

"THE FOXIEST GIRL IN THE WEST 3"



BORN IN 1919 AND RAISED ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF TUCSON, THE LEGENDARY KATIE LEE HAS SEEN THE SUPERFICIALITY OF HOLLYWOOD AS A FOLK SINGER, THE SANCTITY OF THE NATURAL WORLD AS A RIVER RUNNER, AND THE INSINCERITY OF BUREAUCRACY AS AN ACTIVIST FOR GLEN CANYON. HER WRITINGS AND MUSIC HAVE INSPIRED A GENERATION OF NATURALISTS WHO "WON'T TAKE NO BULL." MS. LEE'S INTERVIEW IS CONTINUED FROM LAST MONTH ...



INTERVIEW WITH KATIE LEE BY KYLE BOGGS

In a '96 interview I listened to from the Grand Canyon River Guide's Oral History Collection, one of the very last things Lewis Steiger asked you were about your thoughts on the future — to which you responded, "Forget it, you're doomed."

Did I say doomed? That's probably what I felt for sure ... doomed. What are my thoughts for the future? Future of what? Me or the world or what?

What do you think about our ability to transform our culture into a sane and sustainable one, with equal access to clean air, and clean water, and ...

(Laughing) Yeah, you're pretty doomed at this point, unless things turn around mighty damn fast. Last year at the film festival in Telluride, it was all about water. There were figures explaining that nearly half of the world's population does not currently have access to potable water that's clean enough to drink. The theme for this year is on food, and I said, you know, if you do not get off it and get onto population — this is one film festival that can deal with that. I mean, would somebody tell me how food and water are not connected to population?

I talk about this stuff all the time with my friends, my roommates — we've come to call it our "end-of-the-world roundtable discussions." The conversation always comes back to the issue of population. And it's the one thing completely excluded from mainstream discourse.

No, nobody wants to talk about it. We're

doomed unless we cut our population. That's what the bottom line is and nobody wants to pay any attention to the fact that we are the beasts that are overpopulating this planet and it won't hold that many more of us without killing us off like rats in a cage ... and I think that is a good idea. I'd like to see about half of us gone. And that's all right for me to say because I've had a great wonderful life and I don't care if I go tomorrow.

I wanted to ask you about your music career. How and when did you first learn to play the guitar?

I used to sing a lot with my buddies in riverbeds when we'd go hunting when we'd camp. Someone else always played the guitar and so it never entered my mind, really. But when one of my buddies, George went off to war, he left his guitar with me. I had played the ukulele down in Manhattan Beach where I used to spend summers. I thought, well if I can play the ukulele, I guess I can play the guitar, so I started learning.

I wasn't very interested in it because it was a steel stringed guitar and I kept taking the bass strings off, turning it into a ukulele. George found that out one day and he took my ukulele and slammed it over my head. He sat me down and made me learn C, D, and E. I played those chords for two or three hours until my fingers were bleeding and that's when I really learned to play it (laughing).

And then I went to Mexico and got interested in the rhythms and how the strokes were done. And I lived in Mexico for about 6 months, traveling through the country — that was in the 40s. Suddenly when I came back, I was really into it.

I happened to get a hold of, and I don't remember how, some **Burl Ives** records and I began to play along with them. And I didn't realize, of course they were folk songs, I knew that. But for some reason, I never put cowboy songs into that category. It never entered my mind. I had heard cowboy songs all my life and I thought they were the corniest things in the world because I was singing pop music. You couldn't have paid me to sing cowboy music. (laughing).

In Hollywood I practiced and played guitar and sang folk songs on the set when I worked on pictures. Word got around and I got three big jobs on NBC singing folk songs with Gordon McCray on *The Railroad Hour* and with Ronald Coleman and Benita Coleman on their show, *The Halls of Ivy*. And all of these featured me singing folksongs.

Was this before you met Burl?

I met Burl during the last couple years I was in Hollywood. He would come and go, doing pictures and radio shows. When I finally did get to know him, he's the one that sat me down and said, "You gotta get outta here. These people don't understand what's going on with you." And that was when the coffee house circuits were big. There was the **Hungry Eye** in San Francisco and the **Blue Angel** in New York — you know, folk clubs were popping up all over the country. And so I just took my guitar in 1954 and I left. The other reason why I left was because

I decided I didn't want to spend the rest of my days in Hollywood, in the theater, in movies, or anywhere else like that.

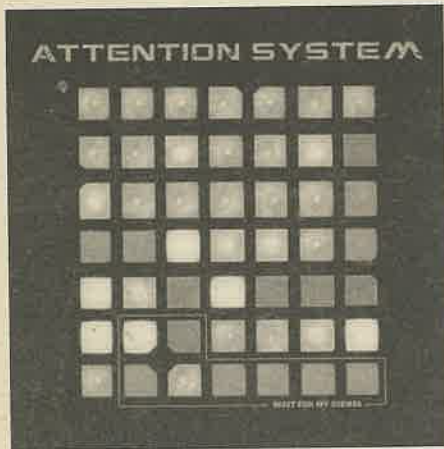
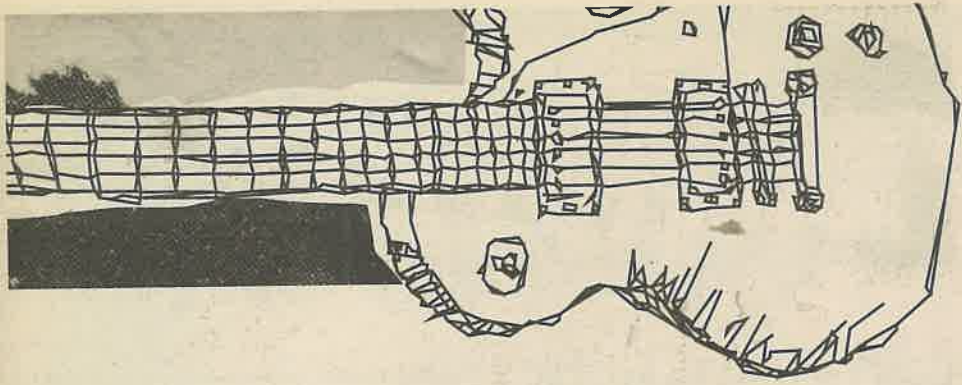
You just decided it wasn't for you?

It wasn't for me because by that time, in '53, was the first time I hit the river. And the river just said "get the hell out of there, (laughing) and get back, you know, to your roots." And I did just that. And I traveled for 10 years all over the country; even before **The Weavers** and other big ones became known. I was still a fringe performer. I dressed too fancily; I had too many years in the theater. I wasn't going to look like a floozy, a dirty-sandaled folk singer. And so, they couldn't put me in a box and label me — and so I never, you know, became "famous," but I worked constantly and that's how I made my living for 15 years.

Can you tell me how important was Burl Ives to your career as a musician and mentor?

I certainly can because, in the first place, I didn't know what a folk song was until I listened to his records. I just heard them and I loved the voice and I loved the message that each one of them had. You know, they were just great little songs with a story. The music really didn't matter a whole hell of a lot; it was the words that mattered most. And that's really what folk music is all about.

Somebody gets an interest in what's going on or they want to write a song or tell a story to their kids. And so they write little rhymes and put it to music. So when Burl came out with those albums, I thought, "Oh, these are lovely." And I learned many of them and played my guitar while listening. I just got better and better at both things, singing them and playing them.



these guys are adding more clutter to an already thrashed room. Electronic dance rock we'll call it. Not that there's no creativity on display here or the lyrics are the worst thing ever. They're better than James Murphy's, anyway. Some of it's even catchy as hell. But that almost makes it worse. I've now heard Atlanta's Faint. Now what?



**I.H.Y.W.Y.P
DEMO 6
SELF-RELEASED**

The long-awaited sequel to Demos 1-5 makes its way out of the box and in Phil Buckman's time off, he's ... well, if you liked Demos 1-5, you'll probably like this. This one's more lo-fi, if that's possible, there's more vocal tracks per track and, yeah, I think the magic is still there, even if it's not totally apparent on the first run through. The album, err, demo, starts with an obnoxious long fractured monologue by cover artist and local spiritual advisor and occasional Macy's employee, Pedro Dia. After you listen to it once, even if you laugh several times like I did, you'll probably skip it every time. The vocals are kind of f*cked on "Don't Get In My Way Cause I'm Goin to College" which I think used to be called "Get Out of My Way Cause I'm Goin to College" followed by "Friends and Lovers" an *acapella* track on which the vocals are exquisite in a nice kind of way, pondering the nature of a seeming Flagstaff standard — the "very fine line between" like, love and hate. Phil has the audacity to suggest a more porous line between the more positive two, leading to ideally, less of the last one, not unlike Foucault's "Friendship as a Way of Life." Yep, I just referenced Foucault.

Meanwhile "Orpheus and His Windfish" is easily Phil's weirdest and most annoying track of all time. Followed by "Cassidy" one of Phil's all time best. It's that uneven

I-Don't-Give-A-F*ck-ness coupled with a seemingly effortless songwriting ability that made IHWYP a wild internet phenomenon a handful or so years ago. The problem here is Phil's wickedly inappropriate sense of humor is a bit buried in obtuse references.

So, oh, I don't know. This one has more obnoxious weirdos than hits but if enter "The Sordid History of Buildings" doesn't butter your biscuit with its heavy synth bassline and Phil's massive vocal range on full display while satirizing the ludicrous logic of, uh, private property laws, I guess, well, I'm sure the new Black Eyed Peas record is pretty good too. Or something.

**LOST IN THE TREES
ALL ALONE IN AN EMPTY HOUSE
ANTI-**

The best thing about this is the production. It's tasteful, big and glorious all around. An out and out orchestra



out of Chapel Hill, North Carolina and I can't recommend this enough to anyone that likes their classical with a little down home country folk.

Songwriter Ari Picker looks a little bit like a cross between Simon and Garfunkel and that's maybe where I'd place his voice. So it's that voice over symphony arrangements that segue into folk jams back into something sort of post-something.

This one has been the hardest to write. I listen to this record over and over, and I can't think of a thing to say about it. Impressive to the very tops of its branches, (is he lost in the trees, or alone in an empty house?) it just doesn't make me swoon, like I thought it would over repeated listens. It's just kind of ... there.

Beautiful, sure, breathtaking even, and I use the word again, *tasteful* — they could play the Monte V or the Coconino Center for the Arts and do just as well, (and I'd probably go to either) but this record, man, it's a hard nut to crack.

**JIMMY GNECCO
THE HEART
BRIGHT ANTENNA**

Jimmy Gnecco looks like Perry Ferrell and sings like Thom Yorke. His day job is singing for a band called **Ours**. There's a big anti-war vibe going on here, and that's the best I can say for it. Heavy downer vibes. Title track, "the Heart" is the first track to be even a little upbeat and then it goes back to trudging mid-tempo for "Bring You Home" and by track 6, "These Are My Hands," I'm beyond bored from the monotony. And there's only

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UNDER the



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were tearing it to pieces without asking anyone what they thought about it. So I just went at them the best I knew how.

I figured, I'm not a politician. I'm not into politics, but you know, people listen to a song before they're going to listen to words and especially my words 'cause I get so mad, I start telling everybody off. That's why Ed Abbey used to say, "Katie, shut up and sing."

So I just sat down and I tried to make the song humorous as well because people listen to a story before they listen to any argument. And if that story, you know, has an argument with it, sometimes they don't even know it. You can sneak it by.

What is a "hootenanny?"

What's a "hootenanny?" Oh my goodness, sonny! Jesus! A hootenanny is where all the folksingers got together at a party, at a picnic, whatever, and traded songs, sang all night long, drank a lot of beer if they felt like it or whatever. I don't remember people being drunk, I just remember music being the thing that was most important. That's where I learned a lot of my songs for god's sake, songs I'd never heard before. I'd learn them from another folk singer. I mean, they didn't come out of a book. That's where I met **Woody Guthrie**. I sang a lot of his songs after I knew him. That's what a hootenanny is.

Well, they were all over the place. Sickle Houston would come up and say, "there's a hoot up in Laurel Canyon tonight, y'all should go on up." Part of the Easy Rider group — some of them — like Pete Seeger were said to belong to the Communist Party and all that horsesh*t, but these people were primarily interested in the music. These were peaceful people. They were writing political songs. They didn't want war. What a big sin that is! You must love war, or it seemed you're a Communist.

Anyway, I would go to these hootenannies. And like I said, that's where I learned a lot of my music. And then I heard that my friends were being called up on the carpet, you know, Josh, Ted — and Burl said watch out for those people. I thought, "What the hell, you know?" I didn't write political songs.

You mean the FBI contacted them?

Yeah. Josh had even been called up. That was the McCarthy era. That McCarthy had made everybody paranoid. The government was just certain that we were all spies. Anybody who sang folk songs, he had it figured out we were Communists.

It was because of what they were singing about. If you sang about peace that means you're anti-American?

Yeah. It got that bad. I guess, but I wasn't


singing political songs at the time and I wanted them to know that. So I called the FBI up and told them. I said, "Look, I go up there to hootenannies to learn my music. That's where I get a lot of my songs." When they called me back asking me to inform them about who was planning on going to the next hoot, I told them, "Up yours buddy, I'm not an informer." I called before to let them know I'm not politically oriented. I was there to make a living in this town singing and acting ...

Did that play a role in your change to more politically conscious lyrics?

Not really, not until the river. This was all two or three years before the river. At the time, to be honest, political songs kinda bored me. I was so apolitical; I didn't go to hoots to learn that kinda song. I went and learned, you know, "Froggie went a courtin'"; he did ride *mmmmmm*."

What does writing and singing music do for you?

I can tell you what it does for me now, but it's not too pretty. If I wake up and sing two words that are in a song, that song is with me the *whole* day. And I cannot get it out of my head. And I realize, because I've talked to my musician friends, that that happens to all of us when we get older. We've spent our lives memorizing these songs and they will not go away. They're engraved on our brain and they stay there. All day long I can hear it, like a broken record, over and over and over again. That's the bad part of it.

I never considered myself a good lyricist, unless I was pissed and had something really important to say. Then it comes out much easier. If I sit down and just try to write a song ... eh? (*shrugs*) ... you know, about what? I can't do that. There has to be a pull, a reason behind it. The river just did it for me. I had something definitely that I wanted to put out there, to explain to people what a gorgeous place this was and what was happening to it and, maybe they would listen and not let it happen to some place that they cared for. 

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