

AMERICA'S FOLK MUSIC

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IT IS of comparatively recent date that we have become aware of the wonderful storehouse of folk music America has been erecting for more than a century. A long line of scholars and musicologists—John A. Lomax, Cecil Sharp, Franz Rickaby, E. Linscott, P. E. Barry, Dorothy Scarborough, Jean Thomas, etc.—poking into every corner of our country taking down melodies or recording them on phonograph discs, have revealed to the world a folk music which for variety of mood and sentiment, subtlety of nuance, and intensity of feeling (as well as occasional originality of musical design) can stand comparison with the best folk music anywhere.

Much of it probably had outside origin. Immigrants pouring into this country brought with them from the Old World memories of their songs. They borrowed from them copiously in describing musically their experiences in the new land. Yet, by a subtle chemistry, these melodies became American, transformed often in intangible qualities by American experience. Just as the individuals arriving here became American through absorption of American experiences and ideals, so the songs they sang acquired new traits and elements. Not only the mood and emotional quality of the songs changed, but even the melodic and rhythmic elements made new songs of the old, brought to them an altogether new personality.

From our earliest beginnings Americans have sung of their experiences, troubles,

and aspirations in a folk music that grew as democracy evolved. In large measure it helped express that evolution; it followed the frontier and developing industry; it mirrored the growth of a nation.

II

Early in our history both shipbuilding and lumbering became highly important industries. Timber was plentiful. As early as the beginning of the 18th century, New England trees were being transformed into buildings and ships; they became a commodity for export to England. In the early 19th century, the lumbering industry moved westward to Pennsylvania and Michigan. By the middle of the century professional lumbering reached its heyday, and with it came the flowering of the shantyboy songs.

The man with the axe derived his name of shantyboy from the French *chanter*—to sing. The man who could write songs and sing them was held in the highest esteem. There is the saga of George Burns. One evening, during the height of a blizzard, Burns staggered into a log camp, frozen and starved. When warmth returned to his body, he asked for food and offered to pay for it with songs. They made such an impression on the men they insisted he stay with them all winter and entertain them during the evenings. Burns was not a good shantyboy, but his shortcomings with the axe were forgiven and forgotten for the sake of his music-making. Burns was typical of the wandering minstrel—

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here one day, gone the next—who traveled from one log camp to another practising his art. Proud of his gifts and expansive before an audience, the singing shantyboy was an individualist of the stature of a true artist, insisting upon singing only those songs he liked, and singing them in his own manner.

They were a polyglot lot—the shantyboys of the West. Scottish, Irish, Germans, and French Canadians were in the majority. Their life was hard, the dangers plentiful. After a day of work, their supper consumed, they would sit in front of a roaring stove and sing of the hardships of their calling.

The shanties are not work songs—meant to lighten the tasks of labor—but are songs about their work, their troubles, hopes, nostalgia. Irish and Scottish folk songs were predominant, but shanties revealed other origins as well. Old English ballads (the kind that were preserved in the Appalachian Mountains) became shanties. So did sailor chanteys, vaudeville tunes, railroad songs, even Negro spirituals. Many other songs, however, are original, though they betray foreign

Often rough and masculine, these songs projected emotions rather self-consciously. A *Shantyman's Life* is a good example of the melodic quality of the best of them, mirroring as it does, in music as well as in words, the bleakness of this life. The songs have the restrained sadness of men too stout of heart to give it more than passing notice. Without becoming maudlin, songs like *Jimmie Whalen* have a poignance achieved through understatement. Occasionally rough humor may enter into them, but whether in humor or in sorrow, there is a lusty pace to the shantyboy song, reflective of a vigorous life.

III

Then there were songs sung by the men who took to ships. From the beginning, America was a seafaring nation; it built ships which rivaled the best efforts of Europe. It developed commerce, had some of the best-manned boats on the high seas.

The work of the sailors was arduous, under discipline that bordered on cruelty. To lighten his tasks—to escape from the

THE LITTLE BROWN BULLS



fingerprints at times, and they have qualities both in technique and mood found nowhere else in our popular music. The rhythms—because these songs were more often declaimed than sung—are free and elastic; many of the airs are purposely notated unbarred to achieve the quality of melodic declamation. Songs like *The Jam on Gerry's Rocks* and *The Little Brown Bulls* become through this free use of rhythm remarkably dramatic.

reality of hard work and ruthless punishment—the sailor sang. In the early days of seagoing, the crews frequently included instrumentalists—a fiddler or an accordion player—who would provide accompaniment to all the singing. As work aboard ship grew more complex, with no hand spared, instrumental accompaniments were abandoned. The sailor songs became exclusively a cappella, usually with solo lines sung by the leader, and

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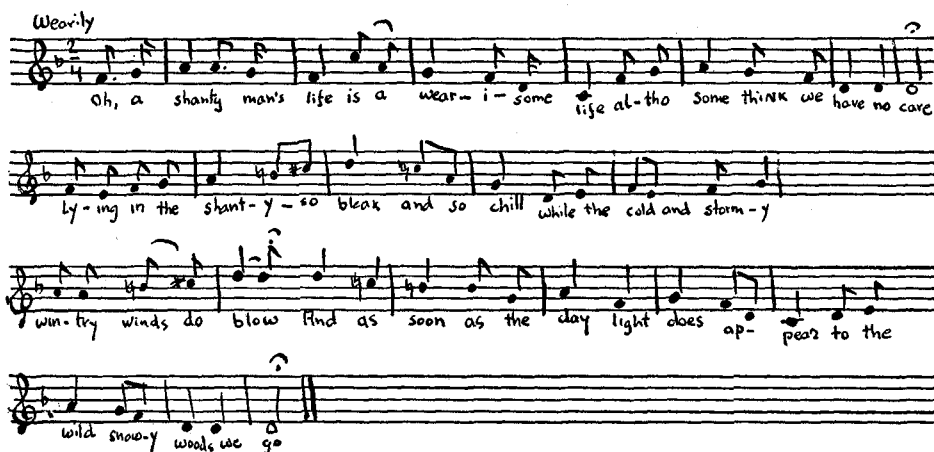
the rest of the crew joining in the refrain. The choruses, of course, were standardized to permit unison singing. But the solo singing of the chanteyman permitted as much variation and elaboration as his imagination encouraged.

The chantey was (as the shantyboy song was not) primarily a work song, an

time) with measured, even rhythms, employed for longer and heavier jobs such as hoisting sail or casting anchor; "Capstan songs," like *Rio Grande*, were adapted for work of a long and steady process, had long choruses and an understandable monotony of metre.

Like the lumberjack, the sailor took

A SHANTYMAN'S LIFE



indispensable element of labor done exclusively by manpower. Without the precision of the rhythmic movement the songs provided, it would have been impossible to achieve the exact timing in heaving and pulling required of every man. It was therefore expected that the men should sing continually at their work, and their singing was encouraged by their superiors. Because the songs inevitably expropriated the rhythmic quality of the work at hand, they became remarkable for rhythmic inventiveness, cogency of drive, crispness of accent. "Short drags" like *Haul Away, Joe* or *Haul on the Bowline* had crisp, staccato rhythm for tasks requiring short, heavy pulls; "Halliard chantey," the most famous of which is *Blow, Boys, Blow*, were regular in form (usually written in common

his melody wherever he found it—from foreign balladry, vaudeville ditties, cowboy songs, patriotic melodies. Many of the chantey, however, were original—the creation of the chanteyman who led his crew. Because he was selected for his voice, Irishmen and Negroes—with the most appealing voices—were invariably selected for the assignment. For this reason, of all the varied strains which make up the cloth of sailor chantey, those of Irish balladry and the Negro spiritual are perhaps the most prominent.

IV

During the 17th and 18th centuries, British settlers penetrated into the Appalachian and Cumberland mountains of Kentucky, Tennessee, north Georgia, the Carolinas, Missouri, and Virginia, there

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to build their homes. Difficulty of access, either by road or rail, brought to these mountain settlers a cloistered existence, quite apart from that of the rest of the country. Virtually until the dawn of the 20th century, these mountain folk lived a secluded and primitive life. Horseback was their only method of travel over difficult trails. Their livelihood came from working at the soil. Their homes were primitive, their existence simple to the point of being threadbare. Money was unknown—the barter system serving adequately their economic purposes. Most of the mountain people had no schooling whatsoever; they spoke in an archaic language passed on to them from preceding generations.

But they preserved a wonderful musical folklore and kept alive an almost inexhaustible library of folk songs. Unknown to the rest of the country, this music was kept fresh and vibrant within the impenetrable walls of the surrounding mountains. Then in 1916, several musicologists—among them Cecil Sharp of England and the Brooklyn-born Howard Brockway—explored the mountain communities and helped unearth this repertoire of American folk music, all of it of British origin.

“We stepped out of New York into the life of the frontier settler of David Boone’s time,” wrote Brockway, describing his expedition. “Here are people who know naught of the advance which had been made in the world outside of their mountains. It surpasses belief. . . . In the 17th century their ancestors brought the songs from England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, and they have been handed down orally from generation to generation. Songs that died out in the old country a century ago are still sung every day in the Appalachian region. The statement has been made that amongst these people one can find nearly all the folk

songs ever sung in the British Isles, and perhaps the claim is not far wrong.”

As Sharp noted in his monumental edition of these mountain tunes, they are no museum pieces preserved from a past age, but music of living, vital quality. Everybody sang, from young to old. There were few homes which did not boast of some musical instrument—preferably a fiddle, guitar, or a banjo. And all seemed to have a natural flair for ballad-making.

The most famous of these melodies, classics like *Pretty Polly*, *Barbara Alien*, and *Two Sisters* (of which there exist many variants) have preserved old English traditions of ballad-writing. Others, like *Ground Hog*, *Kentucky Moonshiner*, and *Sourwood Mountain*—while obviously derived from English balladry—are more intrinsically American; they have acquired an atmosphere and nuances of expression the English never possessed. The free intonation (the nasal twang and slides) of a gem like *Kentucky Moonshiner*—characteristic of all mountain songs—together with the salty humor and the ever-present mood of mountain loneliness give it an essentially American personality:

*I've been a moonshiner for seven-
teen long years,
I've spent all my money on whiskey
and beers.
I'll go to some holler and up my
still,
I'll sell you one gallon for a two-
dollar bill.*

The mountain folk were simple people, who sang of their everyday experiences (except for their white spirituals, in which they expressed their deep religious feelings). The melodies were generally unaccompanied, and almost always solo; they are called “lonesome tunes” and do not encourage harmonic treatment. They have an intonation all their own, with peculiar color and charm. They have freely

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fluctuating rhythms, intriguing patterns, and a high quality of spontaneity, and they are as natural a part of the life of the people as breathing and eating.

V

Migration westward—and its accompanying songs—began almost as soon as the war for independence was over. Inflation and depreciation, the crushing taxation on farms, the panic that succeeded a brief period of postwar prosperity, all sent an ever-swelling army of pioneers into new, rich lands. In 1788 almost a thousand boats carried 18,000 settlers down the Ohio. By 1790 more than 170,000 settlers had passed over the mountainous regions of the South to the westward lands of Kentucky and Tennessee, and the expansion West continued without interruption throughout the 19th century.

This migration brought a birth of new folk song. Bullwhackers, who drove the wagons, sang as they traveled. Stout-hearted pioneers, who lived dangerously and worked hard, sang of their new lives in open country. The entertainments of the city—the theater, social gatherings, even card games—were virtually nonexistent in spaces where one's nearest neighbor lived frequently many miles away. To while away hours of rest and leisure, men and women sang, sometimes making up songs of their own—songs of virility, strength, energy, songs of the open spaces with a power of rhythm and an almost wildness of melody unique to them.

These men were free men. They could build their lives in their own way; they developed their own governments freed of any vestiges of imperial rule. A spirit of equality was born on the frontier—where each man's courage, energy, lack of snobbery made him the equal of his neighbor.

The same spirit entered the songs these men sang. They looked contemptuously upon the popular songs of the eastern seaboard as "Federalist" tunes—the aristocratic tunes of a snobbish people. In the East, they sang about the fashions of the day, or about local politics. Their most popular tunes were bathed in sentimentality: *The Vulture of the Alps*, a great favorite long before the Civil War, described the agony of a parent in seeing her child snatched by a vulture; songs like *The Railroad Wreck* and *The Ship on Fire* sent audiences to tears with their realistic descriptions of major catastrophes. Musically, these songs were formal and stereotyped. The melodies followed the long-accepted patterns of balladry: eight bar songs carefully subdivided into two equal sections, the rhythm even and humdrum.

What the frontiersman wanted in his songs was music for a plain, common, democratic people. He had no use for sentimentalism, for snobbish descriptions of fashions and city vice; he swept away the eastern formal, academic style. To the popular song he brought a gust of spirit and independence of form like a breath of fresh air. His *Shoot the Buffalo* had an energy and lustiness remote from the pallid sentiments of eastern parlors. A melody like *The Star of Columbia* stemmed from a scale with a definite pentatonic character—a far cry from the unvarying diatonic structure of the seaboard songs. In mood and spirit it had a strength and passion—largely through the use of varied rhythmic patterns—which made the songs of the East sound anemic by contrast.

The fiddle was the favorite instrument of the frontiersman. The pioneers would play old tunes and evolve new ones for all their social gatherings. For square dances, for play parties (play parties were evolved as a modified substitute for dancing by

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the more religious pioneers; the young people would sing *Here Comes Three Dukes*, *Weevily Wheat*, or *Skip to My Lou* to involved gestures and steps), for children's play, and for balladry and wagon tunes performed at small social gatherings, the fiddle tune formed the

of the animal spirits of strong-hearted men inspired by visions of wealth; the melodies they borrowed—and created—reflected their high spirits in tunes filled with bluster and swagger, admirably illustrated by *Sacramento*.

There was also the cowboy who created



spine and backbone of pioneer music. The fiddlers played from memory, and they learned new tunes by ear. Originally borrowed from varied sources (sometimes as far removed as an Irish reel, at others from the minstrel show), these tunes, at the hands of different fiddlers, underwent a radical metamorphosis in structure. A melody might acquire new figurations as the fiddler permitted his imagination to wander. The melody itself would be dramatic with abrupt intervals, often that of open fifths. The rhythm became vigorous and dynamic, sharp and incisive. Men of strength and will inevitably expressed themselves in tunes equally strong and independent. Before long, these were considered original by the pioneers; and, to a large degree, original they had become.

The opening of the West brought a wealth of other songs, too. The '49ers, who trekked across the prairies in search of gold, created their own. Many were parodies of the popular tunes of the day (the most famous, Stephen Foster's *O Susannah!* set to new words). The lyrics were sometimes bawdy and usually full

songs to rally his herd or lull them to sleep "up the trail" from Texas to the shipping point at Fort Dodge, Texas. A simple person, close to the fundamentals of living and working, his songs were simple in design to a point of being almost ingenuous, with little variety of metre or melody. He was lonely for the most part, and his songs abound with nostalgic sentiments for home, a girl, peace, and rest. His best friend was his horse, his one dread a lonely grave. Frequently he sang sad accents about dying alone and being buried on the wide prairie, though occasionally lusty spirits found expression in songs of irrepressible robustness—and he sang of breaking loose in Dodge City. But most often his is a plaintive tune. Songs like *Good-bye Ol' Paint*, *The Lone Prairie*, *Poor Lonesome Cowboy*, *The Dying Cowboy* are characteristic in their touch of poignancy.

The men who built the railroads drove their spikes on sun-baked prairies to the tunes of swinging work songs. A leader (frequently chosen because he could sing and improvise) would chant the saga of John Henry or the story of a famous wreck, and the workers would join in the

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chorus, accenting the beat with vigorous clangs of their hammers on the spikes. Their music has fine rhythmic pace and drive.

In the mines, minstrelsy also flourished: miners would participate in communal gatherings on the green in the mine patch at night, in a nearby barroom, or even during the lunch hour within the mine itself. Mine songs—*Down in a Coal Mine*, *Oh My Liver and My Lungs*, *The Coal Miner's Child*—are full of social implications—full of sweat and toil, speaking the fear and despair which dominated the miner's uncertain life.

VI

Finally, there is the music of the Negro—probably the richest and proudest and artistically the most significant of our folk music. So much has already been written about the songs of the Negro—and so well is it known—that any detailed comment here is superfluous. It need only be pointed out that, like all our other folk music, the songs of the Negro also had foreign origin: from Africa he brought some of the rhythmic and melodic devices of African music (shifting accents, syncopated beats, a Dorian-like mode in the melody). But the Negro spiritual and “shout” are far removed from African music. The same subtle chemistry that transformed all our immigrant folk music into something unmistakably American, also played its part in the evolution of Negro song. The melody was transformed until it became the lamentation of an oppressed people. It acquired intensity of feeling, a brooding

sorrow, a religious fervor which African music had never known—and thereby it graduated from a primitive expression into a great musical art.

The march of American civilization has left the making of much of this folk music in our distant past. The compulsions which created it no longer exist. Engines, tractors, trucks, and motors displaced manpower in the forests; steam made the use of sails obsolete; machinery did the tasks once assigned to rough hands and strong backs in the opening of the country. The insularity of the Appalachian mountains was shattered by the 20th century invasion of good concrete roads, the Ford, public education, and the radio. The primitivism of its inhabitants disappeared, and with it much of the creation of its original balladry. The West is now open; the age of pioneering is over; the round-up and the march down the long trail are things of the past. The western pioneer and the cowboy have become vanishing Americans.

But the music that was created by American experiences of yesterday remains alive—a deathless and eloquent commentary on our past. It is only one phase of our folk music: old and passing traditions are ever superseded by new ones, and they too are the stimulus for the folk art of a new age.

David Ewen is the author of many books on music, his latest being Dictators of the Baton.

• Miscellany •

THE YOUTHBUILDERS CLUB of Junior High School No. 43 in the Harlem area of New York City has been intelligently active trying to explode the theory of racial differences in blood.

"Several months ago," they say, "our club, composed of students 12 to 14 years old, was searching for material means to aid the war effort for the cause of freedom and equality. After discussion and interviews with war officials, we decided that promoting unity between the Negro and white people of the neighborhood was the most valuable thing we could do, because of friction over the fiction that Negro and white blood was different. Even some of our club members believed it.

"So we had a meeting between club members and science teachers and Dr. John T. Myers, Chief of Staff of a large laboratory and his assistant, Mr. David Eigenfeld. The president of our club, a Negro girl, Bernice Bethea, and Fred Stern, a white member, were the guinea pigs for this experiment. A comparison of the blood of both persons under the microscope showed that it was the same.

"Next, we decided on ways of publicizing the important facts we had learned. Extra slides were made for the science teachers in our school, and we also wrote up the experiment in the school paper. But we thought printed words weren't dramatic enough. A poster would be the glow of genius, the members thought, and so a poster it was. Since we had no artists among us, our poster committee commissioned Walter L. Wallace, the Fifth, a former '43-er, now a student at the High School of Music and Art, to make it. Our poster committee also found 165 key places in the neighborhood which promised to put it up."

To make sure no one in the neighborhood missed the poster or word about the project, the youngsters made a practice of conversing loudly about it on trolleys and buses, in the corner grocery stores. Eventually they called a large meeting at the Hotel Edison to spread the word beyond their neighborhood—and some 500 people attended. In announcing the meeting, said Tommy Edwards, a member of the club, "As we all know, the aim of Hitler and Tojo is to pit one race against another. We must not play into the hands of these murderous gangsters and despicable enemies, whose motto is 'Divide and Rule.' So, as there is no racial difference in blood, why segregate it? Then we could truly typify our American motto—'United We Stand.'"

When the Red Cross drive came along in school, they debated at length whether they should contribute their nickels and dimes to the organization whose discriminatory practice they had been battling. Deciding finally that some Americans might die on the battlefield if the Red Cross were not supported, they voted to contribute, but wrapped each donation in a paper of specific protest at segregation of blood.

THE EAST AND WEST ASSOCIATION (40 East 40th Street, New York City), a non-profit, non-political organization having as its sole purpose the introduction to each other of the peoples of the East and the West, has launched a "Letters to China" project. Pearl S. Buck, president of the Association, writes: "We hope . . . that the letters come from persons with a variety of interests. We are suggesting that the letters tell some-