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Paul Simon: Folk-Philosopher An Existential Analysis of a Contemporary Folk-Singer

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PAUL SIMON: FOLK-PHILOSOPHER

An Existential Analysis of a Contemporary Folk-Singer

by Bill Cook

A thesis submitted to
the Department of Philosophy of Carroll College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Honors with the B.A. degree.

Helena, Montana
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This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of Philosophy.

Rev. Francis J. Wegenstein, M.A.

Rev. Daniel J. Smith, M.A., S.T.L.

Mr. Robert Heywood, M.A.
To Mr. Robert Heywood
—whose general assistance, especially in library materials, was invaluable,

and

To Father Dan Smith
—whose gentle coaxing and generous help made this work fun,

and finally

To my folks—Mom and Dad
—who gave me life and a guitar to appreciate it.
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American folk songs are national treasures much as our forests and rivers, our topsoil and our landscapes, our libraries and our children are treasures—familiar, taken for granted, and perhaps not valued highly enough. Our best folk songs are strong, beautiful and long lasting, like fine old colonial furniture and silverware—not as museum pieces and antiques, but as family possessions in daily use through the generations—worn and rubbed and scratched and polished, broken and repaired, bearing the marks of our love and care, our mistakes and carelessness.

—Russell Ames"
INTRODUCTION

When I was in grade school we used to play a game. Probably a fore­runner of the educational toys and games which are so prevalent today, it was a game designed to develop the powers of observation and memory. It was really a very easy game. The teacher would simply suggest a word or phrase. Then, starting with the first person in the first row we would all describe or define what the word meant, each person repeating everything that those in front had said and adding his own idea. For example, if the word were car the game might go like this: "A car has a motor; a car has a motor and uses gas; a car has a motor and uses gas and comes in many colors, etc., etc." And when thirty people had answered you knew quite a bit about a car, although there were many ideas that were extraneous to the real nature of a car.

Folk singers also play this game. One says that folk music is this; another adds something; a third subtracts. Over the years definitions have become quite lengthy, and there is little agreement as to just what a folk song is. In chapter one we will try to get a basic understanding of the folk tradition, but for now let us simply say that folk song has been the tale of common men. It has been the story of their experiences and what these experiences meant to them.

Philosophy, on the other hand, has been quite removed from the main­stream of life which is so characteristic of folk music. As John Wild so correctly points out, "No one ever thought of studying seriously the finite existence of the human person as lived from within."
Instead, philosophers have searched for the non-existent man in the abstract. Plato said that man was a fallen creature in a world of shadows, from which he must ascend. Hegel made him a God, an unfolding of the Absolute Mind. They have delved into what man could be or should be, but have shamefully neglected what he is.

In short, then, philosophy has been almost the opposite of the folk tradition. Until the nineteenth century, at least, philosophy has been too concerned with an ideal world and eternal truths, neither of which can be found in experience. Contemporary philosophy has attempted to meet this neglect. Chapter two will be devoted to some basic themes of existentialism as a background for the main body of this thesis, but it must be understood that, as in our game, existentialism means many things to many people.

The world of the intellectual can be far removed from that of the common man. It is a long way from a philosopher's office to a recording studio, but if the two do not have something in common, then neither is quite right. Existentialism would seem to bridge this gap.

I am going to analyze the existential implications of contemporary folk music as exemplified by the works of Paul Simon. His music is concerned with a passionate involvement with life as well as a critical questioning of the experiences of life. Music is the language of the soul. I think that today's "soul" music is one of the very best expressions of existential philosophy. As an epilogue I am also going to include my own critical questioning of the human experience in some original folk songs. I hope to provide an insight into the existential character of folk music and to express this in lyrical verse as well as prose.
CHAPTER I

The Great Laughers and the Great Liars

American folk singers are the great laughers and the great liars because they know that life is so much more ridiculous than anyone can ever hope to tell.

—John and Alan Lomax

When Pete Seeger was asked what a folk-song was, he was quick to reply, "When folks sing, then they are folk songs." Pete wasn't being facetious, but there was a tinge of "if you gotta ask then you'll never know" in his answer. Every folk singer or musicologist has his own definition, but I would like to give you some of the elements I think are necessary.

For me, folk music brings to mind hearty, rustic country people who worked hard and played hard and sang about it. While mother was cleaning away the dishes, dad would be tuning up the banjo, and a typical cold winter evening might be spent singing about the new country that was being formed or the eldest son who had died fighting for it. These "folks" had a hand in forming that country and their songs give us a rich history of it, but more than that they give us a picture of people. What was it like to build a railroad or clear a forest? A good way to find out is to listen, or better yet sing, the songs that the railroad men and the lumberjacks themselves sang. A single cowboy song can provide a vivid picture of what it was really like to move the big herds on the trail. The songs were not written down, but passed on by singing. New verses were easily added if the occasion seemed to require and there was no set way of singing a particular song.
Alan Lomax, who along with his father, John, has done extensive "in the field" research says that folk songs are "homemade hand-me-downs in words and music, songs accepted by whole communities, songs voted good by generations of singers and passed on by word of mouth to succeeding generations." This is the definition of the real professional, the scientific folk song hunter. Ethnic purists will look closely for what they term authenticity. Performers themselves are usually concerned with the sound of the music. Thus, they will hear folk elements in certain songs, i.e. folk-rock or country-rock.

Basically, I don't think the idea of a definition is of real importance. However, the idea of what a folk song is in general terms is very important. Folk songs are about the small talk as well as the big news of people's lives. "Folk songs are for the people who read front-page news, gossip columns, editorials, advice to the lovelorn, comics and obituaries." They have an interest in everything around them.

However, before there were books or newspapers or radio or television people still preserved their culture by singing of their experiences; their trials and joys, sufferings and pleasures. Thus we have drinking songs and children songs, gambling songs and mining songs, but they are all folk songs. These people had no literary conventions to uphold, but they sang because it was a way of expressing what they felt.

"Grimm has said that the folk song composes itself. Its music comes straight from the heart of the people, and its idioms reveal their daily habits of speech." Similarly, Alan Lomax speaks of folk songs as being an expression of the fantasy and the life of the unconscious in the
American people. He says it is made up of both their dreams and their repressed desires.7

Some would say that artistically folk music is inferior to other forms; that it ranks near the bottom in aesthetic qualities. This could be debated, but as Sigmund Spaeth observes, it "remains the richest yield of a people's character and spirit in what they sang from generation to generation."8 And again: "The mere fact that millions of people sang a certain song, or listen to it with honest pleasure, gives it a significance that cannot be ignored. Artistic merit has nothing to do with the question."9

Folk song is actually audience tested and quite democratic.

Folk song grows in small steps, with every change tested for audience reaction, thereby achieving a permanence in man's affection matched only by the greatest art. This art lives upon the lips of the multitude and is transmitted by the grapevine, surviving sometimes for centuries because it reflects so well the deepest emotional convictions of the common man. This is a truly democratic art, painting a portrait of the people unmatched for honesty and validity in any other record.10

However, I would like to make a case for its artistic worth. I think there is something wrong with our understanding of aesthetic value if it leaves no room for such a popular music. For me, folk music can be very beautiful and not just fun to sing. It can evoke powerful sensations and feelings which I believe make it quite aesthetic. Although many qualified musicologists might disagree, I think that its artistic value ranks well with the more "refined" types of music.

Gilbert Chase says that he believes our folk-popular music to have been "the most important phase of America's music." In fact he goes on to say that our folk popular idiom "has been on the march through all these generations and even our most academic composers are catching up with it or being caught up by it."11
This is especially true of our Negro spirituals which have had such an influence on other forms such as jazz or blues. The songs of the Negro have been called the finest of American songs and even the "highest achievement of our entire culture." They are probably also our finest protest songs:

For some it has always been lightly thought that singing people are happy people. Nothing could be more untrue. The greatest and most enduring songs are wrung from unhappy people—the spirituals of the slaves which say in effect—"It is hopeless here, maybe in heaven it will be better." The whole history of the Negro people may be summed up in a line from one of their songs—"lookin' for a home." The Negro has sung what he feels—the blues:

The great changes that were brought about by the Civil War—the mechanization of our lives, our rootlessness and homelessness—are mirrored sharply in the blues. In them as in the spirituals, the Negro people have expressed poignantly the deepest feelings of us all.

Many of these same themes are still present in folk music today, but it is nevertheless on the move. Although it is centuries old, folk music has achieved a rebirth just at the time when it looked like it might die out in the 1930's and 40's. The reasons are fairly clear if you think about them. "In a period when millions were being deprived, dispossessed, and then destroyed, there was a need for an affirmation of things basically human." The New Deal and the anti-fascist war awakened humane feelings in the American people.

"It was a time when intellectual people felt drawn to a commonality with others whose lives and rights were threatened with extinction." Thus, we have Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. 
As we will see in Chapter II philosophy was undergoing this same change with the advent of existentialism. In fact both movements are a manifestation of the time, a time which represents an affirmation of the importance of the individual as a person.

The Cold War created a new phenomenon: Cold Art. The feelings of enthusiasm and faith in an ideal that moved many artists in the years 1930-45 gradually fell away, and were replaced by a deep unbelief, a corrosion of feeling, a shying away of one human being from another.18

Serious musicians became caught up in this "corrosion" and soon lost interest in folk music, but the people as a whole, especially the young, took it up as their own. "Without a clear ideal of life, the young people of our time have turned to the universal expression that is folk music."19 It actually satisfies a basic contemporary need for audience participation.

Today, most Americans live in the cities. The authentic folk singer of the older tradition still exists, but he has been augmented by his city cousin. "There is developing a new generation of folk singers, many of whom combine traditional folk sounds with modern lyrical ideas."20 In the language of the psychology textbook, these ideas would include:

1. Loneliness and sadness.
2. The discovery of interpersonal sharing.
3. The need for trust.
4. The awakening of social awareness.
5. The search for personal fulfillment.
6. A preoccupation with youth, recklessness and death.21

Some still call it folk music, others folk-rock, and still others just popular music, but whatever you want to call it, the important thing is that the new breed of folk singer has moved to the city and is singing as always about what's happening. You will see him in the coffee houses
and parks. From Washington Square and Greenwich Village to Haight-Ashbury and Berkeley, there he is, guitar in hand, singing to anyone who will listen. In place of the mountains, he writes about a bridge on 59th Street. In place of the "flesh ag'in de steam" of a song like John Henry, there is the man against society of A Most Peculiar Man. And the sounds of the forest have come to the city and become Sounds of Silence. These are the sounds of Paul Simon.
Notes to Chapter I


4. Ibid., p. viii.


9. Ibid., p. 3.


15. Ibid.


17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., p. 15.
19. Ibid.


CHAPTER II

People and Things

To carry through an industrial revolution, clear continents, and enlighten or exterminate the indigenous savages, you had to use yourself as a thing. But the things have been quietly catching up. They are now in a position to demonstrate conclusively, that things made better things than people do. Most of us, I am sure, agree that here in America things have never looked brighter. It's the people who give cause for concern.

—Edgar Z. Friedenberg

In this single concise statement, Friedenberg represents the background for why existentialism has finally gained influence in America. We are at last coming to grips with our predicament as individuals in a mass society. However, existentialism doesn't represent a nice neat system of thought, and its proponents differ widely among themselves. The following presents it in general terms:

The terms existentialism and existential suggest to us postwar neurosis, irrationalism, and a morbid preoccupation with such gruesome themes as anxiety, death, and the absurdity of life...... It is rather the first persistent and disciplined attempt in our Western history to explore the dim and hazy regions of the human life-world.  

With this as our point of departure, therefore, we will try to explore some of the basic elements of existentialism. The field is gigantic, but I will try to stay as much as possible to a thematic rather than an historical approach. Volumes could be written on any of the existentialists, but here we are only seeking some understanding of the movement as a whole.
Existentialism actually goes back to Soren Kirkegaard (1813-1855) and his attack upon the idealism of Hegel and the Christianity of the times. Kierkegaard condemned the so-called intellectuals of his day who dared to explain all of life in purely rational terms. But Kierkegaard's influence in Europe was negligible. He was a man ahead of his time.

The philosophy of existentialism made its first real headway just prior to and after World War II. It did so by trying to meet the needs of man in his particular situation:

Contemporary man looked to the older philosophies, whether empiricistic or rationalistic, to see if they would answer his newly risen needs, but he looked there in vain. Not only did these philosophies fail to provide help, but scandalously, they seemed unaware and untouched by the crises (estrangement, alienation, etc.) themselves. Secure in their world of immutable species and eternal ideas, the older philosophies preferred to remain vincibly ignorant of the fact that the man of today was no longer the man of yesteryear—that he had become the post-modern man. It is no wonder that a new philosophy and a new attitude toward philosophy grew out of this situation—a philosophy of self-enlightenment which revealed man to himself in a manner unknown by empirical or rationalistic philosophies of old. We must stress the need for self-enlightenment rather than enlightenment, because the universe was viewed no longer as God's. It was now man's world.2

Gabriel Marcel has attempted to meet this contemporary need by upholding the importance and the beauty of the individual. He says that man is caught up in a mystery, the mystery of being human. Man can confront the mystery only through love, through a communion of persons. Man can be compared to beads, which neatly laid out one next to the other give the impression of forming a necklace, but which on being touched roll away in all directions; they do not form a connected whole because they have overlooked the thread, the meaning of life.3

Because he gets dragged along in the current of the events of the moment, Marcel says that man is unable to commit himself to the future. He
either withdraws to an unchangeable world or wraps himself up in the present moment. Marcel opts for a third possibility: "It is only by linking myself up with the future that I have really put myself at the disposal of the divine plan of salvation." And again, "I am inclined to believe that hope is for the soul what breathing is for the living organism." Actually, Marcel sees God as the illumination of our reality.

Jean-Paul Sartre makes a different case. His first assumption is that God does not exist. Love is impossible for you will either turn the other person into an object or allow yourself to be turned into one. Sartre calls for a return to authenticity—to responsibility to oneself. The world is absurd and man must create his own values.

Sartre's experience with existence is one of nausea, but to "those who are ready to use this as an excuse for tossing out the whole of Sartrian philosophy we point out that it is better to encounter one's existence in disgust than to never encounter it at all."

However, although Marcel and Sartre and other existentialists may differ widely, there is a certain common bond uniting them, based on the following:

1. Existentialism is a rebellion against traditional philosophy which thought it enjoyed eminent domain over eternal and immutable truths.
2. It is a protest by the contingent and free against the abstract necessity of idealistic essentialism.
3. It is also a protest against the increasing de-personalization of human existence.
4. It seeks to understand all in terms of man and so is homo-centric rather than theo-centric.
5. Principally voluntaristic, it stresses the element of the irrational as an important if not a dominating force in man's life. But existentialism is not itself an irrationalism.
Summing up, existentialism has as its fundamental creed the belief that existence must be paramount in philosophy as well as in life and that the starting point for philosophy is man as a concrete person.

In philosophical language, existentialism means that existence precedes essence. Man exists and makes himself to be what he is. His essence comes from his existence instead of being a fixed thing given to him at birth. Man shapes himself by means of freedom and the historical conditions in which he lives.

However, until very recently existentialism has not been very popular in America. Sartre's plays were a flop on Broadway. America was safe and secure with its exclusive knowledge of the bomb and we were content with Friedenberg's things. The economy was booming and people were only secondary. As early as 1962, William Barrett would write that "despite all its apparently cheerful and self-satisfied immersion in gadgets and refrigerators, American life one suspects is nihilistic to the core. It's final 'What for?' is not even asked let alone answered."

Just what is happening in America today is not at all certain, as is expressed in this timely commentary:

The variety of things now occurring in America seems so bewildering at first glance that the observer is tempted to conclude that everyone has gone a little mad. Has America been caught up in a collective fever like the dancing craze of the Middle Ages or lemmings rushing headlong into the sea? Have we come to a decadent debauchery as in the latter days of the Roman empire? Or are we in the midst of a process of breakthrough into a brave new world where living will be richer and fuller for everyone?

I do think that the American people are awakening. They are reading about existentialism and many are doing something about their new found ideas. Life styles are changing. Things and property are becoming
incidental to happy living and even subordinate to human life. Young people today no longer want to do something because they should, but because they want to. They are concerned with experiences rather than set dogmas.

Americans are beginning to ask the question "what for?". They are worried if there are people starving in Appalachia or lacking an education in Alabama. They are experiencing the existential themes of guilt, despair, inwardness, activism, fear, dread, and mystery. The revolution in the way people act in America seems to be in full swing. The revolution in the way they think is only beginning to catch up.

Nowhere are these trends more evident than in the various art forms. Their testimony is convincing because it is spontaneous. It is authentic and more like a kind of reporting, since it doesn't spring from any intellectual program.

"Every age presents its own image of man in its art."11 For example, a Greek sculpture shows us the image of man in the light of which the Greeks lived. And yet today there is no clear-cut image of man, but only a great number of contradictory images. Is it because the modern artist is unable to rise to the task? No, more probably it is because "man is a creature who transcends any image because he has no fixed essence or nature, as a stone or tree have."12 Literature must grapple with the problems of man in his time and milieu. If we now think that the world is dense, opaque and unintelligible, then we need new art forms to meet this challenge.

Personally, I think there are existential overtones in almost all of our art, but I have chosen music as being one of the best representations
of this. It is not a case of using folk music to explain what is happening in philosophy. I would shudder at the thought of making music the slave of philosophy, as possibly Sartre has done in his plays. Music must be free to rise from the depths of a human soul. It has its own integrity. Thus, we will be looking at the songs of Paul Simon to gain an insight into life and not to illustrate existentialism. I am not going to impose the themes of existentialism on Simon's work, but will only attempt to show the themes which he himself is expressing.

Does an artist give an idea to reality? No. "It is found in the work that he produces." The artist does not know what he is going to do until he does it." This is very exciting, because at this point invention and discovery coincide:

Has the poet made his poem or discovered it? Both and neither. The poet does not first invent his creative idea and then incarnate it in words; he discovers it by incarnating. It comes to be in the creative process.

With this very brief sketch of existentialism and its relation to art we are now ready to look at the artist himself.
Notes to Chapter II


5Ibid.


8Kreyche, p. 13.

9Barrett, p. 204.


11Barrett, p. 59.

12Ibid., p. 61.


14Ibid.
CHAPTER III

The Punkel Brothers

When I first heard the names Simon and Garfunkel on the radio about five years ago, I thought the announcer said Simon and Gar Punkel. I was immediately convinced that the "Punkel Brothers" represented a new breakthrough in folk music. It was quite a joke to learn their real names, but I soon became aware that Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel were no laughing matter.

Simon has a B.A. in English literature from Queen's College and Garfunkel has an M.A. in math from Columbia University Teachers' College and is working full time toward his doctorate. They are in great demand on college campuses, but they sing only on weekends when Garfunkel is free from classes. They refuse to play at night clubs, because they do not just sing to be singing. They want to be heard and college students are more than willing to listen.

Paul Simon once said, "As you get older, you think better--up to the age of twenty-two that is. If you are a jerk at twenty-two, you are always going to be stupid. If you are a genius, somewhere at twenty-two it is there." Simon and Garfunkel were twenty-two when they began their thing five years ago and what was there then is still there. They have not released any new songs in the last year since the time when this work was begun, but this is indicative of their strong desire to sing only their best songs. They will not be intimidated into recording two or three hits on an album and filling in the rest with trivia, as is so popular today.*

*It should be noted here that Simon does all of the writing. Garfunkel helps arrange and edit, but he does not write.
Paul Simon's songs touch closely "the prevailing philosophy current of the New Youth which is that of creativity AGAINST the machine and thus FOR humanity." He fights the notion that he is a spokesman for his group. "Nobody is talking for this generation," says Simon. "Everybody has got his own ideas. I don't consider myself a poet. I am a songwriter. I am not interested in puzzling people for the sake of puzzlement. I like what I say to be heard and understood." But if Simon is not speaking for his generation, he is speaking to them: "Hear my words that I might teach you. Take my arms that I might reach you." There is even a sense of the prophet or martyr: "My words trickle down from a wound which I have no intention to heal."

Paradoxically, this is mixed with a real distrust:

I don't know why I spend my time writing songs I can't believe with words that tear and strain your eyes. And so you see I have come to doubt all that I once held as true. I stand alone without beliefs. The only truth I know is you.

However, even in the doubting, a basic existential theme is upheld—a faith in another person. For Simon, this is the only truth he can find.

The varying moods expressed above will be evident in many of the songs with which we will be concerned. This is only right, for moods do change and over a period of time ideas can vary. William Barrett gives us a wonderful insight into the value of moods:

Would it not in fact be a serious and appropriate task for the philosopher to elaborate what is involved in certain moods? We are living in an epoch that has produced two world wars, and these wars were not merely passing incidents, but characterized the age down to its morrow; surely, a philosophy that has experienced these wars may be said to have some connection with the life of its time. Philosophers who dismissed Existentialism as "merely a mood" betrayed a curious
blindness to the concerns of the human spirit, in taking the view that philosophic truth can only be found in those areas of experience in which human moods are not present.

Simon and Garfunkel are talented youths telling about their experiences. "I write about my problems, the things I know best. That's all I know," says Simon.

Why do I feel compelled to write about this pain I see? I could split and be free and do whatever I want. I said to myself, well, why don't you? Because I'm here, that's why.

Simon and Garfunkel talk about life in middle-class America, and though they are often critical of it, they have been patronized by and accepted by this same middle-class—at least its younger members. They are critical of the times, but it is a constructive criticism. Their songs are a strange combination of despair and hope. If this sounds inconsistent they are at least as consistent as that strange thing we call life.

The life of a traveling musician can be extremely difficult. Perhaps Simon himself says it best:

Everyday's an endless stream of cigarettes and magazines. And each town looks the same to me, the movies and the factories. And every stranger's face I see reminds me that I long to be

(Chorus) Homeward bound. I wish I was homeward bound. Home, where my thought's escaping; home, where my music's playing; home where my love lies waiting silently.

Tonight I'll sing my songs again. I'll play the game and pretend. But all my words come back to me in shades of mediocrity. Like emptiness in harmony, I need someone to comfort me.

Their vocal style is a lot closer to the troubadors of the sixteenth century rather than today's "rock and rollers." Their songs are intelligent, poetic, and melodically ingenious. In any song, the melody is just as
important as the lyrics. Both must contribute to a unified whole. This unity is immediately evident in the songs of Simon and Garfunkel. Simon makes great use of the music. The first time you hear one of their songs it will probably be the melody that catches your attention, but just about the time you start to hum along, the words hit you and you realize that it is not just another song.

Simon makes frequent literary illusions. The lyrics are intellectual and demanding. The music is subdued, restrained. At times you would think they were merely choir boys singing a hymn, and in fact this is what they do in Bandedictus. Simon's method is to get the most out of both the lyrics and the music. Neither dominates; both contribute to the other. Together, the words and the melody form a perfect marriage.

Before beginning to analyze their songs in Chapter IV I would like to look at one final question which was only touched on in Chapter I. Are Simon and Garfunkel folk-singers? The answer is not a simple "yes" or "no" but it is very important.

If we look again at the three basic elements in Alan Lomax's definition of a folk song, we see that it has:

1. Lost its identity as a consciously composed piece.
2. Undergone verbal changes during oral transmission.
3. Been sung for some period—say two generations.

This creates a problem for I only know of a few of their songs which would fit all three points. These have been adopted to give a modern flavor and are worthy of note. The first is Scarborough Fair/Canticle. This song was taken from two songs, Scarborough Fair and The Cambric Shirt.
which were collected in *Ten English Folk-Songs* and published in 1915. The second song was actually a nursery rhyme, but Simon created some very subtle changes to make it a war protest song. The melody appears to be entirely his own.

Then, there is Richard Cory. The original Richard Cory was a poem by Edwin Arlington Robinson about a wealthy American gentleman of the early 1900's. Simon adopted it to the American gentleman of the 1960's, the mighty industrialist, but somehow the meaning is the same—the rich man kills himself because his wealth does not bring him happiness. *El Condor Pasa* was adopted from an 18th century Peruvian folk melody for which Simon wrote English lyrics. Finally, So Long, Frank Lloyd Wright, the ballad of the late innovative architect has all the makings of the authentic folk song of the older tradition.

I know of only one song which has presently undergone oral changes. (That is publicly. The number of changes by amateurs is probably fairly large.) Joan Baez changed a line in *The Dangling Conversation* from "Is the theater really dead?" to "Is the church really dead?" In a slightly different context this is reminiscent of the early Puritans and other Protestant sects who fitted hymn words to ballad and dance melodies. For example, "There was a man who had lost his wife" could easily become "There was a man who had lost God's grace."10

Thus, some of Simon's songs are folk-songs in the traditional sense. Most are not. Basically, Paul Simon is a song writer. For many reasons I think he is a writer of folk songs, even if this means broadening the older definition. The three elements in the above definition are all dependent
upon a time period for the song to be sung and changed. Someday this may
happen to some of their songs, but I think these elements are more a test
of popularity rather than authenticity, and the popularity of Simon and
Garfunkel has never been questioned. This is ironic since folk singers are
usually quite skeptical of "pop" music. I think they are failing to ask
a very basic question: Is popular music that which is written only to be
popular or good music which becomes popular precisely because it is good?
I think the latter is true of folk songs in general, but especially those
of Simon and Garfunkel.

In 1950 Evelyn Wells could say:

Although recent discoveries have shown us that we must
not exclude towns and cities from our search for folk songs,
it is still true that the country is our richest field.11

I am not at all sure that this statement is true today. Since that time
the city has discovered the guitar and hootenannies and sing-alongs and the
result has been a new kind of folk music. It is perhaps a little more
refined, in keeping with the tastes of the city-dwellers, but I think it
is nevertheless folk-music.

The songs of Simon and Garfunkel are highly precise and of course
written down. Is this a sin against the integrity of folk music? Actually
there is a great deal to be said for the oral tradition: "Printing stops
the creative process."12 If you sing a song word for word, note for note
as it is on a printed page, it is quite static and clearly someone else's
version. But if you sing from your memory and heart, it "becomes your own
as it leaves you."13 However, I think this fails to take notice of the
fact that printing can be an excellent way of introducing you to a song.
Then, once you know the words and the basic melody you can begin to make
it your own.
Josef Marías attempted to categorize folk singers into two groups:

A. The amateur who sings for love of music and for free.

B. The professional folk singer
   1. The "pop" folk-singer who adjusts his folk music to conform with the popular or mass taste of the time.
   2. The folk singer who reports and sings the songs of his life and experiences in his own way and protests the introduction of "art" into the sacred area of authentic folk song.
   3. The balladeer of the concert field who presents folk music as an art form. "His purpose is to expose to his public the beauty, the power, the emotion inherent in folk music."[14]

I think Simon and Garfunkel combine the best elements of Nos. 2 and 3. They present in a highly refined manner both the sounds and the experiences of authentic folk music. Elie Siegmeister says that folk music lacks the "slickness of pre-fabricated commercial art."[15] This is probably true but it should not keep it from attaining the true beauty of real art.

Perhaps the most important thing is the song itself:

The original intent of the song must be preserved. If a song is a work song it must remain one; if it is a song of protest, the singer must carry the banner of this protest. If it laughs, he must make its laughter ring, and if it weeps he must be the vessel and carrier of its tears. If you want a rule of thumb to go by, then it is this: The true folk singer's responsibility is to the song he sings, not to his audience.[16]

The songs of Paul Simon are new and are only beginning to be assimilated:

As always many of the new songs have died almost as soon as they were born, while some have been absorbed into the mainstream of our most heartfelt singing. The river of folk song never stops flowing; the story never ends.[17]

At last we are ready to look at the story of Paul Simon.
Notes to Chapter III

1 Ralph J. Gleason, in notes for the album *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme* (Columbia CS 9363).


4 "Blessed," by Simon and Garfunkel, from the album *Sounds of Silence* (Columbia CS 9269).

5 "Kathy’s Song," by Simon and Garfunkel, from the album *Sounds of Silence* (Columbia CS 9269).


7 E. Miller, "Simon and Garfunkel Tell It All," *Seventeen*, XXVIII (May 19, 1968), 140-141.


9 "Homeward Bound," by Simon and Garfunkel, from the album *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme* (Columbia CS 9363).


13 Wells, p. 6.


15 Siegmeister, p. 15.


17 Ames, p. 270.
CHAPTER IV

Patterns of Pain in the American Pleasure Machine

There's no need to complain. We'll eliminate your pain... buy a Big, Bright Green Pleasure Machine.

—Paul Simon

An Excursion

If you will recall in Chapter II John Wild characterized existentialism as the first "attempt in our Western history to explore the dim and hazy regions of the human life world." If you will permit me, I would like to take you on a trip to that world. It is a very strange place, a world of dreams, a world where fantasy becomes reality.

As your guide I will be pointing out the places of interest, but first let me give you a better idea of where we are going. We will soon arrive in a world of darkness, but not completely so. Although it is very black out, there are millions of tiny lights blinking on and off. You will be able to see a little bit, but not at all clearly and you will wish that somebody would just let in the warm sunshine, if only for a little while. But they won't. It is cold, extremely cold, and although spring comes for a short time each year it is always followed by a long cold winter. Snow is on the ground—everywhere that cold snow. It rains now and then, but always such a cold, cold rain. It is December, and the remaining leaves on the trees are quite brown. There are very few signs of life and few people live here—or so it seems. As you look around you get a very
strange feeling that things just keep happening in the very same way. Time
is always on the move, and with it the seasons. Everything is an endless
cycle from which there seems to be no escape. Light becomes darkness;
summer turns to winter; all life eventually dies. Silence is king, and
the shadows and clouds make everything quite confusing. Everyone would
like to fall asleep in peace, but they cannot so they go on living in an
endless repetition. There is a strange emptiness to it all, but no one
seems to know quite why.

Where are we going? This strange place is contemporary America as
seen through the eyes of Paul Simon. All but a handful of his songs are
penetrating first person observations and I am going to present a panoramic
view of what life is like to him.

Relax . . . take it easy . . . let yourself go. Imagine that we are
walking on the clouds. Come, we will float together . . . We've "all come
to look for America."2

The first stop is a dark little street which you might find anywhere,
but nowhere in particular. The street has a name but you might want to
supply a different one, one that you know:

Fog's rollin' in off East River bank. Like shrouds it covers
Bleecker Street. Fills the alleys where men sleep, hides the
shepherd from his sheep. Voices leaking from a sad cafe;
smiling faces try to understand. I saw a shadow touch a
shadow's hand on Bleecker Street. . . . I heard a church bell
softly chime in a melody sustainin'. It's a long way to
Canaan on Bleecker Street.3

Down on the corner there's a big apartment house. You've seen many
like it. That's where all the old people and the transients live. There
used to be a fellow who lived there that was really quite strange. At
least that's what Mrs. Rearden said, and she lived upstairs from him. He never spoke to anyone, but simply went his own way, minding his own business. And people never spoke to him for he wasn't at all like they were. One day he just turned on the gas and went to sleep so he'd never wake up to his world of silence. "And all the people said what a shame that he's dead, but wasn't he a most peculiar man?"

Yes, death is a commonplace event on Bleecker Street. Why just last week a boy sat on the ledge of the third story while his desperate mother cried for help below. People started gathering and as it grew darker, the crowd began to cheer and "the boy flew away."

And then there was that other man—Richard Cory. They say he owned half of the whole town. He surely should have been happy with everything he had.

So my mind is filled with wonder when the evening headlines read: Richard Cory went home last night and put a bullet in his head.

I'd also like you to meet my friend, Mrs. Robinson, but she's gone away and no one seems to know where, though some say it's to a mental institution.

Across the street is the park where all the old people like to come and sit—just sit:

Old friends sat on their park bench like bookends. A newspaper blown through the grass falls on the round toes on the high shoes of the old friends. Old friends, winter companions, the old men, lost in their overcoats, waiting for the sunset. The sounds of the city, sifting through trees settle like dust on the shoulders of the old friends. Can you imagine us years from today, sharing a park bench quietly? How terribly strange to be seventy. Old friends, memory brushes the same years, silently sharing the same fear...
Let's have a look around the park. It is really very well kept up you know. But still winter is coming on:

And the leaves that are green turn to brown and they wither with the wind and they crumble in your hand. ...I threw a pebble in a brook and watched the ripples run away, and they never made a sound.

There seems to be a lot of birds around. Look, there's a poor little sparrow all by himself. He looks so cold and hungry. I wonder if anyone will help him:

Who will love a little sparrow who's travelled far and cries for rest? "Not I," said the oak tree. "I won't share my branches with no sparrow's nest, and my blanket of leaves won't warm a cold breast."

Who will love a little sparrow and who will speak a kindly word? "Not I," said the swan. "The entire idea is utterly absurd. I'd be laughed at and scorned if the other swans heard."

And who will take it in his heart, and who will feed a starving sparrow? "Not I," said the golden wheat. "I would if I could, but I cannot I know. I need all my grain to prosper and grow."

Who will love a little sparrow? Will no one write her eulogy? "I will," said the earth, "for all I've created returns unto me. From dust were ye made and dust ye shall be."

Do you feel very ambitious? If you wouldn't mind taking the cross-town bus, I think you might enjoy seeing the zoo:

And the animals will love it if you do.

The monkeys stand for honesty, giraffes are insincere, and the elephants are kindly but they're dumb. Orangutans are skeptical of changes in their cages and the zookeeper is very fond of rum.

Zebras are reactionaries, antelopes are missionaries, pigeons plot in secrecy, and hamsters turn on frequently. -- what a gas. You gotta come and see it at the zoo.
The Naked Light

Hurry! We'd better be going. It's not safe to be wandering around at this time of night.

Hello darkness my old friend. I've come to talk with you again. Because a vision softly creeping left its seeds while I was sleeping and the vision that was planted in my brain still remains within the Sounds of Silence.

In restless dreams I walked alone thru narrow streets of cobblestone. Beneath the halo of a street lamp I turned my collar to the cold and damp when my eyes were stabbed by the flash of a neon light—split the night and touched the Sound of Silence.

And in the naked light I saw 10,000 people maybe more. People talking without speaking; people hearing without listening. People writing songs that voices never shared, no one dared disturb the Sound of Silence.

Fools said I you do not know silence like a cancer grows. Hear my words that I might teach you. Take my arms that I might reach you. But my words like silent raindrops fell and echoed in the well of silence.

And the people bowed and prayed to the neon God they made. And the sign flashed out its warning in the words that it was forming. And the signs said the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls and whisper in the Sounds of Silence.11

Hmm. . . I must have been dreaming a little bit there, but really we must be getting home soon. We should have taken the train, but it is too late now. "The train is gone suddenly, on wheels clicking silently, like a gently tapping litany."12

Oh well, I guess the walk will do us good. Look at all the people. It's night time and the night people are beginning to come out. Look at them—"the sat upon, spat upon, rolled on." Look—a dope peddler, an

*Simon has only one word for them all—Blessed. The song is a kind of Sermon on the Mount in reverse, or you could call it an extension. I am not sure how he means it, but to me the song is uplifting, compassionate, forgiving.
alcoholic—"the penny rookers, cheap hookers, groovy lookers."\(^1\)

Over there is the church. Isn't it beautiful? But so cold and so dark and the stained glass windows will not let any light in. It seems somehow out of place, especially in this neighborhood. I wonder if anyone goes there anymore? It seems like such a shame, such a waste.

At last there's my house. It's nothing fancy. I hope you don't mind the darkness. Be careful and watch those steps. You have to get used to them:

Up a narrow flight of stairs in a narrow little room. As I lie upon my bed in the early morning gloom. Impaled on my wall my eyes can dimly see the pattern of my life and the puzzle that is me.

From the moment of my birth to the instant of my death there are patterns I must follow just as I must breathe each breath. Like a rat in a maze the path before me lies and the pattern never alters until the rat dies.

And the pattern still remains on the wall where darkness fell, and it's fitting that it should for in darkness I must dwell. Like the colour of my skin or the day that I grow old, my life is made of patterns that can scarcely be controlled.\(^2\)

**Dreams and Visions**

The world that Simon sees on the outside is gone. We've left it behind on the street below. It's time to delve into the shadows of his mind and to feel our way around.

Cloudy, my thoughts are scattered and they're cloudy. They have no borders, no boundaries. They echo and they swell, from Tolstoi to Tinker Bell. Down from Berkeley to Carmel. Got some pictures in my pocket and a lot of time to kill.

Hey sunshine. I haven't seen you in a long time. Why don't you show your face and bend my mind? These clouds stick to the sky like floating questions, why? And they linger there to die. They don't know where they're going and my friend neither do I. Cloudy.\(^3\)
Confusion is not only a point of departure for Simon. It is something we will encounter all along the way. His songs speak very clearly of a loss of certainty. Doubt and confusion reign supreme. The darkness makes it so hard to see and even in the daytime it is cloudy. These are only imageries to express the confused state of men's minds, at least Paul Simon's mind. Like most of us, he has a lot of questions, but few, if any, answers.

And the dreaming seems to be a way of life:

What a dream I had, pressed in organdy; clothed in crinoline of smoky Burgundy, softer than the rain. I wandered empty streets down past the shop displays. I heard cathedral bells, tripping down the alley ways as I walked on. And when you ran to me your cheeks flushed with the night. We walked on frosted fields of juniper and lamplight. I held your hand and when I awoke and felt you warm and near I kissed your honey hair, with my grateful tears. Oh, I love you girl. Oh I love you.

While the above represents a rare display of contentment and love, Simon is nevertheless at home in his world of darkness and lonely city streets. The title and the ending would seem to suggest that while this might be the girl of his dreams, he has never found her in real life. In all other references to love the other person is either a threat or else the relationship is not lasting.

Sometimes the dreams become nightmares:

A winter's day in a deep and dark December. I am alone, gazing from my window to the streets below on a freshly fallen silent shroud of snow.

I've built walls, a fortress steep and mighty that none may penetrate. I have no need of friendship, friendship causes pain. It's laughing and it's loving I disdain. I am a rock. I am an island.
Don't talk of love. Well I've heard the word before. It's sleeping in my memory. And I won't disturb the slumber of feelings that have died. If I never loved I never would have cried.

I have my books and my poetry to protect me. I am shielded in my armour, hiding in my room, safe within my womb. I touch no one and no one touches me. I am a rock. I am an island. And a rock feels no pain and an island never cries. 17

At last, an end to suffering, an end to tears, but, alas, also an end to life. This song is perhaps most characteristic of all the forty-odd ones he has written. All the familiar elements are there: the cold, darkness, loneliness, lack of communication and finally death. Two questions are vital. First of all, is he really talking about himself or about others? Secondly, is the situation described as a desirable end or merely as a satirical solution? I think he is probably talking about himself, even if unconsciously. The withdrawal is probably more satirical than real. Many of his other songs are about attempts to love others. I Am a Rock could be the result of these attempts or it could be that Simon is exposing the folly of trying to escape.

Paul Simon is a very complex person, but the same things keep re-occurring: dark winter days in the big city. And always the dreaming: daydreams, dreams, and nightmares.

Tick, Tock ... Tick, Tock ... Tick, Tock

And so it continues. The daytime is scarcely different from the night and the night is filled with shadows and dreams. And always time moves on relentlessly. "Time is tapping on my forehead, hanging from my mirror, rattling the teacups, and I wonder how long can I delay?" 18
Time, time, time. See what's become of me. While I looked around for my possibilities, I was so hard to please. But look around. Leaves are brown, and the sky is A Hazy Shade of Winter.

Hear the Salvation Army Band down by the riverside. It's bound to be a better ride than what you've got planned. Carry your cup in your hand, and look around, leaves are brown now and the sky is A Hazy Shade of Winter.

Hang on to your hopes my friend. That's an easy thing to say, but if your hopes should fade away, simply pretend—that you can build them again. Look around. The grass is high. The fields are ripe. It's the springtime of my life.

Seasons change with the scenery, weaving time in a tapestry. Won't you stop and remember me at any convenient time? Funny how my memory skips while rearranging manuscripts of unpublished rhyme. Drinking my vodka and lime.

Time it was, and what a time it was, it was ... a time of innocence, a time of confidence. Long ago ... it must be ... I have a photograph. Preserve your memories; they're all that's left you.

Someday you will probably not even have a faint memory of this excursion into the shadows of Paul Simon's life world—unless you happen to live there. Perhaps your house is on Bleecker Street. If, somewhere in the darkness and the emptiness and the loneliness, you saw something of your own person then the trip was a success.

Paul Simon seems to dwell in the darkness. Perhaps you go there only once in a while to escape the noise and the bright lights. I think it is a journey we all have to make sometime in our lives. It is a journey to the depths of our being, to the heart of our existence.

Simon sees a great deal of pain. The question is what is its significance. What does it really mean? That is the question we face in our final chapter.
Notes to Chapter IV


7. "Old Friends," by Simon and Garfunkel, from the album Bookends (Columbia KCS 9529).

8. "Leaves that are Green," by Simon and Garfunkel, from the album Sounds of Silence (Columbia CS 9269).


10. "At the Zoo," by Simon and Garfunkel, from the album Bookends (Columbia KCS 9529).


17 "I am a Rock," by Simon and Garfunkel, from the album Sounds of Silence (Columbia CS 9269).

18 "Overs," by Simon and Garfunkel, from the album Bookends (Columbia KOS 9529).


20 "Bookends Theme," by Simon and Garfunkel, from the album Bookends (Columbia KOS 9529).
CHAPTER V

A Squandered Resistance

I am just a poor boy, though my story's seldom told, I have squandered my resistance for a pocketful of mumbles, such are promises all lies and jest. Still, a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.¹

When I first started working on Simon and Garfunkel they had just released their fourth album and I was sure there would be more to come. Although I have indicated how immune they seem to be to the pressure of writing to make money or meet schedules, I was nevertheless very disappointed when only a single record was released during a whole year. You can imagine my excitement, then, when they recently came out with a new album. All but one of the songs were written by Paul Simon and the folk character of the music is especially strong.

A lot can happen in a year. People change. Things can look differently. All of a sudden out of the darkness, the cold and the silence came the title song of the new album—Bridge Over Troubled Water. It is very different from all the rest. The hurt is still there, but at last Simon has relaxed his stance of despair and distrust:

When you're weary, feeling small,
When tears are in your eyes, I will dry them all,
I'm on your side. When times get rough and friends can't be found,
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down.²

The suffering that Simon writes about is almost evident, but I must give him credit for showing it to people in such a deeply moving way
that they had to take notice of it. However, somehow that is not enough. It is not enough to sit back and point out the suffering in America. Simon comes closer to the heart of the matter when he points to his own attempts at love and the resulting frustrations and anxieties. Until the above song Paul Simon never got beyond that. This is not a criticism for he was presenting a very honest insight into his life situation—one with which many people could probably identify. Maybe it was because I could not really identify with it that I was looking for something else.

Basically, I think the pain Simon sees is of two kinds. There are those who are leading a miserable, lonely life; they are unhappy and they know it. Then there are those who have never stopped to examine their life. They are leading a meaningless, humdrum sort of existence, but they are unaware of it. They are content with very little. The pain is here too, but it is not as obvious.

We all know people who fit the first group. I have delivered mail to older people in apartment houses who have not left the building for years. They hardly do anything but stare at the four walls and feel sorry for themselves. They have forgotten what it feels like to smile, they have forgotten what it feels like to be smiled at.

I have also had some experience with the State Hospital at Warm Springs, Montana, which is filled with people who are there primarily because they were not loved. Their minds have become twisted; they think the world is against them; they protect themselves by going into their own little shell and not returning.

However, I think most of us come under the second group. We go to parties and we talk about the weather and that terrible war over there,
but we never give our own opinions on anything or let people know what we are really thinking. One gives a witty comment that he heard at school, and somebody else tells a joke that he heard at a party last week and the dangling conversation goes on and on. Nobody gets too excited about anything; everybody keeps his cool. We play the game and pretend everything is all right. But is it? Men have the potential to work together in peace toward a better world, but instead they fight wars, start riots, and watch their neighbors starve to death.

Almost all of the images in the songs represent a very deep loneliness and alienation. It is a loneliness which comes not from mere separation, but from being with people in such a superficial way that there is no real relationship. The songs are about an aching emptiness caused by a fear of being hurt through loving. This is a most natural reaction as anyone who has ever left himself be open to love can testify. Love brings about a vulnerability which can cause tremendous pain. It can easily move people to seek refuge in the darkness of a quiet street where no one bothers anyone else—or cares about them.

Man has great adaptability in some matters. Usually, he can rise above defeats and will fight back when wounded, but let him be hurt by another's feelings rather than fists and the wound lasts much longer. Love breaks down walls and barriers; rejection in that love leaves a person without a means of defense against a horrible agony. Silence and inner withdrawal provide convenient escapes. Death looms as an invitation. This is the frame of mind of a person who can say, "I have no need of friendship, friendship causes pain... I am a Rock."
Simon also sees man as alienated from God: "O Lord, why have you forsaken me?" And the people bowed and prayed to the neon God they made. And in fact, this is only a direct consequence of man's alienation from himself. To be estranged from man is also to be estranged from God, for God can only be made known through other men.

Paul Simon has been talking about pain for several years. What he seems to be calling for now is a genuine concern for others which will help to ease this pain. He appears to have been holding a great deal within himself, but at last it is starting to ease out: "Ask me and I will play all the love that I hold inside."

The new album represents a real development from earlier themes. The gloom has lifted slightly and the sun has peeked through the clouds. There are songs of laughter and smiles: "All of the night we'd harmonize till dawn, I never laughed so long."

The above song is especially strange since it appears to be about the death of a close friend, and yet all that Simon can remember are the good times and the happiness. Previously songs of death were filled with bitterness. Now confidence and hope seem to abound:

Hey, I've got nothing to do today but smile....
Hey let your honesty shine, shine, shine....
Like it shines on me.

There seems to be an urgency to reach out to someone. To understand...

... and to be understood:

Here is my song for the asking.
Ask me and I will play
So sweetly, I'll make you smile.
This is my tune for the taking
Take it, don't turn away
I've been waiting all my life.

Thinking it over, I've been sad.
Thinking it over, I'd be more than glad
To change my ways for the asking.  

People love to discuss trends in writers and this holds for song writers as well. A great fuss was raised over the emergence of the new Bob Dylan as compared with the old Dylan. Perhaps this is the new Simon. I'm really not sure but I do know that a new and exciting dimension has been added to his work.

What I would like to have you appreciate with me is that he is grappling with something very important. He is raising critical questions which must be asked:

1. Who am I? (What is man?)
2. Can man communicate to his fellow man?
3. Must we always follow the "patterns"?
4. Is it possible to escape from life?
5. Where am I going?
6. Is there anything to live for?

But somehow the questions do not have any answers—at least none that would apply to everyone or be accepted by everyone. Simon is still struggling with them. I think he asks us to do the same.

Perhaps the biggest question for Simon is this: "To what end this suffering?" It is a very complex questioning and one to which the existentialists devote much consideration.

I think that through suffering it is possible to transcend a situation. If you suffer you can either withdraw from everyone and everything, in which case I believe the suffering will grow, or you can reach out for someone to help. If this help comes (and I mean really comes) then the suffering
person himself cannot help but grow in his understanding of what life is all about. He will find a meaning to his suffering, a meaning which permits him to open up to another person and to allow that person to open up to him. A crisis can lead to an intense despair, but it can also bring genuine hope. *Bridge Over Troubled Water* is an attempt to offer this hope to someone in need.

In earlier chapters, I spent a great deal of time trying to show that Paul Simon was a folk singer. I hope that much more than that has come through. I hope that you now see him as a human person.

I would trace the development in this fashion. He begins in great wonder and confusion to try and find out who he is. He tries to talk to others and cannot. He feels society closing in on him and he feels forced to follow the patterns and all the games that people play. Finally this becomes so disgusting that he tries to leave the maze. He tries to escape from life, but things get no better. There seems to be no way to turn, no one to turn to. Despair is a way of life. The future is as clouded as the past and there seems to be no reason to hope. This is a downward trip. A trip to the depth of your being. But it cannot last. Either you will hit bottom and stay there (probably insanity or suicide) or you will begin the long trip back. Simon has bounced back from near the bottom and he is reaching out for others to help him. When this happens the other questions fall just a little more in place. He begins to find himself in others through communication. Somehow the patterns do not seem to be nearly as binding. Escape is but a return to the darkness and it is so beautiful out in the sunlight where you let people touch you.
The future is more closely tied to the present. The now is what is important and Paul Simon seems to have taken that now and found hope in it.

This concern was latent in some of the earlier songs: "I have tended my own garden too long." "The only truth I know is you." But at last it has blossomed forth in all its vigor and beauty.

Paul Simon: Folk Philosopher. Perhaps the title should have been Paul Simon: Human Being. He is not the kind to take a light and go out on a dark street to show the way to others, but he has finally found a light within himself to guide him on his own way. I am becoming more and more convinced that this is the way it must happen.

Suffering will probably always be with us, but I think that Simon has found a reason for it. Why is there suffering? Perhaps because it can bring people together and allow them to share their feelings. Perhaps because it can open up new horizons to those who would cut themselves off from others and from their own humanity. Perhaps because it can help a bitter young songwriter at the age of twenty-two to find compassion and wisdom at twenty-seven. Perhaps.
Notes to Chapter V


EPILOGUE

By the Way . . .

It seems to me that music came into my life in the way that it came into the lives of most composers; through the illicit communication with that fertile subsoil, that vast underground of life where musical matter of all degrees of beauty and ugliness lives freely and is constantly being reinverted, rearranged, transformed and infused with new meaning by a universe of memories and imaginations.

—Nicolas Nabokov

For me, the songs of Paul Simon reflect the themes which are so much a part of existentialism: anxiety, suffering, etc. In a sense, they represent existentialism come to life in real people and real situations. But just as they do not reflect the experience of all people, so also they do not reflect my own experience. My life situation is different; the world I see around me is different (at least to some degree) and so my own expression of my life-world is unique to myself.

I will not dwell on the fact of whether or not I am a folk-composer. I just like to sing and write songs—that is enough. Song writing is a powerful expression of who I am. My songs are philosophical in that they represent my philosophy. Otherwise, they are just songs.

As I look around I see suffering and loneliness and people crying out without even shedding a tear. It is all there in their eyes and expression. Basically, the pain I see is man failing to use his potential to help other men. If we do not love the most peculiar men, nobody else will. Love is a great healer. It can soothe the lonely and bring comfort to the suffering. It can transform and rejuvenate, if we will only be its bearer.

43
Amen to a Man

Man, oh man, where are you?

Man is asleep; won't you rouse him?
Man is alone; won't you befriend him?
Man is in a trap, won't you free him?
Man is unhappy; won't you cheer him?

Man, oh man, where are you going?

Man is lost; let us find him.
Man is afraid; let us calm him.
Man is proud; let us humble him.
Man is estranged from God; let us bring them together.

God, oh God, where are we going?

We are blind; won't YOU help us to see?
We are thinking; won't YOU help us comprehend?
We are questioning; won't YOU help us find the answer?
We are dying; won't YOU give us reason to live?

Man is gone; where did he go?

The first half of each line expresses many of the ideas contained in the songs of Paul Simon. An important difference is that Simon only implies the second part of the line—the "won't you help?" I state it explicitly because I think it is very necessary. I think Simon might be too concerned with the disenchantment in the world and not enough concerned with finding a way to end that disenchantment. Where he describes despair intermingled hope, I would see hope intermingled with despair. The difference is very important.

I like to write about all kinds of things: about little things which we might neglect, about big things in which we are totally enmeshed. I've written about a summer job at the Post Office (Pile Those Sacks Up!) and about a winter which never seemed to end (If You See a Robin). But mostly I like to write about people and about myself.
One of my favorites (Children of Love) is about some retarded children in Boulder, Montana, who cannot read or write, "but they can love with all their might." I've written about the anxiety of leaving home to go away to school (Who's That Speakin' to Me?) and of my rambling, restless dreams when completely lost in my work (A Spiritual Imitation).

Hippie Blues is about the authentic, beautiful people who are crucified every day in the eyes of those they meet on the street. There is a silly song about the astronauts looking for the moon (Moonshine) and a deeply serious one about a little boy who could not survive in the Viet Nam war which was supposed to make him free.

The Happy Valley Volunteers is about the antics of some crazy college kids when they meet a high-flying priest in a mental hospital. In Rosarium I try to understand the mystery of prayer. There are songs about people helping others and one song about my love for a very special person.

Taken together, these songs are about more than a few people or a few isolated incidents. Somewhere there in the laughter and the tears and the hate and the sorrow it says that I like people very much. It says that each person is a credit to his creator, perhaps in a way which we'll never understand. And finally, it says that the most beautiful thing in the world is two people loving each other.

I think I have discovered philosophy in music rather than used music to express philosophy. All of a sudden there it was. Just as someone else might find it in a novel or a painting, I have found it in music. And as someone else might have seen it in a textbook, so I have heard it echoing in the last chord of a song that was actually part of me.
Philosophy can get terribly abstract at times, but to me it is what makes you want to get out of bed in the morning. No, not a specific cause, but some kind of awareness that there is a reason for living. It can be very subjective as when one has to find out for himself what he believes in, but it is quickly related to the objective world when this person puts his beliefs into practice. Philosophy is recognizing and respecting the right of a person to see things in a different light than you yourself might see them. The dialogue that can ensue from such a recognition is staggering. Philosophy is people searching with each other to find a meaning to existence. Perhaps they will never get past the searching; perhaps they will ultimately see that this "searching together" is itself the meaning.

The beautiful thing then is that philosophy can happen on a street corner or in a barber shop as well as a classroom or library. It can happen every day and in myriad ways. Philosophy is the pulsing beat of life around you. You can feel it, taste, see or smell it, and if you listen very closely you may hear it sung:

By the Way . . .

By the way I was sittin' by the way,
Saw a friend come a walkin' by the way.

I could tell by lookin' he was sad
His eyes they seemed to scream "I hurt so bad!"
But I had so much to do,
Couldn't find no time for you.
So I turned around and walked away.

If you see him sittin' by the way,
Say hello to my friend by the way.

Tell him I would like to try again,
Tell him there's still time we must begin.
If he's got so much to do,
That he can't find time for you.
Then he'll turn around and walk away.

By the way Lord I'm troubled by the way.
Tell me why Lord I'm troubled by the way.

I was walkin' down the road one day
Saw some people passin' by the way.
Then I saw my friend come near,
Suddenly I had no fear.
As he held my hand we walked away.

By the way then my troubles passed away.
By the way then our troubles passed away.

Someday you may be asked to play that funny game which we looked at
in the introduction. If that ever happens and if (by some strange quirk
of fate) the subject should ever turn to philosophy, then I hope you will
remember me. I hope you will remember that philosophy is many things, but
most of all I hope you will remember that it is a soft song rising from the
soul of a person tuned in to life.
Songs are the statement of a people. You can learn more about people by listening to their songs than any other way, for into the songs go all the hopes and hurts, the angers, fears, the wants and aspirations.

—John Steinbeck²
Notes to Epilogue


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