



Hot Ticket

Perhaps hoping to forestall an overdose of pomp and circumstance, thousands of 350th celebrants have signed up for light relief in the form of a Friday evening concert, organized by folk singer Tom Rush '63. Billed as *An Evening at Club 47*, it will carry forward the long tradition of American folk music that flourished with special vitality in the coffeehouses of Cambridge during Rush's undergraduate days. On September 5 in Tercentenary Theatre, Rush and his colleagues, including Joan Baez (another star of the early Cambridge club scene), Livingston Taylor, Bonnie Raitt '72, and Robin Bateau '69, will bring their music to a crowd roughly 200 times larger than could have been seated in the original Club 47.

When Rush and Stephen Whisman of the alumni office first discussed the idea of a Harvard 350th concert, they were thinking primarily of an event that would appeal to younger alumni. But the steering committee decided to plan for a much larger group. The "universality" of Rush's music appeals to all generations, says Thomas W. Stephenson, general secretary of the 350th. Ticket demand has been strong from the older classes as well as Rush's contemporaries and juniors. "God willing, if it's a beautiful night and the stars are out, this concert really could be something," says Whisman.

Success came early to Tom Rush, then wandered off and was won back,



Tom Rush '63, folk singer and impresario: Biology's loss was the oral tradition's gain.

In the past five years he has thoughtfully engineered a return from semiretirement to a new kind of role in acoustic music. Besides reviving his own performing career, Rush has sought broader ways to support the folk tradition, reflecting an interest that goes back all the way to his undergraduate years.

Rush came to Harvard intending to be a biologist but found Bio 1 "a nothing experience." It was more fun to "study folk stuff" by shopping around from department to department. He cites Professor Albert Lord's comparative literature courses on the oral tradition as "probably the most important part of my experience at Harvard," along with selected offerings in English literature, music, comparative religion, and anthropology (a primate social behavior course that "I somehow perceived as being related to the oral tradition").

"Tom was very interested in learning

about ballads and about the way in which the oral tradition worked," Lord recalls. "He did a paper for me on the blues." A decade later, when Rush had become well known, Lord invited him to participate in his popular Humanities 9 course. "He was very good with the students. He didn't lecture, but he talked to them, which is better. He has a very fine New England wit, which went over big with the students." And he sang to them too.

Rush's first ventures into public performance grew out of his WHRB live music show, "Balladeers." When folk singers like Josh White and Odetta came to Boston, he would invite them to come on the air with him. "So I got to sit around with some legendary people and embarrass myself by not knowing what to say. My nickname was 'Dead Air.'" He also recruited local amateurs. "To get warm bodies to appear on the show I had to haunt the folk clubs and the coffee houses. I'd go down to the hootenannies and look for people who could be seduced into coming on the radio with me, and ended up performing on some occasions myself. One thing led to another . . ."

A year's leave of absence confirmed Rush in his sense that the former future biologist might really be a musician. Nevertheless a "New England sense of tidiness" brought him back to finish up his degree before moving on to a successful career in performing and recording. One of the highlights was a 1968 Elektra album called "The Circle Game," which introduced works by then little-known songwriters Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne, and James Taylor. There followed a contract with Columbia Records, five virtually non-stop years on the road as a performer, and the inevitable burnout. In the mid 1970s Rush gave it all up and retreated to his farm in New Hampshire.

The bucolic idyll has its own limitations, and before long Rush was contemplating a return to music. He has made his comeback in a manner of his own choosing, however, limiting himself to about forty performances a year and devoting much of his energy to the broader goal of rebuilding an audience for folk music. Through his company, Maple Hill Productions Inc., Rush has been developing new kinds of acoustic

music events and offering representation and long-term career guidance to other folk artists. He enjoys his new role as an impresario of sorts. "It's something we seem to be good at. And it's exciting for me. It also gives me something I can do when I'm 95 years old and may not want to travel."

To operate in this larger arena, Rush has had to learn to think like a businessman, forgoing the convenient division of labor (and identity) between artist and manager. Throwing image to the winds, he has signed up for sales seminars, conducted market research, and built direct mail lists. In this process he has been advised by Harvard Business School professor Michael Porter and David Sykes of Boston University, a former entrepreneur.

"Tom tried to make a comeback at a time when there was a mismatch between his kind of music and the way the record industry was going," Porter says. His first problem was "to understand who his customers were and how to reach them with his music." Surveys convinced Rush and his advisers to seek new venues for performance, beginning with cruises in Boston Harbor and moving on to concert halls. "My audience likes to go to Symphony Hall instead of a rock club," Rush says. "I can definitely live with that."

He also suspects that his audience might just as soon buy records through the mail as venture into a typical record store peopled by life-sized paper cut-outs of rock stars. Rush has released his last two records on his own Night Light label, which he sells primarily through the mail, and he plans to begin recording other artists soon. "There are certain economies of scale in having a whole list of records as opposed to just his own," Porter observes.

Ironically, Rush's success may remove the need for his unconventional approach to distribution. "Acoustic music is getting more and more recognition," Porter notes, and now "the mainstream industry is somewhat ponderously moving more in the direction of what Tom has been trying to do. In the long term, the question is whether Tom needs to have his own company or whether he can fold his activities back into the mainstream record industry and simply become a manager, producer,

writer, and performer as opposed to a distributor."

David Sykes first encountered Rush in 1963, "when he was a big star in Cambridge and I was an aspiring folkie." When they met again in the early Eighties, Sykes had sold his manufacturing business and was teaching at B.U. and "doing a lot of work in the arts." Like Rush, he wants to keep acoustic music alive and healthy. As he sees it, that means making Tom Rush into an organization. "Institutions take on the character of the people running them, and he's a very good person to build one around. Most of the things we've tried have worked, largely because he's who he is—not because of

"My audience likes to go to Symphony Hall instead of a rock club," Rush says. "I can definitely live with that."

SUPPORTING

his reputation but because people who've met him know they can trust him."

As a board member of several arts organizations, Sykes takes a hard-headed view of what is necessary to keep the arts alive. Inevitably, "an institution stands between the artist and the audience." A ballet company, a museum, a broadcast series like "Prairie Home Companion"—"those things require sponsorship and support in order to create the medium for the artist." Because "old-style philanthropy is really leveling off," Sykes sees a need to "build a constituency in the business community and among other people who have money to bring to it." Significant support may come from the new corporate interest in "cause-related marketing," which Rush describes as "a hybrid between philanthropy and advertising."

Maple Hill is currently seeking corporate sponsorship for a Club 47 series of monthly National Public Radio broadcasts and a Public Broadcasting System television show to be based on concerts given around the country over the next year. "Folk Singer Seeks Ven-

ture Capitalist," Rush jokes. More seriously, he continues, "The Club 47 broadcast project could have a major effect on developing an entire art form in the country, encouraging the artists, organizing the audience, and giving a focus to what is at the moment a large but very diffuse movement."

Sixties sentimentalists may wince at hearing terms like "cash flow" on the lips of a folkie. "David [Sykes] advises me that it's very difficult in America to have credibility both as an artist and as a businessman," says Rush. "If you're a businessman, you have to be an artist on the sly, using a *nom de plume*. Likewise if you're an artist you're supposed to be helpless and scatter-brained. I haven't worried too much about it, frankly. I'm just trying to serve up the music in surroundings that are appealing to the audience for that music."

Though he claims no altruistic motivation for his work, his brand of commercialism is far from crass, and his efforts to develop his own market are likely to benefit other musicians as well. One of Rush's more ambitious goals is to win recognition of folk music as a legitimate art, rather than "pop ephemera." Such a change in perception could make it easier for folk artists to maintain stable long-term careers, as is possible for classical musicians. "One of the biggest problems for folk music is that it became pop music back in the Sixties. Now people are apt to think of it as *passé* pop music." In fact, Rush argues, "folk music and its derivatives—second-generation people like myself—are a native art form with a very long history. If Professor Lord is to be believed, it goes back for thousands of years."

The Tom Rush of Maple Hill is following a pattern familiar in other fields. The expertise of outstanding dancers, musicians, scientists, and athletes goes further if it is shared with other practitioners and institutionalized in larger scale endeavors. As Rush says, "There's a need that I can fill better by running Maple Hill than by singing on a stage somewhere, and that is to try to connect art and artists with their audience. I've found a method that works for me extremely well." That same vehicle can work for others. "I've built a bus," he says, "and it is silly for it to have only one passenger." —*Nancy Jackson*

The Herald of Randolph

The Herald

May 10, 1990

SERVING THE COMMUNITIES OF THE WHITE RIVER VALLEY

My Mom Still Wants To Know When I'll Get a Job



By Stephen Morris

Chandler Music Hall faces a challenge. Its directors need to attract a new audience to their spectacular hall—people who were not part of the hard-core cultural elite, yet concerned about the presence of live entertainment in the community. Baby boomers, but not Yuppies, demographically in the mid-section of life, this is a group difficult to pry away from the single family home.

Enter Tom Rush.

Tom Rush has been a professional folksinger for more than 30 years now. His early publicity pictures, a skinny guy wearing boots, bluejeans, and a chambray workshirt, portray a maverick, but a maverick most of us can relate to. He was cleancut. A college boy, but he sang a lot of songs about freight trains, lonesome whistles drifting over endless tracks. Solid gone, whatever that meant.

"The first of December was covered with snow, And so was the turnpike from Stockbridge to Boston."

There was a feeling to everything Tom Rush sang, a feeling of fulfilling emptiness, of smoking cigarettes with the wind blowing through unshorn hair. The seasons go round and round, but I've got the urge for goin'. Shucks. Who do you love?

A little of that feeling promises to be recaptured when Tom Rush comes to Randolph ("I've never been there, but I love the stoves you make") on Saturday, May 12. Tom plays approximately 40 concerts a year.

"I'm lucky," he says, "I get to choose the ones I want to do." Randolph appealed to him because of the proximity to his New Hampshire farm and because of the reputation of the music hall, well-suited to showcase an acoustic performer.

The Herald caught up with Tom Rush just after he returned from Wyoming, in time to catch his thoughts on the contemporary state of folk in the U.S.A.:

Family Audience

Herald: *Is your audience the same now as it was 20 years ago?*

Tom Rush: I don't think so. A lot of them are the people who came on board in the last 30 years, back in the early Sixties when I started out, but I'm seeing all kinds of people in the audience these days, especially a lot of families, people bringing their kids. There's a very wide age mix and I know all of these people couldn't have been at the Club 47.

Herald: *What should we look forward to in your show at Chandler?*

TR: I'll be introducing some new stuff, and doing some old favorites. Luckily I have enough old favorites that I get to rotate them over time so they don't become stale. If I feel that I've said what I had to say about a song, I just put it aside for a while and dust off a different one.

Herald: *Will you be doing any original material?*

TR: Yes, I've written a couple and there are some others by new writers that I'm excited about introducing. There's a woman named Cheryl Wheeler who's just released an album on Capitol, and I'll be doing a few of her tunes.

Herald: *You've had the chance to*

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see a lot of trends go 'round and 'round, to steal a line from one of your songs. Do you see history repeating itself today?

TR: I don't see anything repeating itself note for note. Folk is becoming more popular, but it's not going the POP, capital P-O-P, route as it did in the Sixties. I'd like to see folk have a long-term presence in the culture, like jazz or

classical music.

Herald: *Is folk counter-cultural by definition?*

TR: Folk music has been around since "folks" have been around. It will persist.

What's 'Folk Music'?

Herald: *What's the definition of "folk."*

TR: I'm not sure the definition is

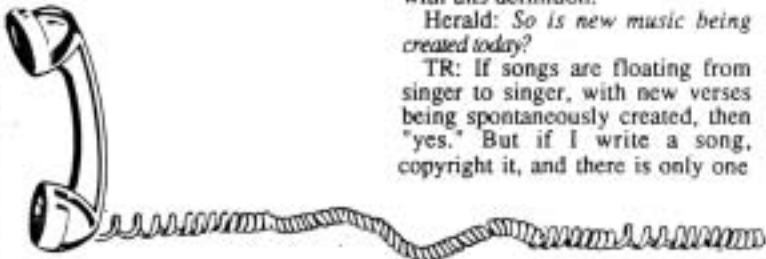
types of audiences, from the Celtic music to the Delta Blues. Strictly speaking, and this is my personal opinion, folk music is handed down by ear, and anyone who is singing composed, copyrighted material is not really singing folk music. The songs have no author, a million verses, no correct version. But I'm not sure if anyone outside the academic community would agree with this definition.

Herald: *So is new music being created today?*

TR: If songs are floating from singer to singer, with new verses being spontaneously created, then "yes." But if I write a song, copyright it, and there is only one



TOM RUSH



worth grappling with. Everyone seems to know what they mean when they say "folk." There are so many different types of music and

correct version of that song, then it doesn't count as "true" music.

Herald: *Did you think you would still be doing this 30 years ago?*

TR: No, 30 years ago I was fresh out of school, actually still in school, and being an English lit major I didn't have a clue where life would lead. It wasn't until 15 years into my career that I realized it was a career. My mom still wants to know when I'll get a job.

After the whirlwind of the Sixties, Tom Rush's style of music

survival, Tom Rush helped his audience rediscover him via nostalgia-laden concerts at Boston's Symphony Hall combined with appearances at intimate clubs where he could be close to his roots. His concert at Chandler will determine whether or not these roots extend as far as Central Vermont.

For Tom Rush and the followers

of his music the seasons will always go 'round and 'round just as they did in his classic ode to wistfulness, "The Circle Game." It has been 30 years now, and another 30 are not out of the question.

"I guess I'll just keep singing as long as I can sing," is the way he puts it. Local residents will be privileged to indulge themselves in Tom Rush on Saturday night.

(Author's personal note: As a guitarist and would-be Tom Rush, I spent countless hours sitting in my college dorm trying to imitate the open tuning and harmonics of Tom Rush's "No Regrets" in the late 1960's. Had I worked in a gas station for those same hours I would be a much richer man now. Had I spent the time studying, I would be a much smarter man. But had I not spent the time fiddling, I would be poorer for it. I never became as good as Tom, but there are certainly, as he said, no regrets.)



went into a decline in popularity, and the audiences who enjoyed it were ignored by the music business. Displaying an instinct for



STEPHEN MORRIS

American Scene

In New Hampshire: Leaving Skid Marks

"You made a record, and everyone bought it. Then you went on tour, and everyone lined up for tickets. That was all any of us knew about the music business, and that included the people who ran the business." The speaker is Tom Rush, a folk singer, acoustic-guitar operator and onetime rambling man with some mileage on him. Just now, like other New Hampshiremen in Mud Season, he feels entitled to be a touch grouchy. There was plenty of snow for cross-country skiing this winter on the logging roads around his big hillside house, but the maple-syrup season was no damned good at all, and then outrageous rains flooded nearby roads so that Keene and Concord were just about unreachable. Blackfly season is not more than 15 minutes away. Still, the sun is shining, just barely, and yes—a sour grin—even the music business is beginning to show signs of life.

Rush, a lean, easy-moving, mustached fellow of 46, got his start as a folkie in Cambridge, Mass., when he was a sophomore at Harvard. Joan Baez was beginning to make a name in Cambridge then, and both of them played at a folk hangout called Club 47.

That was in 1961, near the beginning of what those who know all the verses to *Freight Train* now call, with the rueful irony of survivors, the "great folk-music scare of the '60s." For the rest of the decade, and part of the '70s too, Rush spent most of his time on the road, as he recalls now, playing concerts and club gigs, getting a lavender tan from stage lights, finding his moments of repose watching the mysterious turning, turning of airport carousels, living a life that made more money than sense. A song he wrote in those cockerel days yipped, "I can't stop more than just a few minutes, baby, make love to you, hey, hey, hey, I'm on the road again." Now when he sings it, a rooted New Hampshire householder with a wife and two young sons, there is a note of amazement in his voice: "Did I really do all that crazy stuff?"

Sure did, while the ramble lasted. Then the national enthusiasm for folk music faded to its customary polite murmur. Rush was still fairly successful, but that was fairly disastrous in the platinum-or-bust pop-music world. Punk was big; should he dye his hair purple and wear Spandex? Or mess around with country



Tom Rush has a guitar, a farm and a central organization

rock? A couple of years before, he had bought a shaggy, overgrown 600-acre farm in the southern part of New Hampshire, his home state. He had a good view of Mount Monadnock and enough money to hide out for a year. As the fat years ran out in the early '70s, he retreated to the woods. He spent his time clearing saplings on old logging trails; good folk-song material here. He bought some beehives. He tapped his maple trees in the spring and discovered with a born-again countryman's pleasure that his illustrious ancestor, Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, had written a long letter to Thomas Jefferson promoting maple sugar as a boon to health and commerce.

Low ambition, low energy, he says



In early spring, there are maples to tap

now of that period. Low results too; he kept his guitars tuned, but the none-too-healthy pop-music industry, then as now, was preoccupied with selling rock 'n' roll to teenagers. Listeners, when he had listeners, cheered his *Drop Down Mama* and *Rainy Day Man* and laughed at his New Hampshire jokes. But in one of the gutsy blues yowls that he had begun to sing in his twangy weathered baritone, he complained about feeling "like some old engine, lost my driving wheel..." And that described his stalled career at the end of the '70s.

Looking back, his moves since then seem logical enough, but at the time they took some nerve. He began to talk things over with David Sykes, an old friend who now teaches a course in entrepreneurship at Boston University. Sykes believed that Rush's fans were still out there, 15 years older and living in better neighborhoods. This audience was still receptive to the music it liked, but not in sports arenas with 20,000 screaming kids.

This made sense to Rush, and so did Sykes' idea of how to be an entrepreneur: "Leave skid marks at the edge of the cliff." Rush was about to leave some. The year before, 1980, he had failed to fill a 500-seat rock club in Boston for a Christmas show at \$7 a ticket. Now he booked the city's classiest concert house, the 2,600-seat Symphony Hall, for a year-end performance at \$15. It was a \$20,000 gamble, and it paid off in a sellout. A year later when he repeated the concert, Bostonians talked of his "traditional" Symphony Hall year-ender. Next season public television filmed the show. By this winter the year-ender had grown to a three-performance weekend exhaust-o-thon with Symphony Hall set up cabaret-style, and tickets pegged up to \$24.50. Rush followed what he calls a Club 47 format, an idea he worked out with Sykes. What it boils down to is not just a lot of guest talent, but as much interaction as possible among the performers.

"Chaos describes it nicely," says Rush, but when it works, it means that Guitar Wizard David Bromberg, for example, doesn't just appear, do a three-song Bromberg bubble unrelated to anything else and then vanish. Instead he may back up Rush later on slide guitar and improvise a number with the gifted white Bluesman John Hammond. This

season's featured guest was the formidable black Rhythm-and-Blues Pioneer Bo Diddley, whose major weapon is a five-speed turbo electric guitar built in a startling rectangular shape.

This winter, unless he had played the night before, Rush heaved out of bed at 5:30 a.m. He would be on cross-country skis at first light, breaking trail on his logging roads. By 7:30 he had showered, and driven his sons Benjamin, 11, and Richard, 4, to school. He ate breakfast with his wife Beverly, and by 8 a.m. was busy at his desk in an office partitioned off in what must have been the hayloft of his barn. Then . . .

Wait a minute. This guy is a folk singer? A modern Leadbelly? He sounds like one of those hero CEOs in *FORTUNE* or *Forbes* who eats nails, sleeps three hours a night and never, never loses his driving wheel. Worse to come: by 9 a.m., the six employees of Maple Hill Productions have started to arrive, make coffee and restructure the music biz. The strategy that Rush worked out with Sykes was to use the Tom Rush name for leverage, once it was re-established. Then he would create a central organization that could bring folk musicians and audiences together. Now, Maple Hill Inc. of Hillsboro, N.H., is percolating as a record company called Night Light Recordings, a booking agent for new and used talent, a publisher, a producer of special events (with clam-bakes, boat rides and fireworks thrown in, if that's what you want) and a mail-order house that sends out records and tapes and T shirts.

Defining folk music as anything folks will listen to is too broad for Rush and Maple Hill, and confining it to Elizabethan ballads played on dulcimers is way too narrow. Most of the artists associated with Rush and Maple Hill play acoustic instruments, though Rush's keyboardist, Irwin Fisch, for instance, played a Baldwin grand rigged out with a synthesizer at Symphony Hall. Bill Morrissey is a quirky, funny New Hampshireman who sometimes performs with Rush, singing made-by-hand songs about how he should be working the second shift at the shoe factory, except that here he is in this bar and probably won't make it tonight. David Buskin and Robin Batteau are classically trained musicians, sophisticated enough to put across an intricate, pun-mad parody of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* ("He was a great musician, who finally learned decomposition . . .") Christine Lavin sings witty, wistful songs about shouldering your way through the big world when you are only five feet tall and not very fierce.

Meanwhile, there's a spread sheet to be read and plans to be made for a folk-music conference to be held at the farm in June. No, forget June, there are buckets to be taken down on Rush's roadside sugar maples, and it's time to put in blueberry bushes. Somebody's on the phone. Is he really doing all this crazy stuff? You bet. Has he found his driving wheel? Stay tuned.

—By Jack Skow