

Reviving the Folk Revival



Bob Dylan couldn't have put it better: the times they are a-changin'. Way back in the twentieth century, I did everything I could to get my friends—Washington lawyers, New York consultants—to listen to the old-time music. Having worked my way through the record shops and public libraries of Arlington, Virginia, and Calgary, Alberta, among other places, I was convinced that the next step in my own musical journey was not further study of the sacred texts, but evangelism pure and simple.

"Start with something easy, like Bill Monroe, the Stanley Brothers, or even Hank Williams," I'd say, "Then on to the Carter Family, Dock Boggs, Alfred Karnes . . . here's a tape I made you." For all of my missionary zeal, though—the late-night taping, the clever juxtapositions between Georgia string bands and Western swing—it never worked. "Thanks," they'd offer with a weak smile, filing my musical tracts away under the passenger seat of the Volvo or above the vacuum cleaner in the hall closet. I began to give up.

And then, something happened. "I'm flying to New York tomorrow—can't miss the O Brother concert!" The soundtracks to my peers' lives suddenly changed. Where there had been Mingus and Coltrane, there now were Sara, Maybelle, and A. P. Carter. Where there was Beck, Blur, and Hole, now there was Ralph Stanley. One day I even heard Alan Lomax's *Sounds of the South*, recorded in the field in 1959, playing in the supermarket. It turned out to be Moby, but I still could not believe my ears.

As an enthusiast, I was pleased and astonished that everyone had suddenly decided to join my cult. As a historian, however, I was not that surprised. The folk revival is, of course, nothing new. After all, Dylan himself was a product, in part, of a folk revival that, in the 1950s and '60s, claimed one of the same roots of today's revival: Harry Smith's 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music*.



Fig. 1. *Anthology of American Folk Music*, collected by Harry Smith, Washington: Smithsonian, 1952.

This six-volume set, originally released in 1952, was arguably the most important single influence on the music of the 1960s, shaping not only the folk revival but rock and roll, as well. As the liner notes to the edition released in 1997 by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings proudly advertise, several generations of musicians on the road to Damascus have been struck down by the Harry Smith *Anthology*, including Bob Dylan and Elvis Costello, and virtually every track on the set, with the exception of some of the more obscure religious and Cajun numbers, have been covered by acts ranging from Peggy Seeger to Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds to Taj Mahal to Huey Lewis and the News. Now, with its re-release, followed up more recently by Harry Smith's elusive fourth volume on Revenant Records, the *Anthology* seems poised to spark another revival.

Why, then, does this music keep reappearing? What drives contemporary audiences to spend their money on re-releases, re-mixes and covers of songs recorded as early as the 1920s, and created in the nineteenth, eighteenth, and seventeenth centuries? What caused Smith, and other collectors like Lomax and Ruth Crawford Seeger, to devote years, decades, entire careers to capture and preserve these forms?

In part, the recurring taste for folk music has to be explained by a recurring desire in American culture: the desire to strip away the awful effects of consumer culture and return to a simpler, harder, more authentic time. From Thoreau in the mid-nineteenth century to Naomi Klein in our own day, this desire to rid ourselves of our Nikes, our Britneys, and our "gewgaws upon the mantelpiece" has been almost as constant as consumerism itself. Cultural Jeremiahs, there is a part of us that believes that we truly are doomed, and that only by getting back to our roots can we be saved.

This desire has certainly played a part in the apotheosis of folk music; it is the "Old, Weird America," after all, that has most captivated listeners like Greil Marcus, perhaps the most famous critic of the *Anthology*. And it certainly motivated Smith and his revivalist allies. In contrast to the falsely sweet and oppressively conformist post-war consumer culture the revivalists perceived all around them, Smith's *Anthology*, along with Crawford Seeger's *American Folk Songs for Children* (1948) and Lomax's *Folk Songs of North America* (1960), promised something strange, hard and true, and something that seemed to be disappearing.

Tellingly, the *Anthology* begins with Dick Justice's "[Henry Lee](#)," which Smith chose not because he liked it, but because it was the oldest example he had found of a Child ballad, named for the songs collected in Francis J. Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-98). By collecting these songs, then, Smith and his colleagues were not just saving the music of the past, but saving their audiences from the menace of "progress."

What is a bit strange about all of this, however, is the fact that the musicians who recorded the tracks that Smith wished so fervently to preserve were themselves quite keen to sell themselves on the very market Smith despised. After all, all of the songs contained on the *Anthology* were originally set down in the boom years of commercial recording preceding the Great Depression, years that saw the emergence not only of a commercial industry in country music, but also in the blues. Justice himself left Logan County, West Virginia, in 1929 to record his songs in Chicago, presumably because he wished to strike it rich.

Like the “Soggy Bottom Boys” of the Coen Brothers’ film, who heard they could get a tenner for singing into a can, Justice and the legions of musical migrants who made the music that would end up on the *Anthology* did not think of themselves as vestigial remnants of a transplanted Elizabethan culture. As such, they represent not a dying past of homemade banjos, isolated rural communities, and weird murder ballads, but the integration of Appalachia into a nationalizing market and consumer culture. Indeed, if one looks at the songs Smith chose *not* to include on his anthology, such as Justice’s “Cocaine,” recorded in 1929, one begins to see that the “Old, Weird America” was a land of drug addiction, repossessed furniture, and interracial mixing—in other words, it was a lot more like the “Jazz Age” (and like the racially intermixed America Smith himself hoped for) than the disappearing past.

What should we make of today’s folk revival, then? It seems to me that today’s folk revival—the folk revival of Moby, who sampled Lomax’s ethnomusicological subjects into a collection of songs that would all end up as backing tracks for advertisements (and who, incidentally, didn’t pay any significant royalties to the original artists until Lomax’s family made him), and of *O Brother Where Art Thou*, whose genially grubby cast care as much about hair-care products as freedom—is in some ways more authentic than the “authenticity” promised by the *Anthology*. For while Smith and his cohort sought to erase the traces of the market from the music he found, in order to preserve a world before radio from the ravages of history, the performers he collected saw things very differently. Following in the footsteps of the murder balladeers before them (who were, after all, entrepreneurs), the musicians seem to have seen “traditional” music as just one of many choices in a range of options that included vaudeville, the radio, and the phonograph records that they consumed, as well as produced. For them, this was a good thing, not the beginning of the end. So, go out then, and listen to the music, and keep Smith’s dream alive. But remember, the “Old, Weird America” isn’t as weird as it seems.

Further Reading:

See Bruce Bastin, *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast* (London, 1986); Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1982); Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill, 2000); Bill Malone, *Country Music U. S. A.: A Fifty Year*

History (Austin, 1968); Richard Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago, 1997); David Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill, 1983). For a broad sample of twentieth-century American folk on the Web, see the Library of Congress's [American Memory Performing Arts Collection](#) especially, [The John and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip](#). **CDs mentioned:** Various Artists, *Anthology of American Folk Music* (Smithsonian Folkways 40090, 1997, \$79); Various Artists, *Anthology Of American Folk Music Volume 4* (Revenant Records, 2000, \$31.98).

This article originally appeared in issue 3.2 (January, 2003).

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