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## YOUNG MAN HAS THE VOICE OF AN OLD-TIME FOLKSINGER

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SOMERVILLE -- The first thing you notice is the voice. It sounds older than the still-boyish face from which it comes, a weathered, whiskey voice full of fine gravel, smoke, and soft leather. It is the kind of voice you want to believe is telling you the truth, and when it sounds, all eyes in the back room of Davis Square's Burren Pub lock on 25-year-old songwriter Alastair Moock. Asked how his voice got so much older than he did, he laughs hoarsely. "When I was a kid, my parents thought there was something wrong," he says. "They took me to a throat doctor, who put tubes down there to see if I had some kind of growth or something. It was always raspy; my friends used to call me Froggy."

But it is the songs as much as the singer that are turning Moock's regular Wednesday night Burren gigs into one of the hippest hootenannies in town. He is a far cry from the confessional, introspective songwriter so often seen on folk stages these days. His songs are cut from the rugged, homespun cloth of such classic American troubadours as Woody Guthrie, Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter, and Pete Seeger. The melodies are rootsy and spacious, with an amiable, strutting groove and smart, sassy lyrics that always seek to tell the listener's story along with his own. He does not write "me" songs; he writes "we" songs. He is aware that this sets him apart from the modern songwriter template, which is just fine with him.

"I have a complicated relationship with contemporary folk music," he says, "because I feel like it's become a very different thing from the music I grew up hearing, which was Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez. At the coffeehouses these days, there's lots of people playing folk music who I feel are very careful. And I find that at odds with what the tradition of folk music is about, which is real rebelliousness, saying what you think. One of the things that drew me to Guthrie was that he really sang what was on his mind, whether it was a political song or love song. He wasn't timid; he laid it all out there."

Moock is anything but timid. His best songs compare favorably to Guthrie's fiercely populist anthems, in their iconoclasm if not their radicalism. In "Me and My Friend," he rattles off a long, sarcastic list of things others might expect him to be ("Don't want to starve in protest like Mahatma Gandhi/or wear black leather jackets like, hey, Fonzie"). The theme is refreshingly blunt: Whatever you want us to be, we are not. Whether you seek to hustle us, market us, enlist us, or convert us, we refuse to be anything you expect us to be.

Moock's growing legion of fans feel he is speaking for them in such songs. At a break at a recent Wednesday show, one table of fans (Moockheads? Moockies? Generation Moock -sters?) parrots his catch phrases to each other, mimicking his drawling style: "What if love came too soon," "I'm walkin' to the eeeend of the woooooord." In between, they whooped and high-fived across the table, sure signs of a cult in the making.

Moock loves the idea that others feel a sense of ownership about his songs. To him, seeking that common chord is folk music at its best. To the extent that may cut him out of the herd of myopic modern songwriters, he is very pleased.

"I guess I feel some songwriters today don't earn their audience," he says. "If you just jump in and start talking about how you feel inside, and immediately you're into your deepest feelings, it's like, what have you done to draw your audience into that? Why is anyone supposed to be interested? That's why I like to write songs with choruses; that's sort of where I turn the song over to them and say, here, this is yours, too. It's a way of drawing the audience in, like humor is. And once you've drawn them in, then it earns you the right to lay it right out there and tell them what you think."