

Country Joe: Folksinger for the Ages

By JOHN MAYBURY

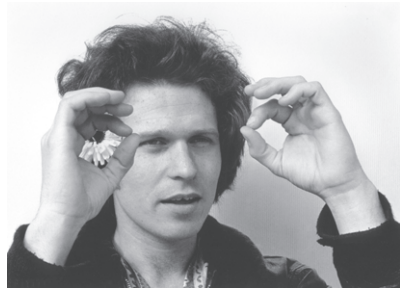
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

“Gimme an F.”

This famous first line from Country Joe McDonald’s iconic call-and-response antiwar classic of the Sixties will ring throughout Sanchez Concert Hall on Saturday, Nov. 11, from 7 to 10 p.m. Country Joe himself will appear to sing songs of peace in the Veterans Day event sponsored by Pacifica Peace People and Veterans for Peace. Also performing is musician and Vietnam vet Joe Paquin. Jim Janko will read a passage from his book on the Vietnam War, “Buffalo Boy and Geronimo.”

“I am struck by how little things have changed for military personnel and the military family,” says Country Joe in conversation with the Pacifica Tribune. “There is now a rather noisy ‘support the troops’ thing by all who are vocal on the left and the right, but still the average person knows very little about the military experience, and still there is a feeling of being afraid of people who are in the military.”

What does Joe think about the current political situation with the Iraq War compared to how things were back in the day? He finds it odd that



Above and right, Country Joe McDonald...then and now.

chickenhawks (civilians who never did military service) are now in charge of the war machine. On the other hand, he is encouraged that antiwar sentiment is growing so quickly despite the lack of a military draft.

“The military experience is more esoteric than ever because of the smaller numbers of active people in the military,” Joe says. “The new generation of young people who are of military service age have very little knowledge of the Vietnam War years, except from movies and television. There is actually much more vocal opposition to the war today by entertainers and such.”

As a U.S. Navy veteran himself (Vietnam era), Joe worked with military nurses and became interested in the story of Florence Nightingale, the



first military nurse. He has become something of an expert on her life and brave deeds during the Crimean War.

Joe once told Abbie Hoffman that he is “the guy who sang the songs, pointed out the wrongs, not the guy who fixed them.” Joe referred to himself and the band as a “Greek chorus” and a “moral conscience” for the Baby Boomer generation, which has made such an impact on American culture and politics since the Sixties.

In 1994, Joe told the San Francisco Chronicle’s rock reviewer Joel Selvin: “I like real. I think it’s danger-

ous, insulting, and demeaning not to be real. I am Country Joe. I don’t pretend to be Country Joe. I don’t have a Country Joe suit in my closet.”

Appropriately, Joe was born in Washington, D.C., a “red diaper baby” whose politically active parents had to get out of Dodge, moving the family to working-class El Monte, Calif. There, Joe grew up catching all the action at El Monte Legion Stadium (gospel, R&B, rock and roll) and the jazz and blues clubs in L.A. He moved to Berkeley in the Sixties to go to school but ended up writing and playing music with various jug bands.

Country Joe and the Fish came about during the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, entertaining and politicizing “the troops” on campus and Telegraph Avenue, then moving on to performing at civil rights marches and antiwar/antidraft demonstrations throughout the Bay Area. Joe and his band, including Barry Melton, had a big hand in fusing folk music, the blues, and psychedelic rock and roll. They played regularly at the Fillmore and the Avalon in San Francisco, and the Jabberwock coffee house in Berkeley. Their big hit, the Sixties anthem “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag,” propelled Country Joe and the Fish to the upper reaches of Billboard’s charts, where they stayed strong for two years.

Legend has it that Joe’s lefty par-

ents named him after Joseph Stalin, whose nickname was Country Joe, and The Fish came from Chairman Mao’s saying about “the fish who swim in the sea of the people.”

The famous “Give me an F” yell started at the Woodstock music festival in the pouring rain, when Joe spontaneously joined Richie Havens onstage to pump up the drenched crowd of half a million. It catapulted Country Joe and the Fish to the big-time: The Ed Sullivan Show, Hollywood Bowl, Richard Nixon’s “enemies list,” recording contracts, Super Bowl TV commercials, Jerry Garcia jams, and the movies. The rest is history.

Country Joe continues to write, record, and perform, an average of an album per year since 1970. He tours regularly in the United States and abroad, solo and with former bandmembers and other musical colleagues. Visit Joe’s past, present, and future at countryjoe.com.

(Pacifica Peace People and Veterans for Peace present a Veterans Day concert

and reading featuring Country Joe McDonald, on Saturday, Nov. 11, 7-10 p.m., at Sanchez Concert Hall, 1220 Linda Mar Blvd. Admission is \$10 donation (adults) and \$5 (under 18). No one turned away for lack of funds. Please arrive early, because the hall holds only 150 and is expected to sell out.)