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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Samuel Ferrucci, chair of the Department of Music at University of New York at Cortland, writes “The first half of
the twentieth century could aptly be described as 'folk song void.' All the ingredients necessary for the creation, dissemination, and popularization of folk music had suddenly disappeared. It is his view that traditionalism was gone and that pride in one's job was replaced with desire to move up financially. Looking back on the Jazz Age, Fonzi emphasized that jazz was not a newer form of folk music, as many had suggested. Jazz, he explains, had a musical message while folk music told a story.

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

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

During the early '60s, many American youths, their attitudes and affiliations jolted by the beatniks, rejected the materialistic and fundamentalist spirituality of this country. While the beats advocated non-association, hard drug use and homosexuality as a supreme statement against the system, these folk music practitioners chose "a simple, uncomplicated life reminiscent of early rural America. There was a highly positive movement that heralded a return to group traditionalism." These youths had a message to spread and a method of group communication for doing it: the folk song and bootlegger. Many of the tunes were borrowed from tradition but the lyrics changed to those of a deeper meaning than "Skip To My Lou." Even the fact that the old songs were sung in that modern age was indicative of the reform sentiment of the movement. These contemporary topical compositions were known as protest folk songs and those people, mostly young, who were not appreciative of the finer points of materialism and nationalism, found a musical outlet. Rock and roll, which many in the establishment considered critical of society, was thought by the folk aficionados to be vapid teen-song. It was loud and raucous but the message was, for the most part, simply an invitation to enjoy the amenities of the culture, untrammeled by morality in some instances, to carve out a place where the elders dare not tread. It was the majority music of the youth.

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

He certainly was correct about the fleeting aspect of the folk revival. One could see that the commercialization and virtual dilution of folk music by such performers as The New Christy Minstrels, The Smothers Brothers, Judy Collins, and a host of others, would trouble jazz purists. Their music had always lost the popularity contest. And many in the folk field-fans and performers-had trouble with that American phenomena of promotion and mass packaging, particularly of a movement that spoke against materialism. But the spreading of the simple folk concept was
Method of group communication for the folk song and hootenanny. The tunes were borrowed from tradition but the lyrics changed to those of a new meaning than "Skip To My Lou." The fact that the old songs were sung that modern age was indicative of the sentiment of the movement. These temporary topical compositions were won as protest folk songs and those people, mostly young, who were not refugee of the finer points of the culture, was taught by the folk aficionados the folk song as a poem. It was loud and lust but the message was, for the most part, an invitation to enjoy the realities of the culture, untrammeled by the ambitions of other intellectuals.

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He certainly was correct about the ting aspect of the folk revival. One could that the commercialization and vulgarization of folk music by such performers as New Christy Minstrels, The Smothers Brothers, Judy Collins, and a host of others, had trouble jazz purists. Their music had lost the popularity contest. And in the folk field — fans and performers — had trouble with the American dream of promotion and massaging, particularly of a movement that is against materialism. But the adage of the simple folk concept was aided by these slick, opportunist practitioners, and the music of serious composers like Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs was brought before the public, performed by Peter, Paul and Mary and others. Indeed, the radio and other media brought the new emphasis on folk music to the public.

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

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

"I took him [Ginsberg] down there and he gave a reading. We went into the Salvation Army and Okie's [tavern]." Those were located on the same block. Ginsberg, on a tour of America in a VW Camper purchased through a $100 Guggenheim grant, also went into the Showboat Tavern, a place in southeast Wichita that featured well-scrambled folk singers. He wrote of his impressions of the land and people in the poem "Wichita Vortex Sutra," selections of which were published in the May 27, 1966, issue of Life.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mecham recalled listening to Barbara Kerr, a black performer. "It was in a place
called the New or Modern or something or
other. The owner committed suicide by
jumping off the Kellogg Bridge and hanging
himself. According to Mechem, the Eagle
published a graphic photo which caused a
stir at the time.

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

"My major contact with folk music was
at house parties. There was music all night
long. Every time we were at a party they
would start up a folk song and it would just
last forever." The gatherings were cultural
events, reaffirmations of scope and direction
for Wichitans artists and liberal idealists.

"We didn't read too much poetry at parties.
Every party would degenerate into folk
singing. We never sat on chairs. We always
sat on the floor."

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

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

Jed Crossen is one of Wichita's folk
practitioners. He first performed in
Lawrence, when a student at Kansas
University in the early '60s, at an open mike
at the Gaslight tavern. "I was playing
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Crossen did not play protest folk. "I
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His instrument was a Martin acoustic
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"I got to know Rosalea Yoder, who
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Crossen, along with his late wife, the
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Clossen recalls sharing the Blackout stage over the course of an evening with Harry Welborn, and Daddy Lee on electric piano. Both men were in their twenties and were WSU students who worked at the tavern. Welborn, who was from West Virginia, played guitar and mandolin, and was perhaps the most influential folk performer in the city during that time. In addition to bringing the authentic Appalachian music to the Midwest, he was also a fiction writer who served as editor of WSU's literary magazine, *Midknight.*

"In 1957 Moody [Connell] had a big party. It started at a wrestling gymnasium around Central and Hydraulic and it turned into a floating four-day party. We ended up at a sand pit somewhere.

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

Musician Barbara Kerr recalled her introduction to Wichita folk singing. "The Grow family used to have houseparties at the house on Lorraine. I was probably the only black that was into that. I went to Frisco in '64 and was a folk singing hippie. I played the 1 and Thon and other clubs. I was there for ten years and had a houseboat in Sausalito, and lived for a time in Haight Ashbury."

Classically trained in voice and viola, Kerr was influenced by Joan Baez and Joni Mitchell. Her first visit to a coffee house was at the 1st and Lorraine. "This was in the late '60s.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES


3. Ibid., 229.

4. Ibid., 230.


6. Ibid.