

If I can't sing, I don't want to be part of your revolution

Francesca Lyman

Bright morning star arising
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Day's a breakin' in my soul

Their voices—smooth, gruff, squeaky-throated—rose up from the desks in the gray, borrowed law-school classroom. They were dressed in rumpled flannel and layers of wool—a motley group of activists for progressive causes. But though most of the troupe hadn't met one another before, what finally came out sounded like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

Whole batches of new verses followed thick and fast, revising the words to "Bright Morning Star Arising," original-

ly an old Appalachian mountain melody: "Don't want no nuclear power plants" and "I feel the people moving." The folk song has been adapted for union rallies, antinuclear demonstrations like the one at Seabrook several years ago and for last May's march on the Pentagon to protest U.S. intervention in El Salvador.

"It happens by a sort of folk process. . . . It's homemade music, suited for the task at hand," says Fred Small, one of the new generation of political and satirical songwriters that has emerged in the last few years. These songwriters follow the well worn path laid down by protest musicians of the 1960s like Tom Paxton, Phil Ochs and Bob Dylan and

their forerunners Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. Small and more than a hundred other musicians gathered at Antioch Law School in Washington, D.C. for the sixth annual convention of Songs of Freedom and Struggle, known as Sas-safra, to give workshops or sit in on them, to swap songs and to talk shop. From all over the country they came, unfazed by icy temperatures, some on trains from Chicago, others in cars from New England and upstate New York, all loaded down with guitars, banjos, dulcimers and scores of leadsheets.

Many of these musicians feel that their music is more needed now than ever, as the wave of conservatism begins to provoke responses of anger, frustration and outrage below the visible surface of mainstream America. Folk seems to still be the cheapest, most accessible and most mobile medium of protest.

Generally, activist musicians say business has picked up in the last year. Maybe it's that songs from the Depression seem timely in the Reagan recession, but "Pastures of Plenty" and "Bourgeois Blues" are having a comeback in certain circles. "Reagan is much better song material than Jimmy Carter was," says Fred Small, who has written such topical songs as "Take a Walk on the Supply Side" (to the tune of Lou Reed's "Take a Walk on the Wild Side") and, for budget-strapped proposal writers, "Gonna Get a Grant to Be in Love."

Pete Seeger, who has spent a lifetime making music for social change, gave the keynote speech to the conventioners: "if the people who ate spaghetti and slept in sleeping bags at a local church could thus be called. Banjo in hand, he roused up the musicians about music designed to rouse.

"If we weren't musicians, we could be wasting our time talking," Seeger said, acknowledging the diversity of movements represented, from revolutionaries to liberals to union workers to feminists. He reminded them of their common struggle as artists and activists and their



Fred Small, a singer writing lyrics for social change, started out wanting to be an environmental lawyer. "Persuasion is not just a single spaced typewritten flyer," he says.

their range of acceptance." He also warned against "guilt tripping" an audience, no matter how liberal its credentials. For example, he advised people not to sing words like "How long are we going to poison the air?" because it just makes people depressed and doesn't move them to do anything. On the other hand, he likes to give an audience something to direct its anger at. "The president of a chemical company may be an okay guy, and, if they had him in counseling for a long time, he'd be fine," Small said, "but as far as I'm concerned he's the enemy—and I'd spell it out."

The workshop was also full of useful general pointers—staying simple and telling stories and not doctrines. But above all, he stressed using humor, since that's what makes a song most accessible. "If Tom Lehrer with his vicious mind had



At the Sassafras convention singers swapped songs at a round robin session that lasted all night.

A guide to the new poets of protest

While it's no longer the rage it was in the 60s, topical music continues to be written. Much of it is folk based, with singers accompanied by traditional instruments like guitar, mandolin, autoharp and dulcimer with an occasional blues 12-string guitar and harmonica. But there are also acappella singers and New Wave rockers among them. Here's a sampling—by no means a complete listing—of records available from this new generation of political singers and songwriters.

Fred Small, *Love's Gonna Carry Us* (Aquifer Records, 1981).

Attorney turned singer-songwriter, Small writes on everything, from nuclear power to feminism to workers rights, in satirical lyrics like "Gonna Get a Grant to Be in Love" and rousing organizing songs like "Stand Up and Tell Them You're Here." This, Small's first album, also contains "Three Mile

Island," with its interesting mix of vision and practicality ("got our eyes on the future and our feet on the ground"); "59 Cents on Every Man's Dollar," a comment on salary equality for women. Distributed by Rounder Records and available for \$8.00 from Aquifer, P.O. Box 566, Somerville, Mass. 02143.

Charlie King, *Somebody's Story* (Rainbow Snake, 1979); *Old Dreams and New Nightmares* (CW Records, 1975).

On *Somebody's Story*, King, one of the troubadours of the antinuclear movement, sings "Acres of Clams," the anthem of the Clamshell Alliance, and "Acceptable Risk," a tale of soldiers who marched across the desert to watch atomic bomb tests and developed cancer 20 years later. His second album also includes "Taft-Hartley," a song about a coal miners' union struggle, and "Thank You, Anita," a satire on how Anita Bryant's antics brought gay and straight together. *Old Dreams and New*

Nightmares includes songs that arose from his work as a union organizer. "The Continental Walk" is about a march to stop weapons production, and "The Mayaguez Incident" tells of the Ford administration's nonrescue of a U.S. ship taken by Cambodians.

Bright Morning Star, *Bright Morning Star Arising* (Rainbow Snake, 1981).

This folk band uses familiar tunes and old Shaker and Appalachian hymns, as well as its own songs, to communicate antinuclear and pacifist messages. On this album, "Solar Power, Solar Power, Inexpensive Energy" is sung to the tune of "Angels We Have Heard on High." Also featured are peace songs and carols like "Tis the Gift to be Simple." \$7.50 by mail from P.O. Box 922, Greenfield, Mass. 01302.

Pat & Tex, *Down Here on the Earth* (Rainbow Snake, 1979).

Pat DeCou and Tex LaMountain sing

not been funny, no one would have listened," Small said.

Musicians who came to the conference were naturally interested in getting more recognition and exposure as artists even though many of those who attended have been recorded, including Charlie King, Ken Giles, Stuart Leiderman, Bobbi McGee, Judy Gorman-Jacobs and others. (For a guide to some of these records, see box.) Musicians were equally interested in gaining respect and clout as activists using music to effect social change.

"Musicians are feeling that they're not being treated right, that they're stuck up on a program for comic relief," says David Sawyer, a Washington, D.C. folk rock singer. Yet music could be the catalyst for change. Others feel this may be changing. "I do sense a growing awareness by political activists that music can

be an important strategic tool," says Small.

Political music isn't likely to make major inroads into mass popular culture except to the extent that the movements on which it feeds grow and get stronger. Women's music, for example, has thrived commercially by maintaining a strong political identity. In many record stores, for example, you can find a separate "women's music" or "liberation" section.

Pete Seeger is probably the best example of an activist who's consistently and successfully used music to move an idea. The boat the Clearwater, which has for 13 years traveled up and down the Hudson River with the Sloop River Singers, spreading the word that the river can be cleaned up, was originally Seeger's idea.

"Whereas only 10 or 12—a handful

of—people knew about the fight to save the Hudson, now there are literally thousands from Sandy Hook to the Adirondacks," says Seeger proudly. "This is a result of years of work and Clearwater waterfront singing parties." Besides the 100 ton Clearwater sloop, there are now two others, the eight ton Woody Guthrie, and its sister ship, the eight ton Sojourner Truth. Meanwhile, Clearwater style projects have been started by groups in other areas, including San Francisco; Puget Sound; St. Paul, Minn. and Solomon's Island, Md.

"Now we've got swimming in the mid Hudson, and that's a source of pride and pleasure to Peekskill and Kingston," says Seeger. "Eight to 10 years ago that would have been impossible."

And it only took a thousand choruses of "Sloop John B" to do it.

"Karen Silkwood," the tale of the atomic worker who was mysteriously killed on an Oklahoma highway, and the rousing song, "No Nukes for Me/Don't You Build a Hanging Tree Over Me." The album also includes "Ten Below Zero," a portrait of the chores and challenges of getting back to the land, and "The Unicorn Song," a whimsical fantasy by feminist singer Margie Adam.

Si Kahn, *Home (Flying Fish, 1979); New Wood (June Appal, 1974)*.

A union and community organizer, Kahn sings folk songs that deal mostly with working class and rural lives from coal mines to truck stops. The second album, *Home*, includes "300 Miles From Hazard," about being an itinerant organizer away from home, "The Union in My Soul," a ballad about union organizing at J.P. Stevens, and "Queen of the Cowboy Cafe," about a lonely Wyoming barmaid. The earlier album has songs about workers like "The Aragon Mill," about a depressed mill town, and "Brookside Strike" about coal miners.

Sweet Honey in the Rock, *Good News (Flying Fish, 1981)*.

Led by Bernice Reagon, the group sings acappella freedom songs with intricate harmonies. Its latest album includes haunting chants like "Breaths," about

the African belief in an animistic world of nature, and "Chile, Your Waters Run Red Through Soweto," about political killings.

Stuart Leiderman, *Songs of Conscience (Songs of Conscience Records, 1981)*.

In songs about issues like pollution, utility bills and the nuclear arms race, Leiderman frequently writes with irony. "Bulldozer Cowboy" is a satire on deforestation in the Ozarks, and "Mothers, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Like Tox" is a parody of a country song for those who live on health food.

Judy Gorman-Jacobs, *Live At Folk City (One Sky, 1980)*.

Schoolteacher and activist, she sings traditional folk songs about friends, lovers, children. Included on this album is "No Nukes for Me" and another song by Lorre Wyatt, composed for the Clearwater sloop, "Once a Boat Has Broken From the Shore."

Holly Near, *Fire in the Rain (Redwood Records, 1981)*.

One of the more prolific of the new generation of political songwriters, Near writes frequently on feminism and gay liberation but also on workers rights and nuclear power. This album contains "Ain't No Where You Can Run," an antinuclear song to a disco rhythm.

Popular music that gets political: Stevie Wonder, *Hotter than July (Tamla, 1980)*.

Includes "Happy Birthday," dedicated to Martin Luther King Jr.

Third World, *Third World (Island Records, Warner Brothers, 1976)*.

One of many reggae bands writing songs about struggles against colonial oppression.

The English Beat, *I Just Can't Stop It (Sire, 1980); Wha'ppen (CBS Records, 1981)*.

Using reggae and ska rhythms, the Beat sings songs about nuclear disarmament, like "Two Swords," and racial unity, like "The Doors of Your Heart."

Gil Scott-Heron, *Reflections (Arista, 1981)*.

Active in the Rock Against Racism movement, Scott-Heron sings about political issues like nuclear power, militarism and, in "B Movie," the policies of Ronald Reagan.

The Clash, *Sandinista (CBS Records, 1980)*.

A punk rock group so political they've had trouble being distributed in the United States, Clash sings about racial, economic and environmental problems.

—Richard J. Kinane
and Francesca Lyman