

Howard Glasser: preserving art and tradition

by David A. Warren

While the Eisteddfod committee awaits word from the Student Senate on its \$10,000 budget request for next year's festival, there is another change it will have to concern itself with besides funding problems: its founder and soul, Howard Glasser, is stepping down from the helm as main organizer of the event and assuming a lesser role.

"To maintain the philosophy of the festival I will continue on as organizer of the performers," Glasser explained. In addition, he will design tickets and posters for the festival, as he has done in the past. But he will be leaving all time-consuming management duties behind.

A visual design instructor at SMU and an expert calligrapher whose work has been exhibited throughout the United States and abroad, Glasser can no longer keep up with the growing demands of the Eisteddfod. As its founder and coordinator, he has found that the job takes up too much of the time he needs to devote to his lessons and his art work.

The Eisteddfod has simply grown too large for him to handle.

Since its conception in 1971, the September folk festival has quadrupled in size. Crowds of less than 2,000 in the beginning years have blossomed to those bordering 8,000 that swarm the SMU campus for three days to hear, feel and live the tradition of dancers, craftsmen, folklorists and musicians who travel from such distant lands as England, Scotland and Africa to share of themselves and their art.

"The music satisfies the need for expression through fixed forms," Glasser remarked in an Eisteddfod publication, "the great appreciation of highly developed skills by the performing artist and the better understanding of our roots and heritage."

His efforts are aimed at creating a certain fellowship between performer and spectator, where there is something for everyone, and where spontaneity can rise to situations—"precious moments"—that one won't see at more rigidly structured events. This atmosphere is what has made the names SMU and Eisteddfod known to persons around the world, and what has kept Howard Glasser coming back year after year.

setting objectives

When Glasser organized the first Eisteddfod in 1971, he drew up a list of eight objectives to keep foremost in his mind as planner and guiding spirit of the festival. These were, and still are:

1. to seek exposure of traditional artists and traditional forms.
2. to stimulate interest in non-professional music making.
3. to stimulate interest in collecting and research.
4. to influence revival performers.
5. to encourage commercial recording of traditional artists.
6. to encourage broadcasters in all of these objectives.
7. to extend interest to all aspects of traditional culture.
8. to encourage others in pursuit of similar goals.

"You could say 'Howard Eisteddfod' or 'Eisteddfod Glasser'—he is the festival," said Collin Williams, who has worked with Glasser on the Eisteddfod as a volunteer since 1972. "But it's more than an association by name," he continued. "Howard gave it the character it represents. And the thing is he doesn't do it for himself: he does it for the performers and the music."

Others Glasser has worked with agree, and comment on his almost religious devotion to folk music. Jean Saltzman, who with her husband Bob (Director of the SMU Alumni Association) will organize next year's Eisteddfod, stated that Glasser "probably knows more about traditional music than anyone I know." This statement is quite impressive when one takes into consideration that Jean Saltzman "grew up with" what has been referred to as the best folk festival in the country, the Philadelphia festival, and was a member of its organizational committee for eight years.

Glasser is interested in the art of the music, and his approach towards the Eisteddfod is to try to preserve the tradition of the music. He has remained true to his objectives with the help of his staff of volunteers, who put in countless hours and entire summers preparing for the three days in fall when the SMU campus is transformed from a university into a cultural depot.

Glasser particularly noted the contributions of Sally Jones, who for the last five years has worked full-time for the committee year-round.

"Sally took certain initiatives that I wouldn't or hadn't thought of," Glasser said. "She worked with the administration and drew out support from the Bookstore, Food Services, the library, the

Foundation...by reaching out she made the Eisteddfod part of the university."

Were it not for the fact that she isn't an employee of SMU, Glasser pointed out, Jones would probably take over the Eisteddfod. Bob Saltzman, on the other hand, is on the SMU payroll and is therefore in a position to work more closely with the administration.

"It's purely a technicality," Glasser explained,



The Eisteddfod allows Howard Glasser to bring together his love for art and music.

photo by Margaret Schuler

but the fact that Saltzman has better access to appropriate channels within the university as a member of its administration, combined with the drive and enthusiasm he has displayed for the festival in his year's association with the Eisteddfod, made him a more practical choice as coordinator, he continued.

Bob Saltzman will go before the Alumni Association at its meeting May 3 to ask them to act as liaison between the Eisteddfod committee and SMU—"to give it a home."

Glasser expects that most of the work on the festival will be handled by Jean Saltzman and Sally Jones. He stated that Jones is knowledgeable of the many "procedural details" such as housing and feeding the performers, public relations, and scheduling performances that must be taken care of and require a great deal of effort to get done. "She knows who to call," he said.

Glasser admitted that he and Jones had differences, but that they respected each other. "Her contributions supported by philosophies of the festival. We worked well together."

introduction to folk music

And just how did this "folk guru" of sorts get so deeply involved with such a major undertaking?

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1930, Glasser was a student at the High School of Music and Art in New York City when a friend scraping for cash asked him to buy a folk album he was trying to sell. Only because the album's cover illustration was done by an artist he admired was Glasser talked into the deal.

Accustomed to listening to classical records while he worked on his art as background music, he "first thought this odd addition to my collection sounded terrible," but gradually through his years working as an apprentice in various studios while attending night classes at the Art Students League and the Brooklyn Museum Art School, he grew to love folk music and proceeded to purchase every folk album that crossed his path.

Still in his twenties, Glasser opened his own design studio in New York and concentrated his efforts on his calligraphy, which he sold to major publishing houses including Random House, Holt, and the Oxford University Press for their cover art, and to institutions like the United Nations and the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.

After teaching part-time at the Cooper Union in New York, he moved on to Pittsburgh and a job teaching full-time at the Carnegie-Mellon University.

Wasting an hour one afternoon in 1960, he stumbled into a travel agency and asked for some brochures on Scotland, the origin of much of the folk music he loved. When the clerk asked when he would like to leave, he decided to go along with him as a gag and blurted out a departure and a return

date. He had his laugh and forgot the episode... until the travel agent called him a week later and said that it was arranged and could he send a check. Booked for a three-month visit, he didn't know what to say. On a whim he decided to go.

Seeking out folk ballads to record on his portable tape recorder, he travelled the entire country, encountering in the Hebrides Islands of the north the "Ceilidh" (pronounced Kay-lee), which is defined as a gathering or a party to make music. This trip and a return expedition in 1963 produced 200 hours of field recordings by Glasser, a portion of which has been added by the Library of Congress to its Folk Music Archive.

Ceilidhs come to the U.S.

He also brought the concept of the Ceilidhs back with him to Pittsburgh, and started his own informal Ceilidhs at the university in 1961. Over the next seven years he held a number of these gatherings and got to know a number of performers. As word spread about these Ceilidhs, performers started dropping in unannounced, Glasser said, including such notable musicians as Loudon Wainwright.

In 1969 Glasser moved his radio show and Ceilidhs to the University of Rhode Island, and two years later came to SMU. His monthly Ceilidhs were so successful that a group of students approached him with the idea of putting together a festival. In 1971 Eisteddfod was born.

They couldn't call it a festival, Glasser expressed. After a bad experience with an outdoor rock festival in 1969, neither the SMU administration nor the local police would go for anything with the word "festival" attached to it. So Glasser came up with Eisteddfod, a Welsh work that translates into "a coming together and sitting down of bards and minstrels."

Funded by the Student Senate and presented through the Cultural Events Committee (of which Glasser was member), the Eisteddfod was a hit from the beginning, according to Glasser, and was compared to the Philadelphia festival. The performers loved it, and by word of mouth the Eisteddfod developed an impressive reputation around the world.

Glasser began receiving inquiries from many groups who wanted to arrange their touring schedules around the Eisteddfod. "They didn't do it for the pay (which was only \$50 for three days work), but for the exposure," he explained.

In a few years the festival broke away from Cultural Events and an independent Eisteddfod committee was made an entity, although funding continues to come from the Student Senate. The festival continued to grow in the number of musicians, workshops and spectators until it became clear that things were getting terrible complex and expensive.

In 1977 Howard Glasser published a letter of resignation in his Eisteddfod newspaper. "...It has become impossible for the small group of volunteers to maintain those standards established," the letter read, "and at this time the University is unable to assist in establishing the efficient and responsible organization to carry on...at the time, it has become impossible for me to continue my involvement with the Eisteddfod."

Called into SMU President Donald Walker's office, Glasser was asked what he needed to continue the festival. As a result of that meeting, the Eisteddfod committee was given an office in the Campus Center to work out of (instead of Glasser's office), additional funding to hire a coordinator, university support where possible (use of postage machines, copy machines, telephone expenses, and assistance from public relations), a lighter course-load for Glasser, and a promise to help find grants to subsidize \$5,000 worth of accommodation costs for the performers.

Funding and growth remained problems, however, and university cutbacks forced an increased workload upon Glasser, who began looking for a new director. He met with Walker three weeks ago and was told to "continue on whatever basis you can."

Glasser feels the administration has "done what they could for the festival. The desire was there to help." Pending an assurance from the incoming Student Senate that the Eisteddfod will receive its \$10,000 budget request, the Eisteddfod will be back for its twelfth year, although cutbacks in the number of days (three to two), workshops (seven to three), and performers (80 to ?) seem inevitable (See last week's Torch).

Glasser believes the Eisteddfod will continue despite cutbacks, and even if it changes its philosophy from the one he created it under, he will still support it, and continue to present Ceilidhs.

"I'm just delighted that it is living on—in any form. It has been a part of me. Something that I hoped I could share with others. There are people who have seen it and appreciate it. That's my pay. I'm paid up."