The Art of Songwriting in the '80s

By Robert L. Cohen

'SOFT WORDS, with nothing in them, make a song," wrote the English poet Edmund Waller. But the ethos of Fast Folk, a combination record label and newsletter described as a "musical magazine," could not be more different. Here, "workers in song" — as Leonard Cohen dubbed his fellow songwriters — are king, and their art is taken seriously. (It is also celebrated. Fast Folk's sixth anniversary will be held at the Bottom Line tomorrow night: 15 West 4th St., 7:30 and 10:30, $11.)

The result, for connoisseurs of literate, evocative songwriting, has been gratifying: more than 50 record albums to date (with accompanying lyrics and articles about songwriting), featuring more than 600 songs by 300 composers — songs playful and poignant, passionate and resigned; songs in a remarkably eclectic range of rock, blues, '60s and '70s pop and traditional folk styles; and especially, as editor Richard Meyer puts it, "songs that say something."

What they say is not always obvious, and almost never predictable; the "folk music of the city," wrote ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl, "is difficult to define [and] to pin down." Conventional categories seem inadequate: The "love songs" on Fast Folk's albums, such as Josh Joffen's "Pandora" and Susan Brewster's enigmatic "If Not For Yonder Mountain," are more like thoughtful questions than pat answers. ("There are no guarantees about love at all," goes a line from one of Meyer's own songs.) Other songs, such as Eric Kilburn's "Wait A Minute," offer wistful commentary on the confusions of life and relationships in the '80s.

Even some of the "political" songs — such as David Massengill's "My Name Joe," about an illegal alien — convey their "message" by telling a story rather than finger-pointing. Paul Kaplan's widely known "Call Me the Whale" makes its point by retelling a traditional whaling song from the point of view of the whale.

Among the Fast Folk: singer-songwriters Christine Lavin, Nanci Griffith, Eric Andersen

And the robust humor of Christine Lavin (cheerfully celebrating promiscuity in "Don't Ever Call Your Sweetheart by His Name") alongside the gentler whimsy of Marci Boyd ("Celibacy" and "The Indecision Polka") puncture pretentiousness, and counterbalance Suzanne Vega's eerily knowing clarity.

"We fight lethargy," Meyer wrote of the community of Greenwich Village songwriters out of which Fast Folk grew, "looking for the elusive songs, ideas, and issues that will be fresh and new." Since its founding as a nonprofit corporation by songwriter Jack Hardy, Fast Folk has sought to nurture the craft by encouraging and providing an audience for intelligent and artistic songwriting. And it avows an even more ambitious agenda: to document the songwriting of its time and place, much as Alan Lomax did earlier in this century in the American South.

Modest in scale and supported largely by subscription ($65 for 10 issues, to Box 938, New York, N. Y. 10014) and volunteer labor, Fast Folk has been remarkably successful in furthering careers. Vega, a Grammy-award nominee this year, recorded eight songs for them, and Lavin, Rod MacDonald, Nanci Griffith, Lyle Lovett and Tracy Chapman are among other singer-songwriters who have gone on to make their own records and reputations.

The label has also disseminated songs by less-known composers. (They receive hundreds of tapes of song submissions by mail.) Some songs seem instantly timeless: MacDonald's buoying "Sailor's Prayer," has already been recorded by a half-dozen other artists.

Fast Folk's songwriters — six will be on stage at the Bottom Line — have clearly taken pains with their lyrics, and listeners are invited to do likewise; this is not background music. Subtle and ingenious metaphors enrich the texts; many songs reward repeated listenings with deeper levels of meaning. It is almost a relief to decide that Joey George's rockabilly-style "Choo-Choo" is apparently actually about trains.

Singer-songwriters today are inevitably compared with the gurus of the '60s and '70s, especially Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell. But in the '80s, intelligent, artistic songwriting is a "countercultural" phenomenon in a different and perhaps more profound way than in the '60s, for it represents a valuing of literacy in an increasingly illiterate country; of music in a largely visual society; and of the possibilities of art as a source of insight and self-understanding in an age obsessed with commerce. "Through true song," wrote the Yiddish novelist Joseph Opatoshu, "one may rise to the power of prophecy." ■

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