

With End Construction reunion, a gathering of folk heroes

By Scott McLennan | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 21, 2013

Stuart Ferguson and Kevin So were sitting together at Westborough's Old Vienna Kaffeehaus waiting for their turns at the fabled venue's final open-microphone session when So turned to Ferguson and asked, "What was it like back then?"

Ferguson had to laugh, never before considering himself part of a "glory days" of any sort.

But Ellis Paul, in a separate interview, supplied an appropriate answer to the question So posed that night in 1996.

"The singer-songwriter was king back then," says Paul.

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From 1989 to 1992, you could say the End Construction collective of Paul, Jon Svetkey, Jim Infantino, and Brian Doser held the keys to the kingdom. The foursome traveled as a team from open mike to open mike and in 1990 recorded the CD "Resume Speed: A New Artist Compilation."



JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

"We had this competitive and supportive relationship among us," says Jon Svetkey (above right), about his fellow folk mates in End Construction, Brian Doser and Jim Infantino (above, from left) and Ellis Paul (below).

End Construction, featuring Ellis Paul, Jim Infantino, Jon Svetkey, and Brian Doser

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Raising the bar for the quality of performances at open-mike nights and drawing attention to a new generation of singer-songwriters, End Construction by many accounts buoyed a blossoming scene that included Ferguson, Dar Williams, Martin Sexton, Don White, Maria Sangiolo, and several others working a literate brand of contemporary folk music.

Date of concert: Sunday at 5 and 8 p.m.

Ticket price: \$25

“Looking back at Cambridge of the late ’50s and ’60s folk scene, you had a similar constellation of remarkable talent hitting the zeitgeist of the time. The late ’80s and early ’90s had the same sort of scene associated with the heyday of Club 47,” says Tim Mason, who booked the Old Vienna Kaffeehaus.

End Construction is reuniting Sunday for two shows at Club Passim (Club 47’s descendant) to benefit Ferguson as he contends with ongoing treatment for multiple myeloma.

While people outside of End Construction credit the group for bringing focus to a musical community and spurring a movement in Boston to rival New York City’s Fast Folk scene, those within the ensemble say it was simply their way of getting better at the craft.

“We had this competitive and supportive relationship among us,” says Svetkey, who now performs with the Loomers.

The four joined forces after attending a party at Doser’s place where they all developed a mild food poisoning and crashed there.

“The next morning the acoustic guitars came out,” says Doser, who now performs mostly concerts for children.

While each had his own sound, they also had complementary styles and different enough personalities that Paul says End Construction would have made a great reality TV subject.

Beyond performing well as a team, each musician had a skill that could propel them all career-wise. Paul had the big mailing list; Infantino had the PR skills; Doser had

access to the recording facilities at Emerson College, where he worked; and Svetkey was organizing appearances and radio play once the CD was released in 1990.

Each member of the collective said the others provided valuable influence. For example, Infantino, who now leads Jim's Big Ego, says End Construction helped open his eyes to folk's possibilities.

"Before the ensemble, I had a fixed opinion about what a good song was. I was more in the Bob Dylan camp than in the Beatles camp," Infantino says. "But working with these guys, I got the Beatles better, and I got the group mentality and how to incorporate it all into a really good show."

And that good show, Paul recalls, rested on competitiveness as much as it did on cooperation.

"We always tried to out-literate and outsing each other," says Paul, who is readying his 19th album for a spring release.

Infantino is actually a little surprised the four have remained close over the years, saying, "We hurt each other's feelings at times. We were not all that careful with each other and kind of brutal."

But there is no denying the quality of songs that friction produced. "Resume Speed" is an essential sampler with four songs from each member and not a clunker in the mix, which runs from Paul's emotive ballads to Svetkey's edgy rockers. The music is available again via the End Construction Bandcamp site. Sales of the download will also benefit Ferguson.



Ellis Paul.

The release of "Resume Speed" led to a tour that brought End Construction to Nashville, Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh, places where the players were heralded for being part of national folk revival, not simply a Boston dust-up.

Ferguson was part of the End Construction “family,” hitting the same open mikes and then routinely opening for Paul when the ensemble ultimately dissolved as each member was capable of being a headliner.

“Hanging out with those guys, I learned more about songwriting than I ever could have anywhere else,” Ferguson says. “We were all stumbling around together.”

Around 1991, the duo of Lyn O’Conor and Heather Quay was also on the Boston folk scene. Ferguson and O’Conor eventually married, while Svetkey and Quay did the same, with the two couples remaining close.

Doser and Ferguson also stayed in touch, and the recording engineer encouraged Ferguson into making his first album, “Shackles and Ties,” in 2004. Ferguson then made “Love Songs (and Other Tall Tales)” in 2010.

While Ferguson is not in shape to attend the shows on Sunday, End Construction will perform some of his songs alongside their compositions — old and new.

“It’s easy to see what’s horrible in the world, but when the chips are down, people are actually quite good,” Ferguson says. “I’m so fortunate to have this insane, amazing group around me.”

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