

The Man Who 'Translated' Tolkien

Santa Cruz

The shortish, slender man with the salt-and-pepper beard-and-mustache ensemble scurries into the small cafe with a fretted look that immediately suggests the harried rabbit of "Alice in Wonderland." One cocks an ear, half expecting to hear him mutter, "I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date. . ."

And he nearly was.

Author Peter Beagle had just done two Famous Visiting Author Star Turns, two days each back-to-back, in Los Angeles and San Francisco — newspaper interviews, radio and TV talk shows, the whole instant celebrity trip, hating it a lot and loving it very much — and then hit bad traffic out of San Francisco that almost made him late to what he calls "my safe place."

This is L'Oustalou, a fine

French restaurant so tiny and unpretentious that even the term unpretentious seems sort of . . . well, pretentious.

In this city for five years now, Beagle has kept in virtual hiding from the fanfaronading and media whoopee common to modern literary life, masquerading on Saturday nights at L'Oustalou as a modest little French cafe singer of no particular distinction, and he is amused by his own presumption.

In fact, he is quite good. He accompanies himself on guitar, his face deadly serious, the way real French faces are when singing of love, his light baritone skipping deftly across, and then under, the surfaces of songs by George Bransens, Jacques Brel, Charles Aznavour, Leo Ferre and other modern poet-singers.

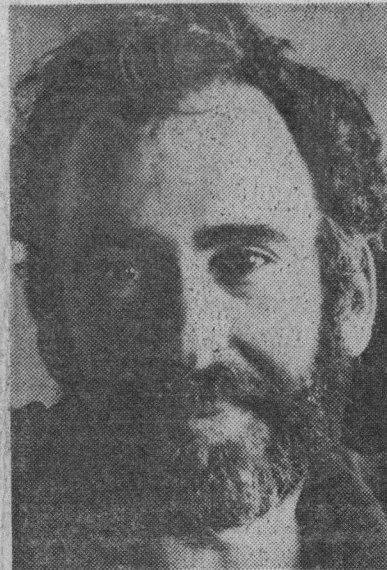
Between sets he visits several

tables, and he stops to chat — did he just square his shoulders, ever so slightly? — about the cause of his unaccustomed current celebrity.

Beagle did the screenplay for the long-awaited Ralph Bakshi cartoon filming of the first part of "The Lord of the Rings," the J.R.R. Tolkien cult classic.

If you've ever heard of Tolkien and his following — which means if you haven't been living at the bottom of McMurdo Sound — you might realize that the magnitude of Beagle's mission could be likened to that of a heavenly stenographer, told by Moses at Mt. Sinai, "I'm absolutely bushed, Peter. Take these tablets and brief them down a little. . ."

Beagle appears undaunted at mention that the much-heralded film, which opened to critical no-



PETER BEAGLE
'Better I should try it . . .'

tices that are politely referred to as "mixed" — which, in California, meant that they ranged from lukewarm to icily disdainful.

It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that the plot of Tolkien's Ring

trilogy renders the story line of Richard Wagner's epic four-opera "Ring of Nibelung" cycle comparatively about as complex as an episode of "Bowling for Dollars."

So how — not to say why — tackle Tolkien's incredibly detailed mythical world and translate that to a movie audience?

Beagle shrugs again, diffidently, and says with guileless candor — a trait he himself has noted with some guile — "I'll admit that I always had some reservations about whether it could be done, or should even be attempted. But I know that Bakshi and Saul Zaentz, the producer, were really committed to the project, and when it was offered to me, despite my trepidation, I figured, well, better I should try it than someone else. . ."

Without asserting total mastery over, or admitting abject defeat by, the massive original, Beagles talked easily about the problems. "If you're familiar with Tolkien, you know the immense

amount of detail — the genealogies, the prehistories, and the episodic way the narrative unfolds.

"It was a staggering amount of work to keep in what the viewer needs to know where he is in the story, and yet not numb the audience with too much detail."

And can Beagle offer some definite word whether Part Two ever will, in fact reach the screen? Bakshi himself, publicly proud of Part One, has been quoted as saying, "Only one movie was shot. The second will come when it comes," while Zaentz has said, "There are no plans per se, although there have been some preliminary discussions with the scriptwriter."

That is true, Beagle confirms. "I think the whole thing depends on the public's reaction to it, and the indications seem to be that it's doing well. And if it seems meant to be, my inclination is the same as earlier: Better I should try it than someone else."

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