

## Folk City

A mighty gathering of US folk veterans marked a book and exhibition launch. **Liz Tomson** was there.



Photo: Filip Wolak

Author Stephen Petrus and the Lead Belly Estate's James Robinson look at Lead Belly's guitar.

**T**he first record I ever owned was *Michael* by the Highwaymen. I have it still, a worn 45rpm dated 1961, its teal label bearing the United Artists colophon. I remember playing it over and over on the big old gramophone my parents had recently acquired.

I guess what engaged my then four-year-old ears was the childlike simplicity of the vocals but, listening now, I hear echoes of the call-and-response style that Charles Pickard Ware must have noted when he wrote down the spiritual, which he heard in the 1860s as he was rowed across Station Creek in the Sea Islands of South Carolina. Number 11975 in the Roud Folk Song Index, it is known to generations of children as *Michael, Row The Boat Ashore*.

At the time of the recording – a *Billboard* number one in 1959 – the five Highwaymen were students at Wesleyan College, Connecticut, and they were outriders for the American folk revival that began when the Weavers took a sanitised version of Lead Belly's *Goodnight, Irene* to chart success in 1950. By the time President Kennedy declared the torch passed, Greenwich Village was established as the epicentre of the revival. New specialist record labels were founded (Folkways, Vanguard and Elektra among them) and clubs and theatres offered platforms to musicians such as the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, Harry Belafonte and Josh White. Campuses from California to the New York islands spawned folk clubs and, at the University of Minneapolis, a student whom the world would come to know as Bob Dylan was obsessing about Woody Guthrie.

By the time Dylan arrived in New York City in January 1961, some 40 Village clubs and coffeehouses were showcasing folk music and the scene was chronicled almost daily in the *New York Times* by Robert Shelton. The Bitter End, the Café au Go Go and the Gaslight, the setting for *Inside Llewyn Davis*, provided some of the most sought-after stages but it was Gerde's Folk City that became synonymous with the scene. The name provides a happy double entendre for the Museum of the City of New York's current exhibition, curated by Dr Stephen Petrus who is also the author, with Ronald D Cohen, of the tie-in book, *Folk City: New York And The American Folk Music Revival* (Oxford University Press).

This summer, I was privileged to be at the exhibition's opening which was attended by some of the great names of the revival. I stood, tears streaming down my cheeks, as Oscar Brand, Fred Hellerman, Tom Paxton, Paul Stookey, John Cohen, John Hammond Jr, Jody Logan, David Masengill, David Bromberg, David Amram, Dominic Chianese and Izzy Young – whose Folklore Center was the locus of the Village folk scene – led the crowd in *Goodnight, Irene* and, of course, *This Land Is Your Land*. Among the guests were Bob Porco, grandson of Gerde's Folk City owner Mike Porco, Terri Thal, widow of Dave Van Ronk, and Betsy Siggins, who presided over Club 47 in Harvard Square where the teenage Joan Baez cut her teeth.

The exhibition is the brainchild of John Heller, a retired Chicago businessman who, at thirteen, got hooked by the music of Bob Gibson, and it is a must-see for any folk fan.

It begins in 1935, five years before Woody Guthrie hit town, and ends in 1965, the year Dylan went electric, chronicling the years of the Popular Front, when folk music became a vehicle of expression for workers' rights, and ending with it harnessed to the civil rights and anti-Vietnam movements. It features such artefacts as Lead Belly's guitar, Odetta's dashiki, the grease-stained napkin on which Eric Andersen wrote *Thirsty Boots* and the pencilled lyrics to four of Dylan's most celebrated songs, including *Blowin' In The Wind*. What's remarkable is how little editing they required.

**H**ow rural music found its greatest champions amidst the brash modernity of post-war New York, the city of *Mad Men*, is a paradox both exhibition and book explore. A yellowing handbill advertises *A Grapes Of Wrath* benefit, March 3, 1940, when Guthrie and Seeger met for the first time. Grainy black-and-white footage captures the fervour of "the battle of Washington Square", in which strenuous attempts were made to ban folksingers from gathering around the fountain to play and share songs in the park that is the geographical centre of Greenwich Village and its beating heart. For Van Ronk, the scene was "a great catalyst for my whole generation". The audio documentary of *The Nashville Sit-In Story*, one of many way-stations on the road to the Civil Rights Act, provides gut-wrenching testimony to the centrality of the link between white city folk singers and their black brothers battling for civil rights. Those seeking pure nostalgia will find much in which to wallow... including a small display about the Highwaymen!

Both book and exhibition (which is extended to January 2016) do a magnificent job of drawing together the many brightly-coloured threads of the New York folk revival and creating from them a rich tapestry which will appeal to those who experienced it first hand and to their grandkids who need to understand both its appeal and its importance. As Pete Yarrow writes in the book's foreword: "Traditional folk music was, by its very nature, a call to the kind of humanity and equity that was in many ways absent from civil society. Singing folk music was as much an act of defiance towards these inequities as it was a way to share a people's art form that was beautiful, moving and inspiring."

Liz Thomson, *journalist, broadcaster and author, is the founder of Bringing It All Back Home, a celebration of the musical links between Britain and America.*  
www.biabh.com