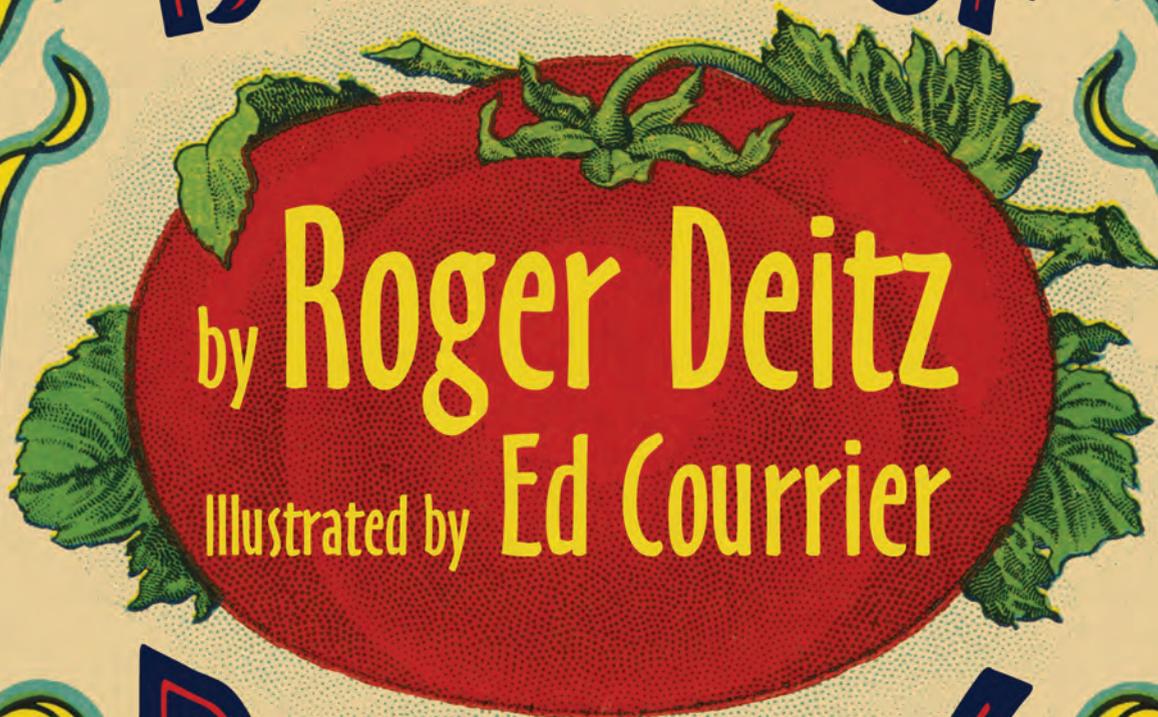


REPRINTED FROM
SING OUT! MAGAZINE 1995-2010

CONTENTS

15 YEARS OF



by Roger Deitz

Illustrated by Ed Courrier

RAGTAG

A *SingOut!* PUBLICATION

Reissued by ROGER DEITZ RECORDS

“Roger! ... Thanks for your column – every issue I turn to it first. Please keep on thru the decades.”

— Pete Seeger

Copyright 2016 Roger Deitz Records
Previously published material © 1995-2010, 2012 Sing Out Corporation and Roger Deitz

Used by Permission. All rights reserved.

No portion of this publication may be reproduced in any fashion without the express written permission of the Publishers, Sing Out Corporation or Roger Deitz, except for brief passages for the purpose of review.

A Sing Out Publication Reissued by:
Roger Deitz Records
127 Old Short Hills Road, #159
West Orange • New Jersey 07052
Web: <www.rogerdeitz.com>

Orders and inquiries should be directed to **Roger Deitz Records** (above) or:
Sing Out Corporation
P.O. Box 5460 • Bethlehem • Pennsylvania 18015-0460
Web: <www.singout.org>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

This Table of Contents is hyperlinked so that clicking on a heading or RagTag column title will take you right to that page in this electronic publication. (To return to the Table of Contents, just click on the folio at the bottom of each page.) The websites in this publication are also hyperlinked so that clicking on a web address will take you to that website.

FOREWORD	5
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	6
ONE MORE RIVER (from Sing Out! v.39#4)	7
FOLKONOMICS AND FOLKTIQUETTE (v.40#1)	8
I ♥ MY GUITAR (v.40#2)	9
BANJO HUMILITY (v.40#3)	10
NAKED PLAYED I ... (v.40#4)	11
EXCUSE ME, DOES THAT HURT? (v.41#1)	12
STRANGE FED BELLOWS (v.41#2)	13
THAT’S ENTERTAINMENT (v.41#3)	14
DR. FRANKENFOLK (v.41#4)	15
THE ADULTLY CHALLENGED (v.42#1)	16
THE JERSEY JUMPER (v.42#2)	17
TWO ROADS (v.42#3)	18
RADIO DAZE (v.42#4)	19
WE THE JURY (v.43#1)	20
BE PREPARED (v.43#2)	21
FREE WILLIE (v.43#3)	22
DA BURD! (v.43#4)	23
MUSICALLY SPEAKING (v.44#1)	24
DEAR EDITOR (v.44#2)	25
THE MAIL ORDER FOLK FESTIVAL (v.44#3)	26
IT’S A LESSON (v.45#1)	27
HELLO DOLLY (v.45#2)	28
EXCELSIOR, YOU FATHEAD (v.45#3)	29
DUST & ASHES (v.45#4)	30

THE JERSEY BOUNCE (v.46#1).....	31
RUNAWAY TWAIN (v.46#2).....	32
FOR ART’S SAKE (v.46#3)	33
OUT TO LAUNCH (v.46#4)	34
SOUND JUDGEMENT (v.47#1)	35
THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE (v.47#2)	36
BANG, WHOOSH, ZAP ... (v.47#3).....	37
HAIR TODAY, GROAN TOMORROW (v.47#4)	38
LIFE COPIES STEVE (v.48#1)	39
RESOLVING THE BOTTOM LINE (v.48#2)	40
CONVENTIONAL WISDOM (v.48#3)	41
BLANK AND FILE (v.48#4).....	42
WOULD HE? (v.49#1)	43
SOUND REASONING (v.49#2)	44
ALTERNATIVE EGO (v.49#3)	45
RING DINGS (v.49#4)	46
BETWEEN THE COVERS (v.50#1)	47
GAG ORDER (v.50#2)	48
RADIOACTIVE VOWEL MOVEMENTS (v.50#3)	49
SCREAMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS (v.50#4)	50
DOT COMEDY (v.51#1)	51
BACKSTAGE PASSAGE (v.51#2).....	52
TALES FROM THE CRYPTIC (v.51#3)	53
LIP SINKING (v.51#4)	54
PRICE TAG (v.52#1)	55
IT’S A MIRACLE! (v.52#2).....	56
PLAYING THE LIAR (v.52#3)	57
TURNING TABLES (v.52#4).....	58
THE SHAYNER YID (v.53#1)	59
COMPUTER BUG (v.53#2)	60
HUMAN ERR (v.53#3)	61
ROADS SCHOLAR (v.53#4).....	62

FOREWORD

Baldassare Castiglione took more than 20 years to write *Il Cortegiano*. Why did it take over 20 years? Because he wanted to get it right. *Il Cortegiano* was written during the Renaissance. It was a guidebook of sorts, explaining how to be the perfect courtier – a multi-talented individual with an excellent voice, an excellent mind, an excellent sense of humor, and knowledge in all things pertaining to the arts. Thus the phrase “Renaissance man.”

Roger Deitz is a true Renaissance man – the perfect courtier. I have envied his many talents and excellent mind for longer than it took Castiglione to write *Il Cortegiano*.

We met in New York in the early 1980s and became instant friends. By my calculations, we have logged over 11,000 hours in phone conversations over the last three decades – and many of those 11,000-plus hours I have spent nearly doubled over in laughter.

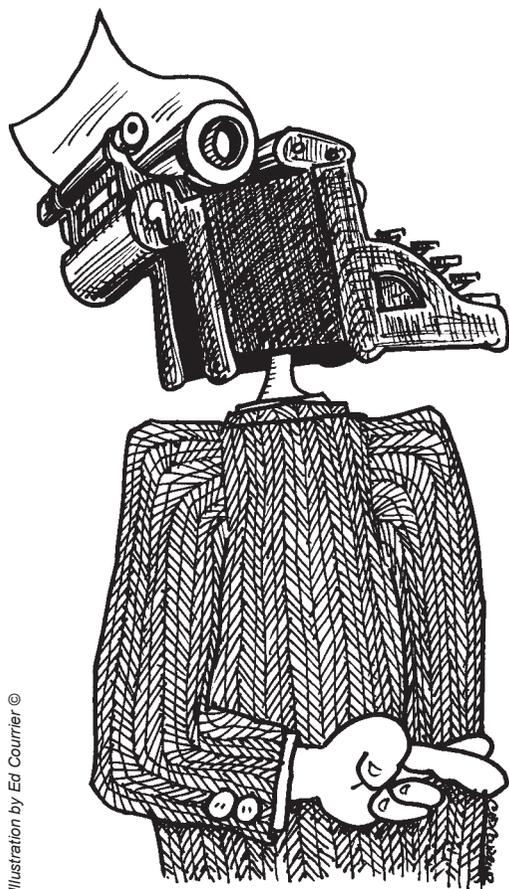
Among Roger’s many talents that I envy are his warm singing voice, his ability to play any number of musical instruments, his vast knowledge of both the arts and sciences, and his remarkable gift of writing both songs and prose.

I’ve been a fan of Roger’s RagTag columns since the first one appeared in *Sing Out!* back in 1995. I’ve read and enjoyed them all. In fact, thanks to those thousands of hours of phone conversations, I’ve frequently had the opportunity to have them read to me by the author himself before they’ve gone to press.

This is a collection of more than 15 years worth of RagTags. Every column is an entertaining glimpse into the excellent mind of Roger Deitz – the Castiglione of folk euphony. And why did it take over 15 years? Because he wanted to get it right.

— Randy Poe

President, Leiber Stoller Songs, Inc.
Author, *Skydog: The Duane Allman Story*



Author & Publisher’s Note

My heart hears music. It always has. Music in everything from songs to spoken and written words.

For more than 40 years, it was all the same professional “beat” to me ... writing about music and musicians; song-writing, listening, and performing. Having fun with the words I penned to express what I saw, heard and pondered.

You hold in your hands an updated version of *15 Years of RagTag*. It was originally published in trade paperback form in 2012, and is now available as a downloadable PDF.

Additional bonus material is available at the “RagTag” section of the *Sing Out!* web site:

<<http://singout.org/ragtag/>>

Also, please check out our announcement to the Folk Community on page 63.

Share with your friends!
And thanks for Tagging along!

— Roger Deitz

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A sincere “thank you” to those, here and gone, who believed I had something to offer, folks who did what they could to encourage my work. First, let me note, I value the friendship of Artie Traum who advised me, neither write nor perform unless I have something to say. And for reminding me that what I have to say is of worth. Heaps of thanks to Mark Moss, *Sing Out!* magazine editor and executive director for respecting my words, making me read better, and allowing me to contribute on and off the page. And those at *SO!* also watching over “RagTags;” Blaine Waide, Amy Neff, Scott Atkinson, Geoffrey Millar, and Rich Kerstetter. A tip of the hat to his nibs the illustrious Ed Courrier. His drawings delineate his talent, and are certainly, art felt works. I further acknowledge:

Tom Sullivan of the *Herald News* who learned me journalistic professionalism. James Rensenbrink and Lydia Carole DeFretos of the *Aquarian* for giving me my first shot at writing a column for a commercial publication. Peggy Noonan for allowing me write an advice to the lovelorn column for the college newspaper (it now can be revealed, *I was Prudence Truehartte!*). Jack Hardy and Richard Meyer for letting me characterize the *Fast Folk* singer-songwriter collective. Roger H. Siminoff for my first *Frets* magazine assignment, Jim Hatlo and Phil Hood for those to follow. Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers at *Acoustic Guitar* making it nearly 50 more.

Rod MacDonald for that first gig with Gamble Rogers at The Speakeasy. Len Rosenfeld for taking me on as his client. Andrew Braunfeld, Fred Kaiser, Teresa Pyott, Gene Shay and Dan Ruvin for giving me the opportunity to emcee and perform at the Philadelphia Folk Festival, as well as Robert Siegel, David Baskin and all the Degerbergs. Paula Ballan and Phyllis Kurland for doing the same at the NCC Long Island Folk Festival. Sue Leventhal, Bill Ayres, and WhyHunger for helping me, and letting me help them. Susan Deckhart for her unfailing support, and for creating my web site. Mike Agranoff for being a light unto his own hat. Joelle Delbourgo, literally, a literary agent. Rick Ilowite, guitarist and computer expert extraordinaire.

Gerry Groe for trading his saxophone for a guitar that made its way into my hands. Michael Moore for putting a banjo (and that guitar) into said hands. My parents for stopping my music lessons. C. F. Martin & Co. for crafting my guitars and banjo. Lynda Kaminski for giving me Judy Collins’ Fifth Album. Fairleigh Dickinson University for a first class Liberal Arts education. FDU English professors Dr. Loyd Haberly, Joel Wexler, and Dr. Edward Yordan, for empowering a bio-major to appreciate literature, and write in his own right. FDU President, Dr. J. Michael Adams and Angelo Carfagna for their kind words in support of my work. Albany Medical College for making me a folk singer. Fondly remembering Gamble Rogers, Utah Phillips, Odetta, John Herald and David Gahr.

Thanks to Alfred Mahler, folk-friendly CPA and family. Jeffrey Strassman and family. Pete Seeger, Tom Paxton, Anne Hills, Oscar Brand, SONiA and sister Cindy, Robert Corwin, Bob Yahn, Stephanie P. Ledgin, Ted Toskos, Carl Apter, Dr. Chris Way, Dr. Donna Toeroek, Donna Brazile, John Weingart and Ron Olesko, as well as Billy Edd Wheeler, Happy Traum, Cindy Cashdollar, my brother Corey Deitz, sister Sandy and all my family ... all, for giving more than taking. Most emphatically; deep gratitude and admiration to ace music publishing executive, author, and barkeep, Randy Poe, my south of the Mason-Dixon Line *alter* ego for proving that talk may not be cheap, (11,000 hours on the phone?), but enlightened conversation is deeply rewarding. My best to Mina and Riley, Michael and Babs, Eve Rantzer, Lynne White, Margie Nolan, Terri Horak, Dr. Robert Levai, Judith Zweiman, Annie Dinerman, Chris Hagens, the Weinsteins, AND Valerie, my *altar* ego, for having tolerated all of the above. In loving memory of Morris & Sophie Deitz ...

— Roger Deitz



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

ONE MORE RIVER

It was time to clean the garage, a job so daunting, I had managed to put it off for more than 25 years. During that period it was packed with discarded effects from my life. You know the drill – you covet it, you buy it, you tire of it, you discard it. People jettison possessions like snakes shed skin. Unlike snakes, however, humans find a limbo for their discard that exists somewhere between the ecdysis and the trash bin. This is usually the garage or the attic or the basement.

These seasonal sheddings are retained in the anticipation of a need that never comes. Inevitably our human slough is forgotten. I think saving junk is a way of not letting go, of holding on to the good old days, of fooling ourselves that the stuff of our lives must have some enduring value. That's my garage, a poor man's Museum of Natural History, a land of the lost.

Garage? Why I still call it a garage defies logic. The last automobile to reside therein was my father's 1953 Packard. But, I guess that, too, was in storage after its balsa wood transmission turned to sawdust circa 1962.

As I got underway, front to back, down layer upon layer of tightly wrapped bundles and carefully stacked cardboard boxes, it became evident that I was at an archaeological dig, uncovering the more recent strata first, then as I ventured deeper, I was delving into the more historic relics of my bygone life. The finds were significant to me, although granted, not on a par with Pompeii or archaeopteryx.

Curiosities came and went. Things once *au courant*, now *passee*: dial telephones, black and white televisions, a beta video recorder, a Salton bun-warmer, my college letter sweater (sure laugh, golf is rugged!). There was a typewriter. What the hell was that for? I came upon my old 8-track player and a collection of tapes: Baez, Dylan and The Byrds. Then, at the very last layer stood one final forgotten carton.

Opening it was like unearthing a time capsule. Inside was a pair of rainbow-striped, size 30, bell-bottom jeans embroidered with American flag

patches. I also found a tie-dyed shirt, a peace medallion, rose-colored granny glasses, a Nehru jacket, love beads, a McCarthy button (Eugene J., not Joseph R.), my draft registration card, a lava lamp, a black light, a few Hendrix and Grateful Dead posters purchased from a head shop on Fairfax in L.A., sandalwood incense, and – far out! – a 25-year-old stash. Was this mine? Was this me before the med school make-over transformed me into a geek for science?

Psychedelic images started to flash. I heard the faint refrains of a sitar droning in my head. Cool. Ahem. Dig it, g-h-a-r-r-r-o-o-o-o-v-e-y!!!

Within an hour the 8-track was playing Donovan and Country Joe McDonald. The black light made the posters come alive. The lava lamp danced amoebic to the music. I dressed for the occasion and smoke filled the air. Unlike Bill, I inhaled, and further, I didn't need Hillary to remind me to exhale every now and then.

The music was a reminder of what a mess the world was in when we all joined together to sing songs of social import. I could hear a faint chorus singing civil rights, feminist, antiwar, antinuclear and environmental songs – songs about the common us, not the me me me songs that prevail today. The music meant something to that distant chorus of singers. The chorus rallied to causes, the chorus protested, the chorus kicked pin-striped butt.

For a while in my time warp, IT'S THE SIXTIES AGAIN and I've rejoined the chorus!

I know the secrets of the universe ... at least until the smoke clears. Then I look at the boxes strewn all over the place and realize that I still have to clean up the mess. I'm a grown-up now.

If I don't clean up my mess, it will just remain until the onus falls on someone else.

Life is about cleaning up messes, and learning not to make them again. Where is the chorus when you really need one?

I disagree with Thomas Wolfe: You can go home again, you just won't be able to fit into your old bell-bottom jeans without getting a hernia.

Peace and love. Heavy, man.



Illustration by Ed Courrier ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

FOLKONOMICS AND FOLKETIQUETTE

Once upon a time I called the folk tour “the stuffed animal circuit” because of the abundance of environmental center listening rooms bedecked with artful taxidermy.

Here I’m referring to post-mortem menageries of furry, formerly frisky woodland creatures, whimsically posed in lifelike, but assuredly morbid displays – kind of a marriage of Madame Tussaud and Doctor Doolittle, or Grizzly Adams meets the Crypt Keeper.

I never complained since I was close to nature, had a place to perform and there were often more dead animals than live audience members filling out the room – all well-behaved and facing the stage, I might add. Also, the critters in some cases were more animated than the audience, seeming to join in on the chorus every now and then.

Although somewhat ironic, and on the face of it not totally “environmentally friendly” by definition, this eerie road kill regalia became a familiar, comforting sight. Sure, they were for all eternity raccoon doorstops, moose head hat racks and skunk night lights, but they were my crowd, my audience, my public.

I actually preferred the laid-back, environmental centers to a certain “club” in Greenwich Village where patrons were greeted on entry by a massive rack of dead meat (goat? horse? wildebeest?) hanging in the front window, presumably there to entice them inward to listen to the racks of live meat performing on stage.

The window mystery meat was sliced wafer thin to make inedible gyros by the proprietor who then sliced the gate receipts with equal alacrity. He was the first person to teach me the new math as he gingerly peeled off money from a huge wad of bills: “Sixty people, times 60 percent of the gate, at \$5 per person, equals ... \$42 ... Right?”

It was always the same. Always \$42. No matter the number of paid customers, I’d watch my rent money retreat into the owner’s pocket. He’d shake his head and moan in broken English, “Bad night. Not sold many drinks. Much loss. Sorry, next time MUCH more better!”

Of course, with a two drink minimum, and enough water added

to the booze bottles to make Jack Daniel’s look like imported vodka, it was *never* a bad night at the bar, and nobody ever needed a designated driver for the trip home, except perhaps the poor open mike emcee who lived across the street, and who, with good reason, logged a great deal of bar time.

On the rest of the folk circuit, things were and are different. There is generosity of donated time and talent, and much effort expended to create places for folk music to be performed.

Volunteers keep most operations going. They do the booking, set up the chairs, collect money at the doors and run the sound systems so John and Jane Q. Folksinger can have a place to play and the rest of us have a place to catch the music. Remembering this, whether you are a performer or audience member, just seems fair.

My least favorite folk moment, number one on my cringe parade, occurred a few years ago at a club I helped run where a rising “star” on the folk circuit tore into a volunteer sound person in front of the audience with such a vengeance, she never showed up again to run the board. Trust me, the sound was fine. Unbridled rudeness shot out over the air on a radio broadcast of marked dramatic tension.

A couple of years after the tirade, after touring Nashville and county fairs, that artist was a falling star. It was back to playing for petrified squirrels, back to needing volunteers, now reluctant to be yelled at.

My advice? There is so much to be learned from a dead raccoon or a stuffed otter – poise, patience and, of course, gratitude. After all, aren’t we all just foraging for berries and nuts until that great taxidermist in the sky makes of us eternal doorstops?

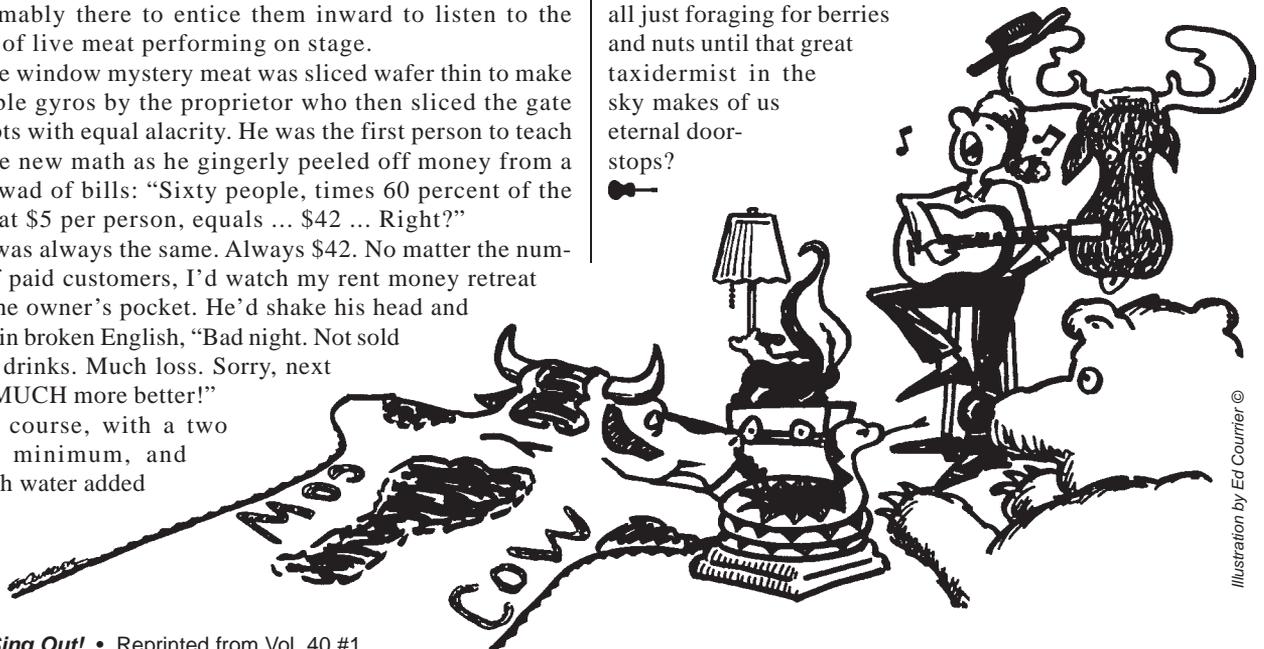


Illustration by Ed Courrier ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

I ♥ MY GUITAR

It was 1930 and my father was well on his way to fame and fortune as a professional musician. For one thing, he had landed a regular gig at the Paramount Theater playing trumpet with Rudy (Hubert Pryor) Vallee and his Connecticut Yankees, a band also broadcast over the radio on NBC's *The Fleischmann Yeast Hour*. At the time, Rudy Vallee, it must be remembered, was a hot item at the peak of his success, crooning and moaning his way into the hearts of swooning fans who, apparently, had grown enamored of the sound of an adenoidal mouse caught in a bear trap.

What a great country! Although in the grips of a depression, Americans still paid hard-earned money for diversions such as radio receivers and Vallee's Victor sound recordings, and also came up with a nickel now and then to take in a talking motion picture on a two-for-one promotion that usually included a free molded-glass dinner plate or gravy boat. Five cents for a dream-like escape from reality for two and a nifty set of dinnerware. Food? Well, maybe next week.

Following a grand show-business tradition, Mom, waiting in ambush at the Paramount stage door after one night's performance, turned that groupie thing into more than 50 years of wedded bliss. She winked one eye and told Dad he was the cat's meow, neglecting to mention that she was barely a 15-year-old kitten. Way to go, Dad.

Well, you can imagine how popular my father was in his neighborhood. Just out of high school and playing for the hottest group in the land. I'm certain that, if a similar opportunity presented itself today, we'd have most of our body parts tattooed or pierced, let our hair grow

down to our asses and wear leather jump suits. Not so Dad. He put his money in the bank and sprang for a little imported pomade for his hair, but otherwise remained, like his son today, altogether modest and self-effacing in his celebrity.

Unfortunately, careers and celebrities are subject to the fickle hand of fate. One night after a show, after tooting "I'm Just A Vagabond Lover," "Betty Co-ed" and "My Time Is Your Time," one final time, disaster struck. While on the platform about to take the subway home, Dad failed to notice as the train pulled into the station that his trumpet case latch had come undone. When he made his way forward, the instrument tumbled out and down onto the track, into the path of the oncoming train. "Son," he told me years later, "although it doesn't appear so ... a trumpet is made up of hundreds of small, shiny pieces. That's why they're so expensive."

He never replaced it. I think I understand. An instrument is more than a thing, it is both a companion and an extension of self, part of one's voice in the process of communicating music. I don't feel quite the same comfort playing some guitar other than my own. I feel the grief of fellow musicians who have their vintage Martins purloined. Dad took it as a sign from above, and used the money he earned to purchase a small radio shop in Brooklyn. To him it was serving the same muse – still bringing entertainment to the people, the hours were just better, and he could devote his pucker full time to his stage-door sweetheart.

A few years ago I was in Miami. After guesting on Michael Stock's public radio show on WLRN, I rushed off to Jackson Memorial Hospital to see my ailing father before taking the train back home.

"Did you hear the show?" I asked. The radio was still on, set to the station. He nodded. I placed my guitar case next to his bed.

Understandably, the discussion ran to his good old days in show business, and once more to the story of his having been guided by fate into "a rewarding trade" – just because a half-penny brass latch sprung open.

"Performing for a living is nice, but it's a hard road, Son. Think about it. I haven't done so badly, have I?"

After hanging through the night, bleary-eyed, I picked up my guitar case and, an hour later, I was on the platform of the Amtrak station awaiting the Silver Meteor for the ride north. As the train pulled in, I got an instinctive, uneasy feeling of cosmic *déjà vu*. I looked down at my guitar case. Dad had slyly, half-jokingly but, I'm certain, full-lovingly undone just one of the case's main latches. Nice try, Dad. Maybe next time. I ♥ you, too. 



Illustration by Ed Courrier ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

BANJO HUMILITY

A story is told about Mark Twain as a boy apprenticing to become a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River. He was Samuel Clemens then, a lad more than a little fond of reading. The ship's master discovered that young Sam had smuggled and hidden a book on board. The elder's reaction was violent as he confronted Clemens angrily.

"If you want to become a pilot on this river," he warned, "you had better stop wasting your time reading books!"

To prove his argument, he wagered that the boy couldn't remember how high the tide was at a certain bend in the river, not this time out, but four trips back. Sam answered he could not, that the voyage in question took place six months ago. "My point exactly," stressed the master. "If you hadn't been wasting your time reading, you damn well would have remembered!"

As marvelous as books are, it's a fact of life that not everything is learned from them. We spend much of our early lives in school. Schooling puts the onus on books and teachers to somehow implant knowledge into the prospective learner's brain, making us teacher-dependent. The truth is that ultimately, it is the student who must be in full command of the learning situation. Good teacher, bad teacher or no teacher, books or no books, a successful student finds a way to learn. This is particularly relevant in our genre where all the knowledge isn't written down, where all the music isn't recorded, and where sometimes the best teachers fail to appreciate their own expertise. In a way, folk music is a little like Twain's river.

Learning to play requires on-the-job training. Much good learning occurs in nonformal, non-classroom environments. Go ahead, read a book, and of course you know which magazine I recommend, but also poke about collecting songs and learning how to play an instrument – or just as important – how not to play one.

Some of the best pointers I ever got came in a festival parking lot at the tailgate of a rusted-out pickup truck. There, some

banjo-toting retired plumber kindly allowed me to watch and listen as he frailed his old-style Vega Whyte Laydie, slowing down to show me a fancy lick or tune. After the impromptu lesson, after sharing a cup of lemonade, I carried some small part of him away with me as I wandered off to find some new musical adventure.

My first banjo lessons came nearly 30 years ago from an acquaintance who worked as a sentry in a trucking company guard shack. It was his job on the overnight shift to check in arriving North Carolina-based I8-wheelers. There we'd pass the still hours of the long, cool night playing and trading rudimentary fiddle tunes and the like.

One morning about four-ish, as I strummed a basic melody, a truck pulled in, its brakes screeching the massive tractor-trailer to a premature halt. I played "Putting On The Style" as the driver got down from the cab and looked on attentively." It's a banjo," I said somewhat smugly as I handed him my open-back. He inspected it as if he had never seen one, then reached into his shirt pocket to remove three gleaming gold banjo picks which he deliberately fitted to the thumb, middle and index fingers of his right hand. The man took his time, like a matador preparing to meet *el toro*.

In the instant he began to play, the heavens opened and I heard the angels sing, or perhaps it was the voice of Mephistopheles. To this day, I have not been so deeply impressed by front porch virtuosity. I remember the truck driver even twirled the banjo in the air a few times and made flames shoot out of its tailpiece. Then there was silence. When done,

he handed my exhausted instrument back over to me saying, "Yep, you're right ... that sure is a banjo!" He took off the picks, replaced them in his pocket, climbed the steps to his cab and disappeared into the night, the sound of air brakes punctuating his surreal exit.

Everyone has something to teach, something to learn – for example, that's the night I learned the concept of *banjo humility*. It wasn't in the book.



Illustration by Ed Courmier ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

NAKED PLAYED I ...

It's open stage night at the Minstrel Coffeehouse in Basking Ridge, New Jersey. Once a month the listening room's spotlight falls upon anyone possessing three songs and the nerve to sing them for a roomful of paying customers. Some signers-up are seasoned veterans of the open stage circuit, others are new faces, new voices.

Always there are those who have performed only behind closed doors at home, tentatively pitching new lyrics to the cat or an incredulous spouse. As their big moment nears, aspirants invariably pace, seek a quiet corner to collect their thoughts, then thrust themselves into the fray with formidable determination.

It must not be easy for a fledgling performer to launch a maiden effort through a sea of adrenaline and sweat, only to carry around for days that sinking, clammy, jittery feeling amid the echoing sound of polite applause. Damn. An audience stares at you, judges you, evaluates your every breath. Protozoa under a microscope don't undergo such scrutiny. At least an amoeba doesn't know it's being watched!

During the '80s, at weekly open mikes sponsored by the Speakeasy in Greenwich Village, performers would be so plentiful that a lottery system was employed to bring some fair succession to the program. A not-so-desirable draw might lead to 3 a.m. slot before a very sparse, very tired, very inebriated audience.

I find it fascinating. Who would want to take the risk? Some faces you never see again. Having dined on show business and found the taste of acute nausea not to their liking, many disappeared forever into the night. The others? Well, suffice it to say I have listened to the likes of Suzanne Vega, John Gorka and Christine Lavin at open stages. I can't remember the details of their presentations, but I did hear from them again.

Is the open stage a bridge between anonymity and folk stardom (an oxymoron, perhaps?!), or is it merely a natural extension of wanting to share music with others, as many others as possible?

For myself, I remember that the first time I played for an audience I was petrified, and each time I played for a still larger assemblage I got anxious. Fear subsided until eventually I could face a few thousand people, guitar in hand, and not succumb to the fight-or-flight physiology that results in expensive dry-cleaning bills.

The only other time I knew a similar feeling was when I played a round of nude golf, at twilight, over the Passaic County Golf Course on a dare from a regular golfing companion, Sarah Anne Cooper. Well, all right. Technically we weren't totally naked ... we wore golf gloves and spiked shoes.

I guess Sarah Anne wanted to break the monotony, liven the session up. She did. About half way through the round, a county police officer appeared. He approached, smirking. Not believing his eyes, he nonchalantly asked to see our greens fee tickets. We complied. As he read our valid passes, I imagined myself in stir, practice putting in the buff before a gallery of jeering convicts.

Obviously a fan of golf, nature and *Liberated Lifestyles* magazine – and probably unable to contain his laughter until he joined his chums at the donut shop – Officer Del Mauro courteously thanked us and suggested we might catch a chill if we didn't put on our clothes. We complied and finished the round. After that, a regular game of golf was a bit, well, boring.

The point is a performer is just as exposed on stage. No escape, nowhere to hide, no excuses. I admire those who make the attempt, just as I admire those who listen ... and that's the naked truth.

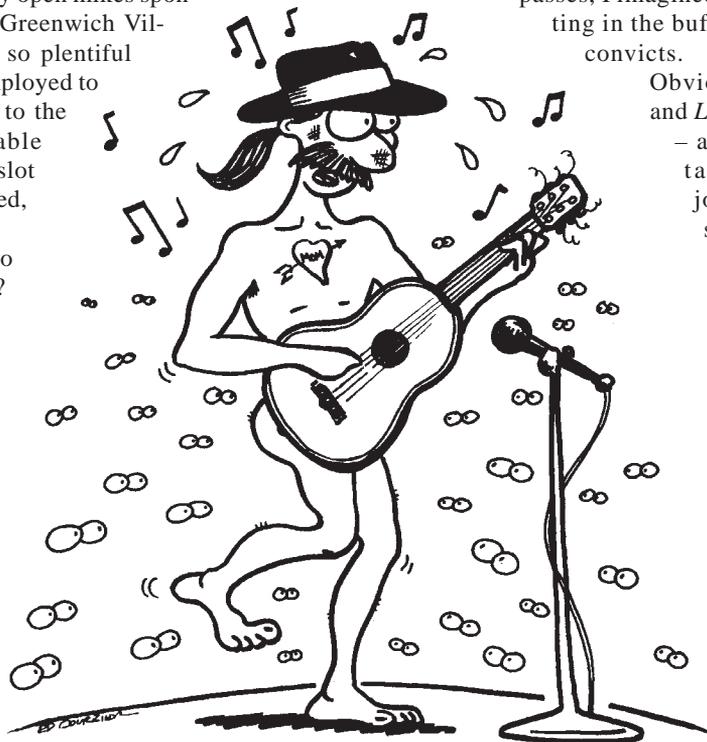


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

EXCUSE ME, DOES THAT HURT?

Perplexing are the turning points in the course of Western Civilization, when the fresh and new herald the passing of one era, the beginning of another. These are history's defining moments. It was thus when faithful Old Dobbin stood unbridled in the paddock listening to the unfamiliar chug of a Ford Model T, only to wonder if his equine future lay in the service of mankind hitched to a milk wagon or spread on the back of a I-cent postage stamp. For me, I stood at just such an epochal cross-road last Tuesday night.

I'm in a self-anointed folk club in the East Village where, I am told, a new wave of cutting-edge folk music is spontaneously generating. A colleague at *Billboard* says this is where the next chapter of folk history is being written. Scrawled on the restroom wall, no doubt. The performer onstage sports a Mohawk haircut, resplendently dyed purple and yellow. He displays a large swastika branded mid-forehead as well as an SS armband. He also wears two weapons: One is a Luger, the other, more sinister, is an acoustic guitar.

Mr. Mohawk is yelling at the top of his lungs about world domination, cable television and Kermit the Frog. I think it's the *Sesame Street* theme song, sung sort of inside out, played with one atonal guitar chord strummed off tempo with the muzzle of a Luger. Nice touch. Folk music? Well, maybe. A case against the influence of too much public television during one's formative years? More likely. Today's performer is brought to you by the letter "N" the number "9" and the drug "Ritalin."

The chances of this artist being a genuine Iroquoian are somewhat remote. The tribal look is there, but he is hardly clad in traditional Native American attire. The silver chain spanning the distance between his nose and navel rings hints at such; the Nazi armband and standard issue Luftwaffe sidearm all but give it away. The lad may be from Oswego, but he is definitely a revivalist.

Hey, isn't that a mosh pit? It's great to see young people gathering in song, listening to live music and hurtling through the air. Yes, I am drawing the most interesting

freelance assignments, but I never thought moshing was in my future. Noshing yes, moshing no.

I'm meeting interesting new playmates, but since Tuesday, I've been having a recurring dream about a dirigible sized Hermann Goering floating across the English Channel playing an immense autoharp. Perhaps Goering is a Freudian metaphor for music executives who strike fast with a marketing Blitzkrieg then move on to the next fad. Mr. Mohawk gives the often-heard term "folk Nazi" an alternative meaning as he sends patrons into the Manhattan night whistling the melody of his catchy new tune, "Mein Kampf Is Your Kampf."

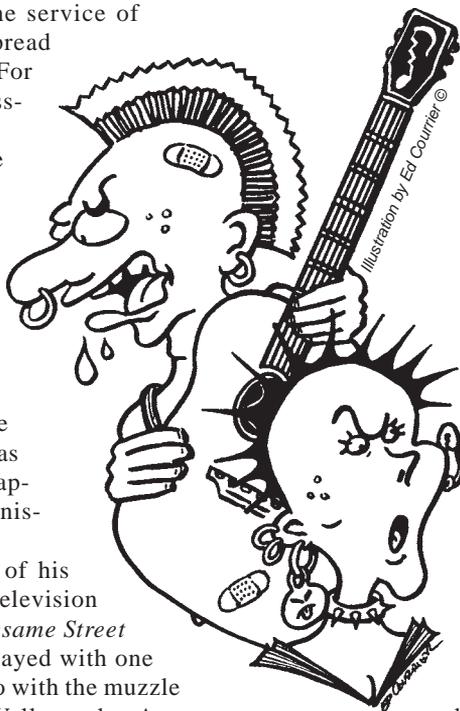
It appears the next revival, should one come, may be governed by attitude more so than melody and lyrics. Everything old is new again. Nazis are in, "Kumbaya" is out.

A woman with orange spiked hair and a safety pin through her cheek offers to buy me a drink. Ms. Spike represents Mr. Mohawk. She says the trick is to "sucker the major labels, make them think they have the inside track on what young people are into at the moment." A few months ago, she informs me, Mr. Mohawk was wearing a crew cut and singing about salvation to the holy-roller sect in Nashville. Now he's signed to a major label as "Adolf Hitster." "There are no rules anymore," she stresses. "No guidelines."

I give her my card and she places it into her leather bra. We have a short discussion about tongue rings and then she says I remind her of her father, a retired Army major. "Do you have a chick ... a squeeze?" she asks.

Oh my god. I'm being hit on by an ex-Army brat with spiked hair, heels and choker. She's probably wondering what color she should dye my beard. Red, white and blue I think. I begin to hear the distant sound of Henry Ford's Model T. It will soon be chugging me to that great glue factory just beyond the gates of the Home For Retired Folk Singers. Maybe the back of life's postage stamp isn't such a bad place to spend one's twilight years. I've always wanted to go first class. Mr. Mohawk and Ms. Spike will be along soon enough to join Old Dobbin and me. A little autoharp music I think.

Hit it Hermann.





RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

STRANGE FED BELLOWS

I cringe during political discussions, not because I don't enjoy a good wrangle. I do. It's just that something ugly happens when zealots try to justify their passions for this ism or that ism. Fanatics affirm and proselytize. Tensions build, tempers flair. The next thing you know, you can read the veins on a politico-phile's forehead like a road map of the District of Columbia.

One just assumes that in the folk world, we're all of a similar mind, right? Guess again. The stereotype of the left-leaning liberal folkie is more the rule than not, yet I've learned via the occasional grumble, icy stare and eloquent post-concert tire-slashing that we have a fair amount of political diversity among our ranks. Did I hear someone respond "mega-dittoes"?

A few years ago I sat backstage talking politics with a well-known and deservedly beloved songwriter-performer. He discerned that some of his candid, right-wing remarks had surprised me. "Well, actually I'm quite conservative," he confessed quietly. Then he reflected and added, "I wonder how the audience would react if they knew how conservative I really am?" We may never find out, since he conceded that keeping this under his hat might well be a good career move.

I didn't so much emcee as referee an impromptu festival concert "debate" between New England-based songwriter Cheryl Wheeler and Texas troubadour Allen Damron. Wheeler commented on the NRA's lobbying efforts for private ownership of semiautomatic assault weapons – something like "How many rounds a second does a hunter really need to fire to kill a defenseless deer?" Damron, performing later on the same bill, was so outraged by Wheeler's mockery of an issue close to his heart that he took half his concert slot to lecture the crowd on the right to bear arms and the need for a strong civilian militia. Allen suggested that Cheryl was, among other things, an animal-rights fawnatic. Well, the United States has never

been invaded by Stalinist elk (redtailed deer?), so I guess the NRA may be commended.

Is political advocacy idealistic or pragmatic? I'd like to think the former, but I admit my first topical song was written when I registered for the draft. Liberal college students with whom I marched in protest are, later in life, developing signs of creeping Rush Limbaugh-ism. It appears their growing holdings in tax-exempt bonds, sheltered annuities and family-sized BMWs may have something to do with the transition.

I realize I am somewhat naïve at assessing another's political bent. You are reading the musings of a writer so imperceptive as to have dated Reagan White House/Bush Campaign conservative speech writer Margaret (Peggy) Noonan for a year when we were university students and – read my lips – in all that time I never discerned she was any more reactionary than the rest of those thousand points of light who were part of the kinder, gentler landscape of American adolescent outrage. Today she is a prominent conservative who lunches at The Four Seasons with Rush.

A short time back, not at The Four Seasons, Peggy and I mused on the ironic parable of the folk scribe and the Reaganite speech writer. Although still not discussing contemporary politics, I asked about the roots of her conservatism. She laughed and pointed out that the signs were there, but my mind was on "other things" at the time, and that once, numbly, I had even been led by her to observe the campaign of a Republican New York mayoral candidate. I'll try not to let that happen again.

I may not be out to lunch with Limbaugh, but I do know the electorate serves up just desserts, having the final word in any political debate. It takes just one quiet, anonymous liberal vote to counter Rush Limbaugh's vociferous conservative ballot in any presidential election. Mine will negate Peggy's. The rest is up to you, however you wish.

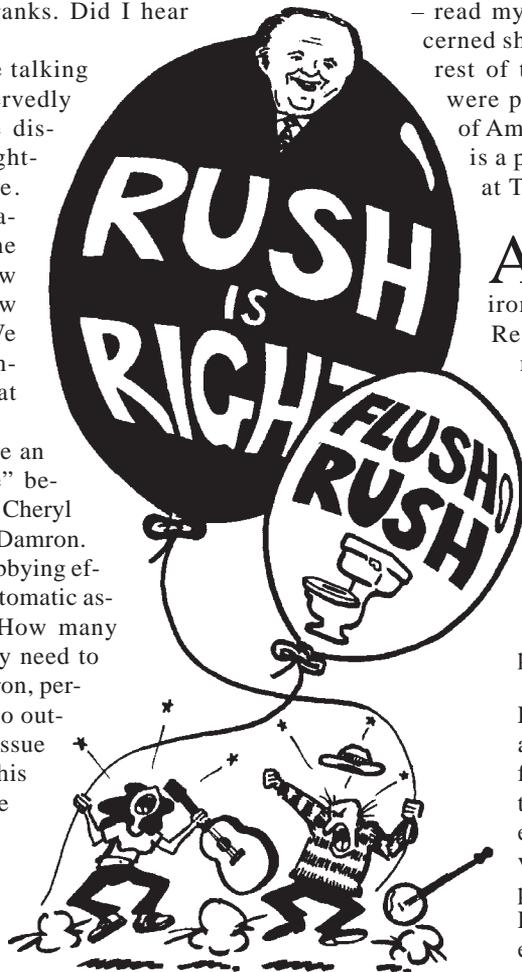


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

Exiled to the Catskill Mountains in the summer of 1957, I spent a formative few weeks with a hunch of rascally little kids. It was there, at the edge of a glacial lake amid snapping turtles and sunfish, I learned about nature and pop culture, just another innocent 7-year-old banished to summer camp by adults forsaking the joys of parenthood for a short spell of recuperative peace and quiet.

I was convinced my family packed me off to be eaten by a bear. Well, at least they didn't tie me to a tree and smear me with honey. As a bribe, my father bought me an official Fess Parker "Ballad Of Davy Crockett" T-shirt. Then he dumped me at the bus station alongside an army of kids, each wearing the identical shirt. "Go get 'em, Killer," Dad exhorted.

At Camp Wasigan, Killer developed a bad case of amusement deficit disorder. Here, records, radio and TV were supplanted by vintage bedtime stories about Indian ghosts kidnapping misbehaving campers. These tales were emoted by camp counselors whose mastery of child rearing stemmed from watching *Father Knows Best* and *Broken Arrow* in a Long Island University dorm. I missed my pals Annette Funicello and Howdy Doody. Alas, there was no Buffalo Bob in boot camp.

I can see it all as if it were happening today. My counselor, Mr. Gary, is distributing fishing poles to all the young braves and squaws for the final "Color War" competition – the Fish Olympics. Color War is a macho camp tradition wherein the Blue Team competes in sporting events against the Gold Team for war wampum (Necco Wafers) and choice roles in the camp variety show marking war's end. The losers are relegated to the chorus, or worse, have to sit in the audience and endure the show. If I win the Fish Olympics, I can sing the Davy Crockett song.

Walter, my camp nemesis stands in my way.

Walter Dombrowki, a sadistic little brat from Bunk 12, says he's going to catch more fish than I am because *he* wants to be Davy in the

show. More likely, it's because he's obsessed with killing stuff. He's already cleared the campgrounds of rabbits and chipmunks and significantly diminished the praying mantis population of Sullivan County. He grabs the fishing pole out of my hand. I take another as he sings, "Davy, Davy Crockett ..." What an odd audition. Ready when you are Mr. Ziegfeld. Got any night crawlers?

I put a ball of bread on the hook and make a deft cast. Nothing. Young Walter drops his dopey line into the lake and instantly, *wham*, a strike. He removes the hook gleefully, then *plop*, another strike, and another, and another. Fish are queuing up to leap into his creel. One myopic fish mistakenly snags a pectoral fin on my hook. Walter triumphantly displays his Fish Olympics gold medal as I suffer the agony of defeat. Don't they know I've got to sing, got to dance? Heavens to Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, don't they know I have show biz in my blood?

As the curtain rises, I'm holding a plastic Mickey Mouse Club banjo with a crank on its side. It's Mickey's Junior Melody Maker. Walter just doffed his coon-skin cap to thunderous applause and now I'm on stage next to two petrified, bogus Tarriers. Clad in striped shirts and chino pants, we're lip-synching "The Banana Boat Song." I guess I'm an Erik Darling impersonator. "Day-O, Day-O ... "Little Alan Arkin is so nervous he throws up on little Bob Carey.

Before the audience can respond, somebody shouts, "Everybody down to the lake. Walter Dombrowski is going to make a bullfrog swallow a cherry bomb, AND LET IT GO UNDER WATER!" There's a momentary pause, then the room clears. At the lake, I find a bigger, more enthusiastic crowd than at the show. Walter, still in buckskins, is holding a bullfrog aloft for all to see. He's singing "killed him a bear, when he was only 3. Davy, Davy Crockett, king of the wild frontier." As the camera pans back from this pastoral scene, Cliff Edwards as Jiminy Cricket can be heard to croon, "When you wish upon a star ..."

It's no wonder I have a master's degree in biology, and a song in my heart.

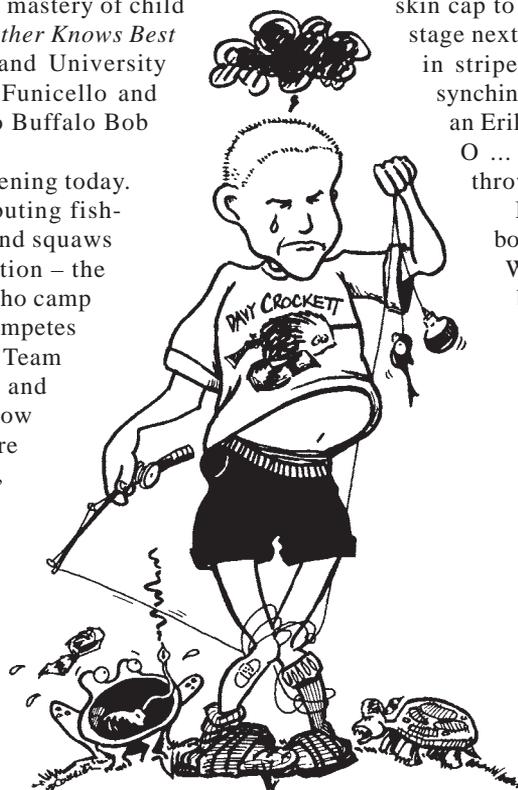


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

Dr. Frankenfolk and the Revenge of the Electric Techno-dudes

It was a dark and smoky bar. Outside, the icy breath of autumn coaxed the falling leaves into a swirling, macabre dance, as if paying homage to some pagan botanic tree god. Young goblins trick-or-treated their collective tummies into a metabolic half hitch, only to learn that socially acceptable extortion must inevitably lead to Pepto-Bismol. The townspeople, still fearing for their fructose, huddled within the local tavern to enjoy liquid spirits, frightfully overpriced bar food, and demon acoustic music – no cover charge – played by a fine Celtic-folk revival band, The Cabbage Stompers.

Things got off to a ghoulish start. The speaker's eerie groan of high-decibel feedback indicated that the equipment setup was not going well. A phantom glitch was haunting the sound system, residing somewhere within the miles of tangled wires and tons of sophisticated glowing gadgets rigged together on stage. The house lights dimmed ominously, then flickered back on. No, I thought as the patrons held their ears, this isn't your father's folk music.

In a room barely 20 feet square, 250 watts per channel seemed like overkill. Did a bar gig require expensive equipment such as signal processors, blenders, pre-amps, vibrato, digital delay, phasers, impedance transformers, effects boxes, equalizers, reverb, compressors, amplifiers, microphones, mike stands, transducers, 24-channel mixers, quartz tuners, cyclotrons, linear accelerators and enough cable to encircle the globe? The scene on stage was somewhat reminiscent of those creepy movie laboratories created by Universal Pictures, lacking only Karloff and the spooky music composed by Franz Waxman. Come to think of it, what was missing was any music at all.

Lost in the technology were the actual wooden instruments, themselves more than capable of filling this small space with glorious music. Zap. Crackle. Howl. The smell of ozone charged the air. Were the batteries low? Check. Are all cables making contact? Check. Are the dials set right? Check. Did Scruffy the bar cat electro-

cute herself by chewing through a tasty wire? Hmmm. Here, kitty. After 90 minutes of setup, a third band member arrived with a van containing even more equipment. Would there be any room left for an audience?

Thinking back, some of the worst sound I ever heard haunts famed Carnegie Hall, where little if any amplification is needed, but where again and again, popular folk artists insist on pressing sound "enhancement" to the max. By the time the techno-dudes crank up the juice, this auditorium, which was created to convey acoustic music acoustically, resonates with an echoey auditory swill characteristic of state-of-the-art audio overkill. This in a hall where Jascha Heifetz played his wee fiddle and never once yelled at a sound tech to cut the gain in the 19K range to the monitors. Today, a folk sound check means creative kvetching and fibbing. (Noise-buster clue #17: "Sounds fine back here!" from the technician translates into, "All right, already, I give up. I'm tired of futzing around!")

Let's be honest. By the time rich wooden music is squeezed through cheesy under-saddle pickups, a vintage guitar can sound like a cigar box strung with rubber bands. And attitude increases with wattage. I've heard more arguments regarding sound reinforcement than discussions about the O.J. Simpson trial. Usually no fewer than 10 "experts" per concert offer the beleaguered sound person conflicting advice on how to set the system, such as "Cut the high end, lose the hum, too much bass, not enough low end, too tinny, bring up the left channel, more vocal, less nasal, add reverb, plug in the speakers, too loud in the front row, too soft in the rear!"

The Cabbage Stompers were still engaged in a game of "my microphone is bigger than your microphone." I slipped out unnoticed, recalling something I heard Utah Phillips say at a folk festival in the early '70s as he glared at a microbus belching out eight-track rock 'n' roll in the campgrounds. "E-E-E-E-E-E-lectric music at a folk festival?" he lamented. "It's a damn shame!" I concur. For all I know, The Cabbage Stompers are still doing their sound check. Hey, by the way ... anybody seen a cat?

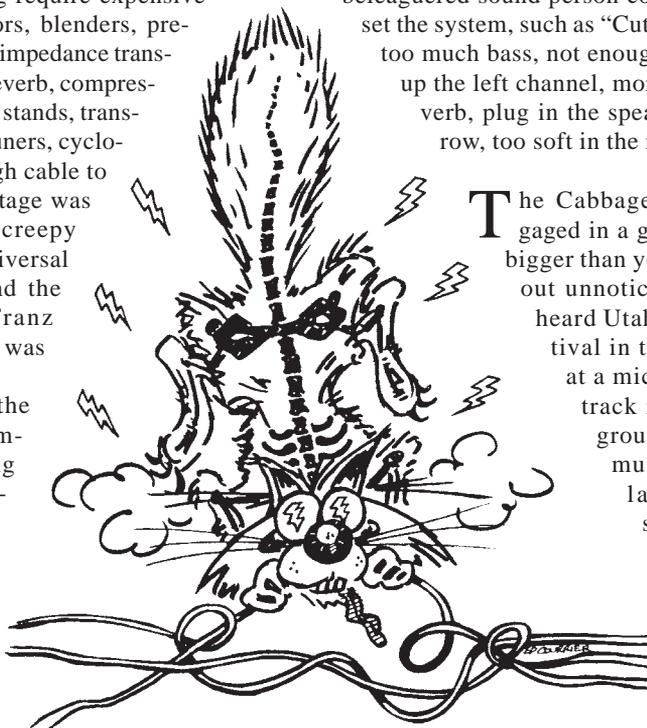


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

THE ADULTLY CHALLENGED

It's Godzilla vs. Shirley Temple. An angry, middle-aged man is towering over a pouting little girl. He is flailing his arms about and gesturing to a printed notice, which reads, "Children under 12 not admitted." You've seen him before. He's Morty, the megalomaniac who runs Folk Music Incorporated, where the profits are up and all the concerts run on time.

Morty assumes the role of evil gatekeeper as he enforces an anti-moppet edict at a venue where youngsters are *moppeta non grata*. He is a folk troll, a somewhat less charming version of a tone-deaf, fairy-tale ogre. You know the type: gruff in the extreme, wears vestiges of his lunch on an unwashed T-shirt that appears to be two sizes too small. He's authoritarian, ruling his folk domain with an iron hand and a tin ear, both of which come in handy for his booking duties. He rarely ever listens to any of the music he books. He's having too much fun dumping on the volunteers and patrons while sampling the home-baked cookies and schmoozing with his cronies.

Children look upon Morty as the anti-parent. For one thing, Morty appears to have eaten two or three of them for breakfast, although the strong aroma of garlic and the colorful tomato sauce pattern on his faded Folk Alliance T-shirt suggest he prefers body surfing in his pizza. Exuding all the appeal of the creature from *Alien*, Morty explains to a dismayed mother that members pay good money for their seats and deserve to enjoy a kid-free concert. "We like our music without no interruptions, no annoyances," he stresses in his most eloquent, nasal Brooklynese.

The cherubic little girl listens intently, but

she doesn't know about folk politics. She just thinks hammered dulcimer music is neat. Tears roll down her cheeks as her mother bristles. I console the child by telling her that I'm going to ask Barney the Dinosaur to eat the evil folk troll. "Yeah," she repeats, "Barney's gonna eat the evil folk troll!" Great kid.

I like children. My mother insists it's because I never had to raise any of my own. There may be something to that. Other people's children come with the benefit of being returnable at the close of a frustrating day. One bounces them on one's knee for a while, only to hand them back to the original owner if a foul odor pervades or if pediatric attention is required. Yes, in a room full of mommies and daddies, I am the ever faithful Uncle Roger – but I like to watch children sitting in front of a stage, mesmerized by what they discover at a concert. They belong there, listening, even falling asleep.

Some promoters ban them, some welcome them. Of the latter, some charge kids for seats and others encourage their presence by letting them listen for free. It's my theory that who we are, what we appreciate, what we are to become is set in stone very early on in life. One's first few years of development are determinative in music appreciation, and early exposure to music is crucial. The folk concert is a great learning experience, even if it appears the music is absorbed osmotically. Trouble? Most parents keep their kids in line, or know where the lobby is when they can't.

As far as Morty is concerned, he never met a child he wanted to see or hear. I am not the organizer type, but I can suggest one way to deal with Morty and his policy of age discrimination. I would take a page from the book of civil disobedience and assemble a crowd of a hundred or so little boys and girls all chanting the Barney "I Love You, You Love Me" song at the entrance to Morty's venue. I'm certain that one look up from his Sara Lee cheesecake and Morty will be on his way to that great folk festival in the sky, where he undoubtedly will insist on running the show – and charging a fee to entrants at the gate.

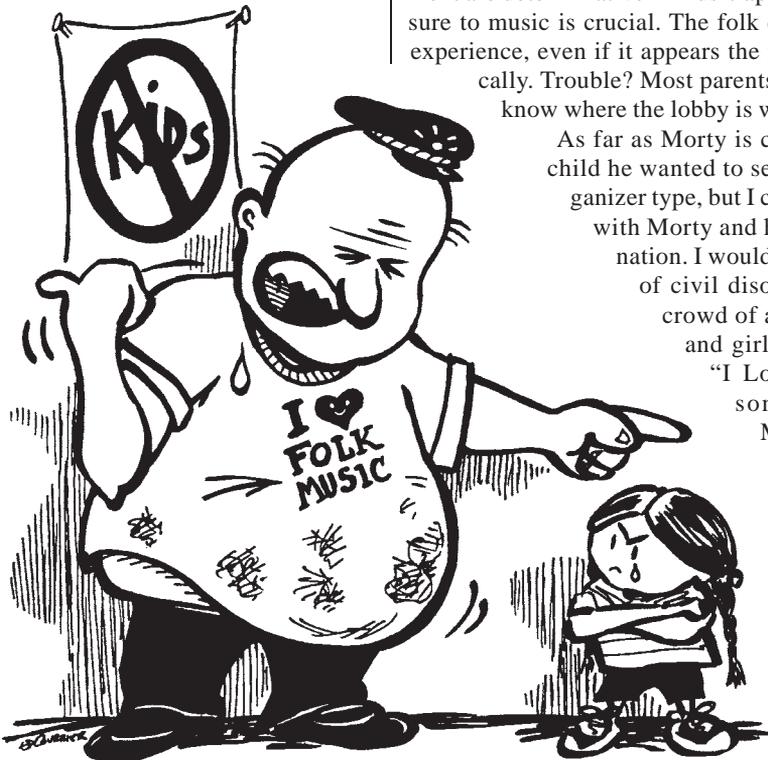


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

THE JERSEY JUMPER

Whenever I observe an individual maniacally engaged in the pursuit of stardom, I am reminded of Sam Patch, “The Jersey Jumper,” and the warning: “Beware what you ask for ... you might get it!”

Originally from Pawtucket, Sam was a teenaged mill laborer who earned the notice of the Rhode Island locals back in the mid-1820s for his running leaps off rooftops into the Pawtucket River. “Childhood larks,” they said. Soon Patch relocated to the booming mill town of Paterson, New Jersey, to earn his living as a cotton spinner. It was there Sam Patch discovered the Passaic Falls, a powerful resource harnessed by Alexander Hamilton to drive the machinery of the great mills that sprung up around its gorge. Now 20 years old, Sam boasted to his co-workers that he would soon jump the Passaic Falls. One day while watching a bridge being erected across the chasm, Sam appeared to be jealous of the adulation accorded the bridge builder, one Timothy Crane. As the townspeople admired the structure, Sam eluded the constables (who had been warned to restrain him) and dashed up the great cliff overlooking the falls. At the summit, Patch gave a theatrical bow and made a few flourishes with his hat. Then, to the amazement of the assembled Patersonians, the young man plunged 80 feet into the churning water.

The crowd gasped. Was the fool dead? No! Sam bobbed to the surface. He survived! Patch basked in the tumultuous applause, cheers and hoots. What an act! What a show! What pluck! He realized he had stumbled ... er ... leapt upon a fabulous idea and set out to exploit his talent and reputation, taking his one-man show on the road throughout New Jersey and New York. He scheduled appearances for a fee, jumping into numerous rivers from various bridges. In 1828, Patch collected \$13 for a Fourth of July gig, then \$15

for a jump on August 2. Before long, his reputation as a folk hero was secure, and the money was rolling in. Far and wide, everyone was talking about Sam Patch, The Jersey Jumper. Then came an invitation to challenge the cataract of Niagara. Believing this to be a glorious opportunity, Sam accepted the booking. No man had ever jumped Niagara Falls and survived. The festivities included an explosives blast and floating the aged schooner Superior over the cascade. Not wanting to share that bill, Patch returned the next day to jump Niagara – first from a distance of 70 feet off Goat Island, and a week later down 100 feet from a spot between the American and Horse-shoe Falls. Many screamed in horror, but again and again Sam popped out of the water and swam to shore.

This is where I would have told Monty Hall to keep what’s behind Door Number 3 and give me the cash. I mean, retire sucker. Go on the lecture circuit or write a screenplay. After all, you successfully jumped Niagara freaking Falls! But fame is a narcotic. Believing his own publicity (“There’s no mistake in Sam Patch!”), Sam headed for Rochester to take on the Genesee Falls, a leap of 120 feet. That Friday the 13th of November, 1829, some of the 10,000 assembled say Sam Patch looked uneasy, perhaps even inebriated. Many admirers treated him to free drinks at the local taverns. Patch couldn’t say no. That would have been rude. The Jersey Jumper reeled about his platform, then flopped into the water never to be seen alive again – except for hundreds of Elvis-like sightings from New England to the Canadian border. Sam’s body was recovered four months later on St. Patrick’s Day, frozen in a large block of ice. He was thawed, then interred in a grave marked “Here lies Sam Patch; such is fame.”

Paterson would later distinguish itself as the home of Samuel Colt and his notorious revolver, the renowned comic genius Lou Costello, and the celebrated Beat poet Allen Ginsberg. Perhaps there was something in the Passaic River water.

The moral? The way I see it, they suffer least who suffer what they choose. If I’m ever well-known, I hope it’s not for being famous.





RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

TWO ROADS

There is more than one way to travel to Loch Lomond – two it appears, if we take literally the chorus of the traditional Scottish song of the late 19th Century, which for those of you following along at home, can be found on Page 153 of *Rise Up Singing*. According to the lyrics, you’ve got your much-maligned high road and you’ve got your ever-popular alternate route, the low road, from which to choose. Perhaps the singer knows the low road will avoid delays at the Edinburgh Kiltway merge with the Glasgow Interclan cutoff to transport him to the bonnie, bonnie banks of Loch Lomond well ahead of his tardy companion, who is undoubtedly still sitting at a roadside pub in Northumberland contemplating this bit of Robert Burns verse: “The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men / gang aft a-gley.” How about another wee dram for the dour lad in plaid at Table Number 3.

Fellow travelers, choose your routes wisely, but in the final analysis, it’s best not to cry over spilt unblended single malt Scotch whisky. “That’s life,” the Sinatra song professes. Meanwhile, I find it a comfort to keep the music playing as I travel my own paths, the real as well as the metaphoric. “Two roads diverged ...,” wrote Robert Frost, who by opting for the poet’s route, “... took the one less traveled by.” You never can tell what’s around the bend, or what’s to be heard there for that matter. Who would have guessed that the softly lilting “Loch Lomond” would be re-born in 1937 as a swing hit by Maxine Sullivan on Vocalion with an up-tempo arrangement by Claude Thornhill? Now, pay attention class, because this will be on the final blue-book exam. Thornhill was then enlisted to rewrite the charts for Benny Goodman and Martha Tilton’s slightly “more mainstream” cover of the song on a Victor recording, one on which Benny actually sings with Martha. Don’t trust your ears? Jeepers creepers, use your peepers! You can see and hear Maxine

Sullivan’s rendition of “Loch Lomond” in the movie *St. Louis Blues*, or opt in a Pat Boone sort of way for Deanna Durbin’s visually “more mainstream” version in *It’s a Date*, which is also on Decca. Dig? It’s all up to you hipsters which road you wish to take, the high road or the low road, and which artistic interpretation suits you.

The poet William Carlos Williams is credited with saying “I don’t play golf, am not a joiner, I vote Democratic, read as much as my eyes will stand, and work at my trade day in and day out. When I can find nothing better to do, I write.” His trade was pediatrics and he was, by all accounts, a crackerjack physician. That his literary output was produced in his spare time makes me question whether there is any such thing as spare time. Dr. Williams certainly challenged the two roads theory.

There are some who are full-time, professional singers. The rest of us keep our music in some other corner of our lives. Our music collections may index differently, but I wager that our hearts are warmed by listening or singing, nonetheless. I have to remind myself that my own experiences are not anyone else’s, just as my career choices, however bizarre they appear resume-wise, are mine alone. Music is there playing on the cosmic car radio as I travel down life’s highway, avoiding the potholes and paying the tolls.

When young Williams was a student at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School just after the turn of the century, the poet-in-training reportedly showed some of his work to an English professor. Commenting something in the neighborhood of “not bad,” the instructor suggested that some day Williams might become something of a credible poet, but that the day was decades off. The professor advised Williams to proceed with his medical studies, then he opened a file drawer and removed a folder. He said he, too, wrote poems, but that when they were done, he placed them into the file – and then closed the drawer. The first time I heard that story, I bought myself a bottle of single malt Scotch whisky, turned up the volume on the stereo, put a fresh piece of paper in the typewriter and set off to make my own way, my own music, my own narrative and my own mistakes. Whether I took the high road or the low road remains to be seen.

Class dismissed.

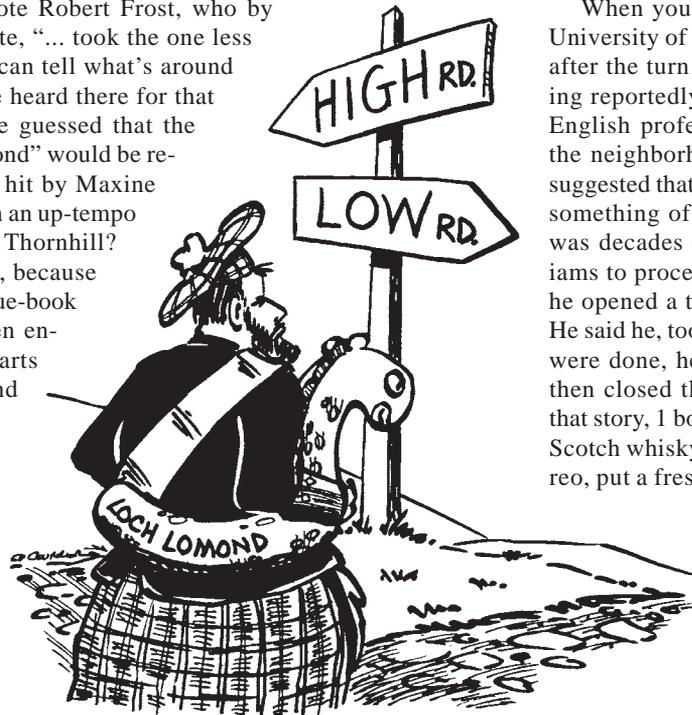


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

RADIO DAZE

It is a little-known fact that the great Italian physicist Guglielmo Marconi invented radio in 1896 so he could listen to his beloved native folk music without actually having to purchase expensive, imported sound recordings. Unfortunately, for the next 10 years, all he could hear from his radio receiver was the endless din of static, punctuated by occasional dots and dashes of a Morse code transmission. Marconi listened faithfully nonetheless. It was not until the development of the audion triode Vacuum tube by Lee de Forest in Brooklyn, New York, that radio as we know it today (a constant series of inane advertisements occasionally interrupted by brief interludes of music) was perfected. Although the Canadian genius Reginald Fessenden had broadcast violin music on Christmas Eve a year earlier in Massachusetts, the first airing of someone actually singing on the radio is generally accepted to have occurred in October of 1907. The song in question was the new popular sensation “I Love You Truly,” which opera diva Eugenia Farrar sang into a microphone in de Forest’s lab. Alas, Marconi missed the program because he had gone to the kitchen to reheat some leftover minestrone, returning just in time to hear the first advertisement for support hose.

Oddly enough, others did hear the astounding musical broadcast. One unfortunate young radio operator, monitoring ship-to-shore Morse code transmissions at the Coney Island Naval Station, reluctantly had to report to his commanding officer that he was hearing “voices” in his headphones – and not just voices, but a woman singing a most fetching rendition of “I Love You Truly.”

It was not until December 10, 1945, when Oscar Brand’s *Folk Song Festival* began its regular airing of folk music on WNYC, that the airwaves were securely the domain of acoustic music. Sadly, Marconi never heard Brand’s show, as the Italian inventor died eight years earlier, dreaming of television static, while staring at a photograph of his family’s vineyard near Bologna.

From those humble beginnings grew an entire industry. Talk radio, Top-40 radio, something called “The Morning Zoo” so even my brother could be employed in the medium. Endless ad spots for corn removers and magnetic trusses. Father Charles Edward Coughlin, Aimee Semple McPherson, and Rush

Limbaugh. But if you huddle around your Crosley at just the right odd hour of the week, tune to just the right public, college or commercial radio frequency in just the right “market,” you might encounter the folk music that Marconi longed for – music that is free, populist and unplugged.

I can honestly state that radio is in my blood, or rather, that my blood was for many years in radio, relentlessly irradiated by 50,000 watts of electromagnetic energy in the form of pure, easy-listening RF, or radio frequency. Let me explain. I grew up in the shadows of the four majestic radio broadcast towers of WPAT-AM and FM in Clifton, New Jersey (Exit 153 of the Garden State Parkway; you can see the towers as you to drive by, but drive by quickly, so as to keep your skin from glowing). For those not familiar with the rudimentary biophysical ramifications of living beneath radio towers, let me simply say that broadcast waves churn out and hang in the surrounding air like a primordial storm. This energy makes surrogate radio receivers out of pieces of metal or passing organisms, which unwittingly vibrate to the frequency. There were reports of 6-foot tall singing squirrels and incandescent talking chipmunks living in the woods behind the towers, where the faint sounds of easy-listening music could be heard eerily into the night. It was like living in a giant elevator. Some neighbors received WPAT on their toasters. One woman got WPAT on her dental work. (Can you imagine hearing Barry Manilow in your mouth, and you can’t turn the sound off?). I recall the Thanksgiving my mother opened the oven door to baste a turkey and we all heard “Chances are, ’cause I wear a silly grin ...” a la Johnny Mathis, whereupon Dad remarked festively, “Well Mother, it appears that bird’s not quite done yet.” The station recently turned “all Hispanic,” so I suspect Cliftonite turkeys nowadays sound like Julio Iglesias.

In the last issue of *Sing Out!*, I learned of one more folk radio show facing cancellation, due, I imagine, to the wayward meddlings of a pimply-faced, culturally challenged program director screwing with a radio station’s format. I hate it when venerable folk shows fall under the purview of Skippy the Media Wunderkind, whose own tenure usually averages less than a year at any given job, just long enough for everyone to learn that Skippy is an idiot.

Beware the Skippys of this world, lest we all end up like Guglielmo Marconi – listening to audio static and staring at a photograph of Aunt Rosa’s Lambrusco vineyard.

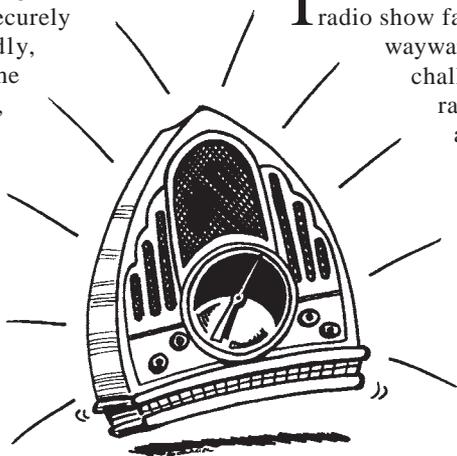


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

WE THE JURY

“No statue has ever been put up to a critic.”

— Jean Sibelius

The musical Finn retaliated with typical Scandinavian icy directness. True, the world has seen statues erected to Lenin and Stalin, yet not one to Alexander Woollcott or John Simon. The closest Woollcott came was to be immortalized (lampooned) in 1939 by Moss Hart and George S. Kauffman as *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. Not quite an honor. Hey, there must be at least one bronze likeness of G.B. Shaw, although probably not for his critical work. Then again, to their captive audience, Lenin and Stalin were extremely influential critics who relied not on essays and bon mots, but on secret police interrogations, purges and gulags to add zest to their commentary. Just ask the czar, Trotsky and a few million “missing” Soviets.

So if Sibelius was a tad miffed when he turned on his critics, who can blame him? All he did was finish (no pun) his austere Symphony No. 4 in A minor and slam. The Helsinki critics in April of 1911 begin referring to his new work as the Barkbröd symphony, a term recalling the fam-

ine of the previous century when Scandinavians were forced to eat the bark of trees. As to the critics, I will resist saying their Barkbröd was worse than their bite (pun), but the term does describe a few folk albums I’ve recently heard.

To be fair, we’ve all pondered, “Who do those weasels think they are, saying that about me?” But we react differently. Some are devastated. Others shrug it off. Many consider criticism constructive. Just check out the Bible. Cain was expressing an opinion, albeit a rather strong opinion, when he offed Abel. On the positive side, that led to the creation of a nifty parable.

And while murder may be the earliest and most emphatic form of criticism, ultimate judgement is the domain of historians and jurors. Now, what’s all this talk of high crime? Yours truly just served as a juror on a murder trial. After years of filing reviews and being reviewed, I have a new found appreciation for passing judgement, as well as a desire never to be represented by a court-appointed public defender.

First, some background. My early theater and concert reviews for *The Herald News* were wicked, and I admit it was easy to take pot shots at celebrities. I dissed Geraldine Page, Sandy Dennis and Rip Torn. Of course, writing, “*The Little Foxes* is looking littler than ever” tended to keep my name, and quotable quote, out of ads and off the marquee. My point of view changed, however, as others started writing about my work.

By the time I was reviewing recordings, I felt more comfortable discussing what I liked, as opposed to trashing what I didn’t like. When others criticized me (the slimy, ignorant maggots), I understood that if one performs, feedback comes with the territory and can often be helpful. I am not alone in being able to recite negative reviews verbatim. No matter the number of good reviews, the bad ones stick with you.

The truth is, ignore criticism if you will, but homicide always gets your attention. The verdict of my recent life experience? Our defendant will have 30 years to contemplate the unanimous review filed by 12 of his peers. In the final analysis, it’s human nature to criticize and, while some criticism may be murder and some murder, likewise, criticism, everybody’s a critic – one way or another.



Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

BE PREPARED

Music plays along on the soundtrack of life. That's why no matter how carefully archived an episode of one's past may be, buried through time and travail, the right ditty plays and, *tah-dah!*, a small-screen version of some vintage personal drama begins its run in the multiplex of one's mind, sans popcorn and Raisinets. That's how it was for me a short time ago when I chanced to hear a folk oldie from the fifties. Composed and performed by the greatly admired humorist Tom Lehrer, "Be Prepared" (*Rise Up Singing*, p. 2) stands as a quintessentially irreverent, black anthem for the anti-scout, a protest song to be muttered under one's breath whilst in the company of all-too-serious "grown-up" scout leaders. Since its inception, the ditty was murmured behind the backs of scoutmasters preparing an army of juvenile adventurers for future camping excursions – like Vietnam – quicker than one could say "Gulf of Tonkin Resolution." So, I hiked about the poison ivy in my scout uniform, knee socks, garters and colorful neckerchief. Now I know what you're thinking ... Roger ... in garters? Could Mr.

RagTag be a product of a group that, while certainly not the Hitler youth, does evoke for some the National Socialism of George Lincoln Rockwell as readily as the patriotic illustrations of Norman Rockwell? The organization, founded for character development and citizenship training and recently a defendant in court battles over civil liberties? On my honor!

I'm no Eagle, but I have scouted some in my time. I can tie a half hitch in a half jiffy, forage for the odd edible berry, and identify any number of wildlife species based on their telltale highway roadkill impressions. I can help an old lady across a busy thoroughfare, whether she wants to cross or not, and I never fail to start a fire using a few twigs and a Zippo lighter. I have also been a scoutmaster at a Boy Scout Camp – Camp Aheka. That was my summer job of 1969, the sum-

mer of love, and I was sequestered in the piney woods, charged with the care of twenty impressionable youths (the Mighty Muskrat Troop) while waiting for my draft board to classify or call me. As head rat, I led my musky band of merry rodents to the obstacle course and rifle range. I admit, I was ill prepared for the task of molding twenty youths into a crack troop of manly young muskrats, but I taught them all they needed to know about survival in the Jersey suburbs.

Alas, one of my muskrats wasn't quite so merry away from mater and pater. Master Alfred was sort of a misfit. The other kids teased him. His oversized uniform flapped in the breeze like a flag. He wet his cot. Then, one morning muster, my morose muskrat was missing. The assembled troop was not, in the lingo, "All present and accounted for – sir!" I was presented with a tear stained (I hope) note that began, "Mr. Deitz, It's your fault if I'm eaten by a bear ..."

Well, after a few hours of searching the lake, the swamp and the latrines, there came a call from his bewildered mother. "Alfred is here, at home!" He had, with the aid of his official boy scout compass and regulation issue topographical map, managed to reach the interstate to hitch a lift most of the route home. What a little trail-blazer! Returned to camp, his exploit was celebrated, while I became known as the first scoutmaster in the history of the council to lose his temper and a camper. I never again entertained the option of

ROTC, grew a beard, and fell in with the maladjusted hippie counselors who would gather in the nature lodge to study herbs and sing Lehrer's song over the public address system.

So, while NASA rocketed men to the moon and returned them to earth, I couldn't keep one sniveling eleven-year-old from his mommy and daddy. Worse, the incident became known to my draft board. It's all there in my record, along with a few private notes made by a disgruntled board clerk ... who just happened to be the mother of a certain reluctant, resourceful, and yes, very well prepared young tenderfoot.

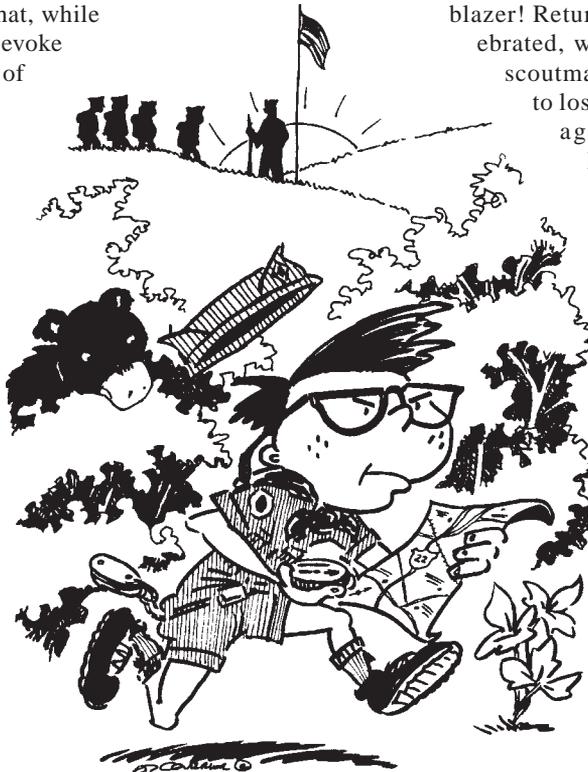


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

FREE WILLIE

When first I met Willie Nelson, we were at the BMI Awards Dinner in Nashville in 1983 ... in a men's room. I won't get graphic here, except to say that Mr. Nelson and I were standing side by side, the way guys often do after drinking dinner. My friend Randy Poe, now president of Leiber and Stoller Music Publishing (and currently a *Sing Out!* advisory board member), chose this opportune moment to introduce me to the famed "redheaded stranger," uncannily knowing in time, this would make a good start for a column. I remember trying to act cool, looking at Nelson and saying something dumb like, "I see you're busy Willie, maybe we should shake hands *later!*" He laughed and nodded, then returned to his dinner companions, I'm sure warning them to avoid the local watering hole. It was ten years until I got to shake his hand.

A magazine editor assigned me a Nelson cover story. At the time, the performer's people were eager for one. He hadn't scored a gold record in a while and the IRS had its hand in his pocket. But in 1993, Nelson released a superb recording, *Across the Borderline*, collaborating with Bonnie Raitt, Paul Simon, Bob Dylan and Sinéad O'Connor. Instantly, everyone wanted a piece of Willie. I was to interview him in New York City (near my home), but got blown off in the hubbub surrounding this hit album. The publicist said a phone interview was also out. As she put it, "Mr. Nelson doesn't like the telephone." She said, however, I could fly to Florida for a rescheduled interview session. Gee, that would be convenient. But a gig is a gig, even if it meant going 2,400 miles out of my way. In Florida, I went back stage after the evening concert ended, at about 12:30, to find myself awash in a sea of admirers holding VIP passes. Because of my relatively low hierarchy in the VIP pecking order, Willie protectors kept moving me to the end of the line. The first to board the tour bus (The Honeysuckle Rose II) were local distributors from the tequila distillery sponsoring the tour. The booze gang paid millions of dollars for the privi-

lege. I understood. There followed a queue of relatives, friends, journalists and gofers. In the wee hours, as dawn grew nigh, I was ushered aboard to ask Nelson my questions. I remember the bus had an herbal scented environment. We chatted at a dinette table while a mellow gent in a suit and tie entered figures into a laptop. "He's a buddy from the IRS," Nelson quipped wryly, as if to answer my question before I asked it, "He *seems* to be interested in tonight's gate receipts." I got what I needed in a terse but genial interview and returned to my word processor, a mere 1,200 miles away.

After the article came out, I received a call from the publicist. She was much friendlier than before. "Mr. Nelson is performing in your area," she said, "He would like to speak with you." This time was different. The backstage queue looked similar, but this time I got on the bus first, before the tequila distributors and pizza delivery boys. I wasn't prepared for what followed, although I did recognize a familiar aromatic aroma. Willie liked the article! All his buddies were calling him about it. His effusive praise was making me uncomfortable. He grabbed a bottle wrapped in Christmas paper; looked at it as if

he didn't know it was Jack Daniel's; opened it; took a swig; then pointed the wrapped bottle at me. Now, having read Nelson's autobiography, I knew where his mouth had been. I pondered my antiseptic options. I could decline and forever regret passing up an extraordinary opportunity to share a bottle of Jack with Willie Nelson. Or, I could show myself to be a weenie, wipe the top of the bottle before drinking, and offend my host. The third option was to grab the bottle and take a swig – which I did. As I left, Nelson patted me on the back, shook my hand, and told me to let him know if I ever wanted to hang out or play a round of golf. I took a deep breath and exited the bus.

There did come a time when I called Willie Nelson. I suspect the dozens of protectors who free Willie from petty annoyances "protected" him from me. The publicist won't respond to my calls. I've been in many more Music Row restrooms, but I've yet to run into my old drinking buddy. I'm sure it's nothing personal, he's probably just on the road again.



Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

DA BURD!

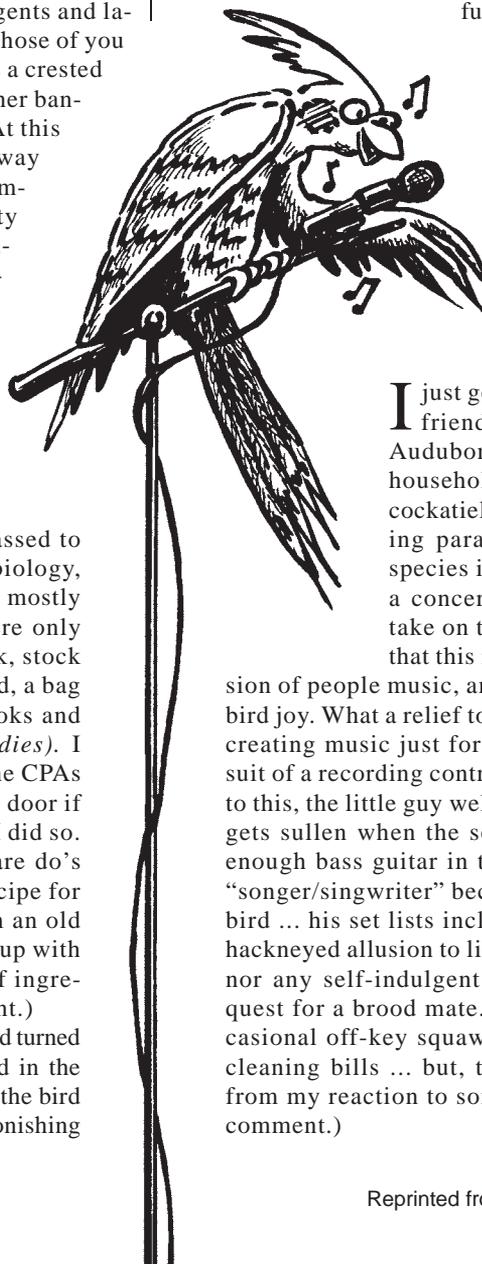
It's been a revelation. I was recently given the bird, or "da burd" as we used to say in Brooklyn. No, this was not a case of an angry audience, less than enthusiastically responding to my latest offering in the realm of high entertainment, nor a rendition of the raspberries, nor the old Bronx cheer. Literally, someone gave me a pet bird, a cockatiel, a ubiquitous companion of elderly gents and ladies who inhabit retirement communities. For those of you needing an avian update, a cockatiel looks like a crested parakeet on steroids, "lovely plumage" but rather bantam when compared with the average parrot. At this moment, it (he) sits on my shoulder, singing away as I type at my keyboard. He is reading the computer screen, critiquing my attempts at witty prose in a most elemental and biological manner – depositing, every now and then, a nitrogenous comment on my formerly clean shirt. Everyone's a critic. Here's the poop (perhaps a poor choice of words, but I'm letting Birdie make suggestions for this column).

My accountant and his wife inherited a two-year-old cockatiel and found themselves unable to cope with the neurotic habits of the caged creature sharing a household with three rambunctious children. The little guy was passed to me partly because of my master's degree in biology, partly because I have rescued birds in the past, mostly because I am a chump. Mr. and Ms. CPA were only too eager to drop off the expensive beast, lock, stock and gigantic cage. They left me pounds of food, a bag of goofy bird toys and a pile of "how to" books and cassettes (my favorite is *Molting to the Oldies*). I should have known something was up when the CPAs told me they would let the creature fly out the door if I didn't take it, and – it was fine with them if I did so. (Bird comment.) Instead of a list of "bird care do's and don'ts," I was handed a hastily written recipe for "Cockatiel Soup" that appears to derive from an old Eastern European family recipe for chicken soup with one significant, rather malicious alteration of ingredients. Pretty funny. (Additional bird comment.)

But, in one week's time, my fine-feathered friend turned out to be a charmer. No longer routinely tossed in the clothes dryer and marooned in the cat litter box, the bird calmed down. My guest began to reveal an astonishing

musical repertoire delivered with a beautiful, sonorous singing voice. First there is the material it learned from humans, punctuated with a self-congratulatory word or two such as "Baby," which I surmise was the original owner's insipid name for the creature. Then there are tunes Birdie co-opted from fellow members of the animal kingdom; crow caws, blue jay cries, whip-poorwills and the like, as well as the meows and barks of house pets. (I now own a bird that mimics the sound of coughing up

fur balls!) Thirdly, comes the stuff that really floors me – music I categorize as the bird's singular, self-written "songer/singwriter" material. The tunes are spontaneous, varied, and examined inside and out like Chopin's etudes. The music is somewhat eerie, in a la-di-da sort of way – reminiscent of the soundtrack of *Young Frankenstein*.



I just got off the phone with my good friend Margie. Margie is an avid Audubon adventurer and resident in a household abounding in cats, dog and cockatiel. Her experience with chattering parakeets and rare Costa Rican species is legendary. I let her listen to a concert via telephone remote. Her take on the phenomenon is to suggest that this is the bird's empirical impression of people music, and the essence of full-fledged bird joy. What a relief to discover a singer-songwriter creating music just for the fun of it, not in the pursuit of a recording contract with a major label. Added to this, the little guy welcomes sing-alongs and rarely gets sullen when the sound system doesn't present enough bass guitar in the monitors. I coin the term "songer/singwriter" because this entertainer is a rare bird ... his set lists include not a single pretentious, hackneyed allusion to life in the lonely, seedy big city nor any self-indulgent tunes about his unrelenting quest for a brood mate. The only problem is the occasional off-key squawk and an increase in my dry cleaning bills ... but, that part's not very different from my reaction to some singer-songwriters. (Bird comment.)

Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

MUSICALLY SPEAKING

I like to collect old books. That means I have passed untold hours amid the dusty shelves of musty used bookshops along the highways and byways of my travels. The rewards are great. Some old books are treasures because of their literary value, others have an intrinsic monetary value, and still others are of worth because they afford the reader a window into the moments in time the books were written. So, a 1947 first edition of the out-of-print novel *The Wayward Bus* by John Steinbeck, complete with the original artwork on the dust jacket, purchased for a dollar, covers each of the aforementioned categories. The novel gives me a snapshot of the frustrations in (then) contemporary American society, using by example the tribulations of a group of travelers stranded in rural California. Having the original book jacket blurb and an introduction by Lewis Gannett helps complete the experience. Now, as a point of information, some people misapply the term “incunabulum” to all old book collecting – not so for my finds. That term only describes books printed prior to 1501. Although a fitting hobby for Dorothy Sayers’ dapper detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, such museum quality ex libris are beyond my budget.

My latest acquisition is a book entitled *Soper’s Select Speaker* printed in 1901, containing the “choicest orations, humorous, dramatic and pathetic readings and recitations,” and “dialogues, drills and tableaux in national, patriotic, old time, and modern costume.” The author, Henry M. Soper, was president of The Soper School of Oratory, founded in Chicago in 1877 with the motto “Eloquence is Power.” Soper and “his able corps of teachers” suggest that these readings and recitations “will make one the envy of all listeners at school, church, home, soldiers’ reunions, temperance meetings, labor days, old settlers’ meetings, and all miscellaneous gatherings.” I bet.

The book got me thinking. There are not many able speakers extant in the land today, not many orators who can captivate an audience. Some call Mr. Clinton a “great communicator,” but that’s pretty bogus. He’s a monotone

mush mouth, like the crowd of politicians, authors and celebrities who are paid exorbitant fees to gad about the speaking circuit instilling great snore. Oration has become a lost art. I knew great speakers ... and Mr. Clinton, you are not a great speaker.

As an undergraduate at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Rutherford, NJ in the late 1960s, I was made to participate in a not-for-credit class called “Convocation.” Each Wednesday morning at ten, (attendance was mandatory), a notable lecturer would regale the assembly with an hour talk. Here is a partial list from my diary. I listened intently to the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., University of Mississippi alum James Meredith and civil rights activist Julian Bond; impressionist David Frye; comedian Flip Wilson and comedian turned activist Dick Gregory; environmentalist Paul Ehrlich and writer/feminist Gloria Steinem. I also heard former Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas; pediatrician Benjamin Spock, political columnist Jack Anderson and representatives Shirley Chisholm and Adam Clayton Powell. I was exposed to the teachings of Sri Chinmoy Kumar Chose, a noted Hindu Yogi, and musician Ravi Shankar. I got to hear basketball great Bill Russell; writer Jean Shepherd; conservative cartoonist AI Capp and screenwriter Rod Serling. Finally, there is my sentimental favorite – Howdy Doody’s pal Buffalo Bob Smith, who reeled about the dais in an inebriated, but most eloquent manner.

A stirring speech and a nice read. These are now music to my ears. This is because I observe that oration and writing contain many musical attributes such as rhythm, pace, the use of sounds, interesting words, thoughts, inflection, and theme. I believe great speakers and writers are, in their own way, musicians who can move a participant to feel some sense of symphonic excitement – and each practitioner can do that with one Stradivarius tied behind their back. So when Henry M. Soper’s publishers wrote in 1901, “How few entertainments are there in life surpassing in pleasure an entertainment consisting of good reading and speaking, interspersed with appropriate music?” I must concur. It’s a shame I had to climb on a soapbox in an out-of-the-way antiquarian book mart to retrieve an old book hidden on a dusty shelf in order to access such timeless wisdom.



Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

DEAR EDITOR

The following was found recently as we searched through early editions of *Sing Out!* for articles and historical tidbits that we might like to reprint during our (upcoming) 50th birthday. The note in question appeared as a letter to the editor in the September 1965 edition of our esteemed rag. This was a volatile era – musically and politically – and letters were often, well, passionate. This particular one reads thus. “Dear Editor: I have never voiced my opinions before (lazy, I guess), but perhaps now is just as good a time as any. All I really want to say is that I don’t always agree with your opinions, but you have the guts to stand up for them, which very few publications do. Also, I would like to request an article on John Hammond, Jr. Just one more thing. How can I go about getting honest criticism on my singing and playing style? I am not interested in becoming a professional, but I do enjoy performing and would appreciate honest help or advice from someone who knows. Sincerely yours, Emmylou Harris, Woodbridge, Va.”

Well, “honest” though I may be, I don’t profess to be “someone who knows,” (excuse me while I clear my professorial throat), but it seems a shame that such a sincere and direct missive as yours went unanswered. So, Ms. Harris, here goes. First of all, thanks for the kind words about our editorial policy. Back then we had positions a’plenty. Still do, although many of today’s issues are musical ones. Historically, politics may have rankled a reader or two, but ’twas all in good fun. Nowadays, Mark Moss is the editor. He is quite restrained, yet does occasionally have an opinion to share. As to your request for criticism, I have a feeling that criticism will befall you, as it does any musician who opts to pick and sing for folks. It comes with the territory. The critics may say you’re too much this or you’re not enough that, or you should do this or you should have done the other. But, stay your course. Be yourself. I’ll relay some advice given me by Gamble

Rogers back in 1985 (that’s 20 years in the future of your letter – so be patient). When booked for his first folk festival, he ruminated over whether to change his club act ... make it grander for the greater stage. He decided not to recreate himself. Gamble reasoned, “Don’t dishonor or have misgivings about that part of your work that is the truest, that part of your work that got you at last to where you wanted to be. It is the proof of what you are.” So, I pass along this advice ... listen to everyone you can ... then, just be yourself. Trust yourself.

And by the way, let me tell you the good news. John Hammond Jr. received some nice ink in *SO!* the years following your letter. For example you might take a gander at a JHJ feature that appeared in January 1985 along with articles about Jean Redpath and Ferron – two other fine performers. Funny, that’s two years after I met someone with the same name as yours at the CMA awards ceremony in Nashville. Come to think of it, didn’t I chat with an Emmylou Harris backstage at Carnegie Hall during Nanci Griffith’s “Other Voices, Other Rooms” tour? It was a conversation not about music, but about Thomas Hardy, Emily Bronte and Oscar Hijuelos. We later shared a table at The Russian Tearoom whilst comedian Bill Murray elegantly poured champagne into our glasses. (By the way, you should listen to Ms. Griffith. She’s got some great songs and is really a fine performer. I forget who it was she looked up to when she was coming along.) Hey, could *that* Emmylou Harris be a relative of yours? She’s a pro. Her voice is hauntingly expressive, her taste refreshingly eclectic and her music as purely American as Willie Nelson’s Martin guitar. *That* Ms. Harris seems to have assimilated every note of country music history into her own youthful yet respectful style. Maybe she too was a reader of *Sing Out!* – while also being a student of Bill Monroe and the Beatles. Gee, I wish I could be more helpful.

Keep plugging away, and who knows ... you too could be sharing a stage with Nanci Griffith, sipping champagne with Bill Murray, and discussing English masters backstage at Carnegie Hall with the likes of me. After all, you *might* want to try your hand at performing some day, when not reading the classics or writing letters to the editor.

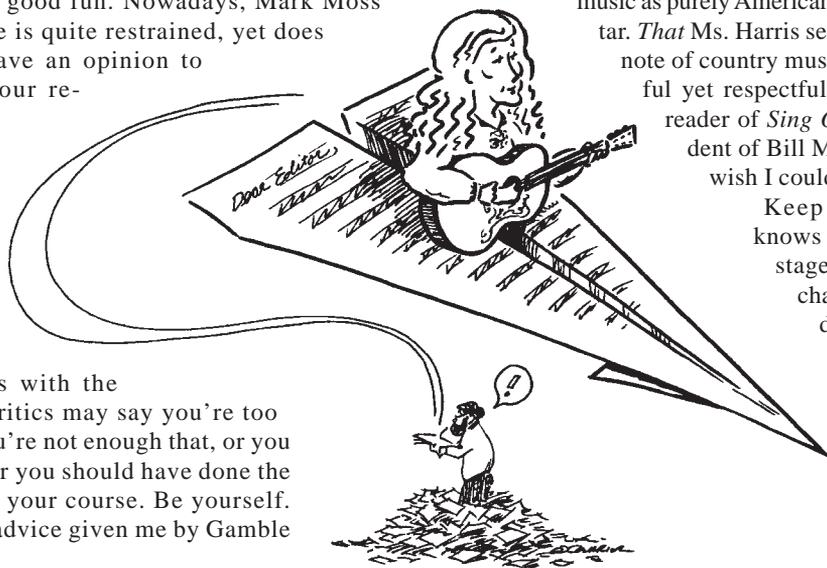


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

THE MAIL ORDER FOLK FESTIVAL

The first article I wrote for a commercial publication just happens to have been about *Sing Out!*. That was back in 1973 for an alternative music newspaper called *The Free Aquarian*. *Sing Out!* had been a part of my life from the sixties and I guess I couldn't wait to tell everyone about all those folk songs and teach-ins. To describe its musical bounty, I called *Sing Out!* a "mail-order folk festival." I was proud of *Sing Out!* using my quip as an advertising slogan, but I whined to Pete Seeger that *The Aquarian* was being credited with the quote – not me. I was too green to know that the writer earns the credit when also earning a bit of notoriety. Pete said I should be "proud" – that I had "joined the greatest author's club in the world ... the Anonymous Club." Little did I know I had been granted lifetime membership.

Recently, at The Folk Alliance meeting in Cleveland, Tom Paxton asked me to join him for breakfast. The round table also featured Pete Seeger, Utah Phillips, and John McCutcheon – performers like Tom who have made important contributions to our genre and to *Sing Out!* as well. When breakfast was over, as we headed off to workshops, a gentleman at the next table couldn't contain his excitement, exclaiming to me, "Man! That's what I like about these weekends. You come down for breakfast and the next thing you know is you're sitting at a table next to Tom Paxton, Pete Seeger, Utah Phillips, John McCutcheon, and ... who are you?" Reaffirmed a member of the Anonymous Club, I wear my anonymity as a red badge of courage.

Now, *Sing Out!* has turned 50 years young. This is the last edition before the 50th Anniversary issue, and I hope to make a point or two. This little rag you hold in your hands has made quite a contribution to society, and to the music scene in the latter half of the twentieth century. I congratulate it ... and I congratulate you for sticking with us through boom and bust. You're in good company. At the Cleveland conference, Richie Havens told me that *Sing Out!* was essential to him, confiding, "Half the songs I learned, I learned from *Sing Out!*" Peter, Noel (Paul) and Mary each in turn at my recent interview stressed how warmly they felt about *Sing Out!*, how important it was to them. I share that opinion. As someone who lived through Bobby Darin's "folk" period, it was inspiring to discover an alternative to show biz music. For fifty years, *Sing Out!* has

published substantial music for the front porch; the community; the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist movements – for countless stages and settings around the world. Our magazine became the meeting place, the exchange center for music and musicians. *Sing Out!* fueled the folk song movement and showed even mainstream writers that meaningful popular songs could be an alternative to "June, moon, spoon" songwriting. *Sing Out!* changed the notion of what songs were, why we sang, it even helped change the way we lived.

I took on the job of development director a couple years back when we had finally realized the dream of having our own building, a home for our magazine and world class library resource center. Finances were tight. I'll do this here, just this once. It has been my task to remind people we are a not-for-profit organization. We rely on financial support. A small donation to the "Our House Campaign" would serve as a meaningful 50th birthday present for an organization that has given so much to the world. Even Graham Nash (who joined our advisory board with the above mentioned Seeger, Paxton, and Havens, as well as Judy Collins and others), lent his name and song to the effort (see the ad page 88). The purchase of just one brick is a major contribution and I thank all those who have already helped out. For my birthday present, I'll make this offer. Contribute at any level (or add at least one brick to a donation you've already made), tell 'em Roger sent you, and in addition to the premiums offered at the various levels in the Our House ad, I will send you a copy of my book, *The Folk Music Chronicles*. The book will be autographed by its anonymous author. I will also send you a souvenir reprint copy of the first issue of *Sing Out!* including a recently updated historical essay. In researching that history, I discovered that time and again the member/subscriber made the whole thing work. That makes our readership the unsung, anonymous authors of our 50-year success story. Yet, there's no need to be anonymous, your name will be inscribed on a plaque on the Resource Center who could be a major patron of that center, anonymous or otherwise. I'll donate two books for that. So, happy birthday *Sing Out!*. It's been a grand first fifty years. One can only imagine what fifty more will bring, or whether the guy at the next table will know my name when I have breakfast with Paxton in the year 2050 for our centennial.

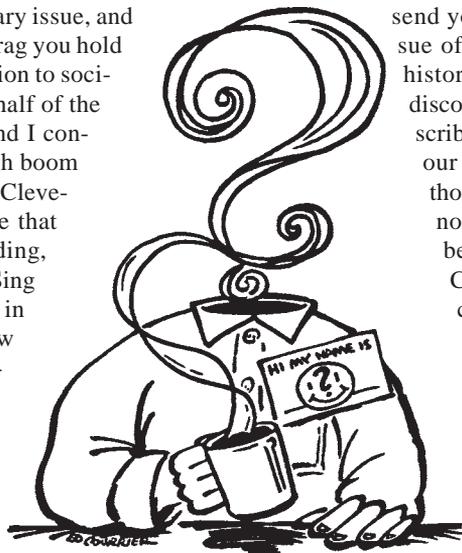


Illustration by Ed Courmier ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

IT'S A LESSON

Too late for the learning, I have been reflecting on the subject of the merit of formal music lessons. I had my chances. When I was seven, my mother acquired an immense piece of furniture of doubtful archaeological origin. The structure in question was a grotesque, white baby grand piano featuring copious wood carved fruits, oak leaves, filigrees, and lavish touches of gilding. The white monstrosity fit ever so suitably into the pink and blue 1950s décor of the living room, making a fashion statement that seemed to recall the lush opulence of a nineteenth century New Orleans brothel. The piano was a conversation piece. It lit up the room with the glow of its veneer, reflected back from dozens of plastic slipcovers laid upon chairs and sofas meant for display, not for comfort. To justify the purchase of such a musical instrument, the burden would fall on me to take piano lessons. Actually, it was a two-pronged attack. My mother's best friend Ann had a son Albert, who at the age of nine was a certified child prodigy. Tired of looking at photographs of Albert with Liberace, Horowitz and Toscanini, it was my turn to strut my stuff and win back bragging rights. Albert really could play beautifully. I remember wee Albert Stanziano pounding out "Autumn Leaves" and various Chopin etudes as if possessed of the spirit of Franz Liszt. It was scary. Albert later taught at Oberlin College and today gives recitals in Europe, the rest of the year taking on private students and continuing to study the great masters.

My formal training began in the classical arena under the tutelage of old Professor Metzger. I hated having to practice scales and preferred picking out my own melodies ... something that horrified Herr Metzger, an austere European, also of unknown origin. I think the Israeli spy agency, the Mossad, had not yet caught up with him for war crimes, but reading from the teacher's nervous demeanor, they were close on his heels. Metzger did a fair amount of shouting in some exotic foreign language and, to motivate me, piled on two extra assignments whenever I failed to get any one assignment right. We squared off. I deliberately did anything I could to push his buttons. I succeeded. Within a couple of

years, the Professor retired to an argentine rest home, and I was free to practice my own pieces, which took on the feel and sensibility of Las Vegas lounge music. No more piano lessons! Then, more trouble. Someone owed my father a fair sum of money, and settled up by handing over a brown, musty, leatherette case containing a red mother-of-toilet seat, 120-bass piano accordion. It sported more chrome than a late model De Soto, and made sounds that could only be described as eerily vulgar. Professor Flinta carried on where the unsuccessful Metzger left off. Flinta dutifully earned his five-dollars-an-hour, listening to me make sounds akin to the strangling of a cat. Eventually the gravy train ended for Flinta as well, and I struck out on my own, playing in a musical combo at weddings and bar mitzvahs. My one great achievement, having been the "oboe" participant in Edward Flinta's All Star Accordion Orchestra ... one of seventy-five accordionists playing the transcribed music of Beethoven, Mozart and Brahms. If Hell hath Muzak, I have previewed the soundtrack.

For me, the best lessons have been the pointers I've picked up, now and again, from various guitarists and banjo players I've encountered at music festivals and house sings, or performers to whom I listened carefully. I've learned a lot this way. Although I am not a quick study, I am fortunate in that I have gotten occasional tips from some notable artists and writers. I've gotten to sit and steal a lick or two from folks I admire greatly. I remember Gamble Rogers (fruitlessly) trying to get me to play a triple-lick on the guitar with my forefinger, or Tom Paxton showing me the proper way to write a bridge or segue from verse to chorus. Jimmy Ibbotson from the Dirt Band pushed me hard to get me to understand what is really going on when he is singing on stage. Sammy Cahn once told me to practice writing songs by creating new lyrics to go along with well-known standard popular tunes. Michael Moriarty coached me on, of all things, the proper way to breathe when performing. What have I made of all of this? Well, as a performer, I'm still a pretty fair columnist. But, these lessons were joyful, just as it is a hoot to try and assimilate something new in the old

dog, new tricks department. Bits and pieces – that's how I've learned. Yet, I would never suggest eschewing formal music lessons. You know that was the last thing on my mind.

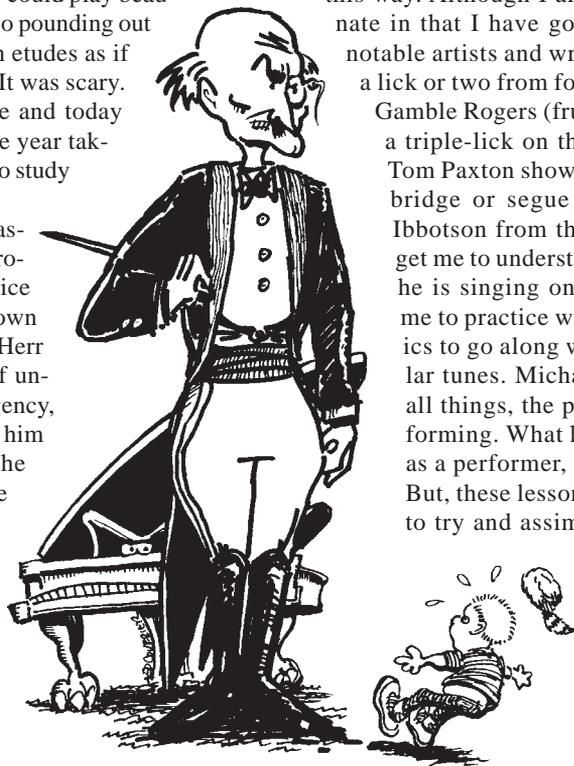


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

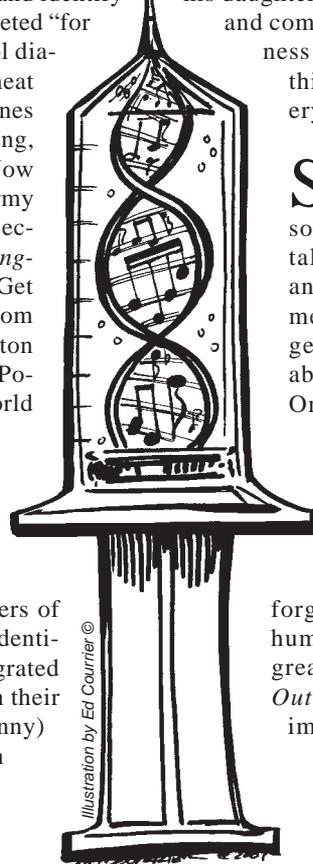
HELLO DOLLY

Scottish scientists have been very busy since they displayed the chops to clone a lamb back in 1996. You didn't think they'd stop there, did you? The not so sheepish clan from the Roslin Institute at Edinburgh Castle in association with PPL Therapeutics produced offspring from Dolly – Bonnie in 1998 and a set of woolly triplets in 1999. Obviously, this was a diabolical plan to create the new Dolly Sisters, or to corner the market on singing haggis. Then they cloned a bunch of chickens – collectively named “Britney,” and five pigs that go by the names Millie, Christa, Alexis, Carrel, and Dotcom ... presumably endeavoring to form the veterinary equivalent to the Spice Girls. “All God’s critters got a place in the choir,” Bill Staines points out, so can dancing chickens and singing pigs be far off? Also, recently came the announcement that the Genome Project, a massive effort to map the entire human chromosome makeup, and identify each and every DNA component, has been completed “for science and mankind!” Sure, some genes control diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, and lots of neat drug therapies will be developed ... but may genes soon to be discovered help control how we sing, play instruments, and learn and write songs? Now we're in for it. More singer-songwriters, an army of singers with songs learned merely by an injection of some medication ... no need for *Rise Up Singing*? Perish the thought. Far-fetched you say? Get ewes to it! We may someday instantly learn “Tom Dooley” from a single dose of Pharmco’s Kingston Trio batch #334 or the Clovers hits from Love Potion #9. We would have access to the entire world song catalog in a way that dwarfs the song swapping traffic on Napster and makes community music sings something akin to a house concert in the Village of the Damned.

Who were the Dolly Sisters? Goodness, only the hottest female sibling entertainers of the early part of the twentieth century! Eerily identical twins (get it – one fertilized egg!) who emigrated from Hungary to the United States in 1904 with their uncle Latszie. Roszika (Rosy) and Yanszika (Jenny) Deutsch were a smash hit on Broadway and in the movies between 1913 and 1920. They dressed alike, sang and danced in unison and were really a weird visual sensation. I'm not

certain what the Spice Girls are – some genetic experiment gone astray no doubt, like the Monkees. The non-identical Betty Grable and June Haver portrayed the twins in the 1945 movie “The Dolly Sisters.” Jenny married dapper vaudevilian, comedian and actor Harry Fox ... the man credited with inventing the Fox Trot. My publisher friend Randy Poe thinks this is not the same Harry Fox who led and lent his name to the Harry Fox Agency, the United States’ major mechanical rights clearing house and monitoring organization. But I do see a connection, a conspiracy of sheep, singers and shepherds – identical twins, scientists, and publishers as well as singing veterinarians along with the Warren Commission and one precocious pig named Arnold Ziffel. I also find it suspicious that although the Spice Girls’ “Wannabe” was number one in the UK for seven weeks, selling about three million copies worldwide, Prime Minister Tony Blair claimed to be able to name only four of the five Spices. This even after he assured the public his daughter listened to them. I will admit that Posh Spice and company may have been cloned in the show business sense to sell lots of recordings, but again, this all smacks of intrigue; there are sheep everywhere you know.

So, following my unerring line of scientific reasoning, it presumably will be possible some day for people with no apparent musical talent to take a drug, pick up a guitar then sing and play in public. Nothing new there, so let me rephrase that thought. One may expect that genetic engineering could play a part in the ability of individuals to learn and make music. Once the folk music genes are isolated, everyone could, after the ingestion of a pill, learn all the verses to the Scots ballad “Tam Lin.” I liked the old fashioned way – studying the Child Ballads, listening to recordings, practicing for hours, then messing up the chord progressions and forgetting the words. As to singing sheep, baa humbug, it'll probably never happen. The next great scientific advances in music, after the *Sing Out! Holographic CD*, will be the auto harmony implant in the medulla oblongata, self-tuning guitar strings, and acoustic guitars that resist amplification. I think Nostradamus predicted that one, along with the Palm Beach County Butterfly ballot. 





RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

EXCELSIOR, YOU FATHEAD

Throughout the years, I have endured several nervous turns as a concert producer, but none scarier than my first attempt acting the impresario. I had spoken with Jean Shepherd before his WOR New York radio program one night about a possible fund raising concert, then stayed to listen to him render a smooth, brilliant monologue about steel mills and prom nights in Hammond, Indiana. I knew Jean's friend Leigh Brown from my hometown of Clifton, New Jersey. She ushered me into a small studio at 1440 Broadway in Manhattan, giving me introductions to Jean and other radio idols Bob (Elliott) and Ray (Goulding). Like my compadre baby boomers, I was raised on Captain Video, Howdy Doody, and The Lone Ranger. Although radio's death knell was supposedly sounded in my childhood, with the advent of the cathode ray tube, radio was far more compelling for me and for a legion of dedicated listeners. Nothing we knew compared to Shep's storytelling. It was human communication at its freaking best. For most of my adolescence, I'd stay up (too) late on school nights, sit in a dark room and listen to his familiar voice. Each session was an intimate visit from an old and admired friend I never met. Perhaps these were learning sessions. I was overwhelmed with the genius of a writer so at home with plot, language, irony, rhythm, humor, words, life and emotions, a writer who could create allegorical works of art, night after night, as deftly as a Dutch diamond cutter might incise facets on a million dollar gemstone. Jean Shepherd worked the English language as if it were a jewel, which of course ... it is. The deal was struck. One thousand dollars (in September, 1969 money!) would be paid up front, and another grand handed over the night of the performance. A piece of cake, I thought. Jean Shepherd had been on the air for years in New York and Philadelphia. He wrote for *Playboy* and penned a hit book of short stories, *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*. His name was a household word among the metropolitan area intelligentsia who made him a cult hero and attended his live one-man shows at the Limelight. You may know Jean Shepherd as the creator of "A Christmas Story," the movie with the Red Ryder BB gun, a snotty department store Santa, and a wealth of nostalgic Americana.

By the day of the concert, 23 tickets were sold. This would certainly make the 1,000-seat hall appear under-attended. I was concerned. What would Shep think? Here I was being so cool and hanging out with him and all. The gala was looking more and more like a funeral. But, Jean announced the event on the radio, and sure enough, opening night, the line outside the box office stretched to the horizon. All seats were sold in a frenzy that left some enthusiasts begging for admission. It was like one of Jean Shepherd's stories. I was off the hook, and I learned a few things about life and art. Shep knew, and prodded me afterwards, "So, Kid, how was your first taste of the big time? Sweaty, right?" Then he chuckled. I went to see Jean Shepherd one last time at his annual Princeton University concert a few years ago. He was ailing, but game. He still had it. I heard that Leigh passed away, and soon followed the news that Jean was gone on October 16, 1999. Recently, Debbie Adler from KCRW radio, 89.9 FM in Los Angeles sent me a two-disk memorial her station had aired, *A Voice in the Night: A Tribute to Jean Shepherd*. It was produced for public radio by Harry Shearer of *Le Show* on KCRW and Art Silverman of National Public Radio (and is available for purchase from KCRW by the way). It all came back to me, the joy, the stories, my clammy palms. Thanks Debbie.

What do I remember best about Jean Shepherd? I recall a questioner ruffling Shepherd's feathers after the big concert, incredulously asking, "Hey Shep ... did all that stuff *really* happen to you?" Jean stared him down, as a hunter might take one steely last look at a doomed turkey, just before squeezing off a lethal shot. "Hey man, don't diminish my art ... I'm a *writer*," Shep sneered, then under his breath added, "...*you ignorant fathead*." Shepherd later confessed, "I write, that's what I do. I *create*. Give me a little credit. Do you think this is easy? *They* think it's easy because it *looks* easy. They always want to diminish what I do by saying I just remember a bunch of stuff ... it pisses me off." Then, Jean sat down and, in a reflective tone, continued, "But that's what the great ones do ... Kid ... *they make it look easy*." Shep was right. The easier you make it look – the more difficult it is all the way around. That's the secret, but it can sure piss you off sometimes. Oh yeah, Shep said to keep your knees loose.

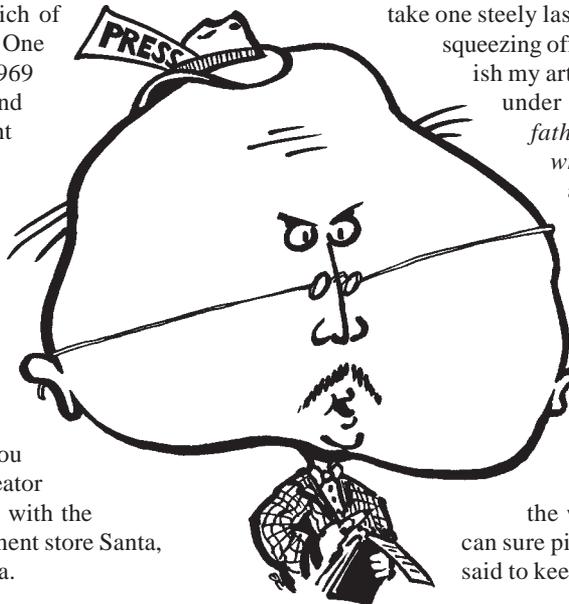


Illustration by Ed Courmier ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

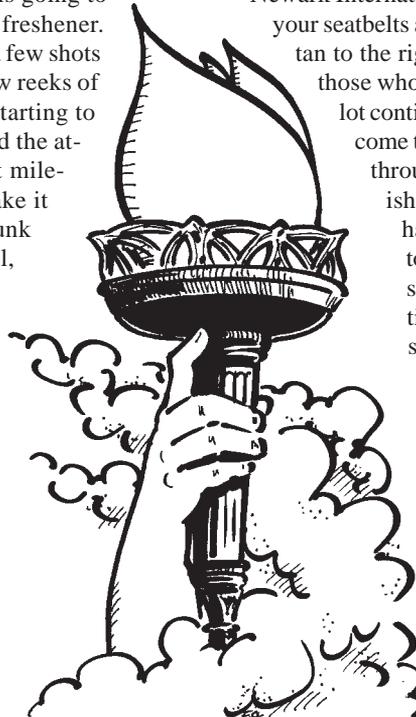
Parting Shots

DUST & ASHES

On Sunday, September 9th, 2001 I find myself on the usual over-booked airplane, traveling from Newark, New Jersey to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. My mother is ill and the next day I am to speak to a neurosurgeon. On the flight, I sit next to a woman who has, I believe, an Israeli accent. “Sabra? (*Native born Israeli?*)” I ask. “No, Lebanese,” is her response, “although I haven’t lived there since maybe thirty years.” She is charming and beautiful with dark hair and sparkling eyes. She tells me longingly, with a touch of melancholy, about her beloved Beirut, the way it used to be. She reflects, “It’s criminal what they did to my beautiful country. It was an oasis, a garden, and they destroyed it. The world, everybody sat back and watched, let them make it into garbage.” We talk about my mother, and the woman gives me her airline sandwich to take with me. “Your mother will be hungry. It’s South Florida,” she laughs, “if you don’t give her this, she will never forgive you.” Then it’s on to pick up the rental car. My cute red compact is there with the keys in the ignition. But, also inside, there is a horrid smell, like that apartment in the city where the lady kept 46 cats all a’ meow, meow meowing for something to munch on besides each other. This aroma is going to require more than a cardboard pine tree air freshener. I watch in disbelief as the attendant sprays a few shots of deodorizer at the dashboard. The car now reeks of animal urine *and* country fresh pine. It’s starting to rain torrentially. Mine’s the last car left and the attendant reminds me that the car gets great mileage. “With the windows open?” I ask. “Take it or leave it,” he responds. We look in the trunk to discover, in the corner by the wheel well, a mother mouse and a nest of wee baby mice. I gaze astonished as the attendant scoops them up, sprays the spot, closes the trunk and whisks them away from their cozy nook. Yet, the rear suspension makes a loud squeaking sound as I start to roll. “Pretty funny,” I say, “larger mice in the shocks?” “They all do that,” says the attendant, referring to the make of automobile. “Will there be anything else?” Yeah, bring those cute mice back, and how about a three-foot tall pine tree air freshener to wear around my neck.

I thought Monday at the neurosurgeon’s office was the ultimate horrendous day, un-

til the events of Tuesday the 11th. What was I thinking? The Lebanese woman, the mice, the smell, the flight, thoughts of insecurity and mortality ... and those television images I refuse to look at. Is there no plane back? Do I *want* a plane back? My rental car does have unlimited mileage. Could I endure twelve hundred miles of squeak, squeak, sniff, sniff, barf, barf? Maybe I should have known something was up – the bombing at the same address a few years ago – that *was* a subtle hint. I start to hear personal stories and learn of losses, such as Jack’s brother Jeff Hardy, a stand-up guy who played stand up bass who wouldn’t harm a fly but was unfortunate enough to find a job at a restaurant at the WTC. That’s just *one* un-lived innocent life out of thousands. What, no *Entertainment Tonight* drivel on the evening news? Context drifts into an age of slow news days. I get lucky the following Sunday with an available return flight, I just have to rise at 2:30 AM and wait in line for a few hours, and hand over my nail clipper and look suspiciously at another passenger, who looks suspiciously back at me. The plane is almost empty. I haven’t traveled on an empty plane in decades. For some reason, most folks have decided to forgo flying. No air traffic, so the plane heads in, a half-hour ahead of schedule. The cabin has an eerie feel to it. As we ready to set down, the pilot informs us, in professional sounding pilot speak, “We will be landing at Newark International Airport in a few minutes, please be sure your seatbelts are securely fastened.” There’s lower Manhattan to the right of the plane. A few gasps are heard from those who dare to look at the altered landscape. The pilot continues, “Thank you for flying Continental. Welcome to Newark where the temperature is 60 degrees through haze.” He pauses, (I thought he was finished speaking), then adds, “But that’s not really haze ... *it’s dust and ashes.*” I have just listened to a profound, unexpectedly jarring editorial observation from the pilot’s pulpit. In biblical times it was a sign of penance – to fast, wear sackcloth, sit in dust and ashes and apply them to one’s head. The words hang in the air like that yellow cloud we are flying through, and seem a profound hook for a song waiting to be penned, one that I have no desire to write.



The *Sing Out!* e-mail listserv group has a discussion today about the relative merits of gathering for patriotic house sings. Perhaps some other time, I’m really not in mood for singing much of anything at the moment. I just want to crawl into my nice, safe little nest by the wheel well.

Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

THE JERSEY BOUNCE

Well, how about that! Imagine little old me being asked to write an entry for an encyclopedia. It was the perky Jiminy Cricket of the Mickey Mouse Club who taught me how to spell “e-n-c-y-c-l-o-p-e-d-i-a” lyrically in an annoying ditty preceding a daily feature dedicated to kid knowledge. More than four decades later, I can *spell* encyclopedia, and write for one, thanks in part to a dancing cricket with a top hat. I would like to share the news with Annette Funicello, but she won’t return my phone calls. So, I’ll pass this on to you. A representative of Grove’s *The Encyclopedia Of Popular Music Of The World* contacted me to write about New Jersey’s contribution to the genre. I know what you’re thinking, that’s kind of like being asked to edit the section on warts for an update of Gray’s *Anatomy*. Balderdash! New Jersey has a rich music history – native personages such as Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughan and Bruce Springsteen. Joyce Kilmer wrote his poem (lyric) to “Trees” here in NJ. Then there’s Thomas Edison’s phonograph, Big Band remote broadcasts in the ’30s and ’40s from the Meadowbrook, and rock ’n’ roll concerts at Palisades Amusement Park. Jersey was the site of the first FM radio broadcast tower, eventually used by folk station/radio partners Ron Olesko and Bill Hahn at WFDU-FM. Even the wee transistor sprang from the Garden State, along with greasy diner food and the first drive-in movie. Never mind that I won’t be able to afford to purchase a copy of Grove’s tome with my honorarium. I have arrived as an authority figure, one that will slip into print as many slippery folk facts as possible. I will spend my honorarium at the Pancake House on Princeton’s Nassau Street for the daily breakfast special, after I walk the paths where Albert Einstein mused on the Unified Field Theory. With my remaining money, I will leave the waitress a large gratuity. All the time listening to Melanie and John Gorka (both from New Jersey) on John Weingart’s “Music You Can’t Hear On The Radio” as aired from the Princeton campus. After all, this is no Mickey Mouse assignment; this is intellectual, the weight of the world rests on my shoulder ... or is that the sword of Damocles? I always get the two confused.

Some Jersey facts I have accumulated over the years are troubling – many stories about creative people are. In 1935, Princeton under-

graduate senior Brooks Bowman penned songs for the Princeton University Triangle Club review, *Stags At Bay* including the popular, “East Of The Sun (And West Of The Moon).” Based on his precocious work, young Bowman was offered a contract to compose music for motion pictures (also developed in New Jersey, as was the process for mating sound and moving images). After graduation, Brooks died in an automobile accident while en route to California to accept his assignment. Life sucks. But death sucks more. Fame’s nice, but fleeting. Frank Sinatra’s 1941 vocal rendition of “East Of The Sun” (with Tommy Dorsey, who often played the Meadowbrook) made Bowman’s song a hit standard. Something the Princeton graduate would never know. I think about young people, rapid out of the gate with great success and admirable talent. I call it the Nickel Creek effect. After performing at the Philadelphia Folk Festival about ten years ago (as we watched some young phenom fiddling herself into a frenzy), Mike Agranoff and I were engaged in weighing the relative merits of whether is it better to be a has-been or a never-was. Agranoff got serious, making a strange prediction, as if he had looked into the future and seen some mystical aura. He mused he and I *could* eventually become the grand old men of folk music – skipping all the pesky in-between distinguished career stuff – if we merely hung on long enough. Longevity *has* helped bring me an encyclopedia assignment. Mike’s got a song of his into a recent issue of *Sing Out!*, and he performed a boffo showcase at NERFA, so there may be something to his threat.

But, longevity in itself does not necessarily lead to happiness either. Take our little friend Jiminy Cricket. His voice was that of Cliff “Ukelele Ike” Edwards who introduced “Fascinatin’ Rhythm” in the Gershwin hit musical, *Lady Be Good* to standing ovations in 1924. Edwards sold 74 million records during his long and distinguished career, but at the time of his death in 1971 was broke and on welfare. In 1940, Cliff sang the Oscar winning “When You Wish Upon A Star” as a cricket in *Pinocchio*. I recall because I studied entomology in graduate school, and read the original Carlo Collodi book in which the talking cricket (conscience) gets squashed. I guess you just have to watch what you wish for, or the advice you give. Did you know that, by the time George Gershwin (who as a teenager cut piano rolls in East Orange, NJ) was my age, he had been dead for 12 years?

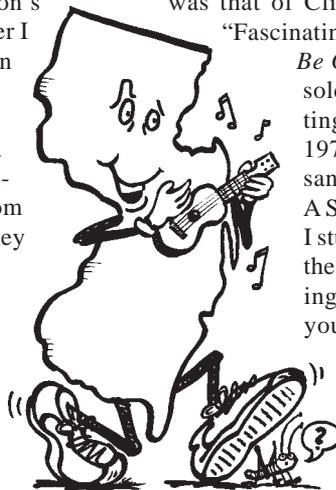


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

RUNAWAY TWAIN

I'm not a Mark Twain scholar, and only occasionally find Hal Holbrook amusing, so I had to accept much of what was offered up in Ken Burns' recent biography on public television as Gospel. I did so respectfully, yet it occurs to me, to be a fair tribute, some prevarication might have paid additional homage to the writer. I do question whether the soundtrack music was appropriate to the story. The nice melodies (some of the period – some not) and fine musicianship jarred me a little as being contemporary Burns formula docu-music. Perhaps this is the downside for the success of the producer's other films. I kept waiting for the Civil War to be fought again with Twain firing on Fort Sumter and Olivia Clemens reading a letter from a doomed soldier. When I tried to imagine what music would have sounded like in Twain's time, or what might have worked better, I couldn't come up with anything. So, sans field recordings, I defer to the experts. What moved me was the context of Samuel Langhorne Clemens' work, the significance of his writings and views about race and bigotry. I went back to some of my notes about Twain and found a quote by Harry Thurston Peck, writing in *The Bookman* in 1901, "A hundred years from now it is very likely that 'The Jumping Frog' alone will be remembered." I love that stuff. Glad I don't review sound recordings anymore. So, it is a hundred years hence, Harry. Do you want to give Twain another look? Let's see, by 1901 we had the good stuff gathering dust on library shelves. Peck would have us forgetting *The Innocents Abroad*, *The Prince And The Pauper*, *The Adventures Of Tom Sawyer*, *The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn*, and *A Connecticut Yankee In King Arthur's Court* among others. All I can say is, "Harry Thurston who?" Peck was a Latin Professor at Columbia Uni-

versity, a noted critic, biographer and editor of *The Bookman* who was snubbed by society following a breach of promise suit. It is said this caused his collapse and suicide. One would have thought it would have brought him closer to Twain's writings. In defense of Professor Peck ... as Twain was working on the sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, the author wrote his editor, "I like it only tolerably well, as far as I have gone, and may possibly pigeonhole or burn the manuscript when it is done." Clemens never discarded it, but renamed it *The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn*.

I just got off the phone with Editor Moss who encourages me to burn my writings whenever I offer. Mark informed me that Dave Van Ronk passed away this morning. I'll take a detour, but not really much of one. Van Ronk, like Twain, understood the importance and rightful context of the African-American contribution to the sounds and fabric of our language and music, and the tasteful performance thereof. He honored that contribution, and slyly offered his own jazzy vision of things popular and obscure. Since we are talking soundtracks, his repertoire could indeed serve as a soundtrack to the Twentieth Century. Dave appreciated diverse music and music makers, and served as a valued mentor to a host of young people working out their rites of passage in Greenwich Village, from Bob Dylan on through Chris Lavin. Rather than remake artists in his own image, he showed the likes of Lavin, that being Christine Lavin was a valid career path, yet encouraged performers to build on a sure foundation of the musical basics. Like Twain, Van Ronk possessed a playfully irascible facade wrapped about a warm heart. Instead of the Mississippi, he traversed Bleeker and MacDougal Streets. One often bumped into Van Ronk, hustling through the maze of crisscrossing West Village streets, guitar case slung over his shoulder, always with time for a quick chat, no matter how behind schedule he might be. His advice too, was Twainsian. Years ago, I was making an album. I asked Dave for input, which he gave thoughtfully and freely. His prescient advice was that "Only a damn fool would put his own damn fool money into his own damn fool recording." I nodded and got a backer. Thanks Dave. You saved me big bucks, although my investor no longer speaks to me.



Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

FOR ART'S SAKE

I declined an eleventh hour invitation to attend the Songwriters Hall of Fame induction ceremony held by the National Academy of Popular Music ... a worthy organization comprised of the leading popular tunesmiths of our time. I've gone to most of the galas these last two decades. Our own Oscar Brand is curator of the organization's museum. You know the drill – lots of tuxedos and evening gowns, a chance to see the BeeGees and Tony Bennett, the spectacle of Oscar Brand tastefully clad in a tuxedo and tennis sneakers. Always, there are more celebrities than you can shake a stick at ... if that's your idea of a good time. This year's inductees were Sting, Michael Jackson, Randy Newman, Barry Manilow and Ashford and Simpson. Worthy indeed, but I'll watch them on television. (The taped program will air on the Bravo Network in October). The invitation came late, and I already had agreed to attend a small conference that included three Nobel Laureates. (Yes, they're celebrities as well, of a different ilk.) Oh, the choices a columnist must make.

This year marks my third decade writing about folk music in the popular (and unpopular) press. The same length of time has passed since enjoying the rigors of medical school. There are so many fond memories on both fronts. I was just speaking with a shaggy medical student as he dismantled his vintage Harley. I could not help but remark on his artful tattoos while noting how things had changed from the "good old days" when we students were required to maintain short haircuts and wear ties in anatomy class. Back then, it was safer to stay a faceless member of the crowd. No points were awarded for individuality, lest one end up singled out for ridicule by sadistic professors. My old school tie had a psychedelic design with bold colors (and yucky stains). It invited lots of attention, and today as you see, I am a music columnist. Doctor-in-training Zach the Biker let me know that if I wanted a nostalgic skull and caduceus tattoo he could recommend a great local artist. It reminded me that my gross anatomy cadaver back then (named Corporal Remains by my lab partner) had the most dazzling rendering of a Native American on his right arm, and the rest of his topography was resplendent with sailing ships and shapely dancing women. I had never seen such a politically incor-

rect display. It seemed a shame – in more ways than one – that no one would ever again see these grand works of art. After all, it would have been gauche (creepy and illegal) to keep a souvenir – although my lab partner (now a noted practicing physician) floated the idea.

Art is personal. Picking a guitar while watching rock idols on television is as close as some of us will get to a celebrity. But still, our personal music can elevate us. I recently took the public tour at the C.F. Martin factory for the umpteenth time, a tradition that has included profiling the company for *Frets* back in 1980. This is a place where dreams are made, then covered by a limited lifetime warranty. Every so often, I'll detour to Nazareth to watch necks being carved, backs book matched and fingerboards pearl inlaid. It never gets old. As the group assembled for my tour in the waiting room, I looked around at the diverse crowd. My companions were excited, trading favorite Martin stories. Folks were pulling sample guitars off the wall and picking at various levels of skill, all eager to show off their favorite licks, and wrap their hands around a new Martin. There were children, a recently married couple, old-timers. Folks had traveled great distances to breathe a little hallowed Pennsylvania sawdust. The tour turned out to be another celebrity event. To my surprise, leading the troop was fellow *Sing Out!* advisory board member C. F. Martin IV, who occasionally takes charge of a tour. As Chris handed out soundhole coaster souvenirs, he wryly quipped to me, "I guess you have collected quite a few of these!" I responded that I was using them to build a life raft for the next flood. He smiled.

I was delighted by Chris' sense of humor – he is a wonderful public speaker who gave us the inside scoop on a number of products in development (I can't tell you what's coming up – Chris swore us all to secrecy!).

One walkway above a grand room reminded me of the cityscape in the movie *Metropolis*. As I looked down at the many skilled employees, I tried to get a handle on the number and variety of instruments being created, thinking about the roster of famous people who play Martins ... and on the collective joy these guitars bring to people like you and me. Hobnob in a room full of celebrities? Share a latté with a Nobel Prize Laureate? Nope. I'd rather take the Martin tour, then sit alone with my M-38 and pick a while, thank you ... and thank you Chris.

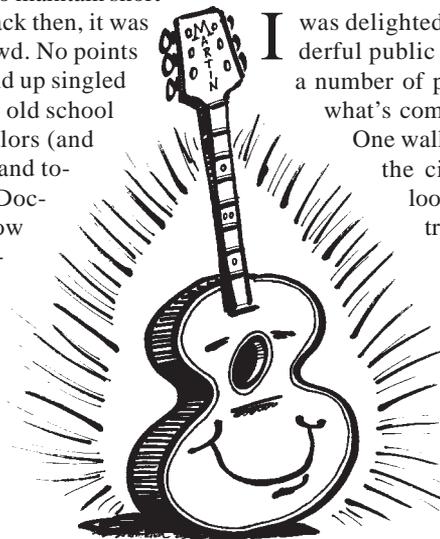


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

OUT TO LAUNCH

If I ever amass twenty million dollars from my folk music endeavors, I'll put a little aside for a rainy day and go off in search of a convenient downpour. Not so for Lance Bass of the musical group 'N Sync, and a sad state of foreign affairs it is indeed. The tuneful Mr. Bass had his heart set on blasting aloft in a Russian rocket for a sojourn in space, supposedly able to lay on the table enough rubles to gas up the boosters and grease the palms of a few well placed Russian Aviation and Space Agency officials. Bass was to rendezvous with the International Space Station this past October in a high mileage, one-owner, reconditioned Soyuz (once driven by a little old tractor salesman from Minsk). But, alas, the best laid plans of mice and teen idols oft go ever earth-bound. The word is (in well-informed intergalactic earth circles, and various teen magazines) that the 23-year-old entertainer could not come up with the twenty million U.S. smackers (payable in advance) that could have resulted in a fuel-hardy earth orbit-uary. After all, it takes a lot of capitalist cabbage to put a vintage rocket ship into shape, you know, buy a rebuilt carburetor, fresh paint, a few thousand yards of duct tape, bailing wire, a *really* long extension chord, and then there's vodka for the crew. Lots of vodka. That's the budget buster. Would you go without vodka?

With all the warmth of a Russian winter, officials sent Lance packing from his training exercises at the cosmonaut academy in Star City. Apologies to Tom Wolfe, officials bluntly and belatedly said that Bass didn't have *the right stuff* for space travel. I guess the translation from the Russian is, "We balked when Skippy couldn't get an advance on his allowance." The best part is that the mission will replace the singer, not with another rich celebrity, but with a *large cargo container*. Perhaps one holding the popular Russian rock group Na-Na that recently trained for a flight, but was purged from the roster when they didn't make the retro-grade. Funny, I would have thought that most people would pay twenty million *not* to ride on a creaky Russian rocket. Heck, I avoid the roller coaster at Great Adventure, and unlike the former Soviets, the theme park is *solvent!*

Fear not space-fans. Negotiations are continuing between the parties, so the pop idol may still get high and go for his post-adolescent joy ride. Undoubtedly Lance is spending time at the computer entering numbers with lots of zeros into

the Internet site, Pricelinesky-Dot-Comrade. The truth is, a little healthy bargaining might make for a supersaver, former Party-member fare. And the Russians can always jettison a few redundant oxygen tanks and in-flight computers to take Lance Bass on at a discount price, with some extra sky miles left over for a side trip to Siberia. Bass still may get his wish, if he brings his own bag of raw potatoes and provides an off-the-rack space suit for, say, the budget class fare of only *sixteen* million. But, of course, that ticket is non-refundable if canceled within a week of space travel, and he'll have to catch his own ride back on a passing meteorite.

I guess this is a time to remember John Glenn, Yuri Gagarin, and Bill (José Jimenez) Dana. They were true pioneers of space travel. The first two enduring the nothingness of space, and the

latter, the nothingness of *The Ed Sullivan Show*. And then there's Dr. Zachary Smith – and Billy Mumy who recorded the classic song *Fish Heads*. Speaking of fish heads, the word is that Cindy Crawford would like to take Bass's place (so she says). I would contribute to have *her* shot into space. Perhaps it's a sign that things have gotten

a tad too spooky here on Earth, when super models queue up for space exploration.

Maybe Crawford can't get a decent latté down here on earth, or was putting on the pounds and heard one is weightless in the vacuum of space. That's *vacuous!* Talk about *Lost in Space*. The Russian crew has already expressed interest in having Crawford join them on their long, lonely journey.

Anyway, with a grounded Lance Bass, we'll be spared the post flight interviews on MTV and VH1, and the obligatory, "Hey dudes ... it was *awesome*," revealed in a chat with Kennedy. Maybe this is a hint of things to come – placing a folk singer in space. Actually, that's not such a bad idea (no names please, some suggestions instantly rocket to mind). While circling the globe, re-tuning in zero gravity, doing a little patter about how tough life is in a capsule on the road, singing of global issues while actually looking down at the globe. Finally having a captive audience, albeit one that speaks a foreign language. Of course, the space-singer-songwriter would have to come up with twenty million, and an agent sleazy enough to mislead their client into thinking this Russian gig was placed on the tour schedule to fill a gap between Lima, Ohio and Altoona, Pennsylvania. I know *I'd* volunteer, if I weren't having a latté with Cindy Crawford next week at Starbucks. *Do svedanya* space cadets! *Danger Will Robinson!*

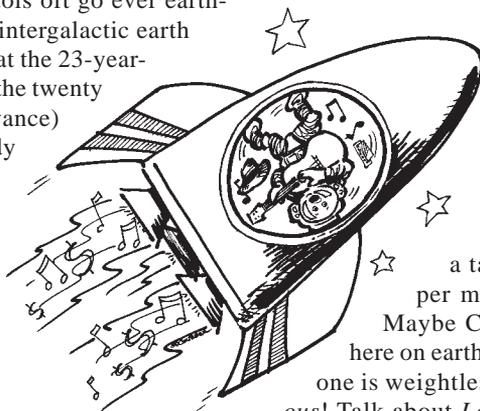


Illustration by Ed Courmier ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

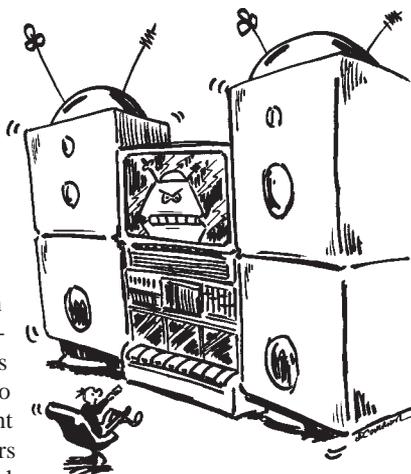
Parting Shots

SOUND JUDGEMENT

Tom's listening room is a shrine for the worship of conspicuous consumption and discretionary income. His den is a bi-wired, gold-plated monument to auditory self-indulgence. Long ago a family room, the space is outfitted with an array of some of the more expensive, cutting edge electronic music gear available this side of the planet Krypton. It is a wonder to behold. Replacing passé expensive equipment that was state-of-the-art only a couple of years ago, Tom once again went all out to approach perfect sound reproduction. (Note the use of the word *approach* and term *once again*.) The new stuff drones with a sinister hum you can feel and emanates a weird force field that makes my skin tingle and the cat's fur stand on end. I can sense the floorboards vibrating, and the flashy system isn't playing any music yet. Tom's stock options in that Internet start-up IPO must have paid off – this stuff is *awesome*. We're talking about tens of thousands of dollars of glowing mono block amplifiers, hand-wired platinum pre-amps, gyroscopic turntables, and a pair of speakers that look like the robot Kronos from the 1957 sci-fi movie of the same name. Actually, that is an apt analogy as the flick was about a robot sent to earth by a power starved civilization to steal the planet's energy resources. As it sucked up more and more energy, it grew to a fantastic size, much like Tom's growing hobby from Hell.

I'm embarrassed. Tom has one pair of blue cables that lists for more than my entire sound system. He gives me a lecture on each piece of gear using such modifiers as *ultimate*, *transparent*, *accurate*, and *uncolored*. He is tossing about terms such as *pace*, *presence*, and *soundstage*. Thomas has neglected to use the words *idiotic* or *music* or *divorce* (I see his wife glaring from the hallway). I suspect this is a male thing, you know, my vacuum tube's bigger than your transistor, but an audiophile magazine I enjoy reading notes that women also like to indulge, only with more accurate hearing and rather down-to-earth expectations. I like reading about glowing dials and innovative gizmos. More so, I get a kick out of audio reviewers trashing each other's choices of expensive equipment. Even in lofty high-end audio, megabucks will not buy consensus or *perfect sound forever* as the ads for early jarring CD players and discs once proclaimed. Listening is still a subjective exercise.

RagTag Roger is limited to daydreaming about audio Nirvana. I am pretty restrained. I try to avoid the trap of



system du jour envy. There is one thing I've noticed about product reviews in the prestigious magazines. No matter how seductive a \$20,000 apparatus is, or how glowing the review, there is always something lacking, something to rue upon comparison with an expensive competitor. There is always a downside, a trade off. For example, the spiffy new Babel Millenium Twenty preamp that outshines the passe Clamor Tens' once glowing review, written by the same Judas who reassesses his opinion that sent legions of readers to the high-end store, cash in hand for the CLAM-10, now a shiny door stop.

My buddy goes on and on. I am learning about theories of hearing, although, more likely, this is more about marketing and hormones than hearing. Tom speaks of magic markers for the CDs and of pillows around the cat's litter box, and mystical disks placed on the speakers to improve the room's aura as well as a quartz crystal hung 43 inches from each speaker. For twenty grand I would hope speakers might sound pretty good without magic markers, crystals and pillows. Shows you what I know. Hey, I still haven't heard any music!

Why not put on some music? We've been *looking* at the system for a long time. The proud owner says, "Sure," as he leafs through a pile of test recordings. We have to wait because we're still warming up the amplifiers. The temperature in the room has gone up ten degrees since I arrived. Then, I must stand in only one spot to get the full effect. *Music?* No, we are listening to ping pong balls, locomotives, and marching soldiers. Tom beams, "Wasn't that gunshot realistic?" Then comes a musical album, but to test *ambiance*. I am instructed to listen to the waiter and the cash register. I carry my own test records. We play some Pete Seeger at Carnegie Hall – hardly audiophile but very nicely recorded, significant, and lovely. Sounds fine to me ... but I could *rent* Carnegie Hall for what this stuff costs. The same album sounds great at home, and in my car, and on a Discman. All through the history of sound reproduction, from the Edison Gramophone beyond 8-track tapes to mp3, people have boasted about hearing near perfect music. Short of inviting Pete over for milk and cookies, and asking him to play a few tunes on the banjo in my living room, there may never be auditory perfection at my place. I find myself asking – "WWWD?" (What Would Woody Do?) I presume *not* place pillows on his guitar. He'd grab his six-string and invite Pete to go find a nice union hall to play in – the *perfect* audio listening-room. I think about recorded gunshots and wonder if Tom will ever get around to listening to music.

Illustration by Ed Courrier ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE

Silence is golden. Now more than ever, it pays to be quiet, or careful what you don't say, or more to the point, with whom you don't say it and how you credit one's silent partner. Confusing? Let me try to explain. For those of you knee deep in the Internet music-sharing tug of war, this wee tale is a refreshing throwback to the halcyon days when songwriters, publishers and lawyers mixed it up the old-fashioned way.

To set the stage, back in 1952 the avant-garde American composer John Cage wrote a memorable, if not hum-able composition, "4'33'" (pronounced four minutes, thirty-three seconds) a notorious piece – that was totally silent. When pianist David Tudor "performed" its debut in Woodstock, New York on August 29th of that year, much of the audience grumbled or walked out of the concert hall. Tudor timed the piece with a stopwatch, turned the pages of the carefully written score, and raised and lowered the lid over the piano keys. Hush-hush for exactly four minutes and thirty-three seconds – I recommend you follow along closely with the sheet music the next time you play the recording. It's a toe-tapper that requires one to mark time with stocking feet. Enter Mike Batt of the classical rock group The Planets, creator of the song titled, "A One Minute Silence" found on the group's album *Classical Graffiti*. You guessed it ... that song bears a remarkable resemblance to Cage's, save a superfluous three minutes and 33 seconds. Following the album's release, Batt was accused of copying from Cage's work, and became embroiled in a plagiarism action. Hey, nothing is, well, nothing to sneeze at. After all, wasn't the hit television comedy *Seinfeld* about nothing? Batt fueled the fire, stating, "Mine is a much better silent piece. I have been able to say in one minute what Cage could only say in four minutes and 33 seconds," and, "My silence is an original silence, not a quotation from his silence."

Actually, Batt only had himself to blame. Had he released his piece under his own name, Cage's estate might not have noticed (John Cage died in 1992). Batt stumbled when he credited "A One Minute Silence" to Batt/Cage. That made John Cage a co-writer ... of nothing now worth something. Nothing indeed! Had Batt credited his silence alone, Cage's publishing company presumably would have no claim. Actually, Batt says he wanted to separate some of

The Planets' acoustic arrangements from more up-tempo rockier cuts on the *Classical Graffiti* album. He remarked, "I thought for my own amusement it would be funny to call it something so I called it 'A Minute's Silence' and credited it as track 13 and put my name as Batt/Cage, as a tongue-in-cheek dig at the John Cage piece." The high point of the conflict came last July when Batt attempted to prove his silent track was different from John Cage's – by staging a performance of the piece. Cage's publisher countered by hiring a clarinet player to perform Cage's silent composition. The jury is still out, so not to speak.

After Batt settled out of court with Cage's publisher Peters Edition and the Cage estate by paying an undisclosed six figure sum to The John Cage Trust, Nicholas Riddle managing director of Peters Edition commented on the matter. He noted, "We had been prepared to make our point more strongly on behalf of Mr. Cage's estate, because we do feel that the concept of a silent piece, particularly as it was credited by Mr. Batt as being co-written by Cage, is a valuable artistic concept in which there is a copyright. We are nevertheless very pleased to have reached agreement with Mr. Batt over this dispute, and we accept his donation in good spirit." Batt added, "This has been, albeit a gentlemanly dispute, a most serious matter and I am pleased that Cage's publishers have finally been persuaded that their case was, to say the least, optimistic. We are, however, making this gesture of a payment to the John Cage Trust in recognition of my own personal respect for John Cage and in recognition of his brave and sometimes outrageous approach to artistic experimentation in music." "A One Minute Silence," has now been released as part of a double A-side single. Per-

haps you will want to download it from the Internet for your mp3 player. You can do the same for "4'33'" on various Cage web pages. Cage was trying to make a point ... that there was no such thing as silence. "Try as we may to make silence, we cannot," Cage reflected in his own writings, "One need not fear for the future of music." During the premier performance of "4'33'," the wind whirled, raindrops hit the roof, and a host of other sounds could be heard ... including angry whispering. Now, that raises another point. If you download a silent song in the woods, does anyone hear you? Sorry. I guess it's a *dumb* question.



Illustration by Ed Courrier ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

BANG, WHOOSH, ZAP ...

Have you ever had a job you really hated? Okay ... put your hands down class. Hopefully it's not the one you have now, and no, I am not ragging on my "RagTag" assignment or rallying my colleagues at *Sing Out!* to mutiny. My dismal workplace was a factory job in college. It was, to my mind, real work. I didn't like the repetitive nature of the task, and I tip my hat to folks who do that kind of job. I would stand at a die press, heat-sealing machine in a hot, smelly, noisy factory and repeat the same few moves *ad foggy-mind-numb*. Each minute the cycle would go, "*bang, whoosh, zap, buzz*, (pause), *whoosh, bang, clang*." I'd hear that song played all shift long. I recall I had to set a few pieces of brown faux alligator vinyl in place into the die. Then I'd cover them with more plastic, flip a jig, place one more plastic piece on the pile, move my hands out of the way, press a foot pedal and two buttons, wait for a timer to run down and buzz then press the buttons again. Gum chewing was out of the question. I'd put the finished product on a slowly growing pile and start anew. When I filled up a box, I put it in a bigger box. When I ran out of plastic flaps and backs ... I went to yet another box and took a pile of flaps to place by my machine. I was making biology class dissecting kit covers – the same ones I saw for years, as I later instructed college biology courses. Argh! Sometimes I would miss a step and an alarm would go off, I'd fry the expensive die, and the smell of burning plastic and electrified ozone filled the air. Something about dangerous radio frequency and forgetting to put the plastic in. The foreman would race over and make derogatory remarks about Roger being a "big-time college student" and how stupid I was not to be able to do this job without screwing up. He got to feel superior, I *did* feel inferior and eventually, I could (and did) do the job in my sleep.

I have been on an accordion hunting expedition lately. That sent me to the Basking Ridge home of Charles Nunzio, a ninety-year-old virtuoso and, although slowed down some, one still repairing and selling vintage piano accordions. Charles is

originally from Cattafi, Sicily, and he must like his job. Once a child prodigy, at the age of eight (around 1921) he rated a \$700 accordion, a Buti (made by Antonio Buti) purchased by Nunzio's father in Mulberry Street, an area of Manhattan known as "Little Italy." Man, \$700 in 1921! Charles played on the radio networks in the '30s and '40s, filling in for his teacher Pietro Frosini at WOR in the mornings with John B. Gambling, the dean of morning radio. He also played for Joe Biviano and Charles Magnente and even backed the Street Singer (Arthur Tracy) who Nunzio says did more street singing than accordion playing. Nunzio wrote accordion classics such as "The Accordion Rhapsody," "Frolic of the Seven Dwarfs," and the "Happy Holiday Polka." He seems genuinely surprised that I can play at all after not touching a squeeze box for decades. His face lights up when I fumble into the right chord resolves for "All of Me." We talk about purchase options and I agree to think them over. In his shop, I glance at the stacks of accordions with their rows of buttons and I remember that practice in my youth was not unlike work in a factory. Charles says that with just a few lessons, I can be playing beautifully again. "*Bang, whoosh, zap, buzz*, (pause), *whoosh, bang, clang*," goes off in my head. Les-

sons? I never liked the rhetorical nature of practicing and spent a lot of time not doing it for piano and accordion. Guitar and banjo were more a whoosh here and perhaps a bang or a clang there. (I've got the clangy banjo technique to prove it.) My theory is to keep the instruments handy, pick them up now and then and noodle. That's why I am not Segovia Junior, (or Charles Nunzio Junior).

Even as a college teacher I felt I was banging and whooshing. The alarm buzzer went off one semester, and I started working for myself. I founded a consulting company that studies research, and "*bang, whoosh, clang*" employee issues at corporations. After that, there was time for music and writing, and often a conversational juncture where I had to justify why I do what I do, usually to colleagues with high paying, "secure" jobs at big name firms. Now, one by one, I have watched my friends down-sized from those big companies, and I feel somewhat vindicated in my vagabond life. I think Charles and I made the right career decisions. But, to this day, it's hard to take a coffee break without thinking I'm cheating the boss.

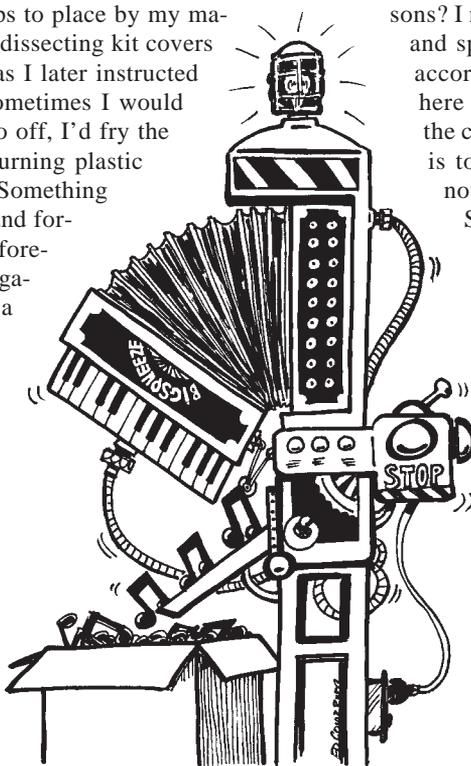
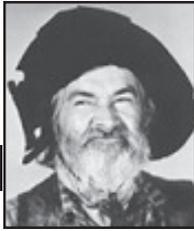


Illustration by Ed Courmier ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

HAIR TODAY, GROAN TOMORROW ...

A number of years ago – I think it was back in 1989 – I interviewed Christine Lavin for an article that appeared in *Sing Out!* (“Christine Lavin, City and Eastern Songstress” v.34#3). The conversation was pleasant and then some. Chris was an artist I knew from the Speakeasy club at the center of New York’s folk scene. We played there often and swapped songs and stories and talked “folk-biz.” Then there were *Fast Folk* magazine events and song circles at Jack Hardy’s apartment. I recall on that particular day, I met her for the interview at her baton twirling instructor’s Greenwich Village apartment. It was an eerily warm February morning. I sat for a while watching her run through a lesson outdoors before we spoke. There was a fair amount of twirling and whoops-ing, but the big whoops happened a few days after the interview.

We were set for a gig that weekend at the Turning Point, in Piermont, NY, having both finished a sound recording at the same studio. I added some music to a track on her *Good Thing He Can’t Read My Mind* album. Christine was returning the favor. “Roger,” offered Chris after lunch, “I really think you should take some album and publicity shots *with* your beard, then *shave* your beard for the rest of the session. That way, you can have a better selection of photos, and who knows, the beardless ones might work better for you!” Well, it all sounded sensible. Chris has that warm, thoughtful, inspiring way about her. Hey ... why not? Yeah! That’s just what I’d do ... and what I did. The beard I grew years earlier had only been routinely trimmed. Snip, snipping, snipped. My recollection is that the face peering at me from the mirror did not look as it did the last time I saw it – but of course, there was no turning back. The night of the Turning Point show, I was seated at the upstairs restaurant bar when Ms. Lavin entered. “Hello Chris,” says I. That welcome got kind of a polite nod in reply as she carried in her guitar and scampered past. Then again she walked to the door and again I said, “Hello Christine.” Again, not recognizing me (probably tagging me a bald-faced masher) she breezed by. Finally, on the third try, I stepped in front of her, pointed to my clean-shaven face, and said, “Chris ... it’s *me*, Roger!” A look of horror grew on her face. “Oh, no ... I’m so sorry!” was her response. I took that to mean she preferred the bearded face. Thanks old buddy.

On August 14th this year, I got a cell phone call from editor Moss, about two in the afternoon. It concerned Christine. “Roger, I’m calling from the road. Once over the George Washington Bridge, what’s the best way to Fordham University?” Mark was on his way to sit in on Chris’s WFUV radio taping, he continued, “You want to come?” Pause. “Chris?” I instinctively stroked my now graying beard as if some naked visage led to my declining the invitation. I’ll do some writing. The next thing I know, the power is off, and I am shutting down my computer on battery backup. I think nothing of it for an hour or so until I get another call from Mark. He says he has dialed a hundred times before getting through to me. He tells me he got to Fordham and a few minutes into the taping ... the entire Northeast was enshrouded in a power blackout. I infer that Chris’s studio CD player has managed to pull the plug on the major energy grid. Or, maybe it’s that old air conditioner ad she once did. *Whoops!* The taping session was kaput. It took Mark hours to take Christine uptown, and exit the city via the bridge, picking up a few fellow travelers here and there, kind soul that he is.

Now, moving along, it’s a few weeks hence. I’m performing at the Philadelphia Folk Festival and about to rib Mark about the perfect timing of his visit to the Bronx. At the Sing Out! booth I prepare to zing *him* when, *Wham!* I get a tag-team razzing from the editorial staff about my press photo in the Philadelphia Folk Festival program book. *What?* Chris must have put them up to it. Moss, Atkinson and Courier are on me about the photo of this “really young guy” with a “dark beard and (my) name.” I look. The lad portrayed certainly appears young and handsome. It is a photo of me perhaps pulled from a folder in the festival archives, from around the time of the session Christine “instigated,” but – by today’s standard, not exactly a true likeness. I counter attack – point out to Mark that both our photos in *Sing Out!* are not exactly true to life either, that this too is a gray area of editorial hypocrisy, in a truth in journalism sort of way. Mark promises to replace said photos soon using his digital camera. Perhaps it’s time for me to shave again. See ... unlike Mark, only my beard is gray, not yet the other hair on my head. I could still shave, then, use the beardless pictures taken way back when as recommended by Christine ... and no one would be the wiser. Anyway, these are just the kind of events that turn one’s beard gray.



[Note: Per Roger’s request, we have updated both Mark Moss’s and his byline pictures. — The Sing Out! Staff]

Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

LIFE COPIES STEVE

To Steve Goodman, the game of life was like the game of baseball ... more to the point, a day game at ivy-covered Wrigley Field. Life after all is nothing more than a long season of joy and frustration. Talent wise, Goodman was the Ernie Banks of folk music ... an all-star MVP playing on team folk. To the business types at the record companies, folk may have been pop's minor league cousin, but no singer-songwriter had a higher batting average for belting musical home runs over the fences. With the Chicago Cubs making the 2003 playoffs, and watching game six of this year's National League Playoff Series, I was thinking about Steve Goodman, and the Main Point Reunion Concert I attended in 1984 with photographer Bob Yahn. That's the last time I saw Steve Goodman, avid Cub fan and enthusiastic performer. The concert in question took place on June 21, a few months before Goodman passed away following a final risky effort to beat the leukemia originally diagnosed in 1969. To me, Goodman was a synthesis of many genres, a musical dynamo that processed life and irony into hot licks and sharp lyrics. He could put the most hilarious spin on any subject and get away with murder due to his impish smile and ability to know just how far he could go in his inventive, irreverent humor. That night on the bill with Steve, we had David Bromberg, Bonnie Raitt, Tom Rush and Buskin and Batteau in Marshall Auditorium in Roberts Hall of Haverford College in Haverford, Pennsylvania. The idea was a tribute to Jeanette Campbell owner and director of the Main Point "for all she's done for our music and our musicians." Gene Shay and Tom Rush presented the concert produced by Jonathan Myerow with the support of the Philadelphia Folksong Society. It was bittersweet. Backstage, Steve looked ill. He was tired, kind of slumped in his folding seat. He was wearing his blue and red Chicago Cubs cap. But he smiled as we discussed baseball and the chances for his beloved team. In 1984 the Cubbies were tearing up their Division and looked like potential World Series champions. They clinched the National League East title in Pittsburgh with 96 victories on Sept. 24th, 1984, at Three Rivers Stadium with Rick Sutcliffe tossing a 2 hitter in a 4-1 victory. Ironically, Steve Goodman never saw that come to pass. He died a few days earlier on September 20. Steve missed the National League Championship Series with the

San Diego Padres, the Cubs' first post season appearance in 39 years (which they lost). It was a case of God seemingly playing a pepper game with Steve Goodman's fungo bat.

On stage at The Main Point concert, Steve Goodman was his usual bouncy, beaming, dynamic self. When he finished his song "A Dying Cub Fan's Last Request," Goodman took off his baseball cap and tossed it into the audience. Like a pop foul ball in game 6, it came to me ... "Moises Alou" Deitz. It was there in my hands, but for some inexplicable reason, something made me pull back and allow the woman seated in front of me to have it. Bob Yahn was mystified. It was as if something, or someone whispered, "No! Let this one go." Back stage I told Steve that I had choked on the routine fly ball. He laughed and said that next time I should bring my glove instead of my banjo.

Recently in Florida, I listened to some FM radio chatter that at first I didn't understand. After a while, it dawned on me. While on a visit to post-World Series Miami, most of the deejays were offering a young man named "Steve" – in this case "Bartman" – free room and board ... asylum in the sun. One alluringly voiced woman on a classic rock station had just invited him to stay at her apartment "indefinitely." Then I got it. Bartman is the 26-year-old Cub fan who went to grab a foul ball in game six of this year's National League Championship series between the Florida Marlins and the Chicago Cubs, some say preventing Cub outfielder Moises Alou from catching it. At that point, the Cubs were five outs away from advancing to the World Series for their first appearance there since 1945.

The fatalists claim this was the turning point in the game, and the series. Even Governor Jeb Bush of Florida cynically offered Bartman an ocean front condo in Pom-

pano Beach ... if he needed to get out of the windy city for a few months. I never once heard Goodman's song played. All I know is the day fans stop reaching for foul balls, is the day you are at a hockey game. If Alou really wanted to be in the stands, he should have bought a ticket. If you are a Chicago Cubs fan, console yourself with the recently released DVD *Steve Goodman Live from Austin City Limits ... and More!* (Red Pajamas). It is a fine representation of Steve Goodman's work, and something to watch while waiting for next year when, maybe, Steve's ultimate request will finally be answered.



Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

RESOLVING THE BOTTOM LINE

It is a fact of life that some people love you and others might hate you. You don't need a college education to know that. You probably want everyone to like you, but that just doesn't happen. I think I'm a sweetheart, but there are people that growl at me as they glare my way. I hope I have earned their lofty disrespect. Not everyone values folk music. Whether it's a question of taste or organic brain syndrome, diverse points of view do exist. We are not all cookie cutter people and the general public is more likely to plunk down ten bucks for a bad motion picture than for a great live acoustic act. There are strangers that would rush into a burning building to save someone they never met, just as there are fair weather friends who wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire. Others have a subtle, more sinister agenda. So goes the music scene in The Big Apple where a really nice club closed. Some loved it ... obviously, others didn't. The Bottom Line in New York City had a thirty-year run. I tip my hat to Allan Pepper and Stanley Snadowski, co-owners who founded the club in 1974. They must be commended for three sunny decades basking in the yellow glow of the Tower Records sign amid the urban campus of New York University. The Bottom Line presented stars and up and comers. Near Bleecker and MacDougal in the West Village, it stood as a 400-seat monument to my kind of music. It continued to stand when so many nearby clubs closed. Folk City and The Speakeasy, among the last themselves, were outlasted by The Bottom Line. Now it too sports a padlock. I think it gave us hope, false or otherwise, that there might be a successful business model for folk music.

I've seen a lot of venues come and go. Heck, now that I think of it, I've closed some of them! So, why should it matter, the padlocking of just one more place to listen to music? A few steps from TBL, Washington Square Park and the Arch are landmarks of the campus of NYU. The Arch was erected in 1889 to celebrate the centennial of George Washington's inauguration. That stately edifice is symbolic, as well, of the folk revival, as the place where many of our most cherished urban artists sat and strummed and swapped new songs back before we knew any of their soon-to-be familiar names. Is this the last gasp of the great folk scare? Has the revival finally gone

beyond reviving? Allan Pepper said that in the wake of 9/11 business fell off and in two years, about \$185,000 in back rent was owed to the landlord ... *none other than NYU*. I have learned two rules of apartment renting; don't store my tube of toothpaste next to the Preparation H in a dark closet, and keep my checkbook near the monthly rent bill. We have to pay our rent. I rather doubt that my landlord would allow me to rack up nearly \$185,000 in debt for back rent. (Hmm, that would let me stay in my apartment for the next 20 years – *think he'll notice?*). And the new NYU lease came with a pretty steep raise as well. So, while NYU appears to have showed some restraint, it had an ulterior business plan for the club ... which we learn will become classrooms. *Classrooms?* – we sure could use more of them! God, I hope they don't cut up frogs there in biology labs or let those NYU film students make more movies about teenage angst and the dark brooding city.

It just seems to me that NYU students are loosing a greater classroom – one of diverse musical arts. The club provided students and the rest of the community with something very special. Now, crunch these numbers. Sure, \$185,000 is a pretty formidable sum, but consider this: the annual tuition tab for just *one* of NYU's 15,584 undergraduates comes to \$28,496. (Add about \$11,000 for room and board if you really want to make your parents sick). So the \$185,000 debt amassed by the club's owners equates to the collective annual tuition of merely six and a half NYU undergraduates. Think the school will miss that? It certainly can't be about the money. Multiply that annual tuition fee times each of the over 15,584 undergraduates and you'll get a figure that is staggering. For the cost of the undergraduate tuition of just a few of NYU's own students, the other 15,577.5 of them have lost a unique educational resource that six and a half could have funded. Seems a bit out of line. Most other institutions of higher learning would be proud to have a music center like that on campus. If I owned a college, Roger Deitz University, I would subsidize such a program to maintain as a centerpiece of my school. Pity what the students of the next three decades will be missing. I

have looked into the future and see a lonely coed of the class of 2034 sitting in silence in the old Bottom Line building cutting up frogs. Do you think there might be somewhere else she could do that? This better be one hell of a frog – her annual tuition bill ought to run somewhat above a quarter of a million dollars. Shame on NYU.

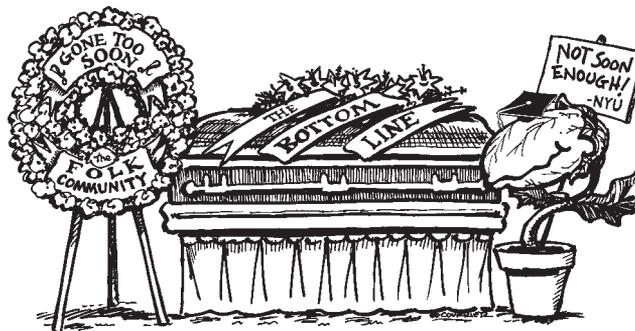


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Life's a gamble, yet I don't spend much time in Las Vegas. The last time I was in Atlantic City, I listened to Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons at the Steel Pier, long before a single roulette wheel was set in motion along the boardwalk. Albert Einstein reportedly once said, "I shall never believe that God plays dice with the world." I think that's because the physicist may have summered in Monte Carlo and wintered safely in Zurich as the National Socialists came to power back home. Hindenburg was out and the fix was in. The fix is often in. I watch photos on the news of flag-draped caskets and wonder if *this* current fix is fixable. I know *Sing Out!* is about people and their music, not soap boxes. So – consider this column one self-absorbed, rambling, annoying song lyric without much melody, fated to piss folks off. The world continues to tap dance on the edge of oblivion, and the electorate in the US of A gets worked up about interns with blue dresses, drunken frat-boy joy rides, failed land deals, national guard non-attendance, negative ads, and who did or did not toss medals (or his bicycle) into the Potomac. Those aren't issues. That's the sideshow. Let's stay on point.

When I was a youngster, my father took me to a side-show. As a young man he ran a wheel of fortune on the midway at Coney Island. Years later, I begged him to take me to a carnival. Cotton candy in hand, I pulled him towards a game booth and asked if I could play, place a bet. First he scowled, then he agreed. Dad carefully looked 'round and about the booth, nodded a knowing nod to the man running the wheel, and agreed, "Sure, you can play." The man winked back asking, "What's your number?" "Five red," I tentatively ventured. "Place your bets," he roared as he strolled by, cane in hand. Clickety-clack went the wheel, and – *five red came up!* "How about the lucky boy!" the stranger exclaimed. "Wanna try again, Butch? Still feeling lucky?" said the man in the straw hat and striped shirt. "Eight black," I chose more confidently. "Round and round she goes, where she stops, nobody knows!" he crooned as the wheel clicked and clacked and slowly came to rest. Sure enough, the wheel stopped on eight black, as it miraculously did on the next couple of numbers I selected. "Wow!" I thought. "This is easy." The nice man in the straw hat handed me a large stuffed panda. "Luck?" asked my father. "Yes," I nodded in the affirmative. Then Dad took the panda and gave it back to the man standing

in front of the wheel. "Hey," I whined, "I won that." "Not really," was Dad's response, "you didn't win anything. Luck had nothing to do with it ... *the fix was in.*"

"Hey friend," Dad said knowingly, "show the kid your shoe." The man in the straw hat smiled and placed his shoe on the counter. It was a normal looking shoe ... except for a small copper plate on the anterior right sole. My father then pointed to a neat row of nails hammered in across the wood floor. The "contact" on the sole, when placed across any given pair of nails, could complete a circuit. This would, as Einstein and any electrician might surmise, stop the wheel anywhere on the dial ... usually away from a winning number, sometimes on a winner to keep the stiff's betting. "But Dad, that's *cheating!* And why can't I keep the bear anyway?"

We really are taken in by a good show. We hear what we want to hear. We see what we choose to see. I would rather hear what I need to hear. I am tired of the sideshow. It's unnerving to watch the 9/11 hearings teeter between the center ring and sideshow. Much of the political scene *is* a sideshow. "Ladies and Gentlemen, gather in a little closer. Don't be shy. I have something I want you to marvel at. It slices, it dices, it cuts your daily drudgery in half, makes your big SUV run twice as far on a gallon of gas and improves your sex life. It gives you a tax rebate while running up the national debt and ignores healthcare, human rights and the polluting of the environment. It panders to the lowest common denominator and the largest voting blocks. It's compassionate, holy, patriotic, and always makes a nice profit. Or rather, a nice prophet." Enjoy the conventions. Enjoy the colored balloons. Enjoy the rhetoric. The fix is in. And whether it's President Body Bags, Vice President Dip Stick, an alternative canned-ideate with 57 varieties of positions or a third party spoiler whose 2000 run proved to be more dangerous than a fleet of 1963 Chevrolet Corvairs, they're all working the angles. They're wearing copper-bottomed shoes. I loved my Dad, too ... but I think I would stop short of invading a country for him. I guess it's easy to criticize. I wouldn't really

want to carry the heavy burden of following my father into the wheel of fortune business, nor the oval office. Democracy requires our full attention. Then again, we could just let the Supreme Court vote for our next president. Wait ... that idea holds an element of déjà vu. Did I mention the fix is in? Anyone have a pair of dice? 

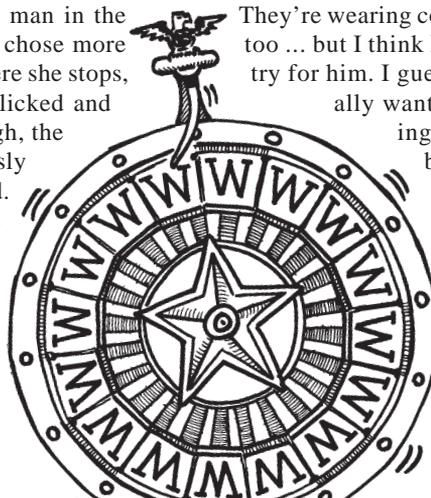


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

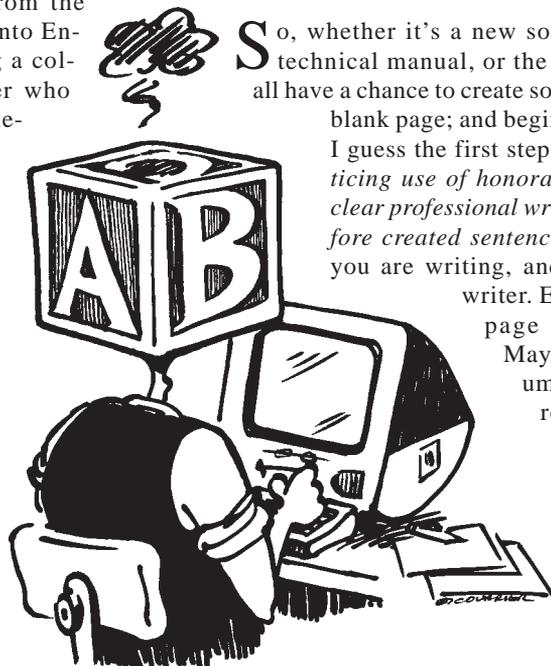
Parting Shots

BLANK AND FILE

Here is a secret. A nagging doubt I have is the uncertainty of whether or not anyone reads the columns I write. If you are reading ... maybe you're the only one. I imagine people flipping ahead to look at the new guitar ads, snubbing all the wordy "RagTag" stuff. Writing an article imparts a different anxiety (and gratification) than does performing. Songwriting as well, but you usually get to road test a song. Whether you sing in a song circle, or stand on a main stage at a folk festival, there might be trepidation, but at least there is instant feedback from the folks who are listening, no matter *what* that feedback may be. (I rarely call a crowd together to read 'em my latest column – but maybe I should initiate quarterly "Readings from 'RagTag'" at the local Barnes and Noble. It would be a small but select group of folks who do most of their magazine reading there for free, leaving the issues dog-eared on the racks.) But, for the *process* of writing ... silence is the rule, save the occasional phone call from an aluminum siding salesman while you try to write the perfect sentence. Then, there is the less than comforting critique, "Hey, I read that thing you wrote ... you know the one about something, I think it was supposed to be funny. I'm not sure I understood the part about the banjo-playing ferret, or why you used those long sentences and all that punctuation. My cousin writes technical manuals, she does translations from the original Korean into Japanese and then into English. That has to be harder than writing a column, right? She is a *professional* writer who manages shorter sentences with lots of one-syllable words; she uses tons of semicolons. You ought to meet her. Pick up a few pointers. She makes a fortune and lives in a big house in Seoul." Sometimes I find a stranger that actually admits to being a reader, and says something nice. They *adore* banjo-playing ferrets. *I from now on commence using most helpful number semicolons, and making for most biggest words and happy time column instruction pages.* For the most part I have to take it on faith that I am accomplishing something, something that reads a tad more breezily than a Korean technical manual. It would be sad if I were engaged in some therapeutic, self-analytical ex-

ercise in literary few-tility. (Hey ... did I hear a page turn? Somewhere in Ohio? *Cut that out!*)

Another fear, of course, is writer's block. But, as you now are reading – if in fact you *are* reading – see how I handled today's writer's block by starting this seemingly germane, but otherwise inane line of babble? The truth is, there is nothing more remarkable than a fresh, blank page on the computer. This versus the empty sheets of erasable paper I once threaded into the Smith Corona. Three cheers for word processing, You press a few keys and the stream flows. Trickles. I have been writing about music for over thirty years, and I remember how smudged typewritten pages used to look back then, with all the re-typing and corrections and white out and edit marks, and carbon copies, and inky fingers. Editors had to retype the stuff, not just edit. It is somewhat *cleaner* to write on the electronic fly and a boon to move words around as if by magic ... now you see 'em, now you don't, in the digital age. I recently uncovered a stash of custom-made typewriter ribbons I ordered in 1972. Along with a pile of old typewritten manuscripts. I still have the portable typewriter. But – blank paper, or a fresh page on the word processor ... that's what it's all about. That's what it's always been about. We all begin at the same starting line. The idea is to start typing, and hold the electronic fly still long enough to write on it.



So, whether it's a new song, a letter to the editor, a technical manual, or the Great American Novel, we all have a chance to create something singular ... with that blank page; and begin with some idea, or no idea. I guess the first step is to *begin*. (*Please are noticing use of honorable semicolon to have most clear professional writer's function as found in before created sentence.*) Once you begin to type, you are writing, and, by definition, you are a writer. Everyone has the same blank page on the computer screen. Maybe you too can have a column that people skip over on route to the guitar ads. Bad writing, good writing? Who knows, and why care so much that it keeps you from writing? It never stopped me. How can you tell *if you don't try?* 

Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



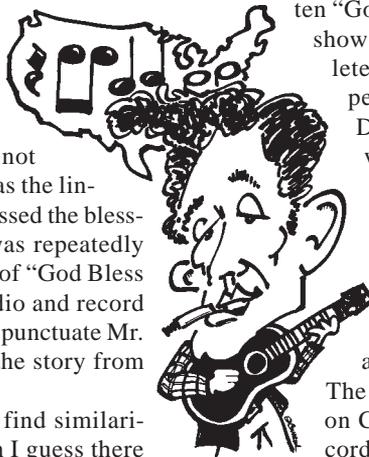
RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

WOULD HE?

Or wouldn't he? Who knows? I think most of us folkies have heard that Woody Guthrie wrote "This Land Is Your Land" (originally titled "God Blessed America") as a response to Irving Berlin's 1939 hit song "God Bless America." Guthrie wrote his song in protest against a pop tune he disdained and thought somewhat insincere. Woody, after all, observed that millions of Americans might not feel so blessed, still having a rough time as the lingering effects of the Great Depression stressed the blessing. While Woody was hitchhiking he was repeatedly forced to listen to Kate Smith's rendition of "God Bless America," playing on every jukebox, radio and record player he passed. That inspired Guthrie to punctuate Mr. Berlin's missive with a ballad that told the story from his personal point of view.



At the surface it would seem hard to find similarities between Irving and Woody, although I guess there are some. Both had tough beginnings. Berlin (Israel Baline) was born in Temun (Siberian) Russia in 1888. That's like Okemah, Oklahoma with a slightly less balmy climate. Born in 1912, teenaged Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was passed between various relatives and friends as his mother ailed. Then, bound for glory, guitar in hand, Woody took to the hobo life, becoming a successful radio personality on KFVD in Los Angeles in 1937. Four-year-old Izzy Baline moved to New York where at age 14 he sang songs on street corners and cafes, taking a job as a singing waiter in 1906, and later, of course, becoming the quintessential Tin Pan Alley composer, lyricist and publisher. For the record (no pun) I admire many folk and popular songwriters (hey – note the numerous popular songs in *Rise Up Singing*). There can be value in these ditties (for example "Over the Rainbow" by E.Y. Harburg and Harold Arlen, page 31 of *Rise Up*) with the ability to inspire, enlighten, divert and amuse. You take inspiration where you find it. Although many folk singers rightly stress the message, I am amused how many are shocked to be reminded they *charge* to play those songs at concerts, and *sell* CDs. *Commerce* – in folk? They may belong to ASCAP, BMI or SESAC to make a few shekels from their work, keep a roof over their heads, or feed and clothe the new baby. (Don't let this get around, I've heard that many actually *want to make it in show biz!*).

As Arlo notes, his father's song did get edited with time. For example, a verse about the relief office is not much

sung nowadays. It's ironic that "This Land Is Your Land" and "God Bless America," are often found on the same musical programs. And for the record (okay, pun this time) both songs have done well in the royalty and residual departments. Although a mega-hit (the term not yet invented) in 1939, Berlin had written "God Bless America" back in 1918 for an all-soldier show called *Yip, Yip, Yaphank*, from which it was deleted. In 1938, Kate Smith asked Berlin if he happened to have any patriotic songs for an Armistice Day radio broadcast. With a few edits, and a world war looming, her Columbia recording became a multi-million-selling hit. Berlin donated the royalties to support the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of America. Woody Guthrie wrote his book *Bound for Glory* in 1943 and in wartime volunteered for the U.S. merchant marine from 1943-1945. "This Land Is Your Land" was really first introduced to the public by The Weavers. The New Christy Minstrels, (also, like Kate Smith, on Columbia Records), made one of the popular recorded versions in 1962. "Roll on Columbia" indeed!

In 1983 at the passing of Ira Gershwin, I was somewhat perplexed (miffed) at a backhanded Dan Rather eulogy of the lyricist that had been written by my old friend Peggy Noonan, who prior to her White House speech writing days was pounding out Rather's CBS radio spots. She and I were companions in college, and occasionally kept in touch. Rather's take (Noonan's prose) was in the realm of, *Oh, wasn't it sad that poor Ira had to live in the shadow of his genius brother, George*. Well, *poor Ira* my ass. Sure, George was a genius, but Ira was a superb lyricist, with more than a touch of genius of his own. *The test?* Just try to imagine *any* Gershwin song with *any* other lyrics. Go ahead Peggy, improve on "S Wonderful." I called Peg from the office of The Songwriters Hall of Fame and made the mistake of telling her all this. She took it well. We didn't talk again for years. Not all songs are worth a second listen, but you know good ones when they grab you.

In this realm, I will pass along some advice given me by the late, great lyricist Sammy Cahn. If you want to *practice* writing lyrics, he told me, there is no better exercise than that of taking an existing famous melody, and trying your hand at writing new words to the song. It is excellent practice. Or, take a tip from Woody. If you don't like someone else's lyrics, just give it your own spin.

Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

SOUND REASONING

My stacks of wax are not record setting in the annals of collecting sound recordings. I know that many of you have garnered larger “golden oldie” mines. I went to locate a particular LP, and in the frustrating process of not finding it, took stock of how many records and CDs I have. Goodness, where did they all come from? I thought I had them arranged in a fairly systematic manner, but unless I lent out the piece of vinyl in question, I’ll have to look through again and try to put things in better order. Or was it on CD? I stood back and looked at my entire wall-o-music, and all sorts of thoughts ran through my mind. Have I lost touch with my favorites, the albums that once were in heavy rotation? How much have I invested in time and money? If I live to be 100-years-old could I make a schedule to hear them all again? Is the floor going to cave in, leaving me buried in a pile of music? ... a pretty ironic way for Mr. RagTag to perish, I think.

Now to be fair, these were not *all* bought from Tower and Sam Goody. There were many years when I reviewed albums. Unlike most of you, I had received hundreds of recordings during this period “gratis”; some from artists, some from magazine editors, others from record companies and publicists. Therefore, not quite free, as there was a review string attached. Yet, I didn’t hoard, for hoard’s sake. (*Do you think I can get away with a ‘hoard of hearing’ pun here?*) I shared the wealth. The things I knew were not my cup of tea went to friends of various musical tastes. Sometimes CDs would be packed in bags I could barely lift and delivered to avid listeners, as if I had become some kind of sonic Santa. So – what I have remaining, is, for the most part, what I wanted, not just stuff I would never wish to hear again.

Much of my collection is of classical recordings. I wanted to learn about artists, composers, symphonies, sonatas, trios and quartets. I wanted to get a handle on Handel so to speak, a grip on periods of music, educate myself to an opera or two. That was fun, and the quest to learn seems to have resulted in a sizable number of really great record-

ings. And I do reach for a favorite now and again, or continue to compare the various renditions of like works. Then there is the usual popular and standard repertoire from rhythm and blues to Sinatra to Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young; and Joni Mitchell, that sort of thing. I do get a kick out of reaching for a favorite Willie Nelson or Dylan album. Then there is that vast and varied archive of “folk” that runs the gamut from singer-songwriter, to Celtic, to world, to roots, etc. Blues from urban and rural backgrounds. I start to look about and listen, switching between LPs and CDs, and I realize that looking back and listening from, well, a library of sorts is a different experience, requiring a different mindset and discipline. I think this must be the same dilemma our *Sing Out!* radio partners have when they pull recordings for their programs. I am not prepared for this ... I had pretty much played things as I got them, then moved on. I am befuddled planning my listening timetable.

For many years, a monthly sing for the Folk Music Society of Northern New Jersey was hosted at the home of “Dave and Jean” in West Caldwell, New Jersey. Jean Gille and Dave Blumgart presided over a wonderful song circle, and their home was a feast for the eye as well as the ear. In addition to being a record collector, Dave ran his antiques business, keeping lots of neat stuff at the house. The walls were built-in record racks, floor to ceiling, and these were filled with LPs and older sound recordings (no CDs yet) and music books. Dave could, at the drop of a name, casually walk over to any particular spot, reach out, and pluck the recording in question from its perch. Now, that’s organization and a mind to be admired. Before I ever get around to organizing anything in *my* life, there will be woolly mammoths peering in the window as I work. So, I took a different tack. I have a strategy that I will NOT make an organized plan for listening. There will be no schedules, no ambling through genres. I have already begun the process of walking to the recordings, selecting one (at a time) at random, and listening to whatever by chance I have extracted from the multitude. It has already paid off in satisfaction and is a most sporting way of moving about. I find I am grabbing things I might not have thought to play, and I am enjoying music I might never have gotten to again. Let’s call it *folk lure*, a *fishing expedition* based on *sound reasoning*, with a whole new *angle*.

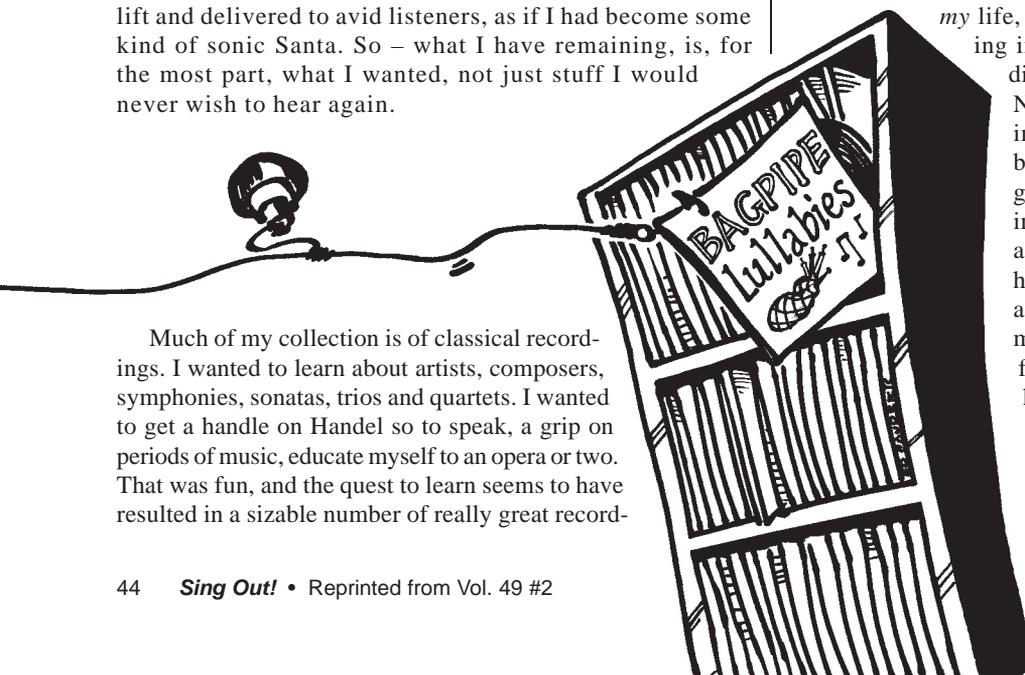


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

ALTERNATIVE EGO

For over 15 years I've written for a minority journal: *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education*. I will admit that although I am somewhat college educated, I am hardly Hispanic. Nonetheless, I've penned over 500,000 words for the *Hispanic Outlook* since my first contributions to issue number one back in 1990. How do you say "carpal tunnel syndrome" in Spanish? (*¿Síndrome de túnel carpal?*). I raise my glass in proud tribute to the niche the magazine carved out for itself ... however I do so with a little progressive wrist pain. Over the last few years, my task was to produce a monthly feature called "Focus on Diversity." In my capacity as the magazine's special projects editor I am always looking for stories that encourage a dialog in diversity. The idea is to present new topics on ways we may better coexist and experience more fulfilled and meaningful lives. It's been challenging and rewarding. Since about the time I left college teaching, this unique Latino magazine not only gave me an opportunity to write about countless issues of minority interest, it allowed – and *still* allows – me to remain connected to topics in higher education, educators, colleges and universities. Regrets? Sure I miss the coeds, but there are plusses. I can do all this higher educating without flunking a single student, and I am free from grading multiple choice tests and seeking tenure. More importantly, I have yet to get chalk dust on my old school tie.

There are more positive aspects. I've learned about our community and written about people from many walks of life who are endeavoring to make this a better world, much like my song connected friends who use their singing voices, guitars, dulcimers and Autoharps to spread the word. I've learned that we all have a part to play. And it has been fun. I have been able to voice some opinions, (you know I occasionally have them) and *listen* to and report other opinions. Much like *Sing Out!* I have watched the Hispanic magazine grow and develop over the years. I hope I have grown along with both magazines.

The *Hispanic Outlook* was inclusive back when I started. My publishers let me Tag along. The fact that I am a gringo, and couldn't make a *tortilla española* with or without *dos huevos* and *salsa caliente* if my life depended on it didn't matter to my Hispanic pub-

lisher. The interviews and the stories are all in English, and that I can handle. However, I must confess that when I began, one of my editors tried to encourage me to use *el nombre de la pluma* of "Roberto Diaz." Pretty nifty, I rather liked the melodic sound of it in a Gerald (Jerry) Rivers / Geraldo Rivera sort of way, but I decided to stick with my given moniker. I opted for truth in advertising. It made for a more honest discussion when I interviewed college and university presidents and talked to folks including the mayors of Miami and San Antonio. One of my favorite interviews was speaking via his cell phone with Cheech Marin (Richard "Cheech" Marin) not about comedy or movies, but about his extensive Chicano art collection and the Latino art scene. He is a distinguished art collector with perhaps one of the country's foremost private art collections. I resisted reciting my favorite lines from Warner Bros. "highest" "grossing" 1978 film *Up in Smoke* – lines like, "We're gonna be bigger than Ruben and The Jets!" It turned out Marin was speaking to me from a golf course during a pro am tournament – every now and then he would pause and tell me in his patented laid back East LA accent, "Hold on ... I have to put down the phone to hit a shot." A golf enthusiast myself, I did tell him to "Keep your eye on the ball," ("*Guarde su ojo en la bola,*") which might have been a violation of USGA Rule of Golf, 8-1 had he asked for my advice. At least I didn't make any references to getting some pot and putting together a rock band.

Usually, as an interviewer I am at ease with the folks on the other end of the questions, but sometimes I feel a little bit like an interloper with some music icons, like when Willie Nelson hands me a guitar, or John McEuen passes me a banjo. But this is a whole different experience. In the Hispanic world I am in the minority, I am the outsider. I'm the one who had to learn the ropes, the customs, the language, the many different cultural and geographic backgrounds that get lumped together under the catch-all heading of "Hispanic." Of all the lessons I learned, perhaps this role of being the outsider, a minority within the minority is one of the best lessons I have learned. That, and the fact that Marin got the nickname "Cheech" from his fondness for the Chicano delicacy *cheecharone* (Spanish for deep-fried pork rinds). By the way, you may recall that pork rinds are George Herbert Walker Bush's favorite snack as well, proving we *are* all *compadres* under the skin, deep-fried or otherwise.



Illustration: Ed Courrier ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

RING DINGS

When writing this column I take care not to sound like Andy Rooney, or Mickey Rooney for that matter. Referencing the *60 Minutes* curmudgeon, you will rarely herein read, “Did you ever wonder why folkies carry cell phones in their rucksacks? You know, next to their Sharper Image Sound Soothers?” As to that other Andy, more Hardy, I paraphrase, “Hey gang ... let’s put on a folk show! One that makes lots of money!” In the movies, this is the scene where Mickey Rooney puts a nickel in a pay phone and calls a big Hollywood producer. It occurs to me that these two Rooneys are on opposite ends of the perkiness scale, and I have a roll of quarters in the car for phone emergencies. I may be the last person on Earth without a cell phone. I put on folk shows in the days before cell phones. And as to making money at these concerts, well, nobody ever filmed them for general release. Andy Rooney? Just imagine him scowling below those bushy eyebrows and letting go with, “I had a Sound Soother, but it kept me awake, and I left my rucksack in the mud at some festival, one that was cheaper to attend in the old days. I just can’t warm up to the idea of grown men carrying pocketbooks, and proper telephones ought to have wires connecting them to the wall!”

And now me as Andy R.: “I hate it when cell phones keep going off at concerts.” There are stories of performers stopping their shows to ask audience members to hand the offending ringing phones to the stage, at which point the artist tells the callers to stop interrupting the show. I like that. During the first practice day of the PGA Tournament at Baltusrol Golf Club just down the road from my place, the organizers forgot to ask people to leave their phones home. Not wanting 35,000 daily attendees to bother the golfers, the PGA created a makeshift cell phone check-in booth the initial practice day. This, I understand, became a sonic hell-on-earth as the organizers neglected to tell the patrons to turn off the phones they deposited. Thousands of phones rang and rang all day. *Fore* the rest of the week, people were just asked to turn off the gadgets.

The first time I noticed cell phones had become ubiquitous I was on a bus from Manhattan that sounded like a trav-

eling phone booth. I heard the symphony of ring tones popping out at me from all about the bus that displayed a “The use of cell phones on this bus is strictly prohibited!” sign. The electronic tones were mostly classical themes. And such conversations! Zipping down the Garden State Parkway, I listened to important half conversations: “Tell the nanny that I’ll be home in 10 minutes.” And, “Have a Greek salad ready.” And, “Let my husband know I have a workout tonight,” or “Any messages for me?” And, “Did you try to call? I was in the tunnel.” And the ever popular, “I’m on the bus.” It’s weird being held hostage in a community gab-a-thon. Lots of sound and fury. You know the rest. Never before have so many said so little so often for so much money. It’s a wonder there are enough overage minutes in the day on any calling plan for this important business. I picture a national defense telecommunications satellite high above the earth overheating as ICBMs travel towards the USA because an early warning signal from the Pentagon is unable to get through all the avid chatter.

From a musical standpoint, not enough is being done with melodic ring tones and personalized phone signals. I guess they’re as personal as a preset menu. I think it would be great if we all got to select ring tones that had significance to our crowd. I’ve yet to hear “Blowin’ in the Wind,” or “Little Boxes.” It seems the high brows opt for Beethoven or Mozart. Now, I’m not yet the owner of a cell phone. I may succumb. But, I would be more likely to if I could really treat people around me to a ringing Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs or Malvina Reynolds message with some political impact.

Like the singing telegram, why not a more apt signal? Then on the bus, one might listen in on an operatic “You have another threatening call from your mistress!” or “Hey deadbeat, you owe another alimony payment!” But, “I Ain’t Marchin’ Anymore,” or “The Bells”? – now that I wouldn’t mind broadcasting back to those around me every time I have an incoming call on a bus ride. But, I still like the idea of being unreachable as I stroll through an arboretum or take a walk in the park or sit at a concert. “I guess being unreachable isn’t quite the same as being out of touch.” Do you think Andy Rooney would wrap up his column like that?



Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

BETWEEN THE COVERS

A book publisher asked if I would be interested in writing “a book about *folk and country music*.” Darned if I wasn’t feeling special – until I started to hear the clinking of chains and sense that *Cool Hand Luke* touch of non-conformity, you know, “What we’ve got here is ... failure to communicate.” Having had similar queries over the years, I flashback to that scene where Paul Newman gets slammed by Strother Martin, but I was still obliged to defiantly ask a question or two. I knew that by doing so, and drawing from my hard-earned life lessons I was about to jinx the deal. What the heck ... more time to goof off. The editor I spoke with was a delightful and accommodating fellow, but I began to sense impending doom. First, not *he* but his boss had the final say. Not to worry, the editor said his company’s what-books-do-we-do-next committee was really interested in having me write a “folk book – with some country in it.” I asked if he had any thoughts on what *that might actually mean*, any idea at all from the committee what *kind* of folk book they wanted? Pause. “No,” he responded, “they didn’t say, they just told me they wanted a ‘folk book.’ I guess anything like that should do.”

I explained that there were countless ways to write one, that perhaps there were other writers with more expertise in certain areas of folk. He replied that the committee came to the conclusion that a folk book with some country in it would be a nice idea, and my name came up. Warning number one – they probably don’t know anything about folk music; number two, *my* name came up. Warning number three is the creation of a book by committee. What, you ask, is warning number four? When an editor that says, “anything goes” is beholding to another person who signs his paycheck you can always hear the distant sound of bagpipes deflating. As a consultant, I have learned that this is a corporate sound not limited to the subject of folk music books.

Within the first few moments of our conversation I stressed that I *would* write a folk book, but I had only two requests. One, that it *not be a history of folk and country music from the 1960s on*, and two, they

allow me to write – well, the way I write about things and people I know. Editor guy was given samples of what that implies and I told him that I would refrain from making this a memoir. I heard on that day a resounding, “That’s fine! I’ll get back to you.” I asked the editor for assurance that the higher ups would agree with my take on things. Over the next week or so all was well, and we were about to ink the contract. My literary agent said, “Do it if it sounds like fun. Don’t do it for the money.” (If *that* isn’t telling! There wasn’t much.) I anticipated the spit hitting the fandango, as I got a nervous editorial query, “Could you write a few chapter and subject notes for my boss, give us a better idea of your book?” *Now* all of a sudden – they *care*? I complied. A day later the editor sheepishly told me the committee had read my notes and decided they wanted me to write – bring up the bloody bagpipes – *a history of folk and county music from the 1960s on*.

At least this jerking around helped them make up *their* minds. I reminded the editor of our first conversation, that I really didn’t feel this was my forte. Translation: You wasted my time. You can’t think I’m crazy enough to spend the next 12 months sifting through dust in a library doing research and phone interviews for a book you *think* you want now, that you’ll re-think later. That’s the hell Ph.D. dissertation committees create. Been there, done that!

Maybe said book executives rented *A Mighty Wind* and got their glimpse of folk through some warped cinematic fantasy. Or the big boss actually read one of my columns. Work for hire is a funny thing. The lesson is: watch who you get in bed with before it’s too late. I can see it now, as I near completion of my last few of the eighty thousand contracted words, a memo is received, “We read what you wrote with interest, but were hoping for a few chapters on The New Main Street Singers, The Folksmen, and of course, Mitch and Mickey. Can you please punch up the book with their profiles? The committee feels you have neglected to mention them as seminal to the Greenwich Village scene.” I didn’t get cold feet. I just wouldn’t want to dishonor the memory of Irving Steinbloom.

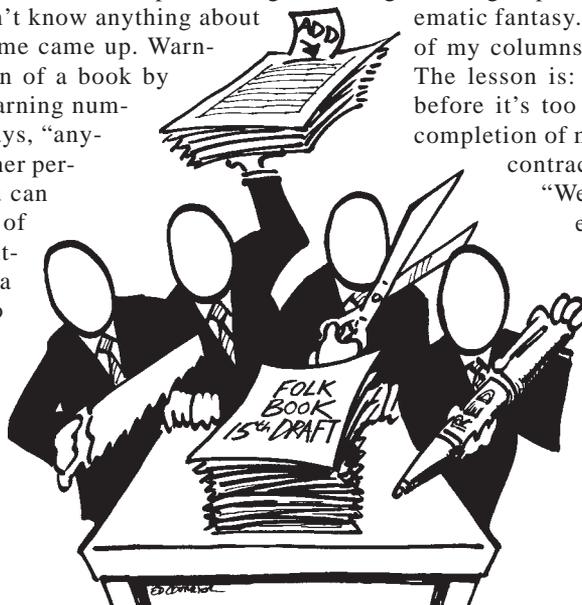


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

GAG ORDER

I t's the funniest thing, or maybe not. I must confess to an ironic, somewhat vexing shortcoming. I don't know any jokes. Many of my friends have a wealth of them at the ready. They recall jokes they heard yesterday, last week or last month – or draw upon years-old witticisms and recount them word for word. Perhaps said jokes appear as snappy patter between songs, or off the cuff afterthoughts such as “*Did you hear this one?*” at the dinner table or over the phone. These jokesters pitch their stories with alacrity, working through the set up, pacing themselves carefully, breezing to the punch line like an Olympic sprinter hitting the tape at the finish line. I laugh. I nod, and then within an instant, I forget the joke to which I have been subjected. I just don't assimilate jokes.

I'll remember a punch line if someone tries to sandbag me again with the same groaner, but tell a joke? Not even if threatened with bodily harm unless I make with a joke would I be able to recover one. I *can* step upon a stage, walk out in front of a group of strangers, start talking and somehow *say* funny things, pull together the words to amuse people. I have numerous times faced large crowds without any notes or planning; *no joke* – no jokes. Time and again I've put my head in that noose only to elude the metaphoric, “die on stage” thing. The audience laughs. Off the cuff, on the fly, extemporaneously, no problem. But remember an actual joke? Tell an audience a joke? Memorize a joke? The joke's on me, not *in* me. And given I have already forgotten the few jokes I was told yesterday, it occurs to me that I never will be sponsored for membership in the Friars Club. Sit around a table wisecracking with Woody Allen, Ray Romano and Jerry Seinfeld, offering a ribald zinger about the late Milton Berle's sexual prowess. Still I press on with my living on the edge approach to show business. As Woody Allen wrote, “It's not that I'm afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens.”

I taught dozens of science courses. So – I know

it's not a deficiency of memory. I have more useless lists of anatomically correct minutia stuffed into my head than will ever rattle out again. I guess my mind doesn't do *humor* by rote. I believe this is the 42nd “RagTag.” Yes, I counted ... about 11 years of pounding out snappy, (occasionally humorous?) prose. Not one joke in all those attempts. Unless you consider the fact the editors let me start writing a column in v.39#4 as joke enough. Perhaps I'll celebrate column 50 with a joke, if that milestone is ever reached. With war, casualties, global warming, illegal wiretaps, inadequate healthcare, mounting national debt, poverty, world hunger, pandemic diseases and a propensity for the general public to express more interest in the latest installment of *American Idol* than with instilling the American Ideal, I reflect. It's getting harder to see the humor in it all. Since it's nearly impossible to find a politician to quote on the subject, I turn once again to Mr. Allen who noted, “More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.”

So, here goes ... a vice president walks into a bar with a wounded lawyer who has a talking duck on his head. The duck leaps onto the bar, waddles up to the bartender and in a raspy, ducky voice, quacks out the word, “*Halliburton!*” The bartender responds, “*Hey, what is this, some kind of a joke?*” Or wait, was it “*Aflac?*” You see I messed it up already. The Allen quotes were checked in *Familiar Quotations / John Bartlett* edited by Justin Kaplan. On the same page, Eldridge Cleaver (like Allen, born in 1935) is cited for saying, “You're either part of the solution or part of the problem.” I would paraphrase that one is either part of the joke or the recipient of the punch line. And there is more wisdom on this one randomly selected page of *Bartlett's* than in any political speech I have heard in a long, long time. That's no joke.



Illustration by Ed Courmier ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

RADIOACTIVE VOWEL MOVEMENTS

Consider what you write when you make with the words. Written stuff has a long half-life. This is my warning to writers and singer-songwriters. Once down in print, recorded or performed as part of even one concert, a story or song is retched in stone as you amble down life's highway, harder to scrape off the bottom of your shoe than a mixed metaphor or bad pun. Magazines may age yellow, but even with the dropping of a song from the old set list there are some that never forget. Submitted for your approval, here is one from my own personal highlight zone, or should I say, *Twilight Zone*?

I just listened to a telephone message from a friend, writer/photographer Stephanie Ledgin. It's a voice mail, the saga of one of her six cats (Maybelle) being "radioactive" along with a detailed explanation of a substance known as "radioactive cat poop." Also included for my consideration is a discourse on Feline Hyperthyroidism and the half-life of radioactive Iodine Isotope 131. It's all there in my voice mail (her *explanation* – not the radioactive cat poop). We talk on the phone. Steph continues the story, the travail of attempted disposal of said radioactive cat-poop and litter (has to be from ALL six cats, collected for two weeks – held for ninety days) within the constraints of environmental protection laws, discarded at 3.5 cents a pound. She reports on the reactions of New Jersey waste disposal site operators to her request for permission for an approved – please forgive me – *dump* space. Most recommended she carry her kitty's litter to *other* counties. I marvel at the estimation in tonnage of the growing mound of hot poop on her back porch that may not fit into the van. I have to say that some stories require the human voice for full impact – this one wouldn't have the same organic charm in an e-mail. The good news – Maybelle is on the mend. This is a happy ending story and a common veterinary situation. But, here's the *real* poop – Stephanie really called to suggest I write a *song* about the radioactive cat. That is why she could not wait to make with the poop ... and well, give *me* the scoop.

Although Steph and I toss around a cat tale now and then, the reason for *this* call dates back to a time my set list in-

cluded songs with titles such as "Fifi the Microwave Pup" and "The Sheep Dip." Stephanie thinks this adventure is a natural subject for a humorous song; "Maybelle the Radioactive Cat." No wonder I hesitate when I pick up the phone ... or radioactive cat poop for that matter. Perhaps this is payback for Stephanie meeting her husband-to-be Ted (now married sixteen years) at one of my concerts where I did, in fact, sing about exploding poodles and love between consenting mammals. How romantic! Mia Culpa! Guilty! I brought this on myself. These *were* dreadfully good songs and I had a growing (*groaning?*) following of folks who wanted more offbeat material. I did not always comply. But scratch that. I've been handed radioactive cat poop on a silver platter. Make that a lead-lined litter box.

I can't help imagining this scenario by way of a 1950s science fiction film with the Amazing Colossal Fifty-Foot Puss beaming and growing larger than a cat house as Army and Air Force weaponry prove powerless against the huge pile of radioactive cat poop and atomic fur balls. The handsome young scientist is on the phone to the Pentagon pleading, "It's *already* radioactive – so forget the SAC bombers. But, if we could somehow reverse the polarity of the *kitty litter* ..." Sci-guy turns to the panting heroine with her provocatively torn fifties' dress and young son from a previous marriage, assuring them, "We still might save life on this planet as we know it." Sci-guy looks to the heavens, shakes his fist and rages, "I told them not to go screwing around with their godless radioactive laboratory rats, but did they listen to me? No!" He shouts into the phone, "General, I'll need a ton of catnip and a really large squeeze toy, preferably one shaped like a field mouse."

So congratulations are in order. I have hit a new low ... made multiple poop references while offending a friend, *Sing Out!* readers (nothing new there), science fiction purists, streetwalkers, veterinarians, the military, lab scientists, B movie actors, dog owners, cat fanciers, squeeze toy manufacturers and, of course, those among us who count on the occasional sheep for a good night's sleep. Anyone left? I guess it's too late to take this column back. You're *purr*-fectly right. I sure stepped in it this time ... with a wry Cheshire smile and really big shoes.



Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

SCREAMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Somehow I never thought of myself as “middle aged” when I was thirty-five or so. Like many baby boomers, I was far too distracted for that kind of honest introspection. Lots to do, you know, and all the time in the world for getting around to completing projects. At this writing I have attended the Philadelphia Folk Festival for the thirty-something-*eth* time. Like the rising and setting of the sun, another festival came and went. This year, much like my first, I listened to new (to me) performers play and sing. I thought about the past festivals that now seem to merge into one among those many lost summers.

When I was just shy of twenty and looking forward to attending my first Philly Festival, my mother made what I thought was an odd comment, in a reflective tone I rarely heard from her, “Enjoy the festival,” she said, “*life goes by quickly. Don’t wish your life away.*” Huh? Sure Mom. Later, see you Monday. She was then the age I am today. Ironically, she repeated that advice when I was in my mid-thirties. I smiled and nodded. Finally a couple of years ago when she was ailing and I was scrambling about to care for her in her Florida home (as she wished, out of a nursing facility) my mother took my hand and, yes, once again repeated this philosophical pearl. It took a while, but I finally got it. Third time’s the charm. It does go by quickly; the festivals, the rainy weekends, the sunny relationships, the little things, the big bad things, stuff you don’t expect and things you take for granted.

Recently a grade school buddy was telling me that next year is our fortieth high school reunion. He taunted me, was I going to blow off this reunion too as I did ten years ago? I went to *one* of the previous three reunions (the twentieth) and was frightened by the many old people in attendance, vaguely familiar strangers who must have stolen their nametags from young school chums I knew way back when. My graduating class numbered over a thousand, yet I probably still know just about everyone by name. My buddy goes me one better. He can recall their birth dates ... really! He’ll phone me on any given day

and say it’s so-and-so’s birthday. Pitch him the day of the year and he can rattle off the names of the high school grads that are making with the birthday cakes. I think he attends reunions only to perform this mystifying feat. Talk about lost in the ’60s. Too bad he didn’t apply this remarkable memory device to his math studies. So, I’ll pass on (better to say *not attend?*) the next. But, something he said made me numb.

At age fifty-seven, my long-time friend cautioned me that I *had to go* this time because these reunions are rites of passage for the “*middle aged.*” I see. Doing the math, (and I *hate* doing the math) we were therefore on track for a life span of about one hundred and fourteen. Perhaps that milestone would be ambitious given my propensity to play banjo and piano accordion in public. At this implied rate, I can’t wait for my eightieth high school reunion ... the one held in an oxygen tent, staffed by EMTs and catered by Meals on Wheels (“Hey gang, have you tried the vodka spiked Similac?”) or the 100th Philadelphia Folk Festival presenting acts not yet born or not born at all, cloned and genetically engineered to be young mandolin prodigies. Of course, Tom Paxton and Gene Shay will be there with new songs and old jokes.

Regrets? Yes, one or two come to mind. Most relate to those red marks on my early report cards: “*Uses time wisely ... D.*” With a tip of the hat to my intuitive teachers who knew me as well as did my mother, I close with a suggestion. Your next viewing of *Citizen Kane*, catch the folksy wisdom by old Bernstein in the newspaper office (by the way, Bernstein is my actual family name). Bernstein: “One day, back in 1896, I was crossing over to Jersey on the ferry, and as we pulled out, there was another ferry pulling in, and on it there was a girl waiting to get off. A white dress she had on. She was carrying a white parasol. I only saw her for one second. She didn’t see me at all, but I’ll bet a month hasn’t gone by since that I haven’t thought of that girl.” Take it from a *muddled*-aged time traveler. If you see that metaphoric girl with the parasol, don’t hesitate to speak to her. It does go by quickly, unlike some of my columns. Even so, I can’t help looking forward to next year’s festivals, the next issue of *Sing Out!* and my friend telling me who was unrecognizable at the class reunion. Human nature I guess.

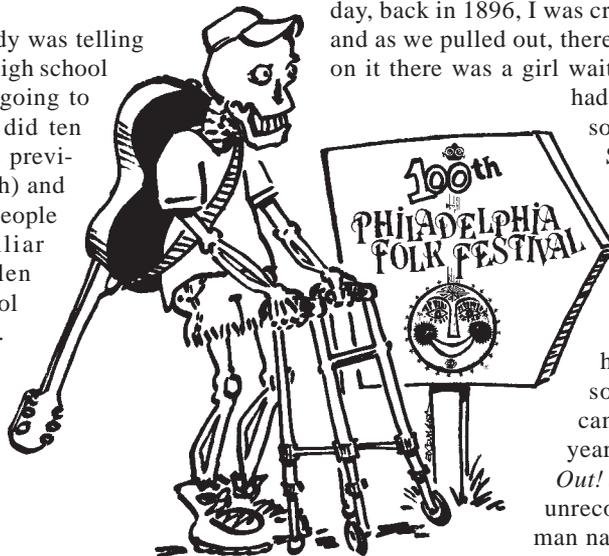


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

DOT COMEDY

A pen is my writing implement of choice when working on a crossword puzzle. It gives me confidence and a false sense of mastery over words and phrases. On a recent bus trip I carried a *New York Times* while making written notes on the design of my new web site <www.rogerdeitz.com> that was in the works. I forgot to grab my favorite pen in the hustle to catch the express bus. A passenger next to me lent me a yellow pencil with a pink eraser, something I never use for the crossword, nor for writing on a yellow pad. In fact I so rarely use a pencil, the sight of this one was nostalgic.

My previous "RagTag" was about getting older (and also quoted a film). I held this pencil as proof that *some* things don't grow old. Has it really been so long since I employed No. 2 pencils and yellow legal pads? Pretty technologically advanced, methinks. I remembered my old Boston crank operated pencil sharpener and then an electric sharpener, a marvelous machine that weighed far more than a laptop. It plugged into a wall outlet and chewed up pencils at a prodigious rate until the smell of cedar filled the air and a black graphite dust cloud settled over my writing desk. It felt odd using the pencil, and remembering those machines. Ironically during the bus ride, I was using a low-tech pencil to complete design outlines for a high-tech web site. Like anything else, creating cyber is a multimedia process. I often resist technological opportunities (changes), eventually I adapt wondering what took me so long. Thanks to Susan Deckhart of Mom & Pop's Coffeehouse in Levittown, Pa., for convincing me it was time to join the (m)e-generation, and for working with me to build my web site. She really made the process fun and I marveled at her mastery over details of web design I never knew existed. I returned home and "typed" the yellow pad notes into an e-mail for Sue. (Yes, a laptop *is* on my Christmas list).

As I listened to the light chatter of the computer keyboard, I recalled another "machine," a Smith Corona portable typewriter that was a high school graduation present from my uncle. It was a bribe to encourage me to go to law school. I should have taken his advice. I often feel like suing someone. That hefty gift was bestowed back in 1967. It was itself a technological wonder, although in time doomed as a remnant of

the machine age. Packed with gears, belts and levers the portable typewriter was a marvel of engineering. The motor whirred in the background (louder than a hard drive) with a hum while repetitive slaps of the type bars against the platen numbed the brain. Slap, crack, snap, crack went the report – the one I heard and the one due at first period class. Thanks also to erasable paper ... and, oh yes, pencil erasers.

The typewriter bribe didn't work. My only recollection of law school is of the front steps of a distinguished one that was near my briefly attended medical school. The steps in question were conveniently placed between a tavern and my dormitory, a rest stop medical students visited ceremoniously after Friday night bar runs at a watering hole ironically named The Fountain. It still works. The *typewriter* I mean. Perfectly as the day it was presented to me. Yes, okay, that *and* the typewriter!

Some folks say the *primary* reason for this typewriter manufacturer's demise was the solidly built machines just kept click clacking away. They never broke down. The manufacturer did not employ *planned* obsolescence. It got me through college and on into journalism. I wrote term papers and other assignments, lyrics and articles. Eventually in the mid-'80s, *unplanned* obsolescence became the ultimate reason for the typewriter's demise. Progress in the creations of Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak and Bill Gates, three college dropouts with rather stellar options, stock options that is. Clever investor that I was, I purchased an Epson CPM based computer, eschewing a more enigmatic MS DOS IBM computer. Then a Quantex, just before they went out of business. By the way – I also neglected to snap up Microsoft stock at its IPO in 1986 at \$21 a share. That was also unfortunate – or I would be sitting on my estate in Belize writing notes to my house staff using a solid gold Montblanc fountain pen. That one share grew to just under three hundred shares, worth around eight grand. The \$1,800 I spent for the Epson would have netted me eighty-six or so shares of Microsoft valued somewhat over seven hundred thousand dollars. Smart shopper! What's that line from the movie? "Steve, is it Steve, right? You say this gadget of yours is for ordinary people. What on earth would ordinary people want with computers?" Re: the Apple I circa 1976 – see *Pirates of Silicon Valley*. Get the point?

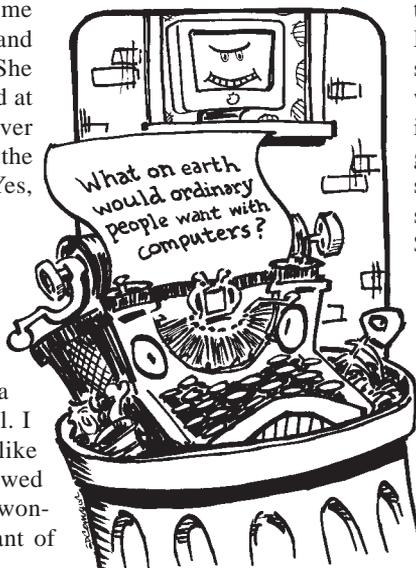


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

BACKSTAGE PASSAGE

Come with me on safari into a secret world that few concert patrons inhabit. You pay big bucks to buy a ticket for a concert, then watch the privileged few, glide by a guard at the concert hall stage door. Bruno's that scowling muscular thug standing at the stage door, (you can't miss it – the sign says "Stage Door"). His arms are folded, security passes dangle from his neck, a can of mace hangs from his belt next to a stun gun and rabbit's foot, rabbit attached. He guards the elite portal, the pearly gate. You know, for those A-List people who are artists, relatives, agents, musicians, members of the press, drug dealers (not necessarily in that order). Big Time Concerts' gatekeeper left a halfway house last year and took a job that requires all his skills. He has the word "Security" tattooed to his forehead next to his name. Both are etched backwards, transposed presumably so he can read his name and job description when he looks in the bathroom mirror.

Bruno also has warrants in six states for assault, usually on groupies half his size that meekly said things such as, "I met Suzanne Vega in 1982 at a bodega around the corner from The New School. We both bought Peach Snapple. She *knows* me. May I go back stage and say *hello*?" Bruno attended a trade school advertised on a matchbook cover ... Jack's College of Long-haul Trucking, Bartending and Security Arts of Phoenix, Arizona. It's actually located in a post office box. But, he is a perfect gentleman. He always says "excuse me" before slamming gatecrashers into Willie Nelson's tour bus. Okay, I admit it. I often get backstage. I know you might think it is all champagne and caviar. That is rarely the case. More veggie dip and slightly rancid pasta salad with tubs of bottled water and diet soda. And, even for those that attain backstage status there is a hierarchy, a pecking order. The "in" group always distances itself from the riffier-raff.

Let's not mislead here. I love schmoozing and it is a hoot hanging out with Jerry Lee Lewis, Emmylou Harris, and the guys in The Dirt Band. That is the upside. But there is a downside. One that became more apparent the more time I spent backstage. As a patron, I *actually got to listen* to music (the reason to attend a concert methinks?). The more I hung backstage, the less music I actually *heard*. With all

that gabbing, who has time for listening to music? It's like being sequestered in an isolation booth with roadies and toadies. And, there were times when for example, Pete Seeger, Tom Paxton and John McCutcheon asked, "Roger! Join us for breakfast!" and before I could order grits some lower-rung back-stager glommed onto *me* for the entire meal's conversation. Don't you hate when that happens? Ironic though.

Here's one of my backstage stories notable for its long delayed reaction and dumb embarrassing punch line. In August of 1988 I was not only backstage, I was getting *onto* some stages. I had signed to open for Pete and Arlo at an outdoor concert at The Walpack Inn. That same year (day) I showcased at the Philadelphia Folk Festival. I had to finish, travel a few hours to make the Pete and Arlo gig, then return. I got there just in time to take the stage. When I began to play a few tunes laced with humor, one a parody of Bob Dylan's "Percy's Song," Arlo Guthrie inched up and sat right in front of the stage. I got worried. The line coming next, sung in mock Bob Dylan voice went, "*I thought I'd be like Woody and follow all the way; Turn, turn, turn away; But I'd rather ride a limo than a freight train any day; Turn, turn to the rain and the wind.*" Thankfully, Arlo laughed.

After the set, backstage, sitting not more than *ten feet away*, Arlo was stringing his twelve-string guitar. He seemed aloof. A woman came up to me, said she was Arlo's road manager, and in earshot of Guthrie reported, "Arlo wanted me to tell you, he really enjoyed your set." I looked at Arlo, and loud enough for him to hear, responded, "Thank him for me," as I

turned to watch Arlo continue to string his guitar. Odd I thought. Flash ahead to June 22, 1995, backstage at Oscar Brand's *Folksong Festival* 50th Anniversary Concert. Arlo Guthrie, Richie Havens, Odetta, Pete Seeger, Tom Paxton, Dave Van Ronk and many others; a back-stager's dream. Arlo heads for me with an outstretched hand. He says cordially, "I know who *you* are." I shake his hand and (thinking it might be a funny, not *rude* thing to say), automatically respond, "Oh, thank you ... and, *who might you be?*" Guthrie looked a bit stunned as he walked back to his seat. I can still see my agent Len Rosenfeld cringe. I still cringe. That moment symbolically solidified my return to the B-List.

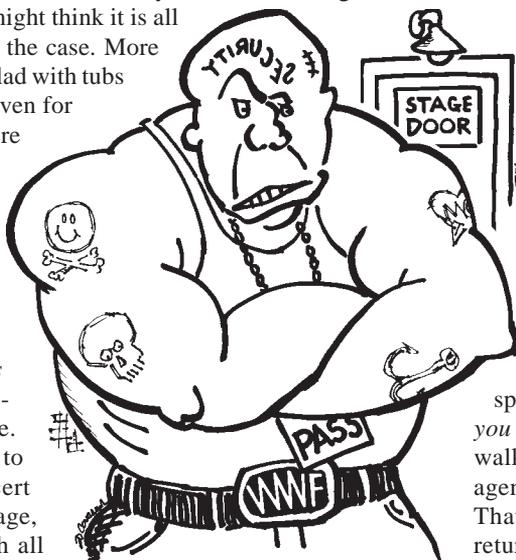


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

TALES FROM THE CRYPTIC

Rumor has it the creature named “Max” came from Saturn and could play rings around other extraterrestrial musicians. In a most curious fashion, Max had a guitar, pennywhistle, jug and button accordion growing out of various segments of its large, slimy body. Slightly shaken by the saucer crash in the 1950s during the folk revival, Max expertly used various arms, hands, fingers and mouths to play these instruments. A virtuoso in all respects, Max was unfortunately “detained” by the government in a hanger near Roswell, New Mexico. It is suggested the leaders (Max asked to be taken to them) hid away evidentiary photos and field recordings, with bootlegs circulating among the higher ups. Seems the government and major record companies wanted alien folk to remain top secret. Once the word (music) got out, they theorized no one would ever want to purchase Kingston Trio records, vote in a presidential election, or leave their fallout shelters. Had to keep this from the lefties and protect Capitol Records. It was just one of those “Things” as Charles Addams might say. Actually, one of those large green multi-talented slimy insect-like segmented things that had, in a different atmosphere, genetically morphed into a self-contained folk group, learning music by monitoring radio signals beamed through space from planet Earth. Max digested the Weavers’ tunes, as well as one local New Mexico resident. Turns out Max liked the Carter Family’s border radio concerts, and the taste of a banjo player from Silver City. The alien came in peace to hear The Weavers live, but under orders from the Pentagon, scientists dissected Max, piece by piece, to see what made him/her tick. They reportedly found a Henry Wallace for President Progressive Party button, a pair of finger picks, and the formula for making gasoline from lime Jello. (Of course the oil companies put the kibosh to that last one.)

Okay, you have my word that either the above or the following stories are true. *You be the judge.* I often emceed and performed at the Nassau Community College Folk Festival (erroneously, many of us called it *The Long Island Folk Festival*). For 35 years it was a unique student-run three-day music and diversity festival integrated into the school’s academic program, providing folk acts and instruction for the college and greater community. The festival as I knew it was guided by Phyllis Kurland, Professor of Student Personnel Ser-

vices, and Paula Ballan, both of whom worked closely with students who had great input in all aspects of pulling together the event. Often the Folk Festival dates would coincide with The Grateful Dead’s engagements at the nearby Nassau Coliseum. Among other things, this would pack the Folk Festival, motel rooms and hallways with deadheads. I remember one asking me for “bread.” When I offered him money, he said, “No,” as he lifted a jar of peanut butter, “I mean *real bread* man, I need *bread*.” One year Maria Muldaur was playing the Festival and I recall Jerry Garcia came to the motel to take her to dinner. I watched Garcia walk up and down the corridor, stepping over deadheads in various states of raised and lowered consciousness. *Not one* recognized the idol they were following around the country.

I also recall one evening concert back in 1988 that spilled over into the motel bar which was opened (past quitting time) after one of the shows – a bottle of Jack Daniel’s catalyzed a conversation with members of Silly Wizard, David Bromberg and yours truly. We broke up our “chat” when the bottle was empty and went to our rooms. A few minutes later there was a knock at my motel room door. It was David asking me to grab my accordion to join him. He hustled me down the hall into another room. Therein Paula Ballan was sitting on the floor, her face aglow ... beaming as she often did at post-show get-togethers, just more so. Reclined on the bed with a guitar in hand was Roger McGuinn, also handy were Phil and Johnny Cunningham holding one accordion and one fiddle respectively. David Bromberg grabbed his guitar, and the rest was an out-of-this-world jam that lasted until dawn. Phil played lightning-fast, buttons and keys ablaze. I (wisely) put down my piano accordion and picked up a banjo. I recall at the time I could *think* but not quite *play* some of the things David was playing, but could not even *think* the things Phil Cunningham was playing. I turned to watch Bromberg gazing at Phil. David was smiling, mesmerized. Paula remembers the evening with the same glowing look she had that night. Damn, no bootlegs available.

Recently I received a letter from Phyllis noting “the festival can no longer continue due to the lack of financial support.” Sigh. She is looking for “input about funding sources, sponsorships, ticket pricing, formats and programming.” The hope is that the festival be reborn in some “new creation.” Bittersweet – the good memories and the bad news. Thank you Phyllis and Paula. Lately it occurs to me what a long, strange trip it’s been.

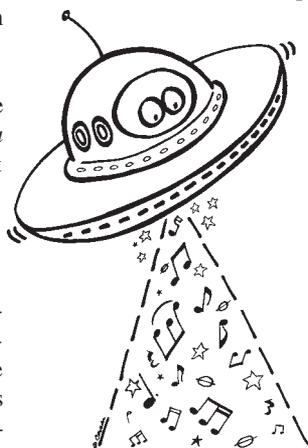


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

LIP SINKING

Industry watchdogs (can watchdogs really hear high-pitched sounds the rest of us can't?) and some of my buddies with iPods dangling from their ear buds tell me CDs are useful as sparkly coasters. I am pro-CD – liking to know that my digits won't evaporate if I have a power surge, battery drain or computer failure. At least CDs sort of *look* like the records I grew up playing. Yet, having all that music stored in one small device, being able to load up from CDs for free or from the Internet for a fee is enticing and setting record sales. Let me say I am also against cruelty to watchdogs. But, I think their bark is often worse than their bright. And the coasters in question are not the "Poison Ivy," "Yakety Yak," "Charlie Brown," "Searchin'," "Along Came Jones," and "Little Egypt" Coasters that rocked out Leiber and Stoller hits on vinyl (now on CDs and iPods). The reference is to those shiny silver discs that are today a bargain to manufacture. They take up much less storage room than my LPs and 8-tracks. Downloads of course take up littler bits. However, if lightning zaps you while listening to a music file, where's the music *then* I ask you? The way the economy and housing markets are going, maybe the CDs the watchdogs *weren't* watching had fixed interest rates the banks tied to risky mortgage investments. Well, before I pick up the real estate section of my newspaper, let me put my drink down on this here shiny coaster. (*Confession*: some review CDs I've been sent *are* so employed.)

One reason I'm holding a drink? I worked with AT&T on a groundbreaking experimental download project called the *digital phonograph* (my name creation!). The music sounded great but DP went somewhere just south of nowhere. The lawyers and brass professed they saw no future investing in music downloads. "Lawsuits!" they cautioned. That was before AT&T stock was lip sinking, and Apple's core was rising. I had a piece of the digitalphono action. But there was only inaction. I did not sign a confidentiality agreement, so some day I may share the details with you in a book. Apple watched closely – and had different lawyers, or should I say, more *brass* where it counts? I digress here to observe we are not only *using* music, we are *abusing* it as well.

Take for example the electronic art form known as lip-synching. Whether ABBA or Ashlee Simpson's notorious *Saturday Night* (sort of) *Live* per-

formances, or Madonna's search for electronic vocal perfection in concerts, even live music isn't what it should be. Meaning actually *live*, or *music* for that matter. And who can forget Milli Vanilli's Grammy-winning (and forfeiting) debacle? "*Girl you know it's ... Girl you know it's ... Girl you know it's ... true.*" How true? How ironic! Oh, just *skip* it. Soupy Sales did it better in pantomime, hawking his single "The Mouse" back in the '60s with a 45 playing while he gesticulated mouse moves. Some of you may not know Soupy. He was a superbly irreverent wacko employed on a few local and syndicated television stations when I was discovering that *Mad* magazine and live television offered me a wicked alternative to *Boys' Life* and reruns of *The Lone Ranger*.

The last time I saw Soupy he was the headliner at a First Night I played in Red Bank, New Jersey. He did a large theater venue. Attending parents, (mostly fathers) eager to show their kids the funny guy they loved on '60s television dragged the family to catch Soupy's act. Then they squirmed in their seats as the Soupster (apparently blinded by the house lights, not seeing the room full of kids) worked blue, treating the youngsters to saucy words worthy of the playground, cable TV or father's review of junior's report cards and text-messaging bill. Probably not as funny as Dad remembered. Pretty damned funny from my perspective – more so than the occasional dirty joke, legendary Frank Sinatra or Sammy Davis Jr. pie-in-the-face episode, or the off-camera dancing naked lady in the infamous "knocking at the door" bit.

Speaking of First Night, irritated that he had to work on New Years Day back in 1965, Mr. Sales thought to shtick it to the station bigwigs. He did so at the show's close by asking the kiddies to take the funny green pieces of paper from their parents' wallets, put them in an envelope and mail them to him at the station. They did so obediently. Sales promised the children a postcard from Puerto Rico. Again, pretty funny ... funnier than Soup's two-week suspension. Heck, this really isn't much different from the current music distribution system if you think about it. Youngsters buy a great deal of music and I've read that nearly two-thirds of the music streamed from download services is snapped up by the 16 to 24-year-old age group. Mom and Dad's wallets *are* ever handy and there's more where that came from. Maybe the watchdogs are watching when they should be listening. Sic 'em Nipper.

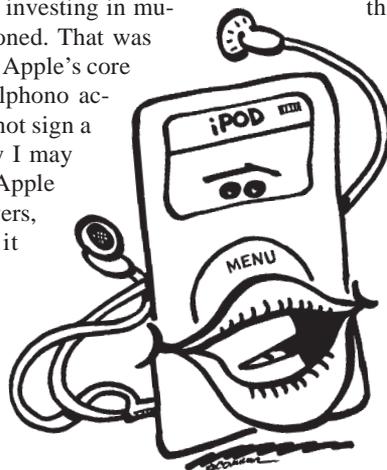


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

PRICETAG

What am I doing in a high-end clothing store? Old Mr. Sweatshirt & Blue Jeans is being surrounded by distinguished looking gents, all wearing suits and tape measures. If this were Animal Planet, I would be a wounded sparrow amid a “clowder of cats.” (I remember *this term* from the book *An Exaltation of Larks* by James Lipton, along with “*a gush of sycophants.*”) It’s been a while since I *needed* to buy a suit. My denim jeans are in good shape (a couple of pair last a year). I was walking to Staples from my car, and just *heard* a radio ad for “*unheard of savings* on a wide range of select men’s wear.” The announcer’s voice was sonorous, melodic, hypnotic, and here was the darn clothing store, *right in front of me.* That’s what superb enunciation will do to you. Of course, one week earlier, the well-spoken radio prices were less pricey. I’ve walked by this store a hundred times without going in, but for some reason, I enter. Before I knew it, I was reaching for the door handle. I step into the clothing store and a well-dressed clerk, elbowing out his chums, solicitously asks, “*May I help you sir.*” I know I am done for. As the door shuts behind me, I think, “Damn, I’m gonna’ buy something I don’t need.”

I browse. List prices on the topcoats and suits read like entries on automobile stickers. Three-hundred dollar pants, two hundred dollar shirts, fifty dollar socks, two-thousand dollar suits ... “*now,*” as the radio guy said, marked down to “*incredibly low prices.*” Two thousand dollars? I paid 2K for my first new car! Incredibly low prices? Not really, just a lot closer to the *actual* price one *should* be spending for this attire. Ninety-nine dollar pants and seven-hundred dollar suits are laid out in front of me by a salesman who notes this particular line of garments represents *low end* merchandise. I panic and ask to be led to the 46-long sport jackets (after all, I have to divert the hover of salesmen). I spot a Harris Tweed label on the sleeve of a brown herringbone. Looks good. I am drawn – curious. The price tag reads \$499.95. “*But today only,*” said the radio an-

nouncer only a few minutes ago ... “*\$199.95.*” I ask: wasn’t this on sale for \$149.95 last week? The salesman says he can cut today’s price even deeper, *just for me!*

What to do? In the daze of the moment, not wanting to disappoint the friendly sales staff, I find myself handing over a plastic card. I am standing in front of a tailor, but the garment needs no alteration. The labels are ripped from the sleeve, (yes, ripped ... a rather crude way to treat my \$500 jacket), the garment is bagged and I am out the door. By the way, the five-dollar item that I needed at Staples is not in stock. Sigh. I get home, ready to join friends for dinner. I slide the top button of my spiffy new jacket through the buttonhole and, hanging by a thin thread, it drops to the floor. What? Back to Antonio the tailor. “They don’t make them like they used to,” one salesman jokes. Yeah, what should one expect for “a mere” \$499.95 anyway?

I know what concerts cost. I know what banjos and guitars go for and music magazine subscriptions. But not this stuff. I might as well be shopping for designer handbags on QVC. I like my jacket ... even if the tweed is a fraction of the thickness I remember on similar coats years ago. Value! Truth! Beauty! The truth is – I see value and beauty in finely crafted musical instruments, performances, songs, recordings and a magazine for which I write (staffed lovingly by “*a worship of writers.*”). Fifty-dollar argyle socks are a bit off-putting, especially when that money scores a year of *Sing Out!*, CD included. Unlike my Harris Tweed, *Sing Out!*

is *thicker* than the old days. And by the way, I (we) have managed to nearly make it through my 49th column (It just *seems* like 499.95). FORTY-NINE FREAKING RAGTAGS!!! Where *does* the time go?

The next issue will carry column FIFTY. Time for the ceremonial pocket watch. Over the years I pulled off most of the ‘Tags, while very few unraveled. How can I put a PriceTag on RagTag? The 50th better be one hell of a column. It just goes to show, you never know what might happen walking through a door for the first time. Regrets? A misplaced comma here or there, and I should have gotten the matching argyle socks and sweater set.

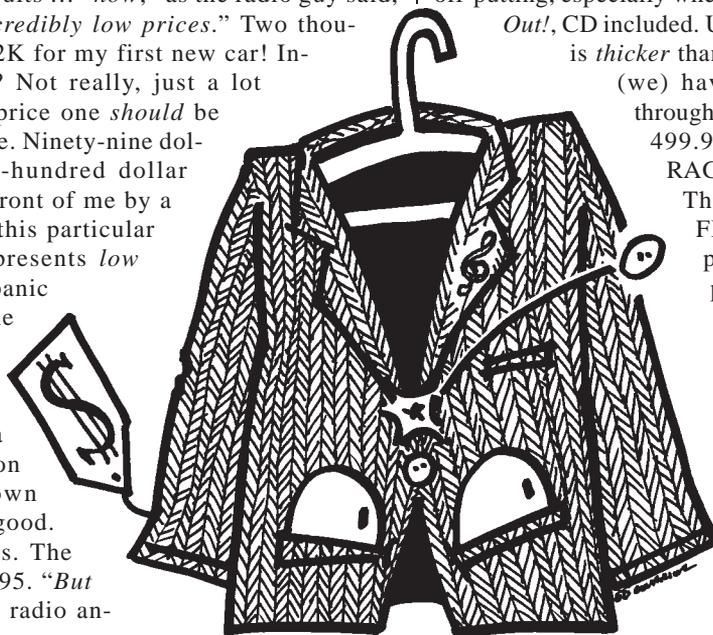


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

IT'S A MIRACLE!

Creating fifty RagTags is hardly an achievement of Biblical proportions. Yet the last page of *Sing Out!* is a pulpit akin to the soapboxes from which speakers rallied enthusiasts near the arch in Washington Square Park years ago. It strikes me that I would have a difficult time at this juncture *listing* fifty topics, let alone setting out again to write fifty columns. By now I imagine you have an idea what I am. What I am not. Trying to say *something* while racking up points for style is my game. As a *scientist*, I hold a lens to a subject. But, writing as an *artist*, that's a solitary process. For a writer there's no immediate feedback. A writer takes it on faith that folks are reading what one composes; that the reader is, well, on the same page with the writer. If a stranger mentions a column, I'm reminded, "Oh, someone's actually *reading* this stuff." A performer with a message knows right then and there, hearing applause or dodging veggies. I'm grateful for the opportunity to contribute to *SO!* Still, I do so marching to the beat of my own eardrum.

This made me a curiosity to my family. I recall a summer about twenty years ago (1989, when I wrote a Christine Lavin feature for *Sing Out!*). I returned to the *Sing Out!* booth at the Clearwater Festival to have Mark Moss pass along the news that a niece of mine stopped by the booth. "Do you know my uncle?" she asked Mark, "He writes for you ... Roger Deitz. *We in the family consider him a little eccentric.*" Apparently, the ex-medical student, leftwing folkie, five-string banjo-playing writer, college teacher turned consultant was the black sheep of the family. My brother hosted a "wacky" morning zoo FM-radio program. *I was the eccentric.*

I wrote in these pages that my father played trumpet with Rudy Vallee's band at the Brooklyn Paramount. In time, Dad traded his horn for a career in electronics, installing the first radios in automobiles and accomplishing a distinguished list of achievements in electronics and manufacturing. Recently I contributed my thoughts on New Jersey to *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*, a section that included a fair amount of information about science and technology. Soon after, someone sent me a full-page laminated

article from the *Paterson Morning Call* of Friday, November 25, 1949. It was titled, "Don't Trade In Your Old Television For A Big Picture Set. Let Deitz Miracle Lens Company Show You How to Convert Your Set To Present Day Efficiency." There was a picture of my father, Morris Deitz, standing beside a couple of antique TVs. What a hoot to see and read.

Back in the "old days" when the cathode ray tube was seven to ten inches in diameter, my father perfected electronic (The Zoomer) and mechanical (The Deitz Miracle Lens) means of "growing" the TV picture up to 16 inches. The Deitz Miracle Lens was fabricated out of two carefully formed layers of clear plastic, filled with mineral oil and sealed. It was placed in front of the old TV screen to enlarge or magnify the picture. Made him rich ... brought him a couple of shiny new Packards, a big house in the suburbs with a swimming pool, and partners that screwed him out of much of his fortune. There's always a catch, as in my columns. Today's windup comes from aged television repairmen (remember when we *fixed* things?) I encountered long after the demise of the miraculous lens.

Working on my color sets, technicians would turn to me, asking a question with similar invective, "Deitz? Are you the Deitz from that god damned Miracle Lens?" "Yes, I would answer proudly ... *that was my Dad!*" One old gent grumbled, "I installed them. They worked great until I got the call back. Damn dogs! If there was a dog in the house, I always got called back ... *to clean up the mess.*" I wondered, was Lassie sassy? Was Rin Tin Tinkling?

No. It turns out, dogs were fascinated with the invention. Pooches throughout the land could not keep from gnawing at the aromatic plastic lens. Dog toy! As a result, the mineral oil would leak onto the floor. Said dogs would lap up the oil and, how can I put

this, the mineral oil would exert its *miraculous* effect on Bowser's GI tract, leaving an oily, fecal mess in front of TV sets from Maine to California. Now, *that's* entertainment! Get the picture? So in closing, like my father before me, I continue to leave my mark. And though I may be eccentric, for the fiftieth time ... I'm giving you the real poop. I guess you could say I'm paper-trained.

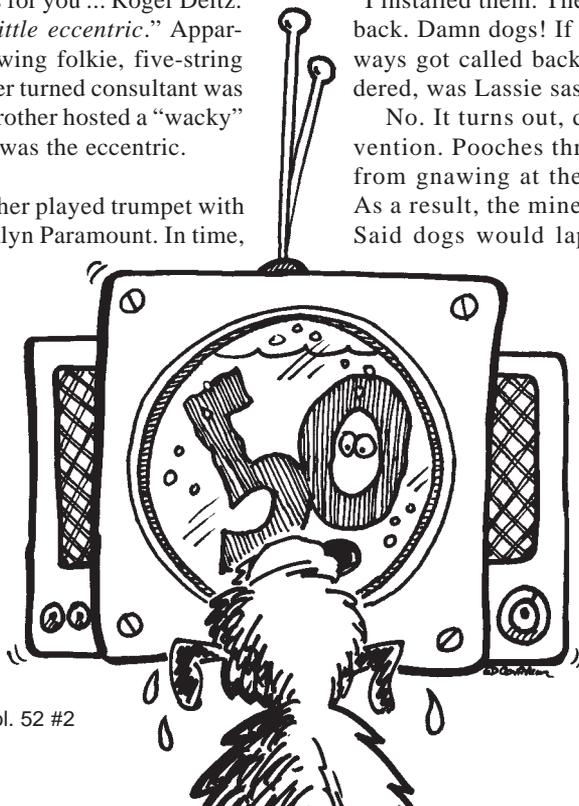


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

PLAYING THE LIAR

I have been labeled dishonest a couple of times that I recall. Sure, it helps I can't hear all of you reading these columns. Both are higher education related, one more musical than the other. In graduate school, I handed in a biochemistry exam about an hour before everyone else was done. Without getting technical, there was a long molecular biology protein synthesis that painstakingly had been taught by Dr. Goodman. The question begged radioactive tagging and all sorts of lugubrious steps upon which to expound. I knew the process, but reading the question, I realized that if one employed a centrifuge – as a shortcut early in the process – one could solve the problem, while saving scores of complicated reactions and grade lowering pitfalls. It was one of those “Eureka!” moments. I went for it because the exam instructions did not specifically warn, “Do not use a centrifuge.” They did on the next year's test. I knew I was on shaky ground. When I handed in my paper, Goodman looked at my answer, turned red, and blurted out – “You Cheated!” The class stared and my heart nearly stopped.

Well, I hadn't *really* cheated and he knew it.

It didn't occur to him some resourceful (lazy) wise-ass would take a short cut (my middle name) and – with “the cheater” standing before him, recanted, told the class I had not in fact *actually* cheated. “Get out!” he snapped. So ... I “cheated” and got away with it. That was time two.

Time one still mars my record. I was innocent I tell you!

Back in my freshman year of college, my music professor also accused me of cheating, but never retracted the charge. The class was Music Appreciation, a one-credit requirement that had lots of music ... with a minimum of appreciation from the freshmen that attended this class at 8 in the morning. One requirement was to go to an opera and write a paper about the experience. Let's face it, you know how I write. This is more or less the way I wrote the paper. My essay was witty, ironic, sarcastic, and, how can I put this ... *not* appreciated.

Back then, the Metropolitan Opera offered patrons a certain number of less

expensive seats. Designated “scorer's desks” their location in the upper tier was far enough back from the inner circle to limit a view of the stage. For just three dollars, a student could *listen* to the opera, study the score. Said student would then hope one of the elderly women with better seats would wink and invite you over to sit beside her and keep her company – so one could actually watch what was going on upon the stage. I went often to learn about and listen to opera. One of the things I learned was that plenty of folks purchased an additional ticket so that they might invite someone from the cheap seats for the pleasure of their company. And on the day of the term paper writing, a little old lady did invite me over to share the scenery. As thus I wrote with graceful, and colorful prose.

I wrote about the chandeliers rising before the overture. I wrote about people trying to sit where they thought a season ticket holder had not attended. I wrote about people rushing to the bathrooms and the bar during the intermission. I chronicled an over-the-hill ingenu, now twenty years too old for the part. I heard some audio clinkers and so noted. I wrote about

Rigoletto, dragging this ridiculously large sack to the river that he learns contains not the Duke, who was to be killed, but Rig's own daughter Gilda. I think the word hernia came up.

Dr. Monroe returned my award winning essay – marked in red, “SEE ME!!!” He insisted there was no way I ever visited the Met (this was about the twentieth opera I had seen) and that I had just made it all up. I showed him my program, my bus tickets, an old lady's phone number. Call her ... she'll tell you. “You cheated,” he insisted. What, with the *old lady*? I didn't cheat, but he didn't believe me. The odd thing is I really enjoyed going with professors and friends to listen to classical music, even joining a classical music record club so I could get a taste of symphonies, quartets, trios and the like. No good deed goes unpunished. You can take my word for that. Of course, never end a term paper with the line, “The opera ain't over 'till the *flat* lady sings.” At least not for Professor Monroe.

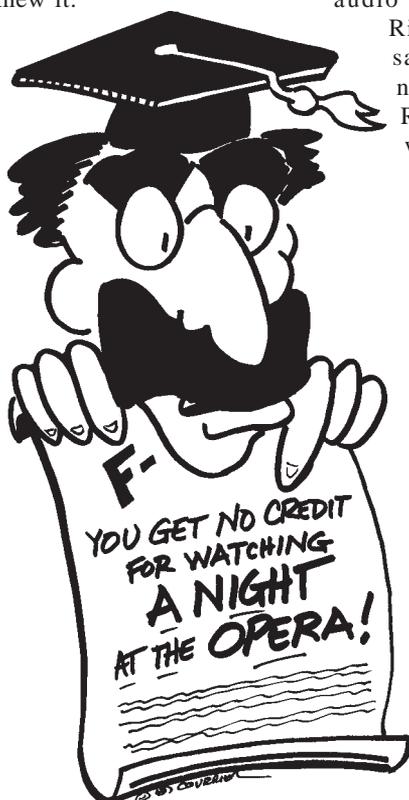


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

TURNING TABLES

October 26th or *Beethoven's Sixth, The Pastoral* plays. There's nothing like the tranquility of Sunday in Manhattan on a lovely fall day. The pace of the city slows while a small-town feel transforms the various neighborhoods into, well, neighborhoods. People amble. They're smiling. Many are gathered in family groups. Up-town and down, there are street-side restaurants and cafés serving brunch as the world passes by one's outdoor table or front window. I guess the operative phrase is "the world passes by." That's what the world does.

I'm on a bittersweet mission. My destination is Anshe Chesed Temple at West 100th Street in NYC. In the span of a few months, I have lost many friends. You've read about some of them in "Last Chorus." After a while, one wonders, "Enough already!" This day I am to play at a memorial service remembering Carl Schwartz. He is not one of our musicians, but was a star non-the-less. As a volunteer and supporter of World Hunger Year (WHY), NYC Friends of Clearwater, People's Voice Café and People's Music Network, he was an ever-present force for good. An environmental activist and a one man Mitzvah Machine. For decades I would meet Carl at concerts and festivals. He'd stop by to say hello and offer kind words. Years back at a WHY fundraising concert, to the delight of the assembled, Carl inexplicably danced The Frug as I played "Midnight Special."

Sue Leventhal, former *Sing Out!* board member and WHY events director, asked if I would play "Midnight Special" and help remember Carl during the World Hunger Year portion of the memorial, which led the afternoon program. No problem ... anything for Carl and WHY. I enter via the front door, and realize I have signed the guest register of a stranger's funeral. I am told to go to the side entrance of the building. I come upon a Children's Street Fair in the 200 block of West 100th Street. The entire block is packed with youngsters and closed off with police sawhorses. Children partake of face painting, music, games and fun galore. There are ironies at work here; the sunshine, the children, a memorial service, a funeral. Inside the large auditorium I encounter a somber but friendly gathering of folks.

My friend Rabbi Bonita Taylor begins with an invocation. She presides over a portion of the service, Kaddish included. Bill Ayers, who founded WHY with Harry Chapin, speaks. Sue Leventhal says a few words. I play a song and reminisce – (George Jessel would be proud) – inspiring some poignant, melancholy laughter. I sit with our friend Marsha Garelick and my wife Valerie. When our part of the program ends, Bill leaves, and five of us set off in search of a place to have lunch. Diner? Turkish? Indian? Around we go with a game of "Where do we eat? I like this, you like that." We decide. *Beethoven's Fifth* now begins ... with sitar accompaniment. Indian it is. Indus Valley Restaurant is just around the corner.

We enter the small eatery and select a table at the rear, declining to occupy the empty tables at the front window. A few minutes later, we hear a great explosion. REALLY LOUD!!! Glass shatters and blows in at us. We just look at each other. It takes a while to figure what happened. A mini-van crashed into the restaurant (and the tables up front – the ones we opted *not* to occupy!). Dial 911. Dozens of fire trucks. EMTs, and police vehicles. The rescuers cut off the top of the mini-van with the jaws-of-life as the building is coming down around them. It's a slow process. I understand about 9 or 10 people were hurt, 2 seriously, none in the restaurant.

After a while, the police and firemen ask if we are okay (we did smell gas) and cut for us a small exit from the side of the building's glass and aluminum frame. No hurry, no curry. Food was not served. When we are out, we spy hundreds of curious on-lookers behind a yellow police tape.

Rabbi Taylor says it's just like a *Law and Order* episode she saw. Our lunch is a lead story on the news at 6:30 p.m.; there are four new, horrid murder and mayhem stories by the time the 11 p.m. news airs. I reflect. The mini-van was traveling the wrong way on Broadway when it hit. Did I mention those tables in the window, the ones at which we didn't sit? AND the narrowly missed pedestrians, and all those children on the side street at the fair when the van instead plowed into the restaurant? Yikes.

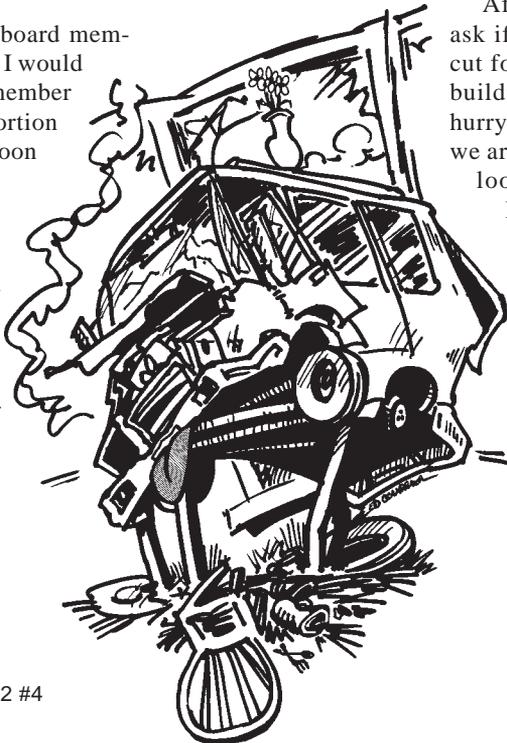


Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

THE SHAYNER YID

A *shayner Yid* is a good or kind Jew of whom others are proud. If a Jewish friend takes me to task for eating bread during Passover or for performing on the Sabbath, (hey, that's when cantors sing), I smile. Usually that friend isn't adhering to the many traditions, rituals and prayers that the truly devout observe, but picking and choosing a few they fancy. We each seek our comfort level. When I was a youngster, my parents, both secular Jews, saw to it I went to Hebrew school to learn about the religion into which we were born, of which they knew little. At home my folks spoke some Yiddish, not Hebrew, and taught me Yiddish sayings and songs. So to me, they seemed so Jewish. I close my eyes and hear my parents singing, "*Ofyn pripetshik, brent a feyerl, un in stub iz heys ...*" (a translation – "*At the fireplace a flame burns and the room warms ...*") This musical fire still warms me. The song is about a rabbi teaching students, and although my parents sang the song with deep passion, Morris and Sophie generally did not listen to rabbis or go to services at the Jewish Center they helped to build. They would "refrain" unless almost forced to go. Mom and Dad were one generation removed from the anti-Semitism of their parents' homelands. They were Jewish in their way, yet, they didn't talk about religion.

On those rare occasions my father and I were together at services (usually a social obligation he could not avoid) I noticed he would refuse to wear a skullcap (*yarmulke* in Yiddish, or *kippah* in Hebrew). Morris had his reasons. Our rabbi, a very nice little fellow, would kid my father, playfully try to place a hat on Dad's head. Morris was way taller. It was a sight. The rabbi would smile (my father would not – something was eating at him). Dad would back away and remove the skullcap, asking the rabbi to stop. It was a puzzle I could see the rabbi challenged to decipher. I got the courage after one of these public tussles to ask in Synagogue (*shul*), "Why won't you wear the cap? What's the big deal?"

Rarely did my father let me in on reflections of this

sort. A kinder, more honest person I have never known. My father never raised his voice or his hand to me. When he was ill, he didn't complain. He was not a *kvetch* like his son who learned that being a secular Jew can lead to problems. For example, I often had lunch with a product representative, a buddy I thought, who wrongly inferred from a story I wrote that I was *not* Jewish. One day, this fellow began an anti-Semitic rant that made my toes curl. About Jews in general and "those Jews at *Sing Out!*" (I think we were in the minority). Once he knew what was under *my* hat so to speak, he became somewhat flustered. I wondered – maybe I *should* have worn a hat. As to Dad, *why no hat?*

His answer, "True, I don't wear one," my father said pointing to a few colleagues in the congregation. Friends we both knew. "See them? They come to services regularly. They outwardly show the trappings of piety. Many *are* devout, some not." Then he shocked me by sharing his grown-up thoughts. "See him?" he continued, "The *ganif* (thief)! He has shorted me on product deliveries. And that guy, he has a mistress. His wife knows. That one over there is in debt, a gambler. His family suffers." I was stunned by these adult revelations. Dad added a bully who kicked our dog down a flight of stairs and rounded out the hit list with a few sluggards, braggarts and drinkers (*shickers*). He pointed out again that most in the room were truly good people, good role models. I am told by friends of different faiths, there is universal resonance to this anecdote. But my father was electing to make his point.

"Yes, I don't wear skullcaps and prayer shawls," Morris said. "I don't want to. I try to live a good life, and I do the best I can.

I know right from wrong and I try to do what's right. I don't observe the Sabbath or fast on the holidays. I sing where and when I choose. But, I think I'm a good Jew, if only by my own standard. A *shayner Yid*. Wearing a hat does not in itself make one a better person. Deeds do. And," he paused, "God knows," as he whispered with a smile, gesturing above, (*– Klezmer music begins to play –*), "To answer your question *honestly*, I don't want to mess up my hair."



Illustration by Ed Courmer ©



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

HUMAN ERR

Mistakes were made. Some on the road of life, others on the fret board. I might now and again hit a clam, and half jokingly call that misplayed note, “Jazz.” (Wait for nervous laughter.) With apologies to jazz artists, that’s a tired old joke. It ranks up there with the banal quip, “Close enough for folk.” Now that I’m a tired old joke, (as well as close enough for folk), I’m coming clean. Many of my finest flights of improvisational fancy were frantic searches for *any* notes that might suit an instrumental run. I could hide behind shades, but, even stoned, waltz do not abysm make (... nor iron bars John Cage?). Don’t let the banjo I purchased during the Vietnam War fool you. I play for what music teaches *me*. I thought I needed one as my Draft Board neared my Selective Service number. Over the years, musical friends have taken time to impart pointers and teach me about songs and instruments. My teaching forte nowadays is couched in the guise (and guile) of a geezer. Longevity gives one a measure of respectability and authority. So, when folks ask for a musical pointer, I point.

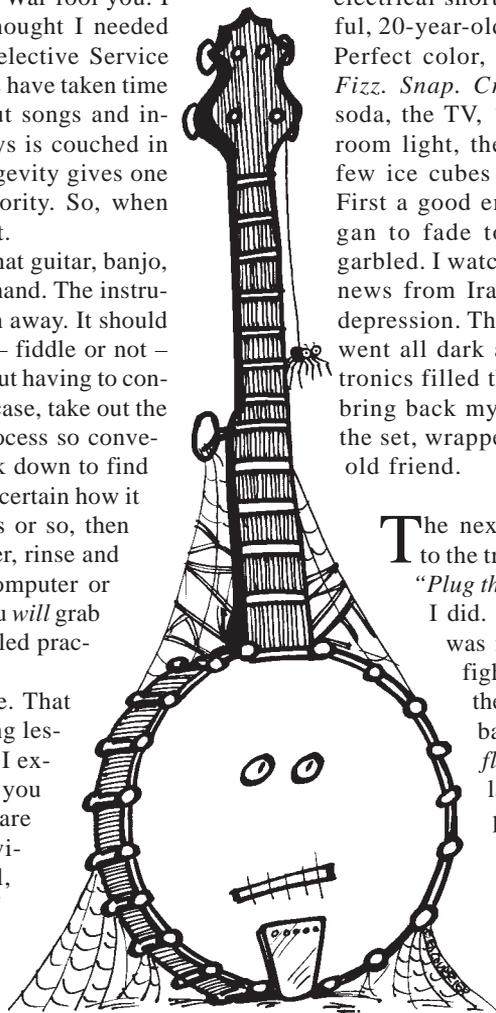
The advice I impart is basic. Keep that guitar, banjo, mando-glockenspiel or fiddle close at hand. The instrument must always be just an easy reach away. It should take no effort to pick it up and fiddle – fiddle or not – almost without thought (certainly without having to consciously walk to another room, open a case, take out the instrument, tune it, etc.). Make the process so convenient and mindless that you might look down to find your guitar embraced in your arms, not certain how it got there. Noodle a bit, a few minutes or so, then put it aside until the next noodle. Lather, rinse and repeat. Whether next to your desk, computer or television set, if your guitar is handy, you *will* grab it. Wonder of wonders, these unscheduled practice sessions reap benefits.

As a lad, I hated *having* to practice. That hour-a-day thing. Once I stopped taking lessons, my playing improved. The more I explored, the more I wanted to explore. If you keep an instrument close at hand, you are *apt* to play it, perhaps during a television commercial, because it is, well, there. Nowadays, the abundance of TV ads might lead to you practicing more than an hour a day. I swear there are times I improve just *looking* at the

guitar, or holding it. Must be the neuronal connections growing between the mini-lessons and the cerebrum. There are exceptions. I have erred, and, perhaps, learned my lesson.

One recent night, I walked into a dark room holding a glass of ginger ale in one hand and my banjo in the other. Television time. I’d switch on the lights when I had a free hand. So, in the dark, I placed the glass of soda atop the television, then walked a few steps to prop the banjo against the wall. That being done, I endeavored to search for the floor lamp, motioning my hands from side to side to locate the lamp’s chain switch. Then ... I hit something. I heard the cup fall. An uneasy feeling came over me. I heard a fizz, then a crackle. Next, I noticed the aroma of electrical short-circuiting. Oh no, my lovely, faithful, 20-year-old, expensive NAD 13-inch television. Perfect color, faultless clarity, sound and service. *Fizz. Snap. Crackle, Zap.* What had I done? The soda, the TV, “*Oh, the humanity!*” I turned on the room light, then the television, as I swept away a few ice cubes from the vent at the top of the set. First a good enough picture, then fuzzy colors began to fade to black and white. The audio was garbled. I watched and listened as the flickering war news from Iraq segued to a drug company ad for depression. The screen paled, and finally, ironically, went all dark and silent. The smell of arcing electronics filled the air. I was numb. No lament would bring back my NAD. Get the picture? I unplugged the set, wrapped up the cord, and bid farewell to an old friend.

The next day, before carrying the television to the trash, a ghostly voice within me goaded, “*Plug the damn thing in, give me one more try.*” I did. Miracle of miracles, it turned on, and was now working perfectly. More news of fighting in the Middle East. I checked all the settings. Picked up my Vietnam era banjo and played “*Where have all the flowers gone?*” Lesson learned? Until last night, when I found myself about to park a glass of Cognac atop my television set. As George Santayana wrote in *The Life of Reason*, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” A wise banjo pleads, “*When will they ever learn? When will they ever learn?*”





RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

ROADS SCHOLAR

What a strange musical adventure, growing up in Folk Boomerville. No question, it's a neighborly place, where 60-year-olds term themselves, "middle aged," and all things are certified youthful – from hip-replacement surgery (for irreplaceable hippies) to little blue pills tucked beneath little blue pillows. Otherwise, Folk Boomers are devoted to their music. In Folk Boomerville we enjoy old timers, new timers, two-timers and egg timers. We may not have known every artist from before our day, but with recordings, publications and documentaries, plus a parade of ever-changing media readers, we know more than we knew.

Woody Guthrie was gone October 3, 1967, the start of my freshman year at Fairleigh Dickinson University. Others, too, were gone ... or in their prime, or aging, or just arising. I was beginning to pay attention to protest songs and folk music. But, as Pete Seeger reminded me, grade school and camp songbooks introduced my boomer contemporaries to a wealth of songs years earlier. As Pete noted, "The Weavers may have sung 'This Land Is Your Land,' but what really got the song around was getting it printed in some school songbooks in the early '50s – and it became a favorite with kids. By the '60s the whole country knew the song, and it had *NEVER* been on the 'Top 40.'" I remember singing folk songs in school; later on, a subscription to *Sing Out!*, and copies of *Broadside* helped fill in some gaps.

And, Lynda Kaminski comes to mind. She sat next to me in my FDU physics class. Some lectures seemed from Pluto. (Wait! *NOT* a planet, but now an *asteroid?* – blue book exam do over!) There would come a point, we'd grow numb focusing on esoteric formulae. We'd look at each other through a cloud of chalkboard dust, then, just start laughing. Lynda is still a lovely lady. Every time we meet, I catch her stifling that same laugh. Lynda is a person placed on the short list entitled, "Ones that got away." Perhaps part of the smile stems from one rainy night Christmas party date, me wearing a jacket and tie, she a velvet gown. As my 1960 Olds Super 88 turned the corner onto her block, my car's exhaust pipe broke and started scraping on the road. Sparks flew *that* night – all the way to her front walk. Her Dad told us to wait inside as he, in the heavy rain,

trussed up my car's broken pipe with wire and an orange juice can. He came back into the house soaked, telling us it was safe to go. *He* wasn't laughing.

Sometime before graduation, Lynda gave me the most significant gift I ever received. It was one that led me down a marvelous road, (sans exhaust pipe). It was an LP circa 1965, Judy Collins' *Fifth Album*. Why that album, I wonder? Those songs, and that voice. I *still* listen to the recording. "Pack Up Your Sorrows," "The Coming of the Roads," "So Early, Early in the Spring," "Thirsty Boots," "Mr. Tamborine Man," "Lord Gregory," "Early Morning Rain," "Carry It On," "In the Heat of the Summer" and more. Songs written by the likes of Bob Dylan, Richard Fariña, Billy Edd Wheeler, Gordon Lightfoot and Phil Ochs, plus Judy's scintillating performance at NYC's Town Hall. What a ride it has been. Or I guess in my case, what a *write* it has been.

I spoke to Judy a short while ago, about how she selected those songs. Then to complete the yin and yang of it, Billy Edd Wheeler told me about sending Judy his words and music, and going to hear Judy sing his composition, "The Coming of the Roads." How he barely had the money to buy a ticket to listen to *her* do *his* song in concert. Pretty nifty all these years later – coming full circle. If you read regularly, you know I've shared a bottle of Jack Daniel's with Willie Nelson, chatted with Tom Lehrer, enjoyed Artie Traum's friendship. I sat in Peter Yarrow's living room listening to PP&M deliver an intimate house concert; sat in on an after-concert, all-night jam in a motel room with David Bromberg, Roger McGuinn and Johnny and Phil Cunningham. I was mentored by Utah Phillips on how to brawl, order Wor Shu Duck, and emcee the Philadelphia Folk Festival (similar experiences). I pissed off dear Tom Paxton by sandbagging him at a topical songs workshop with a parody titled, "Tom Paxton on My Mind," I could go on ... and usually do. I'll be merciful. But, if not for that gifted LP, none of this would have come to pass. The world would have been different. For me anyway.

Novelist Marge Piercy observed, "Life is the first gift, love is the second, and understanding the third." Lynda's gift – all three. Was Ms. Kaminski prescient, clairvoyant? That knowing smile? Maybe *that's* the smile we both smile today. Judy's *Fifth Album* was one for the *coming of the roads*.



Illustration by Ed Courmer ©

“You have a perfectly lovely album here.
The songs are lovely and the variety
works beautifully. I love Roger Deitz.
I love these songs.
You will love them too.”

— Tom Paxton



Photo by Bob Yahn

Love Songs, Now and Then may be found at:

<www.cdbaby.com/cd/rogerdeitz>
<<http://rogerdeitz.com/cd-and-books/>>
digital downloads at cdbaby
and everywhere fine digits are sold.

Our Gift to the Folk Music Community

15 YEARS OF RAGTAG

Written by Roger Deitz & Illustrated by Ed Courrier

This collection of essays and columns, originally appearing in *Sing Out!* magazine between 1995 and 2010, was published in 2012 in paperback.

While print books remain, Ed and I have made the decision to share our collaboration of these 56 columns with our community in digital form.

This in tribute to Pete Seeger (May 3, 1919 - Jan. 27, 2014), and to *Sing Out!* magazine, founded in 1950 by Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Paul Robeson and others. *Sing Out!*, where editor Mark Moss encouraged me to write these columns and Ed to illustrate them.

Enjoy, and thank you for reading! Please share the links with your friends. — Roger Deitz, May 3, 2016

Roger Deitz Records: <<http://rogerdeitz.com/>>

RagTag page: <<http://singout.org/ragtag/>>

If you wish to contact the authors:

Roger Deitz, 127 Old Short Hills Road, #159
West Orange, NJ 07052

(Copyright holders retain all rights to the work's ownership.)



Mark Moss (left) with Pete Seeger and Roger Deitz accepting the People's Hall of Fame Award for *Sing Out!* magazine in 1995.
(City Lore)

**Your FIRST Resource for Folk, Roots
& World Music in North America!**

For information about *Sing Out!*, visit:

<www.singout.org>

JUST DRAWING
YOUR ATTENTION
TO MY BLOG ...



<http://courriertoons.wordpress.com>

ED COURRIER

COMMERCIAL ARTIST • CARTOONIST
PHOTOJOURNALIST

courriertoons@gmail.com

ROGER DEITZ

“... the Shakespeare of Sing Out! columnists ...”

— Billy Edd Wheeler

Sing Out! magazine columnist Roger Deitz, among the most knowledgeable folk music writers in the United States, is a familiar figure on the folk scene. For more than 40 years Deitz has contributed a wealth of columns, feature stories, and reviews to *Frets*, *Acoustic Guitar*, *Fast Folk*, *Billboard* and *Sing Out!* among others.

Deitz is primary author of the section on “New Jersey and Popular Music” for the *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*. Roger’s humor column “Rag-Tag” has graced the last page of *Sing Out!* magazine since 1995. Deitz is the author of *The Folk Music Chronicles*, a book of essays, articles, and short stories. He serves on the *Sing Out!* advisory board and is a founding member of The North American Folk Music and Dance Alliance (Folk Alliance International). Deitz was program director of New Jersey’s Closing Circle Coffeehouse, June Days Folk Festival, and The Folk Project’s Special Concert series.

Known for his acerbic wit and unique guitar style, Roger’s musical compositions have a traditional flavor that fit with other songs of the folk legacy. Since the early 1970s, Deitz has hosted and performed at venues of all sizes including many main stage appearances at the prestigious Philadelphia Folk Festival. Deitz was a regular guest on Happy and Artie Traum’s *Bring it on Home* public radio program on WAMC originating in Albany, New York. Roger is the recipient of the 2012 New Jersey Folk Festival’s Lifetime Achievement Award.

More information is available at <www.rogerdeitz.com>.



ED COURRIER

As *Sing Out!*’s art director from 1994-2012, Ed’s cartoons accompanied Roger’s “RagTag” column from the beginning. Courier’s freelance editorial cartoons have been published in various daily and weekly newspapers since 1973. In 2016, Ed was awarded a First Place Keystone Press Award in the Division 7 Graphic/Photo Illustration category for the third consecutive year. Follow his blog at: <<http://courriertoons.wordpress.com>>.

SING OUT CORPORATION

Founded in 1950, Sing Out Corporation is a not-for-profit tax-exempt organization formed to preserve the cultural diversity and heritage of all traditional folk musics; to support creators of new folk music from all countries and cultures; and to encourage the practice of folk music as a living phenomenon. You can learn more about *Sing Out!* at <www.singout.org>.