

# Ex-Byrd plays Swallow Hill Saturday

By Peter Jones  
Staff Writer

Roger McGuinn has come full circle so many times he must be getting dizzy. The Byrds founder has variously flown the heights of rock stardom and the low altitudes of playing for less than a dozen people in a Denver hotel's cabaret — wearing a tuxedo.

Raised in a rock 'n' roll nest, McGuinn switched to folk music before hatching folk rock, flying south for country twang, reflapping his traditional folkie wings and landing back on to the pop charts for a final approach into rock stardom and radio airplay.

The Byrds, themselves, went through more members than an average frequent-flyer club, then regrouped the originals for the last album, which, appropriately, opened with a song called "Full Circle."

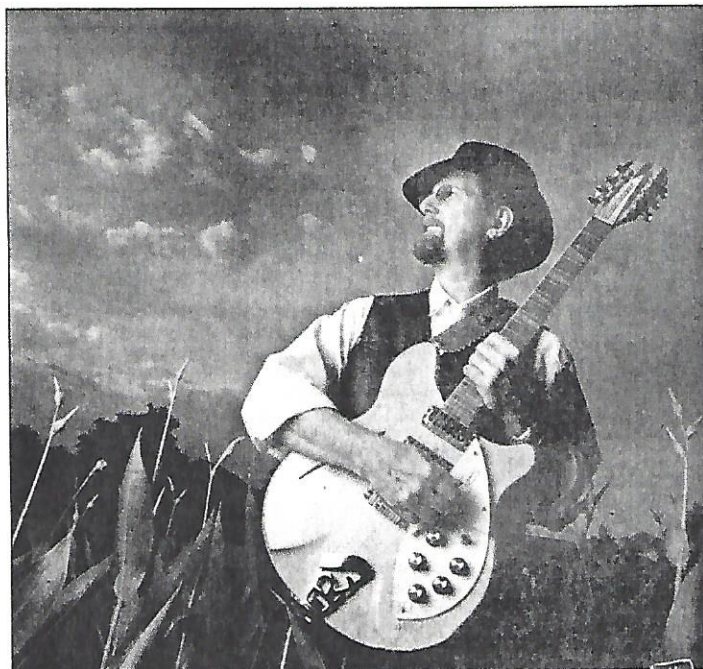
Today, McGuinn strums many of the same public-domain songs he played at age 20 in Greenwich Village folk clubs. He has recorded one a month since 1995 and offers free downloads of the songs on his Web site. In November, he will release a boxed set of 100 selections from his so-named Folk Den project.

"I started out of concern that folk music was becoming so generic that people thought it meant Sheryl Crow or Jewel or something," the ex-Byrd explained. "I wanted to preserve the traditional side of folk music, which I felt was getting lost in the shuffle."

True enough, when was the last time your CD-changer resuscitated "When the Saints Go Marching In"?

Shuffle-in "Limited Edition," McGuinn's latest CD and it could happen. Although he plugged-in his 12-string Rickenbacker for this album, the guitarist managed to revisit "The Saints," "Shenandoah" and other chestnuts from the well-worn American folk songbook. It has, indeed, been a frightening prospect for some rock 'n' roll listeners.

"In a review on Amazon.com, some guy bought the CD and he saw the track list and he threw it on his desk for two weeks," McGuinn said with slight amusement. "He didn't want to listen to it because of the corny songs, he thought, but



COURTESY PHOTO BY JOHN CHASSON

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then he listened to it and he liked it."

Curious skeptics will have the same opportunity Sept. 24 at Swallow Hill, 71 E. Yale Ave., where the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee plays a mix of traditional folk, new material and rock classics.

"I feel like (Byrds songs) have passed from pop music into a sort of classic form, where I can do them as sort of folk music (now)," McGuinn said.

Still, he promises to have more than a banjo on his knee. He plays his electric Rickenbacker to sing like a Byrd on "Mr. Tambourine Man" and "Turn, Turn, Turn," a true oldie — the lyrics, as adapted by Pete Seeger, were culled from the Old Testament.

The number-one hit was a fitting track for folk players more accustomed to sea chanteys than three-chord garage rock. McGuinn had played with Denver native Judy Collins and the Lime-lighters, among others. Chris Hillman had been a studied bluegrass picker. Singer Gene Clark had recently fled the

clean-cut New Christy Minstrels — not exactly a training ground for gritty arena rock.

"I had become disenchanted with folk music," McGuinn said. "I would blame it on the 'Hootenanny' (TV) show and the commercialization of folk. It got boring to the point that nobody wanted to listen to it anymore, and we gave it shot in the arm with electric guitars."

The Beatles were what convinced the Byrds to clip their folk music wings and challenge convention. McGuinn (then known as Jim) began dropping hints — and jaws — by playing acoustic versions of "I Want to Hold Your Hand" in folk clubs where pop music was a sin punishable by luke-warm finger-snapping, if not social ridicule.

"My folk friends, like John Phillips — I'd show him what I was into and he thought it was bubble gum. He didn't want to touch it," McGuinn said of the future Mamas and the Papas leader.

McGuinn, the perceived Byrdbrain, got the last laugh, though — when Phillips ate

crow with his hit take on the Beatles' "I Call Your Name."

"(The Beatles) were incorporating elements of folk into their rock," the Byrds founder explained. "I think they were doing it subconsciously. They had been in a skiffle band prior to that, so I'm sure they learned a lot of these folk music chords."

The Beatles returned the nod when George Harrison used the Byrds' version of "Bells of Rhymney" as the blueprint for the jingly "If I Needed Someone" on the folk-rock influenced "Rubber Soul" album.

McGuinn offers his own version of the song on his latest CD.

With the departure of Clark (the Byrd had a fear of flying) and David Crosby — and the addition of retro-hill-billy Gram Parsons — the Byrds went country, culminat-

ing in 1968's "Sweetheart of the Rodeo."

As original Byrds flew the coop, McGuinn (who oddly became 'Roger' after a brief conversion to the Subud faith), carried on with a revolving door of new musicians. By the time the Byrds closed shop in 1973, the band had not only planted seeds for the folk rock and country rock genres, but had begot a diaspora of ex-Byrds who spread their wings into bands like Crosby, Stills and Nash, the Flying Burrito Brothers, the Desert Rose Band and Boulder's Firefall.

McGuinn took a long, low profile solo flight until "Back From Rio," his 1991 comeback album that saw him dueting with Tom Petty and receiving his most consistent radio airplay since McGuinn, Clark and Hillman reunited in the late 1970s for "Don't You Write Her Off."

"It wasn't much fun," McGuinn said of his "Back From Rio" experience. "It was a lot of work, traveling around in a bus with a bunch of guys, and the publicity machine they put you through — it's like a meat grinder. You get up at 5 a.m. and you do interviews all day."

In short, McGuinn realized — to paraphrase a Byrds hit — he didn't want to be a rock 'n' roll star, much less a proponent of the Byrds of a feather flocking together again. They reunited for a few projects in the early 1990s and enough is enough, he thinks.

"David's been after me for the last 10 years (to do a reunion)," McGuinn said. "It would be a bunch of old guys out there trying to recapture their glory days. It just strikes me as a little pathetic."

Self-releasing his own low-key albums and playing modest solo acoustic gigs are just fine for this 63-year-old born-again folk singer.

"I think it's more dignified at this age," he said.

This Byrd has flown — to quote his favorite "folk-rock" group.

