

RECORD REVIEWS

Contemporary Folk Music Reviews—Part I

Bruce Harrah-Conforth

As discussed elsewhere in this issue ("Whither Goeth Folk Music?", pp. 76-82), the line between American Popular culture and folklore has been a thin one indeed. It is this author's opinion that the main distinguishing factor between the two is what Dell Hymes has called the element of "traditionalizing" (Hymes 1975). In a realistic, non-jargon laden sense, this means that folklore is/can be popular culture that has, through a process of repetition, formalization, or absorption, been infused into the mind and spirit of the folk. To those scholars critical of this inclusion of popular culture in folklore, I must point out that--if accepted at face value--this inclusion is really a rather traditional approach, for is folklore not those items which belong to the collective unconscious, the collective identity of the folk? Of what use would a *märchen* be if there were not some collective acceptance and understanding of the form and its content? It is the same with American popular culture and folklore.

When existing as an item of popular culture alone (a fad, movie, television commercial), there is no infusion into the mind of the folk; it has not yet been traditionalized. Yet once that process of traditionalization has taken place, the item slips across that fine line of distinction and becomes, I believe, a part of American folklore.

Examples of this type of folk acceptance are everywhere. Although the movie classic **Gone With The Wind** is not, by itself, an item of folklore, who can deny that the quote from the film "Frankly Scarlet, I don't give a damn," has not become part of our folk lexicon? In a larger sense, it is this body of information, culled from traditional folk and popular sources, that constitutes our American identity. It is, for example, the "American Way" of the Red Cross. What is meant by the "American Way" is never delineated, yet we accept it without question,

for our collective body of information tells us what it means: neighbors helping neighbors, aid to the down and out, being a good guy. It is that information which we tacitly accept and expect others to know if they are to be included in our club, the American folk group.

Primary among the American body of information are our songs. Due at least in part to the music "industry," we are bombarded from cradle to grave with songs of all type. Occasionally the link between popular culture and folklore becomes so obscured that the popular culture is all but lost. If one whistled the melody, most Americans would recognize the children's song parody "Be kind to your web footed friends, for a duck may be somebody's (mother/brother/uncle)." But few could state that the tune is based on **Stars and Stripes Forever** by John Phillip Sousa. Hence the infusion of popular culture and folklore.

American film-makers during the first half of this century were particularly adept at utilizing and creating portions of the American belief system through their movies. Once again, song played an important role in the creation and maintenance of mood, and in doing so became another part of our folk information. Songs like "As Time Goes By," from the film **Casablanca**, quickly became major items of popular culture, with associated folk ideas surrounding them. The saying "Play it again, Sam," which was allegedly said by Humphrey Bogart to piano player Dooley Wilson in the film, was never uttered. Yet due in part to the popularity of the film and the song, people credited Bogart with the quote which like "Frankly Scarlet, I don't give a damn," entered our folk vocabulary.

Television played an efficacious role in maintaining and creating this popular/folk link. In the early 1950s, a whole generation grew up with these old movies and songs as part of their lives. As a child of the times in New York City, I recall WOR television's "Million Dollar Movie" which would show the same film twice a day for a week, and three times on Sunday, for a total of 15 showings before switching to a new movie for the next week. With this kind of saturation, an early association with the songs of Irving Berlin and George Gershwin, or the stylings of such eclectic performers as Cliff "Ukulele Ike" Edwards

was normal. Most 7 or 8 year olds in my neighborhood could sing any number of Alice Faye or Fred Astaire songs. These tunes became our traditional heritage. They were as much a part of our folk music as was street corner doo-wop singing, or mother's lullabies. It is no surprise to find, therefore, a whole generation of young adults steeped in this era of American song. Likewise, it is no surprise to find record companies producing albums which feature tunes by Gershwin alongside ones by Blind Blake or Mississippi John Hurt, for to this generation of Americans, this is all folk music. It is our intention in this and following issues, to review both the record labels that produce these recordings, and the young musicians who actually make the music. The remainder of this first review will deal with perhaps the most well-known of these companies, Kicking Mule Records, with subsequent issues addressing the work of Yazoo, Blue Goose and others of similar intent.

Kicking Mule Records (P.O. Box 158, Alderpoint, CA 95411) specializes in recording what it believes to be the finest folk musicians it can find, and indeed, its list of performers is impressive. Among those who have made Kicking Mule albums are Stefan Grossman, Art Rosenbaum, Dave Van Ronk, Mike Bloomfield, Roy Bookbinder, David Cohen and a host of others. Kicking Mule's producers seem particularly adept at discovering remarkable guitarists who play everything from traditional blues tunes to John Phillip Sousa marches, or Scott Joplin rags, in all their parts, without overdubbing. It is clear the folk revival of the 1960s has spawned a host of "monster" musicians, and the Kicking Mule seems to have a corner on the market. Particularly impressive are the technical abilities of several European guitarists, most notably Tom Van Bergeyk and Leo Wijnkamp. Their arrangements of classic rags by Joplin, Turpin and others make one wonder if they had not been meant for the guitar all along.

One of the more interesting aspects of Kicking Mule's policy is to offer tablature books to accompany the records, so that budding musicians can attempt to copy the styles of their favorite performers. This is an interesting service, and one with which both reviewer John Bendix

and I take varying exception in the following reviews. One current runs through all of their records, however, and it the infusion of the pop/folk issue which served as the focus for this introduction. All of the Kicking Mule's performers appear to be steeped in the same mold and definition of what constitutes folk music. The following are reviews of four such performers.

Reference

Hymes, Dell

1975 Folklore and the Sun's Myth. Journal of American Folklore 88:345-369.

Guitarist's Choice. Dale Miller. Produced by Ed Denson and Dale Miller. One 12" 33 1/3 rpm disc. 1977. 16 selections, instrumental. Kicking Mule Records KM-137.

Reviewed by Bruce Harrah-Conforth

Dale Miller is one of the most versatile finger style guitarists currently recording, and on **Guitarist's Choice** he demonstrates this well. Unlike several of his other Kicking Mule albums which were theme or technique oriented, **Guitarist's Choice** is just that, a selection of his favorite pieces. Not only are the 16 tunes an eclectic conglomeration in style, they also vary in time frame, from Scottish airs to Beatles tunes, touching base with tin-pan alley, jazz, and the blues along the way. Technically, the level of skill required to pull off such a wide variety of styles and play them all equally well is no small feat, yet Miller handily accomplishes his goal. On tunes such as "Manhattan," "Sweet Lorraine," "Tuxedo Junction" and "As Time Goes By," his arrangements frequently had to be conceived in other than standard guitar tunings, adding to Miller's skills as an innovative musician. As a guitarist, I can clearly state that to include a full, moving bass line against a fully chorded melody-oriented treble is a major accomplishment. Merely trying to duplicate Miller's versions from the accompanying tablature is no easy task and demands a highly developed guitar style. That, if anything, is my criticism of the tablature idea: they are frequently too difficult to reproduce. Just because a superior guitar-