

**FOLK MUSIC CLUBS IN WICHITA:
MELODY AND PROTEST**
by Patrick Joseph O'Connor

The Newport Folk Festival first took place in 1959. By 1963, the folk music program *Hootenanny* was broadcast to millions of homes on ABC evening television. Hits by the Kingston Trio and the Irish Rovers were a part of radio listening. America had embraced folk music and several folk clubs emerged for local performers to join in the singing. This paper will assess the impact the folk movement had in Wichita, juxtaposing this city in the Midwest against those of both coasts, from whence most often movements spring. The plains are the providers, answering these urban calls with versions of our own.

The young thinkers of the '60s found in folk music beauty, humor, and sardonic depiction of American life. They saw in the country a trouble with excess and credit buying. The folk gatherings and performances, held in homes or in recently formed clubs, were a moment for quiet recognition of misdirection and fostering agreement on the way out. Where was this going?

While many performers filled their repertory with traditional folk, shunning the topical, in actuality many folk songs were of protest themes--Woody Guthrie's *This Land Is Your Land*, and the anonymous ballad *Stagolee*, for instance. The mood of the music was one of drama and thought, interspersed with satire. The simple instruments and recognition of the properties of democratization that folk music possessed (the ability to be played and sung by many) carried the feeling of activism.

Robbie Wolliver, in his book on *Gerdes Folk City in Greenwich Village*, wrote "The beats turned neighborhood cafes into smoky dens of jazz, folk, and poetry." While the beats' affinity for folk music is suspect, public perception put the guitar into the beatniks' hands and the music of the people into their haunts.

Dave Van Ronk maintained in an interview that: "The whole beatnik thing had become a mass-media preoccupation. The beatniks hated folk music. The real beats liked cool jazz, bebop, and hard drugs. When a folk singer would take the stage between two beat poets, all the finger-popping mamas and daddies would do everything but hold their noses. When the beat poet would get up, all the folk fans in the house would do likewise. A lot of people came to the Village to see beatniks and ended up seeing folk music."¹

Gerdes Folk City opened in 1960 and quickly became the paramount place to play folk music. By the early '60s, the beatniks had left Greenwich Village, migrating to San Francisco and other points west. This left the devotees of folk music ready-made gathering spots. Robert Shelton, music writer for the *New York Times*, regularly reviewed new acts as they appeared on Gerdes hootenanny nights. On these occasions, anyone could walk in, sign a sheet, and wait for a chance to perform, thus allowing a continuing march of talent that enhanced the craft.

Samuel Forcucci, chair of the Department of Music at University of New York at Cortland, writes "The first hall of

the twentieth century could aptly be described as 'folk song void'. All the ingredients necessary for the creation, dissemination, and popularization of folk music had suddenly disappeared.² It is his view that traditionalism was gone and that pride in one's job was replaced with desire to move up financially. Looking back on the Jazz Age, Forucci emphasized that jazz was not a newer form of folk music, as many had suggested. Jazz, he explains, had a musical message while folk music told a story.

This does not explain Slavic folk melodies or Irish jigs and reels--though lyrics might have existed for these at one time--but these folk compositions, belonging to the people, are melodic, poignant, easily understandable tunes, regardless of the complexity of arrangement. They offer a musically conservative message, as opposed to the often discordant tones of jazz. The rules shift a bit however, and there is no way to make sweeping statements about either genre of music with finality. It is only suggested that folk music glorifies the simple splendor of nature and that jazz is of the city.

A social conscience began to emerge in the '50s and '60s. "It seemed unconscionable that a nation that had recently fought a war to preserve the democratic principles of human rights could . . . deny some of its own people that precise privilege of freedom . . ."³

During the early '60s, many American youths, their attitudes and affiliations jolted by the beatniks, rejected the materialistic and fundamentalist spirituality of this country. While the beats advocated non-association, hard drug use and homosexuality as a supreme statement against the system, these folk music practitioners chose "a simple, uncomplicated life reminiscent of early rural America. Theirs was a highly positive movement that heralded a return to group traditionalism."⁴

These youths had a message to spread

and a method of group communication for doing it: the folk song and hootenanny. Many of the tunes were borrowed from tradition but the lyrics changed to those of a deeper meaning than "Skip To My Lou." Even the fact that the old songs were sung in that modern age was indicative of the reform sentiment of the movement. These contemporary topical compositions were known as protest folk songs and those people, mostly young, who were not appreciative of the finer points of materialism and nationalism, found a musical outlet. Rock and roll, which many in the establishment considered critical of society, was thought by the folk aficionados to be vapid teen-song. It was loud and raucous but the message was, for the most part, simply an invitation to enjoy the amenities of the culture, untrammled by morality in some instances--to carve out a place where the elders dare not tread. It was the majority music of the youth.

Jazz fans disliked both rock and folk. In 1964, Gene Lees wrote in *HiFi/Stereo Review* "The majority [of folk singers] have bad time, a poor sense of phrasing, bad vocal sound, uncontrolled and thin vibrato, no sustaining power, no ear for harmony . . ."⁵ He takes folk singers to task for writing songs about a rustic mode of life they haven't experienced, and charges that ". . . when art is chained to temporary social problems, it can only be temporary art . . ."⁶

He certainly was correct about the fleeting aspect of the folk revival. One could see that the commercialization and virtual dilution of folk music by such performers as The New Christy Minstrels, The Smothers Brothers, Jody Collins, and a host of others, would trouble jazz purists. Their music had always lost the popularity contest. And many in the folk field--fans and performers--had trouble with that American phenomena of promotion and mass packaging, particularly of a movement that spoke against materialism. But the spreading of the simple folk concept was

aided by these slick, opportunistic practitioners, and the music of serious composers like Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs was brought before the public, performed by Peter, Paul and Mary and others. Indeed, the radio and other media brought the new emphasis on folk music to the plains.

One venue for folk musicians in Wichita was Moody's Skidrow Beanery, in operation in 1964 and 1965. A current newspaper description of the place read: "It embraces a few rickety booths, two old sofas, an antiquated organ, piano, and some paintings." Along with poetry readings and the impromptu art show, topical folk music was featured. The patrons of the Beanery and other coffee houses were classified as beatniks by local media. The owner of the Beanery, Moody Connell, had it in mind to serve both the city's transients and the beats. He had his share of trouble with health code violations and police harassment over the suggestive art work and avant-garde publications and sold out to a couple from San Francisco, Chloe and Ike Parker, in early 1966.

They renamed the place the Vortex and in May of that year had as a visitor, one of the recognized founders of the beat movement, Allen Ginsberg. Former Wichitan writer Charles Plymell, who had known Connell, commented on this visit to Wichita:

"I took him [Ginsberg] down there and he gave a reading. We went into the Salvation Army and Okie's [tavern]." These were located on the same block. Ginsberg, on a tour of America in a VW Camper purchased through a \$6000 Guggenheim grant, also went into the Showboat Tavern, a place in southeast Wichita that featured well-scrubbed folk singers. He wrote of his impressions of the land and people in the poem "Wichita Vortex Sutra," selections of which were published in the May 27, 1966, issue of *Life*.

Grant Kenyon, then professor of psychology at Wichita State University,

recalled the poet's appearance on campus. "Ginsberg gave a reading from *Howl*. Bobby Stout [Wichita police detective] was sent up to arrest him. He knew the police were in the audience and said he would take the police to court if he was quoted out of context." No charges were filed.

James Mechem, fiction writer and longtime Wichita resident, was visited by the poet. "I was working at the *Eagle* and went to see Ginsberg read at the Vortex. He came to see me at the lunchroom and I wasn't down there fifteen minutes when they sent a copy boy down to get me. They [*Wichita Eagle* editors] didn't like him at all."

Mechem recalled many of the city's coffee houses from the late '50s and early '60s.

"I went to the Id, the Green Parrot, B.C.'s, the Botega on Douglas between Market and Main, and the Zodiac. There was folk music in some of them. I remember one fellow, Tom Dickerson, played his guitar wherever he went.

"B.C.'s [located on the east side, off of Highway 54] was definitely a coffee house and a cafe. Gregory Groshard ran it. He was a soldier of fortune and had been to Cuba. He just blew into town and was into everything. When they furnished it, he had artistic, handmade plates and cups. People were stealing them. He had a grand opening.

"All his clientele were artists and writers. The damn thing just took off and everybody came in. Anybody who was anybody went there, the intelligentsia of this town. And this happened all at once. It was an expensive place, as I recall.

"The Id [also on the east side] gave me the first espresso coffee I had. We were all kind of beatnik. Dick Grove, the director of the Wichita Art Museum, used to go there. They didn't have anything else—just something to go with the coffee."

Mechem recalled listening to Barbara Kerr, a black performer. "It was in a place

called the New or Modern or something or other. The owner committed suicide by jumping off the Kellogg Bridge and hanging himself." According to Mechem, the *Eagle* published a graphic photo which caused a stir at the time.

"The Green Parrot was on east Douglas in one of those big houses." Mechem met friends there occasionally. He preferred poetry and discussion to folk singing.

"My major contact with folk music was at house parties. There was music all night long. Every time we were at a party they would start up a folk song and it would just last forever." The gatherings were cultural events, reaffirmations of scope and direction for Wichita's artists and liberal idealists. "We didn't read too much poetry at parties. Every party would degenerate into folk singing. We never sat on chairs. We always sat on the floor."

Wichita had folk music well into the latter part of the '60s. The October 12, 1967, edition of *Nexus*, Wichita's first underground newspaper, had an ad for the Blackout Tavern, located near Wichita State University. Folk singers listed were Tuesday: Harry Weldon; Wednesday: Susie Steward; Thursday: Susan Wilkinson; and Saturday: Myrna and Steve.

The 600-square-foot Blackout's "stage" was simply a long-legged wooden stool at the corner of the bar and the east wall. There was a single, antiquated PA speaker mounted near the ceiling and microphones for voice and guitar, harjo or autoharp. The crowd was usually quiet enough for the singers to be heard. As it was a college tavern however, there were occasionally noisy customers. Yet the mood of the times was that of spreading the message--describing the ills and proposing a cure. Those serious listeners were most often able to silence those who were not.

Jed Clossen is one of Wichita's folk practitioners. He first performed in Lawrence, when a student at Kansas University in the early '60s, at an open mike

at the Gaslight tavern. "I was playing traditional folk then, doing the songs of Vance Randolph, traditional Missouri music."

Clossen did not play protest folk. "I stayed the heck away from that, I was doing Woody Guthrie, and Tom Paxton."

His instrument was a Martin acoustic guitar. "I mowed lawns all summer in 1957 to pay off \$70.00 for a [model] 018.

"I got to know Rosalea Yoder, who later had Rosalca's Hotel in Harper. She had a little house trailer in North Lawrence, where the black community was. We had some parties there. This was in '63 and '64.

After his return from Lawrence, Clossen first played in Wichita at gatherings at the house of Tom and Kay Grow and at the Blackout. He had been going to coffee houses since high school.

"I remember B.C.'s. I heard Pete Isaacson there. And there were poetry readings at the Green Parrot complete with bougo."

Clossen, along with his late wife, the well known writer Kay Grow Clossen, had a radio show of folk music in '68 and '69. It was called *Freight Train* and aired on Wichita State University's KMWU.

"We did it live. We used to tape it but the students [production staff] kept messing up the tape. One time they ran the first half hour of the show backwards. I kept phoning the station but couldn't get through."

The Clossens, who performed much of the music, had to learn ten or twelve songs each week. The program ran for a year and a half. "It was a lot of work to do that thing."

Clossen recalls sharing the Blackout stage over the course of an evening with Harry Weldon, and Buddy Lee on electric piano. Both men were in their twenties and were WSU students who worked at the tavern. Weldon, who was from West Virginia, played guitar and autoharp, and was perhaps the most influential folk performer in the city during that time. In

addition to bringing the authentic Appalachian music to the Midwest, he was also a fiction writer who served as editor of WSU's literary magazine, *Mikrokosmos*.

"In 1967 Moody [Connell] had a big party. It started at a wrestling gymnasium around Central and Hydraulic and it turned into a floating four-day party. We ended up at a sand pit somewhere.

"Just about everybody involved with someone romantically had broken up with each other by the end of that one."

Musician Barbara Kerr recalled her introduction to Wichita folk singing. "The Grow family used to have hootenannies at their house on Lorraine. I was probably the only black that was into that. I went to Frisco in '64 and was a folk singing hippie. I played the I and Thou and other clubs. I was there for ten years and had a houseboat in Sausalito, and lived for a time in Haight Ashbury."

Classically trained in voice and viola, Kerr was influenced by Joan Baez and Joni Mitchell. Her first visit to a coffee house was at the Id at 13th and Lorraine. This was in the late '50s.

"They had folk music. Beatnik jazz was at B.C.'s and at the Workshop on Central [street]."

Soon she had taken a part in the process. "I played guitar and sang. We were so much into our own little world that what everybody else thought didn't matter."

After leaving Wichita, Kerr ran into Charles Plymell, musician Janie Robertson, and film maker Bruce Conner, all Kansans holding court in San Francisco.

"This was through the San Francisco Art Institute. I modelled there."

After her daughter Earth was born, Kerr did not perform for ten years. Taj Mahal encouraged me to start playing again. He lived up the street. Richie Havens was a friend, too. Those were phenomenal times. You went to Golden Gate Park in the Panhandle and there was a concert every Sunday."

Kerr is currently playing swing violin six nights a week at a cowboy club, and is again trying to leave Wichita. "Though, I was talking to [jazz guitarist and former Wichitan] Jerry Hahn who was in town from Oregon. He said he didn't play that many nights himself. I'm proud to be paying the bills with music."

She feels the story of her life, told in song and communal musicianship, had a solid beginning in this Midwestern city.

"Back then, it was such a statement for everybody from Wichita to play folk music, coming out of the beat movement. If you were accepted by that group then it was your family. You didn't care what everybody else thought. I was real lucky to be a part of it. It made me a lot of what I am today.

"We learned it's who you are that's of value instead of what's outside. We were all involved in a struggle to say something that a new generation hadn't said before. It was surprising how much of that was in Wichita."

Musical tastes change, and the latter part of the decade of the '60s was filled with violent protest. Concurrently, topical music changed format from folk to rock, transitionally named folk rock. Expositors of this genre were: Bob Dylan (in his *Subterranean Homesick Blues*), the Byrds, Simon and Garfunkel, and Britain's Pentangle and Steeleye Span. The electric twelve-string guitar was heavily favored. Wichita's folk singer Pete Isaacson added lead guitar and drums to his act in 1968.

These artists intent on altering the psyche of the nation chose the idiom of rock to spread their message. A greater number of people were reached--electric guitars, organs and pianos, bass, and drums allowed for more theatrics. The people could rock and dance to songs condemning planned disaster, and the wreckage of the cultural and ecological environment. But the impetus for each measure came from folk music.

Wichita was caught up in the pulse of

the beat and folk music movements. The city was possessed of native talent and this was channeled into the underground expositions of thematic reform and idyllic purport. As in the case of Ginsberg's readings around town and Moody Connell's experiences with censorship, the beats were more controversial, acting as a lightning rod in the community with their obscenity and drug use. Folk singers possessed the mantle of the simple songs that buoyed and chronicled society. They were quiet in their protest--indeed many folk songs have been sung so long that the original defiant message is no longer perceived--unlike the folk rockers who came after them. Perhaps society approved of such well-behaved

dissidence, having experienced the beat movement.

At any rate, the folk performers in Wichita found a greater degree of tolerance than the beatniks. Many, such as Barbara Kerr, passed through folk music into that of more complex arrangement. Others, like Jed Clossen, remained in the fold. It was a movement begun in homes, like that of Kay Grow Clossen's, that helped launch questioning youths, the social inequities giving them a purpose and the music an outlet. The microcosm of Wichita serves a study into the breadth and being of the movement in the center stage of America.

NOTES

1. Robbie Wolliver, *Bringing It All Back Home*, (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 11-12.
2. Samuel Forcucci, *A Folk Song History Of America*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 219.
3. *Ibid.*, 229.
4. *Ibid.*, 230.
5. Gene Lees, "The Folk-Music Bomb," *HiFi/Stereo Review*, November 1964.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Wichita Beacon*, February 2, 1964.