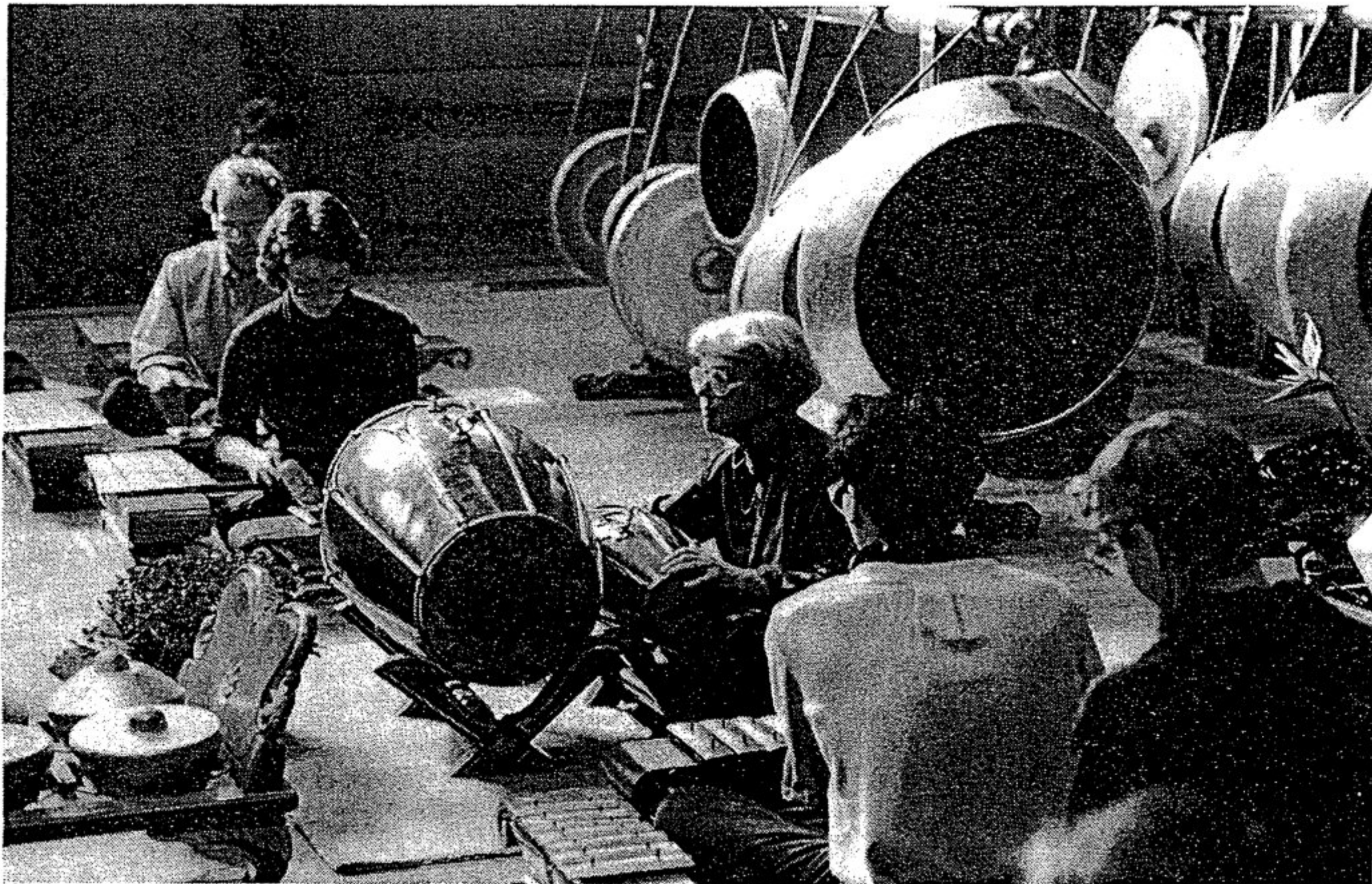


PROFILE

Friends of the Gamelan, Chicago, Illinois



Jane Knourek, artistic director, plays *kendang* (drum) in a concert at Roosevelt University. photo: Gary Sigman

A cardiologist, two attorneys, a bank trust officer, an art historian, an architect, a management consultant, a tool and die maker, two professors, a computer programmer, a psychologist, a therapist, and several professional musicians; Friends of the Gamelan is not your usual gamelan group. Until very recently not affiliated with any educational institution and composed of older professionals, the Chicago based Friends of the Gamelan shares more similarities with the traditional gamelan "clubs" of Java and Bali than they do with most other Western gamelan ensembles in academic settings.

It's ironic that in Chicago, where gamelan first came to America, the music of Java and Indonesia has remained virtually unknown. Until the founding, in 1980, of Friends of the Gamelan—or F.R.O.G—as a non-profit corporation devoted to the promotion and performance of Javanese music, most Chicagoans had never had the opportunity to hear the music that had caught the city's fascination nearly one hundred years before.

Americans had their first opportunity to hear gamelan music at the Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. According to reports from the Exposition, the Javanese Village, which featured a twenty-four piece gamelan, was an

extremely popular exhibit at the fair. After the Exposition the gamelan was boxed up and purchased by the Field Museum of Natural History to eventually end up in the basement of the museum where it remained until, in 1976, it was discovered by visiting assistant curator Sue Carter-DeVale. DeVale had done research on gamelan in Java while a graduate student in music at Northwestern University and could recognize that the original Columbian Exposition gamelan, by then over 130 years old and considerably deteriorated and in need of repair, was still something that deserved to be restored, displayed, and, yes, even played. Several instruments were missing and others badly damaged, but DeVale, along with the help of museum conservators, the ethnomusicologist Ernst Heins, and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Walter E. Heller Foundation, restored the gamelan instruments to their original condition.

By early 1978 the gamelan was placed on exhibit, and in April of that year DeVale began teaching the first classes on the newly restored gamelan. Pak Hardja Susilo, long-time gamelan instructor at the University of Hawaii, was brought in to teach and prepare the gamelan for its inaugural concert. "Most of us started taking classes at the Field Museum," said Jane Knourek, a lecturer in Music Education at Roosevelt University and

current artistic director of Friends of the Gamelan. "But later, the museum decided that the instruments were too valuable to play and stopped offering classes." With the Field Museum Gamelan destined to become "for display only," DeVale, Knourek, and others realized that if gamelan as a performing tradition was to continue in Chicago they would have to make other arrangements.

Friends of the Gamelan was organized in September of 1980 in response to the increasing problem of the limited access to the Field Museum gamelan. By pooling their resources, Friends of the Gamelan was able to raise the money necessary to purchase a new gamelan. "We paid \$1,000 for the instruments and more than double that amount for shipping," said Knourek. But raising the money proved to be only half the battle. After securing a gamelan builder—Pak Dutosudarma, the official gamelan maker at the court of the Susuhunan of Surakarta, Java—and commissioning a gamelan, the actual completion of the project was more than a year and a half away. Finally, in August of 1982 the gamelan arrived and by September it was housed at the Old Town School of Music in Chicago. The sixty-seven piece iron and bronze gamelan was, and remains, the only complete double [slendro and pelog] gamelan in the Chicago area, and Friends of the Gamelan proudly adds that it is the largest iron gamelan outside of Indonesia. The gold-painted iron keys and deep red cases needed a little touch-up after the long journey from Indonesia, but by December the instruments, and the performers, were ready for their inaugural concert.

In February of 1984 the gamelan moved to new quarters at Roosevelt University, where it resides today through a cooperative agreement with the Chicago Musical College at Roosevelt. The college offers one class, taught by Knourek, and others, such as Roosevelt faculty composer Robert Lombardo, are delighted to have the resource of a gamelan available to the Music department. Lombardo would even like to see gamelan become a required course for all composition majors.

In May of 1984 the gamelan officially acquired a name in a ceremony performed by dhalang Sri Djoko Rohardjo, who bestowed upon the Chicago gamelan the name *Nyai Panjang Sari*, meaning "the essence of gamelan music". Rohardjo said the honorific *Nyai* was used instead of the traditionally more masculine title *Kyai* because women were so active in forming and leading the group.

Today, that continues to be the case. For although Sue DeVale soon left to teach at U.C.L.A., she was succeeded as artistic director by Jane Knourek; others such as Janet Hutchins, Judy Prichard, and Connie Segur still remain from the Field Museum days. F.R.O.G. continues to work closely, as it has from its start, with the Indonesian Consulate in Chicago; many of the traditions and customs of traditional Java and Bali are part of its program.

At the same time, things have changed drastically from the early days of Friends of the Gamelan. Today, besides publishing a quarterly newsletter that goes out to 250 people, teaching gamelan classes and performing, F.R.O.G. also organizes occasional films and workshops, runs an Indonesian language class, and sells T-shirts, records and cookbooks at their concerts. There are beginning, intermediate, and advanced classes, as well as the performing ensemble. Current active

membership has swelled to nearly one hundred!

The performing ensemble, led by Knourek and often supplemented with guest artists from the gamelan at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, keeps a busy performance schedule. In the past they have performed at the University of Iowa, the Indonesian Consulate in Chicago, Columbia College, and the Chicago Folk Festival, as well as at their annual concert each spring at Roosevelt University.

Although the primary emphasis of the group has been the traditional Central Javanese repertoire performed in a Solonese style, Friends of the Gamelan has been very receptive to playing new works by American composers as well. Several pieces by Lombardo, including *Three pieces for Harp and Gamelan* and *Independence Day* (with choreography by Robin Lakes), have been premiered by the group in the last several years. Most recently, in October of 1985, Friends of the Gamelan, in conjunction with the Mirecourt Trio, performed the mid-west premiere of Lou Harrison's *Double Concerto for Violin and Cello with Javanese Gamelan*.

Ironically, in the spring of 1985, news came that the original Columbian Exposition gamelan was going back in storage to make way for a McDonald's restaurant and increased exhibit space at the Field Museum. Luckily, a new gamelan tradition is alive and thriving in Chicago thanks to F.R.O.G.



Maria Omo [center] plays *bonang barung*.

photo: Gary Sigman