

According to a Reader's Digest survey published to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Summer of Love, 79% of Brits can hum the melody of "Puff, the magic dragon", a song written by Cornell University students Peter Yarrow and Leonard Lipton in the dying months of the 1950s, as the dull, grey Eisenhower era drew to a close. Within a very short time, Yarrow would be teamed up with Noel Paul Stookey and Mary Travers to form Peter, Paul and Mary, whose recordings of such songs as "If I had a hammer", "Blowin' in the wind", "Where have all the flowers gone?" and, of course, "Puff," provided the soundtrack to the Sixties. Recorded in 1963, it soon became a staple of BBC Radio's *Junior Choice* and, as the years have flown, the Baby Boomer generation, which first encountered the song as students, passed it on to their own children. Now, it's become a children's book.

"It's amazing," smiles Yarrow, as we sit in his magnificent but homely Upper West Side apartment, full of light and plants and musical instruments, which he shares with Zack, his Jack Russell-Chihuahua cross, a rescue dog. "Although folk music is hardly present on the airwaves, it has sustained, and sustained in a way that even the young have learned these songs. It has sustained in the homes, in the

trying to bring back that sweetness, which has been supplanted by mean-spiritedness and greed, animosity and selfishness."

Other books are planned, based on other transcendent songs, with a goal of four volumes each of 12 songs with a CD – "a whole library that we can get on the airwaves". But all that is part of a larger plan that has its roots in "Operation Respect: Don't Laugh at Me", an initiative launched a few years back by Yarrow which has been adopted by the US Department of Education, which aims to combat bullying by emphasizing the moral lessons of folk music. "Now," Yarrow admits, pausing to tuck into a scone, "some people will think this is presumptuous, fuzzy-minded, idealistic – that this is not really a book, it's part of a conspiracy. And it is a conspiracy, a conspiracy to bring children to a new sensibility. These are not political songs, but all sensibilities ultimately turn into a political perspective... 'Puff is a parable.'"

Of course there are others who say it is a drug song, a myth perpetuated in the movie *Meet the Parents*. Yarrow finds it laughable and, though he doesn't deny that he, and Paul and Mary, smoked pot in the 1960s, "Puff" was written long before that. "It was 1959 – I was the *squarest* guy in the world. Grass hadn't even *remotely* touched the scene in New York and it wasn't part of my life. Much later I could have written a song about drugs – but not in 1959."

"But I'm used to big missions... I'm looking at this project not just as a sweet little book"

"A dragon lives forever..."

...sang Peter, Paul and Mary in 1963. 'Puff, the magic dragon' has transcended the generations. Now it's a book. **Liz Thomson** met its composer, **Peter Yarrow**

summer camps, in the churches, in the synagogues, on family outings. And it's not only the songs but the *ethos* and the *spirit* and the *sense* of those songs sustain; that hasn't gone from our hearts." Music, Yarrow continues, the mellifluous tones of his speaking voice matched by his gentle face and twinkly eyes, can "inspire people and bring them together, and I know that if we can get this kind of music into the hearts of kids again that we can be a part of asserting those sensibilities that are so important. That, in conjunction with a new educational model and new policy paradigms, might rescue us from the mean-spiritedness and frightening alienation of our times." He mentions the Virginia Tech shootings ("the tip of the iceberg") and the alarming American Association of School Psychologists' statistic that 60,000 children a day stay home because they are too frightened to go to school.

Yarrow remains a quiet revolutionary and the publication of *Puff, the Magic Dragon*, illustrated by Eric Puybaret, which comes complete with a CD, is part of what he calls his "big mission. But I'm used to big missions", says the man who helped organise the 1963 March on Washington, at which Martin Luther King dreamed his celebrated dream, and who has since organised countless civil rights demonstrations and anti-war marches. "I'm looking at this project not just as a sweet little book, though it is very beautiful. Look at those faces," he digresses, flicking through the pages. "What do you see? Peace and openness, a very whimsical delight in life, a connectedness. Even the *pirates* are charming! The trees have life! All these elements are filled with vitality and sadness; there's a delicacy, a dignity, a poignancy. Look at the sadness of Puff, and then look at how happy he is when another child comes along... We're

The controversy will never die but in the end it doesn't matter – to children all over the world, "Puff" remains a charming and innocent song.

Yarrow grew up in Manhattan. His father vanished from his life when he was a little boy and he was brought up by his mother, a public school teacher. "I never had new clothes until I was in the third year of college. I never minded, though when I got to Cornell I realised other people did. It was while he was there that he first recognised the transformative power of music, when he taught a course in folk music. "I realised that this very insular, hierarchical group of students were open to it. I started singing to a hundred kids in a lecture room and by the time I'd finished there were a thousand people, lining the halls and singing along. Something extraordinary was happening, and that something was what I went in to this community to do: to raise the kind of consciousness that could be a part of the process of the shifting in the societal line."

"I really believed music would play a role in bringing about change," he says, talking of "the collective epiphany" of those early 1960s audiences, when Greenwich Village – where Peter, Paul and Mary, like Bob Dylan, began their careers – was "a crucible of creativity and excitement." When Yarrow played at Bologna and at BEA, it was evident how much those years and that music still means to people. "These songs were not created for big bucks," Yarrow concludes, "something else is going on."

Puff, the Magic Dragon is published this week by Macmillan, price £10.99

Peter Yarrow: a return to old sensibilities

