



## NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

### Smokestack Lightning

It's no easy thing to make history come alive with a textbook. You cannot raise the dead to tell a tale, but you can raise the roof with some toe tapping music. In 2003, a small group of professors at the University of Pittsburgh surprised themselves and others by singing ballads, chanteys, blues, and folk music to convey the working class experience to their students. They took the name of Smokestack Lightning. Joe White, history professor-turned-singer, regarded the experience as a miracle: "It was rather like the hummingbird. There's no explanation of how it can fly, and there's no explanation how this group took to singing,

but they did." With some reconfiguring, they are still singing 16 years later.

Here's how it went in the early days, according to Randy Scott Smith, one of the founders: "At rehearsals in our homes, people proposed certain songs and through a very unorganized collective approach, we came up with arrangements and decided who would sing and play on which songs. Usually songs would develop as each group hived off and worked on their song."

"At first, we weren't a band at all but a 'performance troupe,'" says Bernie Hagerty, another cofounder. "We deliberately recruited Pitt undergraduates, grad students, and faculty, as well as community musicians." And they performed many kinds of music. "We did everything from folk to rock to country to blues. Scott and I did a harp-and-slide guitar version of John Henry that I don't even know how you'd classify, and Professor Pete Karsten specialized in sea songs from the 1700s. If there

was to be an image beside the word "eclectic" in the dictionary, it would be a photo of us." The group performed in classrooms, various venues, and had an annual concert for several years in Bellefield Hall at the university.

Smith adds, "People came and went but there was a nucleus that kept the project together. Nick Coles and a core from the band created a more sustainable and more musically coherent band." Coles, who is still with the band, has taught a class on Working Class Literature in the English Department since 1980. There are songs in the syllabus, and singing in the classroom.

Hagerty also uses music: "I've been doing a multimedia presentation with Tony Novosel in the classroom on World War I that included songs, and it worked out pretty well. Last semester I sang Masters of War in my Terrorism course to help explain the mindset of the Weathermen. I usually break into song about three times a semester."



A 2015 Smokestack Lightning show at the Friends Meeting House.

Both photos courtesy of Nicholas J. Coles.




From left to right: Nick Coles, Phil Smith, David McLaughlin, William Cohen (with mandolin), Stever Weber, Heidi Wettlaufer, and Tom Hoffman.

Their catchy name, Smokestack Lightning, evokes the image of orange flames shooting up from the mills in Pittsburgh's past, but came from a blues song composed and sung by Howlin' Wolf in the Delta region. Howlin' Wolf said it best: "We used to sit out in the country and see the trains go by, watch the sparks come out of the smokestack. That was smokestack lightning."<sup>1</sup>

There are seven members in the band today: Coles from the original group, Steve

Weber from the Chemistry Department at Pitt; Phil Smith, retired from the English department; William Cohen from Carnegie Mellon University's Computer Science Department; David McLaughlin, fiddle player and Westinghouse engineer by day; Heidi Wettlaufer, vocalist and banjo player, is an education consultant on autism; and Tom Hoffman, playing many instruments, works part-time for the Sierra Club.

As an amateur band with day jobs, they

perform mostly benefit concerts, and never for pay. One recurring performance is a yearly benefit to a packed house each December at the Friends (Quakers) Meeting House. In past years, beneficiaries, chosen by the Quakers, have included Casa San Jose (which aids immigrants to our city), Pittsburghers for Public Transit, and the Literacy Council, plus relief for typhoons, famines, and earthquakes in many countries. Bernie Hagerty looks on with pride: "We are glad the current band carries on the name so well." 

You can find Smokestack Lightning online at: [www.facebook.com/Smokestack-Lightning-115718095117038](https://www.facebook.com/Smokestack-Lightning-115718095117038).

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<sup>1</sup> [www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/500-greatest-songs-of-all-time-151127/howlin-wolf-smokestack-lightning-52561](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/500-greatest-songs-of-all-time-151127/howlin-wolf-smokestack-lightning-52561).



## Smithsonian Connection

### Traction brake valve, c. 1875

*Pittsburgh: A Tradition of Innovation*

Even before George Westinghouse's air brake patent of 1869, railroads used air pressure to slow and stop trains. This "straight air" system sent steam from the locomotive boiler to the wheels. This traction brake valve became part of the system that distributed compressed air to the brakes. The danger came when any part of these systems leaked, causing the brakes to fail, just as the hydraulic systems in an automobile can still fail.

Westinghouse's innovation, the "triple valve," reversed the process: compressed air kept the brakes away from the train wheels until needed. To apply the brakes, the pressure would be reduced. That way, if a leak occurred and pressure dropped, the brakes would automatically be applied instead of the traditional method, which failed when the brakes were most needed. Westinghouse's system became known as the brakes that worked even when they failed.

Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, L2007.33.2.

Photo by Nicole Lauletta.

