

FOLKSONG AND CULTURE-POLITICS

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THE roads leading to White Top, the fifty-five-hundred-foot peak of Southwest Virginia, swarmed on an afternoon last August with loaded cars and trucks. Up on the summit which regally overlooks smoky blue chain beyond mountain-chain, the annual festival of regional folk-music was in swing. A crowd of country-people diversified by metropolitan types strolled or sat on the turf about the large tin-rooved sheds permanent on the mountain, about the small transitory stands where men resembling ministers dispensed hot-dogs and coffee, about the parked machines. Natural selection gayly progressed on the airy slopes between clean-shirted bucks and girls in bright dresses; and hilariously here and there amid masculine knots, the grand folk-drunk – also a feature of this festival “in the true folk-manner.”

The drone of fiddles and nasal singing-tones rose from the less enclosed of the two sheds. The judges of the music and dancing were inside, reviewing groups and individuals from various portions of the southern highlands who, wishing to participate in the contests and feeling themselves welcome at them, in their country-fashion had put in more or less unheralded appearances. I followed my party into the shade under the roof. Waiting competitors and spectators were scattered on a hemicycle of rough benches facing a deep, half-lit platform. This, fenced off with chicken-wire save in the spot where steps mounted from the grassy auditorium, resembled a country dance floor deprived of its fourth wall rathermore than a stage. We took seats.

The preliminaries proceeded, a pell-mell on the boards. A bunch of lads advanced and started a morris-dance. Skillfully enough they wound their bodies beneath wooden swords held chain-wise between them and with the aid of the indispensable hobby-horse enacted a little fertility-rite. The whole was a piece of archaism – an emissary of the Richmond English Folk-Dance Society had coached the group. Folklore on the contrary fol-

lowed their performance. The famous West Virginia fiddler, the Fiddling Fool, tore off *The Arkansas Traveler* and other reels, holding his instrument to the center of his chest in the manner of the minstrels in the illuminations on medieval missals. Unorthodoxly he shifted not his arm's but his instrument's position when he wished to play on a string other than that on which he had been bowing. More startling even was the straight-shot continuity of his rhythm. The rhythmic state, the probable source of all folk-music, was distinct in it. Regional tradition again followed, in the shape of a burly singer's booming, dramatically effective delivery of *Santyanno*, the highland shantey whose words are coeval with the Mexican War but whose tune is in the Dorian church-mode. And with the modal flattenings I heard, seemingly for a first time, the strength and melancholy of the highland folksong.

Tension heightened. Several dignified, middle-aged men in their Sunday best one after another gravely and impersonally danced jigs. The continuity of their motion in which at moments the outflung entire body participated was amazing: even more so, the weird moods of their jerky whirls. Any thing but a frolic faced one: rathermore a representation of grimness savoring of medieval earth; a "shaking of the bones" signifying, like some Holbein *Dance of Death*, the omnipresent skeleton. More songs with beautiful modal effects; among them one resembling verse in a strange language, the mode of it was so rare and primitive. . . . A suave performance of the gentle white spiritual, *Jesus was born in Bethlea*. . . . Jigging by a fat-lady in beach-pyjamas, which shook things including the seat of the audience's risibilities; and shuffles and breakdowns by small boys. . . . Zestful performances by mixed groups of young and middle-aged persons of those square-dances apparently expressive of family and pre-individualistic states. And a young lawyer from a valley-town accompanied himself on a dulcimer as in a nice romantic tenor he sang the Child-ballad of *Mary Hamilton*. All the magic of folksong is in that nostalgic "ballet": direct infectiousness of mood, unconscious thought-processes, perfect harmony of word and tune, simplicity and pathos medicating sorrow.

Long however before he began singing, the folksong had begun rousing in me a feeling of the type that is all folksong's prime effect. Doubtless the circumstances, the setting as well as the customs reflected by the performances, the modal melodies and grinding and archaic instrumental sonorities flowed into this feeling. It was the sense first of the quality of a life low-down by the soil, gritty with it, yet anything but primitive; ad-

justed to be sure to conditions of cold and discomfort; narrow, dour, without sensuousness, paroxysmic rather than passionate; possessed nonetheless of dignity, dominating animal existence, capable of religion, laughter, poetry. Pictures of soil in gaunt farmyards, beneath whitewashed little homesteads stilted on hillsides again and again invaded my mind. Women were about the houses, and in the foreground, on roads and in fields, men – inarticulate and blithe as schoolboys and voluntarily attached to the single object composed of earth and the woman on it. Close on the feeling followed one of this life's unconscious depths and unconscious self-identification with a remote, mysterious, ultimately transatlantic past: identification due possibly to descent, possibly to enduring technics, possibly to the special value agricultural societies place on old experience, possibly to the highlanders' subjection to an ancient culture-soul agonizing among their mountains, and probably to something of all four circumstances. At my thoughts' rim, seemingly in the depths of the stage there floated as I looked and listened a dark time-space reaching from the present back, into medieval and even pre-Christian eras in the north of the British Isles, touching and including forgotten forms of life. Tiny areas alone gleamed, known, illuminated, in the chill dark. What is most significant is the fact that what I felt and what I saw, I saw and felt fraternally.

Prime among the properties of folksong has ever been its power to create, where but an ear for it exists, a "folk" about its naive performers; to waken fellow-feeling, to effect a taking-round of hands. That ear – for the American folksong – suddenly had been bestowed on me and others of my White Top party by circumstances profounder than an accidental exposure to a regional festival.

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Such in any case was my sincere conclusion during the weeks following the jaunt: it is the reason for this history. As from a doze I woke with surprise first and foremost to the fact that a sensitiveness to the American folksong, quite like my late-come sensitiveness, on the part of a multitude of the members of the urban and "educated" public was an event of the most recent years. For decades, actually, it had lain beneath the urban and educated horizon, the traditional American music; steadily in process of adjustment to the levels cherishing it; something to which American life was giving form in the country, as in the cities it was giving form to popular music and making jazz. Forces of a nature unknown had rendered it distasteful to the urban populations; to the educated everywhere; among

the very descendants of the people who had used it. The Protestant churches strove to suppress all traces of the folkhymns in their hymnodies. "Music" to persons of this level chiefly meant the music of sophisticated Europe and what conformed to it; and want of feeling naturally was mother to ignorance. It was said that, unlike Russia, France and Germany, the United States possessed no folkmusic. That of the Negro was quite simply "African." That of the mountaineers — one had the word of the earlier ballad-collectors — was entirely Anglo-Celtic. These good people incidentally had found only that of which they had gone in search. It was Anglo-Celtic survivals: not even entire songs but what Tiersot has called "the bird without her wings"—the words. Nor did they divine the truths, that sunken culture-property composes the bulk of all folklore, that what renders music folkish is not so much its origins, which may be various, as its currency. Almost suddenly, then, in the years after the Great War, commenced the intense scholarly exploration of the field. Of the one-hundred-twenty-odd publications concerned in the years between 1900 and 1935 with the subject of American folksong, over eighty date from the time since 1927. (Today the stream of similar publications is cataclysmic.) Musical scholars and scientific apparatus began accurately recording the performances of folk-singers. The WPA in connection with its efforts in behalf of the appreciation of folk-art, financed research, records, performances. The facts appeared: the largeness of the treasure flowing from the circumstance that along with residues of Anglo-Celtic folklore, bits of that of the Poles, the Swedes, the Norwegians, the Canucks and other nationalities survive in it; the vitality given it by the steady reformations of its materials; and its variety and not infrequent poetry. From a matter for intellectualization, the subject became an exciting actuality among field-workers like the Lomaxes. The call for programs of "old-time music" from clubs and radio-stations revealed the general public's rediscovery of its mediumship.

Of the sessions of the recent international congress of the American Musicological Society in New York, a whole one, on comparative musicology, was devoted to North American primitive and folk-music. Three of the concerts presented to the congress, were composed of performances of American folklore — Alan Lomax's atmospheric presentation of ballads accompanied on his guitar; the Nashville Old Harp Singers' costume-concert charmingly featuring, together with bits of the Puritan psalmody, some of Wesley's hymns and Billings' fugueing-tunes, and white spirituals and

folksongs; and the sprightly recital on the part of Aunt Molly Jackson of Harlan County and three wizened "pinies" from southern New Jersey, of racy ballads, shanteys and lumberjack-songs. A few years ago, even at a musicological congress held like this on American soil and concerned with comparative musicology, the exhibition could not have been as inclusive. Possibly not even a portion of it might have figured. This year it was well-nigh inevitable. The emergence into full view of the American folksong, if not the main musical event of the present, is its main American-musical one.

Consequently I inferred that a revolution has been occurring in the consciousness of American society; an occult revolution the cause at once of the folksong's emergence and our sudden sensitiveness to it. The apparent source of the emergence is of course the activities of collectors and musicologists — very possibly inspired with a curiosity about our traditional music consequent on Europe's century-long appreciation of *its* folklore; and the apparent source of our responsiveness of course the charm and poetry of what they have unearthed. (Indeed, the American folksong includes some of the loveliest of American-born poetry.) What nonetheless prompted me to seek further, was the fact that in the past, emotional discoveries of their folklore on the part of sophisticated societies have been tangential with occult revolutions in their consciousness tantamount to introversions. The folksong-prizing Germany of the 1770's, the folksong-prizing Russia of the 1860's, both, were swept by movements of aversion from the rationalizations of the preceding "illuminated" periods. It rendered people freshly confident in spiritual powers transcending the power of observation and the reasoning faculties, and of these powers' expressions. Simultaneously the consciousness of both societies turned inwards. They became as it were healthily amorous of themselves. Independence, unity above all, became ideals: and if the folksong attracted people by virtue of its earthiness, warmth, simplicity and unconscious thought-processes, it magnetized them by virtue of its reflection, along with the images of old customs and ideas, of the traits, the voice, the visage of the beloved collective entity. On movements of this character and the cultural and social politics connected with them, the world has long since bestowed the name of Nationalism.

Professor Dent and others have assumed that nationalism flowed from the work of the folklorists. If I venture to disagree, it is for the reason that it seems improbable that antiquarians could have rendered

their communities nationalistic, had the tendency not existed. In recent years, certainly, nationalism in more than one small country has preceded folklorism.

What further supports my inference is the circumstance that conditions which might be viewed as stimuli to a movement of introversion on the part of American society, plentifully prevail in the present world. The intelligent conservatism of the New Deal may even be conceived to be their product: in turn, it has done much to end the psychic dispersion of American society and create the dignity making for its self-awareness and aperture to the whole of its experience. Still another support lies in the circumstance that cultural and social politics, of a sort in the past the unhappy by-products of nationalistic movements – movements in themselves anything but necessarily deleterious – are manifesting themselves with surprising promptness among certain sophisticates engaged in encouraging and spreading the American folksong: particularly among certain active in behalf of the southern highland song. These culture-politics are those of regionalism and racialism: both are designed to “save” the highlanders and their song. The population and the song are in a plight. The modern age has terminated the isolation of the mountaineers. It has reduced the status of numbers of these nice people to tenancy. The traditional music it has rendered obsolescent. The radio has transmitted a new music; the young are singing hillbilly songs to guitar-accompaniments, and their guitar-technic is not conducive to modal effects. Instruction in the classic European forms on the other hand interferes with their lyricism. To sustain their impulse and culture, the regionalist wishes to draw a *cordon-sanitaire* about the region, “to keep the country-boy and city-boy apart.” He would have the traditional song exclusively taught in the schools. He would substitute for the isolation and the iterative ways of life which once supported it, a strictly regional economy and patriotism. For the racist, on the other hand, the spiritual and economic salvation of the unhappy region is identical with its bloodstream’s retention of its “purity.” He introduces into the Virginia House of Burghesses bills illegalizing marriage between whites and blacks, and is all for “the true folk-manner.” East Side boys it is clear to him can never sing in it: also, he proclaims the doctrine that American expressions to be “American” must base themselves on the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Noteworthy is the fact that this fascist deems the ribald songs beloved of the people and their “songs of social significance,” not in the “true folk” manner.

The degree to which these willful persons will be able to capture the movement for the narrow interests they really represent, remains to be seen. Meanwhile, what is important specially for the readers of MODERN MUSIC: should the cause of the emergence be the one here inferred, we may presume ourselves to be in for an uninduced school of composition spontaneously "nationalistic" in the sense of that of "The Five." The modality and "slides" of the "old-time" music will in this case radiate a thematic influence; the singers' hazy pitch-designs, a harmonic one; the peculiar manner in which they interweave voices, a contrapuntal. That too is in the future.

The American folksong, like the American people, in the meanwhile continues; showing the often beautiful visage of a vigorous creature born of the free interplay and interchange of groups and influences drawn from many parts, and thus, to those with an eye for it, the image of the American idea.