

FOLK FORWARD

How a sound born of tradition is thriving in the modern day

By Peter Cooper

It's the other "F" word. And like its more obscene counterpart, it means different things to different people in different contexts. In the 1950s, it was sweater-vested political subversives. Later, it was shape-shifting musical revolutionaries and introspective singer-songwriters. It has been used to describe troubadours who specialize in journalistic specificity, and others who tend toward poetic vagaries. It was then, it is now, and by all indications it ever shall be. The word is "folk."

More than country or rock or R&B, or most any genre (other than perhaps its cousin, bluegrass), folk music's instrumentation, intent and execution connect the latest commercial trends in a direct line to the sound's ancient architects. While at times over the decades folk has fought to be heard over the cacophony of the latest sonic trends, the music is now in popular bloom. Folk-associated acts such as Mumford & Sons, Bon Iver, Iron & Wine, the Civil Wars, Fleet Foxes and others are especially popular among the youth of today, just as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Judy Collins were a

Folk Alliance brings together players, fans, managers and bookers whose venues range from major clubs to private homes, with showcases running from early evening until the dawn. "You look around Folk Alliance and see older and younger generations," says Sarah Holbrook of SHEL, a Colorado-based, musically expansive quartet of sisters who classify their sound as folk-pop. "Folk music is different for everybody, in every part of the world. It's how folks feel about it. That's folk music."

UP, DOWN, UNDERGROUND

Folks seem to be feeling good about it lately though the music's influence and import has waxed and waned through the history of sound recordings. It's impossible to separate the classic 1920s and '30s recordings of the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers—now lumped into the "country" canon—from folk's traditions of acoustic instruments and sung stories. The Weavers and others revived interest in folk during the 1950s, but the ascent of Elvis Presley and rock 'n' roll pushed it into the background before the late-decade arrival of the Kingston Trio



Mumford & Sons

half-century ago. Rock giants like Bruce Springsteen are harnessing its primal power, and folk standard-bearers like Ani DiFranco are finding new relevance in its effectiveness as agitprop.

"The current state of folk music is the best it has been since the 1960s," says Louis Meyers, director of Folk Alliance International, an advocacy organization whose annual five-day conference draws thousands of folk musicians from around the world. "Maybe better than the '60s, because people of all ages are listening and the overall audience is more diverse and more dedicated than in the past."

'The state of folk music is the best it's been since the 1960s.'

—Louis Meyers

kick-started a folk boom. Legions of young fans sat cross-legged at festivals listening to sages such as Pete Seeger, who exemplified the fierce political edge of the genre. As a member of the Weavers he was called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities,

blacklisted and forced from radio playlists and television appearances.

The 1960s, of course, brought Bob Dylan, who began as an acolyte following the every word and gesture of fierce-minded heroes like '40s pioneer Woody Guthrie and Dylan's own unheralded New York contemporary Dave Van Ronk ("In Greenwich Village, Van Ronk was

the king of the street," Dylan writes). Like most folk artists of the day, Dylan began his songwriting career by setting new lyrics to traditional melodies—the Negro spiritual "No More Auction Block," for instance, was transformed into "Blowin' in the Wind." When he dared to begin formulating his own tunes, purists howled with outrage. Dylan, Baez and Collins came to exemplify a folk music that treated tradition as a springboard rather than a rulebook. "They were learning the traditional folk songs and then as writers adding their own take," explains Amy Speace, an acclaimed singer and songwriter who often tours as Collins' opening act.

Acts like the Byrds and Simon and Garfunkel dared to add electric instruments and rhythm sections,



Amy Speace

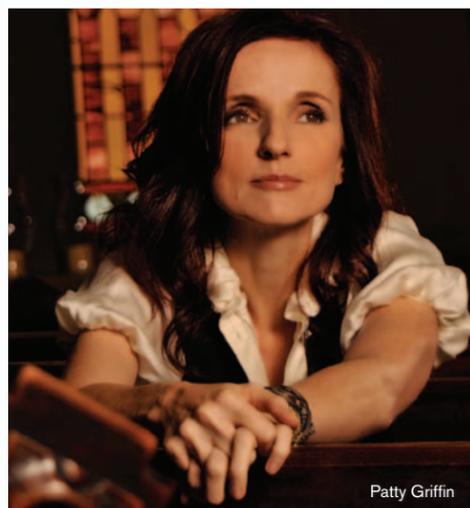
'With the internet, nothing goes unnoticed and there's no regionalism.'

—Otis Gibbs

creating the subgenre of "folk-rock" in the mid-'60s. Folk's big tent expanded further to include a wave of inward-looking 1970s singer-songwriters: Joni Mitchell, James Taylor, Loudon Wainwright III, Tom Rush and the like. But by the bigger-is-better 1980s the music's popular reach was shrinking. When Nanci Griffith sought to move to national stages with a sound influenced by Texas folk masters Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark and Eric Taylor, she repeatedly told interviewers that she hoped to remove the stigma that had grown to surround folk—only to be classified as a country artist instead.

By the late '80s, a roots renaissance was afoot. Suzanne Vega and Tracy Chapman scored radio hits armed with acoustic guitars, and folkies like Michelle Shocked found themselves sought out by major labels. Craggy-voiced troubadour Bill Morrissey led a New England-based mini-folk revival that would

grow to inspire John Gorka, Patty Griffin, Ellis Paul and many others. In New York, the "anti-folk" scene that included Cindy Lee Berryhill and future alt-rock figurehead Beck brought punk-rock elements into the mix. By the 1990s, folk established an essential, if impermanent, independence from the larger pop world. Greg Brown,



Patty Griffin

Garnet Rogers, John Gorka, Dar Williams and others found a folk circuit of listening rooms and festivals based on community, not corporations. It was, as author and performer Scott Alarik called it, "the modern folk underground."

In the new century, folk musicians' aspirations were largely of the grassroots variety. That meant the music was largely immune to corporate whims, but it also made it hard for musicians performing tradition-inflected material to find new fans. The genre's new-era lynchpins—artists such as Gorka, Chris Smither and Greg Brown—played to audiences more notable for their enthusiasm than their youth. But many in the community were certain it didn't have to be that way. "If you can get young people in the room, and if you're good at what you're choosing to do and it's authentic, then they'll respond," says folk musician Rod Picott.



Bruce Springsteen

REFINED AND DEFINED

Whether those acts playing folk instruments are in fact "folk artists" provides unending debate for musicians, scholars and cynics. Most classify on a case-by-case basis. A tradition-drenched string band like Old Crow Medicine Show nearly always gets a folk pass, while other acoustic acts are sometimes derided as rock bands playing not-so-rock instruments. Is Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder a folkie because he made a solo album of songs accompanied only by ukulele (dubbed, aptly enough, *Ukulele Songs*)? "We go out of our way not to define 'folk,'" says the Folk Alliance's Meyers. "It means something different to each person, and that's OK. Any definition

Jeff Fasano, Amy Speace; Danny Clinch, Bruce Springsteen; Traci Goudie, Patty Griffin

NEXT GENERATION



SHEL

Based in Fort Collins, Colo., sisters Sarah, Hannah, Eva and Liza Holbrook are classically trained musicians whose songs meld ethereal harmonies, out-of-the-box melodies and remarkable musicianship. Producer Brent Maher, who's worked with everyone from Ike & Tina Turner to the Judds, co-produced SHEL's *When the Dragon Came Down* EP and is working on a full-length follow-up.



JOHN FULLBRIGHT

Hailing from Okemah, Okla.—home of Woody Guthrie—Fullbright seems to have arrived as a fully formed songwriter in his early 20s. He's shared the stage with Jimmy Webb, Joe Ely, Steve Poltz and more. His *Live at the Blue Door* offered precocious nods to Townes Van Zandt and Mickey Newbury, and debut studio album *From the Ground Up* has him poised for national prominence.



MILK CARTON KIDS

Kenneth Pattengale and Joey Ryan are the Milk Carton Kids, an L.A.-based minimalist duo that trades on somber emotion without posturing or bluster. Pattengale and Ryan are collecting fans like Joe Henry and Sara Bareilles, and heavy-duty roadwork is helping to spread the word. Both Kids albums, *Prologue* and *Retrospect*, are available for free download at milkcartonkids.com.



THE HEAD AND THE HEART

With a sound that is at times stripped down to a whisper but sometimes soars like elegant indie rock, this buzzed-about Seattle collective broke onto the national scene in 2011 when its eponymous independent debut was re-released on Sub Pop Records. The band's growing reputation as one of folk's most exciting live bands points to a solid future.



ANAIS MITCHELL

The Vermont-reared daughter of college professors, Mitchell now makes her home in Brooklyn. Her 2010 *Hadestown* album was a re-imagining of the Orpheus myth that featured appearances from Bon Iver's Justin Vernon, Greg Brown, Ani DiFranco and others. Mitchell released *Young Man in America* in 2012 to reviews that suggest the album will wind up on year-end Top 10 lists.

of folk would be based on that person's experiences and field of reference, and that is different for everyone. Folk music is any music based on a traditional style of music, and we believe that traditions change every time the calendar changes to another year."

Today folk can be Dylan performing at the Grammys with the Avett Brothers and Mumford & Sons. It can be the hippie-friendly freak-folk of Devendra Banhart and Joanna Newsom. It can be Richard Thompson wielding an electric guitar or Celtic artist Donal Lunny with a bouzouki. It can be cowboy fiddler Skip Gorman at a festival, Native American flute player and storyteller Bill Miller on a college campus or the no-longer-blacklisted Seeger being feted as a guest of honor at the White House. "I'm still just a woman, solo onstage with an acoustic guitar—no light show, no pyrotechnics, no dancing, just a story sung to music," Speace says. "Contemporary folk songs are about the same thing that '60s folk songs were about: love, longing, politics, change."

In the internet age, folk can be a mashup of influences and inspirations. "We have everything at our disposal now," says Otis



Tom Morello

as something indigenous to an area—but with the internet, nothing goes unnoticed and there's no regionalism."

In 2012, folk music is about universality, expansion and rejuvenation. "Everything is thriving now," says Eva Holbrook of SHEL. "We have the internet, and we can listen to whatever we want. Our influences aren't just basic ones, and music is becoming more diverse everywhere." The 20-somethings who flock to SHEL shows, or to major venues to catch sets from Mumford & Sons or the Avetts, don't necessarily arrive schooled in the populist philosophies of Seeger or early Dylan. They've likely never heard of Van Ronk, and they have grown up seldom experiencing music as an invitation to political or social change in the way their grandparents may have.

That, too, is changing. The rise of the Occupy movement against corporate greed in America has been accompanied almost inevitably by a soundtrack of folk music. Bruce Springsteen's chart-topping new Occupy-inspired opus *Wrecking Ball* is bursting with folk influences amid the raucous rock 'n' roll. One of the most

Anthony Scialiti; SHEL; Vicki Farmer; John Fullbright; Robert Aescott; Milk Carton Kids; Shawn Brackbill; The Head and the Heart; Jay Sansone; Anais Mitchell; Sean Ricigliano; Tom Morello

politically outspoken rockers of today, Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello has carved out a second career for himself as an acoustic folk artist under the Nightwatchman moniker. "I came upon that type of music later in life," he says. "I had always been a fan of music that was dark and heavy, but it tended to be heavy metal or punk rock or hip-hop. I discovered that quiet music could sometimes be as deep, dark and unnerving as anything played with Marshall stacks. It's a style of music that feels very true to me, as much as any crazy guitar noises I've ever made."

Some very specific folk traditions are being revived by similarly high-profile acts. John Mellencamp rewrote the traditional song "To Washington" with new lyrics applying to the Iraq War. The title cut of Ani DiFranco's new album *Which Side Are You On?* is an Occupy-centric rewrite of a 1931 protest song written by union activist Florence Reece. "I do like that folk process and the fact that melodies and stories can be kept alive indefinitely through the oral tradition," DiFranco says. "It feels really good to get down with the traditional folk-singing side of myself. I'd like to do more of that." (The indefatigable Seeger, 92, plays banjo on the track.)



Ani DiFranco

THE REBIRTH OF COOL

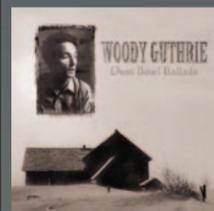
Whether the topic at hand is political or personal, the essential pull of folk remains its innate humanity. It's an energy that doesn't stem from pumped-in electro-percussion tracks and that isn't dependent on video screens, choreography or special effects. Listeners hear songs that are intended as real-life stories, not aspirational fantasies. Those

songs echo with ancient reverberations, but pulse with a contemporary heartbeat.

Veteran troubadour Tim Easton views folk's recent re-flowering with glee. "So funny how the word 'folk' became a bit of a dirty word after the '70s and classic rock," he says. "I believe the recent folk boom started because of computers and technology and corporate missteps. Suddenly you have all these unique kids who want to do something different. These groups are returning us to nature and harmonies and organic sounds, and bands like Mumford will now influence younger kids for sure. Not only will the circle never be broken, but it will turn into a figure eight."

No matter what the future holds, the "F" word isn't so taboo anymore. "I remember when I first started out playing in New York City clubs, being really shy about calling myself a folk singer, as if there was something dated or uncool about that," Speace says. "Seems cool is coming back around to folk again. For many young artists these days, Joni Mitchell, Judy Collins, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez are untouchable. They're stars as much as Bono is a star. It's a different world from the commercial side but the music is still connected!" **M**

ESSENTIAL FOLK



DUST BOWL BALLADS
(1940)
WOODY GUTHRIE

In a whirl of autobiography and activism, Guthrie reinvents American song. The Oklahoma native recorded this 1940 gem in two days, laying the groundwork for thousands of guitar-strumming followers. These are dusty, hard-bitten ballads that somehow gleam and soar more than 70 years after their creation.



THE FREEWHEELIN'
BOB DYLAN
(1963)
BOB DYLAN

The folk bard's second album blew the doors down. Dylan set topical lyrics to traditional melodies, creating classics like "Blowin' in the Wind," "Masters of War" and "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right." The album's most poignant moments come on "Bob Dylan's Dream," where he recalls his now long-gone scuffling days.



BLUE
(1971)
JONI MITCHELL

The 1970s works of James Taylor, Mitchell and others found folk turning inward. On *Blue*, her introspective masterpiece, Mitchell employs incisive language and evocative alternate tunings to explore the intricate complications of the heart. High points include "River," "Carey" and the melancholy title track.



OTHER VOICES, OTHER ROOMS
(1993)
NANCI GRIFFITH

In the 1980s Griffith emerged as a singular voice in folk with country-inflected acoustic albums such as *Last of the True Believers*. This album is a sparkling journey through her folk influences. She covered Guthrie, Dylan, Kate Wolf, John Prine and others—and wound up winning a Grammy for her efforts.



1000 KISSES
(2002)
PATTY GRIFFIN

Recorded in producer Doug Lancio's home studio, *1000 Kisses* is a minimalist triumph. Griffin's character sketches are devastating: pretty little tragedies. She finds a sweet spot between Guthrie's emphatic populism and Mitchell's emotional excavations as she sings of fragile folks filled with regret and hard-won wisdom.

Shervin Lainez, Ani DiFranco

M. WARD | JOAN OSBORNE | KAISER CHIEFS | JESSIE BAYLIN



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Sunny days

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Starts over

MEAT LOAF
Thinks big

JASON MRAZ
The healing power of music

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