

Roger McGuinn Pilots Folk Music Into the 21st Century

By Barry Mazor

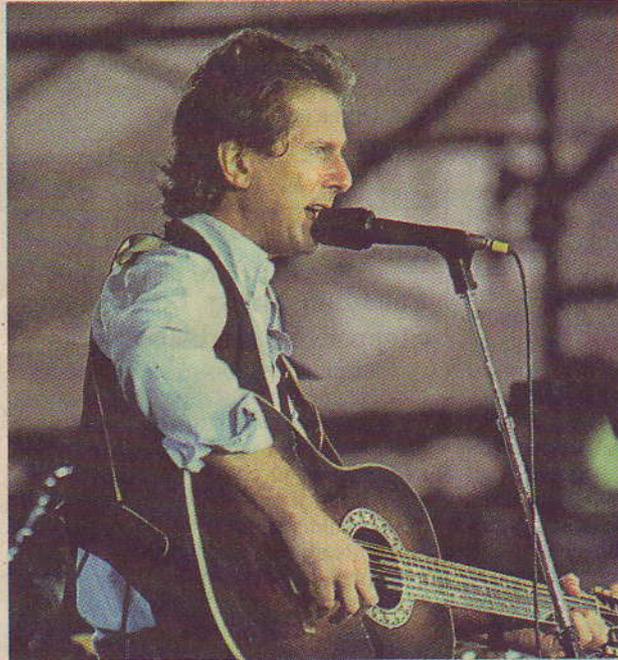
It's been more than 40 years since Roger McGuinn first fronted the talented band that was called "America's answer to the British Invasion," the Byrds' homegrown folk-rock electrifications of Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" and Pete Seeger's "Turn, Turn, Turn" having hit the airwaves in 1965. Those smash singles put Mr. McGuinn's unmistakable (if much-imitated) voice and jingle-jangle 12-string guitar sound on the map—and, it can be argued, played an ironic role in putting nails in the coffin of the commercial folk boom that had preceded them.

"Well, I agree with that," Mr. McGuinn said, speaking from his Orlando, Fla., home in a recent phone conversation. "I was in some way guilty of taking the focus off of folk music in favor of something else. That was a good experiment; we followed it through as far as we could, and loved it. I think the Byrds stuff still holds up. But I prefer to be a folk singer now—a traditional artist."

Right in keeping with that current focus is his new release, "The Folk Den Project, 1995-2005," an elegant four-CD boxed set of 100 simple, story-followable, yet distinctively McGuinn-styled takes on traditional songs that demarcate the song bag of the folk revival of the '50s and early '60s—ones once taught in public schools ("The Erie Canal," "On Top of Old Smokey"), the more adult tales that weren't ("House of the Rising Sun," "Delia's Gone"), the cowboy songs and sea shanties ("Buffalo Skinners," "The John B's Sails"), the bits of blues, jugband jive, country and upbeat gospel.

In keeping with the origin of the project as a series of tunes made available, one by one, on Mr. McGuinn's "Folk Den" Web site and by podcast, the CD set is being sold only through Web music retailers and that original site (www.rogermcguinn.com).

"I started the Folk Den on the Internet about 10 years ago," he explained, "just to keep the songs going. I sensed that people didn't know that this stuff even existed any more, because the music business had kind of pushed traditional folk under the rug, in favor of more lucrative things. I understand the balance between art and commerce, but this had been pushed so far that I worried about it. The



Roger McGuinn

term 'folk singer' had become just a singer-songwriter, or anybody who played an acoustic instrument."

While the folk revival had had something of an antimodern, antitech tone, the man who wrote songs about astronauts and jet pilots and pushed folk rock "Eight Miles High" had always shown a keen interest in technology. Since the advent of the public Internet, Mr. McGuinn, now 63 years old, has been known to take part in Web discussions of his work and surprise fans who've mentioned his music online with personal emails.

"I was online already, and I thought, 'This is a great opportunity to get some of these songs up there to share with people around the world. It's a grass roots thing, and I love the Internet for that, and also more one-on-one. Sitting in front of a computer, it's more like the oral tradition, with somebody singing the song to you, than it is if you're being broadcast at by TV. And I must say, in the last 10 years, since I started doing that, folk music seems a lot healthier, and mostly because of the Internet, with hundreds of other sites that do folk song, maybe with just a lyric and a little MIDI file, not as elaborately as the Folk Den does it—but it's all healthier now."

Traditional songs make up a good

chunk of Roger's live shows now, along with his Byrds and solo hits—whether accompanied by his famed 12-string Rickenbacker electric or the new seven-string acoustic guitar he designed for Martin. But he hadn't had many opportunities to get out there alone, playing traditional folk, in his pre-Byrds club and coffee-house days.

He'd backed the Chad Mitchell Trio on guitar, and played with the Limelighters, but was soon mixing Beatle beats with the songs and fluid picking he'd studied as a teen at Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music, making the move to rock 'n' roll as he tired, he stresses, not of the music of the

Pete Seegers and Odettas and Bob Gibsons, "the real folk singers," but of the bandwagon imitations of the already watered-down likes of the Serendipity Singers—acts that would be fodder for satire in the "A Mighty Wind" film. The historic, handed-down folk music has never lost its appeal.

"I don't know what it is!" he admitted. "You could write it off to genetic memory or something, but it makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. When I hear these old songs and play them, it gives me goosebumps. I just love them, in some sort of emotional way that defies logic."

One of Mr. McGuinn's lesser-known pre-Byrds gigs was playing with Bobby Darin in a serious folk set that was incorporated into the pop singer's club shows.

"Bobby was partly responsible for steering me over to rock from folk in the first place," Mr. McGuinn recalled. "I would ask him about how to make it in the business, and he would say 'You've got to be in rock 'n' roll; from rock you can go anywhere—be an actor, sing anything,' as he'd done. He made it sound like it was easy to get out once you got in it. Now I'm kind of trying to move on myself!"

Mr. Mazor writes about country and pop music for the Journal.