

Utopian Phillips: Anarchist cement minstrel

By Al Grierson

Joe Hill once said, "If a person can put a few cold commonsense facts into a song and dress them up in a cloak of humour to take the dryness out of them, he will succeed in reaching a great number of workers who are too unintelligent or too indifferent to read a pamphlet or an editorial on economic science."

Few would deny that in our society a talented entertainer with a political commitment and the guts to speak about it usually has access to more people than the most competent radical orator. Such an entertainer is Utah Phillips, self-appointed Golden Voice of the Great Southwest and self-admitted rumour in his own time.

For those unfamiliar with his name and work, Phillips is one of a breed of animal fairly rare these days—the full time professional entertainer who manages not only to balance commercial success with political honesty but also to combine the two. He is an excellent writer whose songs have been recorded by such better known artists as Joan Baez, Emily Lou Harris, and Flatt and Scruggs. At the same time he has been remarkably successful in making people aware that the union he belongs to, the Industrial Workers of the World, is not only still alive, but alive and active and that anarchism is not a dirty word but a genuine political attitude.

He has been able to do this because his alter-ego, Bruce Phillips, is a committed IWW and anarchist who uses Utah's outrageous stage personality not

only to make a living but to get people to listen to ideas that they might otherwise close their ears to.

He's aided in this by his grey hair and beard which make him look older than his 43 years and by his consummate ability as a teller of all tales and terrible puns. He is a master of the art of public performance, carefully selecting before each set the material which onstage will seem to erupt spontaneously—a cascade of bad jokes weaving between and often through the middle of his songs. And throughout it all, in his concert performances he hammers out political points. His story about the last time anybody in his family voted, for example, has got to be one of the funniest bits of anarchist propaganda ever.

His antagonism towards the "business" aspect of the entertainment industry is well known, and most importantly carries itself into his offstage life as well. His experience in dealing with it can provide some sound guidelines for other performers seeking to maintain not only their sanity but their integrity while trying to make a living.

For example, he refuses to make money from writing songs—"I don't believe that songs can be owned by anybody. If I am talking to someone in a gas station and later on the story he tells me ends up in a song, how can I say that I wrote the song or that I own it." The copyright notice at the front of his songbook specifically forbids the reproduction of any portion of the book for the sake of profit or capital gain.

Another important aspect of the Phillips approach to being a performer is what he calls paying

anarchist taxes. Put simply, this means paying the people back in kind for what they've paid you in money. For Phillips, this includes setting aside a percentage of his performing dates for unpaid benefit performances—the same percentage, say, that governments take from people in income tax.

On a smaller scale one of Phillips' more successful bits of anarchist consciousness raising is to be found in the comshaw stand which he sets up when and wherever the opportunity and the mood arise. A comshaw is simply a trader and the comshaw stand, which Phillips operates under the pseudonym Nathan Starbuck is a collection of all sorts of things, none of which have any commercial value and none of which are for sale. They do however have other types of value—utilitarian, aesthetic and funk. The stand surprises, shocks, and hopefully alters people's consciousness. On many occasions Phillips is met with expressions and looks of disbelief when a member of the public is informed that a particular article is under no circumstances for sale. Often, that same person will rummage through his or her clothing, wallet, handbag, backpack or anything else looking for something to trade. In some cases people come back several hours or days later to trade for a particular article they really wanted.

If this article has said little about Utah Phillips' music it's because that aspect of his activity has been one so often emphasized in everything written about him. The music should be experienced directly but it is important for people to understand some of the



Utah Phillips

reasons why he does what he does. For those interested in finding out more about what he does I'd recommend his two albums "Good Thought" (Philo 1964) and "El Captain" (Philo 1976), and

his songbook "Starlight on the Rails and Other Songs" (Woodson Shoe Publishing Company, 1036 Solana Ave., Sonoma, California 95476). Better still, go and see him first hand, you get

David Peel: Political Street singer

By Lefty High

The scene is a Yippie rally outside the 1976 Republican convention in Kansas City. Speakers and musicians are being drowned out by the rantings of a right-wing religious fanatic who, for years, has disrupted leftist events by setting up powerful sound systems alongside them.

David Peel sets up on the Yippie stage then bellows into the microphone: "The pope smokes dope... the dope smokes pope." Soon the religious provocateur is being drowned out by hundreds of people bouncing up and down, singing aloud: "He likes to smoke at mass... the pope smokes dope... the pope is getting higher, higher, higher..." For over ten years, David Peel has sung in the streets and at hundreds of protests and benefits for the anti for the Black Panthers, the free-war movement, John Sinclair, civil rights struggles... because, as he asks, "Why wait for someone to pay you for something that has to be done?"

As well, David Peel and the Lower East Side (the band he often plays with) performs as the "house band for the Yippies," frequently playing smoke-ins and other Yippie rallies.

He sees his music as a revolutionary weapon and has fought to bridge the intense energy of early rebel rock 'n' roll with the political awareness that

developed out of the 1960's counter-culture. In 1970, he joined with Tom Forcade, then with the Underground Press Syndicate, to form a "caravan of behind the Medicine Ball Caravan, a cross-country tour of folk music, contrived and scheduled by Warner Brothers to take advantage of the box office success of the film Woodstock. Peel mugged in front of the cameras, sang revolutionary songs, criticized Warner's blatant exploitation of the counter-culture fan, and for his efforts, almost got stabbed to death by a Warner Brothers hack.

Peel was swept up by the social and cultural upheaval of the sixties and, in 1967, began singing in New York's Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village, then brimming with young people who'd come to live on the streets. Although he now plays regular gigs in New York (check out Mill's Tavern) and has recorded several albums, Peel still considers himself a "political street singer" and continues to play at Washington Square Park, which he calls his "Studio A."

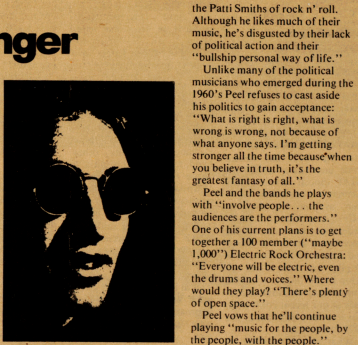
He's been busy in other studios too. Since the release of Have A Marjuniya in 1968, he's released a number of albums on the Elektra and Apple labels and, more recently, on his own label, Orange Records. His music is a high energy yelling, chanting sound that defies

conventional music labels. Maybe you could call it Folk-Punk music with a twist of Lenny Bruce.

David Peel and the Lower East Side was a precursor of punk rock. Peel's grating, sometimes nearly incomprehensible voice and his raucous anti-authoritarian lyrics walked through such early cuts as I want to start another riot, Oink, Oink, I want to kill you, F is not a dirty word, the Chicago Conspiracy and the Lower East Side: "We are from the lower east side we don't give a damn if we live or die... Got to fight the people who will bother us/No school, no work, nothing here to hide/We dig living on the lower east side."

"We were the first punk band," Peel says, while noting his disdain for the lack of radical awareness and legitimate rebellion in recent New York punk scene. "I have a hate/love feeling toward punk," he explains, "A lot of punk is junk but a lot of it is good. The good punk has energy and it can be used to make people wake up."

He plays with the Lower East Side band irregularly these days because "You shouldn't be tied to any one place any more because you should be tied to one person." Now he also performs with the Apple Band and on a recent album ("King of Punk") his music was billed as David Peel and Death. He's about to release an album called "The Rise and Fall of the United States," and



David Peel

some of his new songs are World War III, the Ballad of Aron D'Kay (a tribute to pie throwing), I Hate You, Marjuniya Christmas, and the Bob Dylan Conspiracy.

"I'm warning you poets and singers who lie/We will be watching the rest of our lives... Get back to the streets/Or Rock Liberation is going to come after you..."

As a member of the Rock Liberation Front, a loose non-organization consisting of anyone who doesn't like commercialized "rock," he has "declared war" on the Dylans, the Jagers, and even

the Patti Smiths of rock 'n' roll. Although he likes much of their music, he's disgusted by their lack of political action and their "bulshpik personal way of life."

Unlike many of the political musicians who emerged during the 1960's Peel refuses to cast aside his politics to gain acceptance: "What is right is right, what is wrong is wrong, no because of what anyone says. I'm getting stronger all the time because when you believe in truth, it's the greatest fantasy of all."

Peel and the bands he plays with "involve people... the audiences are the performers." One of his current plans is to get together a 100 member ("maybe 1,000") Electric Rock Orchestra: "Everyone will be electric, even the drums and voices." Where would they play? "There's plenty of open space."

Peel vows that he'll continue playing "music for the people, by the people, with the people."

And his commitment and his exuberance seem almost inexhaustible. "As long as there are reactionaries out there," he insists, "we gotta be actionaries. Action is the final word isn't it." **Discography:** Have A Marjuniya, Elektra Records, 1968; The American Revolution, Elektra Records, 1969; The Pope Smokes Dope, Apple Records, 1972; Santa Claus Roof Top Junkie, Rock Liberation Front, 1973; An Evening with David Peel, Orange Records, 1976; Bring Back The Beatles, Orange Records, 1977; King of Punk, with David Peel and Death, Orange Records, 1978; The Rise and Fall of the United States, Orange Records, 1978.