

RECORD REVIEWS

Folklore and Politics Revisited, 1974: A Review Essay

By Jens Lund

Records:

A Fiddlers' Convention in Mountain City, Tennessee: 1924-1930 Recordings. Vance's Tennessee Breakdowners, Clarence "Tom" Ashely, Fiddlin' John Carson, The Hill Billies, Charlie Lowman and his Brothers, Fiddlin' Powers Family, Fiddlin' John Carson and his Virginia Reelers, G.B. Grayson and Henry Whitter. 12 selections, vocal and instrumental. Mono. Notes pamphlet by Joe Wilson. County 525, 1972. County Sales, Box 191, Floyd, Va. 24091. \$4.50.

"Laywire Mac" Harry A. McClintock. 14 selections: 11 songs, 2 anecdotes, 1 tale. Mono. Recorded, with interview and notes pamphlet by Sam Lskin. Folkways FL 5272. 1972. Folkways Records and Service Co., 701 Seventh Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10036. \$5.98.

Power to the working Class: Songs for a Workers Revolution. anonymous singers and musicians from the Progressive Labor Party. 15 songs. Stereo. Progressive Labor Party PLR-LP (OR 003). n.d. Challenge, G.I.C. Box 800, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11201. \$2.50. (available on cassette or 8-track for \$3.50).

Books:

American Folksongs of Protest. By John Greenway. Pp. 348. Discographical Appendix. Reprint of 1953 University of Pennsylvania Press edition. New York: Octagon Books (Furrar, Strauss, and Giroux), 1970. \$13.50, cloth.

The Marxist Minstrels. By David A. Noebel. Pp. 352. Revised edition of 1966 Rhythm, Riots and Revolution. Tulsa, Okla.: Christian Crusade Press. 1973. \$2.50. paper, \$3.50, cloth. Available from Christian Crusade. P.O. Box 977, Tulsa, Okla., 74027.

Twenty-three years ago, a young folklore student at the University of Pennsylvania wrote a doctoral dissertation titled "American Folksongs of Social and Economic Protest." The basic premise of his work was that much of the folksong heritage of the United States was an expression of class protest. Greenway stated, in his introduction, "Folk, in our culture is an economic term. . . The modern folk is most often the unskilled worker." Reaction to Greenway's thesis, after its publication in 1953 as American Folksongs of Protest, was sharp and varied. Stith Thompson rejected Greenway's class-based definition of "the folk" and even stated that Greenway's collection, "included not a single example of a genuine folksong." On the other hand the politically oriented folksong magazine, Sing Out! praised Greenway's research, stating that it was, "About time someone in the academic world recognized the folksongs of the workers." Since then, numerous writers have

debated the authenticity of Greenway's selection of songs. In particular, his choice of Aunt Molly Jackson, Woody Guthrie, Ella Mae Higgins, and Joe Glazer as "folk composers" has been challenged, as there is little or no evidence to suggest that their compositions have become part of oral tradition.

Almost twenty years later, two doctoral dissertations, one in folklore at Indiana University and one in sociology at Simon Fraser University cleared the confusion somewhat. Richard Reuss' and R. Serge Denisoff's "Folk Consciousness: People's Music and American Communism" (published in 1971 by University of Illinois Press as Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left), pointed out that, following suggestions by Michael Gold in the Daily Worker in 1925, the Communist Party-U.S.A. and other Left-wing groups, such as the early C.I.O. unions, began using the form of American folksong to preach the content of Marxist politics. Both "hillbilly" and blues forms were used for this purpose in the following decade, and, by the time of the "folk music revival" of the 1960's, the idea of folksong as "protest song" was widely accepted by many Americans. Thus, it was only natural that such causes as the Civil Rights and Viet Nam peace movements used folk-like song material to phrase their slogans. Probably more than any other person, Pete Seeger has personified this trend.

It is not surprising that the notion of folksong as a "Communist plot to enslave America's youth" has been an important tenet of many American Right-wing organizations. The John Birch Society and Rev. Billy James Hargis' Christian Crusade have led the chorus of denunciations from the right. Rev. David A. Noebel, a writer for Hargis' group, wrote the book Rhythm, Riots, and Revolution in 1966, arguing that juvenile delinquency was caused by Rock 'n' roll music, and that modern youth's lack of patriotism was a result of subversive folk music. Noebel supplied much of the same documentation linking "folksingers" to Leftist causes that later appeared in Denisoff and Reuss' works. His conclusions, which linked musical form to political behavior, and finally suggested that the whole thing was hatched in Moscow, were a patchwork of spurious conspiracies, plots and counterplots, and contrived cause-and-effect, typical of Rightist literature.

My own research has uncovered examples of the role of Right-wing politics in the history of American vernacular song. Some song material, such as "Little Lary Hagan's" many variants, and the derogatory stanza often sung by whites to "Run, Nigger, Run," could properly be considered Right-wing folksong. Much of the rest has been performed in folk or folk-like style, such as the segregationist "hate discs" issued by Rebel-Rebel records of Crowley, Louisiana during the 1960's.

The fact is that folk music and music stylistically patterned after folk music is not intrinsically political. Leftist groups, especially Communist ones, have made use of folk music for propagandistic purposes. This does not make folk music a Soviet plot any more than Henry Ford's championing of old-time fiddle-music, as opposed to jazz (which he considered Jewish-dominated) makes fiddling intrinsically anti-Semitic. But old fallacies die hard and both the Left and the Right continue to make dubious connections between musical genre and ideology. Greenway's personal conversion from the Communist-leaning Left to the John Birch Society-leaning Right adds fuel to the fire, as he can now speak as an "expert" on "Left-wing folksongs." A knowledgeable reader of American Folksongs of Protest can see that he was no expert on folksong, just as a knowledgeable observer of his present one-man crusade against marijuana might doubt Greenway's expertise in pharmacology.

American Folksongs of Protest has been out of print in recent years. A reprint edition has now been released by Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux's Octagon Books. It is identical to the 1953 University of Pennsylvania edition (and to the 1960 A.S. Barnes Perpetun paperback). Perhaps Greenway's ideological shift has made him reluctant to allow it to be republished, for it seems to be a marketable book, appealing as it does, to the public's preconceived notions about folksong. In spite of its great shortcomings, it is valuable, containing over 300 "protest songs," many of which are not published elsewhere except in scarce early People's Songs Bulletins and Sing Out!'s. The price of the reprint, \$13.50 (the 1960 paperback was \$1.95!) is, however, inexcusable and for that reason I cannot recommend its purchase. Fortunately, many public and university libraries have copies available, although persons unfamiliar with "protest song" should also consult Denisoff's Great Day Coming and Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson's The Sounds of Social Change: Studies in Popular Culture (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972).

David Noebel's The Marxist Minstrels is a revised and expanded edition of the earlier Rhythm, Riots, and Revolution. In the original, the focus had been upon the difference in juvenile delinquency rates between two midwestern cities, one of whose teenagers listened primarily to rock 'n' roll, and the other, whose youth did not. The new work expands these disobedience, crime, drug abuse, decline of patriotism, public disorder--in short, all negative qualities of modern youth, as perceived by the author--are traceable to rock 'n' roll and politicized "folksong." Kremlin masterminds have, of course, plotted the whole thing, giving Chuck Berry's famous lines, "Hail, hail, Rock 'n' roll, deliver me from the days of old!" their most literal meaning. Ironically, a few New Left spokesmen have made similar claims. John Sinclair, guru of Ann Arbor's Rainbow People's Party still extols rock as "the music of the Revolution," and Eldridge Cleaver has hailed the "liberation" of white youth's minds and bodies by popular music since Elvis Presley.

Rev. Noebel's new revised edition is considerably more detailed in its attention to Communist use of folksong, due, no doubt, to careful study of Great Day Coming's footnotes. The release of Denisoff's book was hailed by Noebel in Christian Crusade Weekly as "New Work on Folk Music Verifies Crusade's Stand." Many of the "folk music revival's" spokesmen attacked Great Day Coming, and its author was publicly accused of "Red-baiting" at a meeting of the American Folklore Society. Although the charges of deliberate McCarthyism are unfair, Denisoff's conception of "folksong" controlled by party ideologues can easily lead to such a misunderstanding. Neuss' dissertation, which portrays the Left romantically inspired by folksong, rather than cynically manipulating it, is perhaps more accurate, and certainly more diplomatic, but it remains unpublished.

Persons who have not read Rhythm, Riots, and Revolution can benefit from a look at The Marxist Minstrels to gain an understanding of the exaggerated controversies that have dogged the urban folksong phenomenon. The price, \$2.50, is not high, although one might have some qualms about contributing to the coffers of Largis' organization.

The three records reviewed in this essay were chosen to illustrate some of the effects that politics has had on the recording of folk and folk-like music in the United States.

A Fiddlers' Convention in Mountain City, Tennessee contains twelve selections of old-time "hillbilly" music played by leading Southern folk recording artists of the 1920's. It is one of the best anthologies of "hillbilly" string band music available--all of the selections are clear, well-played and exciting. "Tom" Ashley's "Old John Hardy" and "Dark Holler Blues" are fine examples of banjo-accompanied ballad and white blues, respectively. Grayson and Hitter's tongue-in-cheek "Never Be As Fast As I Have Been" and the Bowman Brothers' "Roll On, Buddy" are other highlights of this recommendable album. Al Hopkins' Hill Billies, "the band that named the music," are present, as is the first "hillbilly" recording artist, Fiddlin' John Carson. None of these recordings was actually made at the legendary 1925 fiddlers' convention, but all of the artists were present, and one ensemble, the Hill Billies, resulted from a meeting of some musicians that took there. Joe Wilson's notes state that the selections were chosen as typical of the artists represented, thereby suggesting the music probably played by the convention's participants. Wilson suggests that the success of the gathering gave recording executives the incentive to greatly expand their handling of "hillbilly" material, thus causing the boom in commercial recording of rural folk music that lasted until the Depression.

Despite the record's quality, one glaring omission from the notes affects the total record-package. This is the failure of the notes' author to mention the political motivation that inspired the event--namely that it was sponsored by the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan, like Henry Ford, was convinced that the elusive "International Jewish Banking Conspiracy" (or IJBC, as Nathanael West called it in "A Cool Million"), was using Negroid Jazz to subvert White Christian American youth. (Similarities to Noebel's reasoning are hardly coincidental.) Ford extolled Anglo-Saxon and Irish fiddle-music and square-dance as a way of returning America to its proper and moral musical heritage. The Klan, at that time espousing a self-consciously bourgeois image, prescribed marching bands, barber-shop quartettes, glee clubs, and choruses. Although there may have been other KKK folk music ventures, the Mountain City Fiddlers' Convention was the only major effort by the Klan to use the White Anglo-Saxon's folk music to revitalize his racial solidarity.

Although John Carson's associations with Tom Watson and the Talmadges' politics are noted by Wilson, there is no mention of Klan's role in the Mountain City gathering. This is a pity. The relation of folk music to non-Leftist causes is a historical fact and attempts to protect the reputations of artists are self-negating. One can disagree with the politics of Richard Wagner, Theodore Dreiser, Pablo Picasso, Leni Kiefenstahl, Ezra Pound, Pete Seeger, and Roy Acuff, to name only a few, but the Klan and Ford's musical nostalgia was an important factor in the history of American vernacular music, as were the Communists' attempts to forge "People's music" from folk music. Neither should be ignored.

The next disc, Larry K. McClintock's "Haywire Mac" album on Folkways, suffers from too much attention paid to its political dimensions. McClintock was a colorful character, somewhat in the Davy Crockett mold, who recorded a number of discs for the Victor Company during the 1920's and 1930's, using the pseudonym, "Mac." His vocal style was Northern Anglo-American--relaxed, open-voiced, non-nasal, and his recordings of "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum," "The Big Rock Candy Mountain," and "The Old Chisholm Trail" are classics. McClintock worked as a railroadman, logger, stevedore, seaman and cowboy in North America, Africa, and Asia and spent a considerable portion of his life railroading as a hobo. It was during this period that he briefly came into contact with the I.W.O. band, Joe Hill, and even joined the "Wobbly" ranks himself. During his later years, McClintock contributed a monthly column of railroad lore to Railroad magazine.

If the Folkways record had been re-issue of "Mac's" early Victor recording, it would have been a great album. Instead, it consists of selections from a taping and interview-session during the 1950's by "folk revivalist" Sam Eskin, long after

McClintock was past his prime. A most dissatisfying aspect of the record is its focus upon the I.W.O. and Joe Hill. Although Hill and the "Jobbies" are certainly heroes of American labor history, it is doubtful whether McClintock's brief connection with them justifies their being the album's major topic. It is as though Folkways and Eskin wanted to bring you a Joe Hill album, but had to settle for "Mac" McClintock as the next best thing. The performances of such classics as "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum," "The Big Rock Candy Mountain," and "Long Haired Preachers" (actually, "The Preacher and the Slave"), are mediocre, and all the more unsatisfactory, considering the high quality of McClintock's early Victor 78's.

The Progressive Labor Party, split from the Communist Party-U.S.A. during the early 1960's as a consequence of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization programs and the Sino-Soviet dispute. After the 1970 dissolution of the Students for a Democratic Society, a number of SDS leaders joined the PLP, and after Nixon's visit to China, Progressive Labor denounced its Chinese mentors and went its own way, becoming one of the smallest, and certainly the most doctrinaire of the extreme Leftist sects surviving the 1960's. Power to the Working Class is a selection of fifteen songs performed by anonymous PLP musicians, praising the organization and calling for a "workers' revolution" in the United States. The rhetoric is occasionally bloodthirsty--cf. "There's a bunch of capitalist pigs in Boston who should be put up against the wall. . .," from "The Ballad of Racist Blairs"--but the style of delivery is most reminiscent of that great American institution, the high school "pep rally." Three of the songs including "La Internacional," are in Spanish, presumably to appeal to Hispanic minority groups. "Challenge: It's the Communist Paper" is a singing commercial for the PLP house-organ. Five of the songs are performed with banjo and guitar accompaniment, suggestive of, and probably influenced by the Almanac Singers, and six others are "soul-tinged" "hard Rock." The Spanish chorus singing "La Internacional" is as moving a rendition of the great old Marxist anthem as I have heard, but the closing number, "Power to the Working Class" is too reminiscent of football cheerleading to be taken seriously.

Although the PLP has little likelihood of altering the American political landscape, the "PLP-PL" is a worthwhile production for two reasons. First, it is interesting to hear what is being done with didactic song in the post-"folk-Rock" era. Second, it inspires a degree of nostalgia for the days when People's Artists and the Almanac Singers truly believed they could change the world through song. PLP's ditties are not likely to change the world, but they will no doubt inspire those individuals already committed to the group's ideals.