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## Story as Song: Filking Children's Literature

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It is midnight at your local science fiction convention. The daily programming and contests have ended. Most of the delegates, costumed or casual, have retired to their hotel rooms or begun the long drive home. Although the hotel lobby is deserted, a faint wave of music floats through the air -- not the electronically-piped Muzak supplied by the hotel, but the gentle strum of a guitar accompanying a soprano voice. The source of this melody is a wide meeting room in a forgotten corner of the hotel. It is midnight and the filking has begun.

Filk is a form of folk music unique to the science fiction/fantasy community. It is a music largely inspired by books, movies, television shows, and comics. Mirroring its broad speculative sources, the styles range from original work to parody to ballads to parody of parody. The musicians themselves are an equally diverse group, composed of talented amateurs, struggling professionals, and those who simply enjoy listening to these unique songs.

Born on the convention circuit during the fifties, the first musicians were an eclectic group of delegates from diverse locales. They gathered in the late evening after the regular convention programming was complete, since this was often the only time they could reserve an empty room. Bouncing from person to person, the music would carry on until sunrise as people sang, exchanged lyrics, and offered up stories and anecdotes to their friends and fellows. One year, as the story goes, when a convention schedule mistakenly listed the event as "Filk" rather than "Folk", the genre was christened. The musicians embraced the word as a way to differentiate their community and musical style from the regular folk scene. (For a more detailed examination of filking, check out [A Brief Guide to Filk.](#))

Children's books, especially those with fanciful elements, have been a source for many filk tunes. Oftentimes, the musicians have first encountered science fiction and fantasy through the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, Madeleine L'Engle, or Lewis Carroll. Inspired by these sources, filkers attempt to translate the atmosphere, emotions, and passions into song. As in any creative enterprise, many of the attempts fail, but some succeed beautifully.

Let me start with an obvious failure. Leonard Nimoy, best known for his portrayal of Mr. Spock on the original *Star Trek*, has recorded numerous musical albums. *The Two Sides of Leonard Nimoy* featured a tune called "The Ballad of Bilbo Baggins", which is essentially a three-minute synopsis of *The Hobbit*. The song contains such insightful lyrics as:

*"Bilbo, Bilbo Baggins, he's only three feet tall.  
Bilbo, Bilbo Baggins, the bravest little hobbit of them all."*

It is doubtful that one would ever hear this song performed at a filk circle. The piece fails to capture the mood of the book or to offer any new insight into its emotional depth.

More instructive than the failures are the successes. Kathy Mar, a popular filker, created a wonderful song based on Margery Williams Bianco's book, *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Rather than summarizing the story, she crafts her song from the perspective of the rabbit to mine the emotional veins of the work:

*"I've often heard the stories of the ones that love made real,  
And often I have thought that I would someday learn to feel.  
I sit here only watching at the borders of my life,  
And the fear of never being loved has pierced me like a knife."*



The song manages to highlight the story's theme of love and loyalty without a strict retelling. It brings a first person viewpoint to a third person story, thus creating fresh insight into the original work.

Another successful song was inspired by the famous puzzle book *Masquerade* by Kit Williams. British singer, Talis Kimberly, wrote a song called "Jack Hare", after the book's main character:

*"Jack Hare, Jack Hare, there's an errand to be run  
Take this jewel to the Lord of the Sun  
'Cos I know you're swift and I know you're cunning  
And I need you, Jack Hare, to do the running."*

The quick musical beat emphasizes the frantic pace of the story, as Jack Hare races all day to catch the Sun. Talis captures the wonder and mystery of the book while acknowledging the puzzle aspects of the work.

One of the loveliest efforts to turn a children's book into song was composed by Allison Durno, member of the Toronto based filk group Urban Tapestry. "Terabithia" captures the wonder and sorrow of Katherine Paterson's Newbery award winning book *Bridge to Terabithia*:

*"Far from the world and the troubles of life,  
Far from despair and fate's cruelest knife,  
Beyond sudden parting  
And healing of heart,  
Long shines all the dreams of Terabithia,  
Terabithia."*

With its slow, haunting melody, the song captures the emotional and spiritual themes of the book. The lyrics evoke the wonder, sadness, and ultimate redemptive powers of a child's imagination, without resorting to cliches or melodrama.

The filk community is a dynamic entity that is growing every year in membership and quality. Conventions devoted solely to the genre have arisen. One in particular is FilkOntario, held in Toronto, which will celebrate its ninth anniversary in 1999. Other conventions include The Second Concerto in New Jersey, and the Ohio Valley Filk Fest, based in Columbus.

Of course, it is difficult to fully appreciate music through lyrics alone. Many distributors of filk music can be found on the Internet. Some sites even carry samples of song, available for downloading and play through audio programs like Shockwave. However, to truly experience filk, seek out your local science fiction convention. But be sure to take an afternoon nap, because you'll be listening to tunes well past your normal bedtime.

### **Bibliographic Information**

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