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WHITHER GOETH FOLK MUSIC?

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It was not long after assuming the position of record review editor that I understood why the task had been undertaken in such a haphazard manner in the past. First and foremost was a practical problem; **Folklore Forum** received very few records to be reviewed. Secondly, there stood an ideological dilemma; what material was deemed proper for our consideration? In order to actively solicit material from record companies, thereby solving the first problem, it was necessary to answer the second and decide what we considered folk music.

A look at some of the traditionally accepted criteria for defining folk song proved to be of little help. Generally there are four elements included in such definitions (anonymity of authorship, time depth, mode of transmission, and existence of variants), but each of these seems to be fraught with problems. The first, anonymity of authorship, scarcely seems appropriate in this day of copyrights

and documentation. Because of its infusion into the American mind and spirit, many scholars would include "This Land is Your Land" within the ranks of contemporary folk music. Yet, we not only know who wrote the piece (Woody Guthrie), but why he did so (as a response to Irving Berlin's "God Bless America"). Mode of transmission and existence of variants also seem questionable criteria for folk song status. I learned "This Land is Your Land" from a song book, memorized the lyrics, and sing it the same way every time I perform it. To me it is no less a folk song because of this. The reliance of the folk on stable forms of transmission and creation is hardly a new development, but it is one which folklorists have a tendency to gloss over in their search for pure, unadulterated oral forms. Blues singer Mississippi John Hurt, a folk singer by almost anyone's standards, often said that he learned most of his early songs from the records of the 1920s, as did many other folk-blues singers. There have always been printed broadsides around to help spread a good song. Further, handbooks from the 18th and 19th centuries taught the rural folk in America how to make corn-husk dolls, how to clog and quilt, how to sing songs, and so on. The line between popular culture and American folklore has always been extremely fine, and so to apply criteria such as the necessity of oral transmission to a folk song is not only illogical, it is in many cases self defeating. No piece of paper ever killed folklore!

Time depth also seems like a dubious way of validating folk music, for what of short-lived traditions? It was not long ago, for example, that members of the Indiana University Business School (a folk group by many people's criteria) created their own folk parody of the Olivia Newton John song-hit "Let's Get Physical." If my memory serves me correctly, their version went:

Let's get fiscal, fiscal,

Let's get fiscal,

Let me hear your wallet talk.

The creation of that lyric seems as important and interesting to me as any version of Barbara Allen or the blues song Sweet Home Chicago, and yet nowhere have I encountered anyone, or any institution willing to call that folk music.

So I must ask, therefore, whither goeth folk music?

In order to find out what other people were calling folk music I thought it would be interesting to look at other journals and see what kind of records they reviewed. A perusal of folklore journals demonstrated that there was a distinct, two-part bias toward certain musical forms and against others. The first portion of this bias consists of a penchant for musical relics. Many of the reviews within the pages of these journals deal with reissues of material from an earlier part of this century, or with traditional musics now more at home at revivalist festivals than in daily life. While some journals may review albums by contemporary artists, such as exponents of the "newgrass" style of bluegrass music, or by modern country and blues musicians, these performers still share a link with the pastoral vision of rural, idyllic folklore. With the possible exception of religious music and children's songs, this present author has found virtually no reviews reflecting modern, northern, anglo, urban folk music. This musical relic bias has led to the extremes of what I have heard called "gestapo folkloristics." There exists a large body of tales concerning festival organizers forbidding young, white performers from accompanying older, Black, or even white, musicians, even when it is the older musician's desire to have them do so. The stories also extend to include the horror expressed when performers show up at festivals with electronic equipment. The purveyors of this "gestapo folklore" generally insist that there is only one type of folk music, and it can only be played one way, regardless of the performers' wishes. There can be no stronger indication of many folklorists' romance with the "pure past" than this bias against change and modern adaptation. While this rural/southern, pastoral view seems to abound within the pages of many journals, it is only the first of the two mentioned prejudices. The other, equally prominent bias, has to do with the music of "the others." By this latter category I mean anyone other than urban North Americans of anglo descent. The records chosen for review within this bias (Afro-American, African, Asian, European, Pacific-Islander, etc.), found particularly in journals of ethnomusicological inter-

est, would lead one to believe that there is either no folk music among urban whites, or that no one is studying it. While I am certain that the first part of this assumption is false, I am not sure about the validity of the latter.

Neither of these two biases (musical relics or "the others") seems logical to me. At last report there were still living members of many vibrant folk communities, of all sizes, shapes, colors, and ethnic backgrounds, going full blast all over the world, with new folk music being made and adapted daily. Someone, it seemed, had to take the risk of exploding the limited view of folk music as portrayed within our discipline and journals and come up with a definition of folk music that was both academically defensible, and still open-minded enough to accept modern adaptations, however short-lived or geographically specific. In order to attempt to produce such a definition here I turned to two acknowledged risk-takers; one ancestral--Phillips Barry, and one contemporary, Alan Dundes.

For a definition of folk **music** I chose Barry's work, done in the early part of this century. I did so not only because of its far-reaching nature, but because it seemed so appropriate for the purpose. Barry, writing at a time when the controversy of communal versus individual authorship of the ballad was still raging, was far-sighted enough to believe that folk music was simply that material which the folk sang. Since they (the folk) made no distinction between written, recorded, or traditionally passed-on songs, why, Barry questioned, should we? (1) The entire crux of the definition of folk music, therefore, revolves around how one defines the **folk**. Here, I can think of no more appropriate definition than that put forth by Alan Dundes: a folk group is "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor" (Dundes 1980). Folk music, therefore, is that music produced by any group of people who share something in common.

While this definition may seem far too broad for some people, I believe it is only by exploding our narrowly defined approach to folk music that we can make any sense out of the song products of our modern world, our modern

folk roots. Here, I'd like to pause and include a portion of a piece that an old friend of mine, Mike Agranoff, a guitarist, singer and storyteller, as well as board member and past president of the Folk Project of New Jersey, wrote for **Sing Out**:

Who am I to deny my **true** folk roots? I mean, I may play Irish music, but the closest I've been to Ireland has been about 32,000 feet as it slid under my wings on my way elsewhere. But I grew up in the same city as Paul Simon. We graduated high school within a couple years of each other. I certainly feel more kinship to him than to, say, Turloch O'Carolyn.

It is quite the thing in the folk community to dump on the commercial folk music scene of the late '60's as being ... well ... commercial. But I maintain that whether it's in spite of that commerciality or because of it, this is the stuff that will prove to be the true folk music of mid-20th century America. And as proof, I offer any kid who goes out and buys an acoustic guitar. What does he learn? He doesn't learn "Pretty Saro" or "Staten Island Hornpipe" or even "The Mary Ellen Carter." He learns "Here Comes the Sun" and "Teach Your Children" and "Friend of the Devil." And what are his sources? His friends or his 35-year old guitar teacher or "the guy down the block who can **really** play good!" And something finally happened to me last December that I've been waiting for for years. I was at a sing, and old friends were swapping songs a mile a minute. But there was a new face there too: a sixteen year old girl who was playing all the Crosby, Stills, Mitchell, and Garfunkel stuff that was on the radio when she was in pampers. And you know who else was there? Her **mother**, who taught her all these songs. Just 'cause you happened to be born in an age cursed with musical literacy doesn't mean you can't have a folk heritage of your own. (Agranoff 1984).

What Mike has done is to provide us with an object lesson of the expanded new view of the folk process for which I have been arguing. By seeing folk music in this way, I believe that it is possible to accept even certain forms

of rock and roll as regional folk music: born of specific conditions and sentiments of a community; reflecting the ideals of that group; and serving a traditionalizing role within the group and its functions.

The Grateful Dead (a good example, but certainly not the only one) are most assuredly the basis for, and representatives of, a folk group and folk music. Even such a staunch opponent of fakelore as Richard Dorson considered the Grateful Dead and their followers a part of the folklore of his so-called "contemporary period" of American folklore (Dorson 1973). The Grateful Dead have as fans a group calling themselves "Dead Heads," who will travel hundreds, even thousands of miles to attend a Dead concert. They trade audio tapes and stories, carry on group traditions and rituals, wear specific clothing, maintain and create symbols, etc. Further, the Grateful Dead rose from a very specific folk region, and its accompanying ideology: the Haight-Ashbury/San Francisco hippie scene. I would maintain that to the Dead Heads, at least, the music of the Grateful Dead IS folk music. I would further maintain that to the scholar, the Grateful Dead are part of a folk region typified by themselves and other bands such as the Jefferson Airplane, Quicksilver Messenger Service, Moby Grape, and Blue Cheer that were as much a part of the 1960s folk traditionalizing as any Child ballad was in the 19th century. And, unlike the view expressed by Linda Dégh that "undoubtedly, the social importance of urban folklore forms is not equivalent to that of the classical Märchen or heroic song in their heyday," (Dégh 1971) not only is there no question that the music of the '60's West Coast bands was terribly important to the folk groups producing it, I would maintain that these groups would not have existed as they did without the music; urban folk music. It served as a background for all of their activities, expressed their political and philosophical statements and beliefs, transmitted and sustained their ideologies, disseminated information, communicated practical data, celebrated their heroes and chastised their enemies. There was no part of their lives that was not affected by or encapsulated within this urban folk music tradition.

It is not the intent of this editor to shun all older forms of music and to begin reviewing rock and roll exclusively. To be sure, **Folklore Forum** will still have its share of musical relics and the music of "the others," for those forms are as much a part of our folk music as anything for which I have argued. But we must acknowledge that there is a good deal of music, folk music, that has been ignored, or denied, by folklorists on the grounds that it didn't fit their neatly compartmentalized, pastoral visions. If we are to grow as a discipline, if we are to keep step with, and understand the world around us, we must not lock our definitions in an atavistic haze of romance. When we ask, whither goeth folk music, we need to look no further than to ourselves, for we are all the folk, and much of the music we make are our folk songs.

Note

(1) For a good description of Barry's contribution to folklore scholarship see R. Gerald Alvey's article "Phillips Barry and Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship," **Journal of the Folklore Institute** 10(1973):67-95.

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