

The “Texas Songbird:” Carolyn Hester

by Scott Sosebee

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(May 14, 2023) Another one in a Texas music series, perhaps someone that is a bit obscure to many, but probably shouldn't be. The general rule is that one doesn't write historical biography while the subject is living, but Hester is, in my mind, too influential to leave out of a Texas music series.

Music fans of many genres rightfully see Texas as a breeding ground for some of the most successful and notable artists in America. A list of influential and renowned Texas singers and musicians would run hundreds of pages and cross many different types of music from country to rock, to pop, blues, and classical. It would include such eminent names and acts as Bob Wills, Willie Nelson, Steve Miller, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Van Cliburn, Ornette Coleman, and ZZ Top. Yes, Texas is a musical mecca for those who enjoy traditional country, western swing, be-bop jazz, hard-driving rock, and guitar blues. One genre that many do not associate with Texas is folk music, and we should because Texan Carolyn Hester—the “Texas Songbird”—was one of the most influential folk singers of her time.

Born in Waco in 1937, Carolyn Hester and her family lived at various times in Lubbock, Dallas, and Austin. She showed an innate aptitude for music from an early age and honed her craft singing in school and church choirs as well as the occasional local fair or festival. After her high school graduation, she did what almost every potential “serious” singer was supposed to do: she took off for New York City, where she looked for work performing in the folk clubs that dotted Greenwich Village of the day.

New York was not kind to the young singer, and she returned to Texas to live with her family, who had by that time moved to Lubbock. Carolyn's mother, like all mothers, believed that her child was special so in 1957 she contacted famed record producer Norm Petty in Clovis, New Mexico—the man who that same year recorded Buddy Holly and launched the career of the rock-and-roll icon and would later be instrumental in beginning Roy Orbison's career as well. Petty agreed to listen to Hester if she would make the short trip to

Clovis and what he heard convinced him that she indeed was a special talent. Petty then produced “Scarlet Ribbons” for Hester in that year and became her manager. After the record’s modest success, the young folk singer went back to New York.

Success came easier this time, and Hester became a key part of Greenwich Village’s early “folk scene”, characterized by a band of liberal politically active artists who played the coffee houses and campuses of the northeast. Their music often highlighted the burgeoning civil rights movement and, most predominantly in the late 1960s, their songs often carried an anti-Vietnam War bent. Hester, who had in many ways often felt she did not “fit in” with the Texas of her youth, found a spiritual home in Greenwich Village, and in what she later said, “for the first time in my life, I felt like I belonged.” A young Joan Baez saw Hester perform at The Bitter End in Fillmore East of the “Village” and the Texas musician became a big influence on her career, although they did not know each other well. Baez told a later interviewer that she began to model her style on Hester, and even at one time began to “dress to look more like her.” Bob Dylan frequently performed with Hester on stage, and he played on her third album for Columbia Records, which helped to launch the musical giant’s career. Carolyn probably made a large mistake when she turned down an invitation to join with three obscure folk musicians—Peter Yarrow, Paul Stookey, and Mary Travers—who would go on to fame as Peter, Paul, and Mary.

Hester became prominent as a live act with the folk milieu, but her success never really translated to recordings. She was always at her best as a live performer, so she never truly had a hit record. Recording sessions made her uncomfortable and for that reason her true sound did not seem to translate to records. Another part of the reason may have been because she stubbornly stuck to traditional folk music based on traditional English ballads even when other “folkies” began to craft a more modern style. It also didn’t help that her husband, Richard Farina, began to micromanage her career after they were married in the late 1960s with the result of promoting his own aims and goals in management and production instead of furthering her career. Whatever the reason, by the end of the 1960s Hester had grown disenchanted with the New York folk scene and she returned to her native Texas.

One would think that perhaps her career was over at that point, but it just entered another phase. She became a key figure in the founding of what would grow to be the annual Kerrville Folk Festival, and she has played the venue every year since its beginning. She continued to influence younger musicians and helped to begin Nanci Griffith’s career in the 1980s; she occasionally appeared and recorded with the woman whose voice was often compared to Hester’s. Griffith died in 2021, and Hester eulogized her at her funeral. Even though she is now in her eighties, Carolyn still makes the occasional tour predominantly with her daughters,

Amy and Karla Blume. She also remains true to the traditional folk sound. So, when you make that list of noted Texas musicians, please include the name of Carolyn Hester.

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