



BLUEGRASS UNLIMITED

SUNDAY AFTERNOON AT WASHINGTON SQUARE:

a Nostalgic event



by Jay Feldman
Photos by David Gahr

There are times, in the history of art, when a certain locale becomes a center of creative energy, a nexus of vitality to which the gifted flock to be among their peers and exchange ideas, techniques, styles, etc. On Sunday afternoons in the 1950s and '60s, Washington Square Park in New York City's Greenwich Village was such a place. Except for a brief period in 1961 (about which, more later), you could visit Washington Square on any Sunday in spring, summer or fall and hear (or play with, if you wished) virtually every good folk musician in the Greater N.Y. area. "Everyone who was anyone" was there, from established artists to young and, as yet, unrecognized talents who would later become respected and influential players in their own rights. The scene was a folkie's paradise.

I was fortunate to have been a regular at "the Square" in those days. Every Sunday in the spring and fall (I was lucky enough to spend the summers upstate), I would make the subway trip, alone or with friends, from my home in Brooklyn to lower Manhattan. My life centered around this weekly pilgrimage, guitar in hand, to rub shoulders with the greats and near-greats of the folk music scene. Sundays meant, for me, a glorious day of unfettered freedom, an inspirational escape from the mundane, the

residue of which gave me the strength to face another week of high school and later, college.

At the center of Washington Square Park is the large, circular water fountain, which on hot days became a wading pool. Around this fountain the music happened. A circumnavigation of the fountain would bring you into contact with two or three dozen groups of musicians (or soloists) of varying degrees of ability and accomplishment, ranging from rank, unskilled beginners to well polished, disciplined performers like Eric Weissberg, Marshall Brickman, Monte Dunn (later Ian and Sylvia's guitarist), Bruce Langhorne (later Judy Collins' accompanist), Dave Van Ronk, Dick Weissman, Billy Faier, Dick Rosmini, Jerry Silverman, Dave Sear, and John Cohen (of the New Lost City Ramblers). Occasionally, a well-known folk music personality like Pete Seeger, Theodore Bikel or Oscar Brand showed up.

The range of musical styles you would hear included bluegrass, blues, ragtime, jug band, old-timey, Weavers-type folk music, Italian folk songs by a group of men from the Little Italy section of the Village, and of course the rhythmic thunder incessantly hammered out by the inevitable group of intense and frenzied conga drummers ("jungle music" we called it).

Surrounding each band or soloist was a group of listeners. Many people did indeed come simply to listen, wandering from group to group, taking in the potpourri of styles. To be sure, the musicians were not performing—the feeling was rather of a relaxed session with people listening in. The size of the crowd around any band depended upon the proficiency of the players. Amateurs would attract merely a listener or two, while a hot bluegrass band like The Greenbriar

Boys (John Herald, Bob Yellin and Paul Prestopino, later replaced by Ralph Rinzler), or a well-known soloist drew a sizable crowd. Bands would casually form, dissolve and re-form in the course of the afternoon, as would the audiences.

Roger Sprung, Lionel Kilberg and Mike Cohen (John's brother) could usually be found at the Square on Sundays. Together they were The Shanty Boys, a quasi-bluegrass group with great enthusiasm. They were regulars on Oscar Brand's weekly folk music show on WNYC radio. The most noteworthy musician among the three was Sprung, who always had a supply of his albums with him, and would divide his time between picking banjo and hawking records.

Lionel Kilberg, who played a washtub bass that he called a "brownie bass," provided me with one of my best moments at the Square. We were playing together in a five-piece group, singing a bluegrass-gospel standard called "Somebody Touched Me," the chorus of which goes:

Glory, glory, glory, somebody
touched me, (3X)
It must have been the hand of the
Lord.

The verses have the same structure, except instead of "Glory, glory, glory," you have:

While I was singing (praying,
preaching, etc.), somebody touched
me, (3X)
It must have been the hand of the
Lord.

We were going around the group with each person taking a turn singing a verse. When Lionel's turn came he sang:

While I was picking pockets,
somebody touched me, (3X)
It must have been the arm of the
law.

Of greatest interest to me, are the dozens of then youthful players for whom Washington Square was a classroom, and who later became influential in a particular style or on a particular instrument. For example, another group of regulars was a trio who called themselves The B-flat Stompers—Larry Sandberg, Artie Traum and Mike Merepol. Sandberg is a guitarist's guitarist, a player of great versatility and finesse. He is also the co-author, with Dick Weissman, of *The Folk Music Sourcebook*. Artie Traum and his brother Happy (also a Washington Square habitue) have long been recog-

nized as exceptional, innovative guitar players. (Merepol, while not having distinguished himself musically, is noteworthy for another reason. He now uses his original name, Michael Rosenberg, and for years has worked to prove the innocence of his parents Julius and Ethel.)

During the latter years of my tenure at Washington Square, I was a member of a bluegrass band called The Kings County Outpatients. Comprised exclusively of Brooklynites of questionable sanity, our name was an iconoclastic tribute to the well known mental ward at Kings County Hospital. The Outpa-

tients—Danny Hankin, Bert Solomon, Carl Shames and myself, all Washington Square regulars—were, I believe, the first bluegrass band in Brooklyn. We were well named—with our long hair and scruffiness, and our non-conformist antics both on and off stage (we predated the popularity of the Beatles, remember), we had a definite edge of amiable lunacy about us.

At least once, at Bard College, we were mistaken for the genuine article. When we took the stage, the audience seemed somewhat aloof and apprehensive. We did our program, complete with our usual jokes and shenanigans, but nothing seemed to warm the audience up. In fact, the routines which usually went over best, like the chimpanzee imitation, this time fell flattest. What we didn't know was that the previous weekend the entertainment had been a performance by the drama group from the local mental hospital. Later we learned that given our name and generally eccentric behavior, the students had assumed we were another group of insane asylum inmates.

From August, 1961 to May, 1962, the Outpatients disbanded because Solomon went away to college—if you can call West Point that. As a freshman plebe, he was a virtual prisoner of the United States Military Academy, so Hankin, Shames and I paid him a visit that winter. Now, we were accustomed to drawing amused, amazed and sometimes hostile stares, but at West Point we were *really* different. Walking by one group of gawking cadets we overheard, "They wouldn't let Solomon go to Greenwich Village, so he brought it here." Solomon now lives in Israel, and is the leader of a group called The Diaspora Yeshiva Band. Hankin went on to play with Tim Hardin.

In those golden years of Washington Square, more than a few now-prominent bluegrass musicians were developing. David Grisman and Fred Weisz used to come over from New Jersey, as did Hank Miller and Gene Lowinger, who went on to play fiddle with Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys. Pete Wernick, alias "Dr. Banjo," now with the outstanding band Hot Rize, was there. So were Winnie Winston, now considered one of the premier pedal steel players, and Steve Arkin, who later played banjo with Bill Monroe. Jody Stecher was a regular, as were Jon Sholle (later Esther Phillips' guitarist) and Steve Mandel. Mandel, who recorded the well-known "Dueling Banjos" with Eric Weissberg, had a unique talent. He could simultaneously sing both parts of the song in the style of bluegrass-gospel singing known as "echoing." In this style, the lead singer's words are echoed in harmony, on the off-beat,

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by the tenor singer (and sometimes the baritone as well). For example, in "Tree of Life," the first line of the chorus is sung as follows:

LEAD: Our Sav-ior died to give this world sal-va-tion

TENOR: died to give this world sal-va-tion

Marc's sister, Julie Silber. In the next group, again in the core circle, we found Irwin Silber, then editor of *Sing Out!* magazine. Sandberg turned to me, and in

Get the idea? Well, Steve Mandel would sing both parts.

Jody Stecher told me the following story concerning a ritual he had when leaving for Washington Square. Sundays were very special to him; he loved going to the Square. He lived on the second story of a two-family house in Brooklyn which had a long inner staircase to the street. He was always so excited about going down to the Square, he would start at the top of the staircase and get up some speed going down. Near the bottom, he'd throw his guitar—an 1890 Martin in the original wooden case—into the air and catch it as he reached the landing at the bottom of the steps. He did this *every* Sunday until one time he missed the guitar and it went crashing to the floor. Well, it's a very delicate guitar, and those old cases don't have any padding, so naturally the fall put a bad crack into the body. But as bad as he felt, he still took the guitar down to the Square and played it that day. Such was the alluring power of Washington Square for those who heeded its call.

Ragtime guitar was a trend that was emerging at that time and several important pioneers of the style were among the Washington Square faithful. They included Stefan Grossman, Marc Silber, Dave Laibman, Perry Lederman (who later served as Ali Akbar Khan's road manager), and another Brooklyn boy named Mike Smith, who at the time of his accidental death in Europe in the mid-'60s was considered by some to be the best of the ragtime guitarists.

Marc Silber later became an outstanding stringed instrument repairman. He also unwittingly provided the partial inspiration for another of my precious memories (how they linger) of Washington Square. One particular Sunday, Larry Sandberg and I were drifting from group to group, listening but not playing. At the first group we found Marc in the inner circle of listeners. After a time, we moved to another cluster, and there in the inner circle was

his sly, dry and wry manner, cracked, "I guess every crowd has a Silber lining."

The Square made its contribution to rock and popular music also: Steve Katz (The Blues Project; Blood, Sweat and Tears); Danny Kalb (The Blues Project); Ricky Brand ("Don't Walk Away, Renee"); John Sebastian (The Lovin' Spoonful), who carried his many harmonicas in a custom-made leather belt; Dave Cohen (lead guitarist for Country Joe and The Fish); and Dave Niechtern, whose hit song "Midnight at the Oasis" was recorded by another veteran of Washington Square, Maria Muldaur (at that time D'Amato).



In foreground (without glasses) are Jody Stecher and Roger Siminoff

The Even Dozen Jug Band, popular in the sixties, was comprised totally of Washington Square personnel. In addition to the aforementioned Nichtern, D'Amato, Grossman, Katz, Grisman and Weisz, the band included Bob "Trumpet Mouth" Gurland, who could, as his nickname suggests, imitate a trumpet; Josh Rifkin, a classically trained pianist whose album "Beatles Baroque" enjoyed great popularity among erudite Beatles fans, and whose Scott Joplin recordings have been widely acclaimed; Peter Siegel, who produced records for Elektra; a singer known to me only as Marlana; Danny Laufer; and Pete Jacob-

son, alias "Flannel Grimes," who, ten years before the advent of Pignose amplifiers, had a small amp that he could carry in the basket of his bicycle, thus enabling him to play electric guitar while riding.

Other regulars worthy of note were Roger Siminoff, now editor of *Frets* magazine; the Locker brothers, Willie and Joe, who had a band with Tom Paley (Willie was permanently identified with his old Gibson mandolin, which he always had with him); Eric Jacobson (now a recording engineer) and Duane Story (related to the well-known bluegrass singer Carl Story) who both later played with the Upper Knob Lick 10,000; Andy Statman, a premier bluegrass mandolinist and an outstanding player of Jewish music; Eric Nagler, who still performs at East Coast folk festivals; and Danny Hamburg, who once had his picture in *Mad* magazine.

And there were the characters. My favorite was the little old man who always wore a red fez and carried a conductor's baton, wandering from group to group, conducting. He was there every Sunday. I understand from people who have been at the Square recently that he is still there, still conducting. I was also very fond of the cowboy who did rope tricks; understandably, he always drew one of the largest crowds. There was the longshoreman with the electric mandolin and the black lady who could always be found on the inner lining of the crowds surrounding the hot bluegrass bands—she sang everything with great animation, in the fervent style of black pentecostal church music.

And of course I must pay tribute to the dean of the scene, the ubiquitous Israel G. "Izzy" Young, proprietor of The Folklore Center on MacDougal St., who could be seen meandering through the crowd, eating an ice cream on a stick, surveying his minions and beaming his approval of the scene. In the spring of 1961, it was Izzy who initially spearheaded the demonstrations that pre-

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served folk music in the Square after Dept. of Parks Commissioner Newbold Morris tried to put an end to the Sunday afternoon sessions.

On March 27, citing an ordinance that had been on the books for many years, but never enforced, Morris unilaterally rescinded permission for musicians to gather and play in the Square. (The ordinance prohibited musical performances [1] for advertising purposes, and/or [2] which caused a crowd to collect.) The Commissioner, it seems, had noticed "minstrels of unsavory appearance" (The Kings County Outpatients?!) performing in the park and then soliciting money from their listeners. Henceforth, Morris decreed, permits for performances would be only issued to "bonafide artistic groups," and he asked the police to issue summonses to "guitarists, bongo drummers and folk singers" who lacked permits.

On Sunday, April 9, an honest-to-goodness riot took place. A two-hour battle between police and demonstrators ended with ten demonstrators arrested and several people, including three policemen, injured. With demonstrators packing the dry fountain and singing "We Shall Not Be Moved," Izzy Young mounted the concrete rim of the structure and delivered an impassioned speech: "We have no organization, no leaders. We have been singing here for seventeen years and never had any trouble. We have a right to sing here." And so was formed the Right-to-Sing-Committee.

By the end of the week, Izzy had sued, in the N.Y. State Supreme Court, to remove the ban on Sunday music in Washington Square. On Sunday, April 16, the musicians boycotted the park and held a rally at nearby Judson Memorial Church, the pastor of which, Rev. Howard R. Moody, was now sharing the non-leadership with Izzy. The following Sunday (April 23), two thousand people held another protest rally just south of the park, complete with music.

On Sunday, April 30, hundreds of demonstrators skirted police barricades and invaded the fountain area. A young man tangled with police, was arrested and another riot was barely averted as cooler heads prevailed. On May 4, Justice Wm. C. Hecht of the N.Y. State Supreme Court refused to reverse the ban, ruling that the court "may not substitute its own judgment for that of the Commissioner of Parks." In the meantime, someone had discovered that Parks Dept. ordinances required a permit only for singing with instruments, so on Sunday, May 7, Rev. Moody led an *a cappella* choir of 600 voices. Another demonstration was planned for the following weekend.

On Saturday, May 13, however, Mayor Robert Wagner sensibly decided

to permit music on a "controlled basis"—between the fountain and the arch, from 3 to 6 p.m. On Sunday, May 14, the music peacefully resumed. Rev. Moody dissolved the Right-to-Sing-Committee and Izzy Young vowed to continue the court battle "as a matter of principle." (On July 6, the Appellate Division of the State Supreme Court unanimously reversed the lower court's decision upholding the ban.)

I regret to say that I missed most of the excitement of those five weeks. My parents, heeding the original warning that violators would be subject to arrest, would not let me attend the Square on April 9. All that afternoon I wondered what was happening. Passing a newsstand in the evening, I saw the banner headline in the late edition: RIOT IN WASHINGTON SQUARE. I bought the paper and ran home to watch the evening news. The images came fast and furious: police, musicians, demonstrators; Bob Easton being led to a police car, stubbornly strumming his autoharp; screaming, shoving, surging crowds; and then, being pursued by police, someone who looked like Willie Locker, running and holding his cherished Gibson mandolin over his head in the manner of some wide receiver hell-bent for the end zone, having eluded the last of the defensive secondary. I jolted forward in my chair. "Go, Willie, go!" I shouted, as he sprinted out of reach and down the sideline. "Go, Willie!"

He did. We did. The music continued at Washington Square.

