

EXCERPT

Connie Converse Was ‘the Female Bob Dylan.’ Then She Disappeared

In an excerpt from his new book, *To Anyone Who Ever Asks: The Life, Music, and Mystery of Connie Converse*, journalist and musician Howard Fishman examines the singer-songwriter’s talent and mysterious life

BY HOWARD FISHMAN

APRIL 28, 2023



Connie Converse singing at Gene Deitch’s home in 1954 COURTESY OF KIM DEITCH

IN 2010, I was at a friend’s party when a song came up on the house speakers — one that sounded both entirely new to me and as familiar as my own skin. A woman was singing in a plaintive tone about “a place they call Lonesome.”

I couldn’t place the song. It had the openhearted, melodic feel of an old Carter Family recording, but there was also some gentle guitar fingerpicking that reminded me of Elizabeth Cotten, and harmonic movement that seemed to echo the songs of Hoagy Carmichael. The traditional elements seemed so finely stitched together, with such a sophisticated sensibility, that the whole sounded absolutely original — modern, even. The song swallowed me. The room disappeared.

Eventually, I sought out the host, and asked what we were listening to. “Oh,” he said. “This is Connie Converse. She made these recordings in her kitchen in the 1950s, but she never found an audience for her music, and then one day she drove away and was never heard from again.”

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In 2009, her 1950s recordings resurfaced on an independently produced album called *How Sad, How Lovely*. It ignited a slow burn that has now become a brush fire. *How Sad, How Lovely* has been streamed more than 16 million times on the Spotify platform alone, and her songs have been covered by the likes of Big Thief and Laurie Anderson. “I have dozens of fans all over the world,” Converse quipped, her humour a mask for her disappointment that no one seemed to want what she had to offer. If only she knew.

I HAVE SPENT THE LAST 13 YEARS chasing Converse’s ghost, trying to nail down details from her shadowy story with the hope of gaining more attention for her extraordinary work.

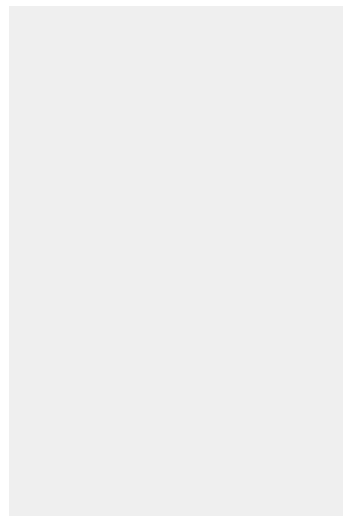
She was born Elizabeth Estlin Converse in 1904 in New Hampshire, the second of three children

an accomplished pianist. Only religious and classical music were allowed in the house when they were growing up. Dancing, alcohol, card playing, and mention of the word sex were forbidden.

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There’s little hard evidence as to what went on behind closed doors in the Converse household, but there are clues embedded in letters, in Converse’s diary, and in the recollections of others. In a letter written in the 1950s, she wrote about her older brother Paul’s mental health issues, and the opinion of his psychotherapist, who seemed to have concluded that:

“Paul’s basic problem seems to have been a DOMINATING mother, from whom he felt he had somehow to escape or else be annihilated... Anyway, one may envision that somewhere inside himself he is still fleeing down a long dark corridor from that genteel, insistent, and horrendous Voice. Well, I’m reading in my own reactions — maybe it wasn’t the Voice that got him; but as for me, I have long thought that if Mother had been stricken mute say, back in nineteenought-twenty, Harvard Street would have been a lovelier place to live in. (And maybe that’s why I’m a notorious mute myself.)”

A brilliant student, Converse attended her mother’s and grandmother’s alma mater, Mount Holyoke College, on a scholarship, but dropped out. According to her younger brother Philip, her whereabouts were “sparse” for the next five years.

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She eventually materialised in New York City, where without a label, a publicist, or an agent (she had a manager for a couple of years, but that relationship netted no real results) Converse became the prototype of today’s DIY songwriter. She made her own recordings in her Greenwich Village apartment, but didn’t manage to break through, mostly (I presumed) because her music was neither fish nor fowl, and the music industry hadn’t known what to do with her.

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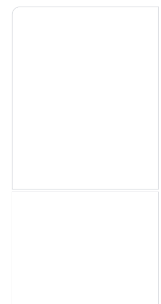
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LOUIS ARMSTRONG IS CREDITED WITH THE LINE, “All music is folk music. I ain’t never heard no horse sing a song.” But as it was understood and used as a term when Converse was getting started, “folk music” meant traditional songs featuring words with no known author and melodies with no known composer.

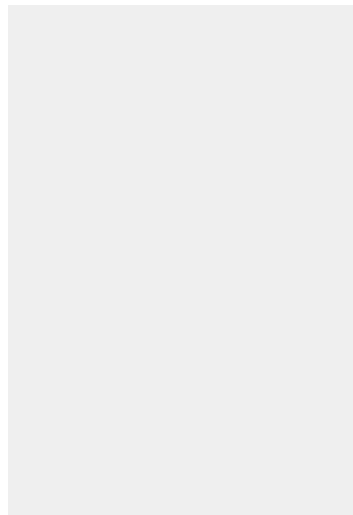
Until Bob Dylan came along, nobody *wrote* folk music. As musician, folk song collector, and scholar Ellen Stekert told me: “John Jacob Niles, well before Dylan, was roundly criticised by the folkies for having written ‘I Wonder as I Wander’ and other songs. It was better to the folkies in those days to have discovered the gem than to have written it. In the ‘50s and early ‘60s, one could write political songs, but there could be no ‘I’ in them, unless the ‘I’ was a farmer, or a coal miner, or a sailor.”

Songwriters like Earl Robinson and Lee Hays were writing original “folk”-flavoured songs in the late 1930s and ‘40s, but it took Dylan to stretch this practice to the breaking point in the early ‘60s. After he’d started composing more personal, introspective, literary-leaning songs, he began quarreling with journalists who called him a “folk singer.”

At some point, the term “singer-songwriter” was coined, with an unspoken understanding that this “genre” of music implies introspective, autobiographical lyrics. Since the 2009 release of her 1950s recordings, some have called Connie Converse “the first singer-songwriter” (a confusing term when taken literally; anyone who’s ever written and sung their own songs is a singer-songwriter, from Jelly Roll Morton to Hank Williams to Beyonce). I think what people mean has to do with the way she performed her songs. We feel taken into her most intimate confidence, a quality we generally think of as belonging to a particular crop of popular artists.

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After I’d first sent Stekert some of Converse’s music, and with no prompting from me, she’d said with absolute amazement, “She was the female Bob Dylan. She was even better than him, as a lyricist and composer, but she didn’t have his showbiz savvy, and she wasn’t interested in writing protest songs. Dylan was in the right place at the right time. Converse was not.”



Connie Converse at Riverside Park in New York in April 1946 PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD AIME; COURTESY OF LOIS AIME

DYLAN ARRIVED IN NEW YORK IN 1961, in the very same month that a disillusioned Converse left. She moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where she spent a decade doing significant work as a political activist and social thinker. Without the benefit of even an undergraduate college degree, Converse began giving public lectures, editing the influential *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, volunteering and agitating in organizations like Women Strike For Peace and People Against Racism, and helping to oversee America’s first “Teach-In” as a way to protest the country’s involvement in Vietnam.

In Michigan she embarked on a number of simultaneous projects, including one she’d begun in her final months in New York – a “Statistical Study of 1000 Melodies.” The study appears to be an attempt to understand, scientifically, what makes a successful song. Converse was essentially doing by hand, ear, and an early computer what programmers a half century later would do on platforms like Pandora and Spotify. “She was predicting the future,” psychology professor Dr Susan A Nolan told me. “She was *tagging!*”

Struggling with mental and physical ailments (“my psychosomatic potential for work was declining,” she wrote) Converse requested a six-month leave of absence from the *Journal*, without pay. In an extraordinary letter to a colleague, she describes having had “half a nervous breakdown following a year or more of the inaudible screaming meemies, accompanied by short but increasing periods... spent partly in extra sleep, since sleep has become the most tolerable condition of my life, but also partly in rather systematic thinking about certain things I want to write... As a long-time novelist manquee, I have one more plot in my bag which I have to shake out before I go...”

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As Converse approached turning 50, she seems to have taken stock of her life, and understood it to be broken. Her friends saw this, too. “She was in ill health at the end,” one told me. In August 1974, she sent cryptic handwritten letters to her closest family and friends telling them she was going away to try to start over again, somewhere else, and that they should not worry about her.

Her nephew Pete told me he remembered watching her walk out to her Volkswagen Beetle (already packed with her guitar and some few belongings), set her bag down on the passenger seat, and start the engine, waving goodbye as she drove away. Neither she nor her car have ever been found.

CONVERSE’S BROTHER PHILIP WAS A CELEBRATED professor emeritus at the University of Michigan. When I began researching Converse’s life, his email address was easy enough to find, so I took a shot. He replied within an hour. Yes, he was Connie Converse’s brother; yes, he was happy to talk to me. How could he be of service? Thus began a correspondence, and a friendship, that lasted until Phil’s death three and a half years later, in 2014.

Phil told me that everything his sister had intentionally left behind was contained in a filing cabinet – something he hadn’t been able to bring himself to open until after his retirement in the early 1990s. When I visited him, he led me out to his garage, flipped on a light, and there, up against the wall, was Connie Converse’s five-drawer metal filing cabinet. It was old and dark, clunky and formidable. Had the moment of discovery been illustrated in a comic book, the cabinet would have been emanating undulating bands of energy like the Holy Grail or the Ark of the Covenant.

There wasn’t just a handful of letters here; there were hundreds of them. Her 1950s recordings were there, but so were boxes containing other old tape reels: oral histories given by members of her family; radio broadcasts of classical concerts she’d recorded; a group of singers rehearsing an unproduced original opera.

There is only one typewritten farewell from Converse that I’m aware of: a one-page all-purpose letter left in her filing cabinet. At the top of it, she scrawled: “8/10/74—This was just one of several efforts, none adequate. A sample.” The letter reads, in part:

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“This is the thin hard sublayer under all the parting messages I’m likely to have sent: let me go, let me be if I can, let me not be if I can’t. For a number of years now I’ve been the object of affectionate concern to my relatives and many friends in Ann Arbor; have received not just financial but spiritual support from them; have made a number of efforts, in this benign situation, to get a new toe-hold on the lively world. Have failed. [...] Human society fascinates me and awes me and fills me with grief and joy; I just can’t find my place to plug into it. So let me go, please; and please accept my thanks for those happy times that each of you has given me over the years; and please know that I would have preferred to give you more than I ever did or could – I am in everyone’s debt.”

In 2011, WHEN I FIRST RAISED THE SUBJECT of Converse’s disappearance with Phil, at his home, I asked if he had reported her missing. He told me that, at one point, he spoke to “a tracer of missing persons” to gain an understanding of what would be involved in looking for her. As Phil told it, the private detective informed him that everyone has the “legal right” to disappear if they want to – that is, were the detective successful in finding Converse, he would be bound by law (Phil’s emphasis) not to reveal her whereabouts if she didn’t want to be found.

How Sad, How Lovely producer Dan Dzula told me that Phil relayed this same information to him.. “It did seem a little odd,” Dzula said. “I mean, isn’t that what private detectives do?” But, as far as Phil had been concerned, that was that; he didn’t pursue the matter any further. Phil felt that to do so would have run counter to his sister’s wishes to be left alone.

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The idea that her story continued is engrossing; the idea that it ended, tragic. For now, the only thing that can be said for certain is that Converse was last seen in Ann Arbor, in August 1974, her final, furtive act utterly consistent with how her life might be described: unpredictable and inevitable; opaque and mesmerising; complete and unfinished; and almost unbelievable.

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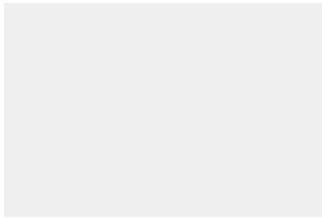
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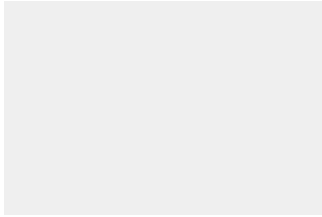
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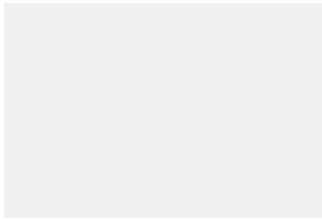
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