from the songs patterned on folk songs or set to traditional tunes. At recent cons more original songs are being heard. Also the very amateurish publications of the seventies are being replaced by more professional products. Foremost in this field is *Off Centaur Productions* in California which now has a substantial catalogue listing numerous songs books, cassettes, and records.

The folk element in the filksong movement may be decreasing somewhat, but the enthusiasm for filksinging is increasing. As Juanita Coulson wrote:

Like science fiction fandom and fans, filksinging is a very eclectic field. If it's funny, if it's outrageous, if it's beautiful, if it's strange. . . if it's in any way out of the ordinary and listenable, it's welcome at a filksing.³⁵

That is a very good description of one of the most prolific types of modern folksong.

York University
North York, Ontario

35. *Kantele* 1 (1978), 9.