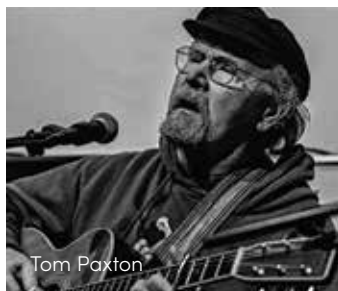


Tom Paxton

OU'S GRAMMY AWARD-WINNING FOLK INNOVATOR CHANGED THE FUTURE THROUGH SONG.

By George Lang

ALAN MESSER



Tom Paxton

BEFORE HE HELPED spearhead the 1960s New Song movement in folk music, singer-songwriter Tom Paxton trod the boards at the University of Oklahoma's Holmberg Hall as a drama student, finding the confidence that would shape his later ascendance in New York's Greenwich Village. And like so many young people, Paxton formed sharp opinions about the music he heard as a 1955 freshman during lunch breaks at Campus Corner.

"Oh, it was orthodox to a fault," says 86-year-old Paxton, a four-time Grammy nominee and Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award recipient. "Pop music in the '50s was pretty awful—with little rays of sunshine now and then."

Paxton, who was born in Chicago and moved to Bristow, Okla., during sixth grade, found rays of sunshine in vocal groups like The Crew-Cuts and The Flamingos, but the music that sparked his own art came from folk singers Burl Ives and The Kingston Trio, performers that revived folk songs like "Tom Dooley" and "The Blue

Tail Fly." They introduced Paxton to Harry Belafonte; Paxton's fellow Oklahoman, Woody Guthrie; and the seminal folk band The Weavers, led by Pete Seeger.

"One day, I was at a friend's place and he says, 'Listen to this,'" Paxton says. "He put the arm of the needle down on an LP. And then came the banjo introduction to a folk song called 'Darling Corey,' and the place just opened up."

That album, "The Weavers at Carnegie Hall," contained multitudes from the folk traditions, including Merle Travis' "Sixteen Tons," and Celtic traditional ballads like "Greensleeves." For Paxton, it was an instant education.

"I had what I like to call chromosomal change," Paxton says. "This was my 'Road to Damascus' moment, where I went from someone who loved the stuff to someone who had to do it."

After earning a bachelor's from OU in 1959, Paxton joined the U.S. Army and soon found himself banging out keys in typing school at Fort Dix, N.J., a short train trip to Greenwich Village and the Gaslight Café, where fellow Guthrie acolytes like Ramblin' Jack Elliott and Bob Dylan performed. Paxton spent his days writing songs of peace on Army typewriters, then pitched them to song publishers in Manhattan.

Paxton and other Gaslight performers were bumping up against folk music values that prized tradition over new

material, but Paxton made early headway after singing his song, "The Marvelous Toy," as an audition to join The Chad Mitchell Trio. Publisher Milt Okun signed Paxton, and soon heroes were singing his songs—including The Weavers.

"I subsequently had a chance to thank each one of The Weavers individually for ruining my life," Paxton says, laughing. "I could have been doing something steady, right?"

Instead, Paxton steadily moved the needle on what folk music—

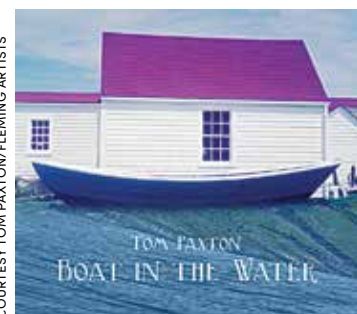
The cover of Paxton's 2017 album, "Boat in the Water."

COURTESY TOM PAXTON/FLEMMING ARTISTS

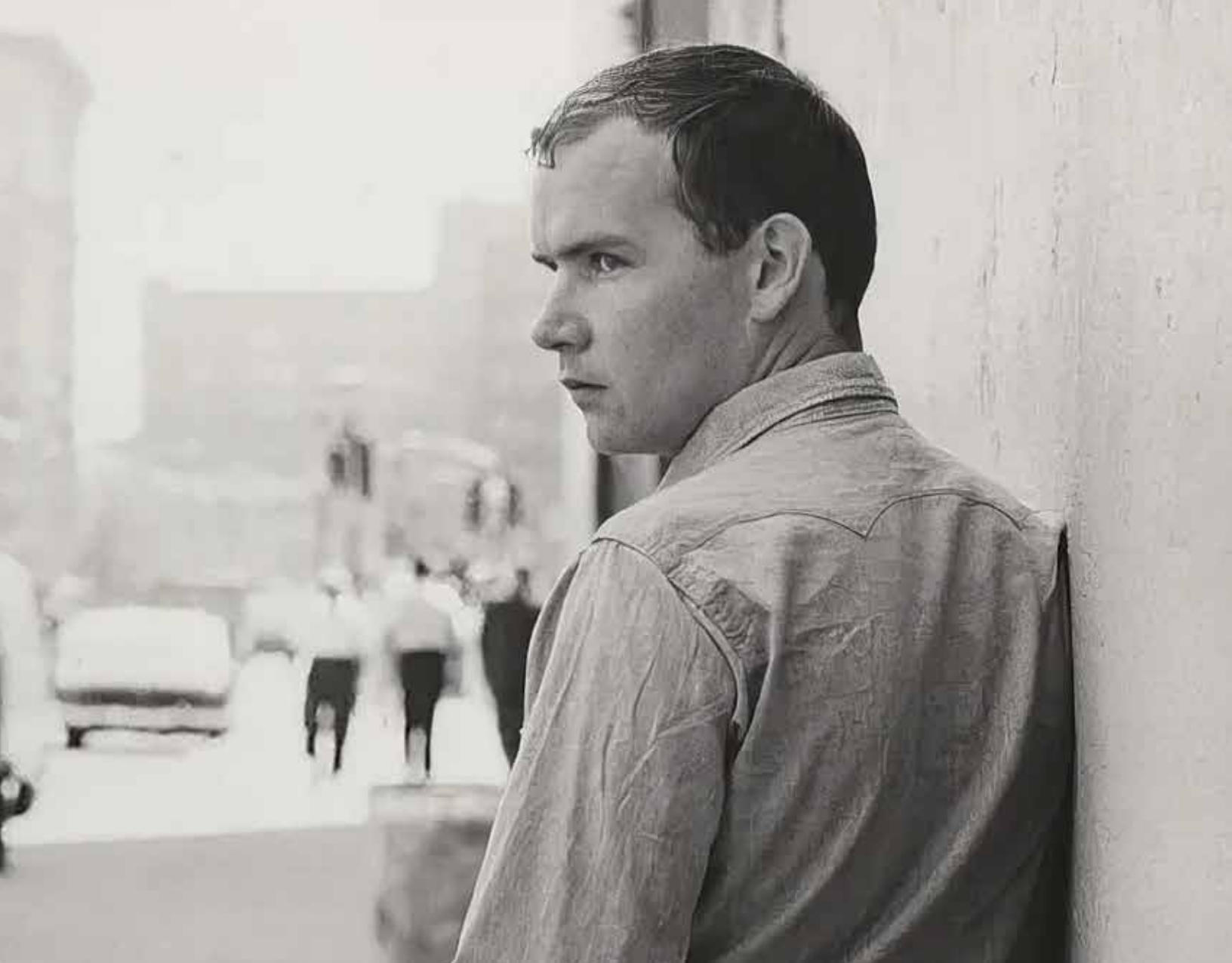


A young Tom Paxton transformed the rules of folk music by writing new songs instead of sticking to the standards.

and folk singers—could be. Over more than six decades, Paxton wrote about human events in nearly real time, signing to Elektra Records and releasing 1965's "Ain't That News," featuring songs like "Lyndon Johnson Told the Nation," as instant commentary



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on the optics of war. On his most recent collaboration with singer-songwriter John McCutcheon, 2023's "Together," Paxton sings "Ukrainian Now," a song of solidarity with the embattled nation.

In *The Mayor of MacDougal Street: A Memoir*, the autobiography that inspired the Joel and Ethan Coen film "Inside Llewyn Davis," noted folk singer Dave Van Ronk wrote that Paxton changed how folk music evolved by insisting on writing new songs. He describes Paxton as blazing a trail, with Dylan following closely behind.

"Dylan is usually cited as the founder of the New Song move-

ment, and he certainly became its most visible standard-bearer, but the person who started the whole thing was Tom Paxton," wrote Van Ronk. "He tested his songs in the crucible of live performance. He set himself a training regimen of deliberately writing one song every day."

Those songs could be about any aspect of life. One of Paxton's best-known, "My Dog's Bigger Than Your Dog," became a jingle for dog food in the 1970s. He also wrote the first hit single for Dolly Parton and Porter Wagoner, 1967's "The Last Thing on My Mind."

"Yeah, I was the first one

who did a lot of writing," he says wryly. "But there was this guy from Okemah. He did a little writing, too."

In 1968, while "The Last Thing on My Mind" still sat near the top of the country charts, Paxton performed alongside Dylan, Seeger, Judy Collins and Arlo Guthrie in a Carnegie Hall tribute to 'this guy from Okemah'—Woody Guthrie—that closed with, "This Land is Your Land."

Paxton says he knew many of Guthrie's songs while at OU and performing in The Travelers, a folk group modeled partly after The Weavers. Though he soon lived in New York at a time of

great innovation for his genre, Paxton took key lessons from the bard of Okemah.

"Something like this is not a job. It's a calling," he says. "If that sounds self-serving, please pardon me, but that's the way it felt. It was a compulsion. I loved it so much, I had to. For me, it was music."

"And more and more and more, through the years, the writing became so much the most important part to me." ❁

George Lang is the former editor of Oklahoma Gazette and assistant entertainment editor at The Oklahoman. He lives in Oklahoma City.