

THE STORY of NJ FRIENDS of CLEARWATER's CIRCLE OF SONG

By Ingrid Heldt



Pastor Sony's First United Methodist Church, where we started our monthly meetings

It was September 16, 2010. We – NJ Friends of Clearwater – had just completed our 35th Annual Festival in Asbury Park, which included a “Circle of Song” stage. I – Ingrid Heldt – was responsible for it. Some of my favorite bands performed that day, like Thomas Wesley Stern, Emily Grove and Lackawanna Rail. My friend Isis Ra put together a wonderful drum circle. She called it “Isis and her Tribe.” She said she was trying to keep children off the streets by having them join a gang – her Tribe.

After we took down the stage, we were hanging around, reminiscing. We were sad because we would probably not see all of these old and new friends again – for a whole year.



Isis and her Tribe at on the Circle of Song Stage at our 40th Annual Festival in 2010.

We wondered whether we couldn't find a place where we might meet in between.

Isis had an idea: “Why don’t we have a group at Pastor Sony’s church in Asbury Park – on a day when they don’t need all their rooms – like a Thursday.”

I had fond memories of Pastor Sony’s Church – the First United Methodist Church in Asbury Park. He and his congregation had helped a friend of mine with great compassion.



Pete mobbed by reporters at the Sloop Club in Beacon



Pete playing along with a Czech band



Learning a song from Pete



Pete and swimmers celebrating the clean Hudson River

I was familiar with similar groups. Beacon, NY, had its Sloop Club meetings at the Hudson River, with Pete Seeger. They were on the first Friday of each month. Another organization I was familiar with was PASA – the Philadelphia Area Songwriters Alliance. They held house concerts where audience members could sign up to do one song. Also, Spook Handy used to have the “Spook Handy Show” – probably the country’s longest-running open mike. So why couldn’t we have something like it near Asbury Park?

We asked Pastor Sony, and he loved the idea. At first, he gave us the children's room, upstairs, but the small chairs weren't very comfortable. The next month, we took over a large room in the basement, which remained our home for a while. We also performed twice at The Saint, one of the oldest venues in Asbury Park.



First Circle in the children's room



Anthony Apostolaros showing his self-made drum to PJ of Thomas Wesley Stern



April and Catfish of April May and the June Bugs



Joe Petraitis and Carl Croce, Jim's Nephew



James Crawford, Isis Ra, Ingrid Heldt, Sharleen Leahey at Pastor Sony's



Isis Ra, Ingrid Heldt and Kathy Moser

In October 2011, the Turnstile Coffee Bar in Belmar made us an offer we couldn't refuse: to have our Circle in their beautiful venue.



The Saint in Asbury Park



The Turnstile Coffee Bar



Between 2011 and 2013, we were there joined at the Turnstile Coffee Bar by some of the following people:



Joe Iantosca, Arlon Bennett, Isis Ra and others



O'Neil & Martin



Gospel singer Helga Kaefer



Comedian and Singer/Songwriter Dennis Mc Do No Ugh !
best known for his song "This Medical Center is your Medical Center."



Isis Ra and Linda Phillips



We were often joined by Bill Doerge on bass

Several bands formed in the Circle. Sharleen Leahey found her band members, Diane Doolittle and Linda Phillips, who called themselves the Cactus Flowers, while Isis and I began performing together, later to be joined by Dale Lakata, as The Clarity Project.

In 2013 and 2014, NJ Friends of Clearwater's Annual Festivals were held right at the beach in Long Branch.



The Clarity Project performing for our friends of the Navesink Maritime Association



Jan Christensen who has come from Brooklyn for every one of NJF Clearwater's Festivals, except one, when he was too ill.



James Durst, Sharleen Leahey, Linda Phillips and Ingrid Heldt in Long Branch



Gina, Ingrid Heldt, Dale Lakata, Abby Anton and Tommy Anton in Long Branch



Our Circle of Song performers usually ended the Festival on the main stage in Long Branch Here with Hillary Zaenchik, Mara Levine, Sharleen Leahey, Jan Christensen, Bob Mecklenburger, Linda Hutchins, Ingrid Heldt, Eric Russell, Diane Doolittle, Tommy and Abby Anton, Cosby Gibson, Spook Handy and Dale Lakata.

We continued our Circles at the Turnstile for the remainder of 2013 and, at some point in 2013, we changed from Thursdays to Sundays, which worked out better for many of us.



Richard Kaltz whom we nicknamed Red Cloud



One of our story tellers, Rose Marie Wright



Sally Neil and Jim Crawford



Joe Petraitis who wrote Ingrid's favorite song, "Where is the Soul"

2014 brought major changes. Our Circle was getting too large for the Turnstile. We decided to move to the Eatontown Community Center.



The Eatontown Community Center



A Group Photo

Pete died right around that same time, and our Circle suddenly had seventy people – in his honor. This was not a problem at our new venue - the Eatontown Community Center.



Our highest attendance – 70 – in honor of Pete Seeger
Another large Circle – with Cynthia Summers



Lydia Adams Davis, one of the Sloop Singers





Circle of Song with Sharleen Leahey



Ingrid Heldt and Rob Lincoln from Philadelphia's PASA songwriting group



Cosby Gibson – all the way from the Adirondack Mountains – and Ingrid Heldt

2014 also became memorable because of a gigantic downpour during our Annual Festival in Long Branch. At first, the storm and the rain did not deter our brave performers and audiences. They stuck with us until it became impossible. Even then, the program continued. While I was packing up our sensitive equipment, several musicians found shelter under the Shoprite food truck. There, they continued – and finished – the entire program.



Madhumita Chakrabarthi and James Durst in Long Branch.



Diane Doolittle, our resident floutist



Singer/Songwriter Spook Handy – Pete loved him. I would have never met Pete, and there wouldn't have been a Circle of Song if Sharleen hadn't sent a song of Spook's to Pete, who liked it and asked Spook to play it with him. I decided to hear the two of them together, whereby I ran into Pete and made friends with him. He was very accessible.



Under the Shoprite Truck – Dennis and Cynthia completing their sets.

In 2015, we still officially met at the Eatontown Community Center, but there were some conflicts. One time, we booked a room at Brookdale College which, to our dismay, was locked when we arrived. We sang in the hallway, and that worked just fine.

One time, the Eatontown Historical Museum let us use their facilities. Yet another time, we were booked at the Belmar Arts Council, but couldn't get their combination lock to work. We ended up singing at the Belmar Police Station.



Brookdale's Hallway



An outstanding performance by actress/story teller Lorraine Stone



Joe Giacoio and Carla Ulbrich



Group Photo at Historical Museum

Our last Circle at the Community Center with Lydia Adams Davis and Sharleen Leahey



In 2017, we decided to change over to the Eatontown Library.

The Eatontown Library



We have been meeting at the library for years. One day, we were double-booked because the library had prepared our room for a book sale event. It made for an interesting Circle of Song, with our chairs grouped around the book tables.



Here we are with Sharleen



and here, Isis really got into it



The day of the book sale at the Eatontown Library



More Group Photos at the Library



Another time we knew that the Library was booked, and so we asked our friends of the Navesink Maritime Association whether we could use their half-renovated building, the Grover House in Middletown. They had helped us build our boat, Pete's Banjo, and they were glad to have us at their house. They also helped us when we needed a room to store our Festival equipment. I call this room our "office."



The Grover House and our "office" inside



Singing in the Grover House with Bob Mecklenburger



Linda Ershow-Levenberg – and Roseann DePasquale



Martin Swinger who, I swore, should have been cast in a movie about Pete – Tony Sloan



Another group photo at the Grover House

and we love the porch

In March 2020, Covid became an issue for us. We managed to have one more Circle of Song at the Grover House, but then came a long break.

On June 6, 2021, we decided to brave it again – this time in the beautiful yard of the Grover House. So far so good. It has worked very well. We liked it so much that we may keep meeting outside, whenever possible.



Circle of Song – “Under the Trees”



Isis Ra and James Crawford “Under the Trees”

For the winter, we have booked the Eatontown Library. However, we will have to wait and see how things will work out – whether we can keep “social distances” and whether we need to wear masks.

But we’ve had wonderful outdoor events there, all summer. It’s so good to be with old friends – and new ones.

Now if anyone wonders why we are doing a Circle of Song, in the first place. I think it was Sharleen – or maybe Richard Fuller – who showed me this quote – attributed to Pete Seeger:



“The right song at the right moment can change history.”

That says it all.