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INTRODUCTION

*T*he great American folk music revival began right after the Second World War. Burl Ives from Indiana was on the radio, singing railroad and cowboy songs. Josh White from South Carolina was a sensation with his blues ballads. The Weavers, with tenor Pete Seeger on banjo, toured the nation with the Okie protest songs of Woody Guthrie. In 1957 the Kingston Trio—calypso collegians from San Francisco—transformed the old Appalachian ballad “Tom Dooley” into a national number one hit single, and commercialized so-called “folk music” took off. Coffeehouses sprouted like toadstools. Guitar sales soared. Most of this music was, in retrospect, insipid. But in 1959 a young Boston University coed named Joan Baez started singing Child ballads, barefoot, at Club 47 in Harvard Square, and caused a sensation with her ungodly vocal range and dark choice of repertoire. Lines went around the block. Her album sold tonnage. Folk began to replace jazz as the cultural expression of younger bohemians and intellectuals. In 1960 a twenty-year-old from Minnesota named Robert Zimmerman changed his name to Bob Dylan and

took the Greenwich Village folk scene by storm, becoming the enfant terrible of the clubs along Bleecker and MacDougal streets—the Bitter End, the Gaslight, Gerde’s Folk City, Café Wha?. Then Baez and Dylan joined forces and became the alpha couple of a movement that mined old American music and new political/protest songs to create a literate alternative to the surf music and pop that preoccupied the enormous postwar generation in the early sixties. The Newport Folk Festival created new stars every summer, and spawned dozens of similar events that drew thousands of college kids.

By 1963 this national phenomenon had gotten its own network television slot. *Hootenanny* was broadcast on Saturday nights, featuring mostly folk singers and groups, but also blues musicians, old-time country singers, and bluegrass pickers. It was must-see TV back then. *Hootenanny* was so popular with its young audience that the program was quickly expanded from a half hour to an hour.

A big problem with the show was that the cream of the folkies—Baez, Dylan, the Kingston Trio, Pete Seeger—never appeared. *Hootenanny*’s stars were mostly from the second tier of folk performers. At the time, we didn’t know that the top echelon of folk singers boycotted the show because of its refusal to invite folk godfather Pete Seeger to perform—for political reasons. So instead of the Kingston Trio, *Hootenanny* broadcast the Highwaymen, the Limelitters, and the Chad Mitchell Trio. Carolyn Hester instead of Baez. Theodore Bikel instead of Dylan.

I watched *Hootenanny* anyway. It was still the best music program on TV.

Late January 1964. America was still in a state of shock and disbelief following the bloody public assassination of President Kennedy two months earlier. I was at home watching *Hootenanny* on a cold Saturday night. The show was filmed at a different college each week, and this night it was at a school in Tennessee. The smirking Smothers Brothers, a fake folk comedy act, were the headliners, so I remember being bored, about to change the channel. Then, in

glorious black and white, host Jack Linkletter announced, “Ladies and gentlemen—please welcome, the Simon Sisters!”



Hold on.

Two sisters, brunettes. Matching dresses and Martin guitars. Both beautiful. The higher, Highland-sounding voice comes from the girl on the left. Her taller sister has an earthier, lower alto. They’ve put a lilting melody to the old nursery rhyme “Winkin’, Blinkin’ and Nod,” and they’re singing the stars from the sky. America wakes up, and is then soothed into a restful state by the Simon Sisters’ melodious new lullaby.

I was transfixed.

Later in the program, the Simon Sisters returned with a quietly thrilling duet on “Turn! Turn! Turn!,” Pete Seeger’s popular arrangement of a biblical verse. Again I was glued to the screen as the girls seemed to glow with a cathode-ray halo. Everything about the Simon Sisters, especially their perfect harmonies, drew me in until I was hooked. When they finished, the audience gave them an ovation. They made a little bow, and looked relieved. They had made a stunning national debut, and done it with mesmeric cool. They were talked about in my high school the following Monday.

I went out and bought their album, *The Simon Sisters*, a few days later. Although the record was filed in the Folk section of the record store, I quickly realized that what they were doing wasn’t as much folk as it was a collection of art songs. Quite a few tracks were lullabies, soothing music, two young mothers gently crooning to their restive children. I tried to find out as much as I could about the girls, which wasn’t much. Lucy was the pretty soprano. Her taller sister was called Carly Simon. I remember thinking I’d never heard the name Carly before.

Right after this, in February 1964, the Beatles arrived in America—as if in response to an occult summons to lift the grieving