

Estelle Klein Award Acceptance Speech
September 25, 2021

I'm incredibly honoured to receive this award. It's been quite a challenge for me to figure out what to say today. I had to write some things down to keep my thoughts together so please forgive me for reading.

Thank you to Folk Music Ontario and to everyone involved in making this award happen.

Special thanks to Jane Lewis, my musical partner in Gathering Sparks, who nominated me, To Graham Lindsay for making the video, and to all those who participated in it.

I want to thank my mom Sue Goldberg. She was a lifelong folkie, community builder, and social justice advocate. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't have become a musician and I would never have gotten involved in the folk community. I think if she were alive she probably would have been nominated for this award herself. So I guess I can say it's all her fault!

Through my family I absorbed a commitment to social justice, and I also absorbed a lot of great music. My older brother and sister, who are both musicians in their own right, turned me on to TONS of music, and taught me a lot, so I owe them a huge debt of gratitude. Thank you Ruth and David.

I want to thank my partner Ellen, who has encouraged me, collaborated with me, and helped me every step of the way, even when my crazy musical lifestyle made her life more complicated. It's amazing to me that she is still here beside me after 25 years together.

The great Utah Phillips once said:

“Time is an enormous, long river, and I’m standing in it, just as you’re standing in it. My elders are the tributaries, and everything they thought and every struggle they went through and everything they gave their lives to, and every song they created, and every poem that they laid down flows down to me – and if I take the time to ask, and if I take the time to see, and if I take the time to reach out, I can build that bridge between my world and theirs. I can reach down into that river and take out what I need to get through this world.”

This expresses so much of what I feel about the folk community.

From the time I started getting involved in folk music in Toronto, I met people who welcomed me into the community and freely shared their knowledge. Whether it was teaching me a better way to make an F chord, encouraging me to sing at a song circle, playing with me on stage, or giving me career advice, I’ve gained so much from their generous spirits.

I couldn’t possibly name everyone but I want to mention some names. Some are people who are no longer with us. I’m naming them today as a way of bringing their spirits into the room with us. And for those who are still with us, I want to personally say thank you. So thank you to:

Estelle Klein

Grit Laskin

Judith Laskin

Lanie Melamed

Ken Whiteley

Ellen Manney

Jane Sapp

Bill Garrett

Paul Mills

Penny Lang

Tam Kearney

David Parry

Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer

Jackie Washington

Peggy Seeger

Rick Fielding

Mose Scarlett

Guy and Candie Carawan

And the many musicians who were part of the staff of The Woods Music and Dance Camp over the years.

These are some of the people who connected me to that river that Utah describes. They helped me understand where I'm standing in the river, and what I'm supposed to do with that now.

From these human beings, I learned how to be a better musician, how to contribute to community, how to make the world around me a little better, and why it's so important.

I learned songs, I learned about traditions, I learned about social justice, and I started to understand the importance of folk music, folk songs, and folkways.

I learned that music, and other creative expression, is powerful. That it can transform individuals in profound ways, and that it can also change the world.

I learned that even though we live in a highly inequitable society that puts value on money, personal gain, and corporate profit, there are always people, down here at the grassroots, doing things that resist and subvert those ideas. And a lot of the time, they are doing that through creative expression. The struggle against Apartheid in South Africa, The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 60's, and the Idle No More movement, are just a few examples of how humans have used the tools of music and art to envision a more just world, communicate important information, validate their experiences, and sustain each other through trying times.

I began to recognize that in our society, we are taught early and often that only some people have “talent,” you are either born with it, or you are not, and if you are not, you should stay away from making art, or singing, or dancing, or whatever. We’re very effective at shutting down that natural human desire for art and expression. I started to understand what a terrible injustice that is and how it causes deep injury to our basic humanity.

I learned how, when we live in a society that rewards corporate greed and individual achievement over the health and well-being of the collective, creating community can be a radical act. Those are words from my friend Lanie Melamed.

Lanie was a dance caller and community educator who had the idea of starting a sleep-over folk music camp for adults. Lanie imbued The Woods Music and Dance Camp with a spirit of joy and play-- the idea that we can all make music, we can all dance, we can all be creative, whatever our previous level of experience.

I first went to The Woods when I was about 17, and it was transformative. That basic philosophy around creating community has carried into almost everything else I have done. Into helping organize The Woods for many years, into my performing, into teaching guitar and ukulele classes, into helping starting a community choir, and many other things that I’ve gotten my nose into over the years.

I’m saying all this because I think what we do is important, it matters. I think about how this pandemic has separated us all physically and prevented us from making music together, and that one of the first things that happened in Italy when people were locked down, was to go out onto their balconies and play music together. We need the connections that music and art bring us. If we are going to survive as a species, it is art and the connections that it creates that is going to see us through.

I am grateful to be part of the folk community. It's my home, my bedrock, it's where I feel most alive and human. It's where I feel comfortable.

But I also want to challenge us not to sit back and get too comfortable. We need to be enlarging our vision, building bridges, and opening space for more voices that have been left out. Whose voices need to be centred? Who's not here who should be here? We have the opportunity to keep pushing the boundaries. And doing that is not always going to be comfortable. It's going to change our community—and I think that's a good thing.

Recently I was in a meeting of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion working group of my union, Local 1000. The amazing anti-racist educator Saul Sarabia joined us to talk about anti-racism work within Local 1000. He described anti-racist work as the process of “continuing to walk toward each other, while asking the hard questions.” I hope we can continue walking toward each other, asking the hard questions, with respect for each other, and with our deep love for what this community is and what it could be.

The river we are standing in is long and deep, but it is always trickling off in new and interesting directions. So I hope we can take care of our ecosystem, and I hope that we can always hold onto that sense of community, and remember to dip back into that water when we need it.

Thank you so much, and I look forward to seeing you at the rest of the conference.