

Swan Song for the Weavers

At 7:30 in the evening of Friday, September 17, 2004, I am walking down Toronto's Yonge Street, the longest street in the world, they say, stretching from Lake Ontario to the Manitoba border. I'm heading south from Dundas Street, past the positively Stalinistic square which is supposed to be the new centre of Yonge Street, but in reality is a stark concrete space surrounded by electronic billboards. A spectacular rosy sunset is obscured by these commercial messages, and the street pulses to the throb of a Toronto Friday night.

It strikes me as strange that I'm heading to a Weavers concert. The venerable and much-loved American folk group started singing in 1949, making it fifty-five years old by my calculations. Once they were young, and in the forefront of the political and philosophical youth movements of the day; how many of the young people I see now on Yonge Street would even be aware of the Weavers, I wonder. I pass by old Massey Hall, another venerable institute that in its day has seen performers ranging from Enrico Caruso to James Galway. For close to fifty years I've been going to Massey Hall to see the Weavers and Pete Seeger, and I notice a crowd milling about the front door. I ask someone who's playing there tonight. "Sarah Harmer," comes the reply, referring to the Canadian-born Juno Award nominated artist whom Time magazine described as one of the ten best in music. The younger generation is making its own mark.

But my destiny is further south, to yet another venerable institution, Toronto's famed Elgin Theatre, the last "double-stacked" Edwardian theatre in the world (the Winter Garden Theatre sits atop it). Built in 1913 and seating 1,500, it is a sumptuous affair with royal boxes and gilded plaster details. Tonight, as part of the Toronto International Film Festival, it is presenting Jim Brown's latest documentary "Isn't This a Time!", a tribute to the legendary Harold Leventhal, who managed the Weavers, Pete Seeger, Arlo Guthrie, Peter, Paul and Mary, and just about everyone in the who's who of American folk music. After the film, there will be a very short concert by the Weavers themselves.

There is a long line-up of ticket holders waiting patiently, but I can go in, just happening to have the right credit card for the financial institute sponsoring this event. I walk through the very long lobby and descend by elevator to the lounge. It's crowded, and

free beer is available. I connect with Jerry Gray of the Travellers, who by coincidence are doing a concert on the Weavers next month. Other folkies abound, and another friend greets me, and I'm soon wallowing in nostalgia of past Weaver performances.

We all line up again, and finally get to enter the theatre itself; I find myself sitting in the centre, about eight rows from the stage. The air is electric with excitement. It is, as you might suspect, an older audience, but there are young people there, too, and so I revise my thoughts about whether today's young people would know of the Weavers.

Finally, the houselights darken to great applause. A coordinator of the Festival greets us and introduces the film's director, Jim Brown, who is currently working on a documentary film on Pete Seeger. Hard to know how he'll get Pete down in a mere two hours. Brown (no relation) introduces celebrities in the audience: Toronto's Michael Cohl, and William Eigen, producers of the film, Harold Leventhal himself, and Toshi Seeger.

And then, after a few false starts, the film begins. More knowledgeable film critics would be better at reviewing this film than I, who sometimes boast that the last movie I saw was "Going My Way" with Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald. Not exactly true, but you get the idea. Seeing it as part of a sold-out audience of the converted is quite an experience. Brown's technique is to let you experience the 2003 Carnegie Hall Tribute Concert for Harold Leventhal as if you were actually there, and he succeeds admirably. After a while I was not quite sure whether I was in Toronto or New York, and I was obviously not alone: when the Carnegie Hall audience applauded a song, the Toronto audience joined in.

It was a powerful emotional jolt, with the appropriate political statements still being made by the participants in this historic concert: Arlo Guthrie (and family), Theodore Bikel, Leon Bibb, Peter, Paul and Mary, the Weavers (Eric Darling, Fred Hellerman, Ronnie Gilbert, Pete Seeger, and Eric Weissberg). By the rousing finale of "Good Night, Irene" there was scarcely a dry eye in either theatre.

Two (of many) good moments: Arlo is trying to convince Pete to appear in this concert. "My voice isn't what it used to be," says Pete. "Your audience's hearing isn't what it used to be either," responds Arlo

logically. Ronnie Gilbert assumes Lee Hays' role of the storyteller between songs. "I feel Lee's presence here," she says, "He was wonderful. He knew the Bible very well. If he were here now I know he would dedicate this next song to the man who has brought the Bible back into the White House." Puzzled laughter greets this remark, but the Weavers immediately strike up "O Sinner Man, Where You Gonna Run To?" Tumultuous applause in both theatres.

The film ends to great applause. The curtain comes down, and the stage crew feverishly sets up some microphones. The atmosphere is charged. Harold Leventhal is invited on stage, to a standing ovation. "I wish I had had this many people at my bar mitzvah," he said. And then the Weavers are introduced. The audience stands, and the five Weavers are greeted with applause like the waves of Hurricane Ivan battering Cuba. Eric Darling, white hair in a ponytail and carrying his long-necked banjo, leads them on. Fred Hellerman, looking even older than the last time I saw him, totes his guitar. Ronnie Gilbert, walking with a cane, beams her famous smile. Then there's Pete. All he has to do is walk on any stage anywhere in the world and the audience goes wild. He shields his eyes from the spotlight and stands, awkwardly holding his banjo, acknowledging with embarrassment the affection of the audience. Eric Weissberg, famed for his banjo in the movie "Deliverance" (see, I do get to movies occasionally), brings up the rear with his electrified bass guitar. The applause goes on. Hellerman tries to get things started, but has to wait twice for the applause to die down. Finally, the Weavers launch into "When the Saints Go Marching In." It matters not how they sound (surprisingly good considering their age, and Ronnie can sure belt it out), the audience is seeing the Weavers and that's enough. In truth, it is hard to believe that they are there, on stage in Toronto, and there is no one in the theatre who doesn't also know that this will never happen again. "Health, age, and geography are keeping us apart," as Ronnie Gilbert said.

It's a short concert, three songs long. They end with "Wimoweh", now more properly known as "Mbube". Seeger discovered this African song as recorded by Solomon Linda, and taught it to the world. He made sure that royalties went to Linda. Others did not have Pete's social conscience. Linda died in poverty and there is a lawsuit now with the Disney people who are using the song in their "Lion King" productions.

An encore was a given. Back they trouped, and we all sang "Good Night, Irene" together. Good night,

Weavers. We shall not see their likes again. Thank you, thank you, thank you. The audience took a while to leave, buoyed with good feelings but tinged with sadness for the end of an era. Bram Morrison (of Sharon, Lois and Bram) and I talked about the extraordinary night. An American held a sign aloft, inviting fellow U.S. citizens to work with him to get the vote out in November. And then I was out on Yonge Street.

But for me, the night was not over. Carrying a magic pass around my neck, I headed with Jerry Gray down to another venerable institution, Toronto's Royal York Hotel, now named the Fairmont Royal York. Built by the CPR in 1927 on a site that has had a hotel since 1843, the Royal York was once the largest hotel in the British Commonwealth. Tonight, in its ballroom, it was hosting a gala reception for "Isn't This a Time!"

I entered the ballroom, lit by three massive crystal chandeliers. Immediately in front of me, his banjo safely encased in a blue padded bag and slung on his back, stood Pete Seeger, alone in a crowd. I told him how special the night was, but he awkwardly deflected the remark, and I remembered that he does not like receiving compliments. The room was filled with folkies: Paul "Curly Boy" Stubbs, Klaus von Graf, Joe and Sharon Hampson, Holmes Hooke, it was hard to take them all in. I spotted Eric Darling standing alone, and spoke to him of the late Rick Fielding. How Rick would have loved to have been here. Darling's eyes shone at the name, and we had a good chat about Rick, so I guess he was there after all.

It's hard to imagine a folk song devotee who hasn't felt the influence of the Weavers. This was their swan song, but partly because of them, singing folk songs will continue for generations to come. And to think that it happened in Canada.

Lorne Brown

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