

# The Rebirth of Tom Rush

A figurehead of '60s singer/songwriters enjoys an unexpected renaissance BY NANCY DUNHAM

**O**F ALL THE stories from the golden era of singer/songwriters, perhaps the least understood is that of Tom Rush's pivotal role in its development. He was just a kid in the early '60s, studying English literature at Harvard University, when he began to sing and play a blend of traditional folk and blues with some Woody

Guthrie tunes mixed into the sets.

His shows at coffeehouses and clubs in the Boston area, including the renowned Café Yana and Club 47, nurtured a cult following. Soon, Rush signed record deals—first with Prestige, then Elektra and then Columbia—and released albums including *The Circle Game* (1968) and *Tom Rush* (1970) that became standards, combining originals

with songs from friends and other working singer/songwriters.

"It was a nice confluence of circumstances with *The Circle Game* album," he says of the album's breakout success. "As chance would have it, it introduced talented singer/songwriters—Joni Mitchell was on one, James Taylor and Jackson Browne was a third."

While *Rolling Stone* crowned him the Svengali who ushered in—even created—the era of the singer/songwriter, Rush is likely the one person who doesn't believe this. "I think it's a bit odd. I don't think I invented that," says Rush of the accolade. "[The music we were making] was something different. It wasn't folk, it wasn't rock—it was something else."

What he leaves unsaid is that by the late '70s and even into the '90s—when many of the singer/songwriters he helped break were in their heydays or even regarded as legacy artists—Rush's popularity had largely faded.

And yet there's not a hint of acrimony in his voice. "I hear people doing interviews and it is odd when they sound kind of embittered, that things aren't going as well as they used to," Rush says. "I never got the huge recognition that some of my friends and colleagues got. That was frustrating at times, but I've had a very nice time making a very good living doing something I want to do. I have very

little to complain about."

Although Rush has continued to play and tour—notably at Judy Collins' Wildflower Festival in California—his resurgence didn't come until 2009 when an

Internet video of him playing "The Remember Song" netted millions of hits and found him with an reinvigorated fan base. "I was really excited," he says, "then I realized a 10-second clip of an elephant burping was gaining on me." Spurred, Rush released *What I Know*, his first

studio album in 35 years. It took "Folk Album of the Year" honors from the International Folk Alliance in 2009.

In concert, Rush remains positive and forward-looking, gently punctuating his live sets with some of his classic songs—even an occasional rendition of the beloved "Driving Wheel"—but typically concentrates on newer material.

Of course, there's also the banter and chatter that is reminiscent of folk shows from yesteryear. And, just to underscore the fact that times have changed, Rush shows audiences slides of himself through the years, joking with them about his aging.

"With the fans, I think it's feeling the connection with the artist that keeps people interested," says Rush. "I try to respond to each and every one of them—'Thanks for your note. See you in Alexandria'—that kind of reply. After all, they've been paying my rent for 50 years." ●

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