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Philly's baseball troubadour

Folk singer Brodsky celebrates hometown heroes

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

Ask Chuck Brodsky how things are going and he doesn't hesitate before answering. "Well, the Phillies are in a pennant race," he says. "So life is good." But even if Brodsky's hometown team weren't fighting for first place in the National League East, you still get the feeling from talking to him that life would be good anyway.

That's because Brodsky is a successful touring folk singer and songwriter with a loyal following, several critically acclaimed albums to his credit, and plenty of big-name friends who might join him on stage on any given night.

And then there's baseball, which he's loved since he was a kid and has provided the subject matter for one of his most popular and widely lauded projects -- his 2002 album, *The Baseball Ballads*.

Brodsky, whose first album, *A Fingerpainter's Murals*, came out in 1995, says he wasn't looking to write an album full of baseball songs, but the idea came to him organically through words of encouragement from fans after he debuted his first baseball song, "Lefty," a few years earlier.

"I was too shy to play 'Lefty' publicly," Brodsky says. "I thought a song about sports would be too trite. But five or six years after I wrote it, I was playing at a folk festival in Texas, sitting around a campfire, and I played it and people really responded.

"I was shocked. I mentioned that I had been timid about playing it, but they thought it was a great song and encouraged me to play it publicly and I did. I kept getting a good response."

That song, which is "semi-factual" and based on Hall of Fame pitcher Steve Carlton, was followed by "The Ballad of Eddie Klepp," written about the first white man to play in the Negro Leagues.

"All of a sudden, people were referring to me as 'the guy who writes baseball songs,' and I was having fun, so I kept at it. By the time I got to the seventh song, I started really tasting it and started making plans to do a baseball record."

The result is a brilliant work of musical storytelling that touches on Carlton and Klepp and other characters of the game, such as legendary baseball clown Max Patkin and pitcher Dock Ellis, plus Bonehead Merkle, Moe Berg and Eddie Waitkus.

The two songs closest to Brodsky's heart are about a pair of his favorite Phillies of all time, Richie Allen and Richie Ashburn. The first is "Letters in the Dirt," which Brodsky says is about Allen and also the relationship between Brodsky and his own father.

The second, "Whitey and Harry," details former player and broadcaster Ashburn's death and his absence from the broadcast booth alongside legend Harry Kalas.

"The songs mean a lot to me and apparently a lot of other people my age who grew up in Philadelphia," he says.

The songs also mean a lot to the braintrust in a certain old building in Cooperstown, N.Y.

In fact, Tim Wiles, the director of research at the National Baseball Hall of Fame, liked the album so much that he called it "a new chapter in the folklore of our national pastime," and put the songs in the Hall's Sound Recording Library.

"I'm just thrilled and overjoyed," Brodsky says of the honor. "I'm at a loss for words even now. I never envisioned anything like this when I started writing these songs. I was just having fun with it. But the fact that the Baseball Hall of Fame would acknowledge my music that way is an incredible thrill."

Brodsky always pursued some form of baseball success, having played second base and center field into his junior year of high school.

"I wasn't remarkably good," he says. "I didn't have a future. I sure enjoyed it, though."

Brodsky eventually moved out of Philadelphia and now lives in North Carolina, but he keeps track of his Phillies via MLB.TV and still writes baseball songs. He says he can't escape the dramatic pull of the subject matter.

"It's very colorful and it's a universal experience, I guess, for people in North America and now South and Central America and so many places around the world -- the idea of being initiated by one's father and taken to games as a kid," he says. "It's a very universal experience. That's one side of it."

"And it's got such colorful folklore. There have been so many great characters and so many strange but true and wonderful stories. That lends itself to be written about."

And Brodsky continues to write. He contributed a new song, "The Curse of the Billy Goat," to the [Cubs compilation CD *Take Me Out to a Cubs Game*](#) to go along with the previously recorded "Bonehead Merkle," and he says he's planning on another *Baseball Ballads* album.

"I'm about two songs shy," he says. "I'm working on it bit by bit. One song will be about Disco Demolition Day at the old Comiskey Park, and one will be about going to the final game ever played at Connie Mack Stadium in Philly."

"I'm sure I'll come up with a few more."

Doug Miller is a Senior Writer for [MLB.com/Entertainment](#). This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.