

Fourtold are Anne Hills, Cindy Mangsen, Michael Smith & Steve Gillette

- "A Quartet of Note"

Part 1 - We form the group and record an album

"Fourtold" by Fourtold is one of the finest albums to pass my way this year. The twelve folk songs, some traditional, some contemporary, and in the latter regard, some old, some new, are an aural delight. What follows is a recent conversation with this harmonious foursome. I began by asking Anne Hills how and when she met the other members.....

Anne Hills. Michael and I met when he was playing bass behind Bob Gibson in Chicago in 1980. Cindy, I heard singing Gordon Bok's "Little River," on the "**Midnight Special**" [**Note.** A Chicago radio show, broadcast weekly since 1953 by station WFMT]. I remember that very distinctly. I first saw her play in a band, The Ravenswood, at a pizza place in Evanston. I thought, "*This is somebody I want to meet.*" This would have been about the same time I met Michael. I met Steve Gillette, down at Kerrville, around the same time that I met my husband Mark [**Note.** Mark Moss, Editor of **Sing Out**]. Maybe 1983. I was not a person who followed any particular type of music in high school. I didn't know Steve's material. Not even "Darcy Farrow." He was new to me and I liked him very much as a person. The first song of his that I learned and sang with him was "Bed Of Roses." This was on main stage at Kerrville, that summer or the next.

Who came up with the idea for the quartet.

AH. Cindy and I love to sing harmony. A Shape Note [**Note.** Three or four part *acappella* sing of traditional songs] project we planned fell apart. Any time I talked about these projects, Michael would say "*Well, you know, if you ever want to include me on something.*" I was talking to Steve and Cindy about harmony work and I said, "*Well Michael and I work together. Maybe our four voices would work.*" Everybody got excited about that idea. The first time we got together and sang was very powerful. That first rehearsal, I think, is the thing that clinched it.

When did the quartet idea first surface, timewise.

AH. We had talked about it, probably, for the last two or three years. One of my favourite things to do is collaborate with people. I've worked with (Winter) Voices [**Note.** A trio est. 1990 and featuring Cindy and Priscilla Hardman], Michael, Tom Paxton and I have one project coming up with Bill Jones and Aoife Clancy. I make fun of myself and call myself a "*vocal slut*," but it isn't really that bad [laughs].

Michael Smith. It's only been about a year it seems to me. That's my picture of it, at least. I talked to Anne about the Voices group and how they isolated their working period to, essentially, December. I thought that seemed awful civilised. You could enjoy it, but not have it occupy your mind the entire year. I liked that idea. As it turned out, for me at least, it's hardly work at all to get to do music with these people because they really take up the burden and they make it roll.

Does anybody else want to offer a recollection.

Steve Gillette. Having talked about it, over the years, a few times, about two years ago it sort of seemed like a timely thing. Everybody was free enough and ready to do it. I was very excited and thought, "*Boy this is going to be a big thing. A very exciting thing.*" I was thrilled.

MS. I felt like I was going to be the least adept at harmonies [laughs] of the four of us. My original picture was that I would sing bass, because I had been doing that with Weavermania [**Note.** Michael's tribute group to The Weavers]. But as it turns out there are times when I get to sing lead, which is nice. And also get to sing other harmonies, other than bass.

Cindy Mangsen. Like Anne said, we love singing harmonies, so this was a chance where we would both get a chance to sing them [laughs]. I've known Michael a long time because I used to live in Chicago, but I'd never worked with Michael and I have enormous respect for him as a musician. It was exciting to work with him.

I believe you had some practice sessions. When and where.

AH. Our first practice session was in the Spring last year in Vermont, and then another time we rehearsed at my house in Bethlehem. We also got together the day before we went into the studio in September, and worked all that day on the new tunes. "Nine Little Goblins" only came into play that day. And Michael's "Aramalee."

SG. That was the tricky thing, trying to get everybody together. Anne's five hours away down in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and Michael's in Chicago which is a day and a half's drive from us. We also worked out there in Michigan, at one point, on the 4th of July, two years ago.

CM. No, that was also last year. We started rehearsing about a year ago, just before Easter. It was the end of March.

SG. We had two good sessions, just sat around the dining room table, all day, each day and drank some wine and talked about songs and sang. It was very relaxed and informal. I did set up a couple of microphones so we could listen to what we were getting. Three or four songs seemed to ring true, so we kept those and moved on.

CM. What surprises me is how quickly it all came together. We didn't agonise much over arrangements. We would decide who was singing lead and then start finding parts on our own.

MS. One nice thing is, since we are all adults, there really isn't a leader. Everybody was willing to say what they thought, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on their personalities. There was a period of time where, at least, Cindy and Steve were thinking twice [laughs] about whether or not they wanted to work with me. I get really specific about what I want to have and what I don't want to have. As I say, I thought of it as voluntary and concluded, "*Let's all be pleased.*" I would say, "*I absolutely don't want to do that song*" – that kind of thing. Anne is used to me being that way, but I could see looks of dismay particularly from Steve and Cindy. I really respect those people, and at the same time there's a part of me that says, "*If you don't speak out about what you believe, it's as if they are not really getting you.*" I'm pretty aggressive about what I think.

So you looked at other songs during the practise/non-recording phase of the project.

AH. Oh yeah. There were a couple of Michael's that Cindy and I love, but Michael wasn't happy with. "The Ballad Of Dan Moody" and "Demon Lover," are both great story songs. "Dan Moody" replicated "Four Rode By" – Michael pointed that out. It was interesting to pick and choose, with the very specific understanding that they had to be story songs. We each tried to bring our writing in, in some way. Cindy was working on a couple of things but they weren't ready in time.

Was storytelling always going to be the thrust of the album.

AH. I wanted to get away from the personal, in the sense of a specific personal experience kind of a song. I feel we have so many now in folk music. I love story songs. Unfortunately, when you get good story songs, it's just like tv plots or movie plots, a lot of times there's a fair amount of death. At one time I jokingly called the album "**Death, Death And More Death**" [laughs]. When we finished it, it had an upbeat feeling to it. My reaction was not one of "*Oh this is morbid.*"

CM. We decided not to do humorous songs. That gave us a little framework to operate within otherwise it would have been impossible. The storytelling aspect actually arose before we rehearsed.

SG. The story song idea, kind of, surprised me. I remember feeling a little restrained initially because a lot of us don't write story songs.

CM. You do though.

SG. Well, there are a few from the past. Reading Mark Moss' notes for the first time I realised that that was what he picked up on. The theme being that songs used to be the movies, the soap operas – they used to be the chance to laugh and cry, so it does make a lot of sense.

MS. When Anne came up with the notion, *“Let’s only make it songs that have stories.”* That really helped a lot, in terms of getting a picture of what was going to happen with this group. It also made it closer to what I think of as, a kind of folk music ideal. I don’t remember a lot of folk songs that had to do with personal feelings. Most of them were stories and I really liked that idea.

At what stage did the name FORTOLD arrive. Who came up with the name.

AH. We had a rule that everybody had to approve of something. If anybody was uncomfortable with anything – and I would say that probably the one thing that we never really were all completely comfortable with – but we had to make a move, was the name of the group. We tried to come up with something that said four-part harmony, story songs. It felt like Fortold did that. We all kind of came up with the name, I would say it was a bit of all of us.

SG. We had thought about the word *“four”* being used in some play on words and we actually came up with about forty-five or fifty different forms of the word. I liked the word, four, that was my favourite choice.

CM. Then we thought about someone introducing us and going – four [Cindy said the word loudly]. It sounded too much like everyone would duck down [laughs]. We had Fortell for a long time, and then we found out there was a gospel group with that name and we didn’t want to step on toes there.

SG. Not those toes. There were some good ones but I think Anne was the one who finally stumbled, pardon the expression, on Fortold. It sounded right.

MS. I stayed pretty much out of the naming of the group, because I think of very corny things. Similarly with photographs, I have a hard time judging them. I said, *“If you think it looks good, then go right ahead.”* Similarly with the name, *“If you find one that works for you, I’ll be happy with it.”*

Scott Petito co-produced the album with you. Cindy and Steve worked with him on their “A Sense Of Place” album. Anne has worked with him numerous times. Michael seems to be the exception.

AH. Michael worked with Scott on my album **“Angle Of The Light.”** Michael’s album **“Time”** [Note. Which Anne produced] was recorded in Scott’s studio. Michael was also on my album **“Bittersweet Street.”** That makes three, so this would be the fourth project. There was a past history for all of us. Scott is not only a premier engineer and mixer, he really knows how to record acoustic instruments well. During the sessions, he also played fretless bass and stand-up bass.

Did Scott come up with ideas for the arrangement of songs.

AH. No that was pretty much our domain. When it came to percussion, Scott and I worked together. Tempo, guitar arrangements, a lot of that was Steve’s work – some Michael’s, but I would say that Steve on *“Four Rode By,”* and his tunes *“Molly And Tenbrooks”* and *“Darcy Farrow”* had very specific ideas. Michael mostly played twelve-string guitar on this album. It is such a beautiful sound to work with.

Does anyone else have comments on Scott’s input to the project.

SG. He’s absolutely wonderful. You know, he’s our oldest boy [laughs]. He’s so gifted and so musical, and, of course, he has worked with everybody. He has produced projects for everybody in Woodstock. He’s probably the best bass player that we know.

CM. Scott is the best-educated musician of all of us. He went to Berklee School of Music and really knows his theory. He’s very tactful at dealing with musicians too – he doesn’t step in unless he really needs to. He’s got such a good ear and we really trust him.

MS. He’s totally involved in this kind of music and has been for years, on the one hand. On the other, he’s obviously deeply involved in sound reproduction. That’s a great combination. He’s quite succinct in the way he expresses himself. I feel I can say to him *“Does this work ?”* and I’m going to get an answer that’s within the realm of reality. There are very few people that I can talk to like that.

How long did the studio sessions last.

AH. We were there in September for five days. And again in January for five days. What you have to build in is mixing time because people think, *"we'll record and record, and mix it in a day or two."* Mixing is really one of the hardest parts, Scott has taught me that. With this project, you hear a voice surface, and then another voice. It really is like watching waves in the water. Scott did a great job of mixing the voices I think.

SG. Scott works mostly on the computer – a MacIntosh with Digital Performer. We were able to do cumulative mixes in the studio while we worked on the songs. We went home with some pretty good rough mixes that we could listen to and then communicate with Scott by E-Mail. I was able to redo some tracks at home. I wanted a different guitar lead and some other things. We were able to keep a dialogue going. They even offered us one last chance, after the final, final, final mix, but we were pretty happy with that one.

Were most of the tracks recorded "live" or were there overdubs/edits.

AH. We put the instruments down, and then we did the voices. We tended to do the voices together in the room, so that there was that live feeling.

CM. One thing we like about the album is that it really is just the four of us, and Scott on the bass and percussion. We can pretty much recreate in concert what we did in the studio. I like that.

Anne, did you have to twist Mark's arm to do the sleeve notes.

AH. No. I did some and I tend to be a little bit poetic and a little, maybe, Victorian or frilly in my language. Cindy wanted it to be factual and pragmatic. Cindy and Steve felt theirs was too plain. I finally said, *"You know, we're all writers. There's just no way that we're going to be able to write this. Let's just ask Mark if he can capture what he hears going on with this group."* So he did it.

What did you think of them Michael.

MS. I really was happy with them. I trust his judgement. He's always thinking about this music, and he's real involved with how folk music is being exercised around the world. He definitely is an opinionated man, one of the most opinionated men I've ever met. It's nice that he feels strongly about it.

Anne, your banjo playing on "Molly And Tenbrooks" sounds like a guitar. Is it a basic five-string model or a hybrid.

AH. Sometimes I have a difficult time hearing which is the banjo and which is the guitar. I was trying to get that driving feeling that Steve gets with his guitar playing. It seemed to work and it's just a five-string banjo that I'm frailing at a real rapid pace, back and forth.

Was the album always going to be an Appleseed release.

AH. I approached Appleseed, since that's the label that Tom Paxton's and my record was on. One of the things with Appleseed is besides Jim Musselman's goal of sowing the seeds of political change through song, he also loves good harmony singing and traditional music. He likes interpretative work, that's roots oriented, but he likes original work as well. He said he'd be interested, so we set it up.

Once the album is released, how are you going to promote it.

AH. We are doing about six summer festivals and a couple of independent dates besides that. Then we'll see. I tend to be project oriented. Plus, Steve and Cindy are pretty busy. So is Michael. We really felt like Fourtold was perfect for the festivals that need something for the main stage.

SG. They can hire all four of us and put us in workshops as two's and singles, and so forth. What we are hoping is that, after one round of festivals, if the album gets played and people like it, it may open up the opportunity to do some of the larger venues that we wouldn't normally do as solos or duets.

CM. Some festivals are fairly short sets, so we'll do half a dozen songs. I think a few of the festivals are full concerts, so we'll probably do some quartet things, and then split up into solos, and duos and trios and divide it up a little.

To be continued. [2915 words]

Arthur Wood.

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