

Phil Ochs: American Troubadour

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He wasn't a very good guitar player. His voice was a bit on the homely side, and during high-profile gigs it would let him down altogether as stage fright and anxiety left him barely able to take the stage. He never had a hit single, his albums earned mixed reviews from critics, and his later-period concerts drew hostile responses from his audience. And yet, nearly 40 years since he began making the rounds of New York City folk clubs, Phil Ochs is still remembered because no one sang and lived the messages of his songs with more conviction than Phil Ochs. America also loves its tragic figures, and the continued interest in Phil and his music is in no small measure due to the fact that there are few figures in America's musical history more tragic than Phil Ochs.

The second of three children, Phil Ochs was born December 19, 1940 in El Paso, Texas. His father, Jacob Ochs, met his mother, Gertrude, while going to medical school in Edinburgh, Scotland. After bringing his new bride to the States once he completed his degree, Jacob was immediately drafted into the Army. When Phil was only 2 years old, his father was sent overseas as a medic. For Jacob, who had already exhibited erratic emotional behavior at home, witnessing first hand the horrific human toll of World War II was too much, and almost immediately upon his return two years later with an honorable medical discharge, he went away again. This time to a psychiatric hospital where for two more years he was treated for manic depression with drugs and shock therapy before being released to return to his family and hopes of a medical practice.

As a child Phil was a daydreamer, and began a lifelong love affair with the movies. He even kept a scrapbook with pictures of his favorite stars like John Wayne, Audie Murphy. By his mid-teens Phil had discovered the rock and roll of Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers, and especially Elvis Presley. He also loved country music and Phil began to follow music with the same obsessive zeal as he did the movies.

For someone who later wrote the song "I Ain't Marching Anymore," it is especially ironic that the 16-year Phil Ochs, at his own suggestion, packed his bags for Staunton Military Academy in Virginia. Actually, the strict, structured environment of military school was a positive experience for Phil, who gained confidence by taking up weightlifting and switched from glasses to contact lenses during his two years there.

After graduating from Staunton, Phil enrolled in Ohio State University. Phil began to flourish, and it was at this time that his political views and future career path began to form and take shape. These new directions were spurred on by Phil's new best friend and roommate, Jim Glover. Significantly, it was Glover who introduced Phil to the folk music of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and the Weavers, and it was with Jim and Jim's father that Phil would share many long, leftist political discussions. Phil also added another idol to worship on his shrine right next to Elvis, James Dean, and John Wayne: Fidel Castro. Phil had become an expert on Castro and the Cuban revolution, and soon he was writing articles for the Ohio State student newspaper, *The Lantern*, as an outlet

for his exploding political views. Before long, he was the most prolific writer for the paper and going into his senior year he was in serious contention to be the newspaper's editor-in-chief. But his outspoken political views were seen as too controversial, and the post went to a less talented, but more moderate candidate.

Meanwhile, Jim Glover began teaching Phil how to play the guitar, and soon the two of them began performing in local folk clubs, first as the Singing Socialists and later as the Sundowners. Their act was a combination of traditional folk songs and new songs that Phil was writing, largely inspired by scouring the newspaper for topics. As Phil later told *Broadside* magazine, "Every headline is a potential song."

A mere two months from graduation, and to his mother's dismay, Phil dropped out of Ohio State in 1962 to join countless others in pursuit of stardom in the folk clubs of New York City. Soon, his seemingly boundless energy made him a fixture at all the important clubs and hangouts in the folk scene, and he began to build a following of listeners who was drawn to his wit, thoughtful lyrics, and sincerity.

For Phil, his guitar playing and the song's tune were merely the vehicle for his words, and by 1963 Phil was writing songs at a frantic pace. Once when he was asked where he came up with ideas for songs he replied, "*Newsweek*, of course" and held up a copy of the latest issue. But it was Woody Guthrie that inspired a song that he once referred to as "the greatest song I'll ever write." "The Power and the Glory" is not as immediately hummable as Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land," nor does it have the Judeo-Christian mass appeal of "God Bless America". But whereas Irving Berlin's song sees America's greatness as divinely bestowed, Phil Ochs puts the responsibility for perpetuating its greatness squarely on the shoulders of its citizens. The "power" is the national ideals that we espouse, but to have the "glory" we must each be willing to act to uphold and preserve those ideals.

By 1964, Phil was one of the biggest stars in the New York City folk scene, and he drew the attention of Elektra Records, who signed him to a recording deal. His first album for the label was *All the News That's Fit to Sing*, a fitting take-off on the motto of the New York Times. 1964 also saw the release of Bob Dylan's *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, which drew jeers from folk purists who were dismayed at Dylan's retreat from topical songwriting in favor of more introspective and abstract numbers. With Dylan's abdication, the 1964 Newport Folk Festival saw purists ready to crown Phil Ochs as the new king of the protest song. *Broadside* magazine's Paul Wolfe announced that the festival "marked the emergence of Phil Ochs as the most important voice in the movement."

Phil touched on a wide range of topics in his songs during this period. He sang about labor unions in "Links on the Chain," the plight of migrant farm workers in "Bracero," the civil rights movement in "Too Many Martyrs" and the blistering anger of "Here's to the State of Mississippi," the Christian church in "The Canons of Christianity," and U.S. foreign intervention in "Cops of the World." For Phil there were no sacred cows. Even those with left-wing sympathies could not avoid being skewered by Phil's cutting wit in "Love Me, I'm a Liberal." Here, Phil again makes it clear that anything short of taking personal action is unacceptable. In one verse he sings: "I vote for the Democratic Party/They want the UN to be strong/I attend all the Pete Seeger concerts/He sure gets

me singing those songs/And I'll send all the money you ask for/But don't ask me to come on along/So love me, love me, love me, I'm a liberal."

But the live *Phil Ochs In Concert* album from 1966 also contained the first indications that Phil was feeling constrained by just writing topical songs. He was a staunch defender of Dylan's change in direction, and would soon embark on a similar path toward abstract writing himself. His breakthrough song in this vein was one that we heard earlier this morning: "Changes," his first non-political song. Indeed, many changes were afoot for Phil: he hired his younger brother, Michael, as his manager (Michael Ochs has since achieved notoriety for overseeing the largest popular music photo archive in the world); he signed a new recording deal with A&M Records; and he moved to Los Angeles to record his next album, the experimental *Pleasures of the Harbor*.

Fans and critics are polarized by *Pleasures of the Harbor*. While it contains some of the most beautiful melodies and poetic lyrics Phil would ever write, it also boasts ornate arrangements and production that in many cases overwhelm Phil's unsteady vocals. Most controversial is what many followers consider Phil's greatest song, the epic "Crucifixion." Michael Schumacher, in his biography of Phil Ochs, *There But For Fortune*, describes the song as "the story of Jesus, an account of the life and death of John F. Kennedy, and a commentary on every heroic leader who had passed under the sun." Beautiful and harrowing, though at nearly nine minutes too long to play for you this morning, "Crucifixion" recounts the inevitable sacrifice of the Jesus/JFK central figure. In 1967 Phil Ochs had the opportunity to share a plane ride with Robert Kennedy. During their meeting, and lacking a guitar, Phil performed an a capella rendition of "Crucifixion" that brought the Senator to tears. Yet, the version that appears on *Pleasures of the Harbor* is a cacophony of electronic sounds and studio tricks that badly date the recording and, many argue, strip the song of its power. In later years Phil himself finally conceded that the studio version of "Crucifixion" was an unmitigated disaster.

By taking a new direction in his music, Phil hoped to reach a wider audience. Ironically, it was the one topical song on the album that nearly became Phil's first hit single. "Outside of a Small Circle of Friends" once again returns to the crime of inaction as its theme. The opening verse was inspired by the infamous story of a woman who was murdered on the streets in New York while neighbors ignored her pleas for help.

The single started strong in markets on the West Coast, especially in Seattle where it made the Top 10, but many radio stations refused to play the song because of the "smoking marijuana" line. A&M tried to appease radio by issuing an edited version of the song, but the necessary delay killed the song's momentum and the "Circle of Friends" single fizzled. And along with the single went the rest of the album. Although it wound up being Phil's best-selling album, *Pleasures of the Harbor* fell far short of reaching the mass audience its creator had hoped for. In addition, like Dylan before him, Phil Ochs had alienated his core following of folk purists, who attacked the album with a vengeance.

Partly as an effort to raise his stock with the left-wing, Phil associated himself with the Yippie movement of Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman. This association reached its horrific zenith during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Phil performed at the demonstrations held in Lincoln Park, near the convention hall. On his latest album, *Tape From California*, signs of cynicism made their way into his songs. As he witnessed

the Chicago police hurl tear-gas canisters and beat and kick demonstrators in a merciless show of force, that cynicism gave way to despair and hopelessness. In his mind, his efforts over the previous five years had been for nothing.

Chicago was a major turning point for Phil. Nowhere is this more succinctly illustrated than on the cover for his next album, *Rehearsals for Retirement*. It features a picture of a tombstone bearing the inscription: Phil Ochs, American, born: El Paso, Texas 1940, died: Chicago, Illinois 1968. The music inside, though some of his strongest and most beautiful, was full of personal and political despair, lacking the humor and hope that were regular components of his earlier work. Phil was beginning to drink heavily around this time, prompting erratic and belligerent behavior.

But his biographer, Michael Schumacher, writes about even more troubling signs in Phil's mental state from this period:

"Phil began to display, for the first time in his life, indications that he might have inherited his father's manic depression. For the moment, the signals were so subtle that neither friends nor family would take much notice of them, but, in hindsight, there is little doubting that the Convention triggered the manifestation of an affliction that would torment Phil for the remainder of his life."

In 1970, Phil's next obsession threatened to destroy what was left of his career altogether. His concept drew upon two of his biggest idols by combining the rock 'n' roll glamour and mass appeal of Elvis Presley with the revolutionary ideals of Che Guevara to try to bring about change. To the dismay of his manager-brother and his record company, he titled his next album of all-new material *Phil Ochs Greatest Hits*, a spoof on the fact that he had, of course, never had a hit. The cover depicted Phil on stage in a spotlight, holding an electric guitar, and wearing a gold lamé suit made by Elvis's own tailor. Phil could still deliver the goods musically, but for someone who used to be able to churn out new songs virtually at will, writing was becoming a laborious process. The most prophetic song on *Greatest Hits* was about writer's block, the haunting "No More Songs." Though not intended to be at time, it ended up being the last track on the last studio album Phil would release.

Phil had even grander ideas for the tour to support the *Greatest Hits* album. Appearing on stage with a full band, and wearing his gold lamé suit, Phil's set list would combine many of his best-known songs with cover versions of his boyhood country and rock & roll favorites, including medleys of Elvis and Buddy Holly hits. His fans' hostile reaction to his new approach was documented on the live album *Gunfight at Carnegie Hall*, where you can hear Phil's ongoing battle to win over the crowd. The troubled tour was cut short, leaving Phil in a state of limbo. Apparently deserted by his muse and by his audience, he was convinced his career was over.

Phil stumbled through the first half of the 1970s with little direction; traveling widely to see first hand the political situations in other countries, drinking more heavily, slipping further into depression, and seriously entertaining thoughts of suicide. He played the occasional concert, but though he hated the idea of becoming an oldies act, he was seemingly incapable of writing any new material. A further blow came in September 1973: while traveling in Africa he was mugged and strangled by two assailants. Though he survived, the attack ruptured his vocal chords, robbing him of the upper register of his

singing voice. Despite the setback, Phil still managed to stage two events that briefly helped him to recapture the glory of his earlier career: first, in November 1973, he staged a tribute-slash-benefit concert at Madison Square Garden for Salvadore Allende, the communist Chilean leader who was killed in a CIA-backed overthrow of his government. The concert became a sell-out once Bob Dylan agreed at the 11th hour to play at the show as a favor to his old friend. The second event was a "War Is Over" rally in May 1975 to celebrate the negotiated end to the Vietnam War. Phil's efforts were rewarded, when over 100,000 people filled a portion of Central Park for the event. These triumphs were short-lived. Though Phil had been able to rally enough to throw himself into the planning of these events with his old manic energy, once they were over he slipped back into a cycle of heavy drinking and depression. But the strangest chapter of Phil's story was yet to come.

In the summer of 1975, a bizarre alter ego he called John Butler Train replaced the artist formerly known as Phil Ochs. Like a monstrous Mr. Hyde to Phil Ochs' Dr. Jekyll, John Train rampaged across both the east and west coasts, leaving a trail of mayhem and damaged friendships in his wake. Though suicidal at times, to this point Phil could not yet bring himself to finish the deed. Instead, he had John Train do it for him. As Train, he insisted that he had murdered Phil Ochs, saying in an interview, "The reason I killed him was he was some kind of genius but he drank too much and was becoming a boring old fart. For the good of societies, public and secret, he needed to be gotten rid of."

Biographer Michael Schumacher explains the "death" of Phil Ochs this way, "Becoming a martyr at the hands of John Train assured Phil of the status of having a heroic figure in the minds of the 'public' society that admired his activism, and ended his harassment by the 'private' societies (i.e., the FBI, CIA, Mafia, etc.) that wanted him silenced." As John Train, Phil's drinking was out of control, he was abusive to strangers and friends alike, and as the delusion progressed he became a danger to himself and others. He had numerous scrapes with the law, and with each arrest his brother Michael hoped Phil would be placed under psychiatric care, but each time a contrite John Train would get the charges dropped. Friends pleaded with him to get professional help, but their pleas were always ignored. Finally, come the Fall, after being passed over to participate in Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Review tour, John Train realized that he was a failure, just as Phil Ochs had been. As quickly as he had appeared, John Train was gone, leaving behind only the shell of the man who used to be Phil Ochs.

Completely deflated, convinced that he had permanently destroyed his relationships with friends during the John Train episode, and certain that he had nothing more of worth to offer the world as an artist, he had just enough resolve for one final action. On April 9, 1976, in the bathroom of his sister's house in Queens, Phil Ochs hung himself. He thought that he was little more than an artifact from an earlier time. He had no idea how, 25 years later, he would be so sorely missed.