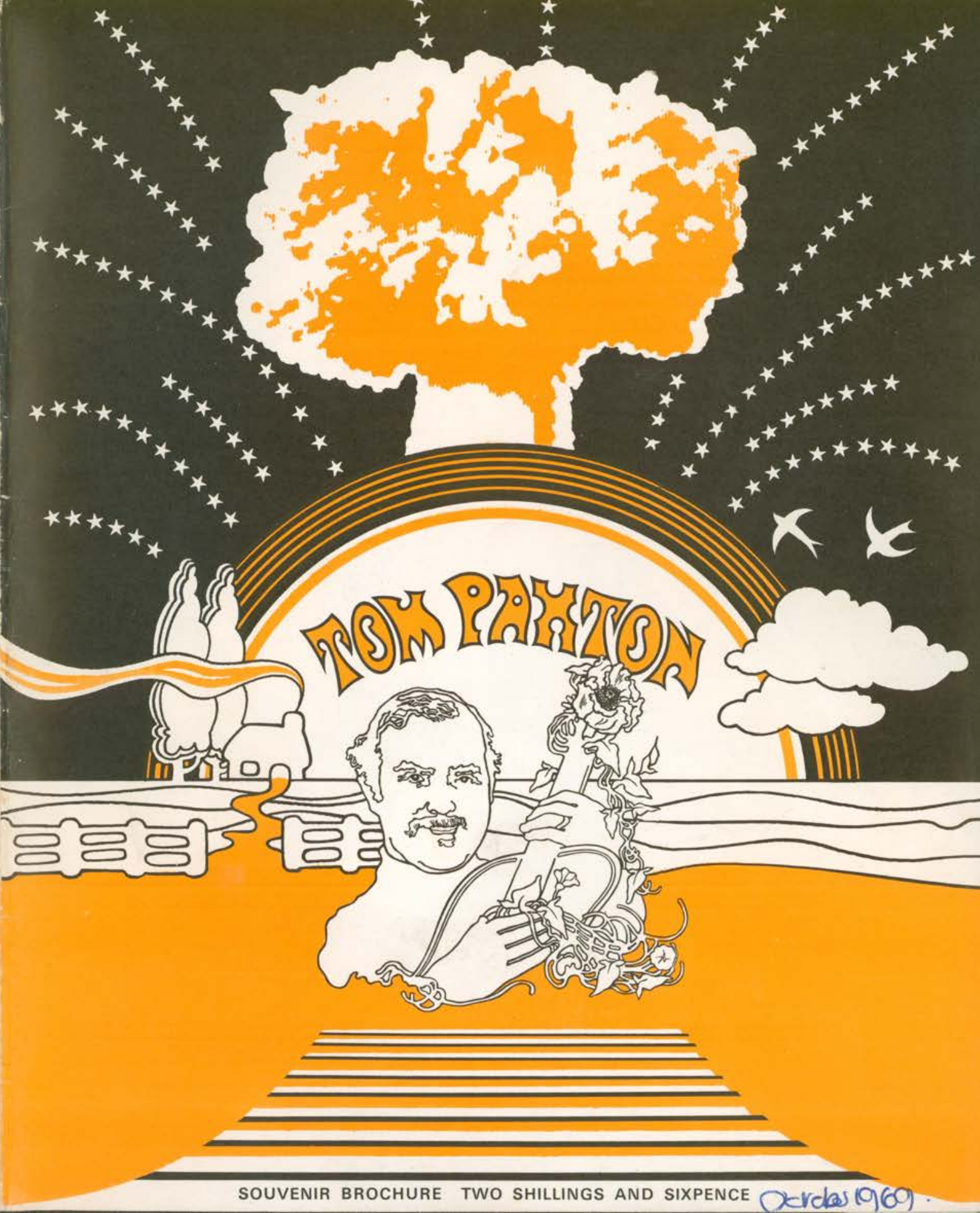


SOUVENIR BROCHURE TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE Oct 25 1969

photograph by DAVID REDFERN

HAROLD DAVISON presents

AN EVENING WITH

TOM PAXTON

promotion direction: JACK L. HIGGINS

TOM PAXTON

Every so often, perhaps half a dozen times a year, I receive letters from young people which ask the same question. I always groan when I read the letters, because it so happens that the question has no answer. My correspondents are University students intent on winning a degree by composing a thesis on such subjects as The Significance of Popular Music, or Social Trends in Mass Entertainment, or some such theme. And all the letter-writers ask me which books they should read to get a total picture. The fact that there are no books which give a total picture makes my predicament very embarrassing indeed, and I have no doubt that in ten or fifteen years' time one or another of these questing students will himself write the very book he is looking for.

But what is most interesting of all about these requests is that in my own adolescence they could never have been made. It is not difficult to see why this new curiosity has developed, why young people, instead of regarding the popular song as a harmless irrelevance to be bracketed with crossword puzzles, trainspotting and growing roses, see in it a reflection of the baffling times we live in. Their curiosity is commendable and the magnitude of the task awaiting them quite terrifying. Whether he realises it or not, the student of popular music and its sociological content, is faced with the problem of deciding where form must end and content begin. And as nobody in three thousand years of criticism has so far found the answer, it becomes clear why my heart sinks into my boots whenever I get asked this sixty-four thousand dollar question.

The problem, which has acute relevance to the art of a performer like Tom Paxton, can be expressed in a few sentences, and it consists of these points. Some songs try to take the listener out of his everyday surroundings, and have absolutely no pretensions to being anything more than a vehicle of escapism. Other songs are intended primarily to make us see the riddles which face us from day to day, and perhaps even tempt us to try finding the answers. So far so good. It is very clear to us which of the two types of songs ought to engage our attentions the more deeply. And now the muddle begins. Which songs should we respect most, those which are exquisitely wrought from a technical point of view but which express vacuous and sometimes inane sentiments, or those which have no particular subtleties of form but which are ingenious enough, and brave enough, to look distasteful facts straight in the eye? Or to bring it down to personal cases, who is the artist more deserving of our concentration, Sinatra singing '*All The Things You Are*', with its evasive poesy about two-dimensional romance, or the latest coffee-bar jerk with his heart in the right place and his fingers on the wrong strings who dares to face the possibility that we might all be transmuted into cinders even as we attend a concert like Paxton's this evening?

The second of these two genres of popular song, the one which tries to relate popular music with popular anxieties, is generally considered, especially by those who have a financial stake in the status quo, as an ephemeral thing which can have no lasting effects on the cosy mechanisms of moneymaking perfected by Tin Pan Alley and Hollywood over the last fifty years. The problem singer is represented as a recent and surely temporary phenomenon whose rise will end soon and allow things to get back to the cretinous norm. Even

programme notes by BENNY GREEN

if this were true, it would have absolutely no relevance to the battle being staged between the sheepbrains and the thinktanks, between the two hypothetical lyric-writers, one of whom uses a rhyming dictionary to match 'Moon' with 'June', and the other, who has only to see a word like 'errant' to match it up with 'nuclear deterrent'. But the charge of newness and ephemeral flimsiness is not only irrelevant but historically inaccurate. We have only to look back at the truly popular music of the past hundred years to see that until the popular songwriting industry imposed its own standards of intelligence on the popular song, people were not only willing to take social messages with their music, but actually expected it.

If we are to believe the great lyricwriters of Broadway, particularly Ira Gershwin, Lorenz Hart and P. G. Wodehouse, the father of all popular lyricwriting is W. S. Gilbert. It may seem a far cry from The Bab Ballads to '*Mairzy Doates*', but in fact a direct line of inheritance may be traced, through the Savoy operas to the Broadway writing after 1910, through the Hollywood musical and the better type of Hit Parade song of the 1930s down to the halfwitted excrescences of more recent years. Gilbert in the Savoy operas blithely swiped at politicians, bureaucrats and fake aesthetes, at cowardly generals ('He led his regiment from behind, he found it less exciting'), and the crazy quadrille of party politics ('And I always voted at my party's call, and I never thought of thinking for myself at all'), and above all at the hereditary principle ('The House of Peers, throughout the war, did nothing in particular, and did it very well'). These lines of Gilbert's, and many others, were popular in the sense that they sank very quickly into the consciousness of the nation. And nor were they untypical of the lower classes who might perhaps be too poor to afford the price of a ticket to the Savoy. And this brings us to the Edwardian music hall.

One of the saddest things about the passing of music hall and the subsequent Americanisation of our mass musical entertainments is that the realities of day-to-day life, what H. G. Wells somewhere calls the 'jolly coarseness of life', disappeared utterly from the context of the popular song. Where Marie Lloyd and Gus Elan would sing of love and marriage as it really is, with drunken husbands and shrewish wives, the music which replaced them returned to a morbid preoccupation with moonlight, tilted lips, the first kiss, the last waltz and the look in somebody's eyes. It is true that the predominant social note struck by the Edwardian music hall song was one of arrant patriotism verging on chauvinism, but at least it was a political attitude of a kind. Gilbert may not have approved of its sentiments, but at least he would not have been surprised that it existed in popular song. How sad that he did not live ten years longer than he did, and so bequeath to us his views on pieces like '*When Those Sweet Hawaiian Babies Roll Their Eyes*', '*Daddy, You've Been A Mother To Me*' and '*They Needed A Songbird In Heaven, So God Took Caruso Away*'.

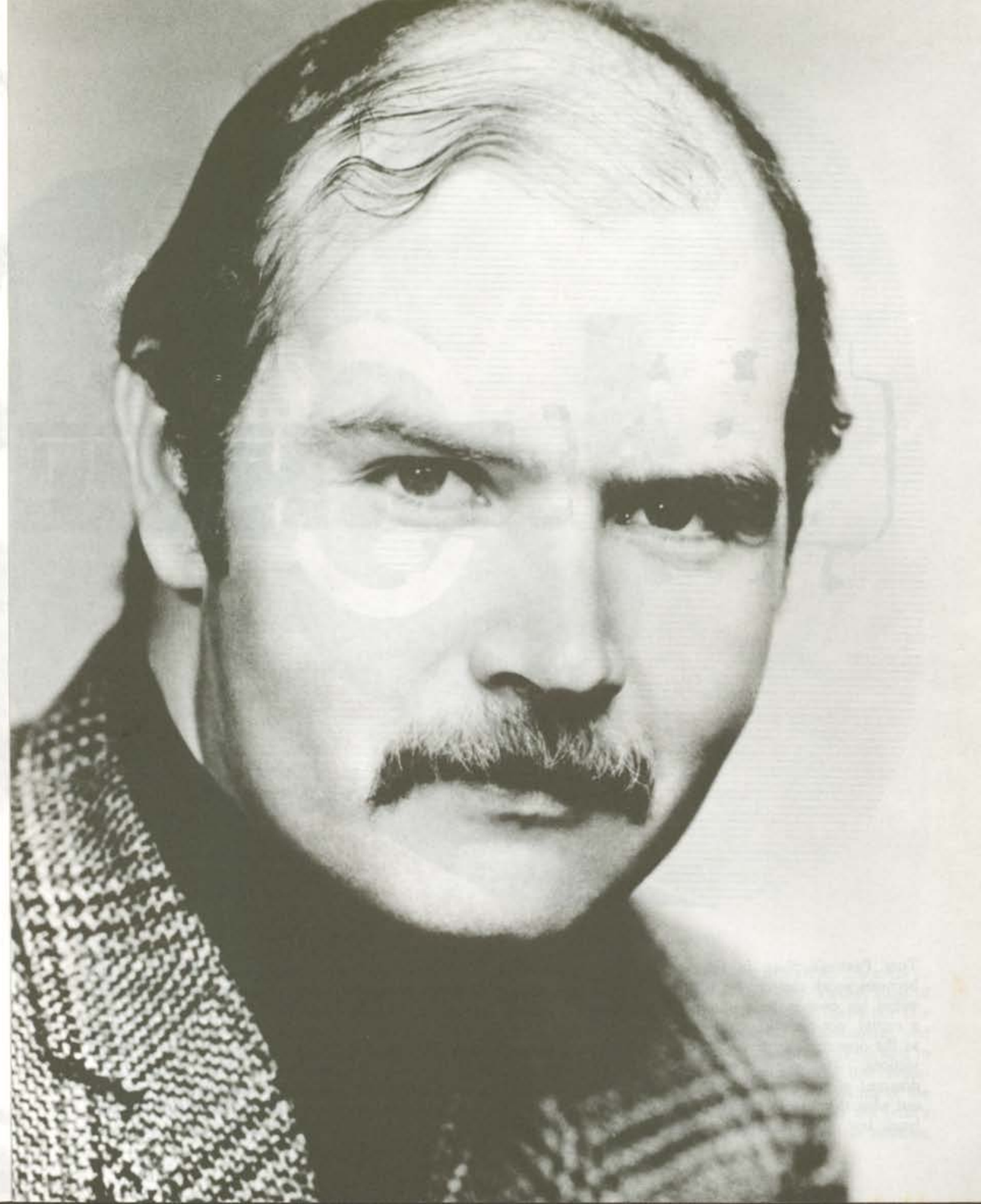
So far the case is very clear in favour of the song with a social comment. But through the 1920s a complication began to rear its ugly head which nobody so far has really resolved. While the popular song forewent any pretensions of intelligence of content, so at the same time did it reach dazzling heights of formal

brilliance. The resource of musicians like Gershwin, Kern, Rodgers and Porter gave a new literacy to the popular song, but it was essentially a literacy of technique, not of content. The lyricwriters too, either abandoned, or were forced by social pressures to abandon any wielding of the sociological hammer, turned inwards and gave insignificant sentiments the highest possible technical gloss, finding ever more ingenious rhymes with which to cloak the poverty of the rhymes' content. Now the men I mention were not fools, and all were aware of the limitations imposed by their working conditions. From time to time there were signs of flickering rebellion. The Gershwin brothers actually got reckless enough in 1930 to follow the example of their beloved Gilbert and produce the Broadway musical with political overtones. The success commercially of '*Of Thee I Sing*' and, to a lesser extent of its sequel, '*Let 'Em Eat Cake*', was an unmistakable sign of the willingness of people to take their escapist entertainment with at least a dash of political satire, and there was at least one remarkable follow-up when in 1937 the pre-war equivalent of the off-Broadway theatre produced a Trade Union musical whose hit tune had the unlikely title, '*Sing Me A Song Of Social Significance*'. In a way it is this title which sums up what artists like Tom Paxton are trying to do, the demand they are trying to meet, the need they are trying to fill, but it was not till very many years after these early breakthroughs that a movement really got under way.

And the reason why I can never give the right answers to the students who ask me leading questions is that, being a musician as well as a citizen, I am torn between the musical excellence of the Broadway song and its total failure to acknowledge the existence of its own environment. Is '*All The Things You Are*' a rare pearl because of the ingenious approach to the enharmonic change in the last bar of its middle eight, or a sad fiasco because of the fustian of its lyric sentiments, those pseudo-poetic phrases which sound so nearly absurd that more than one generation of jazz musicians has been irresistibly tempted to revise them to 'You are the crusty bread at lunchtime'? Is Lorenz Hart a hero for having had the wit to rhyme a single word 'sandwiches' with three other words, 'planned which is', or a villain for having spent his incredible metric dexterity on romantic trifles? How many of such songs, gems of the Golden Age of popular songwriting, even mention any of the realities? And if they do not, should we blame their creators for not having succeeded in doing something they had no intention of doing in the first place? .Too much criticism of the arts is based on the precept that a thing is bad, not if it is badly done, but if it is not what the critic wants to be done. These questions are unanswerable, and each individual has to come to his own, highly subjective conclusions, or even, if he is like me, contrive to have the best of both worlds by plumping for neither.

It is possible that this Golden Age of finely wrought inconsequentialities might have gone on indefinitely, except that one small detail occurred which nobody, at least nobody in Tin Pan Alley, bargained for. That small detail was the Second World War and the dropping of the atomic bomb. The young had shown remarkable patience for a long time. They had duly respected their elders, assumed that father knew best, and accepted the concept of a great statesman with an astonishing passivity. After the end of the last war, that passivity seeped away, and one of the most interesting manifestations of this new loss of faith was its replacement by another one, which said that popular art should deal with popular subjects. The whole conception of singing and songwriting underwent a slow but steady change. In the 1950s the idea that people might possibly sing those songs of social significance and still be accomplished entertainers won ground. The older artists were too old to change approaches, and so the young produced their own performers, with some spectacular results.

It is now that we arrive at the second of the two knotty problems about socially conscious art. Just as a nonsensical lyric does not necessarily mean that we are looking at a nonsensical song, so it follows also that a socially informed lyric may quite easily be embodied in a wretched song, or if not, might easily be in the repertoire of a singer who would be better occupied milking cows. This causes the tiresome situation where there are no easy guides to conduct. We all have to make up our own minds at each individual performance, and in so doing we might sometimes work ourselves into a hopeless tangle. I myself do not think too much of Tom Lehrer's gifts as a composer, but I like his attitudes and I like even more the insulting way he expresses them. I am still not too old to warm to the uncompromising fervour of Joan Baez, but I can never quite forgive her for dismissing, in a conversation we once had, the songs of the Gershwin brothers as so much twaddle. I give three cheers for the release from the inane effected by someone like Bob Dylan, and yet I find myself congenitally incapable of recognising the genius he is said to possess. I suppose the answer is to find artists whose lyrics are not an insult to the intelligence and whose craftsmanship is not an insult to the sensibilities. It is asking a great deal, but not, I think, too much.



Tom Paxton's place in the scheme of things now becomes much clearer. He is one of those artists who writes his own material, presumably because he sees a recital, not merely as a technical exercise, but also as the opportunity for the expression of personal convictions. The previous generation but one never dreamed of going to an Al Jolson performance to find out what that extraordinary gentleman thought of, say, lynch law. They accepted his idyllic Deep South as gullibly as Jolson did himself, because neither he nor they related the sound with the sense of the words. The next generation did likewise, except that instead of Jolson dabbing on the boot polish there was Crosby with his pipe. The next group had Sinatra to contend with, and here the situation did alter a little. Sinatra sang of the love clichés with so superlative a technique that somehow he wrenched the aspirations of his lyric-writers up into the realm of sociology, if only by the intensity of his performance. I know more than one man of my own age group who is literally incapable of listening to the early Sinatra recordings because they symbolise for him all kinds of lost chances and missed clues from the old days. But that is a different kind of social significance from Paxton's. The Sinatra output, and the streams of consciousness it evokes, might be produced just as vividly by an old photograph, or the taste of a hot dog, or the aroma of a perfume.

The Paxton school has no time to wait for the event to be matured by the years in this way. Paxton sings of the events and the personalities which shape our fate today. The impact is supposed to be immediate, and in Paxton's case, I think it is immediate. If we stop to think for a moment of the implications of this revolution in popular song forms, we get some inkling of the enormous reservoirs of untapped energy at the artist's disposal. Paxton can express any opinion or emotion

photograph by DAVID REDFERN

he pleases, always provided, of course, that he considers its theme universal enough to strike home for other people, the ones who buy tickets for his performances. Instead of going to the rhyming dictionary for his material he has simply to pick up the day's newspaper and there all his plots are, provided ready-made. It places a heavier burden on him than the old-time singers knew of. It means he has to have opinions as well as a voice, attitudes as well as a guitar, a sense of expression as well as a technique. But Paxton has all these things, otherwise we would not be watching him this evening.

Paxton as an individual is archetypal of his group and his generation. The facts of his biography could almost apply to half a dozen other artists with the same approach. Here, however, we are on the rim of yet another pitfall. Because several artists share the same attitudes, we tend to lump them together to form that invisible entity beloved of the pedantic critic, a school. There are no schools, only individual artists, some of whom may happen to influence and cross-influence, but whose only real excuse for walking the stage at all is that they are trying to express something personal to themselves alone in their idiosyncratic way. So when the facts of Paxton's case come out with the predictability of mouthings from a computer, we would be well advised to digest them as quickly as possible and then search for where the really significant facts lie, in his songs and the way he performs them.

Paxton was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1937, but spent most of his early life in the town of Bristow, Oklahoma, where the family moved soon after he was born. Paxton enjoyed the fruits of the Higher Education in the State University of Oklahoma, and it is here that we get the first clue to the shape of his mind. His chosen subject for specialisation was Drama, and naturally he did as much campus acting as was possible. His performances ranged from classical to modern, and among the roles which he recalls with most affection are those of the First Murderer in '*Macbeth*' and the Citizen in Shaw's '*The Devil's Disciple*'. The choice of those two examples tempts one to wield the cowardly weapon of hindsight and draw parallels between what Paxton was acting then and what he is singing now. '*Macbeth*' is not a bad morality play for people interested in the excesses of power politics, or, to give them their less exalted name, gang warfare. And as for Shaw, one wonders whether Paxton took particular note of that moment in '*The Devil's Disciple*' when the very reason for the existence of the artist with a conscience is crystallised into a moment of high comedy. The British General Burgoyne, an urbane and intelligent man frustrated in his military intentions by a series of most preposterous blunders by Whitehall, is asked what history will make of such ridiculous goings on. And Burgoyne, pausing on the stairs as he makes his exit, replies, 'History, sir, will tell lies, as usual'. History will find it that much harder to tell lies about our own condition today if Paxton and his generation instil into their songs a little of the truth.

After University, Paxton continued to follow his interest in theatre, and participated in a successful production of a western melodrama at the Cripple Creek Theatre, but by now something was happening to him which happens to so many artists. He was discovering that his chosen vocation was something in the nature of a false start. He found that drama was beginning to take second place to music, and slowly his energies were diverted away from the drama stage to the concert hall. Not at first, of course. I have little doubt that when he first began to think more consistently about music, the idea of his filling auditoria with his songs never so much as occurred to him. But the process had started, all the same.

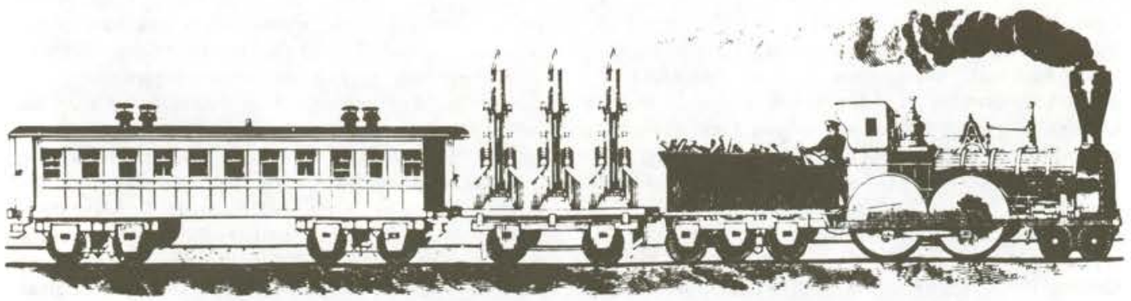
Even during his studies as an actor Paxton had followed a hobby, songwriting, but then, nothing is wasted. People who have attended Paxton concerts and taken due note of his underplayed, quietly histrionic style of delivery need not ponder too much how the approach came about. Once a performer, always a performer, and although it is a long road from Shakespeare to Paxton, it is a much shorter road from small parts to quiet songs.

Being a member of one of the Western democracies where a man is encouraged to make decisions for himself, Paxton was then drafted into the United States Army and posted to Fort Dix, in New Jersey, an establishment not particularly devoted to the arts which nonetheless had one saving grace, in that it was much closer to the centre of the action, New York, than Paxton had ever been before. There was already thriving in New York at this time the coffee bar scene which helped so many singers of Paxton's age group on to more spectacular platforms. It was now, in the coffee houses that Paxton the part-time songwriter was slowly usurped by Paxton the singer-performer. He sang to his first audiences and gradually built up his first supporters. The drift from amateur to professional was too subtle to be delineated, but the drift must have been taking place, because by the time he was due for discharge from the Army, Paxton made the brave decision to stay in New York and try there to carve out a vocal career for himself. Before long he had established himself as one of the best-equipped and most original

of the young singer-composers on the coffee-bar circuit. Soon a venue became associated with him specifically. This was the Gaslight Club in Greenwich Village, where he was booked for a short spell and stayed for nine consecutive months. After leaving the Gaslight Club, his career could be said to have got finally under way, because it was now that he began touring, taking his work beyond the coterie audiences of the beginnings in the Village.

Today Paxton's time in the coffee-bars is over, probably for good. He is now primarily a concert artist, although he manages to bring to the larger halls the same kind of piercing intimacy that must have won him devotees in the crowded bars of New York. Although his career is short so far by contemporary standards, he has already enjoyed many triumphs, and has been the dominant personality in evenings at Carnegie Hall, the Town Hall and the Philharmonic Hall in New York, the Academy of Music in Philadelphia and the Jordan Hall in Boston. He has also appeared as guest soloist with the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra and has become one of the best-known performers on the campus circuit of the American Universities. This is his fifth working visit to this country, the last being as recent as 1968. Those who have followed him from the beginning will remember that for a concert at the Albert Hall, he drew 7,000 inside the premises and another 7,000 outside, who found themselves unable to get a seat.

His recording career has been much less frantic than one might have expected, but his four long-playing albums have all appeared on the Electra label. On these albums may be found the end result of this attitude of the contemporary young singer-composer towards the world he lives in and is obliged to make the best of. What would, say, Rudy Vallee or Whispering Jack Smith have made of titles like '*Lyndon Johnson Told The Nation*'? But then Vallee's generation, comfortably swaddled in the illusive belief that it was captain of its own fate, could afford to ignore the problems of Religion, of Race Relations, of Education, and the Daily Press. Paxton cannot afford to ignore them, and nor can the rest of us. That is why we should listen most carefully to what he is singing as well as to the way he sings it.



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