

CHUCK BRODSKY

Beyond Take Me Out to the Ball Game

By Eric Fine

Chuck Brodsky's love affair with baseball began while he was a boy growing up in the Philadelphia area. Yet, the soft-spoken folk singer composed hundreds of songs before he wrote "Lefty," his first about baseball. His early work was fairly traditional, and the subject of sports seemed as out of place as a Philly cheese steak at a French restaurant.

"Lefty" paid tribute to Steve Carlton, the lanky left-handed pitcher who spent most of his career toiling for the Philadelphia Phillies. Carlton's determination to stay in the big leagues years after he was past his prime inspired the lyric: "He used to throw the heater/but the radar does not lie/And now when Lefty lays one up there/you can kiss that thing goodbye." I wrote the song for a friend of mine as a lark," Brodsky said, during a series of interviews last spring. "I never really imagined that I could get away with singing a song like that in public. I had never heard anybody sing about sports before and it just seemed like a trite topic".

"Lefty" opened A Fingerpainter's Murals [Waterbug], the first of Brodsky's four CD's. As a songwriter though, Brodsky prefers "The Ballad of Eddie Klepp," which chronicles the brief career of the first white player in the Negro Leagues. "The Eddie Klepp song crossed over (from) being just about baseball," Brodsky said, "It dealt with some of the Jim Crow issues. I think that was when I first was able to see baseball as a vehicle for telling a deeper story."

The two songs helped bring Brodsky to the attention of an historian at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York, where he has performed on two occasions. Visitors can listen to Brodsky's CDs in the museum's library.

It's no surprise that Brodsky's muse continues to take its cuts at the plate. His new CD, Last of the Old Time [Red House], features two more baseball tunes: "Gone to Heaven" and "Bonehead Merkle." Eventually, Brodsky would like to devote an entire album to baseball.

While it's not the only sport the folk singer follows, he believes that our national pastime has a timeless quality that is "distinctly American." With roots that go back to the mid-19th century, baseball has witnessed everything from the Civil War to the civil rights movement. "Everybody grew up touched by baseball in one way or another," Brodsky said. "There have been so many great characters and so many great tales and so many legends."

Brodsky began his pursuit of a music career in 1979 after he dropped out of college and bought a guitar. He spent the next 15 years living in the San Francisco Bay area, working odd jobs and traveling around Europe and Israel. In 1995, he moved near the town of Asheville, North Carolina.

By then, his songs had become less self-conscious, telling quirky stories and gently poking fun at the world. The song "Talk to My Lawyer" (from the CD *Letters in the Dirt*) is a good example: "I'm gonna talk to my lawyer/I think I've got a pretty good case/All I need are some crutches - maybe put on a neck brace/I've got a witness - to put a hand on the Bible/Jury jury, hallelujah - you might be liable."

"I think I came to realize after I had grown up a little that I wanted to write songs that most people can relate to." said Brodsky, who turned 40 in May. "Only rambling people can really relate to songs about rambling people. I started trying to write songs that touched on topics that were a little bit more universal."

Baseball certainly fits into the category. In writing about the game, Brodsky often looks past the big names for the more obscure characters and stories. The late Max Patkin in the famed "Clown Prince of Baseball," inspired "Gone to Heaven." "Bonehead Merkle" tells the sad story of a player who cost the New York Giants the National League pennant in 1908 when he failed to touch second base. "Moe Berg: The Song" is a tribute to the brainy catcher who spied on Japan and Germany in the 1930's and 1940's.

But "Letters in the Dirt" remains one of Brodsky's favorites. He dedicated the title track from his 1996 *Red House* album to Richie Allen, one of the first black athletes in Philadelphia to become a star. In the 1960's, Brodsky regularly accompanied his father to Connie Mack Stadium where he watched the Phillies' slugger take his brawny swing in the batter's box of that

old ballpark in North Philadelphia.

Brodsky never forgot the tape-measure home runs that Allen used to hit. But the abuse that Allen received from the crowd made a stronger impression. "I knew that something wasn't right about the way Richie Allen was getting treated," Brodsky said. "I assumed it was for racist reasons and I knew racism was wrong, even as a 4-year-old or 5-year-old."

Brodsky had the rare opportunity to meet Allen a couple of years after the album came out. The singer performed a concert at the Hall of Fame in 1998. Allen was in Cooperstown to attend an awards banquet. The two met in the lobby of Allen's hotel. The retired star had never heard of Brodsky. But he was visibly moved when Brodsky gave him an autographed copy of *Letters in the Dirt*.

"I told him how I'd grown up watching him play in Philadelphia, (and) told him he was my favorite ballplayer of all time," Brodsky said. "He took both of my hands in his hands, and then I saw this tear running down the side of his face. I've had many, many rich experiences, but this was something very special. I never imagined that I'd ever get to meet him, let alone to stand there and hand him my CD."