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## TWICE THE FOLK ENSEMBLE REVUES KEEP MUSICIANS, FANS BUSY

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If you are a singer-songwriter in Boston, there's good news and bad news. The good news is that you are working in what is widely regarded as the largest and most influential folk scene in the country, with more venues, radio airplay, and media attention for this kind of music than anywhere else.

The bad news is there are also more singer-songwriters, a lot more, all clamoring to be heard, to get onstage, score record deals, and build careers. It can be difficult for even the most promising talents to simply stay busy, much less become stars. Two of Boston's best and most adventurous songwriters - Faith Soloway and Alastair Moock - have found exciting ways to stay busy with separate projects aimed at bringing folksters together for some ensemble fun and at addressing some dark spots they see amid the bright lights of the Boston folk scene.

Soloway cut her teeth in the Chicago theater scene, where she and her sister Jill created a cultishly popular cabaret musical called "The Real Live Brady Bunch." She has mounted similar satires at Club Passim over the last few years, the most ambitious of which, "Miss Folk America," has grown so popular it will be held at the Somerville Theatre tomorrow.

Soloway described the folk musical as "the Boston folk scene meets 'South Park' meets a beauty pageant." In a smart, madcap blend of skits, songs, and video clips, she and local folk stars Catie Curtis, Jennifer Kimball, Kris Delmhorst, Mary Gauthier, and Megan Toohey compete for a mythical Miss Folk America title.

"The beauty pageant is a structure to satirize the notion of superstardom in folk, and what it is to try to achieve the ultimate dream of celebrity folkdom," she said. "I'm satirizing that here is this folk community people feel they belong to, and yet there is a strong competitive element within that. I'm lucky to have these women involved who realize the traps of the songwriter game and who are willing to take some risks parodying their own images and using this format to exorcize some of the demons they see as part of the scene."

Moock has earned his own cultish following by eschewing the dominant urban folk-pop sound for a rootsier, more Woody-Guthrie-esque style. On Dec. 14 at Club Passim, he launches the first of an ongoing series of ensemble shows, called "Pastures of Plenty," named for a Guthrie song and aimed at injecting some traditional music into the local songwriter scene.

"I want to bring the roots of folk music back into focus a little bit," he said, "because for so many of us, the history only seems to go back to James Taylor. The songwriting push in Boston has been toward a very introspective, personal style, and there's nothing wrong with that - I have plenty of songs like that myself."

"But when I go to a performance and that's all there is, I get really bored. You can only sit and receive that kind of information for so long if it's not mixed with anything you can participate in or feel a part of. With 'Pastures of Plenty,' I hope there won't be such a barrier between the people onstage and the people in the audience."

The Passim lineup includes Moock, Laurie Geltman, Les Sampou, Laura Risk, Sean Staples, Eric Royer, Tim Kelly, and Rob Laurens. Each artist is being asked to offer a song or two that fits their notion of American roots music.

"If you only sing original songs, you cut down the possibilities of other people participating in any ways other than just listening," he said. "In a lot of folk performances I see today, it feels like the show would be the same whether there was an audience there or not."

"But whenever I do concerts where I bring other people onstage, there's a different kind of energy. Audiences really seem to crave it - and so do performers. Something special happens when people are sharing something onstage and also sharing it with an audience. You can see it in the way the audience watches, the way their eyes light up when they feel like they're part of what's going on."

After all the broad fun and barbed satire of selecting a new Miss Folk America, Soloway will end her role in the pageant with a dark lullaby written for a folk community she fears is becoming too vain about its own star-making importance, and performers too enchanted by their own ambitions, to remember why they fell in love with folk music in the first place: "Lay your head down tonight in the bosom of artificial light/ You have climbed to a high fictitious height/ Where none of your dreams come true."

"That song came from trying to figure out what all this meant for me," she said. "I think the songs came first for all of us, these songs that just had to come out and that we had to share. But then other things enter in, the competition, the marketing. I think the biggest truth we all have to admit is that, in order to do this, there is competition. Doing these kinds of special shows is a way for me to make sure that the song and who I am always stays more important than the game."