

THE ENGAGING AND EDIFYING EFQ INTERVIEW

Chuck Brodsky,

Baseball Balladeer

By EFQ Staff

Chuck Brodsky is a folksinger. A good one. He's been at his craft for about twenty years now, ever since his freshman orientation at Penn State when he observed others playing guitar around the university campus and decided that the life of a troubadour was more appealing than spending his time sitting in a lecture hall. Before that epiphany, Brodsky's musical instrument had been the piano, but he soon took up the guitar, withdrew from classes, and began working at a folk club in Philadelphia. Over the next few years he spent a lot of time back at State College playing around the campus, but eventually decided that his future lay elsewhere. In 1981, he hitchhiked out to California, ending up in the Bay area, where he immersed himself in the local folk scene. Although Brodsky lived in Berkeley and San Francisco for most of the next fifteen years, he also spent two years street-singing in Europe and six months working on a kibbutz in Israel. When in California, Brodsky sang and wrote whenever he could—and supported himself with a variety of jobs: picking fruit as a migrant laborer, driving an ice-cream truck, working as a bank courier; merchandising for a book distributor.

Such experiences undoubtedly provided him with the grist for many a song, and Brodsky began to perform at local events, including the San Francisco Free Folk Festival and the Napa Valley Folk Festival, where he won the "Emerging Songwriter Award" in 1992. But it wasn't until he appeared at the renowned Kerrville Folk Festival (in Kerrville, Texas) in 1993 that Brodsky realized his music would resonate with larger audiences. "At Kerrville," Brodsky says, "I met folks who actually book performers for events, and I started getting inquiries about my availability." He also received positive feedback from fellow performers, something that took him by surprise. "I always believed in my long-term future," Brodsky adds. "But I assumed the breakthrough would be farther down the road."

Brodsky's debut CD, *A Fingerprinter's Murals* (Waterbug Records) was released in 1995, followed by *Letters in the Dirt* (1996); *Radio* (1998); and *Last of the Old Time* (2000), all of which appeared on the Red House Records label. But it is his latest release, *The Baseball Ballads*

(which he self-produced), that has probably brought him the most media attention. The Baseball Ballads is a compilation of his previously recorded baseball songs (that have appeared on his other CDs) as well as several new releases that Brodsky has been performing the past couple of years. While he doesn't wish to be pigeonholed as a "baseball singer," he's especially happy about the publicity the CD has generated, given that his role as producer, financier, and overall designer of the accompanying song booklet made the project a "true labor of love." EFQ publisher Tom Goldstein first interviewed Brodsky in 1999 when the singer-songwriter was in St. Paul for a concert, met him again at the Society for American Baseball Research National Convention in Milwaukee in the summer of 2001 (where Brodsky performed in a downtown park on the waterfront), and conducted a second interview by phone in early September.

EFQ: Your baseball songs seem to focus on the "fringe players" in baseball—Max Patkin, Moe Berg, Eddie Klep—or tragic figures like Fred Merkle and Eddie Waitkus. What attracts you to these kind of stories?

CB: I'm generally interested in the stories that haven't been covered and written to death. Something that's fresh, rather than just dwelling on the mundane. Obvious, well-known subjects like Babe Ruth and Joe DiMaggio have already been dealt with extensively; I'm more interested in the stories that haven't been told. And yet your first baseball song, "Lefty," while loosely based on Steve Carlton, was really just a folksong about baseball rather than an attempt to examine a historical player or event. At that time I was pretty shy about playing a baseball song for a folk audience; I thought people would consider it to be trite. It never occurred to me that the public might find a song like that thought-provoking. But when I played it before an audience in Berkeley for the first time in the early nineties, people enjoyed it. So I thought I should do a song about Jackie Robinson and breaking the color barrier. Then I found out about Eddie Klep.

In Jules Tygiel's book, right?

Yeah. There was a brief mention of Klep in Baseball's Great Experiment, and I knew right away that the song would have to be about Klep's journey rather than Jackie's.

And that kind of opened up a new way for how you approached songwriting?

It was the chance to tell a true story, to write about a real human being. Before ["The Ballad of Eddie Klepp"], I wrote more introspectively—love songs, social commentary—but not much in a storytelling format. Klep was my first story-song about a real person.

So you made a conscious decision to write more baseball songs?

Once I had the two songs, I started getting referred to as the "folksinger who sang about baseball"; that planted the seed that I might be onto something. And the process was a lot of fun, especially the chance to do more research, which I found really enjoyable. Actually, a number of songs that I've written in the past couple of years, including many songs that aren't about baseball, have required a great deal of research. But it adds a quality to the stories that wouldn't be there otherwise.

Are baseball audiences different?

When I've played baseball gatherings, there haven't necessarily been a lot of music fans there. Some people may pay close attention, while others talk among themselves. At a club or folk venue, everybody is a folk music fan, in part because the venues make a real effort to get people to focus on the music. Sometimes they'll have signs on the door or on each table asking patrons to be respectful of the artists. But I've been pleased with the reception I've gotten when playing at the Hall of Fame, and I thought the concert in Milwaukee [the SABR Convention] turned out well.

Tell me about the song "Letters in the Dirt," which was the title of your second CD. Especially the line "Me & you, we never booed Richie Allen."

It was my third baseball song, and mostly a tribute to my dad. I tried to write it a few times over the years as a traditional folksong, but couldn't quite find the right approach. Once I had "Lefty" and "Eddie Klep," it sort of evolved into a baseball song. And yet it's really a thank you to my dad for letting me grow up as a baseball fan—for shielding me from the prejudice being

directed at Richie Allen, who became my favorite player.

Tim Wiles [Reference Librarian at the Hall of Fame's National Baseball Library in Cooperstown] has told me a great story about you getting to meet Dick Allen in person.

I was in Cooperstown one year for a concert, and Tim tipped me off that Allen was in town and staying at the [nearby] Otesaga Hotel. I was going to drop off a copy of "Letters in the Dirt" at the front desk, but then I saw him in the lobby wearing a tux. I went over to him, introduced myself, and told him that I'd written a song about him. When I handed him the recording, he reached over and pinched my cheek. Then I took out the song booklet and showed him the illustration of the word "BOO" [that Allen used to write in the dirt around first base with his spikes]: It brought a tear to his eye.

You had a touching experience with Max Patkin as well.

I was traveling through Philadelphia a few years ago and knew that he had retired there, so I got his phone number from a local sportswriter and gave Patkin a call. I got his answering machine and left a message saying that I'd written a song about him and wanted to share it with him. He called me back, and we agreed to meet at the downtown courthouse, which is where Max spent his retirement—attending trials. He knew all the guys down there and would kid around with them. A couple of weeks later he suffered a ruptured aorta and died, but according to his family, while he was in the hospital he insisted on playing the song for every doctor that treated him. Of course, after he passed away, I had to change the song from "Going to Heaven" to "Gone to Heaven."

How do you come up with the subjects for your baseball songs?

I saw Max Patkin in the movie Bull Durham, then remembered that I'd seen him perform at Reading Stadium when I was a kid. At the time I filed it away, then later came back to it. I played baseball in high school with Richie Ashburn's son, but it was [the process of] Whitey dying, attending his memorial service, then listening to the first game without him broadcasting that got me to write that one ["Whitey and Harry"]. A friend mentioned the Eddie Waitkus

tragedy, which obviously I had to learn more about.

You've described the making of this album as a real "labor of love." That seems especially true of the song booklet, which is a neat piece of memorabilia in its own right.

Yeah, I'm pretty proud of how that turned out. I knew I would only have one chance to get it right, so I really worked hard at choreographing the details for my designer. I'm really impressed with the historical photos that accompany each song's lyrics. A very nice touch. The crown jewel for me was the Richie Allen photo. It appeared in Life magazine in the late sixties, but I wasn't able to track down the photographer until just a few weeks before we had to get the booklet printed. He searched for the original, but when he couldn't find it, we were at least able to get permission to use a reprinted version. Tracking down that photo made the project; it just complements the song so well.

It must also have been a lot of fun creating the cover image of that Phillies jersey in the locker with your name and number on the back, huh?

Actually, that's my dad's jersey from when he played at Phillies fantasy camps—along with his old catcher's mask and other gear. The guitar in the locker on the left is mine.

Was your dad a ballplayer as a kid?

Yeah, he played at Overbrook High in Philly, a few years ahead of [basketball great] Wilt, then in the army in Korea and Japan. He never saw combat, but got to play lots of baseball against teams on other bases.

How about you?

I played JV baseball at Haverford School, mostly in center field. Richie Ashburn Jr. was our third baseman, but one game we needed him to pitch. So I spent the day before in practice working

out at third. First chance I had in the game was a sharply hit grounder that took a bad hop and hit me in the eye; almost detached my retina. I spent a few weeks in bed after that one.

So that's how you became friends with [Padres third base coach] Tim Flannery—two former third basemen turned folksingers?

[Laughs]. Actually, I first got to know him by email. A mutual friend who I met at Kerrville knew Flan in San Diego and was hanging out with the Padres at spring training last year. He sent me an email saying that I should contact Flan, so we started corresponding. Turned out we had a lot in common, and when the Padres came to Philly that April, Tim left tickets to the game for my dad and I. When we came down to the dugout to say hi, he had the usher let us onto the field, then immediately introduced us to a bunch of the players and coaches. After the game I went back to the Padres hotel, and we hung out all night talking and playing. We even went out at about 3:00 A.M. for a cheese steak at Pat's [in South Philly].

Sounds like a great friendship.

Yeah, we've become good buddies. He's a really talented performer—and a good songwriter, too. He's been carrying his guitar around for about twenty-five years now, so we have a lot of road stories in common.

When you were hanging out with Flannery, did you get a chance to talk with any of the Padre players?

Later that season. I had a gig in Atlanta when the Padres were also in town, so Flan and I spent a couple of nights playing on the outside patio/bar attached to the hotel where the Padres were staying. A bunch of the players came around to listen—[Phil] Nevin, Trevor Hoffman, [Mark] Kotsay, Bubba Trammell, Tom Lampkin. Bruce Bochy and the other coaches were there as well, apparently discussing personnel moves, which felt kind of strange to overhear.

What did the players think of your music?

They're pretty big fans. I was traveling through Houston in late August [2002] when the Padres were playing the Astros, so I went out to see a game. Flan and I hooked up afterwards, and a bunch of the guys started asking us to play, but I'd left my guitar back at the hotel across town. Nevin wanted to buy me a guitar, but Tim and I kind of nixed that idea. So they ended up tipping the Astros clubhouse guy a hundred bucks to drive out to the hotel and retrieve it from my room.

Have you and Flannery ever performed together for other audiences?

Yeah. Last winter he came on tour with me, and we did four dates together: Atlanta; Columbia, South Carolina; Jonesboro, Tennessee; and Asheville [North Carolina], where I live. Then I went out to San Diego in February to be part of his benefit show, "Tim Flannery and Friends," which helps raise money to buy Padres tickets for underprivileged kids in the San Diego area. We had a lot of fun, and I'm pretty sure we'll be doing it again this winter.

—EFQ

Editor's note: The Baseball Ballads and other Chuck Brodsky CDs may be ordered online at www.chuckbrodsky.com, or by mailing \$15 per CD (plus \$3 shipping) to PO Box 16009, Asheville, North Carolina, 28816.

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