

THE KINGSTON TRIO

The Lasting Legacy of the Kingston Trio

Entertainment writer, Dick Boak, traces the Kingston Trio's success to their folk roots.



Like many of my postwar Baby Boom compadres, I was just a kid in 1957 when Kingston Trio songs started to bubble out of my transistor radio. My little Panasonic was no bigger than a pack of cigarettes and it came with a single earbud, though I don't think we called them that back then. I was completely hooked on our local DJ's daily top-ten listing, and not wanting to miss a trick, I smuggled my radio into elementary school and stowed it inside my flip-up desk under my books, the wire emerging out of the circular inkwell port right into my ear. My teacher took great pity on me, thinking I was "hard of hearing." I went along with this ruse until the inevitable parent teacher conference where I was shamefully busted!

I hung down my head, just like Tom Dooley.



The original lineup (L-R): Bob Shane, Dave Guard, Nick Reynolds

Later that year I found myself at my grandfather's lake cottage with my uncles, aunts, and cousins. My cousin Christy had a nylon-string guitar and she was pretty good with fingerstyle. She had learned many folk songs, some of which were Kingston Trio tunes. We had one of those awful little suitcase record players with a veritable nail for a needle. We would pick songs from the LP and Christy would learn them on the spot. All of the Trio's album covers depicted three young, smiling, clean-cut collegians wearing their trademark striped shirts. The music was hard to resist.

To top all of this, my brother Tom headed off to college in 1961. As a freshman, he pledged a fraternity that required new members to entertain the brotherhood. Tom had a good voice and joined together with four other pledges to form what you might call a Kingston Trio cover band, complete with blue-and-white striped shirts and black Dickies. Tom played rudimentary plectrum banjo and soon discovered that sorority girls would melt on their balconies listening to such harmonies. Of course, the culmination of their

crowd-pleasing set was the trio's big hit, "Tom Dooley." In the middle of the song, all five would gasp and screech to a halt, pretending to be tragically hung!



It helped greatly that many of the tunes had only a few relatively simple chords played on an acoustic guitar, a tenor guitar, and a banjo. This was in sharp contrast to Bill Haley &

the Comets or Buddy Holly, or even early Elvis Presley, who at this juncture had traded rock 'n' roll for a military buzz-cut and a stint in the Army. In fact, it seemed that the rock 'n' roll fervor had been reduced to embers. But the Kingston's Trio's massive popularity led to the formation of literally thousands of little folk groups like my brother's, as well as more rock-influenced bands like the Beach Boys, who were so affected by the Trio that they blatantly copied the trendy striped-shirt style for their early record sleeves.

For a few years there in the late 1950s and early '60s, the Trio was ubiquitous—on television, in magazines, on concert stages, and on the record charts. From the fall of 1958, when their eponymous debut album was released, through 1963, the group landed 13 albums in the Billboard Top Ten, including five that hit Number One. That first album stayed on the charts for four years.

Some have said there would be no Bob Dylan had it not been for the Kingston Trio. True or not, the number of musicians who credit the Trio as a formative influence is impressive, with just the short list including Peter Paul & Mary, Steve Martin, Lindsey Buckingham, Timothy B. Schmit, Gram Parsons, Crosby, Stills & Nash, the Beach Boys, the Mamas and the Papas, the Bee Gees, Jefferson Airplane, Simon & Garfunkel, Tom Paxton, Steve Goodman, Jimmy Buffett, Harry Chapin, Tim Buckley, and the Byrds.

Before the Kingston Trio, there really was no such thing as a college concert tour. Although this phenomenon would eventually have happened, the Kingston Trio was the band that really initiated and popularized such tours, both in America and worldwide.

Another facet in the legacy of the Trio is that it put the notion of self-played music within reach. Four years at Juilliard was not a requirement for picking up a guitar or banjo and making great folk music, let alone writing your own songs. But don't be deceived. The Trio made things look easy, but in addition to their personal magic, there was a professionalism about them that evolved from years of immersion and total commitment to their art.

Evolving Toward a Band

Allow me to back up to the beginning, when the seeds of the folk music movement were sown by Pete Seeger and the Weavers, Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives, Lead Belly, Harry Belafonte, Cisco Houston, and, over in the United Kingdom, Lonnie Donegan. This also coincided with the Beat movement—pacifist, left-leaning, embracing both bebop and folk

—but the momentum of both movements had been stifled somewhat by the McCarthy-era anti-communist scare. By 1957, the stage was set for something young, new, and different.

Bob Shane was born in 1934 in Hawaii and by the time he was a teenager, the post-war recovery was in full swing. He grew up in Hilo on the Big Island and took an early interest in the native folk music of Hawaii, especially slack-key guitarists like Gabby Pahinui. Shane met Dave Guard, a high school classmate who shared similar musical passions, and they soon began performing together informally at parties and small events, singing and accompanying themselves on soprano ukuleles. Shane soon gravitated to baritone ukulele, then to the larger and louder tenor guitar. Guard, more the academic, had a slower evolution with the guitar and banjo. There is little question that Pete Seeger's group, the Weavers, had a profound influence on both of their early musical directions.

After graduating from high school, both moved to Northern California—Guard attended Stanford University and Shane enrolled at nearby Menlo College, where he first connected with another budding musician, Nick Reynolds. Shane introduced Reynolds to Guard, and in various pairs or combinations with other local musicians, they started playing low-key gigs in bars and small clubs—initially just with the blessing of the bartenders, until there was a crowd of like-minded collegians treating them to free drinks in exchange for listening to their humorous, often risqué, repertoire.

Though there were a variety of names for the early groupings, they usually performed as “Dave Guard and the Calypsonians” (calypso music, as embodied by Harry Belafonte, being all the rage then), but the band did not earn any viable income. On top of that, Shane flunked out of Menlo College at the end of his junior year and returned to Hawaii with his tail somewhat between his legs. The plan was that he would assist his father with the family business, but after a few weeks this proved untenable. Instead, he chased a solo musical career in Hawaii, playing clubs for small pay but at least steady booking. In Honolulu, he ran into folk-blues singer/guitarist Josh White, who convinced him that a Martin six-string dreadnought guitar would provide a bigger, fuller accompaniment to his overall sound. Intimidated at first, Shane quickly grasped the challenge of the extra two strings, gradually commanding a remarkable talent for rhythm guitar on the Martin D-28. Back in California, Guard and Reynolds carried on, taking on two new members: bassist Joe Gannon and his fiancé, vocalist Barbara Bogue. With calypso's popularity now ebbing, Guard amended the name of the group to the Kingston Quartet, perhaps to

include more diverse Caribbean styles—even though Shane admits that none of the Trio members had ever been to Kingston, Jamaica.

At a seemingly insignificant performance in San Francisco, the group caught the eye of a local publicist named Frank Werber, who was excited by the onstage chemistry of Guard and Reynolds, but less impressed with Gannon and Bogue. After meeting with Werber, Reynolds and Guard were encouraged to let Gannon go. His fiancé followed suit, and Shane, the logical replacement, was invited to return from Hawaii to the mainland. He promptly accepted.

Shane, Guard, and Reynolds entered into a verbal partnership with Werber, who would become their manager, and a good one at that. Werber urged them all to make a serious one-year commitment to the band, to focus and home-in on what he called the X-factor: the unique interaction they had among themselves as well as with the audience. And so, the Kingston Trio was born.

The Guard Years (1957-1961)

Stanford had served Dave Guard well. He was clearly a passionate and studied musicologist, a gatherer of great material, a brilliant arranger, an evolving instrumentalist on the guitar and banjo, a reasonable vocalist, and a comic force to be reckoned with, having been influenced by the stage antics of Lou Gottlieb, first with the Gateway Singers and later the Limelites. But Shane and Reynolds would define the Trio's vocal magic: Shane provided his deep signature vocals together with tight rhythm guitar; Reynolds' perfect harmony would float above Bob's baritone, supplemented by his tenor guitar and bongo/conga percussion. Reynolds also had an appealing boyish humility—he was the short, cute one in the group. Their genuine onstage personal chemistry and humor was palpable and infectious.

With discipline and regular professional meetings orchestrated by Frank Werber, excellent vocal coaching from Bay Area voice teacher Judy Davis, and frequent collaboration with other folk musicians and resources to garner the best material, the threesome wasted no time in developing a successful act, and showing that they could capture their vocal and instrumental magic in the recording studio. [The Kingston Trio](#) album was a nearly instant smash success, propelled by what would be their biggest hit—and one of the most popular songs of the late 1950s, the pretty but mournful ballad “Tom Dooley.” Shane explains, “Tom Dooley's real name was Tom Dula. Tom Dula actually wrote the song

‘Hang Down Your Head Tom Dooley’ while in prison awaiting his hanging.” An odd theme for a hit song, for sure, but apparently irresistible to literally millions of people.

Nick Reynolds’ brilliant 45-second intro to the classic Trio song “M.T.A.” (a catchy 1949 tune inspired by Boston’s Metropolitan Transit Authority subway system) yielded another huge hit that drove the sales of their second album, 1959’s [At Large](#). The band was on a serious roll, and they churned out one popular song after another: “Scotch and Soda,” “A Worried Man,” “Tijuana Jail,” “Sloop John B,” and others.

In the studio, the Trio’s tonal balance and clarity elevated recorded acoustic music to unprecedented levels. Specifically, double voicing fattened the sound by recording the same part twice on parallel tracks. This produced a choral effect that forged a path to the stacking track techniques that have long been taken for granted in recording studios. These were the brainchild of Voyle Gilmore, a staff producer for Capitol Records, whose production techniques helped define the Kingston Trio’s sound.

Over time Guard grew more and more dissatisfied with band’s career arc. He was the most musically disciplined member of the group and wanted to take the Trio in a more adventurous direction. However Shane and Reynolds were happy with the clearly successful formula they had developed and didn’t really want to change it. There’s no question that the group’s grueling tour schedule had taken a toll on all of them during their improbable whirlwind rise to the top, and Guard probably felt under-appreciated by the other two—from his perspective, he was doing most of the heavy lifting, selecting and arranging the songs. For this, he was receiving a 40 percent share, while his cohorts were each getting 30 percent, except for songs in the public domain that the three agreed would be divided equally at 33 percent.

When *At Large* was released, Shane and Reynolds learned that Guard had taken the 40 percent share of the public domain song “Getaway John.” This wounded Shane and Reynolds, and it started an unspoken resentment that ended with Guard selling out his significant financial partnership in the band to the others. He departed the group in 1961, at the peak of their success.

The Stewart Years (1961-1967)

Clearly, the Kingston Trio was defined by the original Guard-Shane-Reynolds iteration. After Guard’s departure, a quick replacement was needed to make sure that the group didn’t lose momentum or jeopardize performance and recording contracts. Among the several prospects were 19-year-old future Byrds leader Roger McGuinn and poet-performer Rod McKuen, but the young songwriter John Stewart already had plenty of

prior involvement with the Kingston Trio. Stewart loved the band and knew their songs intimately; in fact he had already written two songs they had recorded. He played the banjo, was a good vocalist, and also had a well-developed comedic presence. His personality and appearance seemed to fit right in.



(L-R): John Stewart, Reynolds, Shane

Many albums would follow, but the primary hit singles of the Shane-Reynolds-Stewart trio were “Greenback Dollar,” “The Reverend Mr. Black,” and “Where Have All the Flowers Gone.” Perhaps the real purpose of this second lineup was to preserve and extend the legacy of the original band. Maybe that’s unfair to the very talented Stewart, who went on to write “Daydream Believer” for the Monkees, as well as his hit song “Gold,” which he recorded with Stevie Nicks and Lindsey Buckingham. Well beyond that, Stewart’s solo career spanned 40 years, with nearly four-dozen albums and more than 600 recorded songs. He stayed in the band until 1967, at which point Stewart and Shane both put on their solo hats and Reynolds effectively retired, beginning a 21-year hiatus from music. Needless to say, by 1967 the climate for folk music—even for a group with as diverse a catalog as the Kingston Trio—had changed considerably since their early ’60s heyday. The Trio and the plugged-in psychedelized late ’60s were not a natural fit; the clean-cut

image of the group perhaps a bit out of step with the times. Still, all the former members remained active in music, albeit independently.

Many Trio Faces

Many subsequent variations of musicians would carry the musical legacy of the Kingston Trio forward. After the breakup, Shane signed with Decca, but the record company was unhappy not having the Trio. Shane recorded the Bobby Russell song “Honey (I Miss You)” while with Decca, but they didn’t promote it effectively, leaving what would become a #1 best-selling song (and Grammy-winner) in the hands of Bobby Goldsboro on the United Artists label in 1968.

In late in 1967, Shane, unable to use the Kingston Trio name, formed the short-lived “Shane Gang” with David Peel and Michael Hurd. Shane clearly missed singing Trio songs and in 1968 cut a deal with Trident, Inc. (the Kingston Trio partnership comprised of Werber, Reynolds, and Shane), and was allowed to form the “New Kingston Trio” with Jim Connor and Pat Horine. In 1973, Shane released Connor and Horine in favor of Bill Zorn (of the New Christy Minstrels and the Limelitters) and Roger Gambill (of Gambill & Moore). This lasted until 1976, when Shane was able to buy the Kingston Trio name back from his business partners, Werber and Reynolds.

Fresh from Opryland, the talented George Grove joined Bob Shane and Roger Gambill in 1976, providing banjo, guitar and vocals to the group, performing once again as the Kingston Trio. Sadly, Gambill passed away from a heart attack and stroke in 1985. Bobby Haworth (of the Brothers Four) took Roger’s place until 1988 when Reynolds returned from his hiatus.

Reynolds stuck with it for 11 more years, retiring in 1997. Haworth came back to take Reynolds’ place until 2003, when Shane, now recovering from his own heart attack, could no longer stand the rigors of the road. With Shane now licensing the band, Zorn took his place performing with Grove and Haworth. In 2005, Rick Dougherty, also of the Limelitters, took Haworth’s place in the Trio.

For 12 years, Grove, Zorn, and Dougherty toured as the Kingston Trio. They did a more than admirable job bringing the Trio’s music to new and diverse audiences, and it must be noted that Grove performed with the Kingston Trio for 41 years—second only to Shane, who toured with the group for 46 years.

As the result of a recent custody battle over the use of the Kingston Trio name, another version of the band licensed the name and supplanted the talented and loyal Grove, Zorn, and Dougherty. And, by the time this article appears, the lineup may change again. Such

instability is unfortunate, but testament to the intrinsic value and magnetic power of the Kingston Trio's music, which has been undiminished by time.

A Legacy of Acoustic Guitars

Believe it or not, the Kingston Trio's popularity actually put a strain on the availability of guitars (and long-neck banjos), to the extent that Martin's venerable D-28 was at one point backordered for three years.

Even the 0-18T tenor guitar experienced a resurgence in popularity. Frank Herbert Martin eventually convinced his somewhat restrained father, C. Frederick Martin III, to break ground on a larger, more modern factory on Sycamore Street about a mile away from the old North Street plant. The new factory in their longtime home of Nazareth, Pennsylvania, was completed in 1964 and greatly helped to reduce Martin's backorder situation.

To this day, many refer to Martin's Sycamore Street facility as the factory that the Kingston Trio built. This, I might add, was a tremendous source of pride for Bob Shane, Nick Reynolds, John Stewart, George Grove, and the other members of the ever-evolving Trio.



Martin Kingston Trio 40th Anniversary 0-18T tenor guitar

In 1989, when I took responsibility for Martin's in-house advertising, I became good friends with Bill Bush, a first-rate ad man from Seminole, Florida, and also an ardent lover of Martin guitars, an instrument collector, an expert on all things Buddy Holly and early rock 'n' roll history, plus a serious fan and friend of the Kingston Trio in all of its variations. Bush is in fact the author of the definitive Kingston Trio biography, [Greenback Dollar: The Incredible Rise of The Kingston Trio](#) (Scarecrow Press, 2013).



Martin Kingston Trio 40th Anniversary D-28

A few years later, in 1995, Martin had unprecedented success with my Eric Clapton signature model guitar project that saw me transition from advertising to artist relations. Not long after, Bush began lobbying me to honor the Kingston Trio with a similar signature edition. Fan that I was, it was not a hard sell.

With Chris Martin's blessing, I began a collaboration with Bob Shane. At the 1997 Winter NAMM show, the Kingston Trio 40th Anniversary set of three Instruments was introduced

(a D-28, an 0-18T, and a Deering-made replica of the Vega long-neck banjo). The edition was limited to no more than 40 sets and the instruments could not be ordered individually.

As there was residual demand for a Bob Shane D-28 signature edition, Martin introduced the D-28KTBS in 2003 with the unusual but faithful option of a double pickguard. In 2010, Nick Reynolds (1933–2008) was honored with a signature model 0-18T.