

No Brooding on Radio

Chuck Brodsky strives

to tell stories

By Dan Armonaitis

The folk music community is full of talented singer/songwriters, but talent alone doesn't always make for songs that stand out from the crowd. While many folksters are brooding away on intense, emotionally dark ruminations on their personal experiences, Asheville-based Chuck Brodsky's uniquely appealing songs chronicle the stories of unlikely and overlooked characters and communities, turning ordinary tales into fascinating songs.

"I don't really try to come up with anything," Brodsky says of his ability to find interesting stories. "I think that's the key. I just pay attention, and when I encounter something, I recognize that 'this is a gift right here, this is an important story. This has a lot of meat to it. This is something that I can write something about.' For me, the topic is everything - well, not everything, but it's at least 75 percent of it. If the topic doesn't strike me as being deep enough or rich enough to go mining for, then I don't even bother to try to write."

Take, for example, the title track from his latest release, *Radio*. The song relates the story of a mentally retarded man from Anderson, SC and the T.L. Hanna High School community which has embraced him since he was a kid. *Radio* goes to class, eats in the cafeteria, and helps manage the football team. Brodsky gives the story an appropriately light-hearted musical flavor.

Much of Brodsky's keen eye for characters and stories can, perhaps, be attributed to the fact that he has spent time in many different places, encountering a variety of different people. Though he currently resides in Asheville, Brodsky was born and raised in Philadelphia and has also lived in San Francisco, Sweden, and Denmark.

"I think the most important observation I've made has been that people feel the same, and think the same, and deal with the same stuff no matter where they live," Brodsky says. "No

matter what culture it is, parents still worry about their kids, and people still have to make a living and house and clothe themselves. People have a sense of humor wherever they are. Whatever culture they're born in, people feel pain. Human beings are human beings no matter what culture they come from."

Radio's favorite sport at T.L. Hanna may be football, but some of Brodsky's most popular songs are the ones he's written about America's true sports pastime: baseball.

The title track to his album *Letters in the Dirt* is about his boyhood idol,

Dick Allen, the Phillies slugger who endured racism long after baseball's color barrier had been broken. The record also contains "The Ballad of Eddie Klepp," about the first white baseball player in the Negro Leagues. And Radio includes "Moe Berg: The Song," which tells the story of a Brooklyn Dodgers catcher who also dueled as a pre-World War II spy for the United States.

"My dad's a real big baseball fan, and he took me to games all the time when I was a kid," Brodsky explains. "We also played a lot of ball together, so when I grew up I started to write baseball songs as kind of a way for the two of us to connect."

Because of baseball-related songs, Brodsky has a file in the music library at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, NY. But the biggest honor Brodsky has received is that several of his musical peers have recorded his songs, including such heavyweights as David Wilcox and Kathy Mattea.

"That anybody would record some of my songs is a big compliment," Brodsky says. "Every time someone records one of my songs, it's a real nice feeling. It's sort of a validation, not that I'm really looking for that, necessarily, but to be respected by my peers and other songwriters is great. David Wilcox has written some great songs, and to have a great songwriter want to do one of my songs is an honor."

Even without that sort of validation, Brodsky knows he's pursuing the right career for himself.

“Music is just something that I always wanted to do. I saw people doing it when I was a teenager, and it just struck a chord with me, no pun intended.”

But growing up with rock and roll influences around him, it took Brodsky some time to envision himself as a folk storyteller. “Once upon a time, I probably wanted to be Bruce Springsteen or something - in the rock and roll world. But I think the older I got, the more clearly I saw that the world of rock and roll is a little too phony, a little too image-driven. The world of folk music sort of came into view for me, and I saw how by and large it’s a lot more real. The people in it are not really dog-eat-dog. They’re not really in it for the money. Anytime you’re doing music for the money, corporate interests get involved and then the artistic side suffers.”

As long as he keeps running across characters as rich as Radio and continues to pay attention to the interesting ways people, sports, community, and history collide in our culture, Brodsky’s art will likely not suffer.