

## From Richard Carlson... in Ohio.

Maybe it was the Depression, and how all the people had to pull together to get us out of it. Maybe it was the New Deal, and all those agencies planting trees, building dams, cleaning up towns, cities, the countryside, encouraging art, literature, music, theater, movies. Maybe it was uprooted people, from the Dust Bowl and lost jobs, traveling around, bumming around, looking all over this great land for a new home. Maybe it was whole families of folk music collectors and performers: the Seegers, the Lomaxes, the Carters. Maybe it was radio, broadcasting jazz and country from small towns, heard by producers passing through, who stopped and brought them to the big cities for us all to hear. Maybe it was Woody Guthrie, riding the rails, writing down and singing out what he saw. Maybe it was World War II, making us all get together again to fight Fascism. After all that there was such relief, we just had to celebrate ourselves.

So it was that we kids, just entering school in the mid and late nineteen forties, got taught folk music in our classes. In my small city in western New York, where Sicilians and Swedes shared each other's very different cultures in order to manufacture furniture, we didn't sing that stuff every day. A few classes had pianos and teachers who could play them, but most of the time we had to depend on just one itinerant music teacher who visited each of our half dozen neighborhood grade schools once a week. But when she came she taught us the great American cowboy and folk songs those families of collectors had found in the mountains and prairies. We developed a pride in being American by learning our heritage that way.

By the early 1950s, folk music had gained such popularity we heard it on the radio. You could hear live performances like the Grand Ol' Opry and big bands and jazz groups from Chicago and New York and New Orleans at night, when AM radio carried a long way. But there were records on the juke box too. Probably most popular of all was a singing and playing quartet called The Weavers. Their records were on Decca, and they had big arrangements, with dozens of violins and choral singers, of tunes we had sung in 3rd grade. Wow! On Top Of Old Smoky...and then one we hadn't heard before, called Good Night Irene. And around that time, I heard them sing another "new" song, which was called This Land Is Your Land...and I loved it so much I was overjoyed to learn some people even wanted it to replace our National Anthem.

But then when I was in 6th grade, some kind of trouble came...and it lasted through the rest of my public schooling, and The Weavers disappeared and folk singing stopped being heard widely. We learned that underneath all those happy songs of celebration, those singers actually were being unAmerican. There was an UnAmerican Activities Committee in our Congress, and they had investigated The Weavers and a lot of other movie stars and radio announcers and people like that. They found those people had been involved in "Red tactics" all this time and so, especially in the schools and on the public airwaves, they weren't allowed to be taught or heard or seen anywhere anymore.

On our new televisions, the investigating committees held their hearings in our living rooms every afternoon. They even replaced the soap operas! A famous broadcaster named Fulton Lewis Jr. sent his son to my hometown to investigate our school libraries. He went on the Mutual Network every evening to report his findings. We had some questionable John Steinbeck for kids to read. He said The Weavers didn't choose that name because they were sitting around knitting sweaters. He said The Weavers were a communist labor movement in Europe that tried to take over the factories. Our superintendent of schools, Dr. Carlyle Ring, the father of a school friend of mind, was forced to resign. He died shortly after that. Pete Seeger refused to testify, but did

offer to sing some songs to the Committee.

When I went off to college, I had met only one Democrat (that I knew of) in my whole life. He was Herbert Beckman, and had taught social studies in my high school. He admitted to me one day after school that he was a Democrat. I don't remember what we were talking about, but it may have been Harry Truman. I remember distinctly when he said it and how I felt. I admired Mr. Beckman but now he looked something like a creature from outer space. At the time I had no idea there were people in my own family who were Democrats...and the really Swedish ones were further to the Left than that! But many things were hidden in America now, not spoken about. "Under God" got added to the Pledge of Allegiance.

One day my freshman year at Bates College, way the heck up in Maine, I walked toward Parker Hall, where I was living, and to my astonishment I heard folk music playing from a little speaker a guy had pointed out the window of his room toward campus. Even more amazing, it was The Weavers...and they were singing alone, without the orchestra and chorus---and it was wonderful. Another time I went past that guy's room and Charlie Parker was playing in there. That did it, I had to find out who he was, and so I just walked in. I said, "I thought all you guys were squares in here!" The guy with the little record player looked up from his book and said disdainfully, "You sound like a square coming in here like that." And of course he was right.

It was 1958, and Fred was from Upper Manhattan. Paul, who didn't live in the room but was draped in a chair all the time, was from Greenwich Village. Nick was from the Boston area, and Gray was a kind of woodsman from the even further outer reaches of Maine. I was a hick from the sticks in the Midwest dairyland somewhere beyond the Appalachians. My limits and boundaries began to stretch and open up. A couple of years later we were picketing the local Woolworth's in Lewiston, Maine, because we heard the chain of variety stores had a policy of not serving black people at their lunch counters in the South. We began to attend rallies in Boston, and Pete Seeger was there leading us with folk songs, and Hubert Humphrey was there, and Steve Allen, and Erich Fromm got pelted with eggs.

Civil Rights, and the War Resisters League, the SANE nuclear committee, and Fair Play For Cuba, all came along in the early '60s. Rallies brought us a new generation of folk singers too. There was Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. Folk revival was in the air, and we heard the music again...and many new songs. Rock 'n roll became affected, and Dylan plugged in. We picketed John Kennedy's White House in the slushy winter of '62, and he sent out greetings and hot chocolate. By the late '60s and early '70s, young people were "dropping out," going back to the land to make their own folk music and babies, or heading to ashrams to clean out their heads. We and the music were losing our political edge.

With the end of Carter and the beginning of Reagan, we all went underground again. The glitz of Las Vegas and the Crystal Cathedral of Evangelicals took over. "Family Values" were advocated, and eventually Lawrence Welk appeared every week on National Public Television. America was all flat and cardboard once more. Ugly, scowling faces told us what to do. Eventually the Supreme Court decided a presidential election and we got a man who celebrated ignorance and decision-making from the gut. Football triumphed over baseball. Big box stores offered ultimate convenience---as long as you had a car to get to them...and even then people hated to walk the distance of the parking lots. Local shops and inner cities died. We declared war on terror. Guns and gasoline-power on road and off road are sacred. "Ease your finger off the trigger" to achieve universal peace seems an insane suggestion.

That line in the last sentence is part of a lyric to a new song I heard last weekend. Through the whole ghastly period of recent history I've just described, from my point of view, that tradition of

folk music and songs of social change has been carried on by "Woody's children," Arlo Guthrie being among the most visible from time to time. He and Pete Seeger even traveled and sang together sometimes. Most incredibly for a month or 2 in 1984, they even gathered Ronnie Gilbert, from the original Weavers, and another member of the new generation of singers, Holly Near, to form HARP and perform old and wonderful new songs here and there. In some ways HARP was just as wonderful as The Weavers, and certainly more so in that Pete and Ronnie passed on the tradition so visibly to Arlo and Holly. If you're curious about the group you may be glad to learn Holly Near recently reissued a glorious HARP concert in a double CD album, available on her own label. <http://www.hollynear.com/themusic.html>

Which brings me again to that song from last weekend. Four weeks ago Holly Near got the idea to gather a bunch of mostly new folk groups and individual singers that she knows about, and bring them "on their own dime" from all over the States to Ohio, from which many say the current election again may swing. A week ago Friday and last Sunday, my family got to see them here in Athens and over in Marietta, an hour to the east. I really was so preoccupied with other things I hadn't bothered to investigate Heather Cantino's announcement they were coming. Had tickets not fallen into my wife's lap, we might not even have gone. I learned Friday afternoon, the troupe was going to sing on a street corner in front of the county courthouse. I went down, spotted Holly at once, and got her to autograph my LP copy of the original HARP release. I didn't know anybody else among the group, but I liked the spirit.

Nothing could have prepared me for that rally Friday night, or for the quite different show Sunday afternoon! It was like hearing The Weavers again that afternoon in 1958. Joy stirred inside my body, and a song of hope came dancing out. My 17-year-old daughter was at work Friday night, so I made sure she was in the audience Sunday afternoon. She was jumping up and down and clapping her hands. Thankfully the torch got passed. Others have written now about the Sing Out The Vote Ohio tour, and I'll refer you to a couple of sites. Four of the songs, from the Columbus appearance, are at YouTube, and Holly is considering putting something together to release. Whatever happens Tuesday, songs of social change have happened here and will resonate through my being into my future and beyond...no matter what!