IN THEIR OWN WORDS

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This book is dedicated to:
"Mom, The Gang, and My Baby"

quickly taken into the mainstream of American life. This clean image of fireside folksinging, however, the camp-counselor-good-kid-college-youth (how come you never hear about the *good* teen-agers—because they never *do* anything), was nowhere near what real contemporary writing was all about.

The goody-goody folksingers (and their prematurely mature followers) never saw beyond their ivory towers into the street. One of the few to escape the stigma was Peter, Paul, and Mary. In fact, Peter Yarrow's "The Great Mandalla" stands as one of the best works of the era. Much later, even parents would suspect that there was something happening . . . and it had nothing to do with them.

PHIL OCHS

For a long period of time in Greenwich Village, Phil Ochs served as a sort of town crier. Each month at the Sunday Songwriters Workshop held at the Village Gate, crowds of expectant fans lined up to wait for another batch of Ochs' originals, and each month a new edition of instant current events analysis in song form would issue from him. The first and foremost of our protest singers and a fixture at rallies, marches, conventions, and all significant social happenings of the entire decade, Phil Ochs carved a place for himself with his seemingly endless series of epic songs—complicated, stirring, and deftly rhymed.

Today, looking back at his songs, we can see some of the same problems still facing us. They are a grim reminder of what the sixties in this country were all about and at the same time point up the changing sensibilities of the seventies. Certainly, among all the new songwriters, there is no new Phil Ochs to be found, unless of course it is the old Phil Ochs, who periodically shows signs of staging a verbal return to the fields of battle.

The interview with the verbose Mr. Ochs took place in the offices of A&M Records in New York City.

"I didn't even think about being a writer, it didn't cross my mind until about 1960. I was down in Florida and I was arrested for vagrancy. I spent fifteen days in jail and somewhere during the course of those fifteen days I decided to become a writer. My primary thought was journalism. I'd been to college for two years and I didn't have a major, so in a flash I decided —I'll be a writer, and I'll major in journalism.

"This was the period when folk music was on the rise, when John Kennedy had just come in and Fidel Castro had just come in. Those forces just sort of took me over. I mean Kennedy got me superficially interested in politics, and Castro got me into serious politics, socialism, and anti-imperialism. He became the teacher of anti-imperialism of that time period by surviving. And at the same time I started writing songs—I'll never know why, but out they came.

"There were a couple of little ditties I wrote in jail, but they aren't anything. The first regular song was called, 'The Ballad Of The Cuban Invasion.' Those early songs were all sort of political—about Freedom Riders, Billy Sol Estes, the AMA. They just came out, no effort, no strain, absolutely no training, just bang-o—songs—one after another, and it lasted from 1961 to 1970.

"At school my roommate was Jim Glover of Jim and Jean. He gave me a few guitar chords and that week I wrote a song. It was the impulse of journalism—you know, you've got to get that story in. The infatuation with folk music and fifties rock, the newness of politics . . . all fused in my first songs. In school I had my own paper called *The Word,* which was a very radical paper, which is where I saw the fundamental weakness of journalism. I had an editorial saying, at the peak of the anti-Castro hysteria, that Fidel Castro is perhaps the greatest man

that this century has produced in the Western Hemisphere. And this caused a giant storm, and I was taken off political stories in the local newspaper. So I saw the way bureaucracy censors people. At the same time I went to a journalism fraternity meeting where I saw the same people that sacked me swearing an oath of allegience to Truth. I had one of my first impulses to murder, which I still haven't lost.

"I would sing the songs for Jim right away. I sang with him for six months in a group called the Sundowners. Sort of Bud and Travis stuff, early Seals and Crofts. He loved the songs. After we both quit school we split up. I got a job in a club called Farrager's in Cleveland, which was good training, considering that I'd only been playing a half a year. To go public with new songs at a point when new songs weren't fashionable, before Dylan had entered the scene, was a very tough experience. So I was opening act to a lot of really good people like Judy Henske, the Smothers Brothers. Bob Gibson was a big influence on me musically. So I quickly gained the professionalism onstage. I was thrown to the wolves when I came out. I did my early political songs and a couple of, say, Kingston Trio things thrown in."

From there Phil journeyed east.

"Everybody said go to New York and I figured, well New York is the tiger's den, I can't go up against those pros. But I went to New York and right away I met Dylan and I said, 'Oh my God, this is the guy!' As soon as I heard him sing his first song I flipped out. And of course there were also a good ten or fifteen other people around who wrote songs. At that time songwriting was still unfashionable—I mean it was still the euphoria of ethnic folk or commercial folk. Folk being defined by age, songwriting being defined as pretense. You can't write a folk song, that argument. You can't use it for propaganda. You can't use folk music for politics was also a side argument. The breakthrough was Newport sixty-three with the Freedom Sing-

ers, Dylan, Baez, the songwriter's workshop, where it suddenly became the thing. It moved from the background into the foreground in just one weekend.

"After that I got an album out and I was completely prolific; I was writing all the time. Quickly followed by another album, followed by a concert.

"My thought throughout this whole time period was, all right, here we have the form of a song, how important can a song be? Can it rival a play? Can it rival a movie? Can it make a statement that's as deep as a book? And by making a simple point can it reach more people than a book ever can? That was always in the back of my mind. And I was completely political, as I still am, and I thought, being a socialist, what political effect can these songs have? I saw it with my own eyes; I sang the songs, they came through me, and I saw they had a political effect on the audience.

"Like I was writing about Vietnam in 1962, way before the first anti-war marches. I was writing about it at a point where the media were really full of shit, where they were just turning the other way as Vietnam was being built. It was clear to me and some others—I. F. Stone—but *The New York Times,* CBS, Walter Cronkite, and all those other so-called progressive forces chose to look the other way for several years before they decided it had gone too far. But it had already gone too far back then. People had seen the handwriting on the wall.

"So my songs served that function. Everything I wrote was on instinct. There was some sort of psychic force at work in those songs and I don't know what it was. It's a strange way of giving birth; ideas giving birth in song form. And when the songs came they came fast. I don't think I ever spent more than two hours on any one song. Even 'Crucifixion' was done in two hours.

"That period in the Village was incredibly exciting, supereuphoric. There was total creativity on the part of a great number of individuals that laid the bedrock for the next ten

years. But everything goes in cycles, everything has a life span and I guess this life span just ran out. Even though everyone from that period has sort of petered out, the important thing to bear in mind in terms of a whole life is, I mean you take a whole life, whether it's ten years or sixty years and say, what has this person done, what has he accomplished, if anything? He's now dead, what has he left behind him of value? And I think the people who made that contribution in the sixties can rest on that.

"Hopefully some will continue on, like Joni Mitchell is doing. But if they don't—like I mean Tim Hardin has made a major contribution and it doesn't matter if Tim Hardin ever leaves his house again, he's already done it. The big question mark is, where is the new generation? We're all waiting for them. But for whatever reasons they're not coming out yet. Jackson Browne, John Prine, Bruce Springsteen, Steve Goodman, they're all—I hate to be so crass—but they're all interesting possibilities. Nobody's gone over the line yet. You know, like that Joni Mitchell song, 'Carey,' I mean you can tell she went over the line with that. She left her ego behind and got into a fabulous song . . . and you can hear it in her songwriting, the sense of liberation she achieves. I don't think these other people have done it yet. They're all writing pleasant tunes, nice little words, but they're all derivative. To be considered a serious artist you've got to break new ground, to have people say '*he* did that, *she* did this' and it opens up and you can tell when it opens up; you can just feel it happen.

"I mean Joni Mitchell is the only one who seems to be developing like a true artist, like a painter or a sculptor, with serious long-range stuff, constant growth, constant activity, and I really admire her for that. Plus she's developing a fabulous singing style, also improving all the time. It's wonderful to see somebody who's able to grow in difficult times—God bless her.

"As far as music goes today I think we're in kind of a stalemate. Country music is probably in the forefront of all writing

at the moment. Merle Haggard, Charlie Rich, Dolly Parton, Jerry Lee Lewis, these are people whom I think are making the best music. I think it's very interesting that they've been able to survive and continue creating. I mean Jerry Lee Lewis is getting close to forty, and still he's putting out record after record.

"The old-time songwriters were more trained. The sixties were very instinctual and untrained and that's what's showing now, the lack of discipline and training as inspiration runs out. I mean a lot of these people are laymen; it was basically a layman's revolution. These people don't know much more about music than the average guy on the street.

"For me songwriting was easy from 1961 to 1966 and then it got more and more difficult. It could be alcohol; it could be the deterioration of the politics I was involved in. It could be a general deterioration of the country. Basically, me and the country were deteriorating simultaneously and that's probably why it stopped coming. Part of the problem was that there was never any pattern to my writing. The point of discipline is to create your own pattern so you can write, and I haven't done that. I always make plans to do that—I'm now thirty-three and I may or may not succeed. But ever since the late sixties that's constantly on my mind—discipline, training, get it together, clean up your act. I haven't been able to do it yet, but the impulse is as strong as ever. To my dying day I'll always think about the next possible song, even if it's twenty years from now. I'll never make the conscious decision to stop writing.

"But getting back to music today, I consider rock music basically dead, uninteresting, boring, repetitious, too loud, egomaniacal, ludricrous, and totally beside the point, and I can't be too strong about that. To me there's no point in having Ringo Starr put out 'You're Sixteen' with a great production job in back of him—which is not a tenth as good as Johnny Burnette's original. There's no point to it in terms of the importance of music."

In the seventies Phil Ochs has returned to his first interest, journalism.

"In 1973 I wrote six articles on weird little subjects, some Nixon political stuff, predicting the fall of Agnew and the fall of Nixon—that they both had to go, period. I did an article on Bruce Lee, the Chinese–American actor that died this year; an article on Mike Mazurky, an American character actor and wrestler; an article on Tom Reddin, police chief running for mayor in Los Angeles.

"The articles came out the same way. It was very painful to start it, but once I got started it flowed smoothly, and after I got done I was very happy with it. The next article would start out just as hard. My mind is like an engine in the middle of winter, it just won't start . . . then once in a while it catches on. I'm sure that's the story of my life. Things come in a flash, like the way I wrote songs. The same impulse that said there's a great song here would say there's a great story here.

"Also I've been traveling a lot. I go to a different country every year. In 1971 I went to South America, in 1972 I went to Australia and New Zealand and Southeast Asia. This year I went to Africa for three months. In Africa I wrote two songs. One side was translated into Swahili, the other into Lingala. The Swahili song concerns the life of the herdsman, the guy you see at the African roadside standing with a spear with the cows. The other is sort of a general freedom song based on a traditional melody."

I asked Phil if criticism had any affect on him.

"If I liked a song I had total confidence in it and it doesn't matter if people said it's a great song or a lousy song. Hysterical praise or hysterical attacks didn't affect me at all. It's always been between me and my songs, not about the critics, not about the public, not about sales or anything else. 'Crucifixion,' 'Changes,' 'I Ain't Marchin' Anymore,' 'There But For Fortune,' and a couple of songs I liked that the general public

didn't, such as 'I've Had Her,' 'Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and Me,' are my personal favorites.

"It's always been a question of will it stand the test of time? That was always one of the things in the very early days, before Dylan left politics, when he and I were writing political songs. There were two attacks: You can't write folk music, and you can't use folk music for propaganda. Besides it's topical and it'll be meaningless two years from then. And so to sing 'Small Circle Of Friends,' seven years later and still get the same response, gives the lie to that attack. Whether the audience is hearing it for the first or the fifteenth time it still holds up. It could be nostalgia for some people, but on the other hand, there's some essential truth locked up in that song, and it's locked up to a thirteen-year-old kid that hears it today for the first time. He responds to it because the truth is there. In a way it's more there than ever, than even when I wrote it.

"I'd just like to add that I never had anything against Dylan when he stopped writing political songs. In that controversy I was always completely on his side. The thing that's important about a writer is whether or not he's writing good stuff. It's not important if he's writing politics, leftwing, rightwing, or anything. Is it good, is it great, does it work? When Dylan made the switch I said he's writing as good or better. And when he made his *Highway 61* album I said, this is it, his apex; it's fantastic. But after his hiatus, when he came back and made his recent albums, at that point I couldn't go along with Dylan, because he'd reached his heights, and I couldn't accept what I considered lightweight stuff.

"But if you're writing a book on song lyrics I'd make a statement that Dylan was by far the best song lyricist that ever lived, and probably ever will live. He's in a class by himself."

I asked Phil where he was when rock 'n' roll broke out.

"I was going to military school in Virginia. I had no idea what I was going to be. I wasn't political; I wasn't musical. I was just an American nebbish, being formed by societal forces,

completely captivated by movies, the whole James Dean–Marlon Brando trip. I was about sixteen. My brother was heavy into rhythm and blues. I was into country and western music. I memorized all those songs, my music teacher being the radio. There was Webb Pierce, Ray Price, Johnny Cash, Faron Young. And then I really fell for the Elvis image.

"I recently came to the conclusion that Colonel Parker knows more about organizing America than Angela Davis or SDS. He understands the American mentality. In terms of changes in America you have to reach the working class, and to me Elvis Presley, in retrospect, is like a giant commercialization of the working class singer, also a true integrationist in terms of bringing black music and country music together, which is why his strength is so long-lasting. His gold suit was Parker's idea of the super-gross carnival treatment, a cheap icon of all America has to offer.

"That was part of the idea behind my *Greatest Hits* album, an idea which has yet to be consummated. I had another insight about it when I saw the truckers strike blocking the highways. The whole way they dealt with the truckers was to play them that country music. There are waves of restlessness sweeping through those kinds of people, which is why they find themselves in the awkward situation of being like the students they were hating five years ago. My most recent album *Gunfight at Carnegie Hall* is the companion piece to *Greatest Hits.* If you listen to both together, the whole thing makes sense, but neither one alone is quite complete."

Briefly, *Gunfight at Carnegie Hall* is a live album of a concert at which Phil Ochs appeared in a gold suit, encountering massive resistance from his audience.

"*Gunfight* is an explanation of why the gold suit. *Greatest Hits* was the germinal idea of that thing, which is fifties rock, primeval rock, done with lyrics that are addressed to real problems. The key songs would be 'My Kingdom For A Car,' or 'Gas Station Woman.' These songs were both in the direction

I wanted to head in that I was stymied by, but that I would hope to get back to. I mean 'Gas Station Woman' could be sung easily by Ray Price. 'Kingdom For A Car' could be done by Jerry Lee Lewis.

"I happened to meet Jack Clement, who produced all the Jerry Lee hits and is a Nashville shitkicker, and I laid a copy of *Greatest Hits* on him in Hollywood. He went back to Nashville and I was lying in bed in Hollywood and at three o'clock in the morning the phone rings and it's Jack Clement calling from Nashville. He says, 'Phil, I've been sitting here all night playing "My Kingdom For A Car." When I met you I had no idea you knew about this kind of stuff.' He talked for two hours and I don't know what he said, but he raved about the song and then he hung up.

"So, in other words, it contacted. It didn't contact with the public, but the record was worth doing just for the Jack Clement phone call. I was on the right road; I just haven't followed it up. But I'm still interested in that train of thought.

I asked him if there was a market on the top hundred for Phil Ochs' songs.

"I'm amazed that 'Changes' wasn't a hit. We've got about twenty recordings on it. Done by Roberta Flack or Anne Murray I'm sure it would be a number one song. 'There But For Fortune' was a hit, but it certainly wasn't written as one. Joan Baez just happened to pick it up and it caught on. I think 'Flower Lady' could catch at any time with the right group. At one time the Byrds were going to do it—that's another one of my disappointments. I think if they had done it, it could have been a hit.

"My favorite recording of one of my songs in Anita Bryant doing 'Power and Glory' on her patriotic record—it's unbelievable. She has an album out called *Mine Eyes Have Seen The Glory*—it's straight patriotic stuff. She does a version of 'Power and Glory' on it that's unbelievable, I mean really incredible. I think if a song has enough meaning it can survive anything."

BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE

Buffy came to prominence during the folk era, hoisted to underground approval on the virtue of her classic "Universal Soldier" and her first album of unique and disturbing songs, entitled *It's My Way*. Before long she was a Greenwich Village fixture, playing on bills with Phil Ochs, Eric Andersen, and Tom Paxton. She and Joni Mitchell were certainly the pioneering female songwriters of the decade.

Although some of her most deeply felt creations have related to her Cree Indian background ("Now That The Buffalo's Gone"), she has written of many other experiences—battles with drugs ("Cod'ine"), women's protest ("Babe In Arms"), personal freedom ("It's My Way"), and a new definition of romantic love ("Until It's Time For You To Go").

Back on the concert circuit in the seventies, after much time spent abroad, Buffy is now writing and singing . . . rock 'n' roll!

A natural artist and intuitive poet, Buffy Sainte-Marie is articulate as well as passionate on the subject of writing. The interview took place at a restaurant in Greenwich Village.

"I've always been an inventor and a creator of my own world, partly because of unavoidable isolation and partly because of solitude not imposed so much as chosen. I've always enjoyed being by myself and have also fallen into that kind of situation from the time when I was growing up to now, being on the road. The pattern of my life seems to be that I'm alone a lot.

"I don't sit down with a pencil and paper and write poems and songs and stories, but I always have poetic ideas and music going on in my head. It's like a constant radio station of my own. I hear the music and the words at the same time and I