

# POST-FOLK AND THE "ACOUSTIC RENAISSANCE"

Once I arrived in radio, with LAs only acoustic Americana show, it didn't take long to begin seeing things with a wider view. Radio people receive ballots within their musical genres. When I received mine for Americana album and artists of the year, I didn't know some of the names. How many of these folks do you know? Tom Gilliam, Clay DuBoise, The Melroys, The Believers, Mark Jurgens and the Whistling Mules, The Skeeters, Wade Jacoby, Ots Gibbs, Slant 6 Cowboys, Iris DeMent, Todd Tubaud, The Woodys, Stuart Rosh and the Geniuses.

For some readers, this topic won't be news. I suspect that isn't so for many others, so here we go. For starters, it isn't simply about learning the names and hearing the music of a few new artists.

It's deeper. It made me realize that many speak of "the folk era" as a bygone singularity, though no one seems to have any trouble finding their own favorite shade of folk music performed by still-living artists in what should presumably be, for those music lovers, a post-folk musical museum.

So, what's the folk era that those fans cite? Usually, it's the early 1960s, the beatnik-gone-straight coffee house scene that gave rise to Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, the Chad Mitchell Trio, the Limeliters, Peter Paul & Mary, and in the next half-generation, Joni Mitchell, Arlo Guthrie and John Denver.

Note that others now get included as classic folkies of that era, though they were seen as rockers at the time, like James Taylor, Judy Collins, Simon & Garfunkel, Carly Simon, Carole King, Jim Croce and more recently, Gram Parsons and Crosby, Stills & Nash.

But wait. Older folk fans take issue with those who look at the 1960s as the folk era or a golden age, often asserting that the icons of that time certainly were not carrying the traditions of 1950s-era stars like Pete Seeger, The Weavers, Woody Guthrie, and a dozen others.

Then comes the term, "post-folk." But it's fluid and contextual. Want to view, say, the 1930s as the time of founding fathers? Is Jimmy Rogers now a posthumous inductee to the folk pantheon of that earlier era? Are Charlie Patton and Lightning Hopkins? Would that, en masse, make the 1960s folkies post-folk?

For some, Jimmy Rogers' being proclaimed as "the father of country music" keeps him in another pasture. Others will say the blues giants are in a different genre, one unto itself, and (gasp) jazz – even string jazz – is many miles farther afield. Yet some who cast-out the music of the Mississippi Valley inconspicuously accept Cajun music as a folk category. Others require Appalachian connections to get interested, or even to regard any music as American folk.

What about new acoustic music, that which is not pre-electrification or overtly rootsy? Maybe it's a good place to test that term, "post-folk." Perhaps that moniker is a two-way street, given the later acceptance of those held at arm's length at the time. Moira Smiley, creator of the exciting group, VOCO, markets the world-influenced vocal band / cello combo as "post-folk," yet what folk music aficionado would pass-up the chance to see them? Still, do they emulate traditional Americana roots music? Well, sometimes.

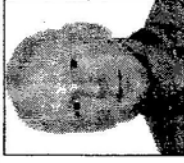
That mention of VOCO's inclusion of the cello illustrates another point. A year ago on this page, I cited a Seattle rock radio deejay who, surveying last summer's tuneful crop, proclaimed it "The year of the mandolin," after she had awarded the previous year to the banjo. Seems rather remarkable, given LA radio, that anyone could credibly do that, but she did, and it was. In that impromptu tradition, I'll proclaim 2005 as The Year of The Cello.

Strings or not, it's not a traditional folk instrument, but one usually associated with chamber music and classical symphony. (Okay, among folk/roots groups with cello, there are Fiddlers 4, and yes, the Putnam String Country Band with Jay Unger had a cello 30 years ago, and there are cellists Abby Newton from New England and Natalie Haas who plays with Alasdair Fraser.)

Yet listen to the raft of new CDs that skillfully employ the cello, and look at the CD release parties that have prominently advertised the inclusion of a cellist in the musical festivities. Two are especially memorable, the sold-out release events for Kat Parson's *No Will Power* and Marcia V's *Simple Magic*. Kelda Nelson's release of *Detour* also brought a cellist, and she's on a national tour with her new release.

If those are unfamiliar names, your listening has likely been limited to more traditional spheres. Welcome to the Acoustic Renaissance.

We are well along with a third wave of new folk, or post-folk. Call it what you will. It is, in fact, a rising tide of music written for acoustic instruments, and even some that's been previously recorded as full-electric rock, now rediscovered or reinvented as acoustic music.



Let's take the latter. John Bardsorf and James Lee Stanley's release this year of *All Wood and Stones* is a fine example and a good album. The "wood" is the pair's acoustic guitars, the "stones" is the music of the Rolling Stones, presented in fine acoustic arrangements. Don't cringe. Think of all those "pickin' On..." albums, where music from other genres is interpreted as bluegrass.

There's much more. Take the group Tesia, a heavy metal rock band who scored so big with their album, *Five Man Acoustical Jam*, that they're out again this year with an all-acoustic tour. And not all the lyrics are of mainstream rock sensibility – the old song, *Signs*, is social commentary in the best folk tradition.

The advent of CD technology, together with digital recording-studio-quality programs for home computers and laptops, added to easy and cheap duplication, allows any musician with aspirations to make and pitch an original CD to their audience. The web is overflowing with offerings of indie music. And it's especially noteworthy that much of that music is acoustic, bearing no resemblance to commercial radio and major label offerings.

Commercial music defies the notion of a free market economy, where the better mousetrap is supposed to prevail. Instead, it's all big money capitalism, where corporate radio and big record labels create and perpetuate an assembly line of American idol clones, always, inevitably, someone who isn't a songwriter and isn't accomplished. And, Songsalive! founder Gilli Moon recently echoed roots-label Rounder's Robert Lefez, who asked in a recent essay, "Who can sing anything in the top ten now?"

That's also a thought cowboy star Don Edwards often shares with his audiences.

So, at least two artists, from different musical landscapes, voice the same observation. Gilli Moon operates in the modern world of some acoustic, some electric, some guitar and other strings, and a lot of piano. Don Edwards is the archetype roots musician, a standard bearer for 150-year-old classics that have stood the test of time: indeed, his discography includes a project with Peter Rowan that was the first traditional Western music album nominated for a Grammy in the folk category.

Other genres sometimes have shared responses to mandated pop culture. It's been 15 years since Kirkwood Station recorded the chorus, "I'm going back to bluegrass, because country music sucks," and that's a thought that resonates more now than ever, as Nashville perpetuates its own conventions of "sing-on them salngs with that fakke ahk-a-sen." Amazing that authentic Southerners don't start a new Civil War.

Some folk fans seek solace in traditional music, not unlike classical fans who revere only dead composers. Others are reveling in the newest expression of new folk / post-folk / third-wave Americana, or call it simply the Acoustic Renaissance. Get to a club or coffee house and learn why. Check the schedules of Kulak's Woodshed, Coffee Gallery Backstage, Room 5, Hallenbeck's, McCabe's or any of the more than 200 acoustic-music-friendly venues in the LA area. Yes, there are that many. Count 'em yourself in the directory at [www.acousticrootsla.net](http://www.acousticrootsla.net).

Some of LA's best Acoustic Renaissance musicians, in no particular order, are Kat Parsons, Sean Wiggins, Rick Shea, Marina V, Pete Hopkins, Kelly Fitzgerald, Amy Celsi, James Hurley, Denise Vasquez, Ashley Maher, Verigo Road, Matthew Lee, Sally Zito, VOCO, Brian Garret Swayne. Most fit the title of Samantha Murphy's new CD, *Somewhere Between Starving and Starved*.

And there are a pack of others, like Ric Taylor, Craig Lincoln, Lorie Deswell, Joan Engaita, Charlie White, Cyndi Mora, Linda Gelenis, emith, Daniel McFreely, and others who are rising fast.

Some of these artists just played the Kerrville Folk Festival, establishing inroads with the traditionalists. Any of them could join the time-tested giants in this town, like Lowen & Navarro, Wendy Waldman, Freddie, Harriet Schock, Jack Tempchin, James Lee Stanley, Joan Bardsorf, Severin Browne, James Coberly Smith, Dave Alvin and Michelle Shocked. Some of them are accomplished performing songwriters with small multi-artist record labels, like Aussie transplant Gilli Moon (Warrior Girl Records) and Mark Humphreys (Trough Records).

Some have fans everywhere and tour constantly, like Kat Parsons (with sold-out CD release parties in NY, LA, Chicago and DC), Jaret Robin, Bob Malone, and Amilia K. Spieer (who also produces records for others and played the main stage at Kerrville). They, also, are among LA's best.

One caution with many of these artists: they are multit talented versa-