

Gifts From Filk

Thank you to the Hall of Fame jury for choosing me for induction, and for all the hard work they do every year. Thank you, many times over, to anyone who thought I was worth the time, thought, and effort required to write a nomination. A belated thank you to the people who made me feel welcome and accepted when I was new to filk, especially the always-gracious Gordy Dickson, and my friend and mentor, the always-challenging Bob Asprin. As for the rest of you, well, that gets to the heart of what I want to say.

You've just heard a recitation of things I have supposedly given, or tried to give, to filk – both the music and the community. In return, I'd like to take a few moments to talk about some of the wonderful and awesome gifts – for they bring me both wonder and awe - that filk has given to me.

Filk has given me an education in both writing and performing

It's done this in three ways. First, by surrounding me with brilliant, creative, inspiring, generous people who give of their music and themselves, who are happy to share their techniques and views, and who are constantly showing me new and different ways of thinking and working.

Second, by giving me an endless and ongoing string of opportunities to place my craft in front of an audience and learn from them. Each performance is a lesson in what works and what doesn't, when to push and when to pull back, how to find the truth of a song, a poem, a character, a feeling. I've been given the means and the motivation to practice, practice, practice. And forty years later, here I am at Carnegie Hall.

Third, and perhaps most important, filk has taught me a better definition of success. If the whole room is laughing or applauding, that's great. I'll take that. But if a song has meaning for one listener, that's a success, too.

Filk has given me a home

When I arrive at a filk con, I'm surrounded by people who speak with the same vocabulary, who share the values of the community, who are there for many of the same reasons. Like, I suspect, just about everyone here, I've had my days, even whole weekends, of feeling excluded, of thinking of myself as an outsider looking in. It can be hard to get past that. But I've come to know, on a deep level, that this is a place I belong. It's a place where I might end up missing that concert I wanted to hear because I fell into a fascinating conversation with people I may have known for decades, or may have only spoken to a few times. It's a place where I know I can get up and dance when the music moves me, and not be judged on the quality of my movement. It's a place where I can be certain that at some point during the weekend, my voice will become one piece of a much greater whole, as harmonies and instrumentals ring through the circle. Whether I'm in Mississauga, or Columbus, or Atlanta, or Seattle, or Jersey City, or Basingstoke, I know I'm home. Which brings me to . . .

Filk has given me joy

Joy, and the ways in which it differs from simple happiness, is a personal thing. I can't define it. But I know it comes in different flavors. When that greater whole I just referred to coalesces, and fills my awareness, that's a joyful moment. When someone who's been working up their nerve, sometimes for

months or years, sings in front of other people for the first time since childhood, that's a joyful moment. When someone who's found their voice here keeps going, keeps on singing or playing or reciting, and manages, whether through applied hard work or simple repetition, to get better and build confidence, that's a whole series of joyful moments. Those moments accumulate, and build, and keep me connected to this community in a way that will never be broken.

Filk has kept me young

There are people I count as friends here who range from a decade or more older than me to three decades or more younger. That's a source of both satisfaction and occasional astonishment. I love and value my long time friends. I also love and value the way the filk community gives me regular chances to make new friends, to hear new voices, to be exposed to new styles of music. That's important to who I am, or at least try to be. While I treasure and respect the historians among us, my own inclination is to focus on looking forward more than back. I hope it will remain central to our beliefs and practices to work on making newcomers of all musical genres and experience levels feel accepted and appreciated.

Finally . . .

Filk has given me the impetus to try to be a better person, and lessons on how to accomplish that

Being part of the filk community means being surrounded by valuable lessons.

Some of those lessons reinforce things we learned as small children. Share. Take turns. Look out for each other. Don't be mean.

Some of the lessons are a little more sophisticated. Be generous with praise, and stingy with criticism. It's not a competition, so try not to compare yourself to other people. Recognize and appreciate the work of people who aren't in the spotlight. Remember that most of the time, it's not about you.

Some are lessons of affirmation and inspiration that we can all sing together, ranging from "Time won't drive us down to dust again" to "We're all mad here, and it's OK".

But the most fundamental lesson, and here I will steal shamelessly from an essay I wrote several years ago, is the power inherent in a single word: listen.

Filk's greatest strength lies in the deeply ingrained philosophy that everyone has the right to express themselves creatively, to, as Sally Childs-Helton and Kathleen Sloan put it, "take back the right to sing and play."

But, all unknowing, we've done something even greater than that. We don't just say, "Express yourself." We say, "If you choose to express yourself, we will listen to you."

For listening, as distinct from merely hearing, is not passive. Listening says things. It says, "We acknowledge you." It says, "You have value." It says, "We may or may not agree with you, but we will not just dismiss you." And when we in filk listen, it also says, "The act of expressing yourself will not bring you harm." (That last has a power almost beyond comprehension, as there can be so much fear, so much past repression, so many old scars, that must be overcome.)

These are, to be sure, ideals, and as humans we don't always live up to them. I know I fail on a regular

basis. But it's important that we keep trying.

For in saying these things, we change lives. We reach out to the hesitant, the shy, the frightened. We tell them that, with hands and voices joined, we can make a better life in a better world. We imbue them with the sure and certain knowledge that their words, their music, the children of their souls, will not just echo in the void.

That, more than anything else, is why you are and will remain my people, my tribe, my world-wide small town.

And so, on this ninth day of April, two thousand sixteen, it is with love, and joy, and gratitude, with considerable pride and a perhaps-unaccustomed measure of humility, with an open heart and always, always with open ears, that I accept this honor. Thank you.