

life Music

Tom Paxton, folk music survivor

By Peter Jones

Tom Paxton is happy being a one-man show.

In the late 1960s when many of his contemporaries were transitioning to folk-rock or embellishing their sound with fancy production and chamber pop, Paxton started... well, embellishing his sound with fancy production and chamber pop.

But not for long.

The urge to plug in his guitar amidst chorale singers was fleeting, Paxton says, kind of like a bout with gas. Sure enough, by the mid-1970s he was back to his acoustic tricks and had fully abandoned his short-lived venture into pop music.

He never looks back, except when someone asks him to.

"I don't disdain that kind of stuff at all," Paxton said of 1960s' pop-rock music. "I think Bob [Dylan] made exactly the right decision for himself. But my earliest favorite was Burl Ives, and then I found Pete [Seeger] and Woody [Guthrie]. That's not only where my heart is, but it's where my talent is."

Paxton may have paid a price for being a steadfast troubadour. Although the singer-songwriter has never seen wide commercial success, some of his songs... "The Last Thing on My Mind," "Ramblin' Boy" and "The Marvelous Toy," to name a few... have gradually drifted into the nation's folk canon.

Further, his wide-ranging material has been covered by hundreds of *genre*-sweeping

'We got along like thieves.'

artists, from Johnny Cash and Judy Collins to Bobby Darin, the Pogues, the Spinners, and even Tiny Tim, who put his distinctive mark on the bittersweet ballad "I Can't Help But Wonder (Where I'm Bound)."

"It's very touching for me to hear that," Paxton said of Tiny's rendition. "He really cared about music and he did the best he could with whatever he did."

While Paxton never experienced the pop-culture frenzy of getting married on "The Tonight Show," the 75-year-old musician has maintained a forever-loyal audience that has always been eager to hear his classics, new songs, and musical quips on current events.

Being a folk music survivor for a half century is itself a notable accomplishment, especially in a music industry that has tried to convert, neutralize and occasionally retroactively deify many of its folk music heroes.

Unlike other 1960s' folk-boomers who retired, changed styles or joined the oldies circuit, Paxton has been content to keep his gaze forward, remaining on a small label and steadfastly controlling his own career. His busy touring schedule is only

matched by the new territory he has explored in an endless 50-year stream of recordings.

Paxton does not miss a beat... anymore than a folksinger can... when asked about his busy, but decidedly low-profile career.

"To be totally candid, I don't think I would have been commercially successful, even if I had made an all-out effort," he said. "I don't think I'm that kind of artist."

On Jan. 12 Paxton will play a mix of new and old, popular and esoteric, and even a few hits, at the Swallow Hill Music Association, 71 E. Yale.

Born in Chicago in 1937, Paxton took a circuitous route to the New York folk scene via the Army. While stationed at Fort Dix in 1960, he spent his furloughs in the folk clubs of Greenwich Village. Armed with obvious talent and a quick wit, he quickly fell in with the likes of Dylan and Phil Ochs, among others.

"We got along like thieves," Paxton said.

His style was an amalgam of American folk influence, from Guthrie to Mississippi John Hurt. His early albums fused timely political protest with timeless love ballads and were a veritable overview of musical tradition, from ballads and talkin' blues to labor songs, rag-time and biting social commentary.

While such ballads as "Leaving London" and "My Lady's a Wild Flying Dove" would confirm Paxton's softer, romantic side, he was equally adept at satire and topical commentary in "The Willing Conscript" and "Lyndon Johnson Told the Nation," a song that seamlessly fused anger and pathos with a disarming sense of humor.

The influences on Paxton's more biting edge ranged from musical satirist Tom Lehrer to the 18th century writer Jonathan Swift.

"Swift's *The Modest Proposal* was very funny and absolutely savage in its excoriation of British policy at the time," Paxton said. "Satire is something where you don't want to leave the gloves on. You want to draw blood."

During his heyday he would aim his poison pen at subjects ranging from the Watergate scandal and Vietnam to post-mortem excess at Forest Lawn cemetery.

"I have certainly done myself no favors in commercial circles by some of the stuff I've written, but they seemed like songs that needed writing," he said.



PHOTO BY LINDA DAVIDSON, THE WASHINGTON POST
HE NEVER LOOKS BACK, except when someone asks him to.

Although Paxton's record sales were often lukewarm, he could hold a live audience in the palm of his hand. In 1969 at the Isle of Wight Pop Festival, where Dylan made his controversial post-motorcycle-accident "comeback," Paxton performed a legendary set that became an inescapable chapter in his biography.

After 18 hours of rock acts... the Who, Joe Cocker and others... Paxton bravely walked onto the stage, all alone, his acoustic guitar in tow. Although he had expected little more than polite applause at best, the singer's humor, unflinching melodies and poetic introspection were evidently just what the audience of 150,000 needed.

The emcee, an "official Cockney bastard" to hear Paxton tell it, had sneeringly told the folksinger not to anticipate an encore, but in a jolt of poetic justice, as the singer was backstage putting away his guitar, the audience screamed for more.

The "Cockney bastard" ran backstage: "You better come and do another song!"

That encore, "Talkin' Vietnam Potluck Blues," had the crowd in hysterics.

"They really went crazy," Paxton recalled. "I was back putting my guitar away [again] and [the "Cockney bastard"] says, 'You better come back!' So I went back. It was a once-in-a-lifetime-

type deal."

Paxton continued to be a concert draw, albeit on a smaller scale. After years on Elektra and other major labels, including a few short visits to the album charts, the singer began recording for smaller labels, where he has clearly been most comfortable.

"Completely. I'm really happy with this period of my life," he said.

His later-period work has run the gamut, from material on love and aging to "short shelf-life" songs about everything from Sarah Palin to Rubik's cubes.

In 2009, he received a Lifetime Achievement Grammy.

In later years, Paxton was diagnosed and treated for depression and attention-deficit disorder, topics that have yet to be immortalized in his diverse canon.

But give it time, especially when it comes to the comic potential of ADD.

"You're right," Paxton said with a laugh at the end of a 30-minute interview. "You've given me an idea: a song where the subject has to change with every line. There's an idea."

Tom Paxton will perform Jan. 12 at Swallow Hill Music Association, 71 E. Yale Ave. For more information, visit swallowhillmusic.org or tom-paxton.com. Contact Peter Jones at pjoneslifemusic@aol.com.

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