



PHOTO BY LUCIEN KNUTESON

The unlabeled man

Leon Rosselson still sings for the excluded

BY MIKE WOLD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

If you didn't hear about the Leon Rosselson concert in Seattle in late July, you're not alone. Fewer than 100 people attended West Seattle's Kenyon Hall to hear English singers Rosselson and Robb Johnson perform an acoustic set of mostly political songs.

Acoustic they may be, but neither is he strictly a "folk" singer — Rosselson in particular insists that he only accepts the label "folk" because there's no place else to put his albums in the record stores. And Rosselson consistently rejects the label of a "political" songwriter.

Although Rosselson has had moments of "fame" — from writing songs for a seminal English TV show in the 1960s to a Billy Bragg cover that made the indie charts — he's better known in the music community for his accomplished and complex guitar arrangements and his complicated, literate and often satirical lyrics. He has a consistent and unpatronizing sympathy for the excluded of society, the "hungry and the homeless, downtrodden and distressed" in "Harry's Gone Fishing" or, as he also put it in "The Ugly Ones":

*What shall we do with the ugly ones
The ones who have nothing to sell
The failures, the fumbling muddy ones*

*Who never do anything well
Who never remember their name or number
And lose their place in the queue?
And what can you do for the ugly ones
When they can't do a thing for you?*

At 77, Rosselson has just issued a four-CD retrospective of 72 songs, "World Turned Upside Down: Rosselsons 1960 – 2010," he recorded over five decades with supporting musicians including Roy Bailey, Billy Bragg, Martin Carthy and the Oyster Band. With tour-mate Johnson, he's also recently issued a CD of stories, readings and songs from a show he created about the life of Thomas Paine, one of America's more radical founding fathers, on the 250th anniversary of Paine's birth in Thetford, England.

Mike Wold: *Your best-known song and the title song of your CD set, "The World Turned Upside Down," is a kind of anthem about the Diggers, a group of early socialists who resisted the privatization of the English common lands in the 1600s. Many of your other songs have political topics or reference working-class history — yet you don't like being called a political songwriter.*

Leon Rosselson: I'm not working class and I don't see myself as representing working-

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class politics. I try to create well-crafted story songs about people — it's a bit like writing mini-plays. Of course, politics is part of life.

What I don't like is to be labeled as political. If you're a political songwriter, people expect you to write songs with messages; I write songs. The world I live in includes everything. I write songs for children; I write songs about relationships and songs about my relationship with the world. I write songs about the past, when it seems to me that it has relevance, because they say something to people today.

My most recent song is about a guy who is on incapacity (disability) benefit. The British government is giving people on incapacity benefit a computer test which will reassess them and push them into some awful job or else they'll be on job seeker's allowance, which is less than what they get now — much less. That's the politics. You've got to make something out of it, which is not a description of the politics but a story. So I created a story about Jim, who may or not be justifiably on incapacity benefit. It's a story. You're always going to get different interpretations. It's multidimensional — if you're writing a statement song or a slogan song or a song with a message, there's only one dimension, which is good for gathering the faithful and giving heart to the believers. They need those songs, but it's not mainly what I write.

M.W.: *Most people I've talked to about songwriting say you should keep a song simple, with lots of repetition and not too many lyrics, to avoid overwhelming the audience. Your songs, which I quite like, are the opposite of that: They're full of words. Is this a completely different aesthetic?*

L.R.: If you're writing a pop song, that would be very good advice. I see song differently: I don't see why if people can watch three hours of King Lear or Chekhov, they can't listen to seven-minute songs. It makes demands on the audience, but if they can make the effort I don't think it should be a problem.

M.W.: *In the liner notes to the CD set, you talk about being influenced by the chanson movement in France.*

L.R.: That would include George Brassans, Jacque Brel and other singers like [Edith] Piaf. Brassans' songs, for example, can be extremely demanding and complex and quite literary. When I went to hear him, he never even spoke to the audience, he just sang. He said, "I write for the ears, not for the eyes." People were listening, song after song. They were obviously popular; they sold millions of records. The problem is not with the audience but with the expectations of song in Britain and America. It's not seen as an art form, more as a lower class of poetry. But I like to think of it as an art in its own right, which you should take seriously.

M.W.: *What hope do you see for the future?*

L.R.: When you're 77, the hope you see is for the children and the grandchildren. I'm not all that optimistic about the future for them.

Looking back over those decades on the CD set, the '60s was a hopeful decade, although we were a bit naïve then. Since then, it's been downhill ever since in many ways. You have to keep on. William Morris (19th century writer and socialist visionary) says you may get what you think you fought for, but in the end it turns out to be not what you fought for, and you have to fight for your vision again under another name.

M.W.: *What would be your vision?*

L.R.: My vision would be a transformed society, not based on money and greed. It's in the song about William Morris, "Bringing the News from Nowhere."