

Lifestyles

Baseball Balladeer: Chuck Brodsky's love of music and the game

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Friday, July 13, 2007 9:33 PM EDT

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Singer-songwriter Chuck Brodsky has been busy for over twenty years living his life penning some of the most clever, insightful and thought-provoking melodies by anyone in the music world.

His tunes touch on many subjects; some are autobiographical, some are serious songs that have to do with pollution or politics, while others showcase his wry humor.

He was far from an overnight success but his path has been one that he has enjoyed and he continues to write and tour across the country doing precisely what he loves, usually connecting with audiences on an intimate level, and on other occasions, at various folk festivals.

Brodsky was first noticed on a national level after performing at the Napa Valley Folk Festival in 1992, where he won the "Emerging Songwriter Award." The next year, he was performing at the renowned Kerrville Folk Festival in Kerrville, Texas. He released his first album, "A Fingerpainter's Murals," in 1995 and began touring in earnest.

Brodsky, 47, was born and raised in Philadelphia and his father was a definite influence on his intense interest in the sport he cherishes, baseball.

"My dad's company had season tickets to Phillies games at old Connie Mack Stadium and back in those days, they were not a great team, so we could get field level box seats next to the on deck circle about anytime we wanted to go, which was at least once a week," said the self-described "huge" Phillies fan. "His favorite player was Richie Allen, who also became my favorite all-time player. Baseball was and still is a big part of my life, there were ballfields in the neighborhood where I grew up and kids were always playing pick-up games."

Chuck Brodsky is shown here singing at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. -- Photo Submitted

Allen also inspired Brodsky's most-beloved song about baseball and the title cut of his second album, "Letters in the Dirt," released in 1996.

"On a heart level, that remains my favorite baseball song," Brodsky said. "Growing up in Philly and with Richie still my favorite all-time player, that song means a great deal to me. It's really a thank you song to my dad for letting me grow up as a baseball fan and for shielding me from the prejudice that was directed at Richie."

Allen was thought of by many of the harsh Phillie fans as a malcontent and boos were directed at him, sometimes unmercifully.

The power-hitting first baseman responded without uttering a word -- instead by writing messages in the dirt around first base, thus inspiring the song title.

Years later, Brodsky met Allen in Cooperstown, N.Y., the home of the Baseball Hall of Fame, where Brodsky has performed on three occasions. He introduced himself to his childhood hero and gave him a copy of his fifth CD, "The Baseball Ballads," which included the tribute to Allen. Included in the song booklet to the recording is a picture of Allen that was taken for Life Magazine, showing the word "BOO," which was Allen's response to the taunts of the Phillie fans. The photo brought a tear to Allen's eye when he saw it again, which undoubtedly brought back emotional memories of his days in Philadelphia in the turbulent 1960s.

The first baseball song written by Brodsky, "Lefty," appeared on his debut album and is also included on "The Baseball Ballads."

"It's loosely based on Steve Carlton, but it's really a fictional character," Brodsky noted. "It's about a guy in the last days of his career still trying to hang on."

Another song featured on "Letters in the Dirt," as well as "The Baseball Ballads," is "The Ballad of Eddie Klepp," a true story about the only white player to play in the Negro Leagues. Klepp was signed by the Cleveland Buckeyes in 1946, but he appeared in only three games. Klepp's presence drew taunts from hecklers in Birmingham, Ala., and the story was interesting to Brodsky because of the reverse discrimination, a polar opposite of the Jackie Robinson story.

Brodsky also says it was really the first story-song he wrote about a real person, after writing more introspective songs about love, as well as social commentaries.

It also earned him a reputation as "the folk singer who writes about baseball," but Brodsky is much more than that.

He has been compared favorably to Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan and John Prine, and the

introductions he conveys to his audiences before his songs are always entertaining, as well as informative.

Brotsky's songs paint a picture and demand the audience to listen closely to what he is saying, simply because you are never quite sure what may occur next. He claims Mark Twain as one of his primary influences, along with many songwriters and musicians.

"If Mark Twain were still here today, he would probably be the greatest folksinger alive," Brotsky mused. "I just love his short stories. I love his novels as well, but I really love his short stories."

He still loves performing in front of a live audience, although "the novelty of traveling has worn off.

"I love to sing and I have to travel in order to do it but the spontaneous moments on stage are what makes it a fun experience," said Brotsky. "In terms of performance, it never gets old because the possibilities are infinite and it's always brand new to someone in the audience who may be seeing me for the first time. Every night is different and I love meeting people and interacting with them. All of it is fun and sometimes the tiniest inflection keeps the songs fresh and interesting to me."

Brotsky's third recording, "Radio," released in 1998, brought even more national acclaim from music critics across the nation and the title cut helped to inspire the movie of the same name in 2003.

"I first read the story in Sports Illustrated, by a writer named Gary Smith, and it inspired me to write the song," Brotsky said. "The director of the film, Michael Tollin, also read Gary's piece and was inspired to make the movie after reading the article and hearing my song. As it turned out, we were also all three Phillie fans who grew up in the same area."

The song and film are based on a developmentally challenged man in South Carolina, portrayed by Cuba Gooding Jr., who was taken under the wing of a high school football coach. The movie was a tear-jerker that garnered several awards for Gooding Jr. and supporting actress Alfre Woodard.

Also on the "Radio" CD is "Moe Berg: The Song," the true story of a backup catcher in the 1920s and 1930s who later became an agent for the Office of Strategic Services during World War II.

"It's a truly amazing story and I like that one a lot," said Brotsky. "On a personal level, I learned that my great-uncle knew Berg and recently had that confirmed. Berg was inducted into the Jewish-American Hall of Fame and I was sitting there watching a presentation when I saw my great-uncle's name as one of his personal references for the OSS job."

That song, as well as the aforementioned songs, are all part of "The Baseball Ballads," which I would highly recommend to any true baseball aficionado.

Also included on the disc are songs about the "Clown Prince of Baseball," Max Patkin, who performed in front of major and minor league crowds for over 50 years, "Dock Ellis' No-No," "Bonehead Merkle," "The Unnatural Shooting of Eddie Waitkus" and "Whitey and Harry," a song about the longtime Phillies announcing duo of Richie Ashburn and Harry Kalas.

Brodsky met Patkin, also a former Cleveland Indians coach, just before the affable comedian suffered a ruptured aorta and passed away at the age of 79 in 1999. The song was originally titled "Going to Heaven" but was later changed to "Gone to Heaven" by Brodsky.

"Max loved the song and used to play it for all of the doctors and nurses in the hospital," recalled Brodsky. "I had just met him a week before he died and he was actually trying to resurrect his career at the time."

Brodsky said the song about Ellis, the former flaky Pittsburgh Pirates pitcher, is one of "the really fun songs to perform." The song tells the tale of Ellis' no-hitter in 1970 against the San Diego Padres despite being under the influence of LSD, according to Ellis. The talented but controversial Ellis also claimed he never pitched a major league game without the assistance of drugs. Ironically, today Ellis works a drug counselor.

Most baseball fans are familiar with the story of Fred Merkle, who will forever be remembered for costing the New York Giants the 1908 pennant for missing second base. The baserunning blunder wasn't ruled on until the game was apparently over and thousands of fans had stormed the Polo Grounds field. Since the Cubs and Giants finished the season tied because of Merkle's mistake, a playoff game was held the next day and the Cubs prevailed and went on to win their second World Series.

Tim Flannery, the third base coach for the San Francisco Giants and a former infielder for the San Diego Padres, is a friend of Brodsky's after a mutual friend thought they had a lot in common. Flannery has also been writing songs for many years, as well as performing for teammates and audiences.

"Tim is a really good musician and songwriter and we met up in Atlanta when the Padres were playing there and we played for about a dozen of his teammates in the hotel," recalled Brodsky. "Tim also uses the Merkle song to instruct players today on what not to do."

The song about Waitkus, a former All-Star first baseman for the Phillies in 1948 and 1949 was intriguing to Brodsky because Waitkus served as the inspiration for the novel *The Natural*, written by Bernard Malamud in 1952. The book later became one of the

biggest baseball movies of all time in 1984. Malamud took the basic elements of Waitkus' tragic tale and wove them along with other baseball legends into his novel.

The tragedy involved Waitkus getting shot by an obsessed fan in Chicago in 1949. He barely escaped death but his career and life were never the same.

The song about Brodsky's beloved Phillie broadcasting team is also a very personal one for the singer-songwriter, who now makes his home in Asheville, N.C. Ashburn, the former fleet-footed centerfielder and Hall of Famer, was also known as Whitey because of his lightly colored hair. Following his retirement in 1962 after playing for the expansion New York Mets, Ashburn moved to the radio booth. Kalas joined the Phillies in 1971 and the two became best friends as well as synonymous with Philadelphia baseball until Ashburn suffered a heart attack and died in 1997.

"I played baseball with Richie's son in high school," Brodsky said. "Richie used to come and watch us play sometimes, he would just stand off to the side and smoke his pipe. So, that song means a lot to me and I remember going back to Philly when they had his coffin on display, there were about 30,000 people that came out to pass by. Listening to Phillies games when I'm on the road was never quite the same after that."

Brodsky has recorded a pair of albums since "The Baseball Ballads."

"Color Came One Day" was released in 2004 and "Tulips For Lunch" came out in 2006. The former didn't include any baseball songs but his most recent release includes "The Curse of the Billy Goat," the infamous tale of why many Cub fans believe they were deprived of a World Series in 1945 and haven't claimed a title since 1908.

Brodsky says he is always writing new material and enjoys the research aspect of his profession.

"The Internet has made songwriting easier, I can usually determine the truthfulness of something I'm researching if seven to ten articles contain the same information," Brodsky explained. "I'm also a member of the Society of Baseball Research (SABR) which provides me access to their materials. Tim Wiles, the director of research at the National Baseball Hall of Fame library, has also become a close friend and a valuable resource as well."

Wiles also has a great deal of admiration for Brodsky and his immense talent and his quote is included on Brodsky's Web site.

"Baseball's troubadour poet laureate... Chuck combines his gift for lyrics and melody with his love for baseball history and culture, and in the process creates a new chapter in the folklore of our national pastime."

Not only is Brodsky a masterful storyteller, but he is also a very genuine, down-to-earth

individual who deserves any praise he receives, as well as much-deserved success in the future.

For much more information about Brodsky or to order his music, see <http://www.chuckbrodsky.com>.

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