

Folk & Traditional Song Lyrics

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Ballad of the Unknown Soldier

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Come and Listen to a story I will tell
Of a young GI you will remember well.
He died in Vietnam in the Mekong Delta land,
He had sandals on his feet and a rifle in his hand.

Chorus:

I wonder what was his name?
I wonder from which town he came?
I wonder if his children understood the reason why
Of the way he had to fight and the way he had to die.

They say that December '65
Was the last time he was ever seen alive.
It was U.S. Army lies that caused him to decide
To leave his old top sergeant and fight on the other side.

Was he lonesome for his homeland far away?
Fighting with his new companions night and day?
In the base and jungle camps they tell about a man
Sharing hardships with his comrades fighting on the other side.

It was in the month of April '68,
In the Delta land he met a soldier's fate.
He fought to his last breath and he died a hero's death,
And he wore the black pajamas of the People's NLF.

Well it's now that poor soldier's dead and gone.
His comrades and his friends are fighting on.
And when the people win, of their heroes they will sing,
And his name will be remembered with the name of Ho Chi Minh.

The song is called "The Ballad of the Unknown Soldier." I don't know whether anyone other than Barbara Dane sang it in the U.S. back in those days. Barbara recorded it on Paredon's "What Now People?" Vol. 1. some time in the early seventies. (She first got the song from Peggy Seeger who sent it to her in 1969.) The author, Rod Shearman, is English. Shearman wrote it after seeing a brief item in the Manchester Guardian about an American GI, dressed in sandals and black pajamas, who was found dead behind "enemy" lines. (There had been a number of other stories in the New York Times and other places about GIs who "went over

to the other side" in Vietnam. One had to do with a team known as Salt and Pepper -- a Black GI and a white GI, and another soldier called Porkchop, who also fought alongside the Vietnamese. Jack Warshaw, an American draft resister who was living in England during the Vietnam War, shortened the original down to seven verses and sang it at least in the Singers' Club and probably other places too. (That's where I first heard it.) When Barbara recorded it she cut it down to five. I don't think it was ever printed anywhere, but you can probably get a copy of "What Now People?" Vol. 1 from Smithsonian-Folkways. Barbara and I donated the entire Paredon catalog to Smithsonian-Folkways about five years ago.

I remember B

point was. And then she would get them to sing along on the chorus of Ewan MacColl's "Ballad of Ho Chi Minh."

Very few people know the incredible story of how songs became a powerful medium through which antiwar GIs could vent their feelings about the Vietnam War. IS

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