

Folklore Productions and Manny Greenhill

By Mitch Greenhill

After Mitch and I formed our duo partnership in 1976, not long after Mitch had become an integral part of his father's company, it occurred to me that Folklore Productions might be able to help untangle a legal mess concerning the publishing rights to the product of my first few years of songwriting. Very fortunately for me they were willing and able to help me out, and I discovered the peace of mind that comes from doing business with people whose values control their dealings with absolutely everyone. This piece of writing is excerpted from a larger work that was published in a paperbound booklet to mark the fiftieth year in the company's history, and can be found as well at the Folklore Productions website <<http://www.folkloreproductions.com/Folklorefifty.html>>. In both of those instances, illustrative photographs accompany the words. -- Mayne

It is July 4, 1976, and America is in a self-congratulatory mood. To celebrate two hundred optimistic years, brass bands march, fireworks explode, and news anchors pontificate. I celebrate by breaking down on Route 66. Stranded in Kingman, Arizona, my wife and I sit vigil for our Dodge van.

Even in the first light of day, when we roll to the shoulder and contemplate our fate, the temperature is more suitable for lizards than for a displaced couple and all their worldly belongings. Still, we manage to find a tow truck and a motel, and from that vantage point watch the festivities flicker by. It will be several more days before we can resume our journey to Santa Monica, where I am to join my father in the music business.

It was a move that I would not have contemplated a few years earlier. In my twenties I viewed the business world as full of compromises and less pure than a musician's life. But now, in my thirties, my gigs involve playing five sets a night at Louie's Lounge in East Boston, where we assiduously cover the Top 40 hits, careful to play every hook note-for-note, like the record. Now it is the artistic life that seems compromised, and I am moved to readjust. Besides, my dad's most illustrious client, Joan Baez, has left for another manager, and he needs me.

At least that is how it seems to me and that is what I tell myself. Later I can see that Manny might have been just as happy to run the company on a smaller scale and ease into semi-retirement. Or perhaps that is how it seems to him and that is what he tells himself. As the years go on, he never shows all that much interest in retirement, and is in the office up until the day before leukemia sends him to UCLA Medical Center, shortly after his eightieth birthday.

Or perhaps each of us needs to reassure himself that he is acting selflessly -- father helping son, son helping father -- so that we can maneuver into unacknowledged symmetry. Perhaps we belong together at Folklore Productions, where we guide the careers of those who are truly plugged into the power of music, but who nonetheless need our skills. Perhaps we are also keeping the structure sound for those who will follow, like my own son Matthew, who joins years later.

On July 4, 1976, Folklore Productions was nineteen years old, although there is a certain amount of guesswork involved in dating its birth -- Manny had already

presented some small, somewhat informal concerts and had been involved with the Folksong Society of Greater Boston. Then, in the fall of 1957, he presented a series of more ambitious concerts, featuring his old guitar teacher Josh White in one, and in another the artist he most respected, Pete Seeger. These were major events at important venues, Jordan Hall and Symphony Hall. They put Manny on the city's cultural map and marked a change in his life's direction. For me, at thirteen, they meant a new home life, a house filled with traveling guitar players like Seeger and Reverend Gary Davis and Jesse "Lone Cat" Fuller. Guy Carawan, just defying the Red Scare with an illegal visit to China that had cost him his passport, taught me the basics of finger picking. Rolf Cahn stayed with us for several months, working off his board by introducing me to the blues and drilling me in the guitar solos of Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

Manny had known a number of these musicians, including Pete Seeger, from his days as a labor activist in New York. They both had been at Peekskill, New York, a few years earlier, when right-wing vigilantes had beaten and stoned a crowd gathered to hear a concert by Paul Robeson. In that summer of 1957 our family traveled a hundred miles west, to Lenox, Massachusetts, to hear a concert by Pete and the rest of the Weavers. After the concert Manny and Pete had a long and serious conversation, sitting in the barn auditorium of Tanglewood, open to the steamy Berkshire summer that hovered just beyond their words. Pete had a problem -- the blacklist was causing local presenters to cancel confirmed bookings -- and he expressed a wish to find a local New England presenter who would follow through. Manny said, "I'm your man," and agreed to present his next Boston appearance.

Pete's concerns were well founded. Some months later, with the concert booked and advertised, an FBI agent stopped Manny at the trolley stop, on his way to work. After identifying himself, the agent asked why Folklore Productions was presenting Pete Seeger, a known Communist sympathizer, in concert. "He sells tickets," Manny shrugged, and, feigning nonchalance, returned to his crossword puzzle.

A few weeks later, with the concert just hours away, Pete and my sister Deborah and I went ice skating. He was our houseguest then, along with blues harmonica virtuoso Sonny Terry, who would visit frequently in the years to follow, and Sonny's nephew J.C. Burris, who started out as their driver, but wound up playing bones in the concert. "What color is your coat?" asked my mother Leona, as we prepared to leave the house. Sonny, blind since childhood, helped her get over her embarrassment by reassuring, "It's the biggest one."

It was more excitement than our little corner of Dorchester was used to. Pete's banjo rang through the rooms, and one afternoon a University of Massachusetts student, who called himself Taj Mahal, took a break from his studies in Animal Husbandry to stop by and pay his respects. (At least that's the way Pete remembers it. Taj recalls that they met later, when Pete brought Jesse Fuller for a guest set at a concert in Amherst. "Fuller showed me a way in to the music. So I bogarted my way backstage to meet him.")

The concert was wonderful, and a big success. It was thrilling to sing labor songs with Pete, to watch him chop a log while he sang a work song, and to hear the big sound of his twelve-string guitar and the high sparkling sound of his long-neck banjo.

And staid Jordan Hall was sold out. "The blacklist gave me a lot of free publicity," Seeger said in later years. "If a concert did not sell out, [manager] Harold [Leventhal] and I used to joke that next time we would need to make sure that the John Birch Society would picket." Looking back now, from the twenty-first century, I remember the scene as more informal in those days. My mom would make up the spare room and cook a big pot roast for the musicians. Some, like Sonny Terry and Cisco Houston and Reverend Davis, would become her favorites, and we could expect to see them several times a year, concert or no. On the other hand, Lightnin' Hopkins once indicated his displeasure with his morning eggs by spitting them over the kitchen wall, and became less welcome. (Not to me. I loved using my new driving skills to ferry Lightnin' around to his New England gigs, including the deliciously hallowed ivy of Yale. On the ride home, Professor Hopkins gave a seminar in how to drink gin from the bottle.)

As Folklore Productions reaches its fiftieth year, it is [my son] Matt and his wife Janna who best maintain the tradition of hospitality to its performing artists. His home, in a northern California forest of redwoods, regularly hosts artists who find themselves far from their own. While recording their album *Redwood*, the Irish group Lúnasa slept in the loft and ate abalone that Matt harvested while snorkeling. British guitarist John Renbourn became godfather to my granddaughter Ina, and Irish musicians Karan Casey and Niall Vallely became godparents to Ina's younger sister, Freija.

But, for the most part, things are more businesslike and professional these days, meaning that artists stay in hotels and our conversations are more often in restaurants. They still get a kick out of our main office's location, tucked in among some beach shacks and hotels near the Santa Monica Pier. A few can remember our first west coast office, above the merry-go-round on the pier. And the leggy joggers and roller-skaters still impress those from paler, more northern, and colder climes.

The story of Folklore Productions is in large part the story of family. The guy who thought it up and brought it into existence was my father, Manny Greenhill.

Mendel from the Ghetto

Dr. Greer paused and looked over the group of Manny Greenhill's friends and associates, gathered to mourn his passing on April 14, 1996. Outside, sounds of a spring breeze battled the traffic on Mount Auburn Street. David, recently retired as head of Brown University School of Medicine, was struggling to convey a sense of early twentieth-century New York, a world of impenetrable ethnic enclaves and their old-world authority figures. Like Manny, all of David Greer's childhood friends had been Jewish, and on the basis of their forefathers' experience, saw a world comprised of two main components: "abused Jews and abusive Christians. ... We were taught that it was therefore important for Jews to stick together and it was not wise to venture too far into the inhospitable surrounding society."

What then to make of his strange Uncle Mendy, whose very name had changed? "Mendy had become Manny. He was living among the largely Christian avant-garde in Greenwich Village; some, like his guitar teacher Josh White, were even black (!). He had assimilated and had identified with the problems of the wider, secular society to such an extent that he had become a 'left-winger,' which in those days might be indistinguishable from a -- dreaded word -- Communist!"

This world view was radical. It opened a door out of the ghetto and into a world of empathy and connection, where the problems and obstacles of one group were part of a wider narrative in which all had a stake. It sent Manny into the arts and politics, while David ventured into the hitherto restricted areas of medicine and academia.

Dr. Greer sensed that it was time to wind up his part of the memorial proceedings. Others were waiting to follow: producer Joe Boyd would reflect on the time that Manny turned from an adversary to an ally, by inviting Joe to accompany Reverend Gary Davis to Europe, where Joe spend would most of his life; Doc Watson would recall the time that Manny lent him money to build a garage, and didn't ask for interest; Joan Baez had sent a message of farewell to her first manager; and the Silver Leaf Gospel Singers would make a joyful noise in appreciation of the days when Manny "opened a door, and we walked through it." Dave Van Ronk, Jim Rooney, Jack Landrón would also recall their friend and mentor. But, of them all, only David Greer had the connection to the world from which Manny Greenhill had emerged.

He gathered himself, and tried to sum up his thoughts. "An apostate, Manny nevertheless followed the Talmudic injunction, 'Who *can* protest an injustice, and does not, is an accomplice.' Young Manny was a non-conformist, a reformer, a romantic, an adventurer, perhaps even a revolutionary. In his later years, he was a gentle man and a peaceful man, but nevertheless a staunch advocate for social justice."

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