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Simon and Garfunkel: Folk Revivalists

Thrust together by inexplicable chance, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel joined forces in the cluttered confines of a Queens' elementary school in 1953.¹ By middle school, the duo were writing and performing original music for Big Records under the name "Tom and Jerry," and by college they were signed with Tom Wilson-- a legendary producer most often credited with Bob Dylan's rock success --to Columbia Records as "Simon and Garfunkel." While touring various East Coast folk clubs, the pair wrote a song called "The Sound of Silence." The song flopped.² Simon, disappointed, fled to England to pursue a solo career and just like that, the soon-to-be-folk-rock legends ditched each other, convinced they had no future together. Oh, how wrong they were...

On one fateful night in 1965, a late-night DJ at WBZ-FM in Boston played "The Sound of Silence," where it experienced a small new wave of intrigue from the collegiate community. By the end of the week, stations all up and down the East coast were playing it. Encouraged by this new found interest, Wilson remixed the original acoustic song with a drum line and an electric guitar and re-released it. Within days "The Sound of Silence" was topping charts, propelling "Simon and Garfunkel" into unimaginable mainstream success. Simon didn't even know the song came out until he got a wire from Columbia Records that he had a song in the Top 10 and that he "better hurry back."³ Suddenly--as if overnight--the public wanted more Simon and Garfunkel. Simon flew back from England and as they say: the rest is history.⁴ While Simon and Garfunkel embodied elements of many different genres--most notably pop, rock, folk and latin--they were ultimately most instrumental in the eventual prominence and ideological impact of folk music. As we will see, the media portrayed them as pop music artists, but from a twenty-first century vantage point their music brought to life the fundamental principles of folk in a modern and new style, culminating in what is now known as the Folk Revival.

Simon and Garfunkel grew out of folk. Their angelic harmonies perpetuated the communal pillars that were the foundation of early folk music dating back to Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. In songs like "Baby Driver" and "The Boxer," you can clearly hear the early 20th century finger-picking influence of songs like "Tear The Fascists Down" and "Big Iron" by Woody Guthrie and Marty Robbins, respectively. No doubt, whether intentional or unintentional, these folk legends played a role in shaping Simon and Garfunkel's sound. As they toured, S&G drew big crowds and were "able to communicate with audiences on a personal basis,"⁵ a uniquely folk characteristic. While Blues, Rock and Country embodied certain "personal" elements, they were less applicable to the public: more personal to the artist and his or her own struggle, than to the

¹ Scoopa, Bud. "Biography." *The Official Simon & Garfunkel Site*, www.simonandgarfunkel.com/biography/.

² Johnson, P. (1967, Jul 24). Snap, crackle, pop world of simon and garfunkel: SIMON AND GARFUNKEL. *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*

³ [Ibid.]

⁴ [Ibid.]

⁵ Picone, Linda. Daily Illini Newspaper, page 6, October 31, 1967.

audience as a whole. As Linda Picone of the Daily Illini commented from a show in 1967, Simon and Garfunkel riddled their set with “talk of alienation and the separateness of people” yet made the experience “intimate and deeply personal.”⁶ Their music spoke to the general public, but most specifically to the lonely, ostracized youth of the 1960’s. Thematically their music talked of war, drugs, politics and social unrest in an accessible and comforting manner. Their music wasn’t just a casual representation of their own experience, but a deeply nuanced social commentary. If folk music is the “music of the people,” then Simon and Garfunkel embodied folk of the highest order, even if they evolved into a more experimental duo later in their careers.

From their very inception, Simon and Garfunkel fought a media perception of contrived pop, which is arguably fair given their start.⁷ When they originally came out with “The Sound of Silence” it met with little general reception. Inspired by The Byrds and their folk-rock style in addition to previous experience doing the same thing for Bob Dylan, Tom Wilson remixed the song with a drum line and an electric guitar capitalizing on the growing niche of electricity in folk. When “The Sound of Silence” became a hit, Columbia Records flew Simon back to New York from England and forced the duo to rush release an album by the same name, which essentially recycled Paul’s solo work and included four new S&G songs including another huge hit, “I Am A Rock.” While the album was wildly profitable, critics felt it was a product of the industry and rightfully so. It was rough. And it was derived far more from the general zeitgeist of the emerging popular music (which was the growing interest of electric instrumentation in folk music), than the inherent brainchild of the two folk legends.⁸ It wasn’t until their second album “Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme” that the duo were given the creative freedom they so desperately desired. As seen in various newspaper articles by the Los Angeles Times, S&G were relentlessly categorized as pop,⁹ which can be attributed to the simple fact that Simon and Garfunkel were literally “popular.” It’s impossible to deny the mainstream success of Simon and Garfunkel and, while their harmonic style is inarguably folksy, their chart-topping hits were not marketed exclusively towards the Eastern rural coast, an undeniable straying from the traditional trends of old folk music.¹⁰ It should be argued--however-- that it was less a straying from convention and more of a natural evolution away from antiquated tropes. Music was becoming increasingly more accessible and it was inevitable that the niche demographics of folk, country, rock, and blues would find mainstream success in unlikely markets. Genres were becoming increasingly more fluid and while S&G didn’t exclusively appeal to the same demographic as traditional folk (rural, working-class East coasters), their music transcended those archaic boundaries, appealing to a wide variety of demographics instead.

Perhaps the pop music sentiment from critics originated from Paul Simon himself, who admitted in an interview with the LA Times in 1983 that the “Simon and Garfunkel” catalog was benign:

⁶ Picone, Linda. Daily Illini Newspaper, Page 6, October 31, 1967.

⁷ Johnson, P. (1967, Jul 24). Snap, crackle, pop world of simon and garfunkel: SIMON AND GARFUNKEL. *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*

⁸ Scoopa, Bud. “Biography.” *The Official Simon & Garfunkel Site*, www.simonandgarfunkel.com/biography/.

⁹ Johnson, P. (1967, Jul 24). Snap, crackle, pop world of simon and garfunkel: SIMON AND GARFUNKEL. *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*

¹⁰ The Sunflower, Tuesday, November 4, 1969

<https://roboud56.wordpress.com/the-60s/reviews-news-around-1966-1969-concerts/>

“Benign sounds like a negative word. I don’t mean it like that. I don’t mean bland. I mean good-hearted, warm, caressing. I think in a way it was a comforting music. I feel we live in brutalizing times and any time you come across a public figure or figures that represent the opposite, they become very important.”¹¹

Simon and Garfunkel served as an antithesis to their folk counterparts in Greenwich Village in the 1960’s and may be one of the biggest reasons their commonly referred to as pop. Greenwich Village folk was uncomfortable, frequently associated with the Civil Rights Movement, police brutality, and Communism. Simon and Garfunkel represented the clean and sterile folk of a peaceful utopia, not the catalyst for a civil revolution. Retroactively, it’s thought that S&G were a gateway to the Greenwich Village folk scene, offering youth a palatable starting point for their future musical exploration, while never actually being a part of it.¹² Simon and Garfunkel signaled the evolution of folk from old, rural roots to the clenched fists of the general urban youth. S&G didn’t negate folk, but simply modernized it.

Old folk appealed to the rural working class. “Simon and Garfunkel” appealed to the working class in general, both rural and urban, which furthers this notion of the Folk Revival and the broadening appeal folk music had in the 60’s. Their mainstream success shouldn’t homogenize them as pop music, but rather stand as a testament to the incredible talent, eloquence and ingenuity they possessed in writing, producing and performing folk music. Their popularity shouldn’t make them “pop music.” Their popularity should cement them in history as venerated folk icons.

¹¹ Hilburn, R. (1983, Jul 17). POP MUSIC: OLD FRIENDS PAUL, ART ARE AT IT AGAIN SIMON AND GARFUNKEL SIMON, GARFUNKEL ARE AT IT AGAIN. *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995)

¹² Deusner, Stephen M. “Simon & Garfunkel: Live 1969.” *Pitchfork*, Pitchfork, 31 Mar. 2008, pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/11325-live-1969/.

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