

Peter, Paul & Mary

Harmony from an Era of Protest

BY ROGER DEITZ

(Photos by Robert Corwin unless otherwise noted.)

I received an invitation to Peter Yarrow's charming Manhattan apartment ... those modest digs known around town by admiring folkies as "The House that Puff Built." This was a couple of years ago, after I had written a *Billboard* article about Ferron, another Warner artist, so I just assumed this get-together with Peter, Paul and Mary was an additional "press op" request. Eagerly, I looked forward to meeting these three icons of popular culture that championed so many causes with so

many great songs. Their PBS special, "Lifelines," had recently aired, the latest in a series of the trio's notable projects. It featured three generations of folk artists singing side by side in timeless kinship. This small gathering of press at Yarrow's was clearly, I surmised, an opportunity for Warner Bros. to keep the buzz going, give the project "legs." That's show biz publicity-speak. PP&M's folk music message may be universal, heartfelt, meaningful and honest ... but keep in mind that the trio *is* a successful business after all. I don't often find myself using the words "folk" and "successful business" in the same sentence, but here I do so with a smile ... and with pride. For some reason, this union of Peter Yarrow, Noel Paul Stookey and Mary Travers had slipped the surly bonds of folk to launch an astonishing number of important folk songs into the mainstream subconscious and onto the *Billboard* charts. Yet the three were anything but exploitative, pop-for-pop's-sake, flavor-of-the-week artists. Since the group's inception, Peter, Paul and Mary have used their talents and repertoire for good works in the best tradition of Pete Seeger, the Trio's acknowledged role model. As performers, PP&M proved to indeed have "legs." To this day, their distinctive three-part harmony strikes a familiar chord with the general public, and audiences continue to buy what they're selling.

Obviously, something special is going on here. Think of their accomplishments. Peter, Paul and Mary successfully wooed generations of young people raised on rock-and-roll music – *without offending their parents!* Then, as if that weren't enough, decade after decade, the trio continues to draw young and old alike into record stores and concert seats. They are quite possibly the best selling "folk" act of all time.



Children from the audience join PP&M onstage at the Westbury (NY) Music Fair in 1993 (above) and Paul and Mary "butt heads" during the taping of "Lifelines" (right).





Mary Travers, Noel Paul Stookey and Peter Yarrow still together after all these years (left), during the 1981 reunion tour (inset) and in Peter's living room for the taping of their PBS "Lifelines" special (above).

In 1992, they reached out to yet another generation of folk children with *Peter, Paul And Mommy, Too*, their second children's album, the first being *Peter, Paul And Mommy* in 1969, after the name Mary's daughter Erika once gave her mother's group. There is little doubt – for children of all ages there is magic in this musical union of activism and idealism, harmonic sorcery worthy of Puff The Magic Dragon, Peter Yarrow's frolicking alter-ego. Since the 1960s, PP&M challenged concerned listeners to examine and question the status quo, rallying them to political action with songs of conscience and messages of substance. Did Peter, Paul and Mary help to define their times or did their times define them? A little of both I think. I suggest that Peter, Paul and Mary is a cultural phenomenon worthy of a doctoral dissertation. For some cosmic reason, these three spiritually pure performers joined together at a pivotal juncture in history to contribute their individual talents and good karma for the purpose of catalyzing a revolution with songs, songs and more songs.

That night at Peter's home, the trio gathered together for an impromptu house concert for a handful of listeners. Even I, who have practiced self-control against getting all gee-whizzy, thought, "I can't believe I'm listening to PP&M perform in a living room!" I placed a pillow on the floor and settled down for a singularly charming experience. I noticed

“We really respect one another and we really care about each other and see each other in all our faults, our warts and all and yet, knowing that, we’ve learned to accept the package and love each other. That’s something very precious.”

— Peter Yarrow

she returned, she was laughing and red faced, reporting, “Peter is a bit concerned. He just asked me, ‘Sue, what are you doing? You’ve got the guy from *Billboard* washing dishes?’ ‘No Peter,’ I told him, ‘Roger’s not *washing* dishes, he’s *drying* them!’” Perplexed, Peter withdrew, responding pensively, “Well ... I guess that’s okay then.” As I departed, Yarrow made an effort to apologize for my dish pan hands. I thanked him and his colleagues for the house concert and – likening my KP duty to what PP&M have done for nearly forty years – added, “You three have been helping us tidy up *our* dirty dishes for decades, the least I can do is help you clean up yours.” Peter Yarrow nodded, cocked his head philosophically and responded with a mixture of playfulness and deeply

the way they worked together, played off each other and supported each other. Peter had clued me to look for the way they “share, experience and validate each other.” Afterward, I joined Sing Out! Board member Sue Leventhal in the kitchen to help clean up the buffet dishes. Sue, director of “Artists Against Hunger and Poverty” at World Hunger Year, is a long-time friend to Yarrow and helps out at many of his philanthropic and fundraising efforts. Before I knew what hit me, she draped an apron about my waist, and started washing dishes while handing them to me to dry. There was soon a stir and Sue was called out of the room. When

reverent concern, "That's how it is, ever another dirty dish to wash, but will you always be there to help us dry?"

In recent discussions with Peter, Noel and Mary, the three reflected on their association with each other, their relationship with songs, and their passionate belief that people live with a commitment to truth, freedom and equality. Much of the conversation touched on their new recording, *Songs Of Conscience & Concern*, a personal milestone by way of retrospective and an excellent place to start if you want to understand what makes the trio an influential and enduring musical conscience. Peter Yarrow says the album contains the

essence of Peter, Paul and Mary's longevity, quipping, "We're frequently asked how we've sustained an enthusiastic relationship with each other over 38 years. If you listen to this record, I think you'll find the answer." On the new album, the three artists selected 15 of their most evocative songs – what they call their "hidden treasures." These are not necessarily famous songs, but they are songs that "moved and inspired" them. These are compositions perhaps more recognizable to folk music enthusiasts than the general public, but they are powerful, inspiring songs found on nine of PP&M's twenty albums. There is also one new piece, "Don't Laugh At Me," that prompted the retrospective project. "Don't Laugh At Me" was discovered at the Kerrville Folk Festival by Peter's daughter and sometimes accompanist Bethany Yarrow, who is also a cabaret performer.

"It started in a funny way with 'Don't Laugh At Me,'" Mary remembers. "We wanted to do it, but the world doesn't make singles anymore. We realized that there were a whole bunch of songs [that we've recorded] that definitely weren't hits, but that were really important songs that had either a personal, ethical or political point of view. So as we neared our 40th anniversary, we thought 'wouldn't it be wonderful to put them all together.'" Travers values "Don't Laugh At Me" as "a great song." She and the others agreed that songs chosen for this album all be great songs that address diverse issues squarely and artfully.

"It is so hard to find a good song that is specific to an issue without it sounding like propaganda," continued Travers. "You have to be careful. Sometimes you are so eager to musically comment on an issue that you grab at a song that is really not good. Another great song we chose for this record is Sally Fingerett's

Yarrow, in a 1995 studio session with PP&M's "role model," Pete Seeger (Above). A taping of "Lifelines" with (l to r) Mary, John Sebastian, Ronnie Gilbert, Buddy Mondlock, Tom Paxton, Richie Havens, Noel, Dave Van Ronk, Fred Hellerman, Peter, Odetta and Susan Werner.



'Home Is Where The Heart Is.' It's an example of a fabulous song that deals with same sex relationships in a wonderful way. It's not preachy. It doesn't beat you over the head. It's gentle ... but it is absolutely on the mark. You can't order that up. We heard it and said, 'This is it, this is a great song!'"

Over the years, Peter, Paul and Mary have always paid particular attention to song selection and the songwriting process, and in turn, a great deal of thought and effort went into choosing the songs for this project. "There were over fifty songs under consideration," Peter Yarrow stresses, "This is not an album for everybody. Un-

less you have 20 albums and know where to look, you won't know where these songs are. What we chose ultimately were songs that, on a personal level, revealed very special moments when we were inspired by a song. These songs gave us signposts to a particular feeling or issue. These are think pieces. Feel pieces. Heart pieces. I don't know if it is going to sell two albums or 100,000. I don't care. What I care about is that the new song 'Don't Laugh At Me' finds a home and that people revisit the other songs. This is a wonderful album to have out there ... so these issues can be discussed."

"Song selection never has been casual," Noel agrees. "It wasn't easy to select these songs for the album, just as it isn't easy to settle on a song for performance. But, you know a good song when you hear it. If there is a song that we want to do and we don't think it's a complete statement – we'll write a verse or contribute a chorus. We've even been presumptuous enough to do that with Phil Ochs' material when we wrote a bridge for 'There But For Fortune.' We are continually doing little nudges." Travers agrees and adds, "They have to originally be good songs. If you are just writing propaganda it lasts for 15 minutes. 'There But For Fortune' is a good example of a lasting song. I think the thing that many of these good songs have in common is that they *poetically* deal with a problem. That song will last a long, long time.



“Some songs don’t have to be poetic. Take union songs ... songs that you sing on a picket line have a different requirement. They should be easy to learn, and can be sung in a boisterous manner. We look at songs very critically. One of the advantages of the trio is you edit out excess. If somebody in the group comes with a song you really love and the other two look at you like you’re crazy ... somebody says, ‘let’s talk about it.’ Some of the best fun is taking a song apart. Sometimes it’s hopeless because one person in the group just can’t decide what it is a song is saying. Sometimes the song needs just two or three words changed and you call up the author and say ‘Can we do this?’ We do it with each other. Peter will write a song and it’s wonderful – except we may have a problem with one aspect of it. The key is you talk about it as if it wasn’t our best friend’s piece of work. It has to be that way. You can’t get thin-skinned when you’re talking about work, and there is no piece of work that cannot be improved. Nothing is engraved in stone.”

“It’s bitterly debated sometimes what song we are going to sing,” Peter observed, “but that’s one of the things about the trio that works. What makes the group ‘tick’ is that we each have our place and our understanding and know what we can do for the group. But *most* important is the fact that when we are together and sing together on stage, we bring out the best of each of us to each other – the least self-serving, the least neurotic, the most honest Peter or Mary or Noel. It is the nature of the association that it has not been anything but an exercise in real naked confrontation, interpersonally and artistically. There is only the responsibility to be truthful and be committed to our own ethic. That’s one of the reasons we sustain and survive and have meaning.”

Peter further noted that choosing the right song is very important to reaching the audience and making a connection. He stressed, “You can launch all the public relations campaigns you want, all the consciousness raising sessions, but ultimately, if a song and performance doesn’t interlock as a person to person experience, reaching deeply one person to another, you don’t wind up with the transformation of society.”

“I hesitate to use a spiritual buzzword,” Noel interjected, “but in the broadest sense I think something redemptive is at the core of it. That is to say, you hear a song and it is important for us that the song take you someplace else and confirm the feeling that you’ve had or lead you to another level of appreciation. Whether that’s done through sarcasm, whether that’s a political perspective, or whether that’s an emotional perspective. If there is one common thread that runs

through all of our songs, it’s that they definitely have more than one layer. We take our responsibility pretty seriously. It’s a joyous opportunity and responsibility to be able to bring new writers, new songs, and new thoughts to an audience. I also think the audience senses that we don’t do anything on stage that we don’t mean. In order to have an integrity about singing or saying or living the material ... that’s the final piece, it seems to me, of putting your body on the line when you sing these songs. It’s like a belief process. You’re either whole hog or you don’t do the piece.”

“Each one of us has things that we do as individuals,” Peter added, “and causes we support as a group effort. The most important effort that we’re a part of is spreading the gospel, the word, the ethic, and the commitment as it is felt intuitively and from the heart when we perform. Watch the way we look at each other when we perform, no other group does that. We don’t look at the audience when we perform. We share and experience and validate each other. That’s the story that’s told in *Peter, Paul And Mommy, Too*. Why do we have four generations of children in the audience? Because it gives people the realiza-

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tion of a dream, of continuity and of the universality in the material Peter, Paul and Mary do.” The fact that songs might have relevance for different age groups and meaning on many levels also invigorates Noel. He pointed out, “That’s what has always appealed to us about the music. Isn’t that, in fact, what’s always going on when you sing a traditional song? Unless you are just an archivist or trying to duplicate what was done 30 years ago, isn’t there a kind of ingrained irony between these words of yesterday and the contemporary times? Isn’t that the dynamic that makes folk music so interesting? We have always been aware of that and made sure that, even in the simplest children’s song, there is an element that is somewhat ‘piquant.’”

PP&M has covered a great deal of ground, much of it virgin territory. The album *Songs Of Conscience & Concern* is a reminder of that fact. Here is a short biographical sketch of how they came together. Peter, Noel and Mary met in the early 1960s in Greenwich Village at a most dynamic musical period. Yarrow, who had moved to Greenwich Vil-

lage with a psychology degree from Cornell recalled, “The Village in the early 1960s was a crucible of creativity. Involvement in music was a matter of joyous discovery, not business. We knew that folk music was having an enormous impact in the Village, but it was a couple of years away from being embraced on a national scale.” While many were toting their guitars from club to club at pass-the-hat-gigs, Noel Stookey was earning a reputation as a fledgling stand-up comic. He was fresh from Michigan State where he had been more into rock-and-roll than folk, playing an electric guitar in a band to help earn tuition money. Meanwhile, the Village was a haven for folk performers honing their craft. With dozens of clubs such as the Bitter End and Gerde’s Folk City situated in the Village, up and coming performers such as Paxton, Dylan and Yarrow were getting their start. Near the end of 1960, Stookey was hitting his stride, gaining popularity around the Village for his stand-up routine.

By the time Noel met Peter, Mary was already known for her work in the Song Swappers, a folk chorus made up of

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young people that had recorded three albums with Pete Seeger and made a couple of appearances at Carnegie Hall. Having grown up in the Village, attending The Little Red School House, the flaxen-hair singer was a familiar figure at Washington Square Sunday sings. Early on, Mary's mother, Virginia Coigney, exposed her daughter to much of the bohemian arts and music around and about the area. Travers remembers, "The folk scene was small but vibrant and I was one of those kids who was hanging out, singing in the crowd, having a good time. I never planned on becoming a singer. It was just a hobby."

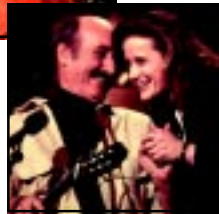


Richie Havens and Peter (left), Mary and Odetta (center) along with Paul and Susan Werner (below), perform in "Lifelines."



ing the folk song line that scans, "Peter, Paul and Moses, playing 'round the Roses." Grossman became the group's manager. Oh yes, and Peter grew a goatee to match Noel's. A nice touch in stark contrast to Mary's striking long golden hair. They had the look. Next came the sound.

Mary met Noel at the Gaslight in 1961, introduced by music teacher and singer-songwriter Milt Okun, who encouraged the two to form a duo, which they did. (Okun later became PP&M's musical director and continued to be an important advisor.) Noel and Mary were some time soon approached by impresario Albert Grossman who was already representing soloist Peter Yarrow. Yarrow had performed in various folk groups, been featured on a CBS special telecast "Folk Sound USA," and appeared at the 1960 Newport Folk Festi-



while the other two instinctively sensed the harmonies. Then everything beyond that became a question of expanding the possibilities." After rehearsing for seven months in Travers'

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three-flight walk-up apartment, Peter, Paul and Mary premiered at the Bitter End in 1961, going on to play other important folk clubs like Chicago's Gate of Horn and the Hungry i in San Francisco. Following their appearance at New York City's famed Blue Angel nightclub, the three troubadours embarked on a rigorous tour that lasted nearly ten straight years. 1962 marked the trio's debut on Warner Bros. Records, with *Peter, Paul And Mary* bringing folk music to the public and the top of the charts. The album was on *Billboard's* "Top Ten" for ten months and remained on the "Top 20" for two



years ... and it didn't fall off the "Hot 100 album" charts until three-and-a-half years after its release. Their version of "If I Had A Hammer" became a popular single from that LP when it was embraced as an anthem of the civil rights movement.

This began a remarkable period of influence for the group, and for the contemporary urban folk tradition they personified. In the third week of November 1963, PP&M had three albums on *Billboard's* top six. That same year their recording of "Blowing In The Wind" helped introduce the general public to a young Village songwriter named Bob Dylan.

Group members agree that signing with Warner Bros. has made for an enduring partnership. "You may be too young to remember," chides Stookey, ten years my elder, "to have experienced the scrambling of record executives in the mid-sixties to gobble up talent. The record industry in general was totally perplexed by folk music's appeal and success, yet most labels tried to cash in on the folk movement ... not recognizing that integrity was part of the mix as far as the audience was concerned."

Peter maintains that integrity *did* matter at Warner Bros. He recalls, "There was a time Warner was more proud of Peter, Paul and Mary marching with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he delivered his 'I Have a Dream' speech, than they were of a fist full of Grammys that we'd march home with from the awards shows. Or the Playboy Jazz Poll that we won year after year."

"Warner is more than a major label," Noel asserted, "it's home." Then he muses, "I suppose we left home three times only to return. I don't know any other group that has signed with the same label three times."

More important than topping the charts, the group distinguished itself by making folk music relevant and influential. Peter, Paul and Mary were among the first artists to embrace the Civil Rights movement. In 1963, they stood with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, Alabama and again in Washington, D.C. PP&M were deeply involved in the anti-Vietnam War crusade, performing at demonstrations, fundraisers and "sit-ins." In 1969, Yarrow was a co-organizer of the March on Washington, where the trio stood before the half-million people who gathered for that landmark event.

Needing time for themselves, for personal growth and to recharge their batteries, the group disbanded in 1970, just as

PP&M raise their voices at the 20th Anniversary of the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington commemorating Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech.

John Denver's "Leaving On A Jet Plane" was about to become the group's first number one hit single. By 1970, the group had earned eight gold and five platinum albums. They went on to numerous individual projects. Stookey's spiritual development led him to write and perform "The Wedding Song," make eight solo albums (one nominated for a Grammy) and create

a multimedia organization that is still involved in a number of children's computer, television and music projects. Mary Travers recorded five albums; produced, wrote and starred in a BBC television series and went on the concert and lecture circuits. Peter Yarrow concentrated on political activism and solo music projects, and also co-wrote and produced "Torn Between Two Lovers," the No. 1 hit for Mary McGregor. His animated specials for CBS based on his song "Puff The Magic Dragon" earned Yarrow a Grammy Nomination. By 1978, the Trio reunited when Peter was helping to organize Survival Sunday, an anti-nuclear benefit at the Hollywood Bowl. "We hadn't sung together in six years," Travers remembers. "We realized that we'd missed each other personally as well as musically, so we decided to try a limited reunion tour. We wanted to work together enough to have it be a meaningful part of our lives, but not so much that it wouldn't be fun." The three say the balance they have struck allows them to divide their time between group and solo performances, playing around 40 dates a year as the Trio.

Mary says that the group's chemistry is still there, appraising, "Peter is a patient and meticulous worker, especially when it comes to sound quality, and that commitment to excellence is what yields the best possible environment in which to be creative. Noel has a relaxed sensibility, and that's a very calming influence when it comes to adjusting to difficult situations, which happens all the time. Of course both are talented songwriters as well. I think I bring a passion and spontaneity, with an ability to connect with them emotionally and focus our attention on having musical conversations. I believe that if we can have that conversation, then the audience will feel included." Peter Yarrow remarks, "We really respect one another and we really care about each other and see each other in all our faults, our warts and all and yet, knowing that, we've learned to accept the package and love each other. That's something very precious." Yarrow paused, then added, "We weren't born to this. We could choose not to be together ... we had chosen not to be together at one point before in our lives. We choose to be together in the sense that you choose to be married."

Today Peter, Paul and Mary seek to be viewed less as performers and more as "purveyors of a universal, accessible lan-

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Celebration Shop, P.O. Box 355, Bedford, TX 76095; Ph: 817-268-0020; Web: celebrationshop.org.

Newworld, Route 175, Blue Hill Falls, ME 04615. (All of Noel's other recordings are available here, too).

Reader's Digest, Ph: 800-491-7504, Web: shopping.readersdigest.com/rdsah/ (select: Music).

Rhino, 10635 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90025-4900; Ph: 310-474-4778; Web: www.rhino.com.

Warner Bros., 3300 Warner Blvd., Burbank, CA 91505; Web: www.wbr.com.

Peter, Paul & Mary on the web: www.downeast.net/ppm/


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guage that fosters mutual recognition, mutual validation and empowerment.” There are still causes and solutions. Today their individual and collective efforts focus on critical issues such as gun violence against children, the rights and organizing efforts of strawberry pickers in California, homelessness and world hunger. A portion of the proceeds from *Songs Of Conscience & Concern* is going to The Center for Constitutional Rights which advances human rights, The Children’s Defense Fund which works to meet human needs and Oxfam which helps to fight hunger. Mary noted, “We’ve always been involved with issues that deal with the fundamental human rights of people, whether that means the right to political freedom or the right to breathe air that’s clean.” Noel founded the Public Domain Foundation guided by his daughter Elizabeth Stookey Sunde to use the proceeds of “The Wedding Song” to be channeled to public good. The group is currently asking songwriters to donate just one song to the effort. Tom Chapin, Christine Lavin, Tom Paxton, Paul Winter and others have already joined. Peter Yarrow, whose list of causal support makes for a frantic schedule, explains his playing for good works as “a platform and a privilege.” Peter says, “If you are Jewish there is something called *Tikkun Olam* – it means although you cannot presume that you can save the world yourself, you must not shrink from doing your part.”

Why have they had four decades of success together? “The message,” they say, “more and more it is that our music belongs to everyone.” Travers says of folk music, “The songs tell you, ‘If you’re going to sing me, you have to live me, too.’” She reflects about audience participation, observing, “When we’re singing on stage, there’s a chemistry. There’s something about when we sing to each other, not so much in reality as we are singing to the person we think that person could be. They are that, but they are not that all the time. But you sing to them as if they are at their best.” Peter adds, “People can overcome their differences, and when united, move toward a world of greater fairness and justice,” he continues, “as in folk music, each person has a unique role to play.” The music is for everyone, Yarrow underscores, “Particularly the children, who are so frequently marginalized, need to know they have a voice, that they can be heard – and why not a singing voice? When combined with others in school or home, these songs dramatically demonstrate what Peter, Paul and Mary have lived and learned for 38 years. We *can* reach each other. We do make a difference to one another. Ultimately, we are a family.”

Noel professes, “Folk music in the early ’60s changed the course of all mu-

sic and opened the door to the possibility of speaking about things that were not just relationships and love lost or love found. In fact, affairs of the community, concerns of the world. That is still in place whether you are listening to Smashing Pumpkins or Sting or Peter, Paul and Mary. Maybe it’s cool to care again. Things go in cycles. Folk music has this amazing element, and I think this is Peter’s specialty, of engaging you to the point of participation, where the medium is the message. Where doing something together becomes the connective message. In some instances it’s the message of the song itself. ‘If I Had A Hammer’ speaks of love between our brothers and our sisters – and at the very moment you are singing that with your brothers and your sisters.” Peter interjects, “There is a reason we keep at it. Keep working. Keep singing these songs. To have an effect is to live. To cast along and not have an effect is to bypass the great potential of life. We are here on earth to love each other and be of service to each other. There is nothing else. Mary concludes, “We are all the children of Pete Seeger. He is a very good mentor. Like all good mentors he laid down a code of behavior. It’s probably why we are still singing – because the music is more than a job, more than a living, more than a career, more than all of that. It’s a way of life and that’s the beauty of it all. 

Roger Deitz is a regular contributor to these pages, as well as an accomplished singer, songwriter and musician in his own right.

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