

The Peoples' Voice Cafe

BY ROGER PARADISO

PVC is an alternative coffeehouse offering live and live-stream entertainment in Greenwich Village. They have kept the folk tradition alive since 1979. Their current home is at the iconic Judson Memorial Church at 239 Thompson Street. If you ever wondered what it was like in the 1960s, come on by and join a hootenanny night or an evening featuring the best independent artists in folk, blues, jazz, rap, poetry, spoken word, storytelling, theater, and dance.

Many well-known artists, like Pete Seeger and Odetta, have played here. Let's meet two current artists.

Steve Suffet

Steve, a member and performer at the PVC, likes to call himself an old-fashioned folk singer. He said, "I was born in 1947 and I've been singing as far back as I can remember. My mom was a jazz singer who couldn't stand what she called "hillbilly music." So, rebel that I was as a young kid, I insisted on listening to Tennessee Ernie Ford sing *Sixteen Tons*."

In high school, Steve bought a \$17 Harmony Stella guitar and Jerry Silverman's *Beginning the Folk Guitar*. From then on, he was completely hooked. He started hanging out around the fountain in Washington Square Park on warm Sunday afternoons and tried to absorb everything he heard, including blues, bluegrass, ragtime, ballads, cowboy songs, hobo songs, union songs and topical-political songs.

"In a year or two I got my courage up to start performing at open stage nights -- hootenannies they were called then -- at various clubs and coffee houses," said Steve. "My goodness, I was awful! But I certainly learned a lot and I even met some fellow musicians who I still know today. Now I do folk music, but you may rather call it roots music, traditional music, old-time music, or even hillbilly."

Steve had to teach to make a living like just about all independent artists. But that doesn't stop these artists from doing what they love--singing in front of an audience. "Now that I am well into my 70s, I have cut back on my public performances, although I still participate in sing-arounds,



STEVE SUFFET, above, performing at the Peoples' Voice Café. Photo credit: Russ Chandler.

round robin concerts, and workshops," he said.

Steve has recorded four CDs, two digital albums, and many digital singles which are available from Amazon and other online retailers. But we all know that streaming has caused every independent artist big problems. Steve said that his albums on CD Baby bring in about \$100 a year and streaming singles bring in about \$12 a year.



JUDY GORMAN, above, singing at the Peoples' Voice Café. Photo by PVC.

Judy Gorman

According to Pete Seeger, "Judy Gorman shoots the arrow straight to the heart; she's a wonderful singer and musician."

And even with all this talent, Judy is another artist with a day job. She was born and educated in NYC and earned a BA in Literature and an MA in Art History. Judy has produced radio programs for Pacifica Radio's WBAI 99.5 FM, taught English in Chinatown, assisted in oral surgery, did construction work, community organizing and worked at the Guggenheim Museum and Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Her albums include *Live at Folk City*, *Analog Girl In A Digital World*, *The Rising of Us All*, *f Dreams Were Thunder* and *Right Behind You in The Left-Hand Lane*. She has performed with artists such as Pete Seeger, Odetta, Harry Belafonte, Whoopi Goldberg, Sweet Honey in The Rock, Suzanne Vega, Richie Havens, and the Indigo Girls.

Even with this wealth of work, she said it is so hard, in our present society, to make a living in the arts. Independent artists fight for their right to sing whether it pays well or not. It is a passion.

Judy said, "99% of all artists are underpaid and cheated. I did make a modest living as a musician for some 25 years. Could I do so if I had tried to start now? I can't imagine it."

"We know that to control people it is essential to control their cultural expression and their education in general. To maintain sexism, like any form of disenfranchisement, it is necessary to have those exploited and oppressed believe in their own inferiority. In our capitalist society most people are expected to passively, commercially consume music rather than create and express it."

Judy quoted Pete Seeger, "Music cannot change the world, only people can. But sometimes music can change people." A refrain in my song, *For Women's Lives** is "Our history need not be our destiny!"

Check Out PVC

"It's a progressive café made from dreams and brick and wood. When the music starts to play, the politics are always good."-Ray Korona, member, and independent artist

With people like Judy and Steve performing at the PVC, we can feel part of a community. That's what it's about. So, turn off the Wi-Fi and get out of the house. If you want to spend a Saturday evening with friendly people who don't like unfair wages and working conditions, wars, poverty, racism, sexism, or homophobia, but do want a future in which people live in peace and justice on a healthy planet, the Peoples' Voice Cafe is the place for you! Much of the music heard at the Cafe was inspired by the experiences of people fighting for survival and a better life.

The Peoples' Voice Café at 239 Thompson St., NY, NY, 10012. Tel. 212-787-3903 or peoplesvoicecafe.org

CAN INDEPENDENT ARTISTS EARN A LIVING?

My discussions with Steve and Judy reinforce my belief that independent artists are disrespected. They are taught early on that independent artists are not really working—and if you are not famous or rich, you can't be taken seriously in the arts.

And now independent artists are stuck with streaming being one of the only outlets to make money. My research found that \$1 in 1970 equals \$8.33 in 2024 according to CPI BLS.gov – Bureau of Labor Statistics. So streaming companies should pay musical artists about \$8.00 a single. Why aren't they getting \$8 instead of \$1?

Here's what Vince Gill has to say, "The devaluation of music and what it's now deemed to be worth is laughable to me. My single cost 99 cents. That's what a single cost in 1960. Creative brains are being sorely mistreated."

There are few government subsidies for the arts. There are lotteries for grants that rarely go above \$10,000. Many countries have regional and national art centers that are inclusive of independent artists and pay them a livable wage.

Like Judy, I think governments should support the art/artists and arts education for all citizens BUT they do not. They subsidize billionaires and "Citizens United" corporations." The Supreme Court calls them "people." The Citizens United ruling makes you wonder if they really run things for us or against us.

Hunter Thompson was believed to have said, "The music business is a cruel and shallow money trench, a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free, and good men die like dogs. There's also a negative side."