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Vinyl Liner Notes: Tarkio by Brewer & Shipley



Tarkio Brewer & Shipley, 1970, Kama Sutra/Buddha Records

In 1970 a little ditty hit the airwaves that raised the ire of the Nixon administration and landed its creators on Nixon's enemies list. The song was "One Toke Over the Line" by folkies Michael Brewer and Tom Shipley.

"One Toke" is a track from the duo's classic third record, *Tarkio*. Today *Tarkio* stands as a time capsule of an era where the line was drawn in the sand. It was Them and Us. Them was Nixon, the Vietnam War, the uptight middle class, the establishment; Us was the kids, the hippies, the anti-war protesters, the anti-establishment.

Them had the money and power. It was a dark time, but every so often Us could detect a glimmer of light at the end

of the tunnel. Brewer & Shipley's *Tarkio* was just such a glimmer, and it wasn't just 'One Toke,' but 'Don't Want to Die in Georgia,' 'Tarkio Road,' 'Fifty States of Freedom, 'Oh Mommy (I Ain't No Commie)' and four other tasty tunes.

Besides smart and funny songs, the musicianship is great. Nick Gravenites of Electric Flag produced (as he did their previous record, *Weeds*). The rhythm section included Chicago-area blues musician friends of Gravenites' such as keyboardist Mark Naftalin, guitarist Fred Burton and drummer Bob Jones. Jerry Garcia plays pedal steel on "Oh Mommy," which was the B side of "One Toke." And John Kahn and Bill Vitt of the Jerry Garcia Band also appear.

On the 40th anniversary of *Tarkio*'s release, it seemed appropriate to check in by telephone with Michael Brewer at his Ozark Mountain home in Powersite, Missouri.

JL: *Tarkio* gave a lot of people hope that maybe we would win this cultural war.

Michael Brewer: "I've had a lot of people tell me that over the years. Where they were, they felt alone, the only person in their small town or whatever who even had the thoughts and feelings. They felt alone and listened to our *Tarkio* album and said, 'Wow, it's not just me. There are other people out there who feel like me.' It gave them hope. I'm proud of that."

JL: You guys had made two albums before *Tarkio*.

MB: Yes, *Down in LA* and *Weeds*.

JL: Basically the same band, at least on *Weeds*.

MB: "Yes. *Weeds* and *Tarkio* where the same band, with a few exceptions. *Down in LA* was mostly studio musicians. The best guys at the time, really. We've been so blessed to work with so many really, really good musicians over the years. We've just been blessed with that.

JL: How did you hook up with the band. Was *Tarkio* intended to be a band album?

MB: IT kind of came about with *Weeds*. Nick Gravenites produced both those albums. He was in the Electric Flag. He's a blueser from Chicago. A bunch of those guys, Nick put them together. They were all basically a bunch of guys originally from the Chicago area, blues players, who ended up in the Bay area. It was kind of a strange mixture, so we created a hybrid sound. Here are a couple of folkies playing with a bunch of bluesers, Electric Flag members. It ended up being kind of magical really.

JL: How did Jerry Garcia get into the mix then?

MB: We recorded five albums at a studio called Wally Heider's in San Francisco. The Jefferson Airplane, when their first record deal was signed with RCA, one of their deals was unlimited free studio time. So they took over Studio A at Wally Heider's. They were there every day, like going to the office. If it wasn't the Airplane, it was offshoots of Airplane, like Hot Tuna. Or if not them, the Grateful Dead and offshoots of the Dead were in there all the time. It was kind of a community of musicians coming and going ALL the time, Crosby, Stills & Nash. Good grief, the list just went on and on. People were going from studio to studio to see what everybody was up to. At the time Jerry was just starting to play pedal steel guitar and we needed a pedal steel guitar for "Oh Mommy, I Ain't No Commie." We went to whatever studio he was in and said, 'Hey, Jerry, feel like playing pedal steel on a song?' He said, 'Sure.' A lot of people think he is playing guitar on 'One Toke', but he's on the B-side, which is 'Hey Mommy.' It was an interesting

an era and an interesting place to be. All that talent floating around.

JL: You guys are originally from the Midwest. Were you living on the West Coast by then?

MB: Tom's from Ohio, I'm from Oklahoma. We started out on the folk circuit as solos. We both ended up in LA. I'd already been there a year and half. I was a staff songwriter for a brand new record label called A&M. Then Tom came to town and moved right around the corner from me. He was living next door to Jim Messina, who was a recording engineer at the time. Tom and I knew each other from the folk circuit. We started hanging out and writing some songs together. I helped him get a job as a staff writer also. That's how we came about with songwriting. We'd go into the studio to write songs for the publishing company to pitch to artists. It didn't take long for the company and ourselves to realize we had our own style and sound. That's how the first album, *Down in LA*, came about. And that's why we named it *Down in LA*, if that gives you any idea what we thought of the place.

At the time, going back to the heartland was just unheard of. If you didn't live in LA, or San Francisco or Nashville or New York, you weren't really in the music business. We figured there just had to be a better way to do what we do and to have a better life than living out there in that rat race. We ended up in Kansas City and started up a company called Good Karma Productions. One thing led to another. That's how we got out of our contract with A&M. They thought we had just given up and gone home. Today artists can live where they want to, but at that time it was unheard of. We were kind of the front runners on that.

We changed coasts and got another record deal, with Buddha/Kama Sutra. And then we would go back to California, to San Francisco and started working with Nick Gravenites. We ended up doing five albums at Wally Heider's.

JL: I thought that was kind of strange. Buddha/Kama Sutra was known as a sugary pop label.

MB: Bubblegum label. Neil Bogart was known as the bubblegum king. This was back when FM radio was brand new. It was called underground radio. They played album cuts or whole albums. The last thing you would hear is someone's new single. We were never about singles. We were album artists. To us, every song was just as important as the one before or after it. Every album was a package.

So, that's what he was looking for. He was looking for album artists. He wanted to shatter his image as the bubblegum king. That's why he signed us for our *Weeds* LP. We helped him break out of the bubblegum king image. Of course, then he went on to move to California and started Casablanca Records and became the disco king.

JL: Did you guys feel you were channeling some new generation?

MB: To be honest with you, we came from the folk era. We still call ourselves folk singers, or folk rockers. Folk music is all about social commentary, be it Civil War ballads or chain gang songs or Woody Guthrie or Irish bar songs or whatever. That's really what we were doing. We were still folk singers reflecting our own experiences in life. We were really just reflecting our lives and times. It just happened to represent what a whole lot of younger people were going through at the time.

JL: Once it gets out into the public, and the Nixon Administration puts you on its enemies list...

MB: Which we consider a badge of honor, by the way.

JL: Did you realize at that time the significance of what you had done?

MB: We wrote 'One Toke Over the Line' literally out of sheer boredom one night, making ourselves laugh. We didn't even really think it was one of our better songs. We thought it was more of a throwaway song. Maybe our ballads were our forte. We were just entertaining ourselves. First time we played Carnegie Hall, we opened for Melanie. We went over really well and kind of ran out of songs. For a second or third encore, we said, 'Let's do that new song.' Everybody loved it. We were working on our *Tarkio* album at that time. Neil Bogart came backstage and said, 'You've got to record that. You've got to add that to the album.' So we did. We went down to the Florida Keys to do some fishing and came back to find they had released it as a single and not only was it going up the charts, but we were in big trouble. The government was coming down on us. It was kind of like, huh, you're kidding. It's just a song. People were making a really big deal of it and we just didn't get it. When the FCC was threatening radio stations with revoking their licenses for playing drug references lyrics. This even included 'Puff the Magic Dragon'. It was ridiculous. It was like burning books in Nazi Germany, as far as we were concerned. We didn't realize at the time what significance it did hold to a lot of people. People decided to play it any way and buck the system and make it popular. Who would have guessed 40 years later it would be a classic song played everywhere in the world and in movies on TV? We didn't have any idea of any of that.

JL: I just recently saw the Lawrence Welk version. It's hilarious.

MB: Oh, it is hilarious! We were in London at the time and we didn't even believe it. You've got to be kidding me, Lawrence Welk did 'One Toke Over the Line'? For 36 years we looked and looked and looked to get a copy of it. Then I got my hands on a copy of it. It's on YouTube now and has had about half a million hits. Pretty funny. Lawrence Welk even refers to it as a modern-day spiritual. I love that. It's gospel to us.

JL: And that's how they treated it.

MB: Yeah. I live in the Branson area. The world's largest roadside oddity. Anyway, I know the Lennon Brothers. In their younger years in California they had a band and they used to play some of our songs and have been longtime fans. Saw Bill Lennon just recently and were talking about that, laughing about Lawrence Welk doing one toke over the line. All the guys in the band knew. Obviously Gail & Dale and Lawrence Welk and whatever the guy's name was that introduced it, the accordion player, didn't have a clue. I figured some of the guys in the band must have known. Bill Lennon confirmed that. He says, 'Oh, yeah, they definitely had a clue. They definitely knew what they were doing and thought it was hysterical.'

JL: Myron Floren was the accordionist's name.

MB: Right, right.

JL: Were there any government repercussions?

MB: Not really. Every day of our lives on tour, we kept expecting at least to have the police hassle us, but it never happened.

JL: Did it make you any more cautious?

MB: No. We've always thrown caution to the wind. You can't stop who you are just because people threaten you. You just can't do that. You've got to stand up for what you believe in.

JL: Have you ever used the Freedom of Information Act to see how they were keeping tabs on you?

MB: No I haven't. I really would like to do that, see what kind of file they did have on us. We recently discovered we're still dangerous guys in some places, even after all these years. Several times we've done this northwest tour of several states, and it ends with five shows in Alaska. Every single show is a fundraiser for state troopers and fire departments and stuff. It's hysterical. We go over like gangbusters. Singing autographs and selling CDs and T-shirts. The T-shirts is "More Tokes for Old Folks." It was so weird signing autographs and selling T-shirts to cops and their wives and kids. I would say every night on stage: 'It's too bizarre. One time we were afraid of you guys and now we're raising money for you.'

But back to being dangerous guys, in Kalispell, Mont., way up there in the middle of nowhere, the concert was picketed because we were on the bill. And in Alaska, two different times now, people have made a real big deal of it: 'I can't believe state troopers are bringing those guys to Alaska. Doing that song.' It's nice to know we're still dangerous guys.

JL: But it sounds you like guys are still having fun doing it.

MB: Absolutely having fun. Life is for living and we're doing our best to do that. Tom Shipley for years has been into television production. He is his own department at Missouri University of Science and Technology. They're always sending him off to some bizarre place to shoot videos for the school. He's already been to Bolivia once and he's getting ready to go back, about 10,000 feet, a little village with maybe 100 people. Sleeping bags, the only food is what they have to feed them. 20 to 30 degrees nighttime. The only place to bathe is a river that comes straight from a glacier. I got an e-mail from him just this morning: 'I hope I know what I'm getting myself into. I'm getting way to old for this.'

I write all the time. I have a couple of solo CDs, *Retro Man* and a new one called *It Is What It Is*. I play solo. But Tom and I like to go out and sing our songs for folks and we're happy that people still show up and like it.

JL: Are you plagued by that one song?

MB: Well, we'll go to our graves with it. It's amazing how many people, that's all they know us for. We've got a dozen albums and we wrote a lot of songs. There's way more to Brewer & Shipley than 'One Toke Over the Line.' It wasn't even one of our favorite songs. That's the way it goes, I guess.

JL: Did you guys have the choice of 'Oh Mommy' on the B side?

MB: Oh yeah. We chose 'Oh Mommy.'

JL: One thing I think might be lost to the younger generation but expressed on your record, is how difficult it was for kids with long hair at the time. There were acts of violence and...

MB: Oh, yeah. Scary time. It was a very tumultuous, frightening time, but you know what, it doesn't even compare to today. It's just crazy, crazy times today. Frightening.

JL: Yes, it would be nice to go back to that nice, peaceful time.

MB: Yeah, nice, peaceful time. You know what, I'm really surprised why what happened in the 60s didn't happen during the Bush administration, Where were the people.? Why weren't people marching in the streets and doing the same things they were in the '60s? Apathy I guess. Every one of those people in that administration, in my

opinion, should be tried for treason as war criminals. Trampling all over the constitution and getting away with it.

A lot of our music has been misinterpreted as political. We really have never viewed it that way. We are folk singers and the music is social commentary, a reflection of the times.

JL: And *Tarkio* is a perfect example of that, right down to the art work. I forget the artist's name.

MB: Bill Sanderford. He was a longtime friend. We went back to the folk days.

JL: I Can't describe what it is, but he captured something that was in the air at the time.

MB: The inside of the cover is pointillism, made all of single dots. The original was black and white without all the paisley around the edges, making it hippie '60s looking. That was really cool, the simpler black and white.

I'll give you a little piece of rock trivia here. Inside there's one thing missing, and I didn't notice it for years and years. I didn't notice it until very recently. I guess he forgot, but I am missing a sideburn. I forget which one (the left), but it ain't there. Kind of like a Where's Waldo.

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