

ON THE HOLLYWOOD FRONT

By LAWRENCE MORTON

FOLKSONG became American Big Business (as Roy Harris pointed out) so long ago that one wonders why Hollywood has waited until now to climb aboard the bandwagon that the recording companies and radio already ride so merrily. The studios of course know about the charm and appeal of folksong but for some reason have been unwilling to espouse its cause. Tunes have been "spotted" frequently enough, but without much appreciation of their real meaning as artistic and social documents. In "westerns," for instance, a plaintive ditty is often as essential a part of a cowboy's heroism as are his horse and his gun, as necessary to his virtue as a righteous cause and an unblemished bride. Since *Stagecoach* no Overland Express has crossed the plains without the accompaniment of a rolling folktune which makes that primitive mode of transportation appear as pleasant as one of today's extra-fare Pullmans. Shy, overgrown lads are likely to get the folksy treatment, as Gary Cooper did in *Along Came Jones*, where *Joe Clark* and *My Little Mohee* were "spotted." At a somewhat higher level, the documentaries provide numerous examples of the use of folk material, but very few of these are made in Hollywood. At the very top, there are scores like Copland's for *Of Mice and Men* and *Our Town*, which are well grounded in the folk idiom but at the same time, because of truly creative processes, reach be-

yond the boundaries of what is really a very limited medium. These are precedents for Hollywood, but not traditions; films whose scripts successfully transcribe the American scene, such as *The Human Comedy* and *Our Vines Have Tender Grapes*, continue to have scores that eschew both the local color and the feeling-tone that folk music can provide. Not even the availability of attractive folk personalities has suggested anything to producers. Leadbelly, one of the great folk artists, has been living here for years, employable but never put to work by the studios. And the talent scouts have passed up John Jacob Niles, Richard Dyer-Bennet, Josh White and others who appear in concert halls and swanky night spots. Now at last Burl Ives has made his way through the gates that lead to the sound stages and upper income brackets, and a trend is on.

Preceding the advent of Ives there had been some practical pioneering, notably by Earl Robinson, whose faith in and enthusiasm for folk art are genuine, however far his achievements fall short of his intentions. A few minor assignments led to *A Walk in the Sun* where his ballad, written in a Southern Mountain style, was intended to be more functional (as both narrative and commentary) than decorative; unfortunately the reverse happened. Two other tunes, a *Blues* and a *Waiting Song*, turned out to be even less significant; and a third piece in the style of a worksong

was cut out of the film entirely. Certainly this music (quite aside from the matter of its quality) was not integrated as it should have been into the production as a whole. It stood in marked contrast to the rest of the musical score, which was conceived and executed by Freddy Rich as if the folksongs were no part of the picture at all. Robinson has somewhat greater opportunities in *Old California* (Paramount). He has written several tunes, among them *California or Bust*, in the style of a saloon song of the forty-niners, and *I Said to My Heart, Said I*, an adaptation of a Kentucky love song. More in line with his ambitions for folk music was the underscoring of two large montage sequences. Here he used a variety of types — blues, spirituals, square dances — for a variety of media, solo voice, vocal trio, chorus, banjo and guitar. All of these elements have been combined to make a musical montage whose rhythmic excitement will match the visual imagery of a rapid series of Gold Rush scenes. It still remains to be seen what use Victor Young will make of this material in his underscoring. Robinson is now working on *The Romance of Rosy Ridge* at MGM for which he will compose both the songs and the score. This will be a real test of his musicianship, for the oversimplified methods of cantatas cannot support the weight of the complex dramatic situations of a screen story.

An inkling of what can be done along these lines is given by David Raksin's score for *Smoky*, the Twentieth Century-Fox film which introduces Burl Ives to the screen. The picture has not yet been released, but

I have seen some of the sketches for the score. There are about a dozen sequences built on the songs that Ives sings, *On Top of Old Smoky*, *I Wish I Was a Woolly Boogy Bee* and *The Cowboy's Lament*. The first of these, the film's theme song, is heard mostly as background music for quiet scenes. Its opening phrase appears as a solo for oboe, flute or high trombone with megamute and is developed as a fragment separate from the rest of the tune. Harmonic alterations are frequent, occasionally producing results a bit rich for my taste, but on the whole the manipulation is discreet. *The Cowboy's Lament* escapes this harmonic lushness by being cast as a rapid scherzo-like piece in which contrapuntal procedures predominate. *I Wish I Was a Woolly Boogy Bee* is also treated simply, with frequent key changes, clean harmonies and transparent orchestration. There is an amusing scene where the tune is stated in fragments separated by the sound effect attending the lassoing of a calf; another witty version gives the tune in a 6-8 "swivel hip" meter. Its most attractive setting is as a slow canon at the octave (violins against muted trumpet) in an ambiguous 6-4, 3-2 meter, with an undulating accompaniment in strings and winds. With the Ives songs and the Raksin score, folk music appears to have been well launched in commercial films.

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Ives is now about to move over to the Disney studios for a picture about Indiana, taken from Sterling North's *Midnight and Jeremiah*. It will use both real characters and the animated Disney creations as does the nearly completed film on the Un-

cle Remus stories. These pictures introduce American subjects to the cartoon, and Disney is so enthusiastic about them that his plans now call for a whole series of Americana. Characters already selected for picturization include Davy Crockett, Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed, John Henry and Ichabod Crane. For some of these the basis of the film will be tailormade to fit the music, as in *Fantasia*. Beyond this the studio does not yet indicate what its musical in-

tentions are. But since Thomas Benton has been engaged to style the art work of several productions, it is reasonable to expect that Disney will be equally ambitious for correctly styled music. If this happens, it may be the means of bringing Hollywood together with some of the country's most distinguished composers who have based their whole careers on the belief that folk music is the unailing source of inspiration for a truly national art.

OVER THE AIR

By CHARLES MILLS

THE seventh WNYC American Music Festival, the largest and most comprehensive one so far, gave us more than one hundred and fifty programs of native composition in a fiesta lasting eleven days. The station deserves great credit. Not only is this an important civic service, but the occasion offers encouragement and stimulus to composers and performers far removed from New York City.

The highpoint of the whole show for me was the closing concert, a program sponsored by the League of Composers, which presented Joan Field, violinist, and Ray Lev, pianist, playing the *First Violin Sonata* of Charles Ives. This rich and moving score is one of his most successful works. Not so strongly individual in rhythm and harmony as certain of his later pieces, it is still more gratifying because of its genuinely sincere form and the mature simplicity shown in the way tensions are released at

cadence points. The melodic lines, though most independent, bear some delightfully congenial relationships to the fairly complex chordal arrangements. Thematically the *Sonata* is imaginative and, to my mind, very American in character. I would have preferred a more interesting treatment of the violin — it is rather on the plain side — but the piano writing is quite intricate and the general instrumental color by no means dull.

Other chamber music works in extended forms included Harold Morris's *Piano Trio*, performed by the Stuyvesant Trio. This large four-movement piece has a rather severe structural plan; it begins with a pascaglia and ends with a double fugue. The musical content, however, is far from austere and suggests neo-romanticism in its expressive warmth and color. Two suites by Paul Creston, one for violin and piano, the other for viola and piano, were both cleanly made and clearly conceived, surpris-