

## Decades of Harmony

by Joe Kernan

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KINGSTON TRIO

Back in 1957, Bob Shane had no idea that he and two of his buddies would become one of the most successful recording artists in the history of popular music as the Kingston Trio.

"It was the chicks," he said the other day, from his home in Phoenix. "We were just a bunch of guys who wanted to be entertainers."

Shane is the only surviving member of the original Kingston Trio and, although he won't be at the new trio's performance at Veterans Auditorium in Providence on March 25, he still controls the name and image of the group. George Grove, who has been playing with the group for 35 years, will provide the stage presence.

Shane grew up in Hawaii and expected to follow his father into the family's sporting goods business. He and his friend Dave Guard learned to play the guitar together and went to college in California where he and Guard hooked up with Nick Reynolds to play at

fraternity parties, college hangouts and other minor gigs. When Shane graduated from Menlo College, he went back to Hawaii and the sporting goods business. Reynolds and Guard continued to play an eclectic selection of calypso, folk and foreign songs but decided that they needed Shane's collaboration to become a professional, moneymaking entertainment act.

"Then they called me and I said, 'O.K., I'll do it.'"

With a savvy manager and lots of rehearsal, the trio began to play coffee shops and nightclubs in the San Francisco area and was actually making a living as entertainers.

"We never saw ourselves as folk singers," said Shane. "If anything, we actually considered ourselves more a calypso group, but Capitol Records looked at our instruments and said we were folksingers."

Their first album featured a song called "Tom Dooley," a story of a murdered girl and the execution of her killer that occurred back in 1866. As unlikely as it seems, people really liked the tragic tale and it became a huge hit.

"There was this disc jockey, in Salt Lake City, of all places, who really loved the song and played it often and then called his friends around the country and they played it," said Shane.

Capitol then decided that it would release "Tom Dooley" as a single and it topped the charts.

"We were playing a hotel in Hawaii when we got a call from Capitol telling us it was number one on the charts and you guys better get back here," said Shane.

That was just the beginning. At one point, The Kingston Trio had four albums on the Billboard Top 10. No other musical group, not even the Beatles, has been able to match that

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accomplishment. Other songs performed by the group, like "Scotch and Soda," "Where Have All the Flowers Gone," and "Seasons in the Sun" introduced American audiences to something very different from the over-produced, lushly orchestrated music of the 1950s. Regardless of what the Trio saw themselves as, they were responsible for launching the folk music boom from 1958 to 1961. The folk music establishment didn't take kindly to them, though, and accused them of distorting and commercializing the genre. In retrospect, the earlier criticism of the acoustic left seems quaint. They were criticizing an apple for not being an orange. Shane sees the irony in all that, but he doesn't gloat.

"If you look at the songs that we did over those years, you can see that we were not really folksingers, even if we did play guitars and bongos," said Shane. "We wanted to entertain people."

Regardless of their intentions, or even despite their intentions, The Kingston Trio's influence on the development of American popular music has been considerable. According to music critic Bruce Eder, writing for the Internet AllMusic Guide:

"In the history of popular music, there are a relative handful of performers who have redefined the content of the music at critical points in history – people whose music left the landscape, and definition of popular music, altered completely. The Kingston Trio were one such group, transforming folk music into a hot commodity and creating a demand – where none had existed before – for young men (sometimes with women) strumming acoustic guitars and banjos and singing folk songs and folk-like novelty songs in harmony. On a purely commercial level, from 1957 until 1963, the Kingston Trio were the most vital and popular folk group in the world, and folk music was sufficiently popular as to make that a significant statement."

The world of music has been much kinder than those early critics and the recognition of the trio's real value as been near universal. Their first Grammy Award was in 1959 for Best Country and Western Recording (They had no folk category at the time) for "Tom Dooley." In 1960, it was for Best Ethnic or Traditional Folk Recording. "Tom Dooley," the recording, got the Grammy Hall of Fame Award in 1998 and the group got a Lifetime Achievement Award this year.

They are in the Vocal Group Hall of Fame since 2000; the Hit Parade Hall of Fame since 2008; and "Tom Dooley" is in the Library of Congress National Registry of Historically Significant Recordings as of 2008.

George Grove admits that he's getting old but performing with the group is still fresh for him. As a lifelong musician and accomplished jazzman, he said the Kingston Trio songbook is wide and deep.

"We have over 400 songs to do," he said. "You always try do give the songs something fresh or interesting although the audiences don't always know what your doing with a song but it's in there."

The trio occasionally does new music and Grove says they are approached all the time by songwriters who want them to perform their work.

"We have one criteria for new songs," said Grove. "They have to sound like the old songs."

The Trio continues to tour over 30 weeks a year and now consists of Grove, Bill Zorn and Rick Dougherty. You can see and hear them on March 25 at 7:30 p.m. at The Veterans Memorial Auditorium in Providence.

On Monday, Shane was insisting that life in retirement is just doing nothing and that all right with him. He says golf is easy and boring and, as a former Hawaiian, he is used to doing nothing. At 77 he has no problem just hanging out



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77, he has no problem just hanging out.

“Occasionally someone will call me and ask me to go on stage and I pack a couple of oxygen tanks and go,” he said, but he doesn’t see anybody carrying him home on his shield just yet.

“I always tell people I intend to live forever,” he said happily, “So far, so good.”

The concert is a benefit for the Wounded Warrior Project; a national organization whose mission is to provide support and assistance to severely wounded servicemen and women. Information about the Wounded Warrior project can be found at [www.woundedwarriorproject.org](http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org).

Tickets for the concert are priced from \$25 to \$35 and may be purchased at the Providence Performing Arts Center box office, (PPAC handles all advance sales for performances at the Veterans Auditorium), by calling 421-ARTS (these will be mailed), or online at [www.vmari.com](http://www.vmari.com). There is a surcharge for tickets purchased online. For more information about RI4GIs and the concert, e-mail the organization at [ri4gis@yahoo.com](mailto:ri4gis@yahoo.com).



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