

CHUCK BRODSKY

Folk Music's Designated Hitter

By Otto Bost

Chuck Brodsky has been interested in two things for as long as he can remember: music and baseball. His father began taking him to major league baseball games at Connie Mack Stadium when he was just a toddler. It's no wonder then that as his unique storytelling style of songwriting has developed, he has frequently turned to baseball for inspiration.

Chuck grew up in Bala-Cynwyd, PA, just a short line drive from Philadelphia. Though there were no "serious musicians" in his family, there was a piano in the house - "I have pictures of myself at ten months old, reaching through the bars of the crib, fingering the piano" - and he began taking lessons at age five. As a teenager, he worked briefly as a waiter at the legendary Main Point folk club, where he witnessed performances by some of the great songwriters and performers of the day. In 1981, he moved to California, where he worked at a series of odd jobs...all while sharpening his skills as a songwriter. "I never really considered anything else seriously, as far as a career," he says. "The very first day of college, I remember sitting in the orientation ceremony, and looking out the window, and seeing two guys sitting on the grass, cross-legged, playing guitars, and I immediately knew that's what I wanted to do."

Like many young songwriters, Chuck taught himself to write by "trying on the shoes of other songwriters and trying to emulate their styles." He's quick to name Dylan, Guthrie, Springsteen and Forbert as early influences. And like many young songwriters, his earliest songs were mostly about himself. He speaks with some disdain about his early work, calling it "the typical introspective crud, a lot of posturing, a lot of phoniness, a lot of lyrics for the shock value that they carried, without the songs actually meaning much." But his songwriting style has evolved over the years. Today his songs reveal a great storyteller, and he always keeps his musical arrangements straightforward and simple, so the music doesn't overshadow the narrative. The title track from his 1998 album, *Radio*, tells the touching tale of a man with Down's Syndrome who, for decades, has been a beloved fixture on the campus of a local high school: "Everyone knows Radio/the townspeople adore him/the students pat his head/just like their parents did

before them." Chuck has a wry sense of humor, too. The song "Third Dead Cat," from *Last of the Old Time*, offers a set of directions in which the lifeless feline becomes a significant landmark: "It's just past the third dead cat/the one that looks like a welcome mat/it's just past the third dead cat."

These days Chuck makes his home in the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains near Asheville, NC, but his Philadelphia upbringing has made him a die-hard Phillies fan. It's no surprise, then, that Phillies' pitcher Steve "Lefty" Carlton was the inspiration for Brodsky's first baseball song. In the late 1980s, Carlton was approaching the end of his 25-year career, and the three-time Cy Young Award winner was showing signs of aging. Brodsky wrote "Lefty," the story of a pitcher whose skills are fading, trying to hang on at the end of his career ("He used to throw that heater/but the radar does not lie/now when Lefty lays one up there/you can kiss that thing goodbye") - but he's quick to point out that the song is not specifically about Carlton. "It was certainly inspired by him, but it's not his story," says Chuck. "There are things about it that are not factual, so I really don't like it when people say that it's about Steve Carlton. It's about a generic washed-up pitcher who once was great."

For his second swing at writing a baseball song, Brodsky decided to get specific. He had read about the first white man to play baseball in the Negro Leagues in Jules Tygiel's book *Baseball's Great Experiment*. Chuck decided that the story would make a good subject for a song, but he wanted the song to be historically accurate, so he contacted the research department at the Baseball Hall of Fame in order to verify the details. The result was a new kind of baseball song - one that not only tells a good story, but a true story - and a song that Chuck remains particularly proud of to this day. Indeed, it became the archetype for all of his subsequent baseball songs, and "Lefty" remains his only song about a "generic" baseball player.

Despite his meticulous research, though, "The Ballad of Eddie Klepp" (see *Sing Out!* v.42 #4) contained a minor league factual flaw. Chuck learned after writing and recording the song that Klep's name was actually spelled with only one "p." With the recording already in print, the mistake stands...the experience, however, has made Chuck even more fanatical about historical accuracy. "You can't mess around when it comes to presenting factual material," he says. "If you're going to be factual, you have to make sure your facts are true, check them, and take the research end of it very seriously, which I do, because I realize that there are people out there who can call you on things that aren't correct." He now subscribes to an Internet listserv for the Society for American Baseball Research (a large group of serious baseball researchers, many of whom are authors or journalists), and publications like *Elysian Fields Quarterly*, a literary journal

filled with stories about baseball.

So what is it about baseball that makes Chuck want to write songs about it? "I think baseball is unique because of the mythical status that it has, and the timelessness of it, and the broad appeal that it has," he explains. "I think it lends itself to art and to writing much better than any other sport does, maybe because of the fact that it's played in a gentlemanly way, and it's a very cerebral game, played in good weather. I don't know what all the factors are, but I don't see the same sort of research societies and serious journalism around any other sport does."

He never stopped writing songs on other subjects, but writing songs about baseball soon became a goal unto itself, and after years of writing, Chuck has decided to release *The Baseball Ballads*, a collection of all his baseball songs to date. "I've never been more thrilled about any project I've put out before," he says. "This is something that's sort of a culmination of a dream...at first, I only half-seriously thought I would do it, and each time I'd write another baseball song, it became a little bit more in focus, I guess, and by the time I hit five or six baseball songs, I realized I could pull this off." In all fairness, most of these songs are not so much about baseball as they are about people - people who play baseball, or watch baseball - and the songs often become vehicles for larger messages. "Letters In The Dirt," for example, talks about legendary Phillies' slugger Richie Allen, who endured more than his share of racial prejudice on the field - but at its core, the song is mostly about Chuck's relationship with his father. "Me and you, we never booed Richie Allen/I never understood why people did," he sings in the opening verse. The nod to his father comes in the closing verse, with the lines "I've since found out all these years later/now I know a lot more than I did/and if back then you knew, Daddy, why all those other people booed/thanks for letting me have my heroes as a kid."

There are nine innings in a baseball game, and it's no coincidence that there are also nine songs on *The Baseball Ballads*. Six are drawn from Chuck's earlier recordings (though he did cut a new version of "Lefty" for this project to keep the CD more sonically consistent), and there are three previously unreleased songs. There's also a brief instrumental version of "Take Me Out To The Ballgame," played on the organ by Chuck himself, between the sixth and seventh songs. "The seventh-inning stretch," he says with a smile.

Chuck's previous three albums were released through Red House Records, and though he hasn't broken his ties to Red House, he has started his own record label (ChuckBrodsky.com Records) for this project. At first he thought this release might "close the book" on writing baseball

songs, but his friends are already encouraging him to start working on "Volume 2," and now he sounds a bit undecided on the matter. "There's no real reason to stop, especially if this album is well received," he muses. "Who knows? I'd love people to say after I die that "Chuck Brodsky wrote great baseball songs...and he wrote a hell of a lot of 'em."