



Tom Paxton / Anne Hills / Bob Gibson **"Best Of Friends"** Appleseed Recordings

**"Best Of Friends"** was recorded live at the now defunct Chicago, Illinois club, Holsteins, on February 16<sup>th</sup> 1985, and apart from the trio who give their name to this release, this CD features singer/songwriter Michael Smith on bass. Best of Friends, included two established and influential folk musicians, Tom Paxton and Bob Gibson, both bastions of the Elektra label during its fledgling years. The third member of the trio, Anne Hills, relocated to Chicago in the late seventies and by the time this recording was made, had one album, **"The Panic Is On"** [1981], produced by Gibson, under her belt. Hills and Paxton appeared as vocalists on Gibson's album **"The Perfect High"** [1980], and in 1984 Anne produced Bob's album, **"Uptown Saturday Night,"** while Gibson was producer of Tom's solo efforts **"Up And Up"** [1979], **"The Paxton Report"** [1980], **"Bulletin"** [1983] and **"Even A Grey Day"** [1983]. Anne sang backing vocals on the foregoing Paxton recordings.

I guess the purpose of the foregoing paragraph is to highlight that it was inevitable that these musicians would eventually work together as a trio, although it's worth noting that circa 1960, at manager Albert Grossman's behest, Gibson and his *then* singing partner, Bob Camp, had passed on forming a trio with a female vocalist. Jo Mapes was her name, according to Rich Warren. Instead, the world was given Peter, Paul and Mary. This *live* recording was made by Warren, for over 20 years, host of Chicago Radio Station WFMT-FM's folk show, **"The Midnight Special,"** and it's also worth noting that he engineered a number of the recordings mentioned in the opening paragraph. We're talking about family here, a close-knit community. *The best of friends.*

Since this is the only recording by Best Of Friends that will see the light of day, as well as capturing their onstage vocal magic, thankfully producer Warren has left intact half a dozen song introductions and some of their *quick-fire* verbal repartee, including in track 13 [*lucky choice, huh !*] mention of that beloved event – the Kerrville Folk Festival. The threesome then launch into Tom's "Panhandle Wind," a song they expected to perform at the festival a few months later. By 1985 the recording catalogues of Messrs. Paxton and Gibson stretched to some twenty albums each. Of the fourteen songs featured on **"Best of Friends,"** nine were composed solely by Paxton, to which can be added the Paxton/Gibson ballad "And Loving You." Anne supplies the gentle, banjo led, love song "While You Sleep," plus there are two further Gibson collaborations "Let The Band Play Dixie" [with Dave North] - which captures events in Washington D.C. on the day the American Civil War ended, and "Pilgrim Song" [with Marv David]. The former song is introduced by one of Bob's trademark 12 string guitar intros. The only cover song on **"Best Of Friends"** is the opening cut, "Sing For The Song," from the pen of the late Shel Silverstein. In the scheme of things, Shel's song serves its purpose well – as this trio's [vocal] *statement of intent.*

Returning to my earlier comment about the song introductions, a few have aged somewhat, nevertheless rather than detracting from the end result they should be viewed as integral parts of a remarkable historic document. For instance, only readers of a certain vintage will immediately be aware of the significance of Stephen Biko [d. 1977], one of the founders the Black People's Convention who struggled against the South African Apartheid system. No one was ever indicted for Biko's death, yet it's clear that the brain damage he sustained while in police custody contributed to his demise. In the closing verse, Paxton tellingly sums up the loss in "The Death Of Stephen Biko" with *"Now the country was South Africa, the victim, Stephen Biko, The victim, All South Africa, the victim, all humanity."* Elsewhere, Paxton prefaces his *ecological warning* "Something's Wrong With The Rain" with proof that Presidents who make dumb statements are not a new phenomenon. Far from it, it's almost a prerequisite for the post. Rather than

blame emissions from internal combustion engines for causing environmental problems, back in the early eighties, former President Ronald Reagan blamed trees for causing pollution. According to Tom's introduction, by way of registering a protest, a tree on a university campus in California posted a sign that read "*Stop me before I kill again.*"

The other selections from Paxton's extensive song catalogue include the heartfelt tribute to a famed blues musician that Tom knew and worked with in his later years, "Did You Hear John Hurt?," while "She Sits On The Table" relates the tale of an abused wife. The latter lyric is suffused by the doubting voices of doctors and police, in terms of, respectively, "*What did you do to deserve such a beating from him?*" and "*The policeman asks isn't she secretly glad for a man who'll keep her in her place.*" Tellingly Anne, alone, sings the final lines "*He didn't mean it, He will change some day, Oh God how he used to love so.*" Their voices intertwine and separate to great effect on the *timeless* Paxton classic "Ramblin' Boy," and the collection closes with the sing-along drinking song, "Bottle of Wine."

The liner booklet includes notes and reflections on this recording by Tom and Anne, Rich Warren and Appleseed Recordings President, Jim Musselman. Warren, in his submission, nails *the essence* of "**Best Of Friends**" with "*this CD is a totally unselfconscious evening of music-making by three exceptionally gifted people in love with the music and the joy of sharing it.*"

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

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