



Faith Petric

life as a geritol gypsy

Born September 13, 1915, ninety-three year-old folk singer Faith Petric exudes life energy. After music, travel is probably her second love, and she has successfully crafted her life around these two passions since her retirement at age fifty-five. The song she wrote about retirement begins (and ends) :

*Life begins when you retire,
You're free to do as you desire.
You've paid your dues now
claim what's due;
Your life at last belongs to you.*

When she arrived on a freighter in San Francisco in 1938, on her way around the world, Faith's plan was to work for a while to earn money to continue her journey. But the war, life, and motherhood intervened and she stayed in the city. (She finally made it around the world in 1973-74). Faith retired from her 9-to-5 job in 1970, and began her career as a professional folk musician. After touring the United States and Canada with the Portable Folk Festival, a group of performers she



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story by Lane Schulz

formed with friends, she realized she loved the life of a “traveling folkie.”

Ever since she was “bit by the bug” of the touring life, Faith has traveled with her guitar, working festivals and folk clubs across the US and Canada, with forays to the United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark and Australia. She has slowed her schedule a bit: “I used to travel six months out of the year, but in the last few years I’ve cut out going east to work festivals and clubs there.”

Traveling with Chautauqua

One gig she most certainly hasn’t dropped is the New Old Time Chautauqua. Faith has performed for twenty-six years with the Chautauqua, a traveling vaudeville show that tours through small towns that have little or no live theater. At each stop the troupe does a show, parade, workshops, and performance for a local institution such as a juvenile detention center, nursing home, hospital or prison.

During their summer tour, the all-volunteer Chautauqua group tours with two buses, a U-Haul truck and several cars full of equipment. Faith was once part of the yurt set-up crew — “Hard work!”— and she has always camped along with the rest of the traveling community.

“I used to drive a small Saab. I took out the passenger seat and put a plywood and foam bed in, so I could sleep in it — I called it the world’s smallest Winnebago.” Faith adds that for the past couple of years the group has attended to her comfort, arranging rides for her in an air-conditioned car and a bed in local homes along the way. The younger people carry her guitar, or jump up to give her a chair.

When the Chautauqua performed in Alaska a few years back, the group traveled from show to show on the ferries. “That trip was physically very demanding,” Faith said. “We’d come into town on a ferry, parade, do workshops, a show, pack, load up and get back on a different ferry, sometimes as late as 3 a.m. We all slept in tents on the decks. But the organizers had told the ferry authorities we had an older person on the trip — namely, me — and we were given one free cabin. I preferred to sleep in my tent on the deck, and the cabin was used mostly by the group’s young people. Finally I was told, ‘Look, we told the ferry people we needed a cabin for you, so you’ve got to sleep there!’ I did, once or twice. But mostly I slept on the deck with the others.”

Faith’s billing reads “Long Time Folk Singer and Certified Crone.” She had “a wonderful croning ceremony” at the age of seventy-five in Port Townsend, Washington, organized by the Flying Karamat-zov Brothers and other members of the Chautauqua troop. “At one point I was the center of flying flaming torches being juggled over my head from four different directions!”

Home in San Francisco

At home, Faith hosts song swaps and jam sessions of the San Francisco Folk Music Club every other Friday night, as she has done for over forty years. Folk musicians know her as “The Fort Knox of Folk Music,” due to her legendary ability to remember tunes and lyrics of all kinds, from activist (she co-founded the Freedom Song Network) to traditional to outrageous, and everything in between. “I know a lot of songs, and I used to try to never do the same song twice when performing for any group. But at this age it’s different — now before getting on stage I review every song I’m planning to sing.”

Faith’s home is a ten-room, Tudor-style house in the Haight-Ashbury district, she bought in 1960 with the plan to rent out rooms to pay for the mortgage. At that time her daughter was in high school and she rented rooms to foreign students. Now her granddaughter Alex — an aerialist who travels with the Chautauqua and studies circus skills in San Francisco — lives with her and helps out with shopping and other chores.



A typical day? “I’m kind of a workaholic,” Faith confesses. “I spend several hours a day on the computer.” There is a lot to do: she writes a column in *Sing Out! Magazine*, helps with the San Francisco Folk Music Club newsletter “the folknik;” and answers endless questions via email.

Faith breathes life into the folk scene, not least by her inspiring, irreverent presence. “For a time in the ‘60s I was sort of the glue that held the Folk Music Club together. Now others do the work and I still get the credit... that’s nice.”

Faith gives no quarter to age-ists. “When I’m introduced as ‘whatever-year-I-happen-to-be young,’ I could [do] murder. I am not youthful, I’m *oldful*. The idea that youth is the only time of life

when you’re vital and interested — that myth makes millions of dollars for people who try to make you feel there’s something wrong with you just because you’ve lived a long time.”

Her folk music CD “Faith’s Favorites” features what she calls her theme song — “Geritol Gypsy” by Peter Krug. The chorus says it all:

*I wanna be a Geritol Gypsy,
drive an RV ten yards long;
I wanna roll on down the
Interstate just singin’ a high-
way song;
I wanna be a Geritol Gypsy
underneath the open sky;
I wanna be a Geritol Gypsy
‘til I die!*

Music and travel... for Faith, that’s the recipe for a good life. ☺

Read more about the amazing Faith in Amy Gorman’s Aging Artfully, a book profiling twelve elder woman who are actively engaged visual and performing artists. Find out more about the book at Amy’s website www.agingartfully.com.

“Faith’s Favorites”, “When Did We Have Sauerkraut?”, the children’s “Sing a Song, Sing Along” and the IWW songs “Rebel Voices” are all available \$15 each from Faith Petric by mail at 885 Clay-ton St., San Francisco, CA 94117;

To contact Faith, email faithpet@gmail.com, call 415-661-2217; or see her webpage at www.members.aol.com/faithpet.