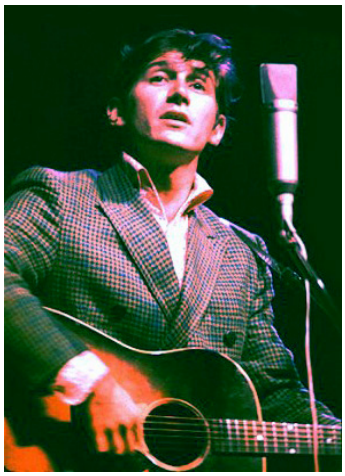
Phil Ochs

By Jefrey D. Breshears

Phil Ochs once told an interviewer he was "born in Moscow in 1917." In fact, he entered the world via El Paso, Texas in 1940, but neither truth in particular nor reality in general ever came easily for Ochs, the preeminent troubadour of the New Left and an ardent SDS and Yippie camp follower. A remarkably gifted songwriter and political propagandist, on the one hand he was known to sing the praises of Mao Zedong, Idi Amin, the Viet Cong and Charles Manson, while also admitting he probably would be shot for singing his kind of protest music in a country like China.



Ochs was a major force in topical protest music in the sixties and penned some of the decade's most scathing indictments of American society and politics. He was a serious New Left revolutionary who believed musicians like himself could and should function as the vanguard of the revolution. As such, he remained true to The Cause long after most other folksingers abandoned this sinking ship for greener (and more lucrative) pastures. While he lacked the brilliance of a Bob Dylan, his passionate commitment to the leftist agenda inspired an awesome outpouring of songs. If not the best topical songwriter of the era, he certainly was the most prolific. Ochs was capable of writing interesting melodies and lyrics that were witty, provocative and (occasionally) profound. Unfortunately, too often he was incapacitated by alcohol or drugs or ego conflicts, and his artistry suffered accordingly. Stylistically, his voice was plaintive, if undistinguished, and his music rather traditional and simple (particularly in his early career), so he never achieved great commercial success.

Ochs was born into a non-religious liberal Jewish family of first-generation immigrants. His father was a physician who served in the U. S. Army in World War II. Unnerved by his war experiences, he returned home so emotionally debilitated that he was unable to establish a successful medical practice on his own. As a result, he worked over the next 15 years in several TB hospitals around the country, but he never recovered from his wartime experiences. Chronically despondent and emotionally distant, he was eventually hospitalized for severe depression. He died in 1963 at age 53 from a cerebral hemorrhage.

Young Phil grew up in New York state and rural Ohio. As a child he was a dreamer with an active imagination and an avid movie-goer who was mesmerized by celluloid heroes like John Wayne. Later, in his teenage years, he identified with Marlon Brando, James Dean and other amoral rebels without a cause. From 1956-58 he attended high school at Virginia's prestigious Staunton Military Academy, where he studied at night while tuned in to the local country music radio station. (Years later, when he began his career as a folksinger, Ochs patterned his singing style after Faron Young.) A sensitive soul with an artistic orientation and deprived of a warm and close relationship with his father, his experience at Staunton apparently drove him into a state of rebellion. In an environment designed to instill rigid discipline, honor, duty and patriotism, its effect on Ochs was just the opposite. For the rest of his life he rejected authority, becoming not only anti-military but anti-American.

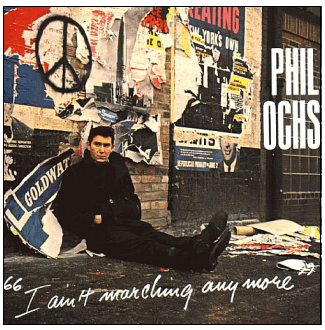
In 1958 Ochs enrolled at Ohio State University and met Jim Glover, a neophyte folksinger who introduced him to the left-wing political music of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. Glover taught Ochs how to play the guitar, and Glover's father, an ardent Marxist, became a kind of political mentor to Ochs. Together, Ochs and Glover formed a folksinging group called the Sundowners, although unofficially they billed themselves as the Singing Socialists. Soon, the two became ardent campus activists involved in issues such as protests against mandatory ROTC. Ochs, a journalism major, used his position on the OSU student newspaper to rail against the Eisenhower administration and American foreign policy, but when

the editors refused to publish some of his more controversial articles, he started an underground paper of his own called *The Word*. Intrigued by the Cuban Revolution and increasingly influenced by left-wing propaganda and conspiracy theories, he wrote on one occasion that Fidel Castro was "perhaps the greatest figure the Western Hemisphere has produced in the last century." When in his senior year he was denied the editorship of the student newspaper because of his radical views, he dropped out of school one semester short of graduating.

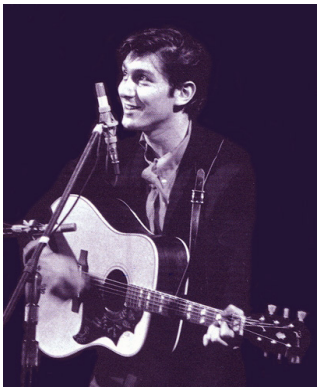
By then, Ochs' family was living in Cleveland. Hanging out in the city's folk clubs, he met Bob Gibson, whom he adopted as his musical mentor. Gibson had been associated with left-wing causes since the late 1930s, and in the early fifties he was one of the folksingers along with Pete Seeger who was investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and effectively blackballed from appearing on American radio and television. Under Gibson's influence, Ochs decided to move to Greenwich Village, where he reconnected with Glover and soon became an integral part of the burgeoning folk music coffee house scene along with other young up-and-coming folksinger/songwriters such as Tom Paxton, Judy Henske, Tim Hardin, Dave Van Ronk, Judy Collins, Mark Spoelstra, Gil Turner, Peter, Paul & Mary, and Bob Dylan.

Ochs was a naturally gifted songwriter, and for the next several years he emerged as a leader among the growing cadre of politicized troubadours. (His first notable composition, "A.M.A. Song," criticized the American healthcare system and called for socialized medicine – anticipating ObamaCare by nearly 50 years.) Although intense and focused, he had a clever sense of humor that he sometimes incorporated into his songs. He became a regular contributor to *Broadside* magazine and organized various benefit concerts in support of unions, civil rights and other causes. Like many young idealists, he was mesmerized by the Kennedy mystique, although he often criticized the President's Cold War policies and tepid support of civil rights. But in the early sixties Ochs' music expressed the kind of youthful idealism that typified mainstream liberalism, and his future appeared bright. His breakthrough came in 1963 when he was asked to perform at the prestigious Newport Folk Festival along with folk luminaries such as Pete Seeger, Dylan, Joan Baez, and Peter, Paul & Mary. He also signed on with Albert Grossman, the managerial entrepreneur who handled the careers of Dylan, Peter, Paul & Mary, Gordon Lightfoot, and others.

Capitalizing on the folk music boom of the early sixties, Ochs signed with Elektra Records in 1964. His first LP, *All the News That's Fit To Sing*, was hailed as a hallmark of topical/protest music, and featured several notable songs: "Bound for Glory," a tribute to Woody Guthrie; "The Power and the Glory," an updated variation on the theme of Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land;" and "What's That I Hear," an upbeat, clarion call for positive social change. His follow-up LP, *I Ain't Marching Anymore* ('65), was another protest *tour de force* and the most commercially successful album of his career (although even at that, it sold less than 40,000 copies). The album cover featured a photo of Ochs sitting on an urban sidewalk with his back against a wall covered with political graffiti and campaign posters, including one of Barry Goldwater that has just been ripped off the wall – presumably by Ochs himself. Like its predecessor, the album addressed a wide range of social and political themes. Highlights included the title track, "I Ain't Marching Anymore," a whirlwind tour through American military history; "In the Heat of the Summer," a commentary on the urban riots of 1964; the delightfully sardonic "Draft Dodger Rag," a favorite of the anti-war movement; a blistering anti-South diatribe, "Here's To the State of Mississippi;" the picturesque "Hills of West Virginia," one of the few non-protest songs he wrote early in his career; and a melancholy tribute to JFK entitled "That Was the President." In 1966 his live LP, *Phil Ochs in Concert*, showcased his provocative humor and revolutionary fervor with songs such as "Love Me, I'm a Liberal," a witty satire on liberal hypocrisy, and the sensitive and reflective "Changes," one of the sixties' definitive songs and one of his best compositions. But although he had carefully constructed an image of authenticity for himself and his music, in fact *Phil Ochs in Concert* was one of the most artificially doctored "live" albums ever produced with most of the vocals, introductory comments and audience reactions augmented and dubbed-in later in the studio. Like his life in general, his record was a testimonial to hypocrisy.



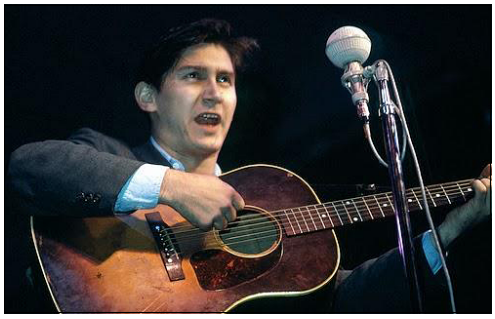
Nonetheless, with three impressive albums to his credit and a growing reputation as a major musical voice for the New Left, Ochs appeared poised to be a prominent figure in the music scene of the late sixties. Typically, however, he was torn between two competing ideals: on the one hand, he was a passionate ideologue who craved acceptance as a serious political prophet like Woody Guthrie, but alternately he was a aggressive self-promoter who aspired to sell a lot of records and become an influential (and rich) star like Dylan. He was stung by Dylan's criticism of his



work, who reportedly told him on one occasion, "The stuff you're writing is bullshit, because politics is bullshit. The only thing that's real is what's inside you – your feelings."

Ochs was dissatisfied with Elektra Records. The company had spent less than $10,000 producing his three albums, and total album sales were under 50,000 units – less than Dylan's recent LP, *Highway 61 Revisited*, sold in a month. Early in 1967 he left New York City for Los Angeles, where he worked out a deal with A&M Records. He also dumped his manager, Albert Grossman, in favor of Arthur Gorson, who had close ties with radical left-wing groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) but otherwise no experience in the music business.

Over the next three years, in an attempt to break out of the acoustic/folk mold and broaden his appeal, Ochs produced four albums. Musically, they were more eclectic than his earlier material, but they were no more successful commercially. For the first album, *Pleasures of the Harbor* ('67), A&M invested $40,000. The album featured two extraordinary songs, the title cut and an enigmatic epic, "The Crucifixion," which Ochs considered his greatest composition. The song featured abstract random allusions, and most listeners had not a clue what it was about other than an apparent reference to the assassination of JFK. Not nearly so political as his earlier works, the album generally reflected a melodic and poetic sensitivity that indicated a certain level of maturity as an artist. However, neither music critics nor his fans were particularly impressed. Writing in *Esquire* magazine, Robert Christgau penned the lines that would follow Ochs throughout the rest of his career: "[T]oo bad his voice shows an effective range of about half an octave, almost no dramatic quality, and a built-in vibrato that makes it sound warped; too bad his guitar playing would not suffer much if his right hand were webbed." A clever comment, but not particularly accurate. Ochs was undoubtedly a gifted songwriter and a competent performer. But he was also a tortured soul. His next release, *Tape from California* ('68), was even less satisfying as he was obviously floundering at this point in his career, groping for meaning and direction both personally and artistically.

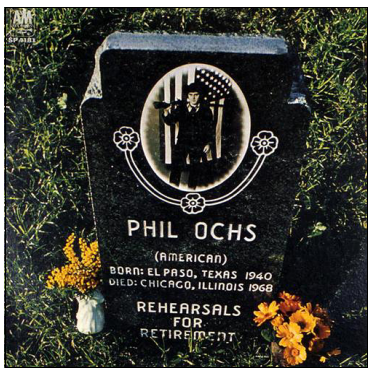


By the late sixties Ochs' personal life, like the society around him, was unraveling. In 1962 he had reluctantly married his pregnant girlfriend, Alice Skinner, who gave birth to a daughter, Meegan, a few months later. Ochs was rarely home, either performing or hanging out in the Greenwich Village bars and folk clubs, and his relationship with Alice was alternately cold and contentious. By his own admission he was an inattentive husband and a disinterested father, and the couple separated in January 1965. In *Death of a Rebel: A Biography of Phil Ochs*, author Marc Eliot relates Ochs' dramatic departure:

> Just before he left, he sat down with [Alice] at the kitchen table and made a list of people she wasn't to sleep with. She took the list, smiled, and kissed him on the cheek. She kept the list in her purse, checking the boys off, making sure she got every last one of them. She had the first one over the night Phil moved out.

Ochs' turbulent private life affected his music. The clever, sardonic wit and skepticism of the past, which also expressed hope for the future, degenerated into absurdist, hostile cynicism and despair. Early in the 1968 presidential campaign he supported the anti-war liberal, Eugene McCarthy, but later jumped on the anarchistic Yippie bandwagon led by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin. In August he serenaded the SDS and Yippie demonstrators gathered in Chicago's Grant Park for the Democratic National Convention, but left town before the violent battles erupted in the streets outside the convention center. Angry and disillusioned over the events of the year – the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy and the election of Richard Nixon – his mental health further degenerated.

In 1969 Ochs recorded *Rehearsals for Retirement*. Once again, the cover art was worth a thousand words, conveying the impression that Ochs, a patriotic American, died fighting for his country in the Chicago street riots of 1968. In a sense this was metaphorically true, as any semblance of idealism that he ever held was now dead. The album featured more of the obligatory ascerbic socio/political commentary such as the refrain from "I Kill, Therefore I Am" in which he intones, "I'm the masculine American man / I kill, therefore I am." Referring to the recent presidential election in "Another Age," he sings, "If that was an election / I'm a Vietcong" – probably an intentional double entendre. He closes the song by declaring: "So I'll pledge allegiance against the flag / And the cause for which it stands / I'll raze them if I can."



The album was not, however, without its sensitive moments in which Ochs bared his soul, including

"Rehearsals for the Retirement," a melancholy, semi-classical musing featuring an exquisite piano line reminiscent of "Pleasures of the Harbor," and the semi-autobiographical "My Life" in which he sings...

My life was once a joy to me
Never knowing, I was growing, every day
My life was once a toy to me
And I wound it and I found it, ran away.

So, I raced through the night with a face at my feet
Like a God I would write, all the melodies were sweet
And the women were white, it was easy to survive
My life was so alive.

My life was once a flag to me
And I waved it and behaved like I was told
My life was once a drag to me
And I loudly and I proudly lost control.

I was drawn by a dream, I was loved by a lie
Every serf on the scene begged me to buy
But I slipped through the scheme, so lucky to fail
My life was not for sale.

My life is now a myth to me
Like the drifter, with his laughter in the dawn
My life is now a death to me
So, I'll mold it and I'll hold it till I'm born.

So, I turned to the land where I'm so out of place
Throw a curse on the plan in return for the grace
To know where I stand, take everything I own
Take your tap from my phone and leave my life alone
My life alone...

Artistically and commercially, Ochs hit bottom with his live 1970 LP, *Gunfight at Carnegie Hall*. Bitter over the political state of affairs in the nation and frustrated by his own lack of commercial acceptance, he decided to adopt a new persona – an absurd cross between Elvis Presley and Che Guevara. Backed by a rock 'n' roll band, the concert was a fiasco, featuring inane stage patter along with incompetent cover versions of old Elvis, Buddy Holly and Merle Haggard hits. Much of the crowd reaction was hostile, and his behavior on stage was so unhinged that the management of Carnegie Hall banned him from ever playing there again. The resultant album was an unconscionable waste of good plastic. Instead of broadening his appeal, he only succeeded in alienating what few fans he still had.

Similarly, his last album, the strangely-titled *Phil Ochs Greatest Hits* ('71), was a commercial flop, primarily due to bizarre packaging: Ochs appeared on the front cover in an Elvis-style gold lame suit, looking like a paunchy parody of a rock 'n' roller, while the sleazy graphics on the back cover proudly exclaimed, "50 Phil Ochs Fans Can't Be Wrong!" – a parody on the advertising blurb for Elvis' first Golden Hits album, "50 Million Elvis Presley Fans Can't Be Wrong!" This was unfortunate because the album itself actually contained some interesting music, particularly "One Way Ticket Home," a flight of futile fancy back to a simpler time when Elvis Presley was the still the king; "Boy in Ohio," a touchingly nostalgic reminiscence on growing up in small-town America; "Jim Dean of Indiana," a glorified tribute to one of his boyhood idols; and "Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and Me" a delicate rhapsody replete with harpsichord and chamber orchestra. Despite his self-destructive tendencies, he was still capable of turning out some engaging and evocative songs.

Early in 1970 Ochs returned to Chicago and grabbed some ephemeral notoriety by attempting to sing a protest song at the infamous media circus trial of the "Chicago Eight," the prime instigators of the Chicago riots two years earlier that included notorious Marxist/anarchists such as Yippie leaders Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, the Black Panther revolutionary Bobby Seale, and actress Jane Fonda's future husband, Tom Hayden. Increasingly erratic and his judgment severely impaired by chronic alcoholism and drug use, he visited Charles Manson in the L.A. jail in 1971, exchanging clenched-fist salutes and praising the demonic Manson for his "strength and personal magnetism." In 1972 he campaigned for George McGovern, and the following year he traveled to Africa where he hoped to meet with Idi Amin, his latest political hero. Walking the beach one evening in Tanzania, he was assaulted by three black men who robbed and beat him. When he came to and realized his vocal chords had been damaged, he sank even deeper into depression. Although he had no evidence, he was certain that his attackers had been hired by the CIA.

Perpetually drunk, depressed, and suffering from writer's block, his subsequent public performances were usually sloppy and morose, lacking the wit and acuity of earlier years. In January 1974 Ochs appeared at a rally for the impeachment of Richard Nixon, and in May he organized a benefit concert for the socialist president of Chile, Salvador Allende. A year later he helped organize a "War Is Over" celebration in New York's Central Park to mark the end of the Vietnam War that drew a crowd of more than 100,000.

However, nothing could stop the downward spiral he was on. By year's end his police rap sheet detailed a long list of offenses, everything from burglary to assault and "criminal mischief." Over the years the FBI had compiled a 400-page file on Ochs, describing him as "un-American," "subversive," "potentially dangerous," a member or participant in various Communist organizations, and a man with "a propensity for violence and antipathy toward good order and government."

Pathetically bloated, often drunk and incoherent, and suffering from a severe case of bipolar disorder, Ochs was a caricature of his former self. Incapacitated by paranoia, he was certain the FBI and the CIA had him on their hit list. Declaring that Phil Ochs was dead, he took on a new persona as the folksinger John Train. He told friends that he was considering reviving

his career by signing on with a new manager – either Elvis' manager, Colonel Tom Parker, or Colonel Harlan Sanders, the Kentucky Fried Chicken magnate. His brother Michael eventually attempted to intervene and have him committed to a psychiatric hospital, but Ochs refused to cooperate. He wound up homeless on the streets before finally moving in with his sister and her family in Far Rockaway, New York, in January 1976. A broken man, and shunned by most of his former friends and colleagues, Ochs succumbed to suicidal tendencies and hanged himself on April 19, 1976. Whether the ultimate act of protest or just the impulsive act of a devastated soul, his death silenced one of the most gifted songwriters not only of the 1960s but the 20th century.

In his 1980 song, "Humans," Bruce Cockburn wrote, "See the extremes... of what humans can be...." In Psalm 8 David wrote of the exalted state of humanity as created in the *imago Dei,* the image of God:

> O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
> You have set your glory above the heavens....
> When I consider the heavens, the work of your hands,
> The moon and the stars which you have set in place,
> What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?
> You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings,
> And crowned him with glory and honor.
> You made him ruler over the works of your hands,
> You put everything under his feet....
> O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! – Psalm 8:1*ff*

Conversely, in Romans 1 the apostle Paul noted the inherent sinfulness of humankind and the depths of depravity to which humanity is capable:

> The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.
>
> For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools....
>
> Therefore God gave them over in their sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator....
>
> Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. – Romans 1:18*ff*

The life of Phil Ochs provides a tutorial in terms of the full range of human potential and depravity. Raised in godless home with a distant, dysfunctional father and a cold, detached mother, deprived of the kind of parental guidance and religious-based moral influences that every child needs, Ochs essentially raised himself. A sensitive soul and a creative dreamer, he spent his high school years in a military academy in which his major avenue of escape was the celluloid fantasy world of Hollywood movies. By comparison, the real world seemed cold, confusing and hostile. Choosing the path of least resistance, he became a rebel – first without a cause, but soon as a Marxist propagandist. The fact that he had a special talent as a songwriter and performer at a time when singer/songwriters were hailed by many as social prophets provided him with a vast audience of impressionable and idealistic youth. But he was a false prophet and a narcissistic hypocrite, not a serious and committed revolutionary with any kind of realistic vision for a more just society. Intellectually impaired by his ideology, emotionally fragile, personally immature and irresponsible, he lacked the moral and spiritual character to distinguish truth from lies or reality from fantasy. Like all social critics, he was adept in seeing the hypocrisy and fallacies in American society, but he was blind to all these problems in his own life.

In late 1973 Ochs wrote an article for the Los Angeles *Weekly News* celebrating the impending impeachment and/or resignation of Richard Nixon. In a rare moment of moral clarity he noted, "I suppose the final lesson of all this is that your character is your fate." The line could have been etched into his own tombstone as a fitting epitaph.

The Essential Phil Ochs
A Selected Discography

All the News That's Fit to Sing (1964)

- The Power and the Glory
- One More Parade
- Talking Cuban Crisis
- Talking Vietnam
- The Thresher
- Too Many Martyrs
- What's That I Hear

I Ain't Marching Anymore (1965)
- I Ain't Marching Anymore
- Draft Dodger Rag
- Here's to the State of Mississippi
- In the Heat of the Summer
- Talking Birmingham Jam
- Ballad of the Carpenter
- That Was the President

Phil Ochs in Concert (1966)
- Love Me, I'm a Liberal
- Canons of Christianity
- There but for Fortune
- Changes

Pleasures of the Harbor (1967)
- Pleasures of the Harbor
- Crucifixion

Tape from California (1967)
- The War Is Over
- White Boots Marching in a Yellow Land

Rehearsals for Retirement (1969)
- I Kill, Therefore I Am
- My Life
- Another Age
- Rehearsals for Retirement

Gunfight At Carnegie Hall (1970)

Phil Ochs' Greatest Hits (1971)
- One Way Ticket Home
- Jim Dean of Indiana
- Boy in Ohio
- Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and Me