

photo by jim marshall



Mimi Farina appeared recently at the Great Southeast Music Hall. While she was in town we interviewed her in conjunction with WRFG radio. Mimi brought Tom Flower of the Atlanta Workshop in Non-violence (AWIN) with her and he participated in the interview at her request. Present for the Bird and WRFG were Roger French and Joe Shifalo.

**BIRD:** You've been gone from the music scene for quite some time now...

**MIMI:** I pretty much quit music and entertainment for about five years. I did work with the San Francisco Committee for one year, and then got back into music about four years ago. I didn't know which way to turn with it, didn't know what to do with it.

Because I'd always been used to singing with a partner I went out and shopped around, formed a trio and then a duo, did a lot of testing and ended up singing with a friend, Tom Jans. We made an album for A&M mostly of our own music and travelled promoting that album for awhile and then split up. Then I sang with a girl named Carol McCoam who you may be familiar with through an album called Cassie & Carol—that's an old folkie album. Carol plays pedal steel and she's quite a musician but didn't like to travel and really isn't into performing, so that split up after a while.

About a year and a half ago I decided to try and sing on my own and see what that was like. At first it was terrifying and then I got to enjoy it. It really is much simpler travelling alone with just a guitar and a suitcase and not having to wait for people. It's much different on a stage when other people are up there, I always feel very obligated to share time. It's like being married on stage (laughs). And I enjoy being single, in all senses (laughs).

She had talked in her set at the Music Hall about the frustrations of dealing with a record company, of being labeled an "act," being told she didn't have enough "up-product" and that she might not be able to record. We asked her to expound on that.

**MIMI:** I made a meeting with the president of the company. We discussed what the meaning of the vinyl shortage was and he said well, it was true there was a vinyl shortage and considering the fact that I was a marginal act, that we were going to have to reconsider putting out an album. So for a year he and I had meetings and discussed when this album could be made and how it could be made, etc., etc. It became very humiliating. So the last tour I did on the east coast I started talking about it to the audience and a really sweet thing happened. In Wisconsin they started a petition and sent in about 1000 signatures requesting an album by me from the company.

Through the whole tour I would talk about it, and one thing that I found that people understood and related to, and that I feel really strongly about, is how the corporate

system works so similarly to the government. I could stand there and say this is what it does to me, imagine how you feel and think how you feel becoming just a number and a name and here I am to sing you my songs and in my own mind I'm only a number. In fact when I walk into that office down in Hollywood I'm a piece of vinyl and no more. I'm dollar signs or, with me, lack of dollar signs and vinyl, and it feels terrible, so let's do something about it. And the audiences were just really super, especially the college audiences. A lot of letters came out of it and a lot of good feelings, but it made absolutely no difference to the record company, although it made me feel great and gave me something to do on the tour besides just sing songs and collect money and go home.

**BIRD:** What about the little companies, Arhoolie and Rounder?

**MIMI:** Well that's what I'm investigating now. If I can be in on the building of a record company, if I can be a part of their structure rather than just an asset to them when they please, then that will be very helpful.

The difference between an artist and a businessman is a big difference. To make those two come together and have some sort of mutual respect for each other is clearly impossible in Hollywood, but maybe there's a chance outside of that atmosphere.

**BIRD:** Are you doing any political stuff these days?

**MIMI:** The most recent thing I did was to get involved with veterans in San Francisco, not just Vietnam vets, though it ended up being mostly Vietnam-era veterans. I organized a concert to fund a march that was taking place July 4 in Washington. After a lot of struggle we got Jackson Browne and Steve Martin, who I'm playing with here (I really like him) and Danny O'Keefe from "Good Time Charlie's Got the Blues" (although I hope one day he'll be known for more than that cause he writes really beautiful songs) and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. The San Francisco Committee emceed the show and my sister [Joan Baez] was sort of weaving in and out. She couldn't keep off the stage, she was enjoying herself. So it was a really nice night and the spirit of the thing was tops. That was the first time I'd done any of that kind of organizing and I was really inspired, really had a good time.

The talk drifted on to the memorial concerts for Victor Jarra, a Chilean folk singer often likened to Pete Seeger; Jarra was killed in the stadium of Santiago after being rounded up during the coup. A memorial concert on the east coast was organized by Phil Ochs (Mimi: "Alcohol and the fact that he's not non-violent are the only two problems I have with Phil (laughs)."). Mimi participated in a concert on the west coast organized by Jarra's widow.

**MIMI:** The east coast one looked like a drunken

brawl, although everyone was there in good spirit and Dylan showed up and Arlo Guthrie and people really came with the right intention. I think that without pacifism and without stressing the fact that non-violence is terribly important, it's easy to go out for an evening and perform in a memorial service about something that's terribly touching. What would happen in that case is that you'd get drunk. It's overwhelming to face those things. But if you face them in another sense and in another way with some background as to how to understand, without falling apart, all of which is involved so far as I can tell in the theories and feelings of nonviolence.

**BIRD:** Why did it fall apart?

**MIMI:** It's shattering to think about a man that's been tortured to death. He's a singer and all those guys could identify with that because they're all singers and play guitar and had some social consciousness. So you feel kind of close to the situation and it's hard to take. You know you're not going to sleep well that night. But if you're prepared for all that in advance, which I think non-violence begins to prepare you for, you can face it with a little more strength. You don't fall apart and everything is just a little more dignified and together. In which case you can progress from there, rather than getting drunk and going home and feeling terrible.

**BIRD:** What's the situation of folk, acoustic, social consciousness music now?

**MIMI:** There's absolutely no audience for it right now and as far as I'm concerned I don't care. I'm going to play that way...because it's really where my heart is. If I can make a living at it, if I can get by, then I will continue to do that. There are always compromises, like the record company. In order to make a record I was going to have to do half my songs and half commercial songs, whatever that meant I'm not sure. But they weren't going to be mine. So that's where I drew the line in my mind. I thought if I consider myself like an artist then I'm going to act like one. That means that I sing the songs that I choose to sing. If I'm in the wrong decade that's too bad for me right now.

**BIRD:** What about audiences, here and elsewhere?

**MIMI:** In places where there are folk audiences, people are very receptive to sitting and listening carefully to lyrics. That's really nice. And there's a lot of activity. For example when I was on the east coast talking about the record company business, and how similar it was to the government, and how if you didn't happen to hear your favorite group on the radio this month or this year, it was your responsibility to call or write the radio station or the record company asking what's up? How we all have to become a part of this. The response to that part of it was really good. When people understand there's something they can do, it's really easy to respond and to feel good about responding. I think there's a need and a desire to respond, but what there is out there to respond to is really limited.

Mimi sings one of her songs, "Sheriffs on the Highway" "and if I could have it my way it wouldn't be quite like this with all the guards and gunmen and these crazy border riffs". She talks briefly about her Quaker upbringing, how she was introduced to Sunday meetings at age 5 and couldn't see anything in them.

**MIMI:** But without it I would not know how to sit still. We're not brought up in this society to be able to sit still and think. And having been introduced to that concept for not that long a period of my life I think has been very valuable.

Now I think we should talk to Tom who works locally with Quakers and the non-violent

movement.

Tom Flower presents a summary of activities of the Atlanta Workshop in Non-violence. They include Tuesday night seminars at the Quaker House, 1384 Fairview Road, preceded by a pot-luck supper at 6:30. Anyone interested in non-violence or any aspect of the radical non-violent movement is invited to come and bring food. The full series of seminars, to begin in September, includes: non-violence in lifestyles, non-violence and national defense, nuclear disarmament, war tax resistance.

**TOM:** Even though the war in S.E. Asia is supposedly over we all know it hasn't stopped, it's just going on with American soldiers wearing civilian clothes now. Many of us are still refusing to pay the taxes, income tax, telephone tax, which is primarily going to pay the cost of past wars, preparing for new war, keeping the military establishment going.

**MIMI:** How much do you withhold?

**TOM:** I withhold 100%. I have for some years. The Friends Committee on National Legislation estimates that 60% of the federal income tax dollar goes for war and war-related purposes. But they don't include the space race or foreign aid or many other programs that I consider really military programs. So I find it easier to take an absolutist position in that area.

**MIMI:** I think my sister takes that position. I still just withhold 60%.

**BIRD:** What is the result of that withholding?

**TOM:** Well, different people take different approaches to this. I'm an absolutist. I don't want them to get any money. I don't have a bank account, I don't own any property. I found one thing about tax resistance, it simplifies life (laughs), because I find it really sort of forces me into a material non-attachment I think I might not have gotten into otherwise.

**MIMI:** It's terrible, I eat meat, I wear fur coats and I own a house (laughs). Which means that they go into my bank account and take money out of that.

**TOM:** The Friends Service Committee has set up an Alternate Fund, whose purpose is to take the money from income tax that goes for war or war-related purposes and use it in our own community for ameliorative life-fulfilling purposes: no-interest loans to free clinics, to planned parent-hood clinics, to people's radio stations, things that are serving the community in a life-fulfilling way, instead of a murderous way.

I might just add, that if you do refuse to pay the 8% tax on your telephone bill—that's the federal excise tax that was renewed expressly to help pay the bill of war in Indochina, and it's doing it—it won't interfere with your telephone service. You just have to let Mother know why you're doing it. You write a letter. In fact, the War Resister's League prints a form that gives an explanation, and an apology. You see, Mother's in a weird position. She's a collection agency for the government and she doesn't like that. Her bill's high enough now without putting the tax on it. So there's no problem with this.

**MIMI:** Right, I've been doing it for five years. **TOM:** Another very exciting thing that the Atlanta Workshop in Non-violence has accomplished is getting the Catholic schools in the entire archdiocese of Atlanta to put a learning-peace curriculum into their classrooms. This is a program that was developed by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Instead of just telling the kids about the generals and the great wars and how we ripped off the Indians, the kids will be offered the alternative of studying peace and learning about peace, and the fact that it is possible.

The Atlanta Workshop also distributes films to community groups: the use of medicine in war, a very fine slideshow on the automated air war, the post-war war, the question of torture in South Vietnam which is still very much going on—not only in South Vietnam, of course.

Some of the events coming up: there'll be organizing for the Second International Week of Concern on South Vietnamese Political Prisoners. This will be September 29-October 6. There will be some protest meetings on the anniversary of the Chilean coup September 11.

And down here at the bottom of the list are some of the needs of the Atlanta Workshop in Non-violence. First, here with an asterisk is money. The second one is office space and the third is volunteers.

I'd also like to put in a plug for a group that I work with called Assistance to Offenders. It's a private group working with prisoners and ex-prisoners trying to integrate them back into society. We have a program called One-to-One. We take community volunteers into local prisons here, the so-called correctional institutions. They form a long-term relationship with a prisoner that hopefully will grow into a friendship and then this friendship will transcend the release of the person back into society and will help him or her bridge his or her way back. If anyone is interested, they can contact me, Tom Flower, at Assistance to Offenders, 848 Peachtree NE, Atlanta 30303.

While we're on prisons, I had the opportunity a week ago to go down to the, again it's a euphemism, Georgia Rehabilitation Center for Women in Milledgeville, which is the Georgia state women's prison, and which is a real horrible place. It's an old ward of the state mental hospital, with women confined there from the age of 16 on up, 310 the day that I was there. There's a lot of problems, but there's some good staff people that are really concerned and really could do something. There's one need in particular that the women have. Unlike the men, the women get no gratuity or reimbursement for any of the work that they do. Consequently unless they have money coming from their home they can't afford to buy any commissary materials. They're forced to use the soap that is prison issue and is very abrasive and takes off their skin and that kind of thing. They have a tremendous need for personal care items, for material for sewing and things like that. If people were to contact me I could let them know what the needs are. If people want to send things like soap or hand lotion, they should send enough for everyone so that some don't get left out.

At this time the prison is very open to groups going in and working with the prisoners. Things like women's consciousness groups, music groups. They have no entertainment, no films. **MIMI:** It just means a lot if anyone pays attention to someone who's in a prison situation. I really like singing in prisons. It's a situation that's not like singing in a club at all.

**BIRD:** All of the things we're sitting around talking about in 1974 just would not have been possible had it not been for the music of the early 60s and to some extent the late 60s. I can't think of anything that contributed to social consciousness, to the kinds of things we're talking about, (more than) music. Certainly that was the rallying point.

**MIMI:** It's the one place where you don't have to be afraid. If you say the word meeting, or gathering, or march, all of these things can sound very scary to someone.

**BIRD:** Is there any hope for continuing that kind of thing?

**MIMI:** I don't think there can be any rebirth of the same songs, but I feel as if the stuff I'm writing has the same sympathy. They aren't sing-a-longs, they aren't march songs, which there is a need for, but the sympathies are the same, and if they can get themselves onto the car radio, that'll be fine with me.

**BIRD:** That's the problem.

**MIMI:** Well, I think that I can write, that I do write what can be called commercial songs. If you want to call them that, you could even call them "up-product". Whatever. It goes both ways. They're not direct and they're not protest songs per se, but they talk about the same feelings. In a rally or a meeting situation, I relate so much more to poetry.

There is a man named Dolce in Sicily, who is a speaker and a tremendous worker with the people of Sicily. He speaks in both ways, he speaks with facts and he speaks with poetry. And I find it so easy to be able to relate to him and understand and I wanted to follow that emotion. And so I think there is a place. There are not that many people writing songs that are that inspiring, but there certainly is a place for it and I'm bound and determined to do everything I can with it.

**TOM:** I think it really would be a shame if we lose the sing-a-longs and the things that motivate crowds. Being in jail, many times songs really pull the whole thing together. You can get through some pretty rough times. And they tend to disarm the adversary in a very gentle way, in a good way. Music is a powerful thing.

Mimi closes the interview with three songs, "The Big Party"—"about success and failure," "Lady Estelle"—a song about Marlene Dietrich during WWII, and "In the Quiet Morning,"—about Janis Joplin.

"In the quiet morning there was much despair  
And in the hours that followed, no one could repair  
That poor girl, barely here to tell her tale  
Rode in on a sea of disaster, rode out on a mainline rail."



photo by david gahr