



Paul Newman's Greatest Scene

By Ross Altman (Reprinted by permission from [FolkWorks](#))

"You better kill me this time, Burt...you better have your goons go all the way with me; because if you just break my thumbs again, or my arms and legs, I'm going to wait until I'm all patched up and I'm going to come and find you and I'm going to kill you. Because if I just walk away then she never lived, and she never died; and we both know that isn't true, don't we Burt? She lived; she died. And I loved her, Burt; I loved her and I threw her away for a pool game."

That was *Fast Eddie Felson*, played by Paul Newman, in his 1961 movie *The Hustler*, based on the novel by Walter Tevis. And it's the greatest one-minute of film in his career; worthy of an Oscar all by itself, which of course he didn't get. (George C. Scott played Burt.)

But, borrowing a line from Arlo Guthrie in *Alice's Restaurant*, I didn't come here to talk about Paul Newman, I came to talk about who wrote what—and the responsibility of a singer towards his or her songs.

Does it matter? Not according to some Songmakers—who were performing at a Hoot I attended recently. They will never see this essay, so there is no reason to reveal their names. Besides, they represent a larger problem, and it is the problem that interests me. They sang an Ian and Sylvia song, not in the sense that one of them wrote it, but they introduced it to the modern folk repertoire. It's a Canadian folk song, a traditional song,

collected and published for the first time in a book by Canadian folklorist Edith Fowke, published by Penguin Paperbacks, from which Ian and Sylvia learned it. It's on their first album, *Ian and Sylvia*.

These Songmakers introduced the song as having been written or collected and taught to them by "an old Songmakers' friend of ours," about twenty-five years ago. Then they sang the traditional Canadian Ian and Sylvia song *Mary Anne*—"in his memory."

After they finished I ineptly and impolitely mentioned where the song actually came from—and it wasn't their friend—whatever he may have told them.

Well, you'd have thought I had farted in church. Friends of theirs jumped to their defense and told me point blank, "What does it matter who wrote what, or where a song comes from? We're just here to sing!"

It matters to me, and I came here to tell you why. Woody Guthrie's favorite song it turns out was not one of the thousand he wrote himself; *The Hobo's Lullaby* was written by Goebel Reeves, a fellow Merchant Marine who called himself "The Texas Drifter." It was included on a Warner Brothers anthology of Guthrie songs performed by other famous contemporary folk singers, such as Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Odetta and Pete Seeger. Trouble was it was credited to Woody Guthrie, not its author Goebel Reeves.

It's the only song Goebel Reeves is known for, and now, thanks to sloppy editing at Warner Brothers Records—and during the Bi-Centennial no less—it is not even properly credited to him. What do you make of it?

Bob Dylan's early masterpiece, *Blowing In the Wind*, is more often thought to have been written by Peter, Paul and Mary who made it into a hit, and were therefore invited to perform it at The March on Washington fifty years ago this August 28. What do you make of it?

According to some attendees at a local music gathering the legendary Ian Tyson's greatest song *Four Strong Winds* was simply purchased by him from an unknown tunesmith. What do you make of it?

But why stop at folk music—a recent movie called *Anonymous* perpetuated the ruling class lie that Shakespeare didn't write his own plays—they were written by their ancestor the Earl of Oxford. This is the mother of all misattributions, despite the fact that Shakespeare's own contemporary Ben Jonson, about whom there is not a whiff of confusion, testified in his majestic eulogy for Shakespeare that *The Sweet Swan of Avon* was indeed their author. What do you make of it?

Some will make of it, as SDS President the late Carl Oglesby wrote on another occasion, that I overdraw the matter. But I make this point every chance I get for the same reason that pool hustler Fast Eddie Felson risked his life for the memory of his girlfriend Sarah

Packard (played by Piper Laurie), because if he didn't "she never lived, and she never died."

One could say the same for Shakespeare, Bob Dylan, Ian Tyson and Goebel Reeves—if they didn't write the songs and plays for which they are best known then "they never lived," and in Shakespeare and Goebel Reeves case, "they never died." A critic worth his salt, and one who earned his PhD in Modern Literature the old fashioned way is determined to see that this doesn't happen. Even though I left academia to become a folk singer my training as a scholar stayed with me and that means authors deserve credit for their work. It's akin to the military concept of stolen valor to suggest otherwise.

Don't kill the messenger. If you are a singer and enjoy going to musical gatherings across town, whether The Santa Monica Traditional Folk Music Club (my home base), the Beach Cities Folk Club, ARC, any of various Songmaker Hoots, or their equivalents in other towns and cities, then your job isn't finished when you have learned the song you want to perform; you need to find out who wrote it, or if it is a folk song, who collected it and brought it into the folk canon. Songs have histories, and often it is their histories that make them meaningful.

If you don't know that *We Shall Overcome* originated as the spiritual *I'll Be All Right* from a slave culture on St. John's Island off the coast of South Carolina then you don't know the song. If you don't know that Dylan based the tune for *Blowing In the Wind* on the antislavery spiritual *No More Auction Block Over Me* then you don't know the song. If you don't know that Donovan mangled the lyric of Buffy St. Marie's *Universal Soldier* and turned the German concentration camp Dachau into the nonsense word Labau then you don't know the song, at least if you learned it from Donovan and not Buffy St. Marie. And if you don't know that *Strange Fruit* was not written by Billie Holiday—Time Magazine's choice of the #1 song of the 20th Century in its misattributed December 1999 issue—but by Abel Meeropol, the real name of songwriter Lewis Allen, who with his wife Anne adopted the orphaned sons of Ethyl and Julius Rosenberg when they were executed, then needless to say, you don't know the song. He also wrote the lyrics to *The House I Live In*, (with music by Earl Robinson).

Just because a song is in the public domain doesn't make it traditional, as Debbie Koken reminded me at a private song circle recently; if we know the author then it is still a composed song. And as her husband Terry added, even "a traditional song was written by someone—we may just not know by whom."

One of my favorite stories behind a song is from Irish poet Thomas Moore's ballad *Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms* about the permanence of love. He wrote it as a personal protest song for his wife, when she took a vacation to America and sent him a letter upon her return telling him not to meet her at the ship's dock because she was "not fit to be seen in public" and did not want to embarrass him. It seems she came down with the small pox during her trip and her face was disfigured with pockmarks. Moore wrote this song to reassure her that "the heart that has truly loved never forgets...those endearing young charms." He went down to the seaside and sang his

welcome home song—just for her. Now, as radio storyteller Paul Harvey would say, you know the rest of the story.

Artists sign their paintings, even if it's just their first name, like Vincent. Composers sign their scores, and novelists assume their names will appear on the title page. No one reads or recites a poem in public without mentioning the name of the poet who wrote it. But for some reason songwriters get short shrift; I hear songs presented all the time without any thought of letting the audience know who wrote it. More often than not, I have to ask. That is why the late great Frank Sinatra was so highly esteemed by songwriters—he always made sure they got credit for each song in his performance. And as I remarked in my recent review of Bonnie Raitt's concert in San Diego she followed the Chairman of the Board's lead in crediting songwriters for songs she didn't write.

A folk singer's job is to be the voice of those who are departed, but more than that, to champion the tradition. And that means to connect the dots between the songs and their sources—whether the composer, the lyricist, or simply the ballad hunter who dug them out of the mountains and without whom they would have remained buried treasures.

I thus never sing *Colorado Trail* without mentioning that Carl Sandburg collected it, just like he did *The Sloop John "B."* And I never sing *Dink's Song* ("*If I Had Wings Like Noah's Dove*") without adding that John Lomax collected it from an African-American maid whose name he used to title the song. That was his way of connecting his informant to her song. The tapestry of America's folk music treasury is woven with thousands of threads, and those threads have names and faces and stories; it is our job to remember them for as long as we can. Alzheimer's—which my mother died from—is a tragedy precisely because it robs us of our most precious human capacity—our memory.

Michael Smith captured both its tragedy and beauty in his great song, *The Dutchman*:

*Long ago I used to be a young man
And dear Margaret remembers that for me.*

For the anonymous songwriters and tunesmiths who wrote *Barbara Allen*, *John Henry* and *Shenandoah*, let us therefore do our best to remember those whose authorship is still available to us, and whose names have graced our lives with music and poetry of the highest order. Otherwise, as Paul Newman staked his life on in his greatest scene, they never lived, and they never died.

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