



Photo by Rachelle Resnick

Tenants win in San Francisco

For almost a decade the elderly residents of the International Hotel have resisted efforts to move them out.

By Chester Hartman

San Francisco. The International Hotel, a 150-unit low-rent building in San Francisco's Manilatown-Chinatown district, has become the focus of intense political activity in this city. In early January several hundred persons, hastily assembled via telephone tree, blocked sheriff's deputies from posting an eviction order. Demonstrations on Jan. 12 and 16—the first with 3,000 people, the second with 5,000—have demanded that the courts stay or rescind an eviction order obtained by the hotel's owner, Four Seas Investment Corp., a Bangkok-based liquor producer sinking its capital into American real estate. The city's liberal sheriff, Richard Hongisto, at first refused to carry out the court's eviction order. As a result he was given a five-day jail sentence and \$500 fine for contempt of court which he is appealing. Judge Ira Brown termed Hongisto's refusal "the greatest threat to every court in this country." But the city's governing Board of Supervisors has reluctantly voted to loan \$1.3 million to the Housing Authority to take the hotel by eminent domain and resell it to the tenants for permanent low-rent housing.

Things came to a head on Jan. 17. Reliable sources within the sheriff's office indicated he was ready to move on the hotel at 6 a.m. the next morning. Threatened with the real possibility of being removed from office for his contempt conviction, Hongisto had decided to go ahead and evict the 75 mainly elderly Filipino and Chinese residents.

The police department was scheduled to move in around midnight and block off the entire area to prevent the expected thousands of protestors from getting near the hotel. All eyes were focused on the courts, where furious legal maneuvers were underway. The Hotel Tenants Association, the Housing Authority and Hongisto were all filing motions in Superior Court, Appeals Court and the California Supreme Court to have the eviction stayed.

The sheriff was reiterating his claim

that his deputies were too few and lacked sufficient training to carry out this mass eviction in the face of throngs of militant supporters.

The Housing Authority and hotel tenants were claiming that eviction was senseless, since the city had come up with a way to save the hotel, via purchase by the Housing Authority.

But Judge Brown was standing firm. He has contempt of his own both for the tenants and the sheriff (who not long ago had infuriated the San Francisco bench by publicly accusing them of not working hard enough). He felt the dignity and the authority of the court's order had to be upheld, and was unmoved by the actions of the Board of Supervisors and Housing Authority. These were being challenged in another court by Four Seas, and although a hearing was just two weeks off Brown was insisting the eviction proceed.

At 6 p.m., just 12 hours before the scheduled eviction, Brown finally granted a stay. The reason he gave was an affidavit filed by Chief of Police Charles Gain asserting that automatic weapons and firebombs had been reported at the hotel.

No one with knowledge of the hotel's supporters believes there is a shred of truth to Gain's assertion, and a few days later the police chief backed away from his statement. But Brown needed a face-saver. According to sources close to the case, the Appeals Court had urged him to ease up, and city officials from the mayor on down simply did not want to risk an eviction. It would have been the most unpopular and possibly bloody police action in San Francisco since the 1934 General Strike.

Why has the I-Hotel become such a rallying point? In part, the hotel and its community are a symbol of resistance to the city's development as "Wall Street West" over the past two and a half decades.

The hotel's population is Third World, low-income elderly. Their \$50-85 a month rooms are all they can afford, and the hotel is partly a communal home, with a

common kitchen and the mutual support system such micro-communities provide. And it is located right next to the stores, parks and community facilities of Manilatown and Chinatown. It and its community are not replaceable.

But because it also adjoins the expanding financial district, the hotel-site has been an attractive development parcel for years. The battle over the hotel dates back almost a decade. First it was Walter Shorenstein, a local real estate mogul, Democratic party heavy and city parks and recreation commissioner, who bought the hotel and tried to evict its residents in 1968. They resisted and embarrassed him into giving them a three-year lease.

In 1973 Shorenstein sold the hotel to Four Seas for \$850,000, and they've been trying to get the tenants out ever since. An eviction trial was finally held last April, with Judge Brown directing the deadlocked jury to find against the tenants.

The long struggle has made the hotel well known throughout the city, enabling the tenants to forge a city-wide support group and to pull together the city's largest protest demonstrations since the Vietnam war. As an almost pure form of the battle between housing/human rights and profit/property rights, old and young of all races have turned out in support of human rights. The city has not seen anything like this in recent times, and its rulers are scared as hell. Passage of Proposition T last November, calling for elections of Supervisors by districts instead of at-large, indicates the possibility of a whole new ballgame in San Francisco.

Things are now in a holding pattern. Judge Brown's eviction stay is good until March 4, and if the eminent domain taking goes ahead, it will supercede the eviction order. In the interim the Housing Authority and Four Seas will be fighting the legality of the eminent domain action. That trial was scheduled for Feb. 1 but, according to reports, Four Seas will ask for a continuance to try to pull together a better case.

If the courts uphold the eminent domain, there still will be further court battles over the taking price. The Housing Authority's \$1.3 million figure is based on two outside appraisals, but Four Seas doubtless will try to squeeze more out of the city, even though that price would represent a 53 percent profit.

Even if the eviction hurdle is finally passed, the tenants will have other problems: how to buy the building back from the Housing Authority—at the inflated price that includes Four Seas' fat profit—how to make necessary repairs, and still keep rents low enough so they can afford to stay. Unless some kind of assistance is found, the tenants may be getting a white elephant.

The building could be sold to the tenants at a marked-down price. (The government does this all the time under the urban renewal program — but that's only for needy shopping center developers, corporations wanting new headquarters, and similar worthy causes.)

Or the Housing Authority could retain ownership of the hotel and allow the present tenants to continue living there at subsidized rentals they can afford, much as they do with other public housing developments. One of the city's new Housing Authority commissioners is Rev. Jim Jones, whose People's Temple turned out almost 1,000 participants at the last big I-Hotel demonstration, so perhaps some creative and supportive proposals may be forthcoming from that agency.

The International Hotel has proved so far how much power will bend when it has to. How the hotel's city-wide support mobilizes over the coming weeks will determine its future. ■

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ART & ENTERTAINMENT

MUSIC

Folk music alive and well in Chicago

No one has yet devised a good working definition of folk music. There are long lists of what it's not, but none of what it is. There is no single set of characteristics that would apply to Pete Seeger, John Jacob Niles, Bob Gibson and Bob Dylan; no definition that would include groups like the Weavers and Peter, Paul and Mary, and eliminate the Kingston Trio.

In the '60s there was an impression that folk music was synonymous with "protest songs." "John Henry" and "Barbara Allen" were forgotten. Bluegrass pickers were ignored. If it wasn't the young Dylan or Phil Ochs, it just wasn't folk music. When Dylan went electric, the folk world staggered. When the '60s ended, folk music died. Or so some people seem to think.

But it ain't necessarily so.

Political commentary is one aspect of folk music and not an aspect unique to the '60s. Broadside balladeers have always performed a function similar to that of today's "underground" press: speaking directly to people outside the power structure, relating events, commenting on conditions; sometimes in the tone of a scandal sheet, reporting grisly murders and illicit love affairs, sometimes as straight journalism, describing great storms, ship-sinkings, battles.

Yet folk music is not confined to commentary, nor to an audience outside a country's cultural mainstream. (One of the best known of all folk melodies, "Greensleeves," is supposed to have been written by Henry VIII.) Through classicism and romanticism, through monarchies, republics and democracies, folk music has followed its own course without concern for artistic trends or schools of thought. While Henry Purcell was writing a trumpet concerto for the British court, an anonymous troubadour was singing the tale of "The Golden Vanity"—a British ship fighting the Spanish in Dutch waters. Both pieces of music survive today. While Purcell's stimulates our senses, "The Golden Vanity" portrays the whole

range of human behavior in the face of danger. Folk music concerns itself with people: their thoughts, desires, triumphs and tragedies. At least as important as its political commentary is its role as the psychological historian of humanity.

In our own century folk music has performed both these functions.

From the gentle ditties of the early 1900s, which reflected prosperity, hope and the belief that right will always prevail against wrong, through the Depression ballads of the '30s, folk music

offered a *viva voce* commentary on who was doing what and why. Then Woody Guthrie gave way to Pete Seeger and the Weavers. And that's where the confusion begins.

Although folk music had always been popular entertainment, it had never entered established theaters and concert halls. It was the Weavers who first brought the general public into theaters to hear the kind of music that had usually been performed in homes, pubs and marketplaces. Like any other music publicly performed before a pay-

ing audience, folk music fell under the scrutiny of critics, scholars and students.

Bob Gibson forged the link between folk music and "pop" music. If folk music had been a simple farm girl, it was Gibson who taught her to wear make-up. He brought sophistication into the genre, creating a wildly successful entertainment form for modern, urban audiences. From the stage of Chicago's old Gates of Horn, Gibson laid the groundwork for what became known as "commercial folk music," the success of which gave rise to

groups like Peter, Paul and Mary and eventually led to folk-rock.

This linking of folk with "pop" had one ominous consequence. Like other forms of popular entertainment—like hula hoops, surfer sounds, frisbees and bubble-gum music—folk became subject to popular whim. Fads have their shining hour and then fade. That's what happened to folk, at just about the time the phenomenon of widespread political protest was dying out.

But folk music didn't die. It merely shook off the bondage of pop culture and once more assumed its old position. Folk music is back where it's always been: in homes, on the streets and in small clubs. Pete Seeger and Bob Gibson are still writing and performing. The blue-grass pickers have been absorbed by country music and are more popular than ever. Weekend folk festivals take place all over the country, all summer long (in Chicago in the worst of winter). And play to full houses.

Since the days when Gibson ruled at the Gates of Horn, two generations of folk performers have grown up. There are Bryan Bowers and Gamble Rogers, who bring sophistication to southern rural music. There's Jim Post who can turn a gospel song into an extravaganza. There's Larry Rand who fills the shoes of the 17th century broadside balladeers. There's Steve Goodman, who can be all things to all people, stepping easily from folk to jazz to rock to classical and back again, because as far as he's concerned, music is music. There are Bonnie Kolloc and Claudia Schmit, who are vocally liberated in a way their older sisters—Baez and Collins—could never be.

So the next time you hear someone tolling the death-knell for folk music, tell him to come to Chicago. In the Second City, folk music, like Tim Finnegan, is a mighty lively corpse.

—G. Gigi Gilmartin

G. Gigi Gilmartin is a Chicago writer who covers the folk-music scene for Chicago readers.



Jim Post is packing the house in Chicago folk music clubs and on many midwestern campuses—sometimes alone and sometimes dividing the program with Steve Goodman. Post's latest

album, "Back on the Streets Again" (from the title song by Tom Dundee), on the Mountain Railroad label, is newly released by Flying Fish (3320 N. Halsted St., Chicago, 60657). Its high-

light is "Walk on the Water," a gospel-type rouser, embellished by a fantastic Postian commentary. □

Folk performers and protesters in new books

FOLK MUSIC: More Than a Song

By Kristin Baggelaar and Donald Milton
Thomas Y. Crowell Co., N.Y., \$14.95

MINSTRELS OF THE DAWN

By Jerome L. Rodnitzky
Nelson-Hall, Chicago, \$8.95

Folk Music: More Than a Song is an encyclopedia. You don't just pick it up and read it; you use it. It is "the most complete and authoritative reference of folk music of the English-speaking world ever compiled." But it falls far short of the publisher's claims.

Unlike previous volumes of this type, *Folk Music* lists performers rather than songs. Predictably, there are lengthy sections of Woody Guthrie, all the Seegers, Baez and Dylan. Al-

though the biographical information is neither complete nor completely accurate, it's the best one can expect from such a "Chinese menu" approach.

The most disturbing aspect of the book is the non-objective criteria for determining which performers are included and which are ignored. The preface states that the treatment is "more personal than scholarly;" the result is essentially a private scrapbook that will only interest those who share the authors' tastes. The listing for Bud and Travis says "See Travis Edmonson." Turning to that listing, one is referred to the Gateway Singers, where it says that Edmonson was a member of that group. There is no further reference to Bud and Travis,

who recorded nearly a dozen albums and were responsible for introducing Latino elements into American music.

Neither is there any mention of Blind Blake—either the American blues singer or the Bahamian calypso artist. Yet the New Christy Minstrels and the Serendipity Singers are prominently featured. Where they do credit "old masters," they've chosen to ignore current successors. Kilby Snow and Maybelle Carter are included as autoharp virtuosos, but there is no mention of Bryan Bowers. Merle Travis and Doc Watson are featured, but there's no mention of Gamble Rogers or Norman Blake.

Neither is there any discussion of the 12-string guitar, its im-

portance in modern folk music or Bob Gibson's creation of 12-string techniques. And how Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young qualify as folk performers defies explanation. Folk purists may well be offended by the emphasis on "Top 40" performers.

The sub-title of *Minstrels of the Dawn* is "The Folk-Protest Singer As a Cultural Hero." Where *Folk Music* is a catalogue, *Minstrels of the Dawn* is catechism. Like a Ph.D. thesis, *Minstrels* states its hypothesis and sets out to prove it with a vengeance. The central portion of the book deals with Guthrie, Ochs, Baez and Dylan (the elimination of Pete Seeger is explained in the preface, but not sufficiently.) The scholarship is to be applauded.

There are copious footnotes; all quotations and facts are identified and authenticated. But there is some uncertainty about the book's intended audience.

At times, Rodnitzky appears to be explaining protest music to its fans. At other times, it seems he's trying to explain the protest performers to themselves and throughout there's a tone that indicates perhaps the *parents* of young radicals are his real target. A sociological treatise of the protest movement as exemplified by the music of the era is a valid undertaking. But Rodnitzky has probably bitten off more than his readers can chew.

—G.G.G.