

Just Folks

FROM 'TOM DOOLEY' TO
'CHARLIE ON THE M.T.A.' AND
MORE: **THE KINGSTON TRIO**
IN EUGENE

By David Ainsworth

Hang down your head, Tom Dooley, hang down your head and cry. Hang down your head, Tom Dooley, poor boy, you're bound to die."

This North Carolina folk song is based on the 1866 murder of a woman named Laura Foster. She was killed by a man named Tom Dula, whose last name is pronounced as "Dooley" in the ballad.

It is hard to say where "Tom Dooley" originated. Credit ranges from the poet Thomas Land, who wrote a song about the murder and hanging, to folklorists John and Alan Lomax, who collected the folk song and published it in 1947.

Many recordings soon followed. One recording stands above them all: the version by the Kingston Trio, a folk group formed in the San Francisco Bay Area. Their version soon hit No. 1 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 charts in 1958 and has become one of the Trio's signature songs.

The Kingston Trio is more than just "Tom Dooley." Since their formation, the group scored numerous hits in the 1950s and 1960s and is still going strong today, even though all the current members have only been together the past few years — and are all 60 or older. They will perform all their hits and more on Sunday, April 16, at the Hult Center.

The current Trio consists of Mike Marvin (vocals, banjo, rhythm guitar), Tim Gorelangton (vocals, banjo, rhythm guitar) and Buddy Woodward (tenor guitar, conga, plectrum banjo). All have unique stories about how they got into the group. Marvin, in particular, had firsthand access to the original group. Back when the Trio was popular during the folk music revival in the U.S., he was backstage for some of their performances, and Nick Reynolds, one of the Trio's founding members, became his guide.

"He was my mentor and best friend for years and years

and years," says Marvin, 78. "After he retired from the Kingston Trio, we maintained our friendship all through our lives until he died." Marvin lived with Reynolds during his teen years, gaining a unique perspective on the band. He was able to experience both the operational side and how they rehearsed.

Gorelangton's friendship with Marvin goes back about 55 years. They discovered each other while singing in ski bars at Lake Tahoe. One day, Marvin asked Gorelangton to join him on stage. "He said, 'Why don't you come up here and let's do some Kingston Trio songs?'" says Gorelangton, 75.

The present incarnation of the Trio started with a letter from Bob Shane, another founder, to Marvin in response to a music video Marvin made from one of Shane's songs. In the letter, Shane mentioned that he was thinking about stepping aside from the Trio.

"He had seen us sing, and so he thought it would be a good idea to take it to the next stage," Marvin says.

The original Kingston Trio was formed by Shane, Dave Guard and Nick Reynolds in 1957. Guard and Shane grew up together in Hawaii, while Shane later met Reynolds at Menlo College. At the same time, Guard was attending Stanford. When they finally met up, the Trio was born. Several of their most-famous songs were recorded during this time, including "M.T.A.," "A Worried Man," and, of course, "Tom Dooley." Guard left the group in 1961 and was replaced by John Stewart, with whom they recorded their version of "Where Have All the Flowers Gone." This iteration of the group remained until 1967, when the group split up.

Marvin, Gorelangton and Woodward, the current Trio, have been labeled a tribute act, since they were

not involved in the Trio's classic lineups. The current members make it clear that they are not a tribute act, and Marvin uses the San Francisco 49ers football team as an interesting analogy: The team today is not the same as the teams that have won five Super Bowls, and yet they are unmistakably the 49ers.

"Of that original team of Joe Montana and Jerry Rice and Carl Monroe and all those guys, there's not a single guy left, and most of the fans don't even remember the team," Marvin says. "But they're still the San Francisco 49ers."

Furthermore, Marvin's experience as a filmmaker has helped bring an authentic experience for audiences. "He has designed the show to pretty much what it would be like to see the Kingston Trio in 1962 or 1963 at a casino or a club date," Woodward says.

Marvin's background working with Reynolds has also been key. "Mike had the enviable experience of having sat in front or backstage for 60 or 70 original Kingston Trio concerts," Gorelangton says.

The Trio are not done making new music. During the pandemic, they made an album of John Stewart songs called *Long Train of Dreams*. They have an upcoming reissue called *The Kingston Trio Still at Large*, and they are also creating new ideas for a new album of older songs to be released next summer.

With their unique voices, the current Kingston Trio are making the group their own, while at the same time bringing back the Trio's old acoustic sound and performance styles.

"We're preserving the fire," Woodward says. ■

The Kingston Trio performs Sunday, April 16, at the Hult Center's Sorenson Theater. Available tickets range from \$36 to \$45. More information is at hultcenter.org/events/kingston-trio/ and KingstonTrio.com.



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