

Bob Dylan

YOU DON'T NECESSARILY HAVE TO WRITE TO BE A POET," BOB DYLAN once said. "Some people work in gas stations and they're poets. I don't call myself a poet because I don't like the word. I'm a trapeze artist."

Perhaps Bob Dylan has always resisted labels because he has found himself defined and redefined in public so often. He was originally hailed as the musical heir apparent to Woody Guthrie, a rebel with a cause, the most promising and galvanic of the young New York-based folkies Pete Seeger called "Woody's children." Then he was transformed into a renegade rock and roller, a gaunt vision in black who unleashed his stream of consciousness with a stark beat and created a new kind of pop music that was brilliant, challenging, even downright dangerous. He has been a pop star, a recluse, a country gentleman and a born-again. He is a legend who has refused to simply sit back and act legendary.

Robert Zimmerman was born in Duluth, Minnesota, on May 24th, 1941. His father ran a hardware store. As a high-school student in the late Fifties, he listened to Hank Williams but liked to play rock and roll. He was considered a quiet boy by his teachers and a bit of a greaser by his schoolmates because he hung around with the biker crowd. He had been musical since childhood; he'd learned to play the harmonica and the piano by the age of ten and taught himself to play the guitar he'd bought from Sears Roebuck. Despite his apparent shyness he liked to perform with his friends; as an eleventh grader he shocked a school assembly during the Jacket Jambourie Talent Festival by playing rock and roll in such a frenzied manner that one teacher described it as "positively Dionysian." In his high-school yearbook, Zimmerman stated that his only ambition was "to join Little Richard."

After graduating from high school, he moved to Minneapolis to attend the University of Minnesota. There, in the student quarter known as Dinkytown, Zimmerman became Bob Dylan, a name he claims to have created after he cajoled the owner of a local coffeehouse into giving him a gig. Inspired by an Odetta album, Dylan traded his electric guitar for an acoustic and began to pattern himself after the hard-traveling folk singers of the previous generation. He particularly looked up to Woody Guthrie, with his plain-spoken lyrics, parched-earth voice and Dust Bowl legacy.

In December 1960, after he'd exhausted the Dinkytown scene and lost interest in college, Dylan moved to New York City. He jettisoned his former lifestyle entirely by passing himself off as a clever vagabond, an orphan, a street urchin who literally followed the footsteps of his idols across America. He gravitated to Bleecker Street, in Greenwich Village, where the folk and blues scene was in full swing, because, he says, "it was a great place for me to learn and to meet others who were on a similar journey."

Dylan made his mark quickly. He played his first gig on April 11th, 1961, at Gerdes' Folk City, as the opening act for John Lee Hooker. Dylan's set included "House of the Risin' Sun" and "Song to Woody" (a song he wrote after visiting the terminally ill Guthrie in the Morristown, New Jersey, hospital where he lived the last, painful years of his life). Later that year he landed his first recording session, playing harmonica for fifty dollars on a Harry Belafonte record. That September he returned to Folk City for

a two-week engagement with the Greenbriar Boys. The *New York Times* critic Robert Shelton saw him at the start of his run and, in Dylan's first major press review, called him "a cross between a choir boy and a beatnik" who was "bursting at the seams with talent."

On September 29th, the day the review appeared, Dylan again played harmonica at a session, this time for fellow folk artist and friend Carolyn Hester, who was recording her first album with producer John Hammond. The prescient Hammond, impressed with Dylan's work, signed him to Columbia Records on the spot. A month later, Hammond and Dylan entered Columbia's studio to commence work on an album that would simply be called *Bob Dylan*, featuring the twenty-year-old accompanying himself on harmonica and guitar. It

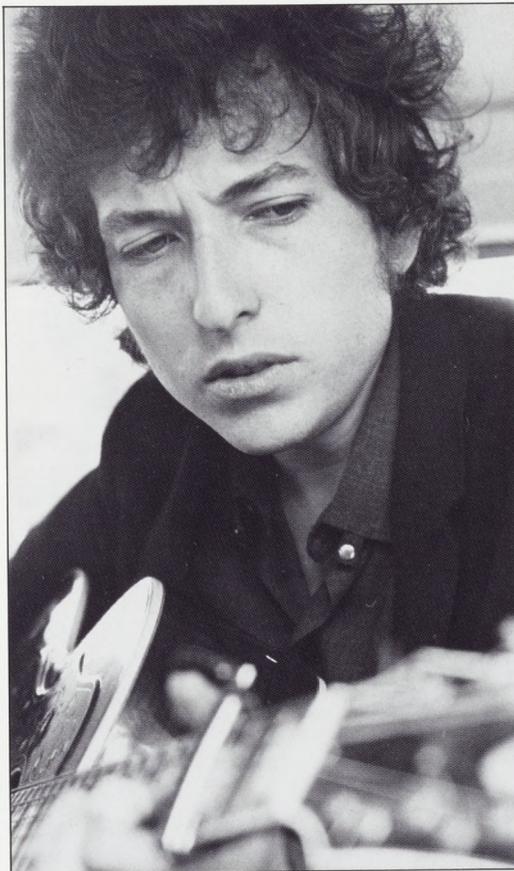
didn't take very long to record. As Dylan told biographer Anthony Scaduto, "I just played guitar and harmonica and sang these songs and that was it. Mr. Hammond asked me if I wanted to sing any of them over again and I said 'no.' I can't see myself singing the same song twice in a row." Total production costs for *Bob Dylan*: \$402. The album included "Song to Woody," "House of the Risin' Sun" and "Talking New York," a bit of wry, off-the-cuff self-mythologizing that suggested the shape of things to come.

In May 1963, Columbia released *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. On the cover, in an oft-imitated photo, Dylan appeared diffident, shoulders hunched against the seeming cold (or the camera's intrusion), walking along a Village street with his girlfriend, Suze Rotolo, clinging to his arm. Columbia executives were skeptical of what they called "Hammond's folly" and had urged Hammond to drop Dylan after the first record. But this second album contained "Blowin' in the Wind" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," songs that had already astonished the cognoscenti in folk circles and established Dylan as a formidable composer and a significant presence. As another awed singer told Scaduto, "In less than one year on the professional folk scene he turns out something every bit as good as Guthrie's 'This Land Is Your Land' or Seeger's 'If I Had a Hammer.'"

Dylan was becoming more influential than his forebears, and his contemporaries had begun to emulate *him*. In a review of a concert Dylan gave at Town Hall, in New York City, a month before the release of *Freewheelin'*, *Billboard*

declared that Dylan possessed "the stuff of which legends are made. . . . His talent will be around for a long, long time." The world at large would discover his work, if not the artist himself, via Peter, Paul and Mary, who would have two Top Ten hits in 1963 with "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right." At the Newport Folk Festival that July, Dylan was the undisputed star of a bill that included Pete Seeger, Joan Baez and Peter, Paul and Mary. He formed a partnership with Joan Baez, both musical and romantic, and together they became the intensely committed — and hiply glamorous — figureheads of the folk circuit.

In early 1964, as the Beatles began to steal the hearts of young America, Dylan — articulate, challenging, charismatic — was occupying the minds of a slightly older set. He released two albums that year. The first, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, represented the peak of his sustained issue-oriented work. In addition to the title song, which has the rare distinction of always seeming topical, the album featured "With God on Our Side" and "The Lonesome Death



Born May 24th, 1941, Duluth, Minnesota

I N D U C T E E S



of Hattie Carroll." The aptly named *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, released in August, riled folk purists with the highly personal, introspective and backhandedly romantic mood of such numbers as "My Back Pages," "All I Really Want to Do" and "It Ain't Me, Babe." Dylan combined the earnestness and anger of the folk milieu with the aura of mystery and unpredictability he had always cultivated – and added just an intriguing hint of inside information. He wasn't playing rock and roll yet, but he was starting to live it. The spokesman was becoming a star.

It was the Beatles who propelled Dylan back to rock and roll. "I just kept it to myself that I really dug them," Dylan told Scaduto. "It seemed to me a definite line was being drawn. This was something that had never happened before. . . . You see, there was a lot of hypocrisy all around, people saying it had to be either folk or rock. But I knew it didn't have to be like that. I dug what the Beatles were doing, and I always kept it in mind from back then."

In early 1965 the Los Angeles-based Byrds chose an as-yet-unreleased Dylan song, "Mr. Tambourine Man," as their new single and cut it, using Beatles-inspired arrangements and elaborate harmonies. Dylan responded with *Bringing It All Back Home*, in which he changed the context but not the content of his work, offering lyrics that were as literate and demanding as they'd always been but set to terse rock and roll. The messages, if there were messages at all, were often oblique, as in songs like "Subterranean Homesick Blues" and "Maggie's Farm" – "Don't follow leaders/Watch the parkin' meters" was perhaps the most analyzed and quoted of them all – but the arrangements left little room for ambiguity. They were intense and unpremeditated, expressing anger or exuberance or a volatile combination of both. As with Dylan's previous record, his folk followers were not amused. A writer in *Sing Out!* branded him "a freak and a parody," complaining, "It's a pity and a frustration, for if ever the world was in need of the clear and uncompromising anger of the poet, it is now." *Bringing It All Back Home* became Dylan's first million seller.

In May of 1965, Dylan left for his first English tour, accompanied by Joan Baez and a camera crew led by documentary filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker. The drama of the tour was captured in stark black and white in *Don't Look Back*, a compelling glimpse of a star's speedy ascent and the attendant power and pressure. Dylan was greeted overseas as a sage, a poet, a people's politician; he reacted with put-ons and put-downs in appealingly arrogant pop-star fashion. As the tour progressed, his romance with Baez began to unravel practically on camera. After his eagerly anticipated debut at the Royal Albert Hall, in London, he spent the evening with John Lennon and Paul McCartney (and allegedly turned them on to marijuana, although his only comment to the press regarding that night was "We just laughed all

night, that's all, just laughed all night"). He himself was turned on not only to the Beatles, but to the Stones and the Animals – to stripped-down, blues-based rock and roll.

Back home in June, Dylan entered the studio to cut "Like a Rolling Stone," with Mike Bloomfield on guitar and Al Kooper on Hammond organ. Actually, Kooper wanted to play guitar, but before the session, he had been fooling around with the organ, an instrument he had never used before, and Dylan suggested he play that instead. Kooper stumbled upon the slightly seedy carnival-organ sound that would be integral to many of Dylan's songs during that period. "Like a Rolling Stone" became Dylan's

Columbia executives were skeptical about what they called "Hammond's folly" and had urged John Hammond to drop the young folk singer after the limited success of his first album. But his second album, 'The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan,' contained "Blowin' in the Wind" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall."

first Top Forty hit, reaching Number Two on the pop chart. On July 25th, 1965, Dylan returned to the Newport Folk Festival and met with a far different response than he had enjoyed in the U.K. and with the new, young radio audience. After playing only three numbers on the electric guitar with the Paul Butterfield Blues Band – "Like a Rolling Stone," "Maggie's Farm" and "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry" – Dylan reacted to the growing chorus of boos by leaving the stage. He returned with his acoustic guitar to sing "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," a choice that *Sing Out!* called "fearfully appropriate." A month later he unveiled *Highway 61 Revisited*, the most audacious and ambitious pop album recorded up to that time – surreal in content, proto-punk in style, ultracool basic in execution, a record that remains a landmark.

In late 1965, Dylan began a world tour, this time accompanied by a backing combo called the Hawks, led by Robbie Robertson – a group that, on their own, would become known simply as the Band. This tour, which included the famous Royal Albert Hall performances, was a moody, tempestuous affair. Dylan viewed the audience uproar in typically sardonic fashion, later commenting to Ralph J. Gleason in *Rolling Stone*, "They must be pretty rich to be able to go someplace and boo. I couldn't afford it if I was in their shoes."

In May 1966, Dylan released *Blonde on Blonde*, a two-record set that contained some of his most deeply romantic ("Visions of Johanna," "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands") and wickedly rollicking ("Rainy Day Women #12 & 35," "Most Likely You'll Go Your Way (And I'll Go Mine)") material. On July 29th, 1966, Dylan crashed his Triumph motorcycle in the countryside near Woodstock, New York, and his career in the center ring of the rock and roll circus abruptly ended.

Dylan's accident, and the year and a half of seclusion that followed, only enhanced his mystique. Although he spent the summer of '67 woodshedding with the Band in the house they called Big Pink, in West Saugerties, New York – a period documented on *The Basement Tapes*, released in 1975 – when he finally reemerged in December, it was with *John Wesley Harding*, an acoustic, country-inflected album recorded in Nashville. It appeared during the height of extravagant *Sgt. Pepper*-induced studio experimentation; *Rolling Stone* noted that the album "changed the rules of late-Sixties rock and roll by artfully demonstrating that it could be subtle and folksy instead of big and baroque."

In January 1968, Dylan performed as part of a memorial to Woody Guthrie at Carnegie Hall. In some fashion he was returning to his roots, except this time he gravitated more toward the country music he had always loved. In April 1969 he offered *Nashville Skyline*, which displayed a richer, mellower vocal style and included a duet with Johnny Cash, who'd been one of Dylan's earliest supporters at Columbia Records. That summer, Dylan returned to the concert stage on his own, backed by the Band, at the huge Isle of Wight rock festival, in the U.K. Although he appeared two years later with George Harrison at Madison Square Garden during the Concert for Bangladesh benefit, Dylan didn't formally resume live performances in the States until January 1974, when he embarked on a national tour with the Band that was greeted with an enormous demand for tickets and enthusiastic notices. These shows were preserved on *Before the Flood*, which, along with his chart-topping *Planet Waves*, was recorded for Asylum Records during a brief split with Columbia.

When Dylan returned to Columbia the following year, he entered the most richly creative phase of his career in the Seventies. It began with the release of *Blood on the Tracks* in January '75. *Blood on the Tracks* was a mature and masterful evocation of lost loves and lost causes executed in the more austere manner of his early work. *Rolling Stone* deemed it significant enough to devote its entire record-review section to the album. In October, Dylan dreamed up the Rolling Thunder Revue while hanging around the Bleecker Street clubs where he had started out. Part traveling hootenanny, part magical mystery tour, the Revue consisted of an ever-shifting caravan of troubadours that included Joan Baez, Ramblin' Jack Elliot, Joni Mitchell and even Sam Shepard (as tour diarist). It made surprise appearances throughout the Northeast and later around the country (in tandem with benefits for the imprisoned boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter). *Desire*, which reflected the picaresque feel of Rolling Thunder, came out during the tour to considerable acclaim and commercial success. Rolling Thunder's musical and romantic entanglements, a melodrama enacted on the road by these seasoned veterans of the star wars, was captured on record (*Hard Rain*), in a book (Sam Shepard's *Rolling Thunder Logbook*) and on film (Dylan's self-directed, shoot-as-we-go epic *Renaldo and Clara*).

Dylan has regularly hit the road ever since, most recently on a worldwide tour with Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers and in American stadium shows with the Grateful Dead. As always, his performances have been events – eagerly awaited and just as eagerly debated. In 1979 he once again shocked his audience by devoting *Slow Train Coming* to songs written from the perspective of a born-again Christian, and he followed it up with the even more explicit – and compelling – *Saved*. In late 1985, Columbia released the years-in-the-making *Biograph*, a multi-album retrospective in which Dylan himself commented on the emotional and musical roots of his songs. It wasn't a summing up, but an opportunity to take stock of an extraordinary, ongoing career. The legend, after all, is very much alive. ■

FOLK MUSIC: 1958-63

By Arthur Levy

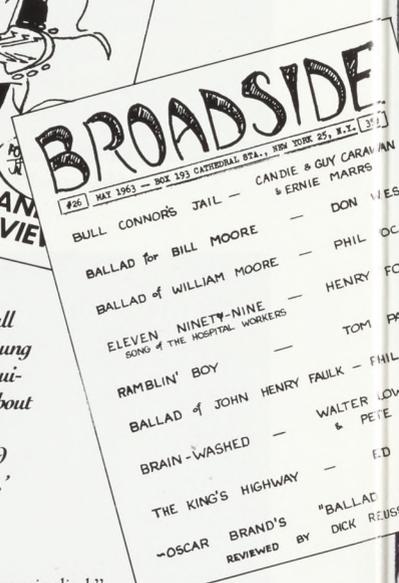
THERE'S A HOOTENANNY COMIN' EVERY week on ABC/Starrin' folk music singers from the mountains to the sea."

In 1963, Jack Linkletter presented the latest entry in the Saturday-night variety-show sweepstakes, ABC-TV's *Hootenanny*. The timing couldn't have been better: Peter, Paul and Mary had just notched up three consecutive Top Ten singles in less than six months: "Puff the Magic Dragon," "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right." To see how far folk music had come in five years, consider that "Puff" was a thinly veiled pot smoker's jingle and "Blowin' in the Wind" had been adopted as the rallying song for Martin Luther King's August March on Washington and soon became the unofficial theme song of the entire civil-rights movement. Did TV programmers need more justification to throw folk music into the lineup?

Clearly, the advent of the *Hootenanny* series, along with an avalanche of *Hootenanny* one-off albums (one favorite was by jazz vibraphonist Terry Gibbs) and even a short-lived magazine named after the show, signaled some epochal change about to take place. The folk boom soon affected food (ethnic cuisine was in), fashion (who dared go without Al Block sandals or Fred Braun shoes?), dance, arts and crafts, summer camps, even college curricula. If the music itself hadn't made such a leap in popularity, perhaps its chances of surviving unspindled and unmutated would've been better. But once it became an important part of the entertainment business, with its requisite support systems of records, concert tours and media exposure, folk music would never be the same.

To understand folk's appeal at the close of the 1950s, one must appreciate a certain disenchantment with pop music that was felt by a specific segment of America's youth. Such now widely heralded developments as the Brill Building phenomenon, the surf bands, even the flowering of New Orleans, were all seen by the early devotees of folk music as frivolous diversions in the face of the revolution that was on its way. These young people had fallen under the spell of Woody Guthrie and Jack Kerouac, Bergman and Fellini, Kafka and Camus, Seeger and Salinger, Gandhi and Ginsberg. Alienation, anomie and relevance were on the agenda, ramalama-dingdong was not.

Nor were socially conscious young people the only ones disenchanting with the evolution of pop in the late Fifties. There is a hard-core school of rock and roll purists who insist that the great groundbreaking work of Elvis Presley (and, by extension, all of the first-generation rockers) began with Elvis's first Sun records in 1954 and ended abruptly with his army induction in the spring of 1958. As perceived by these hard-core purists, rock's wild, untamed nature began to slide hard and fast after the King's departure, and its magic fire



The actions of a small but vocal group of young bloods, armed with guitars, could be read about in the pages of 'Sing Out!', 'Broadside' and 'Little Sandy Review.'

was snuffed within a year, on "the day the music died."

It is precisely within that year that we see the emergence of the Kingston Trio, who were soon followed by an entire new generation of young folk personalities. In 1959 folk singers poured out of every nook and cranny of North America and the British Isles. For them, John Jacob Niles and Burl Ives were no less influential than Maybelle Carter and Bill Monroe.

The new folk singers drew from traditional forms and from fresh musical ideas. And there were enough pop-music fans searching for something new to assure folk music the modest popular support it needed. The key was coexistence with rock and roll, an issue with which the folk community would grapple for the next two decades — and then some.

The commercial folk-music boom started with the Kingston Trio's Number One song of 1958: "Tom Dooley," the first folk hit truly to coexist with rock and roll. The isolated hits of such disparate entertainers as Harry Belafonte ("Banana Boat") and Scottish skiffle man Lonnie Donegan ("Rock Island Line") had been regarded as little more than novelties. But with "Tom Dooley," the San Francisco-based trio's honest and simple performance struck a do-it-yourself nerve that intrigued susceptible youth. The Kingston Trio's studious appropriation of songs and arrangements from the workbooks of the Weavers and the New Lost City Ramblers represented pop homage at its most earnest.

The prospect of a career in folk had presented itself to those kids who were proud to thumb their nose at rock and roll, which had become big business by the end of the Fifties. The gates of folk Eden may have opened, but the lines of demarcation were just as swiftly being drawn.

On the one side were the purists who were uncompromisingly devoted to Appalachian ballads of English and Celtic origin. Since they held day jobs, they didn't fear any commercial exploitation of the music. At their most expansive, they might let a song from Hank Williams or the Delmore Brothers into the

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Concert Report

**CANDID TALKS WITH PETER, PAUL & MARY AND ODETTA; BOB DYLAN SPEAKS;
PETE SEEGER'S FAREWELL; HUMOR BY LOU GOTTLIEB; ERIK DARLING ON GUITAR**



The finale of the 1963 Newport Folk Festival

repertoire; otherwise, they clung steadfastly to a traditional form of song that hadn't been much tampered with for, say, 200 years. Folk purists regarded the advent of Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash as nothing more than a ripple that would soon go away.

On the other side was a network of outcasts to whom the notion of straight employment was preposterous. This colorful subculture of pickin' and singin' "fellow travelers," as the House Un-American Activities Committee pegged them, comprised disenfranchised college students like Cambridge's Eric Von Schmidt, Brooklyn cowboys like Ramblin' Jack Elliott, art-school hell raisers like Bob Neuwirth, well-bred and gifted singers like Joan Baez, classical buffs like Paul Rothchild, expatriates, beat poets, novelists, journalists, photographers, political organizers — and more than a few rank opportunists.

Their role models came from many sources, but all converged into a single incandescent image: the lone singer onstage, a one-man (or one-woman, more often than not) band, with an acoustic guitar slung proudly — preferably a Gibson J-50 or Martin D-28. They were separated from the folk purists by their musical sources, for they drew upon not only traditional balladry but also the rich reserves of immediate forebears like Woody Guthrie and the Almanac Singers, the New Lost City Ramblers, Leadbelly, Cisco Houston, Pete Seeger and the Weavers.

Into this eclectic mix was poured Bill Monroe's bluegrass and the hillbilly of Dock Boggs and the Carter Family, children's sing-alongs learned at the feet of Guthrie, Seeger and Elizabeth Cotten, the house-rockin' hymns of the Reverend Thomas Dorsey and Clara Ward, the white-hot gospel of the Stanley Brothers and the Sacred Harp Singers, Roger Sprung's old-timey banjo, the Landreneau Cajun Band's Creole swing and more — Tin Pan Alley, Dixieland, ragtime and Caribbean, Spanish, Yiddish, Israeli, French and African songs.

Best of all, there were the city and country bluesmen, whose influence was part



Lightnin' Hopkins

and parcel of folk music long before it was acknowledged on the rock and roll side. The deaths of Big Bill Broonzy (1958) and Blind Willie McTell (1959) were felt most strongly in folk circles and led to a time of feverish re-discovery. The legacy of recording from the Twenties and Thirties left by country and Delta bluesmen like Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Sonny Boy Williamson, Peetie Wheatstraw, Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell were a treasure-trove for the tough young performers in 1960.

At the same time, the careers of living bluesmen were experiencing a revival greater than anything since John Hammond's Spirituals to Swing concerts in 1939. The Newport Folk Festival exulted in the newly discovered sounds of Lightnin' Hopkins, Son

House, Skip James, Mississippi John Hurt, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Bukka White, Jesse Fuller, Furry Lewis, Big Joe Williams, Memphis Minnie, Sippie Wallace, Mance Lipscomb, Sleepy John Estes, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee and the greatest teacher of them all, the Reverend Gary Davis, from whom a generation of singers learned "Samson and Delilah" and "Candyman."

It was only a short jump from the rough-hewn Delta blues to the gritty electrified Chicago, Memphis and Detroit styles of Jimmy Reed, Muddy Waters, Elmore James, John Lee Hooker, Howlin' Wolf, Otis Spann, Willie Dixon and B.B. King. Most folk musicians eagerly adapted the songs to acoustic and National steel guitar. But in 1960, electrification was out of the question in even the most liberal folk camps. The closest acceptable hybrid forms were the washboard and jug bands (skiffle bands, in England) that popped up at beach-party hoots and at late-night jam sessions in college dorms and dressing rooms. Still, the image of the vagabond bluesman provided a viable role model for yet another breed of alienated youth.

The bluesmen found their audience on white college campuses and the bur-

geoning coffeehouse scene. Without exception, they were shunned by the urban black community, whose embrace of R&B had already reshaped the commercial Top Forty. Nonetheless, the bluesmen were always an integral part of the folk scene – in fact, they were integrated into the fabric of the folk movement in a way that presaged the coming of a more resounding kind of integration.

All this was being transmitted in the spirit of “the folk process,” a cross-fertilization of ideas that, as 1960 rolled around, reflected the expanding world view of a minority of the new players. The narrow position of the purist elite was being challenged on musical grounds, and the controversy was vigorously debated wherever folk music got a toehold. Over the next three years, in Greenwich Village, Philadelphia, Coconut Grove, Berkeley, Chicago, Minneapolis, Toronto,



The New Lost City Ramblers

Los Angeles, Kansas City, Cambridge and London, the conscience of the younger practitioners continuously tested the patience of the elders; it is to their eternal credit that, in one of Western music’s rare moments of cooperative nurturing, the old embraced the young.

That set folk music apart from any movement that came before, ensured its growth and set its path for the future. Given this blessing, the movement’s priorities quickly revealed themselves, propelled by the promises of the New Frontier, as the Kennedy administration’s agenda was nicknamed. In the pages of *Sing Out!*, *Broadside* and Paul Nelson’s *Little Sandy Review*, on radio programs hosted by Oscar Brand in New York and Studs Terkel in Chicago, in the cluttered storefront headquarters of Israel Young’s Folklore Center in Greenwich Village, a curious scenario was playing itself out for all to see and hear.

The action centered around a small but vocal group of young bloods, armed with guitars, typewriters and – by 1962 – a respectable number of recording and publishing contracts. They also had well-connected and influential managers and producers and the means to turn their thoughts into deeds. Chief among their many concerns was the stalled civil-rights movement. “Which Side Are You On?” was as applicable to their fellow singers and songwriters as it was to the world at large. Sparked by fierce determination and quixotic devotion to the human spirit, the words and music of the folk singers identified the issues and then rallied public commitment where it was needed.

However quaint (or threaten-

ing) the notion of idealism and morality must have seemed to pop-music observers, it was the sole *raison d’être* for singer-songwriters, whose numbers flourished. The recordings of Bob Dylan, Peter LaFarge, Malvina Reynolds, Guy Carawan, Bob Gibson and (soon after) Eric Andersen, Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton and Buffy Sainte-Marie provided a Top Forty of their own. Inevitably their concerns roamed beyond the confines of the conscience-bound folk movement. After all, songwriters are romantics too, and beside the all-consuming problems of



Cisco Houston

the bomb, desegregation, strip mining, the welfare state, political corruption, free speech, apartheid, death and taxes, there’s always room for a love song.

The first golden era (all five years’ worth) of the modern, commercial folk-song movement was heading for its denouement. New singer-songwriter albums were few and far between in 1962, and each one was considered a mini-manifesto in its own right. In the following year, the number of new recordings skyrocketed, with Elektra, Vanguard, Folkways, Prestige, RCA, Mercury and especially Columbia actively courting young performers. While many deny it, a subtle competition had taken shape, and a hierarchy was establishing itself.

The power of folk music was displayed for all to see when Peter, Paul and Mary sang “Blowin’ in the Wind” at the March on Washington. For young people whose social and political convictions may not yet have solidified, it was a time for heart and mind to come together. The powerlessness of youth in the Forties and Fifties gave way to a positive feeling of strength and identity in the Sixties. And folk music provided the marching beat for this transformation.

Hootenanny, which refused to allow Pete Seeger and the Weavers to appear, became the white elephant of folk music when Bob Dylan, the Kingston Trio, Carolyn Hester, Joan Baez and others agreed to boycott it. The show didn’t miss a beat though, filling its ranks with the Chad Mitchell Trio, Hoyt Axton, the Tarriers, Mike Settle and the New Christy Minstrels. The viewing public, generally unaware of the boycott and its attendant controversies, supported the show for one season before it was canceled. Folk music had rid itself of an albattross and, in the process, safeguarded its roots.

The final two events that signaled the end of this magical era of folk music were the assassination of John F. Kennedy and, soon after, the coming of the Beatles, when the country lifted its veil of mourning and radio’s frozen playlists were thawed. It was time for the music to move on. Woody would have been the first to warn his children about staying in one place too

long, but the warning wasn’t really necessary. No one wanted to go back to 1962, and nobody ever did.



Reverend Robert Wilkins, Gaither Carlton, Skip James, Arnold Watson, Mississippi John Hurt, Yank Rachel, Hammy Nixon, Doc Watson (standing, from left) and Sleepy John Estes

Read more about it: This era and the years before and after it are capsulized by Lenny Kaye (a.k.a. Doc Folk) in his liner notes to his indispensable four-volume folk series on Elektra Records: *Bleecker and MacDougal: The Folk Scene of the 1960’s*; *Crossroads: White Blues in the 1960’s*; *O Love Is Teasin’: Anglo-American Mountain Balladry*; and *Elektrock: The Sixties*. After twenty years, *The Face of Folk Music*, by David Gahr and Robert Shelton, has retained its value as a primary source material for this era.