

Fast Folk Musical Magazine [1982 – 1997] – The Village Sings Out

By the late nineteen seventies, punk rock and various other forms of electrically generated noise pretty well ruled the roost in New York clubs, while in Greenwich Village the great acoustic [folk] music *scare* of the early sixties had become a faded memory. For the majority of the general public, music is, after all, a mere *fashion accessory*. Record company marketing tactics have proved, repeatedly, over many decades how pliable that demographic is. It's not unfair to conclude therefore, that neither of the foregoing parties retains any sense of acoustic music as a historically evolving art form. While a sense of *creating and preserving history* was not what motivated them, thankfully a handful of folk musicians in the Village concluded that their voice could be heard - if they *did it themselves*.

Having observed, over a number of years, the shrinking number of acoustic music venues in the Village, in late 1981, Jack Hardy and Brian Rose, local residents and musicians to boot, decided to establish a body that would act as a focal point for the folk community. Initially they called themselves **The Coop**, a name chosen, incidentally, by the late Dave Van Ronk. Within two years, the organisation evolved into **The Fast Folk Musical Magazine**, and between February 1982 and June 1997, with Jack adopted as the first Editor, the two bodies published nearly one hundred issues. Each issue was accompanied by a recording, initially a 12" vinyl album and from Issue # 507 onward, circa 1991, a CD. The first issue of **The Coop** cost \$2.00 and although the annual subscription for Stateside residents peaked at \$65.00 for ten issues in the early nineteen-nineties, in the final years it reverted to the 1984 rate of ten issues for \$50.00.

A number of events had contributed to the evolution of The Coop/Fast Folk movement. Through the seventies, Jack Hardy had released solo albums on Great Divide Records, a label he founded in 1970. With a decade of experience in the economies required, by the time he was arranging for the release of the first Fast Folk recording, Jack was well versed in the *how*, as well as the *how many* and *how much*.

December 1977 had witnessed a group calling themselves the Songwriters Exchange, inaugurate their Monday evening meetings at 29, Cornelia Street – a Greenwich Village café that had opened for business a few months earlier. The Exchange continued meeting at that location for seven years, and the only rule that prevailed from the outset was that the singer could only perform self-penned material created during the previous seven days. To all intents and purposes, the Exchange was a precursor of the Fast Folk organisation in terms of attempting to create a sense of community through the sharing of songs. The Exchange had initially met at the nearby English Pub on 6th Avenue and 3rd Street, but they were evicted after a few weeks. Post 1984 the weekly gathering relocated to, and continues at, Jack Hardy's flat on West Houston Street in the Village.

Circa 1980, the New York label, Stash – principally a jazz imprint, released a twelve-track recording that proved to be a harbinger of things to come. Rod MacDonald, Cliff Eberhardt, Michael Fracasso, [Elliott] Simon and [Lucy] Kaplanski, David Massengill and Martha Hogan contributed to the disc and all of those artists continued that process with the Fast Folk recordings, to a greater or lesser extent. In 1990 Stash reissued **The Songwriters Exchange** as an eighteen-track CD.

In late September 1981 following negotiations with Joseph Zbeda, the owner of a Middle Eastern restaurant called The Speakeasy, located on MacDougal Street, Angela Page began presenting acoustic musicians in the back room of the establishment. During the opening month Suzanne Vega, Rod MacDonald, Frank Christian and Lucy Kaplansky were featured. In due course The Speakeasy became part of the Musician's Co-operative under Hardy's direction and it survived at the location for eight years. At various times during its life, Rod MacDonald and Richard Meyer booked acts for The Speakeasy. In late 1994 Hardy found a new performance space on North Moore Street in the Tribeca area of NYC. The seventy-four seat Fast Folk Café was not only meant to act as a venue for presenting acoustic musicians, it also became the new headquarters for Fast Folk Musical Magazine. Sadly, the Café ceased operation in 1999, unable to sustain itself financially. Let's backtrack a little, as we've jumped ahead of the evolving story of Fast Folk Musical Magazine.

In March 1986, Hardy stood down as the Editor of the Magazine following the publication of Issue # FF303, at which point Richard Meyer was appointed Editor. Meyer a sometime musician, songwriter and recording artist, is a highly respected technical director specialising in scenery design and construction and in stage lighting for the theatre. Hardy reassumed the Editorship in June 1992 with Issue # FF602 and retained that position until Meyer, Hugh Blumenfeld [a musician, songwriter, recording artist and former college lecturer]

and Dr. David Seitz [founder of the 1-800-Prime CD record label] took over in October 1996, for the final three issues.

The initial and main impetus for making the Fast Folk albums had been to provide a *channel* that allowed new creations by Village writers to be heard, by audiences well beyond New York. Although Hardy had been something of a pioneer in terms of creating his own label, most Village musicians were struggling to survive financially, with virtually no chance of financing their own recordings, let alone distributing them effectively. Songs drawn from the Fast Folk catalogue soon became a regular feature of local acoustic music radio shows. In time, the Fast Folk recordings were played on stations nationwide.

Rather than continue recording new compositions by Village musicians *in adfinitum*, CooP Issue SE110 became the first thematic collection titled, Women In Song. Subsequent albums bore the titles, Humour In Song and Political Songs, and while the odd traditional tune had been featured on releases from the outset, CooP Issue # SE206 bore the title, Traditional Song.

Commencing In January 1984 [through 1997], the Fast Folk community made an annual pilgrimage to The Bottom Line, on the corner of West 4th and Mercer, for a series of fund raising shows. Fast Folk Issue # FF 104 celebrated the first gathering with contributions from Lucy Kaplanski, Suzanne Vega, the late Tom Intondi and Jack, plus Christine Lavin who had convinced club owner Allan Pepper that Fast Folk was a cause worthy of his patronage and participation.

In time the Fast Folk recording venues moved to locations farther afield. In September 1985 Fast Folk celebrated the 25th anniversary of the late Lena Spencer's Saratoga Springs *listening post*, Caffe Lena. Issue # FF 304 in April 1986 was recorded in Boston and featured Tracy Chapman. Subsequent albums were recorded in Toronto, Los Angeles – twice, as well as at summer festivals in Maine and Kerrville, Texas.

With the appearance of wave upon wave of increasingly cheaper, digital recording equipment during the early nineties, the songwriter was presented with the capability to make and own his recordings. For that standpoint, by mid-decade the Fast Folk releases had become something of an anachronism.

Following negotiation between the Fast Folk Board of Directors and the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings the entire Fast Folk archive was passed to America's Washington D.C. based national archive in May 1999. In celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the launching of The CooP/Fast Folk Musical Magazine, earlier this year, Smithsonian Folkways released a 34 song, 2CD collection compiled by Jack Hardy and Richard Meyer titled **Fast Folk – A Community Of Singers & Songwriters**. On February 23rd, The Bottom Line presented a show that included Jack Hardy, Richard Meyer, Frank Tedesso and Christine Lavin in celebration of the release. The 2CD recording is drawn from a resource of a few hundred musicians and over 1300 songs. The contents of the discs become self-explanatory if I mention that they feature contributions from Rod MacDonald, Lucy Kaplansky, Dave Van Ronk, Shawn Colvin, John Gorka, Christine Lavin, Richard Shindell, Steve Forbert, Suzanne Vega and more. Oh yes, and let's not forget the tracks by Messrs. Hardy and Meyer.

Finally, CDR's of all the original Fast Folk compilations are also available for purchase from Smithsonian Folkways. Initial enquiries should be directed to folkways@aol.com

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