

A tuneful TRADITION



Musicians perform a lively set at the April edition of the monthly Porch Swing Open Mic, held inside at Tapley Memorial Hall in Danvers when the weather is cold, as it was this day. In the back row on the opposite page, from left, are Dickie Chardon, Joe Mahan, Eddie Dee and Neil Henden. In the front row, from left, are Dugie Russell, Ron Sarro and Dan Tremblay.

Porch Swing Open Mic brings music lovers together in historic setting

It's the third Friday of the month, which happens to be April, and shortly before noon.

This is the date and time when Dan Tremblay and his revolving cast of balladeers take turns picking songs to sing and play.

They are gathered inside the Danvers

Historical Society's Tapley Memorial Hall.

This is the monthly Porch Swing Open Mic, but it's too chilly to be playing outside today. But when the weather is nice, you will find them on the porch next door at the Page House.

By TERRY DATE • *Photos by* DAVID SOKOL



Sway on by

- ▶ **What:** Porch Swing Open Mic
- ▶ **When:** Third Friday of every month, 11:30 a.m.
- ▶ **Where:** Page House, 11 Page St., Danvers. Moves next door to Tapley Memorial Hall if too cold, too hot or too wet.
- ▶ **How much:** Free. Bring your own lunch.
- ▶ **More information:** 978-777-1666 or danvershistory.org

Their songbook is about 30 titles deep, drawn from tunes popular in the 1950s, '60s and '70s.

The songs are catchy or colorful or touching or combinations thereof.

Among them are "Shanty" by Jonathan Edwards; "Take Me Home, Country Roads" by John Denver; "Evil Ways" by Santana; and "Act Naturally" by Buck Owens and the Buckaroos.

The troupe keeps its song choices simple, guided by the old Woody Guthrie adage, "Anyone who uses more than two chords is just showing off."

These guys mostly play songs with three chords, but no one is showing off.

The jam is for fun, and any other motivation deemed patently ridiculous and subject to scorn and infamy – for starters.

They pass out sheets with lyrics and chords. And for anyone who just wants to strum along, Tremblay or another regular will holler out the chords before the song starts.

They also play a few originals, thrown in to keep them honest.

Dugie Russell, a veteran from Beverly, has one he wrote about his garden and a friend who took great pleasure spending time there.

Russell sings it in a talking voice, and it sounds good.

Give these guys a compliment, and at least one of them will make a joke, the self-deprecating kind.

Something along the lines of, "Yeah, we're faking it, believe me."

The fellows are mostly guitarists and retirees but for pianist Dickie Chardon, a Marblehead ironworker who still builds bridges.

Russell, who plays acoustic guitar, is still working, too.

He has been a diver for half a century and seeks treasure of the historical variety, including nails made by Paul Revere. Russell also rummages for mushrooms – in forests, fields and even along city streets.

Joe Mahan, a retired engineer who lives



From left, guitarists Dugie Russell, Ron Sarro and Neil Henden get in sync at a recent open mic.

in Beverly, plays guitar and harmonica.

He's got five or six of the mouth harps scattered on a white chair cushion next to him.

He has to shuffle through the lot to find the one in the right key for the song they are playing. Ever the engineer, he is building a rig to organize them.

Right now, he's singing "White Bird," a mournful 1969 song by a band called It's a Beautiful Day.

"That's a real tearjerker," Chardon says after the tune ends with a sad piano run and final guitar strum.

For the next number, Chardon picks "Peaceful Easy Feeling" by the Eagles.

The guys like to chat between songs, among themselves and with the audience.

The porch series has been around for five or six years, Tremblay says. A core group of four or five musicians is joined by others.

"Well, we couldn't ask for a better audience, you guys," Chardon tells the room.

"Thanks for coming out today," Tremblay says. "It's great to have live people here."

"You know what they say, 'It's better to look down on the daisies than to be pushing them up,'" adds Neil Henden, a Danvers guy who plays guitar and mandolin.

Meanwhile, the band recruits a percussion section from the audience. It take a little crystal blue persuasion.

Chardon retrieves a hand drum and tambourine, and the holdouts relent.

The others drum on their lap or a tabletop and bring a nice beat to the remaining songs.

The open mic is one of sundry entertainments and events held at Tapley, a red-brick hall built in 1930.

It's a relaxed and stately setting befitting a historical society, a cross between a small concert hall and a big parlor.

Light enters through tall, arched windows. Look through some of them, and you will see the spire of Second

Congregational Church on Maple Street.

Scores of lightweight chairs line the floor.

Pleasing light-green trim accents the room of about 1,000 square feet.

The seated musicians play below a short stage, the kind common in social clubs and elementary schools built back in the day.

Listen carefully between songs for the faraway echo of a long-past tap dance recital or young narrator in bow tie clopping the stage to introduce a Thanksgiving pageant.

Framed portraits hang around the room.

Above the stage is a George Henry Yewell oil painting of Grenville Dodge, an engineer for the Union Pacific Railroad, a major cog in the creation of the transcontinental railroad and a general in the Civil War.

Also looking down from their frames, moving clockwise, are paintings of John Greenleaf Whittier; Mrs. Clara Preston; "Ricky," son of artist Richard "Dick" Ellery; Francis S. Dodge; Charles S. Tapley; and the Rev. Alfred Porter Putnam.

The jam gives the players a way to keep their hand in music. Tremblay, a retired health officer, played around the North Shore for years, setting up in taverns and Veterans of Foreign Wars posts.

Ron Sarro, of Peabody, says that he joined the open mic a couple of years ago.

"I rode my bike by, and I saw them playing, and I've been coming back ever since," he says.

The only friction arrives, on occasion, over which song they will play next.

Today, there's a back-and-forth over whether to play "Tiny Bubbles."

The jam finishes the song "Shanty" riding high.

"Everybody's doing good here today," Tremblay says. "It's amazing."

"What time do the dancing girls get here?" one of the musicians asks.

A woman in the crowd tells them they need to play a dancing song, and the dancers will come out of the woodwork.

It's then that Tremblay opts for "Tiny Bubbles," and Sarro resists.

He ultimately relents when Tremblay says that he can do a very fast version of the Don Ho song.

"Those of you who like to be out in the islands, if you want to put your lei on, you can dance sideways with your hands," Tremblay says.

"Tiny bubbles in the wine make me happy, make me feel fine ..."



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