

'Peter' committed to music, activism

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

NEW YORK CITY — In the song "Light One Candle," Peter Yarrow, of the folk group Peter, Paul and Mary, wrote "Don't let the light go out, let it shine through our love and our tears."

In a career that has spanned 30 years, Yarrow has kept alight his social consciousness, his optimism, his belief in the possibility of change.

Those years have produced songs that are part of contemporary music's landscape, including "Weave Me the Sunshine," "The Great Mandella," "Day is Done," and, of course, "Puff, the Magic Dragon."

Peter, Paul and Mary still perform together as a trio, and are appearing at the Eastman Theater Dec. 3 and 4 in two benefit concerts for the Sisters of Mercy.

But Yarrow also performs solo, and plans to play Nov. 15 at Elmira's Clemens Center in a benefit concert for the Notre Dame High School Building Fund.

Yarrow became involved with Notre Dame through an acquaintance who graduated from the high school. When he discovered that the acquaintance's family was actively involved in supporting the school, he agreed to perform a benefit.

"I'm very concerned with education, and particularly when it's a family affair," Yarrow explained.

'(Folk music) has the power to unite people in a spiritual way.'

Peter Yarrow

Acting on his concern, Yarrow performs regularly at schools, and stages an annual concert to benefit his son's school in New York City, Public School 6. In fact, the school renamed its performing hall the "Peter Yarrow Auditorium" because of his support.

In addition to education, Yarrow has used his talents to promote a variety of causes. He was a regular at civil rights and anti-Vietnam War concerts in the 1960s, anti-nuclear protests in the 1970s, and at rallies to support the homeless or to oppose apartheid in the 1980s. As a solo performer and in conjunction with Stookey and Travers, he performs approximately 100 benefits a year.

That commitment to activism is part of being a folk musician, he contended.

"(Folk music) is a way of life," Yarrow said. "It really has a capacity to bring people together and remind people that we really do care about one another. It has the power to unite people in a spiritual way, to move people in a political effort, to just put young people in touch with ideals that are imbedded in the songs."

Young people play an important part in his life, Yarrow noted. The father of two children, his concern is evident in songs he has written for children, especially "Puff the Magic Dragon." He has overseen three animated television specials based on the song, earning an Emmy nomination. Currently, he is involved with a project to create a children's radio network.

"I have always had an enormous affection for children," Yarrow explained. "I think they're our best hope for reversing our dilemma."

That "dilemma," Yarrow explained, is the materialistic, narcissistic spirit of the 1980s — a period which he says parallels the 1950s during which he began his career. A 1959 graduate of Cornell University, Yarrow was drawn into the blooming folk movement, joining forces with Paul Stookey and Mary Travers in 1961.

The trio had a string of hits during the 1960s. They also became mainstays of the protest movement. Yarrow's involvement, however, extended beyond performing at rallies and demonstrations. In 1969, for example, he helped organize the March on Washington, which drew 500,000 protestors.



Peter Yarrow, of Peter, Paul and Mary, will be in Elmira Wednesday, Nov. 15, to perform at the Clemens Center in a benefit concert for the Notre Dame High School Building Fund.

In 1970, the trio broke up, Yarrow said, because of the intense pressure of their 10 years together, and because Stookey wanted to dedicate his life to his Christian faith. They remained friends, and in 1971 Stookey wrote "The Wedding Song" for Yarrow's wedding.

Yarrow recorded four solo albums during the 1970s, worked on the three "Puff" television specials, and did production work for other musicians.

He also continued to promote other folk musicians. During the 1960s, he had originated the idea of the "New Folks Concert" at the Newport Folk Festival. That effort evolved in the 1970s into the Kerville Folk Festival in Kerville, Texas. Over the years, these two efforts have helped to launch the careers of such musicians as Buffy St. Marie, Tim Hardin and Michelle Shocked, who recorded her first album live at Kerville in 1987.

Peter, Paul and Mary reunited for an anti-nuclear concert

Yarrow organized in California in 1978. They have performed together since.

At 50, Yarrow continues to perform because he believes folk music is still needed. "These are troubled times," he explained.

Despite his awareness of the world's troubles, Yarrow's own songs and performances reflect a positive view of the world, and include some less-than-serious songs. "You gotta have the funny songs, the love songs, the kid's songs," he said. "You'd lose your audience. If you're serious all the time, you burn out."

Even one of his darker songs, "The Great Mandella," which tells the story of a young man fasting to death to protest war, contains hope.

"The song says take your place," Yarrow said, explaining that suffering can move people to positive action. "It's just you and me: We must make a choice," he added.

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