

# We Sing Again

MAY 10 . . .



*Rose Sigal Golomb*

## HUNTER SINGS THROUGH THE YEARS

It was confusion, delirium. It was creative, artistic. It was banal, garish. It was scintillating, spectacular. It was May madness. It was SING!

From the preliminary preparations in 1917 to the final performance in 1959, it was the greatest attraction of the Hunter Year; it aroused an enormous amount of enthusiasm in participants and viewers alike; it evoked more class spirit, more cooperation than any other class or college event; and it lives on in the memories of a larger number of alumni than does any other extra-curricular happening.

How did SING begin, and what then caused its demise in 1959? "What Hunter urgently needs," state some Student Council minutes of December 1916, "is a new activity—something that will promote college and class spirit as do the Athletic Meet, the Varsity Play, and the Interclass Basketball Games. But it should be something that every student in College can join in if she wants to. Equally urgent are some new college songs—Hunter songs—songs we can put into the new edition of our songbook, songs we can all sing when groups or classes get together."

A few weeks later, three BULLETIN (the College weekly of those days) staff members, reporting to Student Council on the first intercollegiate newspaper conference, held at Poughkeepsie, spoke glowingly of Vassar's step-singing. Then they presented the germ of an idea for a Hunter song-fest that might fulfill

both "urgent needs"—an annual singing competition among the classes, in which every student could join. The songs would have original words and music, and from the best class songs of each year a body of Hunter songs could be compiled.

The idea met with instant acceptance. An overall committee was formed to work out details of the competition, with the Vice-President of Student Council as Chairman. The classes were alerted. Class musicians and lyricists set to work. Weeks of feverish excitement followed. Class rehearsals were held in secret, with guards at the doors. The Class of 1918 offered a prize of a baton to the winning class. (They were certain they would win it.) Judges were selected and a system of scoring by points established.

Then, on Friday, May 11, 1917, SING was born. With no scenery and no costumes, the enthusiastic class groups, showing their class colors in crepe paper and ribbon decorations, one by one marched into the Chapel, singing their entrance songs. An interested audience of faculty members and alumni visitors crowded the balcony. It is noteworthy that the Senior Class of 1917, unable to take part in the preparations for SING because of the impending License #1 examinations, nevertheless refused to be left out. Led by the Student Council and Class Presidents, seventeen of them marched in, in lockstep, singing "Long may she live, our College fair."



HUNTER ALUMNI QUARTERLY

# ... 1968 ...

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Each group had prepared a humorous class song of which only the words had to be original; a serious class song and a serious college song, both with original words and music. The entrance song did not count in the scoring. Cheers, boosts, and knocks were made up on the spur of the moment, hurriedly communicated to a few others, and rendered just as soon as the performing class finished its last note. (1918 even had carbon paper to facilitate making quickly as many copies as possible of the spontaneous gems.) Class pianists vied good-naturedly for first crack at the piano. Here indeed was the "new activity" in which almost every student could join. Sadly pitied were those girls who worked and had been unable to get time off for SING's debut. The first SING, won by 1918, was all its sponsors had hoped for.

The next few years proved conclusively that SING had indeed come to stay. Students, faculty, and alumnae attended in such numbers that the Chapel balcony could no longer hold them. In 1925, SING began its sixteen years of wandering—singing in turn in the Central Opera House, in Carnegie Hall (much too small), and in Madison Square Garden (following upon the heels of the circus). SING '30 was held in the Roxy Theatre, but those who took part in SINGs '28 and '29, '31, '32, and '33 could boast forever after of having sung in the Metropolitan Opera House. The Hippodrome housed the SINGs of '34, '35, and again in '39 (after which the Hippodrome was razed); Mecca Auditorium was host in '36, and the Center Theatre in '37 and '38. The return engagement at the Metropolitan in 1940 ended SING's wanderings. The following year the students were home in their own new building, in the Assembly Hall that was to see on its stage some of the most famous musical personalities of modern music history.

The somewhat impromptu atmosphere of the wandering SINGs was over. With Mr. Joseph Londin as Technical Director at the Assembly Hall, SING sets and lighting could become more elaborate. At this time the Central Sing Committee was enlarged to include lighting and production directors and a banquet chairman; later were added a rehearsals chairman, a stage manager, a Bronx coordinator, and a freshman advisor. Miniature SING, presenting excerpts from the previous year's performance by the three upper classes, was instituted to brief the freshmen on the nature of SING. The production became more and more a "spectacular," and less and ever less the all-college



*Sing '67 Rehearsal*

activities its originators had hoped for, and which the College still needed.

SING was changing fast. In the early years the simplest of costumes and props were added. It needed no more than a large toy goat, marked with the numerals 1919 and carried aloft by 1918's Sing Leader, to create pandemonium. (And now it can be told: the BULLETIN publication room had a small door opening on to the rafters above the Chapel. It was there that the goat had been hidden, and the Editor, in retrieving it, almost fell to the Chapel floor below. What an entrance for 1918 that would have been!) Now costumes and props became more elaborate—Angels, Pirates, Negro Minstrels, and Wooden Soldiers, with the accompanying accoutrements, made their appearance; Elizabethans, Egyptians, Arabians, and Mother Goose characters followed in later years. By this time Central Sing had established technical rules which precluded repetition of themes and a five-year interval before repeating a particular tune. Classes had greater difficulty finding themes that depicted mere humans. The abstract now entered SING—Foods, Dreams, Love Through the Ages, Bars and Stripes, Tempos. The class song and the college song were dropped; original music was out completely. The entrance song and the miscellaneous song, sole musical output of SING, became a conglomeration of brittle, banal, topical trivia—albeit clever and tuneful trivia.

In the early years, the simplest costumes were made and paid for by the participants themselves. The more affluent contributed the cost of the props. Admission was free. When SING moved out of Chapel, and renting costs had to be considered, admission was charged—ten cents, twenty-five cents, and in 1928 at the Metropolitan, it was a dollar for standing room. But SING always made a profit and SSGA was the beneficiary. In 1944 part of the proceeds were donated to the Intercollegiate War Drive. War bonds were sold during the intermission. This practice was continued the following year and additional contributions were made to the American Red Cross.

The increasing cost of the SING banquet was another item unknown in the early days. The winners would crowd into the ice-cream parlors and tearooms on Third and Lexington Avenues for their celebrations. When sister-class banquets became an established fact, the presentation of the baton to the winning class was shifted to the banquet.

The baton remains the priceless possession of the winning class, and is frequently brought out at reunions of the class. From 1917 to 1940, the batons were of ebony, with silver tip and band on which could be engraved the numerals of the winner. They were imported from Germany. During the war it was impossible to get them but 1918 commissioned a salesman for a music supply company to buy up any batons he could find as he visited music stores throughout New England.

Meanwhile men had arrived at Hunter and SING was delighted to make use of them. In 1948 they merely helped with the background chores; in 1949 they were on committees. This year also saw a Vet's



Sing, offered only as an added attraction but not subject to the judging. In 1950 came the first male stage manager and the first male member of SING. From then on SING choruses were coed, and in 1953 came the first male SING leader. The men were definitely in.

In 1956, SING presented a four-class salute to the alumni, featuring the massed choruses in a musical tribute to SING's fortieth anniversary. The alumni prepared an exhibit in the North Lounge, SING THROUGH THE YEARS. It included the mimeographed song sheets of the first year, and a complete collection of SING booklets from 1918 through 1956—the prized possession of the Class of 1918. Alas! The following year the exhibit was borrowed for use at Miniature Sing, stored somewhere in the College, and has never been seen since. Now that SING is no more, it might be a project for some SING enthusiast to advertise for and collect as complete a set of SING booklets as possible and present them to the Alumni Archives.

For that same anniversary, ARROW published a SING SUPPLEMENT of facts and fancies about SING saying, in part,

“SING is our tradition. It is the activity that has come to symbolize the creativity, camaraderie and zaniness of Hunter students, three qualities, which, though typical of many undergraduates, are seldom found in any one. We find in the members of SING choruses the esprit de corps that is notably lacking in other campus groups . . . SING has its shortcomings but they are minor when compared to the benefits. SING is tradition. SING is Hunter College. It is real and we love it.”



What then happened to SING? Why is it no more? Should efforts be made to revive it? The answers are as many and varied as the people questioned.

More students work; many are interested in more serious activities. Hunter has become too big for any meaningful all-class activity. The small percentage of any class taking part in SING negates its value as a class-unifying project. The trend toward more and bigger spectaculars has lost for SING any meaning as a college event. Creativeness no longer produces meaningful lyrics and singable music; it has given way to brilliant sets, theatrical lighting effects, gaudy costumes, farcical and satirical take-offs of current celebrities and events. Are the results worth the tremendous efforts that have to go into SING? Many people at Hunter think the answer is "No."

Others, however, point to the value of selfless co-operation, the opportunity of learning to work together for the good of a cause. These, they believe, are the end results of SING participation.

The fact remains that in 1960, after forty-three SINGS, student interest in this tradition had lessened to such an alarming degree that SING quietly faded away.

For six years it remained as a cherished memory for all those alumni and friends who had known the enchantment of SING. Then in 1967, sponsored by the Centennial Fund, SING had its renaissance. It was under the direction of former SING leaders and had former SING participants in the chorus. It was part of the Alumni Association Spring Reunion, and the Alumni flocked to it. They brought husbands and children to see the revival of this College event that words had never been able to describe adequately. It was such a colossal hit that it's being done again this year. And, now some of Hunter's undergraduates will participate in SING 1968.

As ARROW had stated:

"SING has been a magic carpet for Hunter audiences, transporting thousands through time and space, each flight a sparkling musical adventure."

*Rose Sigal Golomb, '18*

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