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Lucinda Williams, Pete Seeger Sing Praises of Folkways Records

Grateful Dead's Mickey Hart delivered a lecture on the label's place in the history of recorded music.

Correspondent Michael Kramer reports:

New York -- Lucinda Williams sang old Texas folk-blues songs. Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart gave a lecture. Bluegrass legend Ralph Stanley moaned "Man of Constant Sorrow." And, along the way, album covers flashed across a screen in the background, including one that featured the first recording by a guy who used the name "Blind Boy Grunt" for that one but who is better known as Bob Dylan.

What all of these and more had in common was a fabled record label that went by the name Folkways. Many of the artists who recorded for that label turned out Friday for "Folkways at 50: An Anniversary Concert" at Carnegie Hall.

"The folk process goes on and on." -- Pete Seeger, folk singer

"The folk process goes on and on," remarked Pete Seeger, the legendary folk singer, as he tickled his banjo strings almost inaudibly and told of some of his experiences recording for Moe Asch, whose record label, Folkways (now administered by the Smithsonian Institution), is one of the greatest repositories of artists and genres in U.S. musical history.

To prove his point, Seeger proceeded to hum a humorous reworking of Woody Guthrie's reworking of the traditional folk song "Buffalo Skinners."

The version Seeger presented was sent to him by a woman who took part in a union organization drive at a McDonalds in Ohio. In Guthrie's lyrics, buffalo skinners leave their boss's bones to bleach on the plains of the buffalo. In the lyrics that Seeger sang, the unionized fast-food workers eventually make McDonalds send their bad manager to a company workshop to "brush up on his people skills."

It was the kind of "people's song" that label founder Asch, who died in 1986, might have turned into a recording complete with extensive, scholarly liner notes.

The Folkways concert began with a slide show and narration by the evening's emcees, Theodore Bikel and Ossie Davis. The slides and accompanying soundtrack gave an inkling of the significance of Asch's small record-label -- in many senses a forerunner to today's "indie" labels such as Rounder Records and even small punk labels such as Kill Rock Stars.

"They really came out of the woodwork," said Sasha Koren, referring to the audience, which seemed to be composed mostly of aging baby boomers who dragged their children along. Koren said she attended with her mother, who was truly "in her element" listening to 1960s folk anthems.

As the crowd cheered for its favorites (Seeger and late '60s folk-singer Phil Ochs elicited the loudest response), the covers of Folkways albums flashed across a projection screen. They included everything from one of the 50-plus albums that Seeger recorded to samples



Lucinda Williams sang old Texas folk-blues songs from her Folkways years.



from the extensive World Music series and sets of children's music. There was the first Dylan recording (under the pseudonym "Blind Boy Grunt") and the debut album from Texas singer/songwriter Williams. Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie were also represented along with Harry Smith's epochal *Anthology of American Folk Music* and a gospel civil-rights album by the SNCC Freedom Singers.

The slide show even included an album Folkways released that was devoted entirely to the sounds of New York City and another that captured the sounds of the North American Tree Frogs.

Following the slide show, the New Lost City Ramblers -- Mike Seeger (Pete's half-brother), John Cohen and Tracy Schwarz -- played old-time American mountain songs on fiddle, dulcimer, autoharp and spoons while dressed to the nines in Southern preacher-like vests.

Stanley, the bluegrass legend, followed with his soaring, pinched, high-lonesome tenor vocals and banjo work on a medley of traditional songs, "Little Maggie," "Pretty Polly" and "Man of Constant Sorrow." With his son, Ralph Stanley II, accompanying him on guitar, Stanley was one of three parent/child performers during the evening (Bernice Johnson Reagon of Sweet Honey in The Rock performed with her daughter Toshi Reagon, who has a buzz on the New York folk circuit and, fittingly, a debut album out on Folkways; and Bikel, who performed Yiddish and Celtic folk songs with his son, Daniel).

The Grateful Dead's Hart, a self-taught ethnomusicologist, presented a lecture on the history of recorded music and Folkways' place in it. The Freedom Singers had the audience singing 1960s civil-rights anthems, all with passionate gospel tinges. Ella Jenkins, who beats Raffi any day as a performer of children's music, had the audience members playing paddy-cake with strangers sitting next to them.

Then Williams, the writer of the song "Passionate Kisses" (and who has a much-anticipated new album, *Car Wheels on A Gravel Road*, due out this spring), appeared in a cowboy hat and sang Texas folk-blues songs from her Folkways years, including the greatly named song "Disgusted." Declaring that "I never thought I'd make it this far," Williams played with a cool, brimming fury.

Los Pleneros de 21, a three-generation Puerto Rican ensemble, shook the house with songs from the Bomba and Plena traditions. The Mahogany Brass Band and Norman Dixon's Untouchable Secondliners, who waved tall feathers behind them as they danced, wound around the Carnegie Hall aisles in New Orleans marching-band-style while playing "When the Saints Go Marching In."

Dar Williams sang suburban, pop-tinged folk songs that satirized her own New-Age leanings in "Christians and Pagans," before inviting Seeger out to sing a duet on "Turn! Turn! Turn!" Then Ulali, an all-female Native American trio, sang swooping, thrilling three-part harmonies based on American Indian chants as they played subtle but simple rhythms with gourds and hand drums.

Seeger closed the show by bringing out the entire bill to sing the age-old spiritual "Amen."

Though he fell out of time and his voice warbled, Seeger urged the audience to sing along with verve. His wizened dignity and humble dedication to folk music encompassed all that is valuable about a record company such as Folkways. Seeger was the perfect man to celebrate a record label that still struggles to capture the diverse essences of the "people's music."

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