



HAND-MADE FIDDLE

HAND-MADE BANJO

EVERETT FOLKLORE CENTER



A Hoot and a Holler

The enduring impact of Harry Tuft's Denver Folklore Center

BY CANDACE HORGAN

AS HE NEARS his 75th birthday, Harry Tuft shows no sign of slowing down. The Denver Folklore Center, which Harry founded, will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2012. Assuming the Mayans are wrong and the world doesn't end, Tuft fully intends to be on hand for that.

For decades, Tuft has been intimately involved in many aspects of the Colorado music scene. He is probably best known for founding the Folklore Center, whose music school and performing space evolved into the well-regarded Swallow Hill Music Association. Tuft also served as a promoter, bringing acts as diverse as Joan Baez, Arlo Guthrie, Pete Seeger and even Frank Zappa to Denver.

Few know, however, that the classical-music scene in Denver also bears Harry's imprimatur: Tuft served as the executive director of the Denver Musicians Association from 1989 to 1991, during the period that the Denver Symphony became the Colorado Symphony.

Tuft founded the Denver Folklore Center as a way to be involved with music; he felt he "just didn't have the fire" that being a performer requires.

"I was sure that I couldn't take the rejection," says Tuft. "My daughter is in Chicago now and is pursuing a career as an actor, and she goes to auditions all the time, and she has the kind of perseverance I never had — to go on when you get that kind of rejection. The story was a way of compensating and still to do some performing. I would venture to say a sizable percentage of the folks who run music stores are people who, in choosing whether to have a career as a performer or a career next to music as a retailer, have that in their background."

Despite Tuft's modesty, the Denver Folklore

Center was a Mecca for traveling musicians during its heyday in the late '60s and '70s.

"Virtually everybody who came to town to play would come by the Folklore Center, because it was just irresistible," says Nick Forster, the Etown founder and Hot Rize bassist. Forster worked in the Folklore Center repair shop from 1975 to 1978. "Steve Goodman would make up the excuse that he needed a set of strings to come by the Folklore Center. Well, then he would buy 25 albums, buy a used instrument, and he'd hang out and play music and spend the whole afternoon there.

"Next week, Taj Mahal would come to town and say he needed a little adjustment on his guitar, so he'd bring the guitar in to get worked on, and meanwhile, he hangs around and plays and shops. There was lots of playing music."

TUFT WAS BORN in Philadelphia in 1935. Like many people of his generation, he went to summer camp, which is where he developed a love of music and singing that he carries to this day. It was at camp that he first picked up an instrument, the ukulele, at the age of 13. His parents instilled in him a love of folk music, something he cultivated while attending Dartmouth. (He also pursued skiing, which would eventually lead to his relocation.)

By 1956, Tuft had purchased his first guitar, a Stella he picked up for \$18. He initially didn't know how to play it. That year, Tuft went to Europe on a student trip.

"I had a six-string guitar, but I couldn't play it," he remembers. "But there was a guy on the ship who had a four-string guitar that I could play, and he didn't play it. There was no entertainment on the ship, and there were thousands of kids, so we were the entertainment. We

Scenes from the original Denver Folklore Center on 17th Avenue. The front window shows off the store's wide range of appeal. Mike Seeger leads a group pick. COURTESY OF HARRY TUFT

would sit on the lower decks, in the lounge, and basically play all night. That was great fun; it was probably the first time I had played in front of people.

"People would come down at midnight, and we would play most all night, and it was what I would call a 'Bobby McGee moment,' because we sang up every song we knew. We literally pulled out just anything."

After arriving in Europe, Tuft and some friends rented a car and traveled; he taught himself to play his six-string while riding in the back. When he returned to Philadelphia, he was confident enough in his abilities to go to the Gilded Cage, a coffeehouse in Philadelphia that had Sunday hoots. He felt immediate acceptance.

While attending graduate school to study architecture, Tuft befriended Dick Weissman, and the two made a trip to Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music when Weissman was booked to play there. Not long after that trip, Tuft visited Weissman in New York and met John Winn. Winn was there to visit Karen Dalton, who was staying with Weissman at the time.

"[John] had just come from Colorado, and he now lives in Grand Junction," says Tuft. "I had been skiing in Pennsylvania, and it was terrible, and I had been talking about going skiing in Colorado, and Dick talked up Colorado like crazy. Do you know the song 'I Guess He'd Rather Be in Colorado'? That was written about Dick. They were talking up the idea of going to Colorado and being ski bums and doing folk music."

Weissman had a gig lined up at the Ash Grove in Los Angeles. He suggested to Tuft that they drive to Colorado together, and Weissman would then continue on by train to L.A. Tuft returned to Philadelphia and called around looking for drive-aways, almost hoping he wouldn't find one. But he found six Volkswagen Beetles that needed to be driven to Colorado, so he and Weissman headed west, arriving in Colorado on December 4, 1960.

TUFT WENT TO work in the mountains, landing at the Berthoud Pass Lodge, then moving on to some odd jobs in Aspen. He skied in his free time, with an occasional performance spot mixed in. He visited Weissman in San Francisco, where Weissman was performing at the hungry i as part of the Journeymen, with John Phillips and Scott McKenzie. Tuft also played the

hungry i, as well as the Fox and Hound, and jammed with Weissman late at night.

When Tuft returned to Colorado, a chance meeting changed his life. Tuft was working at a small club called the Holy Cat in Georgetown, and Hal Neustaedter, the owner of the Exodus Coffeehouse in Denver, came in; Loveland Pass was closed due to a storm. Neustaedter knew Tuft, because Tuft had tried out for (but hadn't landed) a spot at the Exodus.

"I had heard from friends that if he liked you and was going to hire you, he'd be very critical, and if he wasn't going to hire you, he'd be very nice to you," says Tuft. "Well, he was very nice to me, so I knew what was up. He just stopped in, and he said he thought someone could open a folklore center in Denver and maybe have a part-time business. Well, that sounded sort of interesting to me, and I had been to the Folklore Center in New York in the Village."

Neustaedter had some ideas about a location near the Exodus, so Tuft went to New York to visit with Izzy Young, owner of the Folklore Center on MacDougal Street. As Tuft recalls, he called Young and asked for guidance on how to operate a store.

"I had no idea how to do business," explains Tuft. "My parents were professionals, and virtually all their friends were professionals, so I was never in contact with people who were in business, so I never thought about business as an occupation. I said, basically, 'Izzy, how do you make money?' All I knew was presumably you sold things for more than you bought them. So Izzy said, 'Take me to dinner, and I'll tell you.' So I did, and Izzy sold me some of — what turns out to be, I'm sure — his slow-moving stock to bring out here."

Tuft returned to Denver in December of 1961; in a strange coincidence, he arrived on the same day that Neustaedter, returning from a meeting of folk-club owners in Oklahoma, was killed in a plane crash. Tuft had actually tried to call Neustaedter the night he landed in Denver, getting only a busy signal. Tuft pressed on. He looked at the places Neustaedter had recommended, but found what he thought was a better location — on 17th Avenue, next to the Green Spider coffeehouse — and opened for business in March of 1962.

"It cost \$55 a month, so I lived in the back for about three years," remembers Tuft, "and I had a first cousin in town where I'd go to get a shower and have a decent



meal now and then. I remembered the Sunday hoots from the Gilded Cage, so I started a Sunday hoot and by doing so got some publicity in the paper. That's how things got started.

"I didn't have much money. I started out with \$900 and arrived with less, because I had bought some instruments. A good friend who I had met at the Holy Cat was a carpenter and designer and had been to architecture school, so he helped me design and build the place. The original location was about 600 square feet, 13 by 45, and I built a break that was wide enough that I could put a mattress behind."

CHUCK ERIKSON, AKA the "Duke of Pearl," lived in Denver in the early '60s, at 1642 Pearl Street, right around the corner from the Denver Folklore Center. He recalls it as a vibrant gathering place for musicians.

"It was close and didn't cost anything to hang out there," he says, "and there were always musicians hanging out outside, and you had the whole sing-alongs or bootenzannies on Sundays. I started hanging out there because it was social and I didn't have a lot of friends. It was a dark, not very well-lit place with interesting instruments all over the walls, and that's where I kind of got exposed to folk music."

In 1963, Erikson helped open the House of Banjos, on Colorado Boulevard, an experience, he notes, that was "heavily influenced by what was going on at Harry's

place." Though Erikson wasn't around the Folklore Center for very long, he credits it with helping to spark his involvement with instrument building.

"It had a big impact on me as far as the direction my life took in the world of musical instruments. It got me interested in instruments and playing. I kind of owe a lot to Harry. I'm sure he's influenced probably more people than he'll ever know, because he was sort of the nexus of a lot of stuff that was going on in the Denver area."

By 1964, with only two years under his belt, Tuft had built the Denver Folklore Center to the point where it was nationally recognized — along with the original Folklore Center in New York and McCabe's in Santa Monica — as a place traveling musicians needed to visit. Bob Dylan stopped by in 1964, and his manager, Al Grossman, had Dylan's mail delivered there, which Tuft then took to Dylan at the old Vista Motel on Colfax Avenue.

Around that time, Tuft received a call from Manny Greenhill, Joan Baez's manager; Greenhill, who also managed Pete Seeger and Doc Watson, wanted to know if Tuft would be interested in promoting a Joan Baez show. Though Tuft had no experience promoting, Greenhill told him he could walk him through it.

Tuft rented the Denver Auditorium, a 2,200-seat venue, and Baez's March 15 concert sold out. During Baez's visit to Colorado, Greenhill and Tuft drove

Harry Tuft picks Mississippi John Hurt's Guild F-10. "John got the guitar not long after he was rediscovered by Tom Hoskins and Dick Spottswood," Tuft explains. "On their way to the Newport Folk Festival, they stopped in New York at a store called Fretted Instruments that was run by Marc Silber. The Newport Foundation wanted to buy a guitar for John and basically said they would buy him any guitar in the store. There were Martins of every kind, expensive Gibsons, what have you, but John chose the rather modest Guild F-10. Marc asked why that guitar, and John Hurt said he always wanted a guitar with two colors, which was his way of describing a warbird."

THANK YOU, HARRY!

her out to the nearby Red Rocks Amphitheatre. (Tuft recalls them improvising a little play on the stage.) Greenhill wanted Baez to play Red Rocks, but she had been reluctant. While shepherding Baez around Denver, Tuft had learned that Baez was a big Beatles fan, so Greenhill and Tuft arranged for Baez to play Red Rocks two days after the Beatles were scheduled to play there.

On August 26, 1964, Tuft took Baez backstage at the Beatles show to meet the band.

"When they went [onstage], we went out in the side wings where now is the monitor board," says Tuft. "The speakers were right above us, and you couldn't hear them; the screams were so loud they were like needle points through your body. It was incredible. They were halfway to Denver [after the show] when the screaming died down. They were at the Brown Palace on the ninth floor, and Joan tried to get me upstairs but she couldn't.

"In the dressing room, she mostly talked about Dylan, and she wanted to get Dylan to meet the Beatles, and they were playing at Forest Hills. She took a red-eye, right after her concert, to New York, and in fact, that's when Dylan met the Beatles."

Tuft promoted other performances throughout the 1960s, including Jim Kweskin and the Jug Band and a joint Arlo Guthrie/Pete Seeger show at Red Rocks. He also began acquiring other storefronts next to the Folklore Center, expanding the business so that there was eventually a repair shop, a performing space, a record store, a bead shop, the retail space and even a school, which Harry had started based on the model of the Old Town School of Folk Music.

Nick Forster wandered into the Folklore Center in January of 1975, looking to have some work done on his mandolin. (It had suffered a cracked headstock due to the Colorado cold.) Forster knew how to repair instruments, but didn't have his tools with him. Rick Kirby, who managed the repair shop, convinced Forster to move to Colorado from New York and come to work in the repair shop, which had so much business that Kirby was falling behind. Forster arrived in the fall of 1975.

"When I got there, there was this amazing scene — probably 30 people working there every day," Forster recalls. "There was a lovely balance. That was in some

ways a manifestation of Harry's vision. There was a performance space, the repair shop, the music store over two storefronts, where Charles Sawtelle was the manager, then a bead shop, which had some female energy, and the next storefront was the record store, and the record store was all the stuff you couldn't find at Peaches, which was the local music chain at the time. It was jazz, blues, folk, bluegrass — all kinds of interesting records. The next [door] after that was the school."

It was at the Folklore Center that Forster, Sawtelle, Pete Wernick and Tim O'Brien met and eventually formed Hot Rize.

"I remember meeting Nick at the Folklore Center," says Wernick, who, along with O'Brien, worked as an instructor at the school. "Charles and Tim I had met previously in other contexts, but in and around the Folklore Center is where we got into playing music together. It was very friendly and open, something of a hangout. People would sit in the front room and take instruments off the walls and jam or just sit there and noodle."

With so many musicians working at the Folklore Center, it quickly became a reference spot for people looking to book bands for private events and functions.

"Someone would answer the phone," says Forster, "and say, 'Someone is having a wedding, and they need a country band,' so Charles and some other people would maybe put a band together. Or someone would say they needed a bluegrass band for a party, so Charles would call Pete, Tim, me or some other people and put a band together."

IN THE LATE 1970s, the Folklore Center was hit hard by the recession. Furthermore, after 17 years in business, Tuft was tired. Tuft and some friends from the community formed the Swallow Hill Music Association, and Tuft gave up the rights to the performing space and the school, enabling Swallow Hill to claim nonprofit, tax-exempt status.

"When I had signed the lease, at the end of '79, I told him there was a chance I wouldn't last and asked him if he would let me get out of the lease," says Tuft. "He said he would, as long as I didn't open up anywhere else. He came to me in May and said 7-Eleven would like to have this location. He said they would build the building, and that if I was going to go out of business,



he would like to know, because he had a window of opportunity, so I said OK.”

Tuft closed the store in 1980, and Kirby took the name and the inventory and opened up a location on South Broadway, looking to keep the repair shop going. Tuft got involved in a variety of other projects, including turning a synagogue into a performance space with his friend Sam Brown. Kirby kept the store open, but struggled: Tuft came in and paid off the debts to keep the Folklore Center name clean, but the store finally closed in 1983.

After his time in the Denver Musicians Association ended, Tuft began to get the itch to reopen a store, and in 1993, Tuft reopened the Denver Folklore Center. By this time, Swallow Hill had moved to a location at 1905 South Pearl Street, and so Tuft set up his new shop at 1893 South Pearl, across the street from Swallow Hill.

The current incarnation of the Folklore Center concentrates mostly on guitar builders like Taylor, Santa Cruz, Guild and Blueridge, and does consignment on some used and vintage guitars. They also sell

Deering and OME banjos, Kentucky and Weber mandolins, Kala and Pono ukuleles, hammered dulcimers, fiddles, folk CDs and sheet-music books. The repair shop is managed by John Rumley, who performs with Slim Cesina’s Auto Club, a fixture on the Denver scene. Rumley learned from Scott Baxendale, the former owner of Monman Guitars and the previous manager of the Center’s repair shop.

Tuft, in addition to his work at the Folklore Center, is still involved with Swallow Hill, and has gotten back to his roots by leading a regular Sunday hoot, where he’ll often be found singing as many as four songs in a night.

“A hootenanny is a misnomer,” Tuft acknowledges. “In the old days, a hootenanny was a big sing-along. [This] was initially supposed to be like a hoot, but it became more like an open stage [with people taking turns]. Initially, we thought people would have time to do three songs, then it went to two songs, and now it’s one song. People wait around all night to do one song, which I privately regard as a great compliment.”

In 2012, the Denver Folklore Center will celebrate its 50th anniversary. It’s been at its current location, 1893 South Pearl, since it reopened in 1993.

—ANDREW HODGSON