

HERE'S TO THE LIFE OF PHIL OCHS

by Tim Wilton

Former NBC evening news anchor Tom Brokaw is back on the national best seller list with his latest offering, ***BOOM! Voices of the Sixties: Personal Reflections on the '60s and Today*** (Random House).

Whereas his 1998 best selling *The Greatest Generation* paid tribute to Americans who came of age during the Great Depression and then triumphed through World War II, Brokaw's ***BOOM!*** documents the greatest generation's children—the baby boomers.

Covering the period that Brokaw loosely defines as the Sixties (from JFK's assassination in 1963 to Nixon's resignation in 1974), ***BOOM!*** is a sprawling compendium of anecdotal interviews—more than 600 pages worth—with a large and diverse cast of mostly public figures, and about how the events that happened during that pivotal period in American history affected their lives then and today. All of the major subjects of the era are discussed in Brokaw's typical breezy tone: the cold war; the civil rights movement; the Viet Nam conflict; Haight-Ashbury; the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy; Woodstock and Altamont; the Democratic National Convention riots; and much, much more.

Regrettably, not everyone who played a culturally vital role during that time was interviewed—some had just faded away anonymously while others did not live long enough to tell their tale to Brokaw. One such glaring omission is El Paso-born folk singer and political activist Phil Ochs, one of the sharpest—and in many circles, the most divisive—voices of the turbulent '60s who did not live to tell his tale, but whose legacy lives on today in performers who cover his songs; an especially relevant fact given the current state of our post-9/11 world.

Ochs likened himself not as a folk singer but actually a “topical singer” who carried on the social activist folk traditions that were laid down before him by turn-of-the-century labor agitator and folk singer Joe Hill, and then a couple of decades later by folk icon Woody Guthrie. He is perhaps the most prolific singer/songwriter to have come out of New York's Greenwich Village, the epicenter of folk music's second revival—Guthrie

spearheaded the first revival in the heart of America's dust bowl during the '30s—which began in the late-fifties and had carried over into the mid-sixties. Along with Ochs, folk's second revival introduced to the world the likes of Pete Seeger, The Kingston Trio, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Dar Williams and Tom Paxton, to name just a few.

Over the course of about a decade during which he released eight albums, Ochs wrote and sang hundreds of songs that railed against, among other things, racism, big labor, social injustice, the Viet Nam war, and both right- and left-wing politics. Even Dylan, an on-again off-again friend of Ochs' and recognized by most today as the face of the folk revival movement, admitted in an interview during the mid-sixties, "I just can't keep up with Phil. And he's getting better and better and better." Yet Ochs never enjoyed the success that Dylan had, nor was he ever truly embraced by the critics of the day.

Sadly, Ochs took his own life on April 19, 1976. Later on that year, in the October edition of *Esquire* magazine, contributor John Berendt may have said it best when he reflected on the relatively short lives of both the protest movement of the sixties and its chief instigator: "While the Movement died a natural death, the music died by hanging."

America is two Mack trucks colliding on a superhighway because all the drivers are on amphetamines—Phil
Ochs

Born in El Paso to Dr. Jacob and Gertrude Ochs (*pronounced Oaks*) on December 19, 1940, Phillip David Ochs grew up in a mostly non-political household that had moved around a lot until finally settling down for awhile in upstate New York and then finally, Columbus, Ohio. His father, who tended to wounded soldiers during World War II and had suffered from manic depression upon returning home, was largely detached and emotionally unavailable to Phil and his two siblings, brother Michael and sister Sonny. As a result, Phil was mostly a loner as a child who immersed himself in movies and music.

His first heroes were John Wayne and Audie Murphy, the larger than life icons of American virtue that mesmerized the young Ochs whenever he went to the local movie theater. Later on, he would also idolize the brooding and rebellious Marlon Brando and James Dean.

Ochs learned to play the clarinet while living in Perrysburg, New York, and became very good at it. Then, as a teenager growing up in Columbus, his musical talent was recognized by the Capital University Orchestra, who recruited him to play with them even though he was underage. However, Ochs soon developed a love for the rock and roll of Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly, as well as the country sounds of Faron Young, Ernest Tubb and Hank Williams, and began to lose interest in the clarinet altogether.

After graduating from Staunton Military Academy in Virginia in 1958, Ochs enrolled at Ohio State University. He took a leave of absence after his first semester, and relocated to Miami, Florida. While there, Ochs was arrested and put in jail for two weeks for sleeping on a park bench. It was during his short incarceration that Ochs decided that he wanted to become a journalist.

Upon returning to Ohio State University, Ochs majored in journalism and joined the staff of the campus newspaper. Still a loner, Ochs struck up a friendship with another “outsider” named Jim Glover, a folk enthusiast who in turn exposed Ochs to the sounds of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and The Weavers. In fact, it was Glover who taught Ochs how to play the guitar.

As with most university students, Ochs became more and more aware of the world outside of Columbus. Before meeting Glover and his family, Ochs had not even heard of the House Un-American Activities Committee nor was he familiar with the McCarthy political witch-hunts. But thanks in large part to the countless dinners at the home of Glover’s parents, who were avowed Marxists that encouraged political debate and discussion, and to the subject matter in the music of Guthrie and others before him, Ochs began to form in his mind the basic themes that would later make up most of his songbook.

Along with Glover, Ochs deeply immersed himself in campus activism. At the time, it was a requirement for all male students to participate in ROTC. Both Ochs and Glover organized campus protests, boycotts and marches against this policy. Together, they recruited students and sang protest songs to counter the university’s policy regarding ROTC participation.

Meanwhile, Ochs’ relationship with the campus newspaper became a precarious one as he began writing stories that were very radical in nature, especially when he wrote glowing stories that supported the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the emergence of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Dissatisfied (or just plain scared) with

his writing, the newspaper relegated Ochs to covering trivial campus events. Out of frustration, Ochs quit the paper and started his own underground newspaper called *The Word*.

By merging his growing interest in politics with his love for music, Ochs began writing songs that were politically topical, and with Glover as his partner, performed around campus as a duo called The Singing Socialists. They eventually changed their name to The Sundowners, but before they performed their first paying gig, they broke up, allegedly because Ochs was upset with Glover for not bothering to learn one of his songs. Glover soon left Ohio State and moved to New York City to become a folk singer while Ochs stayed behind and continued writing his songs as well as putting out *The Word*.

By 1960, Ochs' parents had resettled in Cleveland and Ochs would visit as often as he could. It was in Cleveland that Ochs landed his first professional gig at a local folk club called Farragher's Back Room. While there, he opened for the likes of the Smothers Brothers and other touring national acts. For the next year or so, Ochs shuttled back and forth between his Cleveland singing gigs and his classes in Columbus. However, Ochs finally left school for good after learning that he was passed over for the editorship of the campus newspaper. He was one semester shy of a journalism degree.

A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over—Phil Ochs

Ochs moved to New York City's Greenwich Village in 1962, picking up whatever gigs he could find at small folk clubs and coffeehouses. At the same time, he started contributing original compositions to a start up topical song magazine, *The Broadside*, which also accepted contributions from other folk artists including Dylan, Malvina Reynolds and Janis Ian. It was on the pages of *The Broadside* that the world first read the words to Dylan's yet to be recorded *Blowin' in the Wind*, Ian's *Society's Child* and Reynolds' *Little Boxes*. Among Ochs' first contributions was his anti-war anthem *I Ain't Marching Anymore*. Naturally, *The Broadside* became the most influential source of new folk music and protest anthems and would remain so for the next few decades.

The Village's folk scene had already gained a strong hold in the American conscience and Ochs soon became a major player. Describing himself as a "singing journalist" because his songs were ripped straight out

of the pages of *Newsweek* and *Time*, Ochs' vocal style, according to many folk artists at the time, was unpolished but reminiscent of Buddy Holly. Nevertheless, Ochs' power lied in the potent subject matter of his poignant yet unflinching songs about war, civil rights and other topics that still have relevance today.

Ochs finally broke through on the national front when he was invited to perform at the 1962 Newport Folk Festival, where Pete Seeger introduced him to an overflowing crowd of 37,000 people. Ochs nervously climbed the stage and sang two of his songs: *Too Many Martyrs* and *Talking Birmingham Jam*. He was so well received by the audience that he was enticed back onstage to sing his rousing Woody Guthrie-inspired anthem *Power and the Glory*, after which the crowd gave a roaring standing ovation. In the wings stood Dylan, Baez and others, watching first-hand the incredible power Ochs' songs had on the audience. After Newport, Ochs returned to Greenwich Village a victorious troubadour and had an easier time booking gigs all around town.

By 1963, Ochs and his guitar had become a popular fixture at various political events including anti-war rallies, civil rights marches, campus protests, organized labor events and voter registration drives in the South. And that summer, Newport invited Ochs back to appear as a featured performer, and his set was the highlight of the festival. By now, Ochs had become one of the most recognized folk singers in America and he hadn't even yet released an album. Signed to Elektra Records, Ochs had already accumulated enough songs for his debut album and begun recording sessions at the small offices of The Broadside. For Ochs, life was good and getting better. And then President Kennedy was assassinated.

Ochs, like the rest of his generation, had viewed Kennedy as the bridge between the old and the new. But now that Kennedy was gone, Ochs had become frightened with his country's direction—he feared that things would never be the same again. And he was right.

America experienced a prolonged mourning period, and in turn, Elektra delayed the release of his debut album, *All the News That's Fit to Sing*, until early 1964. Although it failed to chart nationally, *News* balances Ochs' unrequited love for America (*The Power and the Glory* and *What's That I Hear?*) with searing critiques of America's domestic policies (*Ballad of William Worthy* and *Too Many Martyrs*) and its role in international politics (*Talking Vietnam* and *Talking Cuban Crisis*). Other notable songs on *All the News That's Fit to Sing* include his loving homage to Woody Guthrie (*Bound for Glory*) and Edgar Allan Poe (*The Bells*).

A protest song is a song that's so specific that you cannot mistake it for bullshit—Phil Ochs

In the summer of '64 Ochs returned to Newport for a third time, but was inexplicably left out of the 1965 edition. Some music historians have theorized that Ochs did not get invited to Newport because he had had a famous falling-out with Dylan one night in early 1965. Although Dylan and Ochs had always been friendly rivals who deeply admired each other's work, they both knew in the back of their minds that they were going in different directions music-wise. While Dylan's enormous talent and ambition was pushing him beyond the traditional folk music that had brought him fame and fortune in the first place, Ochs ardently remained an activist folk singer. As the story goes, one night Ochs, ever the provocateur, had criticized one of Dylan's songs, and in a fit, Dylan literally threw Ochs out of his limousine and told him that he wasn't a folksinger, that he was "just a journalist" and other insults regarding his singing talent. As a result, Ochs and Dylan did not talk to each other for years afterward.

The 1965 Newport Folk Festival is perhaps best known for Dylan going "electric" and upsetting the folk purists that made him the star he had become. Although Ochs was not there to see it, he did admit later on to friends that he admired Dylan's courage for defying the folk establishment.

Despite the Newport snub, Ochs released his second album, the powerfully thought-provoking *I Ain't Marching Anymore*. Again, Ochs railed against racism in the South (*Talking Birmingham Jam* and *Here's to the State of Mississippi*), the '64 Harlem riots (*In the Heat of the Summer*), big labor (*Links on the Chain*), and Viet Nam (*Draft Dodger Rag* and *I Ain't Marching Anymore*). And like his first album, *I Ain't Marching Anymore* failed to chart. Ochs' failure to have his music accepted by the buying public began to shake his confidence and he began to display drastic mood swings, in private and in concert. Still, Ochs managed to continue playing to sold out audiences whenever and wherever he played. His 1965 sold out performance at Carnegie Hall resulted in the 1966 release *Phil Ochs in Concert*.

Phil Ochs In Concert is an excellent mix of protest (*The Marines Have Landed on the Shores of Santo Domingo* and *Cops of the World*), humor (*Love Me, I'm a Liberal*) and anthems (*Ring of Revolution* and *There But for Fortune*). Again, the album failed to chart, and would be his last release from Elektra.

In 1967, Ochs left Elektra for A&M Records, his brother Michael became his manager and he moved to Los Angeles for a fresh start and different musical direction. His 1967 effort, *Pleasures of the Harbor*, was a more personal and less political outing and contained none of the sparse acoustic guitar that was prevalent in his first three albums as Ochs introduced lush orchestral instrumentation into his music with the hope of producing a pop-folk sound that would be more palatable with the record buying public. Sadly, it didn't register with buyers, and neither did his 1968 follow up, *Tape from California*.

The year 1968 marked the beginning of the end for Ochs and his vision for a better world.

Together with Jerry Rubin, Abby Hoffman and other members of the radical far-left, Ochs helped found the Youth International Party, better known as the "Yippies," and was the one responsible for purchasing the live pig (named Pigasus) the Yippies were going to nominate as their presidential candidate as a protest outside Chicago's International Amphitheater, site of the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Despite numerous warnings from friends not to attend, Ochs traveled to Chicago as a guest of Democratic candidate Eugene McCarthy and to play in Lincoln Park at a planned anti-war demonstration. Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley had repeatedly announced that "law and order will be maintained" and had imposed an 11 p.m. curfew. As expected, riots broke out as police squared off against demonstrators. The whole world watched in horror as police brutally beat thousands of people in the street with their nightsticks. And Mayor Daley uttered one of the most famous quotes of the late-sixties: "The policeman isn't there to create disorder; the policeman is there to preserve disorder." Although hundreds of protesters were arrested, seven of them—labeled by the media as The Chicago Seven, and included Rubin, Hoffman, Tom Hayden and others—were put on trial for conspiracy in connection with the riots. Ochs was called to testify for the defense and his testimony included his recital of *I Ain't Marching Anymore*. Although they were all found innocent of the conspiracy charges, five of the Chicago Seven were found guilty of incitement. The convictions were appealed and eventually overturned.

Depressed by the events of 1968—the Chicago riots, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, the escalation of the war in Viet Nam, and the election of Richard Nixon—Ochs fell into a deep depression. He continued to drink heavily and swallow any pill that he could find, but still managed to

release two more albums: *Rehearsals for Retirement* in 1969, and the ironically titled *Greatest Hits* (it contained only original recordings, no reissues) the following year. Sadly, he would not record again.

Ah, but in such an ugly time, the true protest is beauty—Phil Ochs

He traveled the world and remained active in causes that he believed in. In December 1971 he performed with John Lennon, Stevie Wonder and others at the “Free John Sinclair” benefit concert, and would revisit many of his old songs and rework the lyrics to address current events. For example, he reworded *Here’s to the State of Mississippi* as *Here’s to the State of Richard Nixon*.

In 1973, as he was visiting Africa, Ochs was attacked and strangled by robbers and his vocal cords were badly damaged. Paranoid by the drugs he was taking at the time, Ochs was convinced that he was a target of the FBI (later on, the FBI would release the files they kept on him. It was more than 400 pages thick).

By 1974, Ochs and Dylan had reconciled and began discussing touring together. Although it never happened, Ochs’ idea was the inspiration for Dylan’s famous Rolling Thunder Revue. And finally, after more than a decade, the Viet Nam War ended in April 1975, and a jubilant Ochs led a rally in New York’s Central Park, where more than 100,000 people gathered to hear Ochs, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez and other icons of the ‘60s folk revival perform their songs of protest and peace. Appropriately, Ochs closed the rally with a song from his *Tape From California* album, *The War is Over*.

A year later, on April 9, 1976, Phil Ochs hanged himself at his sister’s home in Far Rockaway, New York. Ochs had been suffering from bipolar disorder and a deep depression caused by, among other things, writer’s block.

In the liner notes of *The Broadside Tapes 1*, Ochs said: “It is wrong to expect a reward for your struggles. The reward is the act of struggle itself, not what you win. Even though you can’t expect to defeat the absurdity of the world, you must make that attempt. That’s morality, that’s religion. That’s art. That’s life.”

Ochs’ legacy lives on today in the music of Billy Bragg, Rage Against the Machine, Public Enemy, Steve Earle and others. Here’s to the life of Phil Ochs.

For more information on Phil Ochs and his music, be sure to go online and visit the numerous fan sites dedicated to him and his music, or pick up Michael Schumacher's Ochs biography, *There But for Fortune: The Life of Phil Ochs*.