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FEATURE ARTICLE

The Brodsky Beat

Not much of a courier, Chuck Brodsky, but one of the best ballad songwriters in America, reckons Roddy Campbell. Brodsky's latest disc was recorded with J.P. Cormier on Cape Breton Island -- far from the buckle of the Bible belt and Irish hotels.

Enoch Kent grabs Chuck Brodsky in a warm embrace. "You are great," roars Kent. "Such marvelous songs. Marvelous.

When Enoch Kent raises his voice to praise a performer, take heed. This man sang with Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger at the outset of the British folk revival. He hung out with a young Bob Dylan. And he has written folk songs the lives of Garnet Rogers and Jean Redpath covered. So yeah, Enoch Kent knows a thing or two about great songwriters -- his pal Chuck Brodsky included.

We're backstage at the soon-to-close Marquee in Halifax, NS, on a mild Saturday afternoon in late November. Brodsky's here performing songs from his new disc, *Color Came One Day*, at a private showcase during the *RendezVous Folk/Nova Scotia Music Week* conference and charms the socks of various movers and shakers of the Canadian music industry.

Recorded on Cape Breton Island and produced by that giant of a man, J.P. Cormier, *Color Came One Day* merely confirms what many of us have suspected for several years now: that Brodsky's unquestionably the best folk ballad songwriter currently in America -- bar none.

With a deceptively gentle delivery and a preposterous arsenal of warm, disarming humour laced with cunning, caustic barbs, his striking songs take aim at a variety of social and political ills. That's not to say the disc is full of polemics. *The Room Over The Bar* tells an hilarious tale in a hotel room from Hell.

“I didn't make one thing up,” says Brodsky. “It was a place I was staying at in Ireland . Ireland is a small country. I'm better not to mention the town. I did so at a gig in Dublin but I didn't mention the name of the hotel. That hotel is the only one for miles around and everybody in the room knew exactly where I was talking about. I'll never stay there again.”

The blue-collar philosophy of The 9:30 Pint also has Irish roots -- where else are you going to get a pint of beer at that time in the morning? Then there's the lovingly told Miracle In The Hills about a doctor and his wife who bring comfort and education to the once remote people of the Blue Ridge Mountains .

The absolute show-stoppers, though, include a peep behind the facade of a model suburb, Forest Hills Sub, and the deadpan commentary about the ongoing undermining of America's democratic and civil rights, Dangerous Times. Clearly, Chuck Brodsky did not vote for George Bush during the recent U.S. presidential election.

“I don't think we've ever seen an administration like this. They are a bunch of liars,” says the quietly spoken Brodsky, who lives on the buckle of the Bible-belt, Asheville, NC. “I do as much reading as I possibly can about them and I have just learned so much that has shocked me to my core. I don't think they have any integrity whatsoever.”

Not surprisingly then, Brodsky is actively thinking of moving to Canada .

“I really love it up here. But the real reason is I'm a huge hockey fan. There aren't many folks around Asheville who are into it.”

Indeed, he has written three songs about hockey, including his comical The Hockey Fight Song, part tribute to former Philadelphia Flyer Dave “The Hammer” Schultz. Still, it's Brodsky's brilliant baseball ballads that have largely generated his international reputation as a unique and compelling storyteller. The wonderful Ballad of Eddie Klepp -- the true story of a white man playing in the Negro Leagues before Jackie Robinson broke baseball's colour barrier. Or there's his hilarious Dock Ellis' No-No , which tells how Ellis pitched a rare no-hitter for the Pittsburgh

Pirates on June 12th, 1970 stoned on LSD. The most moving of the lot is surely Letters In The Dirt -- a dignified tribute to Philadelphia Phillies great Richie Allen, who would write "Boo" in giant letters in the infield track when taunted by fans.

"When I was a little kid, Richie Allen was my favorite player in baseball. My dad would take me out to the ball games and hue fans would boo this guy. He was the best player on the team so it kind of haunted me. I found out as an adult that there was a certain racial element to the situation. One of them being that Richie Allen was really the first African-American player that was an everyday regular player for the team. This was early to mid-sixties, long after the colour barrier had been broken. Richie Allen was I guy who I guess came along before his time. In a day and age when black players were not expected to speak out on issues, he always stood up for what he believed in. Always stood up for himself. The rest of the world wasn't ready for that."

Chuck Brodsky grew up in the Philadelphia suburb of Bala-Cynwyd, PA, and took up piano at an early age. While he worked as a teenager at the local folk club, The Main Point, it wasn't until his first day at Pennsylvania State University that he gave a serious thought to music.

"They were welcoming us there at the orientation meeting; we were in the big hall and I'm sitting there on the outside aisle to the window. And just outside were two guys sitting on a blanket playing acoustic guitars and singing. I was looking at them and thinking, 'God, that's what I want to do.' But I didn't play guitar at the time so I went out and got one and started."

His academic pursuits lasted exactly one semester before dropping out and moving to California. There he picked fruit, drove a truck and became a courier until he lost a check for \$10 million dollars one Christmas Eve. It cost a chemical company \$10,000 in interest and Brodsky lost his job. He then moved to Europe and the Middle East -- busking and writing songs as he went.

Back in the States Tom Paxton became an early supporter. And yet it took until 1995 before Brodsky recorded his debut, A Fingerpainter's Murals. Letters In The Dirt followed a year later. And since then he has released an album every two years: Radio (1998) -- the title track would inspire the movie Radio starring Ed Harris and Cuba Gooding Jr. -- Last Of The Old Time (2000), the compilation The Baseball Ballads (2002), and now Color Came One Day (2004).

All of these discs offer a highly appealing balance of humour and serious social commentary -- be it about sexual abuse (Until You Can Forgive), the plight of migrant farm workers (La Migra Viene), or political persecution (The Hands Of Victor Jara).

“I think I was inspired by Woody Guthrie early on. Some of the Scottish and Irish and old English ballads I heard as a kid but didn't pay all that much attention to, but back then I think it grabbed me at a gut level. I think the art form has a lot to it that's very exquisite. There's a deftness to the old ballad writing that I find very inspiring.”