

# Interview with Phil Ochs

Doc Stanley

1966

Color image of album cover for Phil Ochs' 1966 LP "I ain't Marchin' Any More."

It has been a good season recently at Ed Pearl's Ash Grove: last week it was Doc Watson and now it is Phil Ochs, songwriter, poet, revolutionary, and all-around good egg. Phil Ochs, who has been held over this weekend to co-star with Guy Carawan, writes his own songs, thinks up his own comedy lines on the spot, and plays his old-style Gibson Jumbo guitar in a most entertaining fashion. I talked with Phil Ochs between sets and he told me:

"I played Boston on the same bill with Barry Sadler. It was frightening. I found out Barry Sadler smokes a new kind of cigarette, Green Berets. He just rolls up his hat and smokes it. It makes you want to kill.

"My ideas come from my subconscious. What I read, movies I see, whatever all goes into the mill and then—flash—there are the words and music, they come together and there's another song.

"I've been playing the guitar for six years. My first guitar was an old Kay which I won for an election bet. I bet on Kennedy and he won which proves I'd be right into politics from then on.

"My first topical or political song was 'The Ballad of the Cuban Invasion.' People liked it. I had written a few rock and roll songs before that but they didn't work and I'd best forget about them.

"I played sax and clarinet in high school in Columbus, Ohio and I loved popular music ever since Elvis Presley. I learned all the songs on the top forty for about ten years. That's hundreds of melodies, and they merge, and that's where I get my tunes. As near as I can figure out I've got the muscles in my mind trained to make melodies.

"I can still sing songs which were popular in 1956. The great influences were I'd guess, Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, the Everly brothers and lots of rhythm and blues groups like the Platters.

"Poetry is concentrated language and amplified thought.

"I have only one complaint about TV—they won't let me on except on the news programs. One night I was on Walter Cronkite's CBS news show while Huntley-Brinkley was blacked out by a football game. I sang 'Draft-dodger Rag' and I don't know how many people saw me but I'd guess it was my largest audience.

"I quit smoking and drinking on will power alone. I had to. The pace of singing for an hour-and-a-half a night tears up your throat if you complicate it with smoking or drinking.

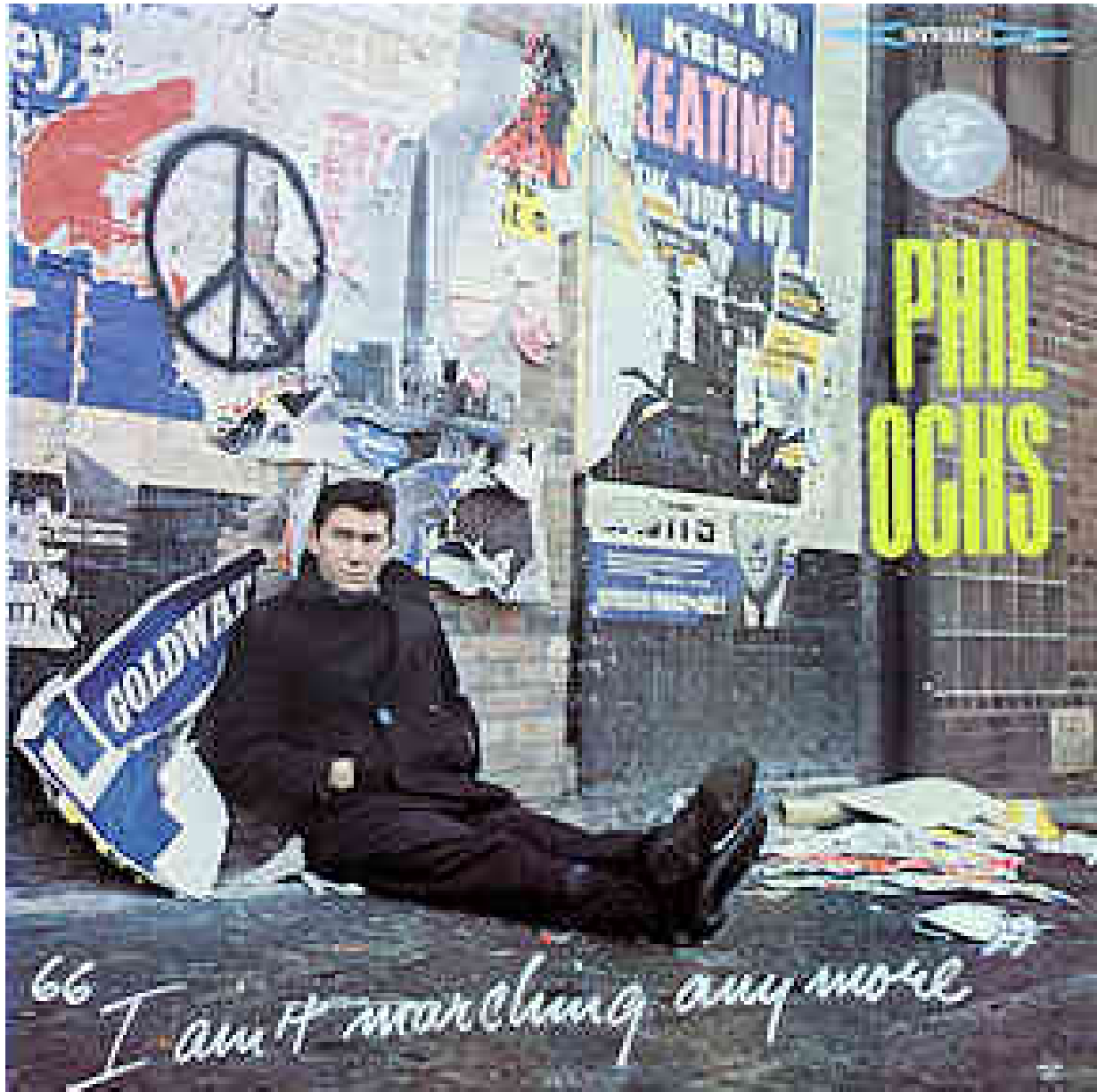
"I spent some time in England last year. England is fine except I almost got in trouble with the Labour Party—they must have thought I was a Socialist or something.

"I have a new record out which should be in the stores this week, 'Phil Ochs in Concert.' It is a real political first. The liner notes are poetry by Mao TseTung in translation. We sent Mao \$50 and a record and a thank you note telling him we had used his poems. Is this the enemy?

"I don't want a revolution, just lots of record sales. Peace through copyright, that's my motto.

"There is a revolution in song writing, however—a major revolution. The new songs say more than they used to. There is a poetry of depth and power, an expansion of scope, an approach to the problems of today with social realism unknown in the past. The old-style songs, the Rogers and Hammerstein type are nice, but they don't say enough.

"The greatest sin-is to deny the esthetic in yourself or in other people in a given situation.



“A Liberal is a guy who hangs out on the corner by the New Republic office waiting for some poverty-stricken fellow to come along so he can lay a little bread on him and find out where the action is.

“Did you ever wonder if LBJ smokes marijuana? Did you ever wonder if the whole security council turns on to incredible drugs?

“I wonder if those guys view the world as a beautiful naked woman standing before them? What would you do with a beautiful naked woman if you’re high? Did you ever wonder? I did and I wrote ‘We’re the Cops of the World’ when I wondered about that. Oh, this psychodrama we call the twentieth century.”

Phil Ochs is a serious young poet. He has a lot to say about the scene in which we live and he says it well. Go see him; he is something else again.

# fifth Estate

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