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Real Music About Things That Matter: The Survival of Folk

Gil Bliss

Following a decade-long slump, folk music is enjoying a return to popularity. The term "folk" should refer to music made by common people, not to the media definition of folk music that elicits visions of hay bales, hootenannies and country hicks. Although many younger music aficionados may not understand this, there once was a time when American musical tastes were not dictated by MTV, force-fed radio programming or even the money-hungry corporate record business. Musicians were able to entertain the public even if they had not made videos. Before electric guitars, Walkman units, microphones, stereo television, or even electricity, people managed to amuse themselves with tunes and styles of music learned and performed around the home.

For years, there were no mass-market media to convey these sounds to the general public, and as a result, musical trends were generated and perpetuated along various geographical and socio-economic boundaries. Bluegrass thrived in the mountains of Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia, while New Englanders kept alive a rich tradition of music from the British Isles. Texas swing was played in the Panhandle and Klezmer music in settlements of American Jews. Blues licks abounded in the Mississippi delta and other Southern locations, a direct offspring of the African tradition brought to North America by slaves. Black spirituals begat blues and the blues begat jazz as well as that radical art form, rock and roll. Segregated by the swamps and bayous of Louisiana, transplanted Arcadians developed a unique form of music called by the name of their former homeland, its syllables twisted by time. Their Cajun music is yet another example of an art form indig-

enous to a certain area that has remained insulated from outside influences.

As America became the so-called melting pot of the world, immigrants brought rich musical traditions with them. These musical styles were in place well before the development of an apparatus that would spread them to the mass market, and it wasn't until the early 1960s that folk music was spread across the nation on commercial radio stations. During that period, a healthy folk scene captured the imagination of the country as performers offered a

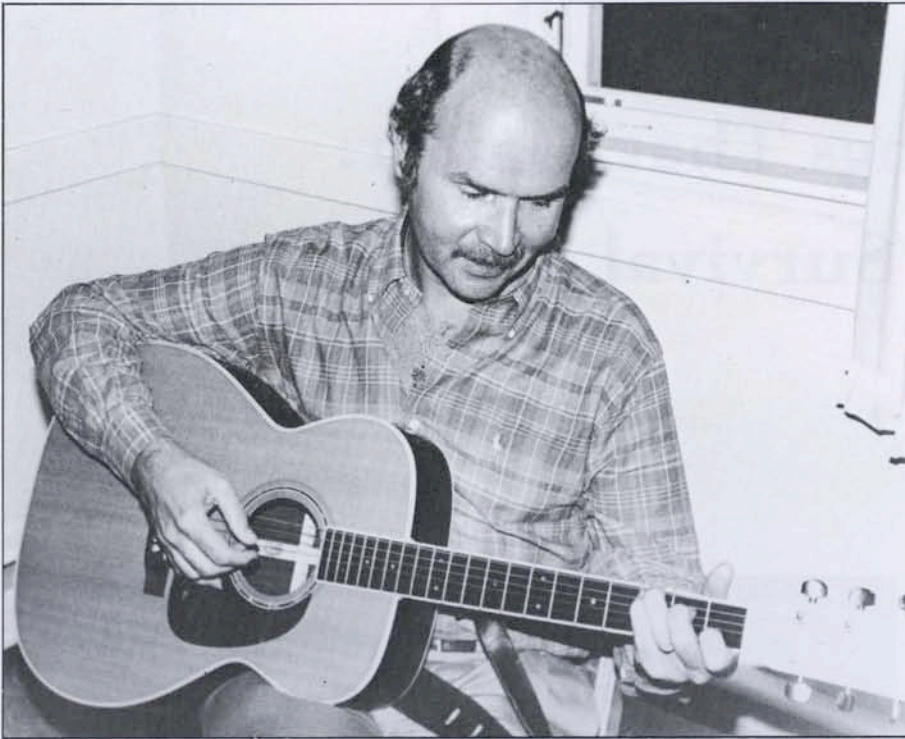
brand of music that incorporated many of the above-named styles.

There has always been a fair amount of "I love you, baby" sentiment in the words of American songs, but the 60s folk movement offered music that featured meaningful lyrical statement. Performers like Woody Guthrie and The Weavers made musical protest statements in support of the labor movement and other causes for quite some time before their music reached a widespread audience. The folk music spreading like wildfire throughout the coun-



Tom Rush

Gil Bliss



Gil Bliss

Tom Paxton

try formed the musical edge of a new age. Social and political upheaval was in the wind, and the new music was its form of public expression; its composers and performers spoke the language of change.

The musical traditions of the past soon gave way to folk music as a way of expressing anti-war sentiment. Acoustic music had been important in protest movements prior to the Vietnam War, but now there were more listeners. The most unpopular war in the history of the United States drew opposition from a wide range of socioeconomic groups. Musical expression of the anti-war sentiment found its way to the public through radio and television. Although the anti-war movement was the dominant social cry of the time, other philosophies found voice in folk music, including the emerging women's liberation movement and the black power/civil rights movement.

With the full force of American media loosed on these formerly simple songsmiths, people from even obscure locations became the oracles of a generation. Hibbing, Minnesota's Bob Dylan and his contemporaries sold thousands of records, appeared frequently on television, and rose

to the pinnacle of a musical empire that had become larger than the American music industry of a few years before. Major recording labels wooed the artists, and tens of thousands flocked to concert halls for live appearances of the new age soothsayers. By the 1970's, rock and roll began to dominate public musical tastes, and protest issues failed to generate the same excitement as they had in the previous decade. Record companies became fat with profits reaped from sales to affluent record-buying Americans. No longer concerned with social content, rock and roll and the record buying public slid easily into the good-time sex and drugs quagmire. Ironically, concern with personal sensory experience derived from the 60s experimentation in free love and mind expansion, but was tragically altered to fit the new hedonistic society.

An economic recession in the latter half of the 1970s served as the crucible for the fleeting yet memorable musical period called "disco." Derived from the 60s discotheques, the new dance clubs featured flashing lights and "go-go girls." They were the pinnacles of self-absorption and fatalistic living. With skyrocketing unemploy-

ment and dismal prospects for the future, America's youth took to the dance floor, undulating to a thumping bass beat and consuming that most hedonistic of drugs, cocaine. One-night stands and a general devil-may-care attitude ushered in the 1980s before a new musical form pushed disco into the museum of popular fads. Punk and New Wave gave voice to the frustrations of a new generation tired of the disco lights and angry at forces beyond their control which had seemingly mortgaged the future.

Meanwhile, the folk sound had been abandoned by the media in general and record companies in particular. Despite the fickle record-buying tastes of the public, long-sequestered musical forms remained alive in the various corners and back rooms of the country. Nurtured over decades, this music was not about to be forgotten along with other temporary trends. Small clubs and coffeehouses around the country maintained performance forums for unknown artists, while a network of independent record companies picked up where corporate artist's rosters left off. The economic depression that struck the country in the late 1970s hit the record companies hard. Lavish banquets and long limousines were part of a lifestyle to which corporate record executives had become accustomed, and when the bottom fell out, they hit the ground with a thud. The result was a radical trimming of the lists artists presented on the major labels, and Top-40 radio stations were encouraged to push a select Top-30. The emphasis was on the marketing of a few superstar names. If a performer couldn't fill an arena with screaming fans, he or she was not considered marketable material. For musicians, having one's work recorded is the chance to leave a permanent mark. Many folk artists passing through during the period of music industry cutbacks failed to have that opportunity. "There's nothing more ephemeral than a song," said Greenwich Village folk legend Dave Van Ronk in an interview last year. "A record is your posterity in a sense." "There are so many people that I would like to hear on record and I can't, and that's very frustrating for me, and more frustrating for them," he said. Van Ronk is a living example of a performer who was once commercially successful (in record com-

pany terms) who was set adrift when times got tough. His recording "Teddy Bear's Picnic" was a major hit in the early 1960s.

After some years, people got tired being spoon-fed the same old formula-rock; the angst of punk lost its intensity and mindless heavy metal rock became the domain of the under-14 set. Previously ignored acoustic musicians began to get a bit more attention from the media, but their resurgence has come primarily in the live appearances. Venues which had been struggling for years suddenly became a bit more populated, and a circuit began to develop where artists could play and sell their independently-pressed records.

A major difference between the current folk revival and the experience of 25 years ago is the level of musicianship. Folk and acoustic performers today feature meaningful lyrical content, and, more often than not, a superior mastery of their musical instruments. "I believe in folk music, and it's worth doing," said 60s folk icon Tom Paxton in a 1984 interview. "The folk scene is booming right under people's noses. There's more good quality music in the folk idiom right now than there ever was in the 60's," said Paxton. Radio programs such as "A Prairie Home Companion" from Minneapolis, and "The Flea Market" from Chicago, are attracting national audiences during their weekly broadcasts. Both programs feature folk music in the truest sense, presenting both nationally known performers, and eclectic practitioners of the more obscure forms, such as bluegrass and Cajun music. "The younger crowd is getting disillusioned with heavy metal and the other standard fare," said popular folk singer Tom Rush of Cambridge and New Hampshire. During his days at the now-defunct Club 47 in Cambridge, Rush gave early exposure to works by James Taylor, Jackson Browne and Joni Mitchell, who would eventually become folk superstars. He has been aggressive in keeping the music alive, and now actively promotes younger folk artists that he feels have talent and potential.

Bob Dylan, the biggest folk name of them all, agrees with Rush's assessment of modern-day musical boredom. "The same limp sentiment dominates the record charts, the kids are getting a raw deal," said Dylan recently. "Nobody's telling them anything



Dave Van Ronk being interviewed by Gil Bliss

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through music anymore. They're just getting a lot of consumer products that aren't doing them any good," he said. "Sooner or later they're going to rebel against it all." While contemporary folk writers aren't harping on the the anti-war theme anymore, they find plenty of other topics. Audiences will pay attention to music with a political message "as long as you're not preaching to them," said Paxton, who has made a career of veiling his sentiments with rapier-like wit and a healthy dose of humor. Folk music will continue to thrive, but it will probably never reach the mass media levels it hit in the 1960s. "There's more of it (folk music) around than five or six years ago, and that's because people are tired of the same old rock and roll recycled and presented as new," said Dave Van Ronk. "There's still not much mass media interest though, and that's what characterized the folk movement of the 60s," he pointed out. "However, pop music is getting boring to more and more people."

Happily, individuality is as much a hallmark of music listening as it is of most other facets of life, and there will probably always be a market for music that reflects that aspect of human nature. Folk music will remain a means to perpetuate musical forms inherent in a particular culture and will continue to provide a forum for new performers. Playing and listening to folk music has a certain inevitability. "As musical tastes shift, folk will go on being played at the grass-roots level, where it started," said Jim Hirsch, director of the well-known folk music instruction school, The Old Town School in Chicago. Tom Rush probably sums it up best. "Folk music offers the same things it offered to me and my cohorts back in the 60s: real music sung by real people about things that really matter to them."

Gil Bliss, art critic and member of the Bridgewater State College Class of 1981, is a staff writer with the New Bedford Standard Times.