

TRENDS

BY NORMAN SNIDER



Where have all the folkies gone?

IMAGINE, if you will, the following scene: it's a Saturday morning and the Intrepid Trendspotter is soaking in his bath. He has been there for a period of time sufficiently long that some observer might be justified in thinking he is modelling for a portrait of Marat. From a distant room, on the FM radio, wafts the sounds of The Jazz Scene on CJRT, just coming to a close. Then, before he can make a move, the music's changed, and it's the dreaded folk music of yesteryear, and the relentlessly cheery Joe Lewis. Now, rather than leap out of the bath and spread watery torrents everywhere, the intrepid TS settles back to listen to that program's inevitable fare: Joan Baez, the early Dylan, country blues. Ah reader, what floods of memory are evoked. Suddenly a whole vanished world, rival to the Lost Continent of Mu surfaces in front of his eyes. The lost world of folk music! And he experiences, as if in a vision, that vanished milieu of Martin guitars, the Half Beat Coffee House, the Mariposa Folk Festival, *Sonny and Brownie*, *duffle coats*, *scraggly beards*, Travis picking, records with such arcane labels on them as Arhoolie and Delmark.

Ah, folk music, where have you gone? Where is Joan Baez now? Phil Ochs is dead, Tom Rush and John Hammond no longer record on major labels, Sylvia Tyson is on local TV, Peter Paul and Mary are reduced to the occasional nostalgia concert. What happened?

The obvious answer is that rock and roll happened. Once Bob Dylan turned traitor to the great acoustic God and plugged in, folk music was doomed. Its practitioners had two ways to go; they could either try to rock or they could transform themselves into "singer-songwriters." This latter course, by and large, was taken by such former folkies like **Joni Mitchell**, Bruce Cockburn and Murray McLauchlan. They changed and survived: it was the interpreters of the music of others like Baez and Rush that tumbled into obscurity.

The less obvious answer is that, with time, the notion of what constitutes "folk" material has changed. Fundamentally, the folk music of the 60s stemmed from two sources; firstly, the tradition that went back via Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger to the Depression Okies, from there to the mountain music of Appalachia, all the way back to the Border Ballads, jigs and reels of Great Britain. Secondly, there was the strain of Black music centred mostly on the rural blues of greats like Robert Johnson, Sleepy John Estes, Huddie Ledbetter, et al. For the college kids and college drop-outs who made up the folk music audience, there was something satisfyingly scholarly about the retrieval of this music, something almost anthropological in the efforts of musicologists along the lines of Alan Lomax, who would venture out into all the thrilling prole realities of rural America to find some forgotten Tennessee sharecropper, say, Mississippi Fred McDowell, and bring him back alive on tape.

Nowadays, this same audience is willing to listen to the contemporary offshoots of both these forms of music with the same kind of seriousness that they formerly reserved for pure folk. Whereas 15 years ago, C&W was regarded strictly as music for truckdrivers, today, the songs of everybody from Hank Williams to Merle Haggard and George Jones, not to mention Willie Nelson, are listened to by the same audience with an unparalleled reverence. The same holds true for Black music. Where in the 60s, only the blues musicians of the Mississippi Delta and their urban inheritors like Muddy Waters, Howlin Wolf and B.B. King were considered worthy of serious consideration, current neo-folk interpreters like Ry Cooder treat the obscure R&B material of the 50s and 60s, with all the veneration formerly reserved for the traditional material. What links both developments is the acceptance of the amplified guitar, which in the previous decade was regarded by folk purists as the very emblem of vulgarity.

So, with the re-evaluation of the status of R&B, as music worthy of meticulous and scholarly reproduction, some interesting things begin to happen. Wilson Pickett and James Brown and Sam and Dave, rather than being regarded as get-down-with-it purveyors of dance music, begin to sound in retrospect like Serious Artists, quite the equal of any old time blues performer. And songs like Please Please Please and In the Midnight Hour begin to have quite a different resonance than they did when first issued. All this, of course, goes unnoticed by the die-hard folkies who came to consciousness in the 60s. For them, time stands still and it's always Baez and Seeger and Doc Watson, ad infinitum. Okay, one more time now, Guan-tan-amera, Guan-tan-amera. Everybody sing.