

FREIGHT & SALVAGE COFFEEHOUSE A HISTORY

If it seems like the [Freight & Salvage Coffeehouse](#) has always been a part of the Berkeley music scene, it's no wonder. The Freight celebrates its 40th anniversary in 2008, and is the longest-running full-time folk and traditional music venue west of the Mississippi River.

Its listening-room atmosphere, the quality and cultural diversity of the performances, and its broad audience make the Freight unique well beyond the San Francisco Bay Area. The Freight is world famous for its presentations of folk, Americana, bluegrass, Celtic, blues, jazz, and Hawaiian artists, and also offers a rich and diverse program of world music. Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Odetta, Alison Krauss, Taj Mahal, Ralph Stanley & the Clinch Mountain Boys, Shawn Colvin, David Grisman, Rev. Gary Davis, Mance Lipscomb, David Bromberg, Malvina Reynolds, Dar Williams, Nickel Creek, and the Persuasions are among the artists who have performed at the Freight.

Ever since June of 1968, when Nancy Owens took over the lease (and name) of a used furniture store at 1827 San Pablo Avenue in Berkeley and re-opened it as an 87-seat coffeehouse, the Freight has been a strong community, where like-minded spirits—performers and listeners alike—have gathered to share the music they love.

“I had a vision of a place where people could be whatever they wanted to be, as individuals and as members of a community,” Owens said. “Almost immediately, kindred souls gathered around and gifted musicians emerged to fill the room with song.”

When the Freight opened, the Berkeley scene was characterized by a freewheeling mix of antiestablishment politics, radical lifestyle experimentation, struggles for racial and gender equality, and a profound respect for traditional cultures able to survive, and even flourish, outside the commercial mainstream.

In those days, everything at the Freight was done by hand. Volunteers baked cakes and cookies and brewed tea and coffee on a small stove. The furniture was comprised of inventory left over from the furniture shop and mismatched tables and chairs from donations, thrift shops, and garage sales.

“In 1968 psychedelic rock ruled the Bay Area and the pop charts, and folk music was written off as dead,” Owens recalled. Nevertheless, players picked guitars and plucked banjos, and the Freight's impact grew. By the end of its first year, the Freight had presented an amazing array of talent from all over the world — Mexican, Chinese, and Celtic music, bluegrass, acoustic Delta blues, and jazz.

By 1972 the Freight was the hub of a growing folk and old-time music scene so remarkable that traditional Appalachian folk performer Mike Seeger documented it with the album *Berkeley Farms* (Folkways). The Freight stage was a welcoming “living room away from home” for folksingers such as Kate Wolf, bluegrass greats including Vern &

Ray, and blues heroes Rev. Gary Davis and Mance Lipscomb, alongside rootsy rockers such as Joy of Cooking and Commander Cody and his Lost Planet Airmen.

At the same time, the Freight welcomed new and experimental music. When mandolin player David Grisman created his “dawg” blend of bluegrass and jazz, he brought his ensembles to the Freight to develop the new approach. As women’s music broke out of its underground confines, the Freight welcomed Teresa Trull, Meg Christian, and Cris Williamson. Delia Bell and Bill Grant brought in a band of Nashville heavyweights to play a mixture of bluegrass, acoustic country, and blues that has become known as Americana and alt-country.

In 1983, the Freight formally organized as a nonprofit entity, the Berkeley Society for the Preservation of Traditional Music. Thanks to a solid base of community support, astute business practices, and a little bit of luck, the club was on its way to becoming a secure cultural institution. Executive Director Steve Baker, who now manages the operation, came on board at that time.

“The Freight already had the attributes of a community organization,” Baker recalled. “The changeover was more of a formality, and the success of our new group became obvious within the first year. Mayne Smith was the organization’s first board chair. He understood that the primary asset of any community organization is trust, and he set a standard for good faith and for commitment to service that continues to set the tone for the organization.”

In 1988, the Freight moved to its current facility at 1111 Addison Street (the Freight purchased the building in 1993). Only three blocks from the original storefront, and with 220 seats, unbroken sight lines, and a new sound system (thanks to Berkeley-based Meyer Sound Labs), the new facility became one of the best spots in the San Francisco Bay Area to see and hear live music.

Reflecting the changing times, the club expanded its musical horizons. Just about every singer-songwriter in the book, from Ani DiFranco to Greg Brown, has passed through the Freight’s doors. World music now makes up a good portion of the programming, and the Freight has hosted Hawaii’s Dennis Kamakahi, Tarika from Madagascar, Hungary’s Muzsikás with Marta Sebestyén, Scottish fiddle virtuoso Alasdair Fraser, Iraqi oud player Rahim AlHaj, and Tlen-Huicani from Mexico’s Gulf Coast, to name a few.

Performers famed for their adventurous spirit, including chamber jazz ensemble Tin Hat, string music pioneers Mike Marshall and Darol Anger, and “avant-cabaret” performer Amy X. Neuberger continue to push the envelope on the Freight stage. And the youngest generation of folk revivalists, from the Carolina Chocolate Drops to the Infamous Stringdusters, continues to blow off any dust that might threaten to settle on the rafters.

Seeing steadily growing audiences, a revitalized demand for folk and traditional music, and recognizing a need for educational programming, the Freight’s staff and board of directors began making plans in 1999 to build a new home. With help from the City of

Berkeley and the Freight's friends and supporters, the nonprofit organization purchased the property at 2020 Addison in downtown Berkeley in 2000.

The Freight's new 18,000-square-foot green performance and teaching facility, with a 440-seat listening room, six classrooms, and a café, is now under construction and is scheduled to open in early 2009. To date, through the generous support of individuals, foundations, and the State of California, the Freight has raised more than \$8 million toward its goal of \$11.3 million to build its new home. Musician Danny Carnahan and investor Warren Hellman (the force behind the annual [Hardly Strictly Bluegrass](#) festival) are co-chairs of the New Home Campaign.

The Freight continues to fulfill its mission without compromising its financial security. The organization meets more than 85% of its operating budget with ticket and food sales, while grants and donations make up the balance.

“While we don't have a standardized approach to things,” Executive Director Baker said, “we remain dedicated to promoting public awareness and understanding of traditional music—music that is rooted in and expressive of the great variety of regional, ethnic, and social cultures of peoples throughout the world.”

“People often us ask us what it means to be a nonprofit community arts organization. The best way I can explain it is to say that we are motivated by these mission-oriented considerations. We're nonprofit because the music we present is too important to be subject, exclusively, to the commercial dictates of the music business.”

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