

Phil Ochs: There but for Fortune

A film by Kenneth Bowser

98 minutes, Color and B/W, 2010
HDCAM, Stereo, 16:9



FIRST RUN FEATURES

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“There’s no place in this world where I’ll belong, when I’m gone, And I won’t know the right from the wrong, when I’m gone, And you won’t find me singin’ on this song, when I’m gone. So I guess I’ll have to do it while I’m here” – Phil Ochs

SYNOPSIS

As our country continues to embroil itself in foreign wars and once again pins its hopes on a new leader’s promise for change, the feature length documentary, Phil Ochs: There But For Fortune is a timely tribute to an unlikely American hero. Phil Ochs, a folk singing legend, who many called “the emotional heart of his generation,” loved his country and he pursued its honor, in song and action, with a ferocity that had no regard for consequences. Wielding only a battered guitar, a clear voice and a quiver of razor sharp songs, he tirelessly fought the “good fight” for peace and justice throughout his short life.

Phil Ochs rose to fame in the early 1960’s during the height of the folk and protest song movement. His songs, with lyrics ripped straight from the daily news, spoke to those emboldened by the hopeful idealism of the day. Ochs himself believed to his core that he and his music could change the world for the better. From protesting the Vietnam War to supporting striking miners, from his attacks on sitting Presidents to mocking the politically disinterested, he struck at the heart of both the Right and Left wing political establishment with precisely targeted musical satire and righteous indignation.

As prolific as he was passionate, Ochs released seven acclaimed albums and wrote hundreds of songs in his career. His songs became anthems for the anti-war movement and still beautifully reflect the pain and the possibilities of those turbulent times. “Phil Ochs: There But For Fortune” is buoyed by these anthems and melodies – from humorous to haunting – and throughout the film play the role of narrator, giving contextual depth to the unfolding saga of Ochs’ complex political and personal life.

Possessed by the American fantasy and dream he saw projected on the Hollywood screen, Phil Ochs fought for the bright lights of fame and for social justice in equal measure. In the end it was this defining contradiction that would eventually tear him apart. While he

never gained the widespread attention he so desperately wanted, his solo shows and his radical politics would generate the kind of controversy that only a true star could attract.

By 1968, the mood of the country had changed. With the death of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy and the events of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, all that seemed possible just a few years earlier began to fade and Phil Ochs took this hopelessness to heart as if the failings of the movement were his own. His mental and physical health declined as he sank deep into depression and alcoholism. He took his own life in 1976 at the age of 35.

By the time of his death the FBI had a dossier on him that was over 400 pages long. They would argue that he had no respect for government policies and stood against his country in a time of war. Weaving together photos, film clips, historic live performances and interviews with an array of people influenced by Ochs; from Sean Penn to Pete Seeger, Joan Baez to Tom Hayden, “Phil Ochs: There But For Fortune” paints a very different picture. We are able to understand that Ochs’ lasting legacy in both music and politics ultimately mirrored the complexities and contradictions of the country he loved -- and his life, sadly, reflects the arc of the times in which he lived.

“Phil Ochs: There But For Fortune” reveals the biography of a conflicted truth seeking troubadour who, with a guitar in hand, stood up for what he believed in and challenged us all to do the same. Unyielding in his political principals and unbending in his artistic vision, Phil Ochs, though branded a traitor by his critics, was above all a fiercely patriotic American. This is his story.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

Kenneth Bowser is a director of documentaries, feature films and episodic television and specializes in crafting stories about American culture. In addition to Phil Ochs, *There But For Fortune*, he is the writer, producer and director of NBC's Emmy nominated two hour network special, *Live From New York, The First Five Years of Saturday Night Live*, celebrating the 30th Anniversary of SNL. He also worked on the SNL network specials for the 80's and 90's and is currently creating the 2000's episode. His next project is a narrative feature based on Peter Biskind's bestseller *Down & Dirty Pictures*.

Bowser wrote and produced the Emmy nominated *John Ford/John Wayne, The Filmmaker and The Legend* for PBS's American Masters, which was an official selection of the 2006 Cannes Film Festival. His last feature documentary, *EasyRiders/Raging Bulls* (a Trio/BBC co-production), which he wrote, produced and directed was an official selection at the 2003 Cannes Film Festival. Bowser is the producer and director of the Emmy Award winning documentaries, *Preston Sturges: The Rise And Fall Of An American Dreamer* (American Masters;/PBS) and Frank Capra's *American Dream* (Columbia/TriStar Pictures).

Bowser has produced, directed and written for ABC News Productions and is also the writer, director and producer of the feature film, *In A Shallow Grave* (American Playhouse Theatrical Films). In addition, Bowser was the director and writer of *Hollywood, DC, A Tale of Two Cities* (Bravo).

BIOGRAPHY OF PHIL OCHS

Phil Ochs (1940-1976) was a singer/songwriter who was known for his sharp wit, political activism, sardonic humor, and haunting voice. His music touched on some of the most difficult issues of the era, raising important social and political questions that few dared to ask. His career and life mirrored the arc of the 1960's from the hopeful optimism of the early protest movement to the dark divisiveness at the end of that decade. Though he never achieved the same level of fame as his contemporary, Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs nevertheless was one of the most important artists to emerge from the folk movement. While the inherent tension between his two conflicting goals, as activist and as star, plagued him throughout his career, his music continues to inspire and resonate to this day.

He was born in El Paso, TX, in December, 1940 to Jacob Ochs, a doctor who was born in the U.S., and Gertrude Phin Ochs, who was born in Scotland. The Ochs family moved frequently; from Far Rockaway, New York, to Upstate New York, and then to Ohio. As a boy, Phil was obsessed with movies and would often escape to watch his hero, John Wayne, on the big screen. At the age of 15, at his mother's insistence, he took up another hobby - the clarinet - and began to nurture a natural musical talent.

From 1956 to 1958, Ochs was a student at the Staunton Military Academy in rural Virginia. Upon graduation he enrolled at Ohio State University to study journalism. He befriended Jim Glover, a fellow student who was a devotee of folk music and left-wing ideology. Through Glover, Ochs was introduced to the music of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and The Weavers. Quickly these two growing passions, music and politics, merged. When Phil bet Jim fifty dollars against his friend's guitar that Kennedy would beat Nixon, America acquired a new President, and Phil Ochs acquired the instrument through which he would finally find his voice.

Ochs and Glover soon began writing their own politically charged songs and formed a duet called "The Singing Socialists," later renamed "The Sundowners" (after a favorite film). The duo broke up before their first professional performance but Phil continued

playing on his own and started to gain a local following. In 1962, he moved to New York City where he quickly infiltrated the blossoming Greenwich Village folk music scene.

By 1963 Phil was becoming well known in folk music circles for his pointed lyrics and prescient political messages. (He was one of the first folk singers to write about the deepening conflict in Vietnam). He carried a book of news clippings wherever he went; and his passionate songs, ripped from the days headlines, set him apart as an unflinching chronicler of the times. He traveled the country headlining folk clubs and fighting for causes he believed in. He sang for striking miners and performed at civil rights demonstrations in the Deep South. While others described his music as “protest songs,” Ochs preferred the term “topical songs” – and approached the subject matter of war, civil rights and labor struggles with the optimism that his music could change the world.

In New York, he met and married Alice Skinner (with whom he had his only child, a daughter named Meegan). He was also acquiring new friends, including a young singer named Bob Dylan who became an amiable rival throughout his career. In 1964, he released his first album on Elektra Records; and within two years, he had enough success to play to a sold out crowd at Carnegie Hall. While his popularity and album sales were growing, so too was his political activism. He rarely turned down an invitation to perform at a rally no matter how big or small; and he aggressively challenged even his liberal supporters and musical contemporaries to get more involved. He was emboldened by the hopeful spirit of the era and romanticized himself, like John Wayne on his horse, both hero and star, riding to his country’s rescue.

In 1967, seeking more popular appeal as an artist, Ochs signed with A&M Records, and — now managed by his brother Michael— moved to California. Musically, he moved away from solo acoustic guitar performances and experimented with more ornate arrangements in the hopes of producing a pop-folk hybrid. His new sound was not well received by his fans, and the failure of his first release on the label left him disheartened.

He continued to perform tirelessly at anti-war rallies throughout the country; and in 1967 he organized two infamous rallies (in New York and Los Angeles) to declare, “The War Is Over.” It was a hopeful message and a last breath of optimism for the anti-war movement; but the mood in the country was beginning to shift and Ochs’ ever more radicalized and outspoken politics seemed to be keeping him from the widespread fame and acceptance he so desperately sought.

The events of 1968—the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, the police riot at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and the election of Richard Nixon—left Ochs feeling disillusioned. He took these events personally and felt that the American public was unaffected by both his music and the message of the political groups he supported. The hopelessness and confusion he sensed in the country perfectly matched up with his own career; and as the country seemed to slide into an abyss, Ochs began his own downward spiral - following in the genetic footsteps of his father who had battled depression throughout his life.

Ochs recorded his last studio album in 1970. Though the album consisted of all new songs, it was called “Greatest Hits” as an ironic nod to his waning popular appeal and his lack of career “hits.” He decided that to get his message across he needed to be “part Elvis Presley and part Che Guevara”. He commissioned a gold lamé suit from Elvis’ costumer which he wore on the cover of the album and throughout the accompanying tour. His fans didn’t know how to respond and at Carnegie Hall, he was greeted with boos and calls to “bring back Phil Ochs!”. He eventually won over the crowds but the tour took its toll. The album was a commercial failure and he began drinking more heavily than ever.

In August 1971, Phil went to Chile where Salvador Allende had just been democratically elected. There he met Chilean folksinger Victor Jara, an Allende supporter, and the two became fast friends. For a brief moment, Ochs’ belief of the power of the people and the people’s music to make a difference was re-ignited. In 1973, he traveled to Africa and even recorded a single in Kenya - “Bwatue”, sung in the local language of Swahili.

While traveling in Tanzania, Phil was mugged and strangled, resulting in the loss of the higher end of his vocal range. After returning from that trip, he sank deeper into a severe depression.

He tried to fight his way back but with short-lived success. He organized a benefit concert for the people of Chile and their fallen heroes, Salvador Allende and his friend Victor Jara (who were brutally murdered in the military coup). When the Vietnam War finally ended, he organized a rally and concert in Central Park. Over 100,000 people were there to celebrate, and Phil closed the concert with his song "The War Is Over." Rather than it being one of the happiest days of his life, it made him feel that what gave meaning to his life was somehow behind him.

His behavior became increasingly erratic. He frightened his friends by his drunken rants about the FBI and the CIA, and he took on an alternate identity, John Butler Train. He told people that Train had murdered Phil Ochs, and that he, John Train, had replaced him. His brother Michael tried to have him committed to a mental hospital but he resisted. At the end of 1975, a defeated Phil Ochs moved to his sister Sonny's house back in Far Rockaway. On April 9, 1976, at the age of 35, he took his own life.

Two biographies have been written about him, and his music continues to influence and inspire topical songwriters around the world. His songs have been covered by artists such as Pearl Jam, Joan Baez, Ani DiFranco, Billy Bragg, and They Might Be Giants.

His best-known songs include "I Ain't Marching Anymore", "Changes", "Crucifixion", "Draft Dodger Rag", "Love Me, I'm a Liberal", "Outside of a Small Circle of Friends", "Power and the Glory", "There But for Fortune", and "The War Is Over".

Entertainment WEEKLY

MUSIC MIX blog

'Phil Ochs: There But for Fortune,' a great documentary about an underappreciated folk singer

by Simon Vozick-Levinson



The story told by the new documentary *Phil Ochs: There But for Fortune* is a very sad one, no question about it. [Ochs](#) was one of the 1960s' greatest folk singers and activists to those in the know, but he never got as much fame as he desired or deserved. He died by his own hand in 1976, and as the film proceeds through his life's work, you know all along where it's heading.

Before reaching that inevitably tragic conclusion, filmmaker [Kenneth Bowser](#) (*Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*) does an admirable job of conveying why Ochs' music continues to mean so much to his fans. Friends and fellow radicals like Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, and Tom Hayden give illuminating interviews, as do latter-day admirers like Sean Penn, Billy Bragg, and Christopher Hitchens. They help explain exactly what made Ochs great — his unrelenting commitment to social justice, his genuine belief that songs could change the world, and of course his songs themselves. But you don't have to take their word for it. Bowser has unearthed who knows how many hours of unseen footage, including clips in which Ochs sings "[I Ain't Marching Anymore](#)," "[There But for Fortune](#)," "[Changes](#)," "[Crucifixion](#)," "[I'm Going To Say It Now](#)," and more. These alone make the film a must-see for fans like me.

Bowser doesn't shy away from Ochs' battles with mental illness and alcoholism. The film's honest depiction of Ochs' final years can be hard to watch; by the end of a press screening last night, I was tearing up. But I'm absolutely glad I saw this movie, and I think any fan would feel the same. It's an essential portrait of an artist who ought to be far better known.

Phil Ochs: There But for Fortune opens Jan. 5 in New York City. Any Ochs fans out there looking forward to seeing the film? Let us know in the comments.

FULL CREDITS

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Kai Shuman
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Stinger
Hank Walker
Stan Wayman

MUSIC

“Ballad Of William Worthy”

Performed by Phil Ochs

Words & Music by Phil Ochs

Published by Almo Music Corp. on behalf of Barricade Music, Inc.

Courtesy Elektra Entertainment Group

By Arrangement with Warner Music Group Film and TV Licensing

“Bound For Glory”

Performed by Phil Ochs

Words & Music by Phil Ochs

Published by Almo Music Corp. on behalf of Barricade Music, Inc.

Published by Appleseed Music, Inc. (ASCAP)

Administered by The Royalty Network, Inc

Courtesy Elektra Entertainment Group

By Arrangement with Warner Music Group Film and TV Licensing

“Bwatue”

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Words & Music by Phil Ochs

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“Draft Dodger Rag”

Performed by Phil Ochs

Words & Music by Phil Ochs

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“Flower Lady”

Performed by Phil Ochs

Words & Music by Phil Ochs

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“Here’s To The State of Mississippi/Richard Nixon” Performed by Phil Ochs

Words & Music by Phil Ochs

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Courtesy Of Warner/Chappell Music, Inc.

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“Jim Dean Of Indiana”

Performed by Phil Ochs

Words & Music by Phil Ochs

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“Love Me, I’m A Liberal”

Performed by Phil Ochs

Words & Music by Phil Ochs

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“Lou Marsh”

Performed by Phil Ochs

Words & Music by Phil Ochs

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“Blowin’ In The Wind”

Written by Robert (Bob) Dylan

Special Rider Music (SESAC)

“Boy In Ohio”

Performed by Phil Ochs

Words & Music by Phil Ochs

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“Chords Of Fame”

Performed by Phil Ochs

Words & Music by Phil Ochs

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“El Cigaretto”

Performed by Victor Jara

Words and Music by Victor Jara

Courtesy Victor Jara Estate

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"Hazard, Kentucky"

Performed by Phil Ochs

Words & Music by Phil Ochs

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“He Was a Friend of Mine”

Performed by Dave Van Ronk

Traditional, Arranged and Adapted by Dave Van Ronk and Eric von Schmidt

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“Links On The Chain”

Performed by Phil Ochs

Words & Music by Phil Ochs

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“Love Me, I’m A Liberal”

Performed by Jello Biafra & Mojo Nixon

Music by Phil Ochs

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“My Kingdom For A Car”

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“My Life”
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“No More Songs”
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Words & Music by Phil Ochs
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Courtesy Greenpeace
From “Amchitka, the 1970 concert that launched Greenpeace”

“On My Way”
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Words & Music by Phil Ochs
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“Ringin’ Of Revolution”
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“The Scorpion Departs But Never Returns”
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“Talking Vietnam”
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“That’s What I Want To Hear”
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Words & Music by Phil Ochs
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Published by Appleseed Music, Inc. (ASCAP)
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“No More Songs”
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Words & Music by Phil Ochs
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“One Way Ticket Home”
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“Outside Of A Small Circle Of Friends”
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“Rehearsals For Retirement”
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“Santo Domingo”
Performed by Phil Ochs
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“Talking Birmingham Jam”
Performed by Phil Ochs
Words & Music by Phil Ochs
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“That Was The President”
Performed by Phil Ochs
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“Tape From California”
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“Too Many Martyrs”
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Words & Music by Phil Ochs
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“We Seek no Wider War”
Performed by Phil Ochs
Words & Music by Phil Ochs
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Recorded for Broadside Magazine in Gordon Freisen and Sis
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“When In Rome”
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“William Butler Yeats Visits Lincoln Park And Escapes Unscathed”
Performed by Phil Ochs
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“The War Is Over”
Performed by Phil Ochs
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“What’s That I Hear”
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“White Boots Marching In A Yellow Land”
Performed by Phil Ochs
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