

METAMORPHOSIS OF MARIPOSA

We teetered between a sanctified past and an exalted future. Ours was the latest incarnation of Utopia

BY RAY CONLOGUE

It was a sunny day in 1966 when I ventured on a used Ducati 250 motorcycle down the long dusty back road to something called Mariposa. The bike, an engineering disaster, had never been trusted north of Steeles Avenue before, so it was a new beginning for it. For me, too. I was in my late teens, coming of age in a society that (for its young people, anyway) was about to fly apart at the seams.

Not that I could have explained it at the time. But it scorched my private school, have-her-home-by-11 mind to see those acres of unfettered flesh lounging around Ennis Lake in a sybaritic tribute to something called folk music. Of course, I had heard Dylan belting out Maggie's Farm and Masters of War on an aging Seabreeze turntable, and the fumes of good cannabis had entered my imagination if not yet my nostrils; but I wasn't yet sure what it all meant.

Pete Seeger called it a cow pasture that day, but to me it was a gypsy encampment, a summoning up from racial memory of a nomadism that none of us had known in our mundane lives. Two friendly strangers named Leonard Cohen and **Joni Mitchell** talked about making songs, the same way you might put together a horse-cart. Joni illustrated by singing in a curious, reedy voice a tune about nuts and bolts. Nobody had heard of her then, of course. She was a "young Albertan."

And when Blind Doc Watson talked about the sunny day that we all knew had gone under a quilt of clouds long before, his vulnerability abolished the distance between stage and audience that I had never before seen challenged. A web of belonging spread like cracks through spring ice — the portent of Woodstock. No one could name it. A writer called it "surrealistic," which meant he didn't know either.

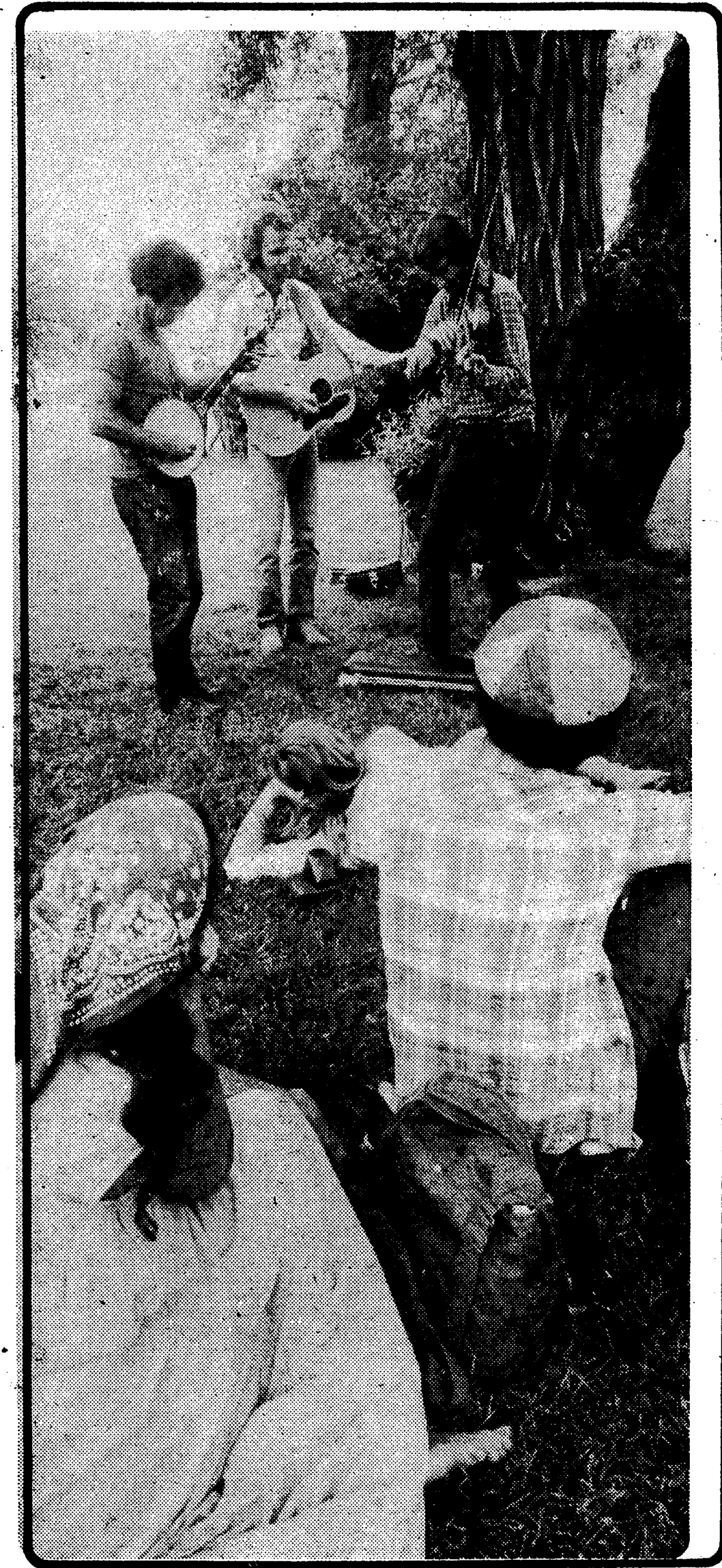
No such problem a few years earlier. In 1963 it was an outbreak of paganism, a fetid bacchanal plain and simple. The Ontario Temperance Federation asked for a study of increased beer sales during the event, and Orillia Mayor Isabel Post swore in a shaking voice that if her council did not send it into perpetual exile, she would personally get an injunction doing so. The Globe and Mail called the assemblage the "screaming, drinking followers of folk music," and the following year the blight was cast into the empty pit of Maple Leaf Gardens, where it very nearly died.

But by 1966, when I sat in gape-mouthed Catholic astonishment while Tom Paxton sang the Talkin' Death of God Blues, Mariposa was not so easy to understand. True, 103 Ontario Provincial Police constables still rummaged behind bushes, searching with late-1950s minds for either fornicators or beer, but revolutionaries and Acapulco Gold had not entered their thoughts. Yet Ian Tyson's guitarist was a draft-dodger.

And did the purists realize that their day was done when Reverend Gary Davis, ancient as a pump handle, stumbled absently onto the stage, drooling horribly, and wandered off in a senile trance before finishing his verses? Or when the news came that Dylan, already an electrified traitor, had been mangled in a motorcycle accident two days earlier and, if he survived, would likely lose whatever remaining kinship he might have with them?

At Mariposa, we teetered between a sanctified past and an exalted future. That was what gave the present its peculiar, millenarian glow. Ours was the latest incarnation of Utopia, and it began to occur to us, as we hugged and sang with our neighbors (weren't they all brothers and sisters?), that this time it might work.

In a way, we won. By 1969, transplanted to Toronto Island, Mariposa had convinced them that it could be trusted. The surly horde of OPPs had been reduced to eight security guards, and they listened, mesmerized despite themselves, as Joan Baez' lute-dulcet voice told them how her husband David had been arrested for refusing to kill in Vietnam. David (and Mahatma Gandhi) were right, she cried; no police-



man would hurt a passive resister. And she would await his release. She loved him (how long? we did not ask; and in a cynical year much later, when she left him, few of us had anything left to betray, and so we did not feel betrayed).

Baez had arrived via the shoreline, walking barefoot in the water, greeting dogs like a lady St. Francis, and her accompanist onstage beamed all night from the Full Lotus position. When **Joni Mitchell** got up to sing Chelsea Morning, no one

troubled to think that her crucifix meant anything mawkishly Christian; enough that it was golden, resting like a segment of beauty on her vivid green dress, near her vivid green eyes. When Bruce Cockburn saw the dew gathering on his guitar, the possible warping of wood did not trouble him. "It's very natural," he whispered.

Folk singers aren't like us, said a critic. They have a "distance from the centre of things," a sublime, loosed spirit that we

can't hope for. Few noticed the cameras churning behind Baez as she trod through the waves and broken willow branches, creating her image as she went.

But when the moon rode overhead, we knew that it had been violated not so many days before by men who rode aloft on columns of igniting chemicals rather than wings of song. That's when Mariposa began to get humble. "The folk craze has passed on," said organizer Tom Bishop. "Now folk music has to be proved a timeless idiom such as jazz or ballet." Singers who had called their raspy, unmusical voices a token of truth began to wonder if it wasn't just the Scotch; and whether their internal condition should be of concern to anyone apart from their physicians. A crisis of confidence set in with the seventies; and of course, not only folk singers were affected.

In following years, when someone like an Indian chief at the ferry docks mumbled about the white man "burnin' our churches an' stealin' our land," the folkies stirred the dust with the toes of cowboy boots and looked uneasy. Reconciliation was the order of the day. "If you don't have a feather with which to pluck the dulcimer," confided Jean Ritchie of the Georgia Sea Island Singers (and in concrete canyons where was a feather to be found?), "why, you can cut yourself a pick from a plastic mar-gar-reen tin!"

We started making up funny songs, like Why Don't They Make Diapers of a Light Yellow Hue?, and the big-star concerts, with the attendant anarchy of gatecrashing, were exchanged for the controllable intimacy of workshops.

By this time, the Man thought we were okay. Only three cops in 1973, and they eavesdropped on nothing more incendiary than workshops on Inexpensive Instruments, or Dirty Tricks in the Name of Love.

And that's what we wanted. Mariposa sold out that year with a bushel of bucks left over in the publicity kitty.

But it starts to be a good question, asking whether those thousands come each year to hear dense discussions of the difference between vibrato and tremolo on a mouth organ, or whether it's the cosmic group grope they're after.

And how many really crave the arcana that Merle Travis learned his picking style from a Kentucky miner named Arnold Schultz, if they can go to the next stage and hear a big name like Taj Mahal?

"Well, I don't know about anybody else," says Chopper McKinnon, a Mariposa director and organizer of the Toronto Folk Centre, "but if there's Andean flutes on one stage and Taj Mahal on another, I'll take the Andean flutes any time."

Yet, not too many people in 1977 are as into folk as Chopper McKinnon. All denim and thatched sideburns, he looks uncomfortable with the oak panelling and trivialized background music of Baffles in Yorkville. He looks Old Folkie. "The problem," says Chopper, "is there's nothing to write about now. In the sixties, there was great stuff. Now you gotta wade through this stoned-in-the-ozone crap."

"But the Mariposa crowd is an older crowd, it came down before the junk. Like, we're all 30 now, and when we go to Mariposa we see people our own age with their kids."

"We're mellowed out now. We don't need stars, we can get into a fiddle workshop."

There's even a new rule that uninvited stars can't pre-empt stage space from lesser but invited mortals.

"And," adds Chopper, "it's like bein' in another country, walkin' through that snow fence on the island. I'm not bein' hokey, none of this 'one under the sun' nonsense, but just the way everyone shares a blanket or gives you a drink of wine out of their cooler."

And there's always the potential thrill of telling Dylan he can't sing because he didn't book a stage in advance. Maybe.