

“Old Hat”—New Inspiration From Traditional Songs

Indianapolis-based band **The Brains Behind Pa** has released a CD of traditional songs with the title *Old Hat*. This is the first release from the group, who have been playing club dates in the area for almost two years.

The band derives its collective name from the lyrics of “Maggie’s Farm,” a Bob Dylan song. “We’re not a Dylan ‘tribute’ band,” says lead singer **Bill Price**, “but we admire the style and sensibility of his songs. We’re partial to singer/songwriters in general: Woody Guthrie, Neil Young.”



The Brains Behind Pa plays in two configurations. The three-piece lineup, featured on *Old Hat*, employs acoustic guitars, mandolin, accordion, harmonica, and National steel guitar. The full five-piece band adds electric guitars, keyboards, and a rhythm section.

“Basically, we’re a song-driven band,” says Price. “I guess the common

Garry Bole

thread running through the music we play is a preference for honest songs rooted in traditional styles, always true, never slick.”

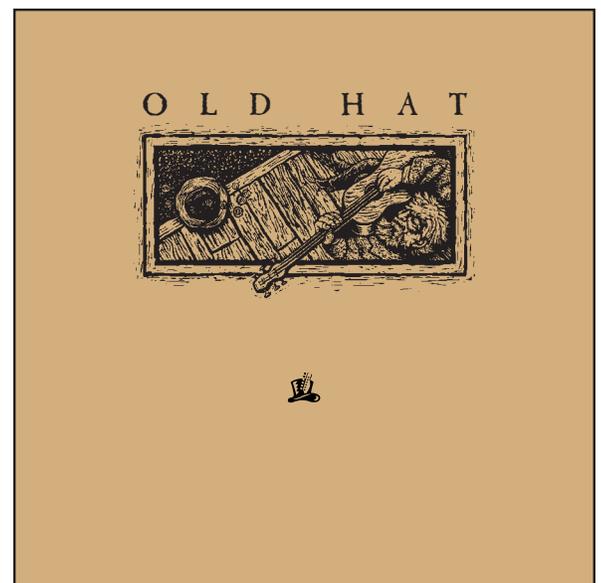
Bill Price

Gordon Bonham

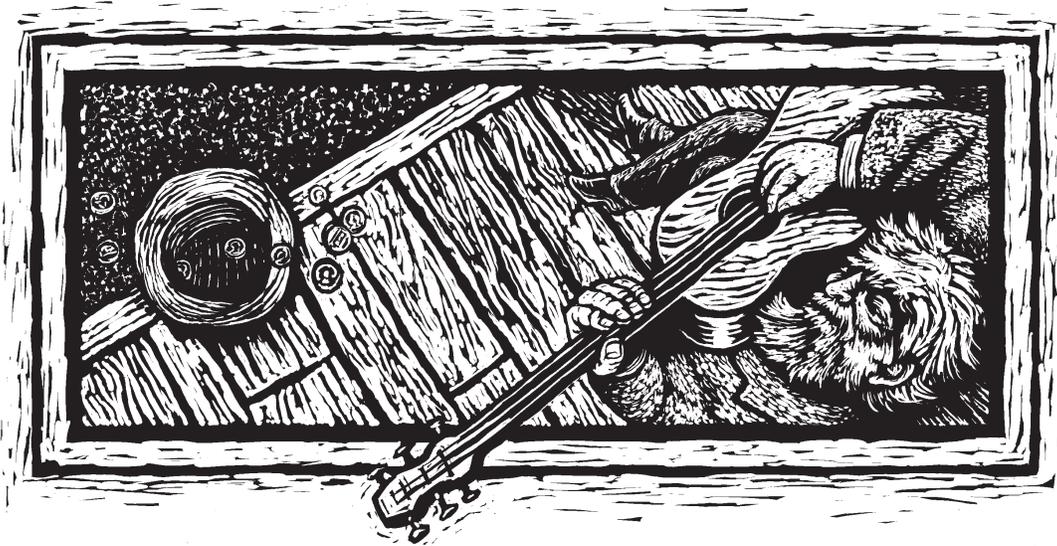
“We play a lot of Dylan, and rock, in our live acts,” says lead guitarist **Gordon Bonham**. “but we would never put out a cover of a Neil Young song on a CD—what would be the point? The album has given us a chance to wear a different hat, and play traditional songs that we really love.”

About the Songs

American popular music—rock, jazz, blues, bluegrass, country, and the rest—long ago conquered the world. These commercial genres grew out of older forms that we call folk or traditional—cowboy ballads, spirituals and gospel songs, slave and convict chants, mountain reels, early versions of the blues, and the songs of working people.



Folk music is more process than finished product—it lives to be passed along and amended. Claims of authorship, almost by definition, are a moot point. “My name is nothing extry,” a cowboy song begins, “so that I will not tell.” Folk is our only participatory form of literature. John and Alan Lomax, in their landmark 1934 book *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, noted that some



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of the songs they collected would have run to several hundred pages, had they included all the known versions of, say, “Stagolee” or “The Ballad of the Erie Canal.”

The Brains Behind Pa approach these old songs with respect but not reverence. “Sometimes we change songs so much that we in effect rewrite them,” says Price.

The first song on *Old Hat*, “**Ain’t No More Cane**,” was recorded most famously by

The Band. Decades earlier, the Lomaxes had recorded convicts singing “Ain’t No Mo’ Cane on de Brazis” on a prison farm near Houston. (The Brazos is a river in central Texas.) The song was sung by men on the chain gang while they wielded hoes under the broiling sun. “No stanza is ever sung in the same way as another,” wrote John Lomax; rather, the convicts “impose a great variety of ornament and original deviation upon the pattern of the tune.”

The album’s second cut, “**Trail of the Buffalo**,” is a variation on an earlier song called “The Buffalo Skinners” (which the Lomaxes suggested was descended from a Maine lumberjack song.) Told by a young cowboy, the song recounts the story of a cattle drive that begins well, but turns hellish in the hills of Mexico. When the drover who recruited the cowboys—promising good wages and a chance to “spend the summer pleasantly”—tries to cheat them out of their pay, they “leave his bones to bleach” on the trail.

“Trail of the Buffalo” was recorded by Woody Guthrie and Ramblin’ Jack Elliot, among others, but The Brains Behind Pa’s rendition may well be the definitive version, driven by the song’s compelling narrative, Price’s Dylan-tinged vocal, and the interplay and layering of instruments. **Garry Bole** plays mandolin and “wet-tuned” accordion, and Bonham employs the album’s only electric guitar, fed through a Forties-vintage amp with an 8” speaker. The song also features **Jeff Chapin**, from the band’s five-piece lineup, on drums.

The band follows their blow-you-away version of “Trail” with a quiet and lovely “**Worried Blues**,” with Bonham singing lead. (He also sings lead on “**Soul of a Man**.”) Five of the seven songs on the album bear the attribution “traditional,” including “**Corrina, Corrina**” and “**Gospel Plow**,” which closes the set. “Corrina, Corrina” may be the best-known of the songs on *Old Hat*. Dylan included it on his second album, and numerous other artists have accorded it treatments ranging from bluegrass to jazz.

Just two songs on the album have the names of songwriters attached, though even these likely contain elements of earlier songs. Elizabeth Cotten, born in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in 1895, wrote the jaunty “**Oh Babe It Ain’t No Lie**” when she was a young girl.

*One old woman Lord in this town
Keeps a-telling her lies on me
Wish to my soul that old woman would die,
Keep a-telling her lies on me.*

Cotten worked as a domestic for most of her life; eventually, in the household of Mike Seeger, who discovered that she could sing and play guitar and banjo. Seeger’s recordings of Cotten—including her best-known song, “Freight Train”—brought her at last to public attention. From her sixties into her nineties she performed in concert, and received honors including a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, and a Grammy.

Blind Willie Johnson, an East Texas street preacher and singer, recorded “Soul of a Man” in the 1920s. Johnson was blinded as a child when his stepmother threw lye in his face. On his recordings, he expounded fierce religious convictions in a guttural voice, while his guitar playing was wonderfully delicate and expressive. In critical regard, Johnson occupies a place among the first rank of blues artists. His extraordinary recording of “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground” was launched into the cosmos aboard the spacecraft Voyager.

The Brains Behind Pa



Gordon Bonham is a well-known and respected bluesman who has played with Bo Diddley and Pine Top Perkins, among others. The Gordon Bonham Blues Band has opened shows for blues legends such as Koko Taylor and B.B. King, and has been a featured act of the Indy Jazz Fest.

A couple of years ago Bonham was hosting an “acoustic open mike night” at Ozzie’s, a now-defunct club in Indianapolis. “Ozzie’s was this little bar under the I-65 South ramp near Market Street; mainly it was a hang-out for cops and district attorneys,” says Bonham. “People would come up on stage and we would sing together. That’s how I met Bill Price”—which meeting, he says, was the genesis of The Brains Behind Pa.

Price, a singer/songwriter, joined Bonham one night at Ozzie’s, and they quickly determined that they shared a taste for Dylan. “Then Bill asked me did I know ‘Trail of the Buffalo,’” says Bonham. “Which floored me—I figured we must be the only two people around who knew that song. We sang it together, on stage, the first night we met. The song has sort of defined our friendship.”

Keyboardist and mandolin player Garry Bole showed up at Ozzie’s one night in the company of Joan Crane. Along with Ozzie’s, Crane’s name always comes up when the band members discuss how they met. Each of them knew Crane, though they didn’t know each other. “Joan is a great old-time finger-picking guitarist,” says Bole. “She was responsible for bring us all together.”

That night at Ozzie’s, Joan introduced Garry to Bill and Gordon. What happened next, according to Price, was that “Gordon and I were playing Little Walter’s ‘My Babe’ and all of a sudden I heard this really cool accordion. Garry had spontaneously joined us on stage with his accordion and just blew us all away.” “We definitely felt something musically between us,” says Bole.

The Brains Behind Pa played its first gig at a chicken wing place. Since that debut they have developed a number of venues where they appear, including Kelly's Pub Too in Indianapolis, and The Willard in Franklin, Indiana. *Old Hat* is available locally at Border's and at Meridian Music, as well as online at cdstreet.com and cdbaby.com. Meanwhile the band's members are involved in their individual projects. Bill Price has a CD of original songs coming out in late 2002. Garry Bole plays in a western swing band. Gordon Bonham's Blues Band is pretty much a full-time occupation for the guitarist and singer.

"I love this kind of music," says Bonham of the songs on *Old Hat*, "but I never get the chance to play it. I would like to see The Brains Behind Pa perform more often, but my calendar fills up, especially in the summer. In a nutshell, *Old Hat* is a chance to play stuff we really like, and we hope at least a few people will get it."

Garry Bole says that "Trail of the Buffalo" is his favorite song on the album. "I like playing in minor keys," he says. "The song has a locomotive effect—it could go on forever. I hate to say this, but when I'm playing I'll think, this time I'm going to listen to the words, but once we get into the song I'm concentrating on the music and what the others are playing. 'Trail of the Buffalo,' though, draws you right in. Bill did a great job with the vocal."

"There was a time in Indianapolis when I didn't know anyone," says Bole. "Now it seems like every musician in town, including me, is involved in two or three bands at once. I don't know where The Brains Behind Pa is going—I'm just glad to be a part of it."

About the Recording

"We recorded the album at The Lodge, here in Indianapolis; it's in an old Masonic building by I-70 and Rural Street," Price explains. "There's a big studio upstairs, where we recorded. It has wonderful acoustics and a great atmosphere."

"Michael Graham was the engineer, and he did the mixing and mastering as well. We've worked with Michael before and we know his taste in music is similar to ours. He knows music theory as well as engineering. He's just great to work with and really sees eye to eye with us as far as how to approach songs. He doesn't really care if you can hear somebody's chair squeak on the recording—if the take was full of feeling and emotion, that's one Michael will keep. The feeling is the most important thing—not slickness."

"Michael recorded the album on 2" tape as opposed to digital. He miked all the instruments instead of using pickups. There was very little processing or use of effects—everything is pretty much straightforward, but, we weren't trying to recreate old-time recording techniques, the way they did with the *O Brother Where Art Thou?* soundtrack. Garry has old accordions, and Gordon has a 1935 steel guitar, that we used on the album. Michael mixed everything manually—without the computer—he really got into the spirit of the thing. So, all those elements add up to an earthy, warm feel, even though we weren't trying to make a period piece. We just wanted to take these old songs and make them our own." •

