

# Everyone Knows Peter, Paul and Mary. But What About Bob?

By JAMES BARRON

The world is full of who-knew jobs, jobs you did not know were jobs until you found out that somebody did them. Who knew that Peter, Paul and Mary had a "recording secretary"?

That was the title suggested by Noel Paul Stookey — Paul to the world. The man who had the job wrote down the vocal lines that Mr. Stookey and Peter Yarrow and Mary Travers improvised in rehearsal so they would remember them. And no, Mr. Stookey did not have a pun in mind, suggesting "recording secretary" as a title for someone who listened in at, um, recording sessions, sometimes telling the engineer to squelch this note or boost that one.

The man in question was Robert De Cormier, 94, who served as their music director for 17 years — arranging, conducting and, when things became heated in rehearsals, doubling as diplomat and mediator. Mr. Yarrow had a different description of Mr. De Cormier's job: fourth member of Peter, Paul and Mary.

He will be celebrated at a concert on Thursday at Symphony Space on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. It is a benefit for Operation Respect, a nonprofit dedicated to eliminating bullying among children. Mr. Yarrow was one of its founders.

"He lived the same imperative that Peter, Paul and Mary did," Mr. Yarrow said, "thinking of this music not just as an art form that had beauty, and that's admirable in and of itself, but also as a vehicle for spreading a certain kind of sensibility."

"We're not just talking about pretty music," Mr. Yarrow said. "We're talking about conveying a sense of commitment and urgency."

Mr. De Cormier did not sing at their concerts or go on tour with them. But he did not go unseen. On holiday concerts that aired on PBS, the camera showed him in



JACOB HANNAH FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Robert De Cormier, who arranged music for many singers and groups, at his home in Vermont. Top right, Mr. De Cormier, left, and Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul and Mary performing in 2006.

ety, which Mr. De Cormier directed from 1970 to 1987. He led a musical double life, as a choral director and a composer in classical music and as an arranger and a conductor in folk and pop.

Mr. Yarrow, Mr. Stookey and Ms. Travers had tried to hire Mr. De Cormier when they were starting out, in 1960. "Bob was our first choice," Mr. Stookey said, "and we didn't get him." He was busy working with Harry

## War II.

Any thought of playing in an Army band ended when he was assigned to the infantry and sent to Europe. Any thought of a career as a trumpeter ended when he was hit by a mortar shell that all but destroyed his wrist.

He was eventually sent to recuperate in a hospital on Staten Island, where he read about a chorus being formed in Manhattan for the Congress of Industrial Organizations, a union that later merged with the American Federation of Labor. He auditioned, and at one rehearsal, met the folk singer Pete Seeger.

Mr. De Cormier considered becoming a union organizer but decided on music, entering the Juilliard School of Music. Along the way, he met performers such as Huddie Ledbetter, the folk and blues musician known as Lead

tor Joseph R. McCarthy. "I told Harry I didn't want to jeopardize him in any way. I was on many lists."

He said he had joined the Communist Party when he was younger and had worked at Camp Unity in Wingdale, N.Y., in Dutchess County. The Encyclopedia of the American Left mentioned Camp Unity in connection with "Cold War harassment — including a 1955 investigation to uncover Communists' use of summer camps to indoctrinate and disaffect American youth."

Mr. Yarrow recalled that the United States was just coming out of the blacklist period in the late 1950s. "You were trying not to be pursued by Joe McCarthy and his legacy," Mr. Yarrow said. "The shadow of being tainted in that way, it was like 'Puff the Magic Dragon.' I can't get rid of the rumor that it was about



CBS VIA GETTY

From left, Peter Yarrow, Mr. Stookey and Mary Travers performing on "The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour" in 1969.

taught before he worked for Mr. Belafonte. "Mary used to wax on about him because she was in love as a young adolescent with this music teacher at Little Red," Mr. Stookey said. "Mary thought he was staggeringly good looking. He was the Paul Newman, the iconic representation."

Mr. De Cormier said he did not expect her to become famous in

listener, editor, and secretary. "They would improvise a lot where we got something we liked, I would write it down because if I didn't, the next was start all over again."

Mr. Yarrow said Mr. De Cormier was important because "none of us was musically late enough to write it down. 'I could do it laborious, but