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The Greatest Activist Folksinger You've Never Heard Of

Phil Ochs was already dead when I discovered him. He had killed himself in 1976, four years before I sat on the floor of the KOPN-FM community radio station in Columbia, Missouri, looking for music for my social change radio show. I found music that not only fit themes of freedom and peace, but gave me years of themes to consider for future shows. I found a lot more more: I didn't glimpse how my passions for poetry, journalism and grassroots organizing fit together until I heard Ochs' blend all three, lyric by lyric.

There are some voices in the world so distinctive and soulful that they feel like the home we didn't know we lost. The first times I heard James Taylor, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Bruce Springsteen, Greg Greenway, Tracy Chapman, Joni Mitchell, and Kelley Hunt, I felt like they were old friends I've known all my life and whose music seemed to know me also. Phil Ochs is part of that small circle of friends for me, but unlike his song, "Small Circle of Friends," his music doesn't turn away from the world's woes out of self-interest or apathy, but shows up with a fury. Jac Holman, founder of Electra Records, says, "Phil had what was essential: a stance, six strings, and an insistent voice wanting to be heard." Because of Ochs' depth of passion funneled through clarity, wit, and conviction, there's no way to listen to any of his songs without believing in his earnest courage. There's also something about Ochs that transcends the sum of his considerable parts: a great sense of rhythm and verve in his songwriting, his vibrant guitar playing and picking, and most of all, his bell of a voice.

Yet most people have never **heard of Phil Ochs is despite Robert Christgau**, eulogizing Ochs in the *Village Voice*, writing, "Not since Pete Seeger has there been a folksinger of Ochs's stature who could claim his unswerving opposition to political and economic oppression." Pete Seeger himself saw this from the get-go, saying, after seeing Ochs and Dylan in the early 1960s, "here I am with two of the greatest songwriters in the world, and someday they'll be famous." What Seeger couldn't have known was that Ochs would kill himself at age 35 after years of limited fame, mental illness, alcoholism, and a boatful of political heartbreaks. Ochs even parodied his lack of fame in his album, "Greatest Hits" because he never had any hits. Then again, nothing Ochs did was pure parody or pure earnestness: on that same album, he wore a gold lame suit, spoofing Elvis Presley, and proclaiming, "if there's any hope for a revolution in America, it lies in getting Elvis Presley to become Che Guevara."

His complexity was as legendary as his music. He loved John Wayne and cowboy movies, but grew up a music prodigy. He protested the Vietnam war but went to military school. He was smarter than most of his generation but dropped out of college. He sang of great tenderness in "Changes" and "Pleasures of the Harbor," but skewered bigots, liberals, and the apathetic in other songs. He marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., but couldn't stand up for his own mental health. He played for any cause -- a homeless man on a corner in the Bowery to striking minors in Kentucky -- but sought fame at great personal cost. He penned and performed one of the main anthems of the anti-war movement -- "I Ain't Marching Anymore," but found little relief when the war actually ended.

On a personal level, his complexity was downright deadly. "Phil was never cool. He was right there, and exposed himself **in a way that ultimately lethal**," said Sam Hood, manager of Greenwich Village's famed Gaslight club where Ochs, Dylan and many others performed in the 1960s. Growing up in Ohio with a distant Scottish mother, and an American father irreparably damaged by WWII and bi-polar disorder, Ochs followed music to New York just on the cusp of the 60s. He found his inspiration in the news, rather literally, turning news stories into songs, aptly naming his first album, "All the News That's Fit to Sing." He went onto to release more albums, played a sold-out Carnegie Hall, fell in love and had a daughter, and hung out with an infamous and inspiring group of radicals, artists, musicians,

writers and organizers, from Joan Baez to Jerry Rubin.

Ochs' songs called for a new world vision of greater compassion, peace, honesty, concern and action. But he was soon caught between the rock of the times and the hard place of his brokenness. The public losses were immense: the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Dr. King, and Robert F. Kennedy; thousands of Americans and millions of Vietnamese dead or dying on the nightly news; the Kent State shootings; and the splits within various protest movements. Two particular tragedies of the time especially affected Ochs: Chicago and Chile.

In 1968, Ochs was one of the organizers of the Yippies' "Festival of Life," one of many demonstrations in concert with the Democratic convention. Ochs, after several performances, was caught in the standoff between peaceful protesters and Mayor Dailey's no-holds-barred police force, a clash that resulted in abundant bullets, teargas, beatings, and arrests. Ochs was so devastated that on the cover of his next album, he put a small picture of a gravestone with his death listed as happening in Chicago in 1968.

Three years later, needing a break from America, Ochs traveled the world, along the way meeting "the Pete Seeger of Chile," singer Victor Jara. Salvador Allende had just been elected president, and Jara greeted Ochs as an **internal** hero, taking him to sing for miners and even doing a Chilean television show together as the two men became fast friends. Ochs' paradoxical life continued to unfold in these travels: he was the first American singer to record collaborative music with Africans, weaving their traditional harmonies with his; during the same trip, robbers beat him so severely in Tanzania that they damaged his vocal cords. Already on rocky ground, Ochs descended further into drinking and paranoia.

By 1973, a coup forced Allende from power, and Jara, along with thousands of other activists, artists and musicians was brought to a giant stadium where soldiers smashed his hands, then told him to sing now. Jara stood up with bloodied hands and led thousands of other prisoners in singing the anthem of Allende's unity party. They were subsequently gunned down. As some of his friends recalled in the excellent film, *Phil Ochs: There But For Fortune*, when Ochs heard the news, he lost his mind but he also regained some direction in organizing, "An Evening with Salvador Allende," a benefit for Chile. While he was so drunk during the show that he could hardly sing at times, because of Dylan's participation, the benefit was a success and was also the first time people publicly announced that the CIA was likely behind the Chilean coup.

Besides truth-telling and coalescing people to march, sing, and fight for various causes, Ochs' contribution as a musician crossed into the absurd at times, or more accurately, Theatre of the Absurd, which he loved. He organized "The War is Over" events in 1967 (and wrote an amazing song of the same title), bringing together thousands of people to march against traffic with noise-makers to celebrate the end of the war. "You can create your own reality. This is what people forget when they become children of the media," Ochs said. By the time the war actually ended eight years later, Ochs was almost beyond reach when he performed for 100,000 in Central Park with Seeger, Odetta, Harry Belafonte, Baez, and many others. He would die by his own hand within a year.

"He was independent, and he took on whatever was ridiculous even he was ridiculous too, but he was ridiculous in a very decent way. He was really devoted to peace and justice," said his friend and fellow organizer Cora Weiss. What he left behind was a body of music precisely naming his devotions. As writer Christopher Hitchens said in *There But for Fortune*, "Phil's very tough grainy songs like 'Santa Domingo,' 'Love Me, I'm a Liberal,' and 'Here's to the State of Mississippi' were far more political and tough-minded than the much more generalized accessible 'Blowing in the Wind.' Anyone could like Bob

Dylan. Everyone did.” But some of us found Ochs after his death, his songs amazingly and sadly still relevant today.

I remember holding his albums his in my 19-year-old hands, reading every word on the back cover, listening to every lift of his beautiful voice and true note of his guitar. Over 35 years later, I joined a big crowd in Lawrence, Kansas for “A Night with Phil Ochs, a concert organized by West Side Folk that featured Zachary Stevenson, a young actor and singer who completely embodied Ochs in voice, gesture, patter and manners. Stevenson reminded me of what I had missed in **never Ochs** live, and the crowd – singing, laughing, crying throughout the charged concert – showed me what a difference Ochs made to those of us who had heard of him as well as how important it is to share his legacy. So check out Ochs on youtube, wikipedia (which has a very accurate biography of him), through his sister Sonny Ochs' remembrance page (<http://www.sonnyochs.com/philbio.html>), the film *Phil Ochs: There But For Fortune*, a book of the same title by Michael Schumacher, and wherever else you can find him. Most of all, listen to him singing of a world we still seek.