



## American Troubadours – Groundbreaking Singer Songwriters of the 60's

by Mark Brend [Backbeat Books, ISBN 0-87930-641-6].

If presentation was the main factor, this 176-page soft-back tome would be a heavy-duty contender. Right down to the imitation hardback “fold over” outer cover in appealing shades of green. Mathematical analysis of the contents, finds the initial ten pages allocated to the author's overview of the era, followed by a thirty-page picture gallery of the nine-songwriters [featured here], with outline notes accompanying each photograph. Add to that an illustrated discography for each artist, the biographical key to other musicians/managers/label owners mentioned in the text, an Index, and you've soaked up another thirty plus pages.

As a result the biographies of David Ackles, David Blue, Tim Buckley, Tim Hardin, Fred Neil, Phil Ochs, Tom Rapp, Tim Rose and Tom Rush are confined to an average of nine pages and around 9000 words each. Of the nine protagonists, five are no longer with us. Ackles, sadly, succumbed to lung cancer a few years back, a heart attack took Blue in 1982, Ochs committed suicide in 1976, while Buckley and Hardin were the [self-inflicted?] victims of drug abuse decades ago.

Travelling in the wake of Robert Zimmerman, none of the writers featured enjoyed sustained major commercial success. In researching this work, Brend interviewed the protagonists still with us, plus Ackles just prior to his passing. As a result, the biographies of the latter individuals are less speculative, than the quartet of musicians who no longer walk this earthly plane. The latter deficiency is due to the lack of historically documented facts that support Brend's suppositions. In order to establish a “time line” each biography leans heavily upon a blow by blow account of the recordings made by each artist. It's a well-trodden path, and I won't say more on that score. I also have the sense that the artists chosen for this treatise are there purely on the merit of being the author's personal favourites, or ones he was familiar with. Why, for instance, no Eric Anderson.

According to page 10 of the Introduction, the book purports to concentrate on sixties contemporary folk music as a Boston/Cambridge and New York/Greenwich Village phenomenon. The only other “*folk singer enclave*” mentioned in the Introduction is Miami's Coconut Grove. Pursuing that vein whither Buckley and Ackles, who were [in the main] West Coast based performers ? As if to add insult to injury, the black and white photograph accompanying featured on the title leaf is of The Troubadour, a West Hollywood venue.

If you desire a more complete picture of the life and times of Phil Ochs, I'd suggest Marc Eliot's ***Death Of A Rebel***, or better still the more recent ***There But For Fortune - The Life Of...*** penned by, the other, Michael Schumacher. In relating Tim Rose's story, Brend practically demolishes the artist's catalogue of recordings, apart from a handful of songs. Or was that meant to be constructive criticism? In analysing Hardin's output, the conclusion is drawn that his career peaked with the early-career recordings **1** and **2**.

Excluding the element of speculation and the relating of each story on a track-by-track basis, this attempt to give some exposure to a much-maligned period and group of songwriters, should at least be applauded for its earnestness.

Arthur Wood.  
Kerrville Kronikles 06/01  
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