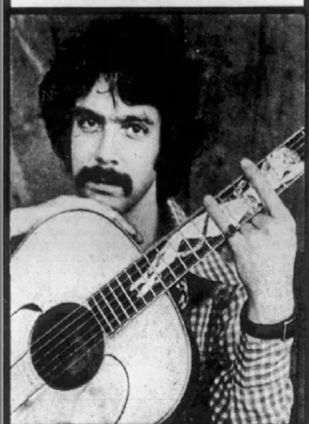


The Philadelphia Folk Festival: 18 years of Americana



Arlo Guthrie headlines this evening



Tom Rush also performs tomorrow



Don McLean appears Saturday night

By KEITH SCHNEIDER
Staff Writer

In the early evening, as the sun sprays a soft light into the front room of his home in Jenkintown, Oscar Brand is working on a new song he will perform at the Philadelphia Folk Festival this weekend.

"They tell you when she starts to leak,
Ya still got a fightin' chance.
Just follow the instructions on the wall,
Well pardon me if I shiver in my pants....
And I'm afraid a little shiver won't be much."

Sunday, Oscar Brand headlines the evening concert at the Philadelphia Folk Festival, along with Taj Mahal, Don McLean, Chris Smither, and Jim and Jesse and the Virginia Boys. It's the first time in five years that Brand has performed at the festival.

"It says get involved when she starts to blow,
And the radiation takes flight.
They say sit in the middle of the living room
And screw down the windows tight."

"It's the biggest continuing folk festival in the country now," says Brand. "It is an intimate festival. Most of the people who go can be very close to the performers. In any festival there has to be a feeling that this is the place to be. The place to be this weekend is in Schwenksville.

Tucked into the corner of the couch beside Brand is his son, 16-month-old Jordan. The child delights in the unfettered roudness of his father's voice, following the easy melody, unaware of the song's ultimate significance.

Brand's wife Karen squats on the rug beside her husband, her knees pulled up beneath her chin, holding Jordan's hand with her pinky.

"So why should you complain
When they poison the water fronts?
By then we'll all have cancer,
And you know they can only kill us once."

Brand's voice soars with the melody of his song, one of thousands he has composed that have formed a chronicle of the 20th Century. Since the mid '30s, Brand has composed simple, flowing tunes, the kind a child can easily memorize. For Jordan, the song is fun. For Brand, the song is a sermon.

Oscar Brand, along with Pete Seeger and Burl Ives, has been called one of the "grand old men" of American folk music. Old? At 59, tall, trim, he has the unlined face of a man 20 years younger.

But he is "grand." With his music and his spirit, Brand is an intimate part of a remarkable American musical tradition.

Brand loathes the title. "I am supposed to be the grand figure of folk music...because all the other people have died."

Their memories stir him every day. Woody Guthrie. Leadbelly. Josh White. They, Folk singers who wrote about an American landscape woven with the rich threads of a unique history.

The tradition has not died, however. The old guard has been replaced in part by a newer group: Woody's son, Arlo, Josh White's son, Josh Jr., by Don McLean, Tom Rush, Stephen Stills, Bob Dylan — singers who have infused jazz and rock licks into their music.

Folk music has always been supple. And it has yielded to the more progressive trends in other musical styles while not relinquishing its unique character: its melodies, its simple yet incisive lyrics.

The folk musicians will be joined in Upper Salford Township by 20,000 other people and a cast of performers who, aside from their extraordinary musical talent, are probably outspoken enough to have merited complete dossiers in the FBI's Washington files.

This year, Josh White Jr., Arlo Guthrie and Dave Van Ronk will headline the Friday night concert. Saturday night Bob Gibson and Tom Rush headline.

One of the men who might be there this year after a long absence is Jesse Baird, a venerable local gentleman drinking bourbon on the broad porch of Joe Springer's Mt. Hotel, two miles down the road from the concert site. Jesse explains that when the corn begins to grow taller than a man, and life around Schwenksville slows to match the placid current of the nearby Perkiomen River, then it's time for the Philadelphia Folk Festival.

"It's a good time for the kids," says Baird. "Sometimes when the nights cool down you can hear the music down here. I went up there 'bout ten years back. They had some good music."

Brightly colored tents have already been erected near the Festival's entrance. Two men are stretching black plastic over gray wooden frames, roofs for exhibition booths for the festival's artisans and musicians. The resounding whack of a half dozen hammers come from the stage at the bottom of a natural amphitheater. Workmen crawl between the rungs of the scaffolding matrix, hanging lights and sound equipment.

A crew from Ma Bell has just finished hooking up a battery of telephones alongside an aging trailer. With

hug tents, a stage, wire fences, and a fleet of four-wheel drive vehicles churning road dust into choking clouds, the scene bears a closer resemblance to a military command post than a concert site.

But when plans have to be made for accommodating nearly 10,000 people a day, for three days, the site has to be ready. It takes 1,500 volunteers to complete the job.

Directing this year's folk festival is Bob Seigel, 50, a Social Security Investigator in Philadelphia. He is assisted by other "amateur promoters" like Ed Halpern, a federal budget analyst, his wife, Esther, a professional musician, David Baskin, a foreign car dealer, Andrew Brawley, a Philadelphia city attorney, Lisette Brawley, a medical books editor — all members of the Philadelphia Folksong Society.

Since 1962, the society has nursed the event from its infancy, through two lawsuits, three location moves, a flood, near financial collapse and a hurricane, to a point where the Philadelphia Folk Festival has emerged as one of the premier folk music events in the east.

In its 18 years, the names that have played here read like a folk music hall of fame: Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, Oscar Brand, Judy Collins, Arlo Guthrie, Jonico Mitchell, Don McLean, Josh White, Jr., Jerry Jeff Walker, John Denver, Doc Watson, Tom Rush, Steve Goodman, Jim Croce, David Bromberg, Taj Mahal.

Most have performed more than once. The only notable exceptions: Richie Havens and Bob Dylan.

"Richie Havens has always had prior commitments," says Seigel, a big, bulky man with an imperious nature that belies the responsibility of being the final voice in the chain of command.

After 18 years the festival seems almost to put itself together. "Dylan came in 1972 with David Bromberg," Seigel says. "He wasn't scheduled to play. I didn't feel it was fair to the other performers. But it was Dylan," he shrugs. "I finally agreed. He was warming up beside the stage just before he is going to go on, and then he decides he doesn't want to play. So what can you do?"

"You do not have to say anything if you're Bob Seigel. His festival has become something of a tradition itself with its history of humor and pathos all its own. Jim Croce played his last concert here in 1973 before being killed in a plane crash. When Steve Goodman plays, he spends his evenings in the campground jamming with the campers."

In 1969, the festival was the first concert over Woodstock. In 1971, it rained for two days prior to the concert, flooding the stage and quickly turning the fields into quagmire.

The crowd comes also to learn how a banjo player clavhammers his instrument, or listen to Taj Mahal give a workshop on African and American music. It's been happening at the Festival since 1962, through the

beatniks, the hippies, the yippies, and sleepy Seventies crowd. In addition to the music, the workshop and the significance of this folk tradition, people come because when the day's events are finished there is time to sit by fires and let it all play slowly through your mind.

If you're going...

To get to the Philadelphia Folk Festival, take the Pennsylvania Turnpike Extension south to the Spinnerstown Exit. Take Route 663 west. The toll is \$1.35. Follow route 663 to route 29 south about 20 miles. From there, follow the signs.

Prices: The tickets for evening concerts beginning at 7:30 p.m. are \$10 each. Tickets for daytime activities are \$8. Tickets good for the entire festival are \$30. For camping privileges, call Esther Halpern for reservations at 215-242-0150.

Cost is \$38 for All-festival tickets with camping.

Children under 12 are admitted free.

Schedule of Performances: The Friday evening concert will showcase Peter Bellamy and Dave Swarbrick, Apple Chill Cloggers, Paula Lockheart, Bruce Martin, Gumble Rogers, Dave Van Ronk, Josh White Jr., and Arlo Guthrie with Shenandoah.

The Saturday evening concert will headline Tony Bird, Bob Gibson and Hamilton Camp, High Level Ranters, Chris Smither (originally scheduled to play Sunday but has switched performance time with Taj Mahal who was scheduled to play Saturday) Bruce Martin, Utah Phillips, Robin and Linda Williams with Peter Ostroushko, Roger Sprung and the Progressive Bluegrassers, and Tom Rush.

The Sunday evening concert: Oscar Brand, Barde, Taj Mahal, Silly Wizard, Bruce Martin, Koko Taylor, Blues Band, Buck White and the Down Home Folks, Don McLean,

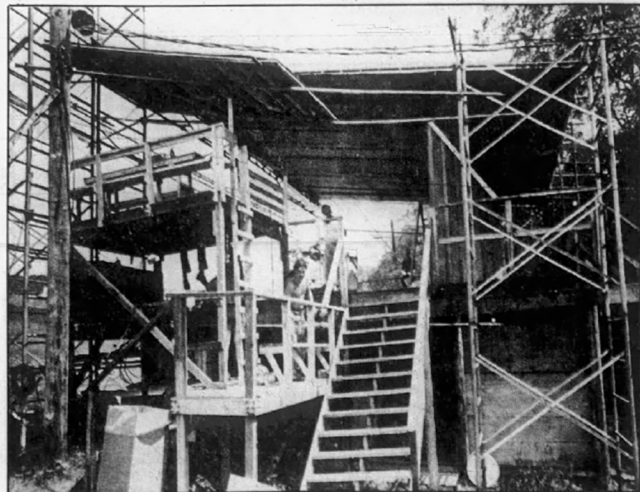


Photo by Keith Schneider

More resembling the frame of country home, the stage at Schwenksville is erected for this weekend's folk festival.