

FOLKSONG — AMERICAN BIG BUSINESS

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WE had been dancing all night — putting the finishing touches to three of the most exciting days in my life. The Cowboys' Reunion came to an abrupt end as the pale blue-green dawn crept over the little Western town nestling into the foothills.

With whistling, shouting, singing and hollering they left by twos and threes and groups together, some by the West Road, some by the East, wagons and riders gradually disappearing and with them their clouds of prairie dust.

Nostalgia as lonesome as the prairies, and as old, too, led me back to the Fair Grounds. There was old Idaho Bill, well over sixty, directing his outfit. He had shipped in six carloads of wild horses from his mountain range for the wild horse race. During the race some had been saddle broken and had to be separated from the others. Idaho Bill figured he wouldn't come to any more Cowboy Reunions. The last time he went to Pendleton, Oregon he had felt the same way. The thing was getting a little too professional. "No question about it being real all right — the boys are the real bonafide article. You take that runt Shorty Kelsey — he broke the world's record for bulldogging this year. Now he figures he'll go professional. In a few years he won't be worth two toots in hell. It's getting to be cut and dried. When the boys ride hell-for-leather because their pardners, the old man or their girls and all the folks are a lookin' on — well that's one thing. That's real cowhide. When they calculate to make it pay for a livin' — that's a white horse of a different color. You know there's somethin' cussed-ornery about that, somehow. Taint decent to be ridin' your heart out for pay."

Now that's what folksong is all about. Singing and dancing your heart out for yourself and the people you were born among — whose daily lives you share through the seasons, through thick and thin. From the hearts of our people they have come — our people living, loving, bearing, working, dying. These songs are as the people whom they express — salty,

hilarious, sly, vulgar, gay, sad, weary, heroic, witty, prosaic, and often as eloquent as the silent poor burying their dead. They constitute a rich legacy of time-mellowed feelings and thoughts chosen through usage from the experiences of people who lived here and helped make America what she is today.

Many of our folksongs began as transplantations from European music. Nearly everywhere one finds remnants of Protestant Church tunes and English, Irish and Scotch ballads. Spanish love songs have lingered. The French "Chant Populaire" turns up now and then. German chorales and folk tunes are part of our tradition. And then finally the ever growing influence of our black fellow-citizens – our one-tenth, leavening, hypnotizing us with voodoo rhythms and the indigo moods of the troubles they've seen.

All this and more too. The flavor added by the sun, moon and stars shining on our people as they built a nation in the wilderness. The smoldering excitable South, the vast lonesome West, bustling cities and man-killing industry. The old songs of our progenitors have been reborn. They are now more intense, sadder, wilder, more ribald, embodying much greater pitch variety and rhythmic freedom.

The pitch design in our best folksongs tends to lift beyond the banalities of obvious symmetrical sequences. Our best folksingers vary the sequence both rhythmically and tonally. They often end their phrases with characteristic "off pitch" ornamentations. Our popular bands also make a practice of this freedom in pitch design, especially the "spot" soloist when he "takes off."

But rhythmic freedom, asymmetry, is no doubt the greatest American contribution to folksong literature. (In that respect it most resembles Russian folksong.) This is probably due to the turbulence of our economic and social life. I cannot ascribe it to our language because we are doing the same thing to the English language that we have done to European folksong.

The basis of this rhythmic freedom is the sense of feeling rhythmic pulse in its smallest units, rather than in large arbitrary metrical denominations. Such a procedure can and does carry the rhythmic pulse into free moving groups of two and three with interspersed passing pulses of one, without in any way interrupting or complicating the clear intention of continuity. Our popular bands are so absolutely precise in their rhythmic ensemble for just that reason. Watch the players' feet for the smallest unit of rhythmic pulse.

In a sense our popular music is *urban* folk music. Both performers and audience have folksong characteristics. They have no esthetic attitudes, the music is produced only for enjoyment, they show a keen interest in the interpretive mannerisms of the performer, a lack of interest in all materials except those spontaneously improvised. There is emphasis on the lyrics, there are many word variations on nearly the same tune, a tremendous enthusiasm and desire to participate, a tendency to emphasize topics of current interest, a naive and aggressive self-sufficiency, and little respect for traditions other than their own.

But our popular music thrives on commercial exploitation. I doubt that folk music can do so but it now seems that it will be put to that test. The situation is as follows. For years the collecting of American folksong has quietly been going on. Credit must be given to such distinguished collectors as Cecil Sharp and to many others less acclaimed. But to the house of Lomax, father John and son Alan, goes the honor of bringing to records folksongs as they actually sound, and of placing before the public such folksingers as Leadbelly, Aunt Molly Jackson, Woodie Guthrie and Johnson of the Golden Gate Boys.

While this work of collection has been moving forward, radio has been increasingly hard put to supply fresh material for its omnivorous and voracious public. Now, since the big networks are planning to close their doors to all members of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, the problem becomes twice aggravated. So folksong is invited into the parlor. Also America has become a haven for expatriate musicians – one might almost say for the expatriated Muse herself. Some think she has now come to make her home with us. All these conditions have combined to high-light American folk music. It's rapidly becoming a new industry. Tossed into the commercial boiling pot, it is now being processed for radio and every conceivable outlet. The more obvious melodic idioms and the word ideas are put through the work-a-day wringer by crooners, bands, small orchestral groups, radio skits, folk-feature programs, records. Folk music is being used to "polish up the handle of the *Buy American* front door." This is America's way of getting acquainted – of applauding those she wants, for the time being. It may be, as it so often is, America's way of completely swallowing and digesting her oyster. In any case, our musical stream of consciousness will flow on with folksong intermingled.

Certain plastic residues will surely accrue to the sum total of usable materials. Unfortunately the tonal-sequential type of folksong – the *Jenny*

Jenkins and *Lil Lizas* and *Sour Wood Mountains* are easiest to capture and exploit. There are some sentimentalists who try to make out a case for these banalities. They will deify folksong as descended from the God-head of *the common people*, just as their prototypes have canonized the old masters, jazz or modern music according to their prejudices. But we need lose neither time nor space on these worthies. They are part of the Art Myth process too.

America will have many folksong vendors in the next few years. Some city boys may take a short motor trip through our land and return to write the Song of the Prairies – others will be folksong authorities after reading in a public library for a few weeks. "And though we have no talents here for hiring, we'll hire the robe out anyhow." We'll have Folk Song Hot and Cold and in the Pot with whiskers on it.

But all this mushroom exploitation of folksong will neither greatly aid nor hinder it. After the era has run itself out there will remain those composers who have been deeply influenced by the finest, clearest, strongest feeling of our best songs. Because these songs are identified with emotions deeply implicit in themselves, such composers will be enriched and stimulated. They may find a gold mine in the rhythmic resources of characteristic word combinations and of folk nonsense syllables, or in their poly-modal-diatonic melody. They will absorb and use the idioms of folk music as naturally as the folk who unconsciously generated them. They will have learned that folksong is a native well-spring, an unlimited source of fresh material; that it can't be reduced to a few formulas to stir and mix to taste.

Those composers who are drawn to and richly satisfied with folksong will inherit the privilege of using it with the professional's resources and discipline and the amateur's enthusiasm and delight. For "here a great personal deed has room."