

Strawberry Flats

Rural Rock, American Travelogue, Hike Reporter & Backyard Naturalism



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One Toke: An Interview Tom Shipley



Michael Brewer and Tom Shipley, popularly known as [Brewer & Shipley](#), are the "One Toke" dudes. But hell, they released some awesome country-tinged folk rock in the late '60s and early '70s. If you're craving more rural jams along the lines of *American Beauty*, side two of *Exile on Main St.*, *Manassas*, and *Deja Vu*, track down copies of *Weeds* and *Tarkio Road*. Recording the bulk of their music in San Francisco, Brewer & Shipley have a West Coast sound in a lot of ways (Jerry Garcia even played a little pedal steel on *Tarkio*). Yet there's some things totally midwestern about their music, too. Like Mason Proffit and [Pure Prairie League](#), the duo isn't dreamy and detached, but earthy and earnest. Although [Brewer & Shipley](#) lived in Los Angeles for a spell, they were born and bred in the Midwest. They returned there in 1969, settling in

Kansas City. After their career slowed down, Shipley became a videographer and relocated to [Rolla, Missouri](#), a small college town in the Ozarks. Some time back I called Tom and we talked Brewer & Shipley for a good long while.

Strawberry Flats: I recently saw this group called the [Avett Brothers](#). They do this kind of old time folk thing with big, pounding beats, kind of tribal-like. Well, after just two songs in, I was convinced that they had spent a lot of time listening to "[Witchi-tai-to](#)." What's the story behind that song?

Tom Shipley: That song was actually written by [Jim Pepper](#). It's a derivative of a Native American peyote chant.

Southwestern Native American?

Most likely. Go to my page on YouTube: [shipleyt](#). At the bottom there are some videos. One is the [original Jim Pepper version](#) that Michael and I heard on the radio while driving across Kansas.

Does it bug you that most people only know "[One Toke Over the Line](#)"? I don't think folks realize how many good records Brewer & Shipley put out.

Well, yeah. We could've shot [Art Kass], who was the head of [[Kama Sutra Records](#)]. He was known as the king of bubblegum. They had the 1910 Fruitgum Co. and stuff like that.

Yeah, Kama Sutra was all about the AM pop.

Exactly. He wanted to break into 'serious music.' So he released our [Weeds](#) album, which contains "Witchi-tai-to." That's probably our best. That or [Tarkio Road](#) [a.k.a. *Tarkio*]. They released a song called "Rise Up (Easy Rider)," and it went to number one in every town it was released in. But they didn't release it in New York or L.A., because he really didn't understand the music. He didn't want a hit single. He wanted a hit album. Michael and I were actually prepared to follow that up with "Witchi-tai-to."

The full six-and-a-half-minute version?

We would've edited it slightly. But as luck would have it, he didn't do that. "One Toke" came along, and we sort of got tagged with that. What can you do?

*You can't deny One Toke's melody. It [drills itself into the head](#).**

We coined a phrase. That's for darn sure. [laughs]

How did that song come about?

Well, we *were* one toke over line. We wrote it backstage in a little club in Kansas City. We were just kidding around with one another and came up with this little ditty. Then we wrote a few more lyrics and played it for a few friends and onstage every one in a while -- get a rise out of people. So we were playing Carnegie Hall for the first time, opening for [Melanie](#), and we got a couple of encores. Essentially, we ran out of songs, so we did "One Toke." The record company president loved it and said, "You got to put that on the next album." We were in the process of working on *Tarkio*, so we recorded. And it hit! But like I said, we didn't sit down to write a serious song. It was just one of those things that pops out

when you're kidding around.

How autobiographical is it?

When we got into the lyrics it was more autobiographical, at least for me. At that point in time, I was having way too much fun. It's a song about excess. We had one too many Holiday Inns, one too many greasy cheeseburgers, one too many greasy backstage girls. [laughs]

I just saw that [1974] movie Thunderbolt and Lightfoot, with Clint Eastwood and Jeff Bridges. It's about young guys wandering America in early-'70s America. But the vibe is different from Easy Rider's -- it's less idealized, more desperate and lonely. That particular feeling also pops up in your music, especially one of your best tunes "Shake of the Demon."

We were just reflective of the times. In the late '60s and early '70s there was a generation in motion. I was a kid from Bedford, Ohio, checking out the world. I thought another song that tapped that was Paul Simon's "America." That's what we were doing. We were just writing about what was happening to us, but what was happening to us was happening to everybody else. You take the song "Tarkio Road" -- that came about because we were traveling around the Midwest. Recording in San Francisco, we had just returned from California, and we essentially glowed in the dark -- the way we were dressed and our hair. [laughs] Driving around the Midwest, there was a little town called Tarkio, Missouri, that we had to go through a lot. So we wrote, "If you're looking for trouble, you can find it on the Tarkio Road." You'd stop at a truckstop, and the truckers would want to beat you up. When you got away from the coasts the country really didn't understand what this generation-in-motion was.

You were born and raised in Bedford, Ohio?

I was born in Youngstown, but when I was three or four my parents moved to Bedford. In fact, I'm in the Bedford High School Hall of Fame, along with Halle Berry. [laughs] I went to Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, but I was playing every night at a [Cleveland] coffeehouse called La Cave, down in University Circle. Everybody who made it as a folk-rocker played there: Gordon Lightfoot, Simon & Garfunkel, who came through as "The Sounds of Silence" was being released. I met Michael at a club called the Blind Owl down in Kent. He was playing there when John and Michelle [Phillips] came through and were on their way to California to form the Mamas & the Papas. But they were just folkies then. That's what happened: All the folkies headed to California and plugged in.

How did you get into folk music?

I'd been playing music most of my life. I grew up with it, but I didn't think of it as a career until I started performing. One of the things I really liked about folk music was the five-string banjo, not a hillbilly banjo, but a folk banjo. I picked up a record, How to Play the 5-String Banjo by Pete Seeger. I then bought his Village Gate album. That introduced me to Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie and all those folks. And there went the neighborhood. Those guys were musical journalism, and I think that's one of the things that really stuck with me. More than a musician, I was a writer, always excelled at writing. My teachers at Baldwin-Wallace tried to get me to major in creative writing, but when I was growing up

that was too far out for family and friends.

*Why did you settle in Missouri?**

We were burned out on L.A., so we headed back out on the road and played whatever coffeehouses were left. We could make more money that way. We settled in Kansas City because there was this guy who said he could get us some dates. We also had a lot of friends there, so we started a production company, Good Karma Productions. Then "One Toke" hit. It wasn't anything planned. The coasts notwithstanding, Kansas City had one of the best bohemian communities in the country -- real old. It was a very cool place to hang out. Plus, it's cleaner living than you find back east.

It's interesting that it's called the "West Coast sound." So many of the people who created it are from the Midwest. Gene Clark is also from Missouri. You can hear the Midwest in the music.

Yeah, he's from Kansas City, so was his brother. He used to play a club that was a block from the club we played, the Vanguard. By the time Michael and I teamed up, he was already in the Byrds. Plus, the guys who played on our *Weeds* album were all from Chicago: Mike Bloomfield, producer [Nick Gravenites](#) and so on.

So you've done some television specials on [Ozark culture](#)?

I've done a couple PBS things, one called *Precious Memories*, which is about the Dillards, the bluegrass band. Then I did one called *Treehouse -- An Ozark Story*, which was about an old guy who basically lived in a treehouse, one of the last river rats. I used him as way to tell the story of how the Ozark culture evolved over the last couple hundred years. This is a wonderful place. I always wanted to live in the Ozarks, but most of the area is rural with rural people. I don't have anything against rural people, but I like the cosmopolitan culture of a college town.

That's an age-old friction in folk music -- musicians love rural music, but share little in common with the people from which the music derives.

Absolutely. Rural people, for many reasons, tend to vote on economic issues that are disadvantageous to them.

In Cleveland there are all these people who are obviously low income, and they drive cars pasted with all these pro-Bush bumper stickers. They don't realize that the politicians they support aren't doing a thing for them.

Yeah, politicians support certain social issues just to get the vote. But they don't care about any of that. They're much more interested in laissez-faire: *business can do whatever they want*. But they got it down, using social issues like gun control. I don't know what to do about that. I was a political activist at one time, but at this age I am what I am and it is what it is.

I have one more question. How on earth did Brewer & Shipley end up playing a show with Black Sabbath?

That was in Cleveland. I believe it was Halloween. I don't remember how it came about, but that was the time when they were going around and trying their best to make riots

happen.

That was the early '70s?

I'd say '73 or '74. At one point people were throwing fireworks. A big, loud cherry bomb went off in between Michael and I. It sounded like he'd been shot. People were throwing sparklers from the balcony. It was nuts. [laughs] If you've been in the business as long as Michael and I, you've played with just about everybody. We did one of the first stadium rock shows, opening for Elton John at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City. We opened for Springsteen at his Central Park concert. Talk about interesting booking: It was Springsteen, Michael and I and Anne Murray. [laughs]. Yeah, we played with just about everybody.

Notes:

*That link leads to a clip from a 1971 episode of *The Lawrence Welk Show*. It's totally surreal. In a misguided attempt to appeal to America's youth, the show had singers Gail Farrell and Dick Dale sing "One Toke Over the Line." Obviously, the producers didn't know what the hell the song was about. Yet there's a moment of truth near the end when Welk calls it a "modern spiritual." That's kind of true. "One Toke" is pure AM pop, but it's also American folk music 101: funny voices and silly lyrics that sound perfect during moments of total rootlessness.

**Before Brewer & Shipley became a recording act, they migrated to Los Angeles, where A&M Records hired them as songwriters. The psych-rock band [H.P. Lovecraft recorded](#) their jam "[Keeper of the Keys](#)."

Posted by Justin F. Farrar at [8:41 PM](#) 

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