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**Beginning of an Era**

Alastair Moock, a man who brought old folk music to Boston, sets out for new pastures.

by Danielle Dreilinger

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Alastair Moock

Seven years ago, Alastair Moock arrived in Boston with a dream in his head. He was in for a rude surprise. *This* was folk music? Whatever happened to hoboes, farmers' uprisings, righteous outlaws, and the music that accompanied them? This crowd thought folk music began with James Taylor. They were competitive: they gossiped during open mics, waiting for the chance to perform their own songs. Audiences listened passively. Contrast this to bluegrass festivals, where there's as much music in the parking lot as there is on stage.

With Alastair Moock, folk music skipped a generation.

"I come to folk music from a different place. What stuck in my craw [growing up] was not primarily the music... [it was] feeling in the audience like we were part of a shared experience."

Some people are folksingers. Moock is a one-man music organizing campaign. His mission is to bring the old stories and camaraderie of traditional folk and bluegrass music back into the singer-songwriter scene.

"For a long time, people have been lamenting that singer-songwriters and traditional music are miles apart," said [Mark Erelli](#), a musician whose latest album, "The Memorial Hall Recordings," takes a page from Moock's songbook. "He is the link between those two camps."

You hear the difference immediately, in his raspy, Dust Bowl voice. He sounds like America, back when hard times made people feel united. Moock rarely takes the stage alone, and he never leads a concert without a sing-along. "Sing *Ugly*," he growls.

The audience responds. "The audience craves the opportunity to be involved. I feel it -- I feel audiences craving the need to participate."

For Moock, the qualities of old music *create* the community. "It's at least as determined by what you play as who's playing it. It's not coincidental that this music leads itself to community involvement." Why? Because it's simple. Even if you don't know the songs, they're repetitive. Anyone can pick them up. Erelli praises Moock's touch with "the simple song that anyone can sing."

In this case, simple isn't boring. Moock keeps the soul but deletes the ego. As one listener said, "He goes back to the days when there were *songs*." The focus is on the music, not the personality.

And he can kick it up. Witness "Nothing in This World", a raucous Monday-night song party captured in the recording studio on his latest album, ["A Life I Never Had."](#)

What Moock finds boring is music that's simply personal expression, sung alone on a stage. He was struck by the *context* of the old tunes. "It was revolutionary protest music with a purpose." Moock tells stories about the universal personal -- his own life and the lives he hasn't had.

He rejects the romantic myth that true art is created out of nothing. "I don't understand songwriters who want to have nothing to do with traditional music. It's dishonest, because we're all heavily influenced by other musicians. Nothing is completely original. You need to know your roots, your history, before you can create something new." He points out that Dylan's first album was mostly covers. The great traditionalists were also the great innovators. "It was always backward-looking and forward-looking at the same time."

He's even meditated bringing back the 1930s in a more concrete way: unionizing folk musicians.

At a recent show at Cambridge's [Club Passim](#) to promote the [Newport Folk Festival](#), Moock sang what he preaches. New songs and old had simple melodies and repeated refrains. They borrowed from blues, swing, and W. Guthrie, including a cover of "Hard Travelin'."

Moock rejects the performer mystique in ways small as well as large. He's one of the few young musicians who talks openly about being married, rather than cultivating a romantic aura. He listens intently when other musicians play, with a furrowed brow and almost religious concentration.

His original songs are balanced: bemused, but ultimately optimistic. It's a little surprising from someone who appreciates folk as protest music. He can be sarcastic, but never ironic. The difference is social commitment. Moock embraces reality as we know it, as in this meditation on ambition and following your dream:

*"Thank you, thank you, Lord, for this life you've given me.  
I wouldn't call it perfect, but it's not all misery.  
And even if it was, well, it wouldn't be that bad--  
At least I'll never look back on the life I never had."*

But Moock is a modern throwback: After seven years building community in Boston, he's heading out for Iowa. Yet, not all is lost. There's the man himself, and there's what he creates around him. His ["Pastures of Plenty"](#) group concerts have sparked an interest in collaboration. It seems that more of the hot songwriters play with each other, not against each other. They cover other people's tunes, write songs together, credit their influences, and bring jam sessions to the stage. Both the new music and the old are stronger for the cross-fertilization. These singers don't pretend that they're going it alone. It must have always been true, but now they can admit it.

Since 9/11, Moock hears hunger, the kind of hunger for "whatever Woody Guthrie was offering -- communal experience, substantive music." In this era, Moock's rough voice and easy songs are comforting. Listening to or singing along with Alastair Moock is like falling asleep in the back seat of your parents' car, going home.