

## I “Own” My Music

If I’m going to use a singing call at a square dance, you can be sure I’m going to know it. Beyond memorizing the words and the calls, there are several other things I keep in mind before I can comfortably say I “OWN” it.

One of my most embarrassing moments as a caller (and believe me; I’ve had many) was when a dancer came up to me after my thunderous rendition of “Seminole Wind”. Of COURSE she was planning to fawn all over me for my tremendous vocals and the way I held that one note for the entire 32 beats of the Grand Square! Or so I thought...

Instead, the dancer informed me that the Indian Chief that I sang about was named Osceola (like Osseeyola) NOT Osceola (like Oh-See-Cola) the way I belted it out at 20 decibels over a typical train whistle. I quietly thanked her and walked away knowing that my ears were glowing red with embarrassment. To this day I still cringe every time I think about it.

What’s my point? I didn’t do my homework. I didn’t KNOW the song, so I couldn’t OWN the song. Even if I had a 5 octave range and shattered every pane of glass in the building with my powerful callers muscle, I still didn’t know the song, and I made a fool out of myself.

Many traveling callers will make it a point to mention the origins of a song. They think it’s important to note that Seminole Wind was recorded on Grand Records by a caller named Kevin Robinson. Truth be told...dancers could care less who recorded the square dance version of the song. Once upon a time, dancers used to buy square dance records to play at home, but they don’t do that anymore

What IS important, is who REALLY recorded the song. The original song. Seminole Wind was recorded by John Anderson, and John Anderson did a great job singing that song. Perhaps, if I had listened to John Anderson, I would have known that it was pronounced “Osseeyola” and not made a fool of myself.

My Osceola experience is the glaring example, but there is a much more important general point I am trying to make. People don’t listen to square dance versions of songs in their car; they listen to the original artist. Square dance callers (in general) do a fair to barely acceptable interpretation of the original. Sure, there are your few exceptions of fantastic singing callers, but even those callers don’t always know the original tune. Dan Nordbye did a very decent square dance version of Stevie Wonder’s “I Just Called To Say I Love You”, but if you ask me, nobody does Stevie Wonder better than Stevie Wonder.

(On a slight detour...nobody does a better Tony O, than Tony O, or a better Flippo than Flippo. Don’t go down that road, because if you’re going to just imitate those guys, the best you can ever hope for is to be “as good as” them. Again...I am guilty as charged...I want to out "Beautiful Noise" Tony O...but it's NOT gonna happen.)

If I'm going to take the time to know my music, I've got to go back to the beginning. When I call "16 Tons", I dig past what Mike Sikorsky did on Elite Records. (ER 1011) I go back to Tennessee Ernie Ford. That man could sing, and if I'm going to emulate anyone on 16 Tons, it would be him. Even here, though, I still don't OWN that song.

The song 16 Tons isn't about Tennessee Ernie Ford. That song is about that miner who has spent his entire life working for the coal mines. He has broken his back every day for who knows how long and he has nothing to show for it. That miner is singing about the fact that he can not even afford to DIE because he has given everything he has got to his job but still owes the company store, and frankly he is P\*SSED OFF about it! This man is ANGRY, and while he is angry about the thankless work...I am going to show that anger in my song! I start off singing quiet and low, more or less resigned to the fact that this is the hand I have been dealt, but as I continue, I get louder and stronger and in my singing you'll quickly see that I'm P\*SSED OFF too. I OWN this song. I feel this song as if I was the one working that mine and I do everything I can to share that feeling with my dancers.

I try to OWN every song I sing. When you hear me sing the lyric, "I'll come back as another man, and I'll be the one who breaks your devil heart", there will be no doubt in your mind as to the nasty intentions on my mind at that moment. (CD 227) A few years back, just days before a convention, my girlfriend broke up with me. I nearly broke down as I sang the lyric, "You left me, just when I needed you most." Dancers who knew me and knew what I was going through at that time actually came up to me after the song to be sure I was alright.

The flip side of OWNING my music is that there are songs that I simply will never be able to pull off. You'll NEVER hear me singing about any "House At Pooh Corner" (RYL 143). Sorry...people who know me understand. I don't care if it's a top selling record and that the dancers love it...it's not who I am.

Once upon a time it was a difficult thing to do the research and find out about the original songs. Now, it's often just the click of a mouse. We live in the information age today. All I have to do is look. I can get free LEGAL samples of songs from iTunes or Amazon.com. I can own almost any original song now for about 99 cents. If I want to know where a song comes from, it's nothing more than a Google search away.

Too many new callers want to impress people with the size of their record collection. (AGAIN, GUILTY! I was one of them.) At some point along the way, however, I realized that quality counts for much more than quantity. It's nice that I physically possess over 1000 legal records, but what the dancers remember is (tops) the couple dozen that I totally OWN.