

RECENT BOOKS

SINGING COUNTRY

IT is not very hard to break down and say *Our Singing Country* is a wonderful book. (Volume II of *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. Collected and compiled by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax. Music Editor, Ruth Crawford Seeger. The Macmillan Company.) It is wonderful in most of the ways similar books are disappointing, exasperating, or even appalling. I could name names, with appropriate horror-signals and danger-warnings; but I would rather dwell on this one because it is such a beauty. Scholarship, human warmth and remarkable taste have joined hands to make a collection which, together with Volume I, rates with Bartok and Kodaly.

In short, I go all out for it. Here are seven reasons why:

- 1) The range and scope of folk-material assembled.
- 2) The determination on the part of the compilers to let it alone, speak for itself.
- 3) The high level of musical beauty.
- 4) The high level of the poetry.
- 5) The authentic "feel" for reality in the songs; the general absence of cute or quaint or self-conscious numbers.
- 6) The accuracy — amounting at times to fanaticism — in the transcribing job.
- 7) The minimum of snobbery attached to the whole performance.

I am happy to note, for example, that

the collection is entirely free of the sort of impudence displayed in what I like to call folked-up arrangements. (I use the term advisedly, although not on the advice of my lawyer.) No mannered interjections of the editor's personality or predilection for false or true basses mar the page. The clear final melody-line, intact and juicy, is all you will find; occasionally a two-part or three-part choral piece, *as sung and heard*. And Mrs. Seeger, who has done the editing, hears with extraordinary precision and love. In particular, she hears a pause as a pause, not as a tied-over note or as an aimless wait until the next line; some of the rests, as in *God Don't Like It* are really thrilling in the way they evoke the singer's breathing apparatus and niceness of phrasing. Five-fours, six-eight-plus-three-fours, etc., hold no terrors for her; if it was sung like that, that's the way it gets notated, and no nonsense. It is true that no folksong was ever sung twice, even by the same voice, in exactly the same way; still, by recording and transcribing one single performance with complete painstaking fidelity, the Lomaxes and Mrs. Seeger have let us in on an *alive* musical moment, from which we ourselves, depending upon our intuition, education, knowledge and taste, can reconstruct the variations and the possibilities. These tunes spring from the page in the same way they leapt from the throat.

Here is the casual "sinful reel," *Georgia Land*:

My gal don' wear button-up shoes,
 Her feet too big for gaiters,
 All she's fit fur — a dip of snuff
 And a yallow yam potato.
 Jint ahead, center back,
 Did you ever work on the railroad
 track?

Sometimes a simple conversation, straight out of speech, makes the song; sometimes a thought or feeling discovers itself sung, almost without the decision to sing:

Pay day, pay day, oh pay day,
 Pay day at Coal Creek tomorrow,
 Pay day at Coal Creek tomorrow.

And this miraculously beautiful "holler":

Little boy, little boy, who fooled you
 here?
 Little boy, little boy, who fooled you
 here?
 Did they tell you it was a heaven?
 You found a burning hell.

The one called *Mamma, Mamma, Make me a Garment* has the most astounding recitative quality, with a style of interval-leaping which sounds to a trained ear at first slightly amateurish or puzzling, but which on repetition yields a wild fresh juice. This is what we have all been talking about, when we said that the "folk art" must stimulate and fertilize the "fine art."

I think I understand better (now that

I have been through this collection) the humility with which such true stuff should be approached. Perhaps I will be permitted the thought that the "fine art" composer need not go completely overboard, to the degree that he wants to stop writing music. And since this note of mild complaint has already crept in, I should also like to make out a quick last-minute case for *town* folklore, not as against, but as supplementary to *rural* folklore; the gutter, the honkytonk, and even the boulevards sometimes give out with a musical richness quite up to the level of the farmers' and miners' and cowboys' inspirations. I am directing this at the reader, not at the Lomaxes. They have included (together with the songs of lumberjacks and teamsters, railroaders and hobos, Negro gangs, outlaws, holiness people, and ordinary lovers) a dozen-and-a-half "Hollers and Blues;" most of them new, all of them from deep inside the people. When Ozella Jones sings from the State Penitentiary at Raiford, Florida:

Now I'm so sorry, even the day I was
 born,

Now I'm so sorry, even the day I was
 born,

I want to say to all you bad fellas that
 you are in the wrong,

this composer confesses himself utterly sent.

Marc Blitzstein

THE APPROACH TO "GREATNESS"

THIS book assuredly is a busman's holiday: Alfred Einstein, eminent scholar and sensitive critic of music, has taken time off to write a book about music. A light book, he tells us, a relaxation and one which, unlike the large and

scientific treatise on the Italian Madrigal he had just completed, would be written quickly and without much preliminary research. It is scarcely necessary for him to have added that the book would nevertheless be "the result of considerable