ROCKUMENTARY REVIEW

By Pete Roche

50 Years With Peter, Paul and Mary

It's been over forty years since America's had so much need for protest music.

You know: The veiled imagery of Bob Dylan. The genteel guitar strums and watercolor lyricism of Joni Mitchell and Joan Baez. The subversive humor of Frank Zappa. The literary acumen and "unplugged" savvy of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young.

Peter, Paul and Mary were the kings and queen of socially-aware folk back in the '60s. The trio hasn't been in the public eye for some time now: Mary Travers passed away in 2009, leaving Peter Yarrow and Noel "Paul" Stookey to play on (if far less often) as a duo, as individuals, or as leaders of ragtag ensembles comprised of friends and family members.

But there's never been a better time to reassess the threesome's harmonious legacy. Fortunately, Emmy-winning director Jim Brown has rewound the clock and unfurled the archival footage for a comprehensive, rewarding review of the singers' art—and activism.

Originally produced for PBS (for whom it was a fundraising sensation), *50 Years With Peter, Paul and Mary* is a behind-the-music documentary worthy of pop's most beloved acoustic threesome.

Peppered by vintage television performances and packed with contemporary commentary and interviews by the vocalists and their kin, *50 Years* makes a case for PPM's ardent musical advocacy…and their inclusion in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. Brown (*Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*) curates songs and images for a compelling retrospective of PPM's song-craft and socialism—but it's the friendship that empowered the musicians (and their messages) that comes to the fore. Turns out there was more to this group than Peter and Paul's goatees and Mary's lustrous lips evinced on camera…or even on vinyl.

We Boomers and Gen-Xers know this, of course—*we* being the kids that grew up with PPM, the former hippies and yuppie puppies for whom music still becomes a panacea in moments of sociopolitical panic. But PPM's songs transcended the Sixties and Seventies, their songs having passed from one generation to another.

It's time their personal stories were retold, too.

"In the early '60s, those of us who shared [Greenwich] Village's crucible of creativity looked at ourselves with fresh eyes," says Stookey in an early voiceover. "We listened with fresh ears. The world was changing fast. Traditional concepts of success were being turned upside-down, and new ideas were forming around what was important, truthful, honest, and worth pursuing in life. For the moment, money and security didn't matter. We were healthy, young, and filled with the intoxication of the Village, which gave us this cloak of invulnerability."

Brown takes viewers from the New York trio's first meeting and formation as a musical entity to its initial brushes with success. The fascinating narrative is eclipsed only by the dozens of PPM stage and T.V. studio appearances made from the '60s, '70s, and '80s and the fiery passion with which the peppy youngsters (then middle-agers and semi-retirees) imbue the tunes.

"Mary and I went over to visit Noel Paul at his lower east side apartment," reports Peter. "He was a brilliant comedian, but also a terrific musician."

"When I sang with them, there was the musical itch. But each voice was its own character. I was sure this was *it*. Lightning had struck. Almost every day we were thrust into a new spotlight. During our first year of touring we performed six concerts a week. Among other remarkable adventures, we sang and met President John F. Kennedy."

Rather than bask idly in said spotlight, Yarrow and his companions used their growing popularity to echo the major concerns of the day. And if someone else's song said it better, why then PPM would cover *that* song, says Yarrow. It was considered a compliment to have one's message spread to the world; there wasn't as much thought given to ownership or misappropriation of one's intellectual property. The music was *art*, and art was for *people*. "It was flattery to be covered," says Yarrow.

Accordingly, we're treated to moving renditions of E.Y. Harburg's "Brother, Can You Spare

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The trio with John Denver at protest march in Washington

a Dime?" Hedy West's "Five Hundred Miles," Rev. Gary Davis' "If I Had My Way," Ewan MacColl's "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face," Gordon Lightfoot's "Early Morning Rain," Phil Ochs' "There But For Fortune," Pete Seeger's "If I Had a Hammer," and—of course—Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind"—which PPM perform during a peace march in Washington, D.C. with Martin Luther King.

"I remember being on the steps at the Lincoln Monument," muses Mary. "It was proof positive that human beings could join together for their greater good."
The blonde beauty's male cohorts concur: "The music of hope and expression was giving birth to new ways of viewing the world that would reshape our destinies as individuals…and as a society," reminisces Stookey.

The spaces between artist and audience began to shrink. Peter, Paul and Mary joined dozens of other like-minded musicians at Newport Music Festival in Rhode Island, where the message of equality became the beacon that would draw countless others from around the nation. "Music began to inspire America and tweak its conscience, and articulate its dreams," says Yarrow. "The messages were personal, of course, but political by implication,"

We discover how PPM's record company fretted a downturn in album sales and overall fandom because of their steadfast involvement in antiwar demonstrations and civil rights parades, and how Yarrow, Stookey, and Travers suffered arrest, hate mail—even death threats—because of their participation in such protests. In Frankfort, Kentucky, a bomb fails to scare the singers away. At the 1968 New Hampshire Primary for Sen. Eugene McCarthy, PPM record a custom-made campaign theme song ("If You Love Your Country). Later, Yarrow pens the bittersweet antiwar song "The Great Mandala"—whose poetic lyric turns up later on the headstones of fallen soldiers.

Mary—a high-school dropout and a single mom at 23 when she joined PPM—becomes a role model for feminists everywhere. Even Gloria Steinem marvels at Travers' ability to "be herself, have her own voice, and be fully expressive" rather than "do what [women] were trained to do in the '50s" and silently submit.

Later, Mary must rediscover how to reclaim herself from the plurality of the group so she can relate to her growing daughter and future husband. By the early '70s, Peter and Paul are likewise ready to step back from the limelight and reconnect with their wives and kids. "We bend to each other because we care and have respect for each other," says Stookey of the willingness to adapt.

"I think you can feel that in our harmonies, and in the texture of what we sing."

Nonetheless, Peter, Paul and Mary realigned throughout the '70s, '80s, and '90s to give their voices over to various causes, starting with a "Survival Sunday" concert at the Hollywood Bowl in defiance of the nuclear power plant at Diablo Canyon. A 25th anniversary tour found PPM playing homeless shelters and correcting "misperceptions" about society's lesser fortunate. The singers join the anti-apartheid movement and visit churches in El Salvador and Nicaragua, where U.S. funds were being channeled to drug cartels and terrorists, and throw their support behind underpaid migrant farmers in California.

Naturally, Brown serves up classic clips of PPM performing hit "Puff, The Magic Dragon," whose two different meanings are explored: Where some insisted the song was about drugs (marijuana) and Vietnam (with "Puff" being a bullet-belching Huey helicopter), others interpreted it as the end-of-innocence metaphor Yarrow intended.

"From an adult's perspective, it's about the sadness that occurs when childhood goes," Peter explains. "It was a sweet song that all of a sudden captured the imagination of young people, of kids."

We hear from ex-managers Ken Fritz and Albert Grossman, and from current handler Martha Hertzberg. We get feedback from the spouses and (adult) children on how PPM interacted with one another and struggled to adjust to domestic life back home.

Bonus features include tributes and testimonials by politician pals (John Kerry) and actress acquaintances (Whoopie Goldberg) at Travers' funeral, along with sterling PPM television performances of "Weave Me The Sunshine," "The Wedding Song (There Is Love)," and "Day Is Done."