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Modern Folk: The Folk Revival and American Cold War Culture, 1958 – 1965

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
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by

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The Dissertation of Stephen I. Moore is approved:

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## **Acknowledgements**

I first discovered The Kingston Trio in a cassette tape case my father kept in his office. It was the live album, *Once Upon a Time*. I loved the upbeat approach to the songs and the silly gags the group pulled between (and during) songs. They were having a great time and seemed to have a genuine passion for singing. In my first open mics, performing by myself with my acoustic guitar my mother bought me after high school graduation, I played a mix of my own songs and songs taken from this record. I often began with “Hard Ain’t it Hard” and ended with “Goodnight Irene.” Thank you, mom and dad, for providing a home that allowed for such creativity and for suffering through those open mics. Once I began my undergrad degree, I discovered “Hard Ain’t it Hard” had been written by Woody Guthrie and “Goodnight Irene” by Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter. Then I discovered how much The Kingston Trio took their arrangements from The Weavers. I’ve been pulling on this string ever since.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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From 1958 to 1965, interest in folk music skyrocketed across the United States, especially among young, White, middle-class Americans. From basement coffeehouses in New York, to college folksong societies on college campuses, to tony nightclubs in Los Angeles, folk music became the hip new trend. The widespread field of revivalism disagreed over the style and meaning of folk revivalism, and they divided into three approaches, popular, anthropological, and political. The popular approach succeeded commercially, and record companies and television producers flooded the airwaves and television screens with groups of clean-cut, White performers playing folk music in a modernized, popular style. While historians have tended to treat popular folk as a simple fad adjacent to the more authentic work of political and anthropological folk revivalists, popular folk is better understood as a reflection of contemporary Cold War values. The marketing of these groups and their adaptations to folksongs embodied middle-class values of domesticity and upward mobility. It also created a vision of history that naturalized America as the endpoint of historical progress. The anthropological and

political revivalists viewed their involvement in folk performance as a wholistic cultural critique. Consequently, they saw popular folk artists' engagement with the marketplace as antithetical to the project of folk revivalism. They rejected popular folk, and attempted to disqualify it in the public imagination by labeling it as commercial. However, mainstream consumers embraced the Cold War value of commercialism as a positive social good. Black artists also participated in the folk revival, but deployed a distinct set of strategies for accessing the White dominated media spaces. These artists used several strategies in an effort to negotiate the ways in which Blackness had been politicized; they made appeals to respectability, staged Black suffering, and advocated for the social gospel. Through their own redeployment of folk material, Black artists reimagined the narrative of American history in their own right. In general, the popular approach to the folk revival helped to reify Cold War values in the popular marketplace. As a result, it centered Whiteness as default in the American imagination and reimagined American history through the lens of the affluent society.



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## Chapter One

### Introduction: The Antecedents to the Folk Revival

In the late nineteenth century, folk music collectors, inspired by a desire to preserve a supposedly disappearing culture, or to find the roots of a national character, headed into the rural backwaters looking for people untouched by the corrupting influence of modern culture. These early expeditions occurred before portable recording technology; folklorists focused on textual authority and invented notation systems to capture singing styles. As social scientists professionalized their academic pursuits, so too did folklorists aspire to greater rigor. Theorists like Franz Boas helped to establish the institutional framework for ethnological study. For example, the American Folklore Society was established in 1888, but this institution focused more on the professionalization of the discipline than on public engagement.<sup>1</sup> By the turn of the century, much of the music labeled “folk” was housed in academic institutions. Popular music publishing, which at this time meant sheet music, printed songs with supposed folk origins, however they were advertised as “traditional ballads.”

By the 1910s, two new waves of folk collectors came of age. Some continued to expand the field of academic folklore, while others were private collectors. What distinguished this era of folk collector was an aspiration to repackage their work for a general audience, which influenced both the content of their collections and how they presented it. Carl Sandburg was perhaps the most well-known private collector of this

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<sup>1</sup> Regna Darnell, “American Anthropology and the Development of Folklore Scholarship: 1890-1920,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 10, no. 1/2 (1973): 23–39.

generation, largely due to his success in publishing. His *American Songbag* stayed in print for several editions and influenced generations of ballad hunters.<sup>2</sup> It also acted as an introduction to folk music for many Americans. John Lomax represented a new breed of academic popularizers. His work collecting cowboy songs was buoyed by support from Texas A&M and Harvard and he published for both academic and popular audiences.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, his success as an author facilitated fundraising for further academic study. After academic and private interest, the next great investment in the study and preservation of folk music came from the federal government.

Through the New Deal programs of cultural preservation, institutional support grew outside of the academy and in the form of government grants and archives. The Great Depression had again frightened Americans that their way of life was quickly disappearing and prompted government agencies to send documentarians into the field to preserve it. John Lomax continued to take collecting trips, at times bringing along his son Alan. Unlike the ballad hunters of the 1880s, the father and son team enjoyed the advantage of portable recording equipment. This innovation enabled them to preserve their subjects' music while still in the field. They not only captured their songs but their singing styles as well. Given the folkloric preference for "untouched" social groups, populations that likely would not have been influenced by popular music, they focused their collection efforts on the prison system in the American South. Of course, the

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 11

<sup>3</sup> John A. Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*. (New York: Hafner PubCo, 1971).

Lomaxes had their audience in mind when they collected in the field, coaching their subjects to omit certain verses, or even to sing in a style more suited to capture by the microphone.

During the 1930s, the driving force of popular music sales shifted from sheet music to records. While popular music records did not advertise folk as a category, producers began to recognize a market for alternatives to urban popular music. Record companies marketed rural music by White performers as “hillbilly” or “old time”, and African American music became “blues” or “race” records. Karl Hagstrom Miller characterizes the shift in record labeling and marketing this way: “The shift from minstrelsy to folklore marked the culmination of two long processes... the growing association between racial music and racial bodies and the distinction between mass-produced music and southern culture.”<sup>4</sup> Not only did blues become a subset of folk as a means of essentializing Black vernacular music, but hillbilly emerged as a category of White rural music split between country and folk depending on artists and audience.

Eventually, Alan Lomax surpassed his father to become the great folk popularizer of the 1930s and 40s. He put on special performances for select audiences in New York City, acting as interpreter and performer. Often these showcases featured lectures by the Lomaxes and performances by an *authentic* performer discovered in the field. The most well-known of these “actual folk” was Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter, who impressed urban audiences with his booming voice and 12-string guitar. Alan parlayed his

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 243.

popularization efforts into a contract for a radio program showcasing folk music.<sup>5</sup> While CBS radio had wanted him to provide music to an orchestra with the aim of modernizing composition, Lomax insisted on bringing in his own performers. This allowed him to present the music in a format closer to how he discovered it in the field and enabled him to give jobs to his friends. These performers on Lomax's CBS show included Pete Seeger, Burl Ives, Josh White, and The Golden Gate Quartet. Increasingly music producers and radio programmers came to use "folk" as a distinct genre of music in the popular market. This label could be applied to American rural music or music from global cultures. Alan Lomax's efforts in raising consciousness about folk cultures went a long way toward defining the genre in the public imagination.

Meanwhile, a dedicated cadre of political activists increasingly deployed folk music as a means of communicating their politics. While artists like Seeger and Woody Guthrie featured on radio programs that explored folk music as an object of study, they also worked with political organizers using folk music as a form of consciousness building.<sup>6</sup> Organizations such as *People's Songs*, which aligned broadly with popular front politics, viewed cultural expression as one avenue of political organizing and sought to use folk music as a means to transmit their political messages of cultural inclusivity

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<sup>5</sup> John Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Viking, 2010), 152 – 156.

<sup>6</sup> Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California*, *American Crossroads* 22 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 48 – 66. La Chapelle groups Guthrie with other Southern California migrants who used the idiom of Country music to express populist ideals.

and class consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Activists established affiliate offices in several major cities. Seeger, along with Guthrie, Lee Hayes and Fred Hellerman, began a singing collective in 1940 known as the Almanac Singers. Rather than a set band roster, this was a rotating group of musicians who came and went from the Almanac House in New York's Greenwich Village. The Almanacs aligned their message with labor organizing and left-wing politics.<sup>8</sup>

The Weavers represented a synthesis of many of the trends that preceded them, at once folkloric, political, and popular. Cofounders Seeger, Hayes, Hellerman and Ronnie Gilbert could certainly boast their own political bona fides, but as concert performers the Weavers tended to play the role of cultural tour guide. With Hellerman on guitar and Seeger on banjo, the quartet drew their material from all over the world. Though they still supported and played at political rallies, their repertoire tended toward an implicit advocacy of global unity through cultural identification. Audiences would be regaled with Black spirituals, Irish folk tunes, Appalachian ballads, and music from the Caribbean. The Weavers performed the role of folkloric guides through this musical world tour. As Lomax had acted as the representative of the folk when he reported back his field research to urban audiences, the Weavers acted as a channel for urban audiences to engage with global cultures. Backed by Decca Records and the lush orchestrations of Gordon Jenkins, commercial success came in the early 1950s with "Kisses Sweeter than

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<sup>7</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 42 – 56; Jesse Jarnow, *Wasn't That a Time: The Weavers, the Blacklist, and the Battle for the Soul of America* (Da Capo, 2018), 38 – 41.

<sup>8</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 26 – 29.

Wine”, “Tzena, Tzena, Tzena”, and their greatest hit, a version of Leadbelly’s “Goodnight Irene.”

Just as they garnered popular recognition, the Weavers fell victim to Cold War paranoia. HUAC questioning, Red Channels listing for Seeger, and informal blacklisting of the Weavers from recording companies and concert venues ruined their commercial viability. Seeger soon amicably broke with the group and continued to work as a folk promoter in his own way, through college campuses and small concerts. With the blacklisting in the early 1950s, the left-wing political apparatuses that worked to popularize folk were relegated to the margins. *People’s Songs* published its last newsletter, and Alan Lomax left the United States on a multiyear collecting tour of Europe. Additionally, Guthrie began to increasingly suffer the effects of Huntington’s Chorea. But the public fascination with folk did not disappear completely in the interim.

The mid-1950s were a transition period for folk music during which the academic folklore studies became increasingly divorced from the popular market and major labels reduced their pressings.<sup>9</sup> Out of the ashes of *People’s Songs*, Irwin Silber began publishing *Sing Out!*, a folk magazine with a more diffuse, cultural politics. Folk records continued to be produced, but this time on independent record labels with limited distribution, notably Folkways and Elektra. At the same time, college campuses developed as centers for interest in folk cultures in two ways. First, universities

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<sup>9</sup> Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 193.

expanded folklore studies programs. Second, folk music clubs sprung up alongside these new programs. Independent, do-it-yourself style concerts and sing-alongs proliferated.

Very few folk groups achieved pop success in the mid-1950s era: this was the time of the individual troubadour. Jac Holtzman, the independent record producer who began Elektra Records out of his dorm room, snatched up these artists because they were cheap to record and eager to get their work before a paying audience. In this era Jean Ritchie, Odetta, and Josh White all recorded records with Elektra. These artists varied in their approach, but they all borrowed some degree from folkloric understandings of authenticity in their presentation. Either they presented themselves as a mediator between the audience and the folk, or they presented themselves as deep researchers of folk music bringing their findings to urban audiences. When that deep research came through a lifetime of experience, performers derived their authority from oral transmission and direct experience rather than academic study. But the position of the performer as conduit to the folk either through textual authority or personal experience or emotional truth remained.

Many of the solo performers that kept folk music going through this era went on to play a role in the great boom. Theodore Bikel, an up-and-coming theatre performer from Vienna via England, recorded several records with Holtzman. His material ranged widely in tone and source. Bikel provided the audience with a broad exploration of folk in the guise of the single folk interpreter. Like Lomax in his radio shows, he provided the listener with a tour of the globe. Unlike Lomax, who tended to focus on the social implications of songs, Bikel's theatrical background allowed him to explore the



emotional depth of the material. At once booming and gentle, Bikel could convey the power behind a lamenting ballad or the irony in a comic ditty. Oscar Brand also recorded several albums with Elektra through the 1950s. While Bikel had a large theatrical presence, Brand toured the world of folk music in exhaustive detail. Recording 26 albums from 1948 through 1961, he produced a catalog of folk music. In the same encyclopedic style, Bob Gibson was a main stay of folk performance through the 50s and into the height of the revival in the 60s. In the style of Burl Ives, Gibson perfected the stage persona of an avuncular folksinger, spinning yarns and recollections about song meanings and origins. Though these three performers had very little commercial success in the mid-1950s, their work during this time would enable them to act as elder statesmen of the coming folk boom. Bikel served on the board of the Newport Folk Festival, Brand's long running radio show would feature new performers on the scene, and Gibson's musical transcriptions often became the basis for later performers.

Though Elektra and Folkways Records released a high quantity of folk music through the decade, their influence on the popular charts was limited. Instead, quasi-novelty performers occasionally rose up the charts. For example, Ives continued to enjoy the occasional hit, even as his focus shifted increasingly to acting. Jimmy Rogers scored a number 1 hit singing a popularized version of the Weavers "Kisses Sweeter than Wine." The one with the most lasting fame was probably Harry Belafonte, who rode the wave of the Calypso Craze and turned it into a more lasting success.

## **Folk Music Historiography**

From the 1970s to the early 2000s, scholarship on American folk music has shifted from characterizations of revivalism as a social process to investigation into the relational qualities between folk culture and identity. The popularity of old-time and rural music among young people living in a modern, post-industrial culture seemed, even at the time, to be an apparent paradox in need of explanation. Beginning in the 1970s, with the generation of scholars that lived through the boom, examinations of folk music tended to present its popularity as a piece of larger socio-political processes. In the 1990s, the field turned to examine folk revivalism as its own separate social phenomenon, though still intimately connected to political ideology and organizing. By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, historians focused on the institutional structures that supported revival activities, particularly political organizing bodies and record companies. The most recent body of work, since the 2010s, has investigated how folk music reflected and reified identity.

Two attendant and interrelated issues have influenced folk music scholarships for the last half century - selectivity and authenticity. Even as scholars parse through varying aspects or trends in folk music, their works elevate some artists and genres over others. This is to be expected due to editing and space constraints, however the selective criteria are usually couched in terms of authenticity. Even scholars who hold that folk lacks a true, original ideal still implicitly or otherwise rate the musical output along a scale of authenticity. The authenticity debate provides a context in which certain musical acts can easily be dismissed as not validly folk regardless of how historical actors may have

thought of the music. As a result, folk music scholarship tends to impose ahistorical categories of purity on what has been historically a very messy and imprecise term.

R. Serge Denisoff and Richard Reuss were forerunners in examinations of folk revivalism outside of folklore studies. Both accentuate a strong, intrinsic link between left wing politics and urban folk singing. Denisoff asserts that the popularity of folk music was an outgrowth of social and political activism of the 1960s. Folk was necessarily political because it acted as a mouthpiece for social movement. This approach conceptualizes the activities of folk collectors and performers as a form of political engagement. These political activities grew out of a “folk consciousness,” which Denisoff claims contributes to an awareness of class position. While the music may have originated with rural peoples, adoption by urban revivalists facilitated a sense of class solidarity.<sup>10</sup> According to this line of thinking, folk music was predisposed to left politics due to its class consciousness, and urban folk revivalism accessed this consciousness through identification. That is, the folk revivalist could tap into the political aspirations of the historical folk. However, the folk revival re-created the idea of folk in political terms. Revivalists did more than emphasize the political connotations of folk music, they presupposed a political aim of the folk while claiming it as their mantle.<sup>11</sup> This sense of identification meant that, as Reuss claims, “Left-wing folk song

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<sup>10</sup> R. Serge Denisoff, *Great Day Coming; Folk Music and the American Left* (Urbana: 1971). Denisoff published several papers on this topic through the 1970s. Another work representative of his thinking is, R. Serge Denisoff, *The Sounds of Social Change: Studies in Popular Culture.*, Rand McNally Sociology Series (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972).

<sup>11</sup> R. Serge Denisoff, “Protest Songs: Those on the Top Forty and Those of the Streets,” *American Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (1970): 808.

enthusiasts seldom cared to make any distinction between being 'of the folk' and 'for the folk.'<sup>12</sup> The term “people’s music” was invented as a way of embracing both approaches. Yet while Reuss argues for continuity between the activities of the 1960s and earlier uses of folk music as protest, Denisoff saw a rather significant change after the popular front era of the 1930s and 1940s. The protest of the 1960s lost the group spirit of group singing and replaced it with individual stars and sentiments of personal emotive feeling.

In the 1990s scholars began to explore the revival as a unique form of cultural production.<sup>13</sup> Though revivals drew from historical cultures, they produced something new, in new contexts. This wave of scholars attempted to assess the meaning of the revival on its own terms rather than as ancillary to or a conduit for political activities. Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison argue that the deployment of folk in the revival reflected an “active reworking of cultural resources.” But they view the changes enacted on folk culture in the context of historical change more broadly, asserting “The transformation of popular culture was dependent on the politics, while the very meaning or content of the politics was substantially shaped by the popular cultural forms of

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<sup>12</sup> Richard A. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957*, American Folk Music and Musicians Series; No. 4 (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 19. Though Reuss’ work was not published until 2000, it came from his dissertation which was completed in 1971.

<sup>13</sup> These works all explore folk as a process, though they emphasize different processes. Eric Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Canto edition., Past and Present Publications (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Robin D. G. Kelley, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Folk,’” *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (1992): 1400–1408; Neil V. Rosenberg, *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, Folklore and Society (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Gene Bluestein, *Poplore: Folk and Pop in American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994); Benjamin Albert Botkin, *A Treasury of American Folklore* (New York: Wings Books, 1994).

representation in which it was expressed.”<sup>14</sup> Cultural production and cultural contexts worked in tandem to produce the conditions of the revival. Revivalists repurpose the past, or transform traditions, into “living sources of collective identity.”<sup>15</sup> The historical contexts gave form to that collective identity. In the case of the 1960s, the folk song movement used the tools of commercial mass culture to critique commercialism and mass culture.<sup>16</sup>

The emphasis on cultural production has elevated the “process of revival” as comprehensive perspective for understanding the music’s significance.<sup>17</sup> From this vantage, while folk music may have been a mouthpiece for social movements, revivalism itself created its own systems of meaning. That is, folk music artists did not simply tap into a primordial political position of the ever-unchanging folk. Eyerman and Scott Berretta characterize social movements as a means of knowledge production “as social forces opening spaces for the production of new form of knowledge.” In this way folk revivalism was a “social-movement activity.”<sup>18</sup> As a social movement the revival not only successfully produced new knowledge about folk music; it re-created the idea of folk. Scholars in this era contextualized these innovations in knowledge production in

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<sup>14</sup> Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 107.

<sup>15</sup> Eyerman and Jameson, 47.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>17</sup> Ron Eyerman and Scott Barretta, “From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States,” *Theory and Society* 25, no. 4 (1996): 503 – 504. This article provides a useful summary of ideas about the production of culture, while it continues to maintain the idea that the recording industry was “relatively apolitical.”

<sup>18</sup> Eyerman and Barretta, 505.

the larger context of the cultural change.<sup>19</sup> George Lipsitz, for example, discusses how Rock music repurposed the language of industrial society as social protest. It was a co-influential evolution he terms, “dialogical.”<sup>20</sup> Revival is thus a coincidental process with social forces and in historical moments.

Robert Cantwell’s *When We Were Good* is likely the most cited work to come from this era. Cantwell combines academic treatise with memoir to characterize a general impulse toward revivalism in the mid-twentieth century. His work is premised on the notion that the work of anti-communist blacklisting had severed the work of folk activists from the public imagination. This allowed the music to reemerge by the late 1950s without strong ideological connections. The alienation of modern society, driven by suburban isolation and anxiety about the atomic bomb, sent young people searching for authentic cultural artifacts in their preindustrial roots.<sup>21</sup> White college students found a sense of political identity in folk music.<sup>22</sup> They were searching for meaning amidst the affluent society. This led revivalists to explore folk looking for pure values.<sup>23</sup> As a result, the political

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<sup>19</sup> This trend in folk music scholarship is best understood as a part of a larger trend in popular music studies. George Lipsitz, *Class and Culture in Cold War America: A Rainbow at Midnight*, Praeger Scientific (New York: Praeger, 1981); Simon Firth, “Art Ideology and Pop Practice,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossenberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988); George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*, American Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); Simon Frith, “REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PEOPLE: VOICES OF AUTHORITY IN POP MUSIC,” *Revista de Musicología* 16, no. 1 (1993): 528–32.

<sup>20</sup> Lipsitz, 99.

<sup>21</sup> Cantwell, 19, 38.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 307.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

commentary of modern folk singers took a more diffuse position than the popular front revivalists of the 1940s. The subsequent generation broadly critiqued large issues like war, segregation, and conformity.

Cantwell excavates a specific thread of folk revivalism, indeed his own story, by tracing the apolitical foundations in Harry Belafonte and the Kingston Trio and blossoming in the anti-war, pro-civil rights critiques of Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. It is a broad theoretical reimagining of the meaning of revivalism especially at that moment in history, but Cantwell himself does not claim to be writing the history of the revival and as such does not show his work. Moreover, Cantwell maintains a fairly narrow definition of what that political identity might look like. He, like many others in the field, classifies the popularized, collegiate folk fad as apolitical; the milk of his youth which lead to the meat of politically conscious folk.

By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century historians turned their attention to the institutional aspects of revivalism, the machinery of music making, and individual biography. Ever since this shift, these works either trace the career paths of certain artists or focus on the “life” of key organizations as facilitators of folk revivalism. Ronald D. Cohen’s *Rainbow Quest* remains a pillar of institutional history. Cohen has devoted his career to investigating and cataloging folk revivalism which is evidenced by this thoroughly documented work. His preference for certain forces within revivalism is also evident as he hones in on a select group of committed revivalists centered in New York City’s Greenwich Village that actively sought to shape the meaning of folk music. Due to his focus, Cohen tends to portray the folk music scene as an insular cultural enclave that did not so much draw

from outside influences as produce cultural products somewhat autonomously. Though he acknowledges aspects of the revival outside this committed cadre, he claims that the work of the revivalists and the production of “commercial” records occurred on “parallel, slightly divided, tracks.”<sup>24</sup> The revivalists concerned themselves with authenticity and meaning while record companies churned out content.

The most likely subjects for biographies since the early 2000s have been the self-stylized folk revivalists who were personally and politically invested in the meaning of the music.<sup>25</sup> By centering the history on Moe Asch’s work with Folkways Records, Pete Seeger’s continued commitment even after the blacklist, Joan Baez’s singular talent, or Bob Dylan’s perceptiveness and iconoclastic stage presence, these works tend to minimize larger sociological trends.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, by focusing on a relatively small cadre of dedicated revivalists, these works have neglected to explore both how that meaning was constructed and the multiplicity of constructions of folk. These works too have

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<sup>24</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 144.

<sup>25</sup> Peter David Goldsmith, *Making People’s Music: Moe Asch and Folkways Records* (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998); Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*, Cultural Studies of the United States (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); David Nicholls, *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Dick Weissman, *Which Side Are You on?: An Inside History of the Folk Music Revival in America* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Anthony Olmsted, *Folkways Records: Moses Asch and His Encyclopedia of Sound* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Dave Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street: A Memoir, 1st Da Capo Press ed, Sixties--Primary Documents and Personal Narratives, 1960-1974* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2005); Erik Darling, *I’d Give My Life!: From Washington Square to Carnegie Hall, A Journey by Folk Music* (Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books, Inc., 2008); Gillian Anna Margaret Mitchell, *Joan Baez*, 2008; Ray Allen, *Gone to the Country: The New Lost City Ramblers and the Folk Music Revival*, Music in American Life (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> David Hajdu, *Positively 4th Street: The Lives and Times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Fariña, and Richard Fariña* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).



perpetuated, rather than contextualized, those ideas about folk music first forged during the revival.

The more recent wave of scholarship has returned to sociological examinations of revivalism. Whereas the work from the 1990s sought to assess social processes, this newer generation has investigated musical expression as an aspect of identity making. Again, the cast of historical actors draws from a similar list as earlier generations, focusing on artists committed to defining folk music in the public sphere (and Dylan).<sup>27</sup> Rachel Clare Donaldson, in *I Hear America Singing*, examines the relationship between folk and national identity. While she emphasizes anthropologists and academic folklorists more than other works, Donaldson makes a case for a sustained revival effort from the 1930s through the 1960s. This work also highlights the multicultural impulses in folk revivalism that led to progressive political identities.<sup>28</sup> Donaldson uses the perceptions of folk music to make connections between academic knowledge production, political ideology, and national identity. Ethnomusicologist Ross Cole theorizes the importance of the folk as objects of middle-class projections, “it was not simply that the folk only ever existed in the minds of the bourgeoisie, but rather that they appeared via the imagination of those with the power and agency to foreclose, transcribe, and

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<sup>27</sup> Jarnow, *Wasn't That a Time*; Aaron J. Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau: The FBI, the Folk Artists, and the Suppression of the Communist Party USA 1939 - 1956* (London: Repeater, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Rachel Clare Donaldson, *“I Hear America Singing”: Folk Music and National Identity*, Folk Music and National Identity (Temple University Press, 2014).

repurpose them.”<sup>29</sup> The middle-class have made use of folk culture as a way of positioning their own culture has relatively higher.

Race is also an important aspect of identity making. Karl Hagstrom Miller, in *Segregating Sound*, analyzes racial components of musical authenticity from the turn of the century to the 1930s. Miller reveals how the meaning of the music was a construction based around racial understandings. While he stresses the construction of the idea of folk in the marketplace of pop music, his examination centers on how collectors, promoters, and producers organized the body of music known as folk into two wholly separate bodies with a “musical color line” separating White and Black canons.<sup>30</sup> This nexus between race, folk, and commerce is an important precursor to the big business of folk revivalism among White middle class college students during the great boom.

Peter LaChapelle details the rightward shift in Country music political culture in Southern California from the 1930s to the 1960s. LaChapelle summarizes the shift this way, “Formerly an outlet for left-wing political dissident and more recently a source for cultural borrowing, the local country music culture became a proving ground for middle-class Whiteness as the region’s most prominent performers downplayed cultural borrowing and aligned themselves with campaigns antagonistic to efforts to integrate local housing.”<sup>31</sup> This perspective allows LaChapelle to trace evolutions in political

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<sup>29</sup> Ross Cole, *The Folk: Music, Modernity, and the Political Imagination* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021), 11.

<sup>30</sup> Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie*, 11 – 12, 115.

culture and in musical genre, and how these changes intermingled. This skillfully demonstrates how musicians can use similar imagery to differing political ends. However, this work tends to deploy an essentialist view of the American political spectrum. That is, the political left and right are used as stable concepts over time. This framework ignores the changing political field between the New Deal and the Cold War. Moreover, he claims space for the apolitical as a cultural possibility. For example, he asserts that record companies and radio stations, for fear of alienating audiences, sought to “depoliticize” country music.<sup>32</sup> By conceiving of the political field this way, with a stable right and left and apolitical middle, LaChapelle ignores how apolitical art can be used to maintain the status quo. Even when artistic production claims to disengage from politics, it speaks into contemporary political realities.

Across the folk music historiography, a persistent debate has never been resolved: the question of authenticity. While previous generations of scholars felt no need to qualify their position as to what was and was not folk music, beginning in the 1990s the discipline fell headlong into qualified definitions of the parameters of folk culture. This has remained an underlying issue in folk scholarship ever since. Textual authority, accurate performing style, political affiliation, or personal authenticity of the performers all acted as matrixes of qualification, or more often disqualification. At times scholars have attempted to side-step the debate by claiming a kind of authenticity agnosticism, but even these works choose sides implicitly. For example, Cohen wrestles with authenticity

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<sup>32</sup> La Chapelle, 119.

throughout *Rainbow Quest*. While he historicizes these debates, he is content to conclude that they were merely a side product of a general fuzziness over the boundaries of folk as a concept.<sup>33</sup> This does not preclude him from deploying his own categories of authenticity. Consequently, even though some scholars discuss at length how folk revivalism generated arguments over ideas about authenticity they fail to assess the reasoning of those disagreements, or how their own work reproduces those same categories.

Philip Bohlman questioned definitions of folk music in an attempt to liberate the music from this ever-present contention. In the end, however, he merely creates his own, albeit comprehensive, definition. Bohlman defines folk music by examining the dialectic of its binary structures, which include “text and context, product and process, oral tradition and written tradition, synchrony and diachrony, and cultural core and boundary.”<sup>34</sup> Folk music exists within the tension of several dialectic binaries. The act of creating and performing this music negotiates between these boundaries. Folk was a constant negotiation and, as such, must be understood in terms of a spectrum rather than a precise cultural location.

Steve Redhead and John Street have addressed the issue of authenticity most directly. Their article examines the strategies and gestures that performers employed to establish authenticity with their audience as well as those actions that diminished the

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<sup>33</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*.

<sup>34</sup> Philip V. Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), xv – xviii, 14 – 28, 53 – 57.

performers appearance of authenticity.<sup>35</sup> Yet Redhead and Street focus only on the politically motivated singer songwriters who attached the legitimacy of their political positions to the legitimacy of their art. This perspective minimizes or ignores completely the sub-set of artists who played popularized versions of folk and were unconcerned with categories of political authenticity. Generally, historians of folk revivalism have used a similar approach to authenticity as Redhead and Street.

Where does this leave popularized folk as typified by the Kingston Trio?

Historians have largely overlooked it. Yet, the high profile of popularized folk was too ostentatious to ignore completely. The string of number one hits, the television shows, and the backyard hootenannies are too much to ignore, but they can be marshalled into an intellectual cul-de-sac of “faddism” and divorced from an authentic definition of folk. Consequently, they acknowledge the trend only to dismiss it. As Gene Blustein once observed, “Fakelore all too easily becomes a category for anything a folklorist doesn’t like or understand.”<sup>36</sup> For example, Benjamin Filene’s wide-ranging look at folk revivalism in 20<sup>th</sup> century America only mentions the Kingston Trio in passing and then only as a counterpoint of ersatz commercialism in contrast to Bob Dylan’s personal

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<sup>35</sup> Steve Redhead and John Street, “Have I the Right?: Legitimacy, Authenticity and Community in Folk’s Politics,” *Popular Music* 1 (1989), 177 – 184. Also, Douglas C. Rossinow examines the drive toward authenticity in this era, “Amid conditions of broad affluence, mass consumption, the bureaucratization of many areas of social life, and increasing disengagement from formal political participation, feelings of weightlessness migrated down the social scale, appearing among much broader strata of American society and leading to a widespread yearning for authenticity.” Douglas C. Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America*, Columbia Studies in Contemporary American History Series. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 5.

<sup>36</sup> Gene Blustein, *Poplore: Folk and Pop in American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 86.

authenticity.<sup>37</sup> Even though Filene's central purpose is to assess the popular imagination of folk music and the "collection of assumptions and criteria people have ascribed to it," he dismisses the popularizers out of hand.<sup>38</sup> Cohen takes the popularizers rather more seriously as a force on the pop charts, but not as a cultural factor.<sup>39</sup> Instead, he champions the work of the revivalists, particularly the small cadre operating out of Greenwich Village. Donaldson, though her work examines the intersection of folk music and national identity in the public sphere, dismisses the potential cultural influence of "clean cut" popular acts as simply "commercial."<sup>40</sup> This framework of authenticity, while useful for examining artists that were attempting to engage with either political or folkloric definitions, has been a hindrance in examining musicians who felt no need to qualify themselves with political affiliations or folkloric qualifications. These musicians represent an aberration in folk revivalism.

### **Cold War Historiography**

Scholarship on Cold War culture has concentrated on the ideological and cultural movement broadly labeled "containment." Studies have used containment as an organizing ethos for U.S. foreign policy, domestic policy, and concurrent American cultural production that articulated and sustained it. Additionally, television, a medium

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<sup>37</sup> Filene, 206 – 207.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>39</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 129 – 134.

<sup>40</sup> Donaldson, "I Hear America Singing," 133.

that rose to national prominence during the Cold War, internalized the ethos of containment and acted as its chief purveyor. While this is a wide-ranging theoretical model, there are several specific aspects of containment that come to bear in my work. First, containment elevated a commitment to individualism as a bulwark against totalitarian domination. Second, containment emphasized the middle-class, especially as expressed through the suburban ideal, as the essential backbone of American virtue. Third, consumerism developed as the language of containment. Finally, music was a unique site for identity in a time when personal identity became a political question.

Following World War II, George Kennan's "Long Telegram" first articulated containment as a diplomatic and military strategy that aimed to contain the spread of communism to its current borders. Without territorial growth, he reasoned, communism would suffocate and wither. As the Cold War wore on containment also became a domestic goal. It represented an individual, internal duty for American Cold Warriors. Patriotic Americans took up the call to contain communism from invading their hometowns and indeed their very psyches.

As a tool for understanding Cold War culture, containment both organizes disparate cultural trends into an intelligible framework and provides explanatory power for the actions of politicians and public intellectuals. It was at once an international relations strategy, a domestic strategy, and a rhetorical strategy. Historians have used this framework to explain all manner of Cold War programs, from international intervention to domestic surveillance. Alan Nadel, for example, notes the ubiquity of containment: "The American cold war is a particularly useful example of the power of large cultural

narratives to unify, codify, and contain - perhaps intimidate is the best word - the personal narratives of its population."<sup>41</sup> The "large cultural narrative" as prompted by domestic political expediency and diplomatic strategies, trickled down through the layers of American culture.

Michael Kackman, in his examination of Cold War spy dramas, has expressed the totalizing cultural work of containment through the language of national identity. According to Kackman, "The nation's political and cultural salience – its effectiveness as discourse – is founded on its own claims of prediscursive presence."<sup>42</sup> The "prediscursive" aspect of national identity means that it hides in plain sight. It acts as the foundation upon which other aspects of identity are built, even as it remains invisible to those standing on it. Cultural products, especially those claiming to be apolitical, project the values of containment as a natural and defining feature of national identity. If the Cold War was a totalizing ideological conflict, then any avenue of cultural production could possibly be pressed into service of the war. Government agents purposefully deployed cultural products as a strategy of global containment. Reciprocally, cultural producers, even those not explicitly employed by the government, also tended to see their work as in intimate conversation with current political discussions. Culture was political because politics was cultural.<sup>43</sup> As such, writers,

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<sup>41</sup> Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age*, New Americanists (Durham [N.C: Duke University Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Kackman, *Citizen Spy: Television, Espionage, and Cold War Culture*, Commerce and Mass Culture Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxix – xxx.

<sup>43</sup> Philip Gentry, *What Will I Be: American Music and Cold War Identity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017) 18.



actors, and musicians engaged in a meta-performativity that engaged with the current political climate. Artists were both keenly aware of the politicization of culture and self-consciously placed their work into the milieu. Of course, artists that sought to use their artistic platform to make political points did so intentionally, however, even those performers who presented their work as apolitical presented their work as aligned with a broadly centrist political perspective.

Performers felt the pressure of these expectations to conform to a narrow political message. At the risk of their careers, they attempted to appear patriotic, or at least apolitical. In an attempt to separate their activities from the world of politics altogether they claimed music as a space that could be freed from political expectations.

Underneath the veneer of disengagement, “apolitical” pragmatism recreated the values of Cold War containment. To reject extremist ideology, to be anti-ideology, was to embrace the vital center as described by Arthur Schlesinger Jr.<sup>44</sup> In other words, to produce apolitical work was to simply endorse the concurrent dominant powers.

While the specific values forwarded by Cold War containment have long heritages in American thought, they were presented anew in this context because of the raised existential stakes. The battlefield for the minds of Americans necessitated an increase in prescriptive behavior. Deviation was dubious. Enforcing containment had the effect of squashing dissent, narrowing the allowable political discourse, and heightening

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<sup>44</sup> Emily Abrams Ansari, *The Sound of a Superpower: Musical Americanism and the Cold War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 67.

proscriptive behavior.<sup>45</sup> This proscriptive expectation compelled a performance of normalcy. Americans could combat the possibility of subversion or obliteration by publicly embracing key values, especially an endorsement of the liberal center. To be seen as undermining the American project was to be vulnerable to accusations of communist sympathy.

Recent scholarship on Cold War culture has examined how containment moved from coercive political suppression to intrinsic cultural enactment.<sup>46</sup> The ideology of the Cold War encouraged a performative Americanness, and the newly dominant medium of television provided a perfect forum for this performance. In reaction to the public ordeal of the HUAC trials, the movie industry, television, and radio instituted their own unofficial blacklists and only greenlit aggressively pro-American story lines to inoculate themselves from claims of communist sympathy. Television readily celebrated the work

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 2nd ed., *The American Moment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 53 – 58. Historians have examined multiple aspects of identity as reified through containment. K. A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy, Culture, Politics, and the Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), Matthew W. Dunne, *A Cold War State of Mind: Brainwashing and Postwar American Society, Culture, Politics, and the Cold War* (Amherst, [Massachusetts]; University of Massachusetts Press, 2013). Also, Christian G. Appy has examined the ways in which daily life was militarized during the Cold War. Christian G. Appy, “‘We’ll Follow the Old Man’: The Strains of Sentimental Militarism...” in Peter J. Kuznick and James Burkhart Gilbert, eds., *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).

<sup>46</sup> Bruce A. McConachie calls this prediscursive: “Containment and similar cognitive processes are prediscursive; they work at an unconscious level that precedes and shapes representation... This method involves a version of symptomatic interpretation in which the critic-historian reasons backward from the material results of cognitive processes – in the case of cold war American theatre, the success of certain types of productions with audiences – to deduce the kinds of cognitive enjoyments that made them popular.” Bruce A. McConachie, *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War: Producing and Contesting Containment, 1947-1962*, *Studies in Theatre History & Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), ix.

of anti-communist G-Men in the FBI.<sup>47</sup> By the late 1950s, American cultural gatekeepers retained the lessons of the early Cold War and continued to engage in informal self-policing.

The most important venue for popular culture making in this era was television. Recent scholarship has tended to position Cold War film, theater, and music as evolutions from earlier eras. Those cultural products predated the conflict and evolved out of their earlier incarnations. Television, on the other hand, came of age in this era. As a new medium, its rules and norms were being established for the first time. As Thomas Doherty claims, in his work *Cold War Cool Medium*, it became the “grand cathedral” of American democracy, the center of identity formation and the portal into visions of American normativity.<sup>48</sup> Music as it arose in the Cold War was intensely visual because of its concurrent exposure on television. Through the television, musical artists jumped off album covers and into audiences living rooms. Television proved to be the perfect medium for containment culture. The shows and the advertisements were consumed by nuclear families in the privacy of their homes. Kackman asserts that the medium and its content engendered a new national identity based on “liberal pluralism, class mobility, and consumerism.”<sup>49</sup> Popularized folk music quickly found a home on television. Not

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<sup>47</sup> Doherty, 34 – 36; 136.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture*, Film and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 191.

<sup>49</sup> Kackman, *Citizen Spy*, XXVII.

only was it popular with a wide range of key demographics, but its modernization of folk cultures into consumer products projected all of these key national ideals.

The first important value of Cold War containment that my work will highlight is that of individuality. The United States was engaged in an ideological war against communist totalitarianism. Political theorists, like Hannah Arendt, warned that totalitarianism, through mass culture, obliterated the individual.<sup>50</sup> This threat pushed American liberalism into a defensive position. They responded by framing their political stances in the language of individualist masculinity. The American liberal was not the ideological liberal of communism – typified as weak, dough-faced, and philosophical – he was a hard and aggressive sort who prized his individualism.<sup>51</sup> Matthew Dunne explores the momentary fascination with brainwashing as a gateway to explore the concurrent obsession with individuality. Because ideological warfare was fought in the mind, the way to combat the ill effects of bad ideology was in the mind. In this way brainwashing was an existential threat, the obliteration of the nation through the subversion of the will. Moreover, the mind was more than just the battlefield; a strong sense of individuality was proof of victory. Dunne asserts that these public discussions of brainwashing reveal deeper anxieties about what it meant to personally resist outside domination.<sup>52</sup> While Americans tapped into historical narratives of rugged American

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<sup>50</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 38 – 40.

<sup>51</sup> K. A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>52</sup> Matthew W. Dunne, *A Cold War State of Mind: Brainwashing and Postwar American Society, Culture, Politics, and the Cold War* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 6.

individuality, especially frontiersman taming the West, the new existential threat heightened this performative Cold War value.

Another vital way the Americans could exhibit their commitment to Cold War values was through an aspiration to middle-class respectability and domesticity. Alan Brinkley theorized the process by which the middle-class came to be viewed as non-ideologically, naturally American.<sup>53</sup> First, a vibrant middle-class was proof that growth could solve inequality. The economic miracle of affluence solved social and economic problems by rendering radical political solutions irrelevant. Second, containment championed the middle class as the most representative Americans. Suburbia represented the realization of American prosperity and television helped to inculcate these middle-class values as naturally American. Third, bureaucratic, White-collar workplaces reinforced the performative conformity required by containment. The associational politics of corporate America, like a commitment to anti-communism, asked individuals to keep their heads down and fraternize with the right kind of people.

The suburban home became strongly identified as the site of middle-class respectability. Americans could combat the corrupting influences of subversive politics, sexual immorality, and untraditional lifestyles from the security and control that the single-family home afforded. Elaine Tyler May examines the home as both a conceptual and material battleground of Cold War containment. According to May, “The self-contained

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<sup>53</sup> Alan Brinkley, “The Illusion of Unity in the Cold War,” in Peter J. Kuznick and James Burkhart Gilbert, *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).

home held out a promise of security in an insecure world.”<sup>54</sup> The cult of domesticity in the 1950s was a reaction to the upheavals of the preceding 20 years. The family structure had broken under the pressure of economic hardship and demands of war. Domesticity also offered a chance to proclaim a post-war normalcy. These were no longer extraordinary times of hardship and war; these were times of affluence. This was the life for which the veterans of WWII had fought.<sup>55</sup> This normalcy was also a bulwark against corrupting influences. Aberration was a potential sign of subversion or weakness to corruption. Divorce, childlessness, and homosexuality were all stigmatized as signs of personal failure. Domestic contentment projected to the wider world an internal security.<sup>56</sup>

The third key value of American Cold Warriors was consumerism. Americans could ensure their commitment to domestic contentment through the purchase of consumer products. While television may have been the grand cathedral of American ideas, the shopping mall was its temple and public commons. Consumerism was containment political culture in action. Lizbeth Cohen, in *Consumers' Republic*, argues that in the postwar era Americans viewed themselves first and foremost as consumers.

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<sup>54</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Bks, 2008), ix.

<sup>55</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, xvii – xxi. These works also explore the suburbs as the essential location of American values. Robert A. Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban* (Minneapolis, MN; University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Nancy Kwak, *A World of Homeowners: American Power and the Politics of Housing Aid*, Historical Studies of Urban America (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton: University Press, 2006).

Consumer goods both eased the burden of domestic work and tangibly represented upward mobility.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, with the existential dread caused by the atomic bomb, the well-stocked home offered a sense of individual security. It was where you could store your doomsday prep and bomb shelters. Moreover, American Cold Warriors did not just enjoy the fruits of an affluent society, they felt a drive to consume as a patriotic duty. As Cohen puts it, “Mass consumption in postwar America would not be a personal indulgence, but rather a civic responsibility designed to provide ‘full employment and improved living standards for the rest of the nation.’”<sup>58</sup> Americans' social position, political identity, and civic life were all understood through the lens of consumerism.

These three key values of the Cold War rested on two intertwined understandings of history and race. Folk means premodern. Whoever sang folk music tapped into the heritage of those historical peoples and, knowingly or not, positioned themselves as inheritors of that heritage. The idea of folk music at the time reinforced contemporary views about America’s place in the world and conceptions of traditionalism and modernity. The “social and ideational fabric” of containment rested on the support of a host of political and social scientific theories that have been referred to collectively as

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<sup>57</sup> Additionally, May examines the decline of this discursive framework in the very next generation. The baby boomers’ rejection of high normativity suburban consumerism is not necessarily a *sui generis*, they were likely influenced by the dissatisfaction expressed by their parents. Of the parents of baby boomers, “Nearly all expressed the hope that their children would avoid the domestic trap in which they found themselves.” The dual rejection of domesticity and Cold War paranoia levied by the Feminist Mystique and Dr. Strangelove, exposed the decline of normativity as a strong hold on the American imagination. They were empty or even pathological ideologies. May, *Homeward Bound*, 188.

<sup>58</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 113.

modernization theory.<sup>59</sup> Modernization theory lodged a utopian faith in the steady, linear progression of science and technology and then constructed a rigid cultural hierarchy based upon the stage various peoples had reached on that one-track journey. The ‘folk’ and their music were placed on that trajectory and thus implicated in contemporary conceptions of cultural progress and American supremacy.<sup>60</sup> Because folk music represented both historical events and traditional cultures, representation of the folk through music brought to life concurrent views of the past and traditional cultures.<sup>61</sup> Popularized folk music did more than claim the folk as the predecessors of the current moment, it represented the present as the consequence of all history. All folk cultures were predecessors to the modern moment, just as America represented the future for third world nations.

Underlying all these facets of cold war values, was an essentialized understanding of American racial identity. Following World War II, a system of racial “domination” was replaced by racial “hegemony.”<sup>62</sup> To be a good cold warrior was to embrace Whiteness as fundamentally American. Individualism championed White heroes; middle-class suburban neighborhoods were marketed to urbanites as homogeneously

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<sup>59</sup> Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 4.

<sup>60</sup> Per Emily Ansari, “What composers in this group has in common, [Virgil] Thompson said, was an interest in evoking history through the lens of modernity, rather than emulating history or rejecting it entirely.” Ansari, *The Sound of a Superpower*, 75.

<sup>61</sup> Cantwell, 270.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Third edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 15.



White; and the language of consumerism spoke to White consumers' desires. Moreover, Elizabeth McRae, in a piece examining southern women's attempts to create a culture of Whiteness in opposition to Blackness, theorizes how these community activists equated Whiteness with Americanness and civic responsibility.<sup>63</sup> Even those committed to racial harmony based their approach on "evolutionary models that optimistically predict[ed] the gradual absorption of racially identified groups into the (implicitly White) mainstream..."<sup>64</sup> This pervasive understanding of American as White in an era of intensified awareness around divergence or deviance led to a logical racial identification; the true American was White.<sup>65</sup>

Histories of the folk revival that highlight Black performers tend to emphasize resistance. These narratives place the Black performers as sending coded messages to their Black audiences which are largely overlooked by White audiences. These artists cannot be read as complicit in the White exploitation of Black cultural products given their commitment to resistance.<sup>66</sup> E. Patrick Johnson focuses on this duality in Black

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<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 6, 88.

<sup>64</sup> Omi and Winant, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Donatella Galella, "Redefining America, Arena Stage, and Territory Folks in a Multiracial 'Oklahoma!,'" *Theatre Journal* 67, no. 2 (2015): 213–33. Galella discusses the process by which privileging certain views of history can "whiten" a cultural product, regardless of the ethnic heritage of the performer.

<sup>66</sup> Judith E. Smith, *Becoming Belafonte: Black Artist, Public Radical*, (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2014); Ian Zack, *Odetta: A Life in Music and Protest* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2020). Beyond the work on the folk revival specifically, these works emphasize resistance as a central narrative, Erica R. Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*, Difference Incorporated (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, Postmillennial Pop 17 (New York, NY: New York

performance specifically in his work *Appropriating Blackness*. He asserts that the "mutual constructing/ deconstructing avowing/disavowing and expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of Blackness is the very thing that constitutes 'Black' culture."<sup>67</sup> These contradictions can be read as a dialogic with the performance of Blackness and a dialectic. It is a dialogic in that the performance of Blackness is, in many regards, the reality of Blackness. Since the performance of Blackness cannot fully encapsulate the lived experience, however, there is simultaneously a disconnect between Black cultural products and internal life of Black Americans. This is why Black scholars have been so keen to expose the modes of resistance in Black performers: to reveal the means by which Black performance was not a pure dialogic. They seek to expose how Black performers inverted and undermined existing conventions to explore the features of Black experience that those conventions distorted.

## **Methods and Sources**

To speak of one folk revival is to cover over the ways that differing factions disagreed over the music. The folk revival unfolded in the pages of the popular media, on television screens, and on the ground in local scenes. Fans experienced the revival in coffee shops and living rooms as much as on prime-time television and the cover of *Life* magazine. These outlets offered unique versions of what folk revivalism could be. The

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University Press, 2016), Kevin Kelly Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>67</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

disagreements in the folk field are better understood as conflicting fundamental visions of the purpose of revivalism itself. These disparate visions led to divergences in both the approaches by the performers and the expectations of the audiences. The lines between differing scenes and incarnations of folk revivalism during the boom overlapped and shifted over time. Blurring these lines even further, some artists traveled in multiple circles. If the poles of folk revivalism were rather clear, the middle ground was often very muddy.

My research conceptualizes three basic approaches to folk revivalism in this era, which I have termed anthropological, political and popular. These categories are not meant as a definitive assessment of the music itself, but as a means to group together like-minded performers, critics, and audiences. These broad categories are meant to show the dominant ways in which folk fans congregated around the music and disagreed over the purpose of it. Why did each group play the music, and what was the purpose of the music in their social lives? By reckoning with this question, we can better understand why they so vehemently disagreed with each other.

Anthropological folk fans sought to recreate historical styles and appreciate the music for what it taught them about other cultures. The study of folk served to inform and enlighten. Their folk song clubs often focused on historical playing styles, historical background on instrumentation, the historical contexts of the songs. They wanted to understand and replicate how these songs functioned socially. In this way, the anthropological folk fans used folk music as a window into another world. It could be treated as a historical artifact, or a living tradition, but the basic position of the performer

was the same: as an instructor enlightening the audience with vital but obscure information. This line of thinking led performers to thoroughly contextualize the music for their audiences. Reciprocally, the audiences attended concerts for cultural appreciation.

This approach was the least likely to accept adaptations, or to view newly written songs as “folk.” They were the most predisposed to view any alterations made upon the music, especially by someone outside of the subject group, to be anathema to the purpose of revivalism. If one were to come to folk music with the goal of understanding social history, then modern adaptations would spoil the aim from the outset. On the rare occasions they were open to interpretation, they demanded that it only be done to enhance the original emotional impact of the song. Even this should be done sparingly, and only in consideration of the historical contexts - or with an amount of explanation as to why the changes were made to instrumentation or style. Any alterations should be thoroughly accounted for. They were more likely to argue that folk was a historical category which modern technology, or society has obscured. Exact historical preservation was necessary because it was a form of social memory. They liked the New Lost City Ramblers the best, when they weren't listening to 78s of old blues recordings. The politically minded revivalists sought to draw political inspiration from historical peoples. To the politically motivated folk fans, folk music provided good political advice for the present. “Which Side are you on?” was not just a political anthem, but a reminder of the stakes of political action. If we are not in solidarity with our fellow workers, or fellow humans who have been marginalized, they reasoned, we risk accepting the will of

our oppressors, even passively. They saw folk material as rooted in deep truths about justice. The promises of freedom, the class solidarity, the dignity of work and fair treatment, these were the political values of the folk, and by embracing them, the political revivalists reminded their audience of what a just society could be. The politically minded folkies thought of folk music as an antidote to modern society. The clear-eyed view of justice stood as a critique of the falsity of Cold War hypocrisy. The voice of the folk judged the present folly. This faction tended to use the language of unionism and the common-sense wisdom of the rural folk, as well as the form of the murder ballad to highlight current social injustice.

They were also far more open to interpretation, if the perspective of the music remained intact. That is, if the music still voiced a critique of power, and represented an antidote to modern falsity. If an obtuse historical reference needed to be edited out for clarity to the audience, this was better than alienating them. If a guitar style needed to be approximated, or smoothed out for the style of the performer, this was acceptable, provided the singer justified it as necessary to communicate the deeper message of the song. The political folk revivalists saw folk music as a means to articulate political positions using the moral clarity of the folk song. For them, the most important aspect of folk music was its ability to provide commentary. Folk music, especially the songs designed to critique, were a template for engendering political awareness. They were also prone to lengthy discussions on the meaning of the song, but for them audience interpretation of the political content, not the precise historical context, was paramount. Though occasionally, the historical significance informed the political significance. So,

at times, these singers could also firmly establish historical contexts, but in an effort to understand the moral message, not the cultural heritage.

The final group, the popular folk artists, sang folk songs to entertain. They thought of folk music like any other canon of music; it was a kind of archive that could be drawn from liberally. In the same way that pop vocalists covered songs from tin pan alley and made them their own, popular folk performers felt a certain liberty to take songs from the folk canon and arrange them in a manner that they thought would speak to the audience. Folk music had the added benefit of familiarity which allowed an instant rapport with the audience. This shortcut benefited these performers who were not likely to spend much time contextualizing the songs either historically or morally. Instead, their on-stage patter consisted of set jokes, crowd work, or nonsense parodies of political and anthropological song introductions. The trope of the folk singer talking about the song for greater length than actually playing the song, was so well worn, that popular acts played on expectation, with the simple aim to bluff and amuse the audience in between numbers.

The popular folk approach was the most open to reinterpretation, with the small caveat that arrangements needed to speak to the audience. Since the aim was entertainment, the actual contexts of the songs were unimportant. The arrangement of the songs could be remade at will, for taste or simple preference, and the responsibility on the audience to appreciate the song either as a historical artifact or a wellspring of moral clarity was completely absent. The popular folk singer did not expect a specific interpretation of the song. They played them as they pleased, and did not need to

contextualize them in any specific manner. To this end performers omitted lyrics, simplified instrumentation, or overlaid pop vocal arrangements in an effort to entertain an audience. This also meant they were more likely to remove possibly offensive lyrics. They also tended to sing only from a rather small canon of standards that would be easily recognizable to an audience. The popular folk artists treated folk music much like any other music fad. They learned the music as a genre and the basic canon of songs, then they performed the music as professionally as they could.

This is not to say that any of these categories was purely one thing. All three approaches made claims about history and politics, and all three operated to some degree in the commercial sphere. Each group contained the possibility of the other two. The anthropological revivalists also had a view of the folk as political animals, and the political performers had a sense of the music coming out of particular historical contexts. Both groups could play songs purely for fun, and sell records for profit. Conversely, the popular folk artists, though less self-consciously, also displayed a sense of history when they presented the songs, and they reflected certain political positions. While each side overlapped, they also developed certain characteristics and proclivities which distinguished them from the other two. The categorizations here are meant to draw out what each group affirmed as most fundamentally important.

My work will examine folk music in the popular market from a perspective that does not hold an authoritative standard of authenticity, whether through folkloric definition, stylistic taste, or political litmus test, but is a historicization of the market of folk music in the public sphere. From this vantage, popularized folk artists can be

investigated as producers of cultural products that functioned as consumer goods with ideological assumptions that undergirded a mainstream political discourse. How then were performances, arrangements, and visual representations a cultural work performed upon the popular understanding of who the folk were and how they acted as a precursor to modern values? If we take the popularizers at their word that they indeed were playing folk music, we can more honestly reckon with how the idea of the folk changed over time. The popular folk musicians of the early 1960s were not simply faddists, they reshaped the idea of the folk and created a usable past for modern audiences.

Ideas about folk music were also intimately tied to place. These various approaches developed in music scenes across the country and the debates over the music took place in scene locally published fanzines. Many of the arguments made in the pages of folk song magazines spoke to contemporaneous conversations happening in coffee shops and in folk fans' upstairs apartments. And in the contexts of these scenes, the three concurrent folk revivals rubbed up against each other. Folk performers soon learned that what played in one venue, would not play down the block, or one town over. The major urban centers supported their own unique scenes that elevated certain types of stars and approaches. The New York scene tended toward the political approach, the scenes on many college campuses were strongly influenced by the anthropological side, and the Los Angeles scene supported popular acts. These scenes were the creators of and audiences to varying conceptions of folk performance.

Meanwhile, consumers began to purchase more 10- and 12-inch albums rather than singles. This format then lent itself to the wide-ranging approach of the folksinger,



who took the audience on a journey through time and space.<sup>68</sup> They visit foreign lands or stopped off at several points in history. Moreover, the declining cost of recording equipment opened opportunities for independent producers. In the absence of the old guard of folk performer, new folk troubadours began releasing records under independent labels. The popular folk music scene reemerged in the late 1950s divested from its former political connections and met a cohort of university students increasingly dabbled in folk music hobbyism. The result was a market primed for capitalization.<sup>69</sup>

In addition to the utilization of the college circuit and the rise in album sales, a new avenue emerged to showcase and market musical acts: television. The ubiquity of this still relatively new technology allowed for a personal, intimate connection between the audience and the performer. More than the radio or vinyl, the television provided access to performers in a way that only a live performance could surpass. But not everyone could attend live performance, either because they were too young, or lived in small markets that could not attract marquee talent.

Unlike the revivalists of the 1940s, television broadcasts brought this new generation of folk singer into the living rooms of their fans. This meant that these artists

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<sup>68</sup> While Broadway cast albums may have legitimized and popularized the LP, the rise of the LP over the single meant that single oriented rock and roll had a competitor from genres that favored the album format. Mick Houghton, *Becoming Elektra: The True Story of Jac Holzman's Visionary Record Label* (London: Jawbone, 2016), 29 – 30.

<sup>69</sup> Cantwell also highlights how the brief interlude in political organizing through folk music opened the door to a new generation of fans who encountered the music in a new context. “It was precisely this momentary obscurity that opened the immense resources of folksong to the young and made it, by virtue of their recovery of it in the postwar period, their own. When folksong reemerged into the light of popular culture in 1958m with its ideological and cultural connections largely suppressed, abandoned, forgotten, or lost, it welled up with all the vitality of a cultural symbol eager for rediscovery.” Cantwell, 8.

were known not just by their sound or their ability to interpret folk songs, but by their looks. Expectations for who “looked” like a folk singer television impacted booking decisions. Genre conventions, combined with a formulaic approach to costume and “look,” produced a subgenre of popularized folk music. The visual presentation of the performance created an image of the music. In this way, the “uniform” adopted by the Kingston Trio became a visual shorthand for their musical approach.<sup>70</sup> Rather than the shaggy hair, beards, and work boots of the Greenwich Village folk scene, or the black suits and ties of the pop vocal groups, collegiate folk groups wore short sleeve Oxford shirts and high-water chinos. This signaled a youthful, affluent-but-informal approachableness.

By the height of the boom late night variety shows frequently featured folk acts in their mix of performers. Since these shows tended to follow the popular trends, folk music TV bookings rose with the ascension of folk songs up the pop charts. The centerpiece of popularized folk on television during the boom was a weekly concert series begun on ABC in 1963 called *Hootenanny*. Emceed by Art Linkletter, each episode took place on at different major regional university. Absent were the long expository monologues common to the coffee house: instead, breathless introductions were followed by enthusiastic clapping and group singing from the audience. Here folk was fun, and everyone was having a good time. Beyond the college students in the room,

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<sup>70</sup> William J. Bush, *Greenback Dollar: The Incredible Rise of the Kingston Trio* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 60.

ABC marketed this *mélange* to the teenagers and younger siblings of those college students watching from home.

Histories of the Folk Boom have tended to take popular folk artists at their word that they were apolitical.<sup>71</sup> To categorize popularized folk as simple, apolitical diversions is to ignore the political implications of mainstream entertainment. This minimizes the political implications of popularized folk, especially in the context of the Cold War. The Kingston Trio modernized folk culture with a centrist-liberal political stance that they shared with their audience. But they were not simply a novelty or parody group: many historical contemporaries in the late 1950s thought of popularized folk as a legitimate representation of the music. To them it was folk music. As such, the messages these artists conveyed about who the folk were and what they wanted, created a patchwork of historical political messages grounded in Cold War values.

These were modern folk. More than playing folk music in a popular style, they modernized the folk song, both in presentation and in sentiment. This had the effect of projecting modern values backwards onto the imagined folk. Modern folk did not so much appropriate the folk stories of disparate cultures, but colonized them as essentially prior to modern culture. They claimed a form of colorblindness that essentialized Whiteness as the final authority, subsuming minority culture into White culture. The popular artists infused their performances with the Cold War values of middle-class

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<sup>71</sup> Denisoff, "Folk Music and the American Left," 432. Denisoff describes the entire field of folk revivalism from 1958 to 1962 as "primarily a-political."

respectability and consumerism. Moreover, these values were understood as historically persistent American values.

The musical artists playing popularized folk songs presented folk culture in a visual and aural language that spoke to Cold War containment, and it did so in a mode that their audience understood best: consumerism. Promoters recognized White middle class college students as a substantial market for this commodity and catered to their perceived tastes. To be a consumer in America was to have a product tailored to your proclivities.<sup>72</sup> However, the White middle class represented the base consumer. This meant that all consumer products, media, and advertising were geared to attract this market as well, or to at least not alienate them. As Cohen argues, “[I]n the new public place of the shopping center, consuming and leisure were becoming inseparably intertwined, constructing community experiences around the cultural tastes of White middles-class suburbanites.”<sup>73</sup> For this reason, folk popularizers stripped the historical contexts from their work. They understood their audience to want the authentic experience of other cultures without the systematic challenges that produced the works, much less any understanding or indictment of racial prejudice and capitalist manipulation. This performance of the music separated the folk from their struggle to

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<sup>72</sup> "Ironically, despite concern among cultural critics of the fifties that the standardization inherent in mass consumption was breeding social conformity and homogeneity, the Madison Avenue that they reviled was moving by the end of the decade in the opposite direction: toward acknowledging, even reifying, social differences through an embrace of market segmentation." Cohen, *Consumers' Republic*, 306.

<sup>73</sup> Cohen, *Consumers' Republic*, 270.

survive amidst massive forces of exploitation or injustice. Instead, it created a history of individual challenges without systematic injustice.

Black artists playing in predominately White spaces, especially on television, also navigated this cultural landscape. These artists made choices in how they navigated these spaces, when they chose to confront White presuppositions and when they held back. Black artists performed folk music for White audiences in an effort to instill a sense of respect or engender sympathy. This is not to reinforce the primacy of the White gaze; rather to demonstrate the eagerness with which White audiences demanded, then willfully accepted preferential narratives. This work follows the current style guidelines regarding the use of the term “Black.” The term is capitalized to indicate the people and culture of the African diaspora and how those disparate people have been historically constructed as a category. The term is thus a proper noun indicating a specific people. I have chosen to also capitalize “White” not simply to emphasize it as an antipode to Blackness, but to highlight it as similarly historically constructed category.

My work on folk music will bridge the literature on folk revivalism with the theoretical modeling of Cold War cultural studies. I intend to contextualize popularized folk music as one example of those cultural products which embodied Cold War values. Cantwell’s summation of folk revivalism recognizes the importance of “psychosocial and economic setting of postwar America” during the Cold War. He claims that the success of the Kingston Trio came out of the:

...the new post war suburbs were simply extensions of a corporate world that, having mostly swallowed the self-employed and small entrepreneur, both eroded male autonomy

and dispelled the “communities of obligation,” ethnic and agrarian, in which traditional knowledge and value had been seated.<sup>74</sup>

Those young people who wished to step outside the sterile confines of suburban Cold War culture used folk music to make contact with those communities and traditions. Yet they did so in safe predictable terms. My work will more fully contextualize popularized folk as an embodiment of Cold War political culture. Popularized folk was more than a simple slick commercial product, it also affirmed, projected, and reified the worldview of Cold War containment. These artists used ostensibly historical material, that is material from historical peoples, and, through musical arrangements and lyrical re-writes, adapted it to the tastes and ambitions of a middle-class consumer society. This, too, was a modernization project.

This project relies on research from the UCLA film archive, the Woody Guthrie Archive in Tulsa, OK, The Robert Shelton Collection at the University of Liverpool and the Kingston Trio Collection at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. The vast televisual and film holdings at the UCLA Film Archive have provided a window into how performers portrayed folk music as an aural and visual medium. In thinking how the music embodied and reflected Cold War values, this archive contains sources that speak directly to how artists presented themselves and their work. Moreover, television programs framed the music for their audiences. Television hosts framed the music for

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<sup>74</sup> Cantwell, 318.

their audiences and in so doing, made certain claims about how the music should be understood.

While live performance was an important aspect of commodification, the physical album was vital as well. Phonographic records and album sleeves reveal the ongoing public conversation around folk music, especially as presented by performers and promoters. In albums of live recordings, artists retained their stage patter - their song introductions and non-musical interactions with the audience. Here they framed the meaning of the song before the performance. Two different acts could tell extremely divergent stories about the contemporary relevance of a traditional song. On record sleeves, music promoters and managers defined for the audience the identity of the performer and the history and meaning of the music. The differing interpretations of the history of folk music made their way into the concert hall patter and onto the album cover. The Woody Guthrie Archive contains the papers of prolific folk scholar, Ronald Cohen. In his work authoring or co-authoring a half a dozen books on the topic, Cohen amassed a wide collection of media coverage over the twentieth century, including many newspaper clippings and full runs of folksong club newsletters as well as short-run popular magazines, like *Hootenanny*. It also holds private diaries and personal letters of those intimately involved with the revival and its promotion. Through this collection my work contextualizes the way popularized folk was presented in print to a general audience.

The University of Wisconsin preserves the private scrapbooks of Dave Guard of The Kingston Trio and the extensive interviews of independent scholar Richard W. Johnson. The Guard papers provide further background on the approach of the Kingston

Trio, how they made choices regarding songs, arrangements, and promotion. The Johnson interviews afford an inside look at how the band viewed their fame and breakup. Johnson also interviewed many people involved with the business of the group, including their manager, Frank Werber.

The Shelton papers represent a trove of information on this singular institution of music journalism at the time. His position at the *New York Times* and his work in bringing *Hootenanny* to air made him a central figure, especially in thinking about folk in the popular marketplace. Both have added to my reconstruction of the sensibilities of folk popularizers and promoters.

This project also uses oral history methodologies in its analysis. I secure interviews with three participants in the folk revival, Dick Weissman, Art Podell, and Richard Davis. Weissman was the banjo player for popular folk group The Journeymen and he has spent a lifetime recording commercially. Podell was singer, guitarist, and musical arranger for the folk chorus The New Christy Minstrels. Since the 1960s he has shifted to DJ'ing folk programming on the radio. Davis began as a stage technician at the Troubadour in Los Angeles and also worked as a tour manager for the Back Porch Majority. All three interviewees created a vivid picture of life in the folk scene, particularly in New York and Los Angeles.

Other extent oral history collections have similarly allowed for a reconstruction of the mindset of the folk revivalists. The Johnson interviews at the University of Wisconsin focus on the Kingston Trio and their business supporters. The University of Illinois contains an oral history archive with interviews of members of the Campus



Folksong Club. And the Woody Guthrie archive retains the recordings conducted by Joe Klein in his research into the life of Woody Guthrie. To a lesser extent this project has used The Smithsonian's archive of musician recordings and the University of North Carolina Folklife collection. These interviews and oral histories reveal a greater context for the stories contained in the folksong newsletters, fanzines, and television programs.

## **Chapters**

Chapter 2 examines how popular folk developed and the ways in which it embodied Cold War ethics. The Kingston Trio were far and away the most commercially successful of this type of act, so much of the analysis focuses on how they came upon their look and sound. Once the genre of popular folk had been established, myriad similar groups inundated the record store shelves and airwaves. This wave of performers adhered to visual aesthetics and public personas that reinforced the Cold War ethics of domesticity, upward mobility, and a view of American history based on mythology and nostalgia. These groups not only created music for an optimistic American present, they re-wrote the American past in their own image.

The popular folk groups represented one approach to folk revivalism in this era; chapter 3 investigates the other two. The folksong clubs on university campuses focused on the anthropological approach to folk revivalism. They hoped to enculturate their members, and the community at large, using the sincere study of folk music. The authentic culture of the rural past could help liberate a modern society awash in consumerism. At the same time, The New York scene spun off from the workings of a

battered but still functioning old left cultural apparatus. The rather small neighborhood of Greenwich Village developed into a hub of folk revivalism. Basement coffeeshops hosted folk singers alongside beat poets and jazz trios and impromptu Sunday concerts began in nearby Washington Square. Folk singers from neighboring boroughs and the suburbs came to the city bringing their guitars and banjos. The folk music coming out of the New York scene was infused with a political understanding of folk music and sustained by the infrastructure of revivalism that maintained ties to the old left.

After the success of the Kingston Trio and other similar popular folk groups, both the anthropological and political folk revivalists turned against them as symbols of a vapid and decadent society. Chapter 4 models how the differing factions marginalized popular folk as inauthentic. The primary critique against popular folk was that it was commercial and therefore exploitative. However, the appeal of the anthropological and political revivalists fell flat to the popular folk fans, who saw no conflict in purchasing commercial art. They were, after all, consumers. Commodities and products made the very fabric of American life in the affluent society. To modernize a cultural product was to turn it into a commodity. Moreover, these artists used their modernized folk art to sell commodities. At the height of their fame, the Kingston Trio translated the lyrics of the folk standard, "Worried Man Blues," into a jingle for 7up, singing, "Take a thirsty man and give him 7up." The Limelites wrote a folk style jingle to sell Coca-Cola. Commercialization was not a side-effect of market demands, a bending of the music to market genres, nor the mollifying effects of "selling out." Rather, commercialization was itself an aesthetic. For many Americans, especially suburban Cold Warriors,

commodification did not denigrate the product. Instead, it made it readable and understandable as a valuable thing worthy of purchase. The consumer society made itself through consumption.

Chapter 5 examines how Black performers navigated the White spaces of the revival. Generally, Black performers in the folk idiom were channeled into three possible paths. First, the folk interpreter presented themselves as a modern performer, playing to modern audience. Only Harry Belafonte and Odetta both theatrically trained performers, experienced much success in this vein. They were likely to discuss heritage or folk life, but unlike their White counterparts, they were less likely to trot the globe. They tended to keep their repertoire tied to Black sources. Odetta also tended to portray the heritage of noble suffering endured by Black folks. Her theatricality allowed them to inhabit a legacy of perseverance. Second, the folk revival “discovered” older blues performers had been playing since the 1940s. These performers, many of whom toiled in obscurity for decades, were lauded for their authentic approach and mastery of the blues guitar. Mississippi John Hurt, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee experienced a resurgence in popularity among the folk faithful and they featured at the Newport Folk Festival in the mid-1960s. Third, gospel performers often played alongside folk interpreters and bluesmen in folk music set lists. Clara Ward and Marion Williams created displays of ecstatic spirituality, blending traditional hymns with soul. Within these channels, these performers made choices as to how they negotiated the White spaces in which they played.

Chapter 6 traces the end of the revival. By 1965, the folk boom began to fizzle. Many of popular groups and folk choruses stopped touring, though some limped along into the 70s. The membership in folk song societies declined precipitously, and they retreated back to historical discussions of dulcimers and song origins; no longer debating the true nature of folk music, nor sponsoring hootenannies. Folk artists of all types began to shy away from releasing new recordings of traditional music. Rather than scouring the archives or the field recording for new folk material, they could simply just write it themselves. With all the new songwriting in this era, the folk purists found themselves in an awkward position. If they rejected all the new output of the new crop of performers, like Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs and Tom Paxton, they backed themselves into a historical purity cul-de-sac. Freezing folk culture in time was a logically consistent position, but one that sealed itself off from what was happening across the country. If folk was a process, surely new songs should be written in the spirit of the old. Consequently, if they embraced the new folk poets, how could they reject other alterations. Folk would become anything. And indeed by 1965, many began to argue that rock n' roll was the folk music of this generation.

The folk boom had two lasting impacts on American conceptions of folk music. First, it helped established folk as a modern genre. Separate from White hillbilly music, folk was now understood as acoustic music, usually sung solo or in small groups. Second, the great boom sanitized folk material for a general audience. Of course, the songs remained apolitical only in as much as the politics remained implicit. The popular folk boom was a key piece in recontextualizing the music as an apolitical, middle-class

entertainment. It helped to change the popular understanding of who the folk were and what they wanted.

## Chapter Two

### **Modern Folk: Popular Folk as the Music of the Cold War Middle Class**

On May 27, 1957, at a small eclectic nightclub in San Francisco, three young White middle-class men made their debut performance as the folk singing group The Kingston Trio. The group sang a broad mix of songs, from Appalachian ballads to Calypso to old Negro spirituals. Any song the trio came across could be potential fodder for the act, especially if it was in the public domain. In between numbers, the guys had a chummy camaraderie and an easy rapport with the audience that displayed their quick wit. They sang well enough, with competent harmonies, and delivered their patter with a spontaneous air. The act rode the balance of highly practiced performance and approachable informality. The crowd loved it. However, the audience that night at the Purple Onion could hardly have predicted that this trio of recent college students from across the bay at Palo Alto would spark an explosion in the interest in folk music, spawning an entire industry of modern folk singers.

Dave Guard, Bob Shane and Nick Reynolds formed The Kingston Trio after spending time in and out of musical groups throughout college. Guard and Shane had first met as schoolmates at Punahou School in Honolulu, Hawaii. They both moved to California for college; Guard earned an economics degree from Stanford, while Shane met Reynolds at Menlo Business College. They sang for beer at fraternity parties or for beer money at backyard concerts. Guard exhibited the most drive to form a professional music group able to gig at real night clubs. He first formed Dave Guard and the Calypsonians, without Shane and Reynolds, in response to the Calypso craze of the mid-

century. The band reformed as The Kingston Quartet, this time with Reynolds. They became convinced that a Trio was preferable set up; it traveled more easily and the split was better. Though Guard was skeptical of Shane's work ethic, Reynolds convinced Guard to give him a try. Guard relented and the trio were born.<sup>1</sup> Frank Werber first caught a version of the act when he saw a Dave Guard and Calypsonians gig at the Purple Onion. Werber immediately saw their potential. The group had the right energy but lacked professionalism. Werber had worked for several years at the nearby Hungry i nightclub, working as the manager, Enrico Banducci's "boy Friday."<sup>2</sup> He ran the lights, worked the house, did whatever the club needed, but he had never before managed a band. Once the band reformed as the Trio, Werber met with the group and offered a practical deal. He would take care of the business side of operations, but they had to develop into a professional act. The Trio agreed and they sketched out the initial contract on the back of a napkin.

Werber hired vocal coach Judy Davis to whip them into shape. They practiced every day for months before they scored the Purple Onion show. Once their engagement was held over for seven months, they spent that time diligently honing the act. Werber remembered in an interview years later that the Trio's act "was definitely shaped,

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<sup>1</sup> This reconstruction of the Kingston Trio timeline relies on Richard W. Johnston's series of interviews with both the band and the talent management. Kingston Trio Records, Box 1, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive. William J. Bush conducted his own series of interviews with the group in his biography, William J. Bush, *Greenback Dollar: The Incredible Rise of the Kingston Trio* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013). Also, there are many interviews with the group in the popular press and in music documentaries, including, *The Kingston Trio Story: Wherever We May Go* (Los Angeles, CA; New York, NY: Shout Factory LLC; Distributed by Sony BMG Music Entertainment Inc., 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Frank Werber, November 20, 1973, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 29, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

chiseled, pounded, molded, pushed, moved, more than anything else, much more than the material. The timing the spacing, stage presence, lighting, choreography – I used as much theatricality as I could without making it apparent that anything was being done.”<sup>3</sup> By the time Werber secured a deal with Capitol in February of 1958, they had developed a set repertoire and stage presence.

A significant aspect of The Kingston Trio sound and persona was the way the members worked together while maintaining a sense of individuality: Dave Guard on banjo and low harmonies, Bob Shane on rhythm guitar and baritone lead vocals, and Nick Reynolds on tenor guitar and tenor harmonies. Each member had their own unique stage presence as well. Guard played the egghead philosopher, making obscure references and delivering his patter in a studious, comic hesitancy. Shane kept it cool, with a Dean Martin like swagger and casualness, though he could also be quite camp and silly. Reynolds, playing off his diminutive size, played up the impish charm. He was also the quite secret ingredient of their group singing; that is, the one who could reliably hold a harmony. Reynolds had grown up singing harmonies with his family and he brought that ease to the stage act. While each member could veto songs, Guard provided the leg work to find new material and he steered the group’s musical sensibilities. They all had their own distinct lane, both musically and in stage persona, yet, they blended and complimented each other.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Frank Werber, April 2, 1975, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 29, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.



Werber's management took the pieces of The Kingston Trio and led them to commercial success. Not only did he encourage the trio to become better professional musicians, he pursued the music business in both traditional and novel ways. He was one of the first managers to view college campuses as a potential untapped touring market. His work in setting up concerts on campuses also allowed for the direct marketing of their albums. Second, he demanded an unusual clause in their first contract with Capitol. If the album sold more than 25,000 units, the band's share would rise from an industry standard 3% to 5%. Werber, as an outsider, simply had the gumption to ask for more on this initial contract, and Capitol, with nothing much to lose on the unproven act, agreed. This resulted in a huge financial windfall for the group when their first album was awarded gold. Finally, Werber used the tried-and-true method of developing a chummy relationship with local disc jockeys in an effort to generate more air play.<sup>4</sup> Rather than payola, the Trio recorded jingles and called in for special interviews and commercial spots.

A Utah DJ, Paul Coburn, proved to be an important avenue for generating exposure for their debut album. When Capitol remained uninterested in producing a single, Werber pointed to the 6,000 units they sold in the Utah market as proof of their marketability. Capitol relented and put out the Appalachian murder ballad "Tom Doley" as a 45. After a slow build, the record rocketed up the charts reaching number 1 by November of 1958. Their debut album also hit the top of the pop charts that same month.

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from Paul Coburn to The Kingston Trio August 8, 1958, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 3, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

When The Kingston Trio took the stage for their first engagement at San Francisco's Purple Onion in 1957, they did so before a rapidly evolving West Coast music scene. As newly studious performers, The Kingston Trio crafted their act to appeal to their audience of urbane San Franciscans and tourists from the Greyline bus tours.<sup>5</sup> Unlike previous folk sensation, the Weavers, The Kingston Trio did not play to the industrial union halls of post New Deal America: they played to the nightclub crowds of the affluent society. They tailored their act to tread a middle ground between beatnik hipness and middlebrow acceptability.<sup>6</sup> Their first live record, for example, displayed knowing nods to academic folklore performances even as it modernized the source material.<sup>7</sup> Guard played comic version of the esoteric professor, a bit he cribbed from fellow folk artists and sometimes musical arranger Lou Gottlieb.<sup>8</sup> The variety show aspect of their act fit in with an eclectic nightclub scene open to a broad range of entertainment.

The nightclub scene in San Francisco was particularly open to far out acts. The folk song acts frequented two nightclubs in North Beach, the Hungry i and the Purple

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<sup>5</sup> Guard remembered that it was the Greyline bus tours that kept them afloat at their first extended engagement at the Purple Onion. Richard W. Johnston interview with Dave Guard, June 23, 1973, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 17, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>6</sup> Warren Bareiss, "Middlebrow Knowingness in 1950s San Francisco: The Kingston Trio, Beat Counterculture, and the Production of 'Authenticity,'" *Popular Music and Society* 33, no. 1 (February 2010): 9–33.

<sup>7</sup> The Kingston Trio, *From the "Hungry i,"* vinyl (Capitol, 1959).

<sup>8</sup> Lou Gottlieb would copy the comedian's jokes from TV and type them on 3/5 cards, Lou stole from the TV comedians, and the Trio stole from him. Richard W. Johnston interview with Dave Guard, June 23, 1973, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 17, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

Onion. These clubs catered to urbane professionals who went out looking for variety. The crowds there welcomed a certain liberty of expression, where musicians experimented with all manner of invention and instrumentation, including combining contemporary popular music styling with folk ballads. Performers had the freedom to try strange and obscure material without necessarily alienating these audience. Both the Purple Onion and the Hungry i were rather small, under 100 seats, and featured acts that could play to an intimate crowd, such as comedians and smaller musical combinations, provided they could cram themselves onto the tiny stages. The Kingston Trio, in a promotional autobiographical book, described the North Beach scene like this, “San Francisco night club patrons are among the world’s most demanding. They are sophisticated and knowing; they are quick to applaud genuine talent, but even quicker to sense and reject the commonplace, the witless, the dull.”<sup>9</sup> In 1964, Banducci described the North Beach scene this way, “They came here to be entertained, and not to drink like in most clubs, or to gamble, like in Las Vegas... That’s why I look for a sound in new talent that generated excitement.” For Banducci the question of folk authenticity was a lower priority than newness, “I don’t believe in the ‘pure folk’ attitude some listeners have. I can’t afford it. If we booked such acts here, everybody would go to sleep.”<sup>10</sup> Venues like these catered to younger, white collar clientèle, who wanted to stay out after dinner, but did not want the stodginess of “legitimate” theater.

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<sup>9</sup> *The Kingston Trio*, Random House, Inc. New York, NY, 1960, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Sinclair, “San Francisco’s Hungry i,” *Hootenanny*, vol. 1 no. 2, March 1964, 58, 71.

The audiences in this scene were open to subversive, non-traditional acts, that still hewed to a middle-brow predilections. They welcomed new intellectual comedians, like Mort Sahl and Bob Newhart, or outlandish, high-concept acts, like Phyllis Diller and Frank Gorshin. The new folk popularizers fit well into this theatrical landscape. Acts like the Gateway Singers, modeled loosely on the sound of the Weavers, could play to audiences' sense of intellectual and cultural curiosity. And in the next song, they could try an arrangement or source material that would have seemed outlandish to a stuffier audience. Comedians, novelty acts, and offbeat musical performers all shared the stage in the North Beach scene. Enrico Banducci, in particular, ran the Hungry i like an avant-garde theater. He was not interested in producing staid musical acts, he wanted fresh ideas that challenged the audience.<sup>11</sup> So, when three college kids showed up with guitars and banjos hoping to play calypso songs and tell corny jokes, the audience would have viewed them in the context of other unconventional acts, like the beat poetry readings of *The Holy Barbarians*, flamboyant performances that defied convention. The trio could shift from Bluegrass to Calypso to English madrigals without alienating the North Beach audience, who were in on the joke.

Dick Weissman of the folk group The Journeymen played at the Hungry i in 1961. By then San Francisco was a well-established folk town and the Hungry i had become a west coast mecca for touring groups due in part to The Kingston Trio's second album and second #1 on the charts, *From the Hungry i*. Weissman talked about the three-

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<sup>11</sup> Per Banducci, "The fabulous nightclub era was dead but having a long funeral and I didn't want any part of it." Richard W. Johnston interview with Enrico Banducci, January 20, 1974, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 9, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

act structure to the gig. Topical comedian Mort Sahl opened. Not only was he well known by '61, he was likely the main draw. "The shows were always sell-outs," he remembers, "I mean Mort Sahl was big stuff. And so, it was kind of cool because nobody was relying on us to get the people in the seats, you know, because they were already there."<sup>12</sup> The second act was Frank D'Rone, "a guy who was a Sinatra with guitar." Even in a major regional draw for the folk world at arguably the height of the revival, the show was only 1/3 folk acts. This is both because San Francisco audiences demanded variety, and Banducci was always exploring new acts. North Beach was also a refuge for outcasts. Per Weissman, "The guy that ran the lights was one of the Hollywood 10... you know San Francisco was a different world. People were more politically radical, or didn't care."

The Bay Area also boasted a vibrant coffee shop scene, and the University of California campus at Berkeley spawned a scene with more anthropological sensibilities. Billy Faier described the West Coast university scene as one that seemed obsessed with defining the form and function of folk song. "Are they [folk songs] still being created? If so, by whom?" One music conference in the late 1950s included a panel discussion on "How to Sing a Folk Song" led by Sam Hinton which included "fundamentals of authenticity pro and con."<sup>13</sup> One article on folk music at Berkeley described the scene this way, "There is a big sociological upheaval going on in this country that jibes with the interest in folk music. The democratic urge and social awareness of the underdog is quite

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<sup>12</sup> Dick Weissman interview by Stephen Moore, May 12, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Billy Faier, "Message from the West," *Caravan*, Aug, 1958, 11.

acute among the younger generation.<sup>14</sup> While the nightclub scene treated folk music like any other novelty act, the folk scene on campus echoed the same kinds of sentiments found at other colleges.

### **The Sound and Look of Popular Folk**

The popular folk artists owed a huge debt to the arrangements of the Weavers. Their successful records a decade before established what a quartet could credibly do with folk material. The similarity between The Kingston Trio and fellow San Francisco based group The Gateway Singers indicated a developing distinct West Coast sound. Both groups took inspiration from the Weavers, and smoothed out the arrangements, rhythmically and harmonically. Guard himself described the sound of The Kingston Trio as “a bad copy of Stan Wilson, a bad copy of Josh White, a bad copy of the Weavers.”<sup>15</sup> They modeled their vocal arrangements on singing groups like the Hi-Los. Similar to the Barbershop Quartets of a half century prior, popular folk harmonies were centered on the baritone, with a tenor floating above, and bass anchoring below. However, unlike Barbershop Quartets, the popular folk groups used harmonies that brought out the melody above the other parts. This was not the lockstep chordal harmonies of the Andrew Sisters or the Crew Cuts, nor the bouncing bass line of the doo wop groups. They also often reduced the blue notes, that is the flattened 3<sup>rd</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> note in the scale, by raising them

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Shelton, “The Folks Out West,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1962, 75.

<sup>15</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Dave Guard, June 23, 1973, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 17, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

into rounder, major keys. The purposefully anodyne vocal approach, inspired by barbershop and gospel harmonies, and simplified musical arrangements, consisting of rhythmically consistent guitar strumming and clawhammer banjo rolls, became the musical prototype for other popular folk groups.<sup>16</sup>

The Kingston Trio vocal arrangements sweetened the plaintive warbling cry typical mountain music into smooth, sustained, and belted vocals. For example, on their debut album, the Trio performed a version of the bluegrass number “Little Maggie.”<sup>17</sup> While the song dates back to the 1920s, the Stanley Brothers’ released version in a 1948 that became a template for others.<sup>18</sup> The instrumental differences are vast. Ralph Stanley’s banjo technique is not quite as heavily picked as fellow blue grass pioneer Earl Scruggs, but his rolls provide the driving beat of each measure, which allows the guitars to accentuate a syncopated chop. Guard based his banjo technique on Pete Seeger’s clawhammer style and, as such, does not play with the fluidity of the bluegrass players.<sup>19</sup> As a result, Shane’s slack key guitar strumming took on more of the rhythm load and the

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<sup>16</sup> The Brothers Four and The Highwaymen were the most commercially successful, but there were many others including, The Cumberland Three, *Folk Scene, U.S.A.*, vinyl (Roulette, 1960); The Yachtsmen, *High and Dry with the Yachtsmen*, vinyl (Buena Vista Records, 1961); The Ivy League Trio, *On and Off Campus*, vinyl, (Coral Records, 1962); 3 Young Men From Montana, *Folk Song Favorites*, vinyl, (Cameo Records, 1962); The Ramblers Three, *Make Way For The Ramblers Three*, vinyl (MGM Records, 1962); The Lincolns, *Four Boys from Illinois*, vinyl (Kapp Records, 1963); The Halifax Three, *The Halifax Three*, vinyl (Epic, 1963); The Wanderers Three, *We Sing Folk Songs*, (Dolton Records, 1963); The Cherry Hill Singers, *The Cherry Hill Singers*, vinyl (HiFi Records, 1964); The Wesley Three, *The Wesley Three*, vinyl (CBS, 1965); The New Folk, *On Campus*, vinyl (Impact, 1967).

<sup>17</sup> The Kingston Trio, *The Kingston Trio*, vinyl (Capitol, 1958).

<sup>18</sup> The Stanley Brothers, *The Little Glass of Wine/Little Maggie*, 10-inch vinyl single (Rich-R-Tone Records, 1948); Derek Halsey, “Dr. Ralph Stanley: Generations of Influence,” *Bluegrass Unlimited Magazine*, vol. 51 no. 2, August 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Bush, *Greenback Dollar*, 70; Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 130.

song lost the foot-stomping feel of the bluegrass renditions.<sup>20</sup> To retain the drive of the song, the Trio ramped up the tempo from the 126 BPM on the Stanley Brothers record to 156 BPM.

Stanley's singing pinched the vowels into a closed nasal whine; he only opens on the "ah" of "stands" as he sings "Yonder Stands little Maggie." In The Kingston Trio version, likely thanks to the vocal training of Davis, all the vowels are open and round. Further, the trio do not emphasize "stands" at all, opting instead to hold out the long "e" in Maggie. The final invention added by The Kingston Trio was the addition of a call and respond between the lead and the backup singers. In the Stanley Brother's version, the singer and instruments take turns at the fore. Each of the lyric couplets includes several beats when the singer holds back and the banjo or violin comes forward. On the Trio's track, Guard takes the lead, while Shane and Reynolds harmonize. When Guard reached the end of a line, the backup singers fill the space with a "Yawp Yawp." This both covers over deficiencies in their instrumentation and changes the feel of the song. Instead of a plaintive cry, the song was filled with silly nonsense. These vocal changes also brought the song inline with a form of popular singing that would have been familiar to mainstream audiences.

The recorded sound of The Kingston Trio can be largely credited to Capitol Records engineer Voyle Gilmore. He understood the vitality of the live performance as

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<sup>20</sup> Dave Guard discussed the importance of Hawaiian slack key, particularly Gabby Pahinui, to their early sound in the liner notes for Gabby Pahinui, *Pure Gabby*, vinyl (Hula Records, 1978). Bob Shane has also discussed the impact of Hawaiian slack key on his guitar playing in many interviews including, *The Kingston Trio story: Wherever We May Go* (Los Angeles, CA; New York, NY: Shout Factory LLC; Distributed by Sony BMG Music Entertainment Inc., 2006).



essential to the feel of recording, while overlying and sweetening the vocals. Gilmore doubled all the voices, creating two tracks per person, for a total of six vocal tracks.<sup>21</sup> This helped create the booming sound associated with the Trio. Another specific aspect of The Kingston Trio sound came from what manager Werber called a “musical inadequacy.” The band simply was not able to play the songs as written, nor to mimic the styles of previous performers. The homogenization of the material came from the limitation of their ability.<sup>22</sup>

The Kingston Trio also created their own new visual template for popular folk, with their iconic striped, short sleeve oxford button down shirts. The look came out of a desire to distinguish the band as a distinct brand. Budgetary limits led them to settling on the oxford shirts, because they could afford to buy them in bulk. Their distinct look worked as a marketing tool as it lent credence to their collegiate appeal. Newspapers and magazines often described them as “Ivy-clad” or equated their look with their college audience. Just like the musical style of the group, the look was an important for quick visual reference on television.<sup>23</sup> Even with the sound off, a television viewer would quickly identify The Kingston Trio by their clothing. This close association even led to a

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<sup>21</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Voyle Gilmore, January, 25, 1974, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 29, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>22</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Frank Werber, November, 17, 1974, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 29, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>23</sup> Simon Frith has theorized about the increased visuality of music with the rise of television. Simon Frith, “Look! Hear! The Uneasy Relationship of Music and Television,” *Popular Music* 21, no. 3 (2002): 277–90.

marketing deal with a clothing company to sell The Kingston Trio branded collegiate wear.

The Kingston Trio's success demonstrated a viable market for popularized folk and their approach made it look easy. To call the wave of folk groups that flooded the airways after them merely imitators would be to discount the wide range of influences available to these groups. But the new crop of performers that emerged after 1960 all hewed to a similar musical style and a fairly limited canon of songs. Popular folk developed as a recognizable sub-genre with conventions.

Hitting their stride just a few months after The Kingston Trio, The Brothers Four formed out of a fraternity group at the University of Washington. When the group moved down to San Francisco in 1958, they found representation and signed with a major label, just like the Kingstons had done. They also adopted the short-sleeved button downs and close-cropped hair styles. Unlike the recognizable personalities of the Kingstons, each member of the quartet tended to sound, act and look the same.<sup>24</sup> One music critic felt the Brothers Four went beyond being simple imitators of The Kingston Trio, "They're so good at following a style that you almost wish they had gotten there first."<sup>25</sup> Their success helped solidify the look and sound of popular folk in the music market place. Many other popular style groups also formed on college campuses, but only a handful had much success. For example, The Highwaymen, a five-person folk group, started out

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<sup>24</sup> Dick Weissman, "I recorded three albums with the Brothers Four and I can't tell them apart." Dick Weissman interview by Stephen Moore, March 25, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Eddie Gallaher, "New Era in Folk Song Still A-Growin'," *Washington Post*, Apr. 9, 1961, G4.

of Wesleyan University in the 1958. From 1960 through 1964, the group recorded eight albums with United Artists, which was a relatively smaller output in comparison to The Kingston Trio, who released 14, or the Brothers Four, who released 15 in the same time period.

The record shelves and television variety shows became crowded with similar trios and quartets. The Limelites included some time The Kingston Trio musical arranger and former Gateway Trio member Lou Gottlieb, multi-linguist and multi-instrumentalist Alex Hassilev, and commanding tenor Glenn Yarbrough. While the Limelites played less on the youthfulness of the performers, they emphasized the fun to had in performing and singing folk music. The Journeymen were one of the rare popular folk trios to come out of the New York scene. Singer John Philips had grown tired of working with pop vocal groups and joined together with Scott McKenzie and Dick Weissman.

The popular folk trend became so pervasive, it spawned a host of parody acts targeting the genre. The Chad Mitchel Trio took a satirical eye to contemporary politics. Though they often used the form of popularized folk like a Trojan horse to deliver weightier message, they also often worked in the idiom quite comfortably. They interspersed typical songs like “Ain’t No More Cane on this Brazos,” with a parody of the Ole Miss alma mater, which eulogized “The class rooms where we learned/ and effigies we burned,” or their song skewering the anti-communist paranoia of the right,

“The John Birch Society.”<sup>26</sup> They were the rare popular folk group that maintained a sense of unpredictability, yet they also performed in many of the same spaces as other popular folk groups. The Smothers Brothers used the form of popular folk as a basis for a double act. Dick played the straight man, keen on presenting the music as any popular folk would, while Tom undermined potential seriousness of the proceedings with juvenile silliness. The Smothers used their act to make incisive commentary on vapidness of the folk scene and the way it could disrespect the source material.

The New Christy Minstrels may have been the most unique musical act in this genre. Founder Randy Sparks collected eight or nine other performers and teamed them up into trios and quartets. In performances each subgroup would take turns. By the end, the whole stage would be filled with singers and acoustic instruments for a rollicking final number. Sparks advertised it as a folk chorus to accentuate the size of the group.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond style and song selection, the aspect that united all of these popular groups was that they were by and large made of up White folks. The incredibly few exceptions tended to be people with Asian backgrounds who were born in Hawaiian, for example Larry Ramos the Filipino and Spanish banjo player for the New Christy Minstrels. For some popular folk groups, the choice to form all-White groups was not an accident of de-facto segregation, it was a purposeful strategy to appeal to a wide audience. Before

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<sup>26</sup> The Chad Mitchell Trio, *Singing Our Minds*, vinyl (Mercury, 1963); The Chad Mitchell Trio, *The Chad Mitchell Trio at the Bitter End*, vinyl (Kapp Records, 1964).

<sup>27</sup> Their first album advertised them as an “Exciting New Folk Chorus” in the title itself. The New Christy Minstrels, *Exciting New Folk Chorus*, vinyl, (Columbia, 1962). The group performance style was evident in their live album, *The New Christy Minstrels, In Person*, vinyl, (Columbia, 1963). I also spoke with former Christy’s member Art Podell about their playing style, Art Podell interview by Stephen I. Moore, July 05, 2022.

Reynolds joined The Kingston Trio, he was enticed by Travis Edmondson of the Gateway Singers, a group that included an African American singer Elmerlee Thomas, to form their own group. Edmondson wanted to form the group without any Black performers to minimize complications. Reynolds recalled that Edmondson said, “We don’t need the problem of having a Black person in the group.”<sup>28</sup> All White groups were more marketable in Cold War America, they raised fewer questions, and they would not run into potentially thorny issues regarding segregation in the South. Though it was often sold as youth music, in practice popularized folk was also a White phenomenon.

### **The Popular Folk Scene**

The folk boom hit earlier in the Bay Area, but Los Angeles became a major hub, especially for popularized folk, by the early 1960s. These two scenes were more than simply the spawning ground for some of the biggest popular hit-makers in the revival, they also cultivated their own unique musical cultures. Popularized folk competed with folklore festivals at California universities in Berkeley and Los Angeles. Meanwhile, both areas supported a vibrant coffeehouse culture, as well as informal song trading in living rooms and backyards.

By early 1962, the center of gravity for popularized folk music moved down to Los Angeles. Like San Francisco, the Los Angeles scene was bifurcated between popular performers and the anthropological and political revivalists. But, while underground

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<sup>28</sup> Bush, *Greenback Dollar*, 56. This is a paraphrase by Reynolds years later in an oral history interview.

nightclubs and the folklorists at Berkeley dominated the Bay Area scene, the Los Angeles scene was centered around two distinct music clubs, the Troubadour and the Ash Grove. The Troubadour whole heartedly embraced the popular folk trend, while the Ash Grove became an unofficial headquarters in LA for anthropological folk revivalism.

Art Podell was one of the first musicians to begin playing the popular folk style in the LA scene. He grew up in New York City and spent his high school days going to underground concerts, “There were be folk music concerts at midnight at the theaters in Greenwich Village, the off-off Broadway theaters. It would be midnight concerts. People like Will Geer would show up, and Pete [Seeger] and Brownie McGee and Sonny Terry and Will Holt and Oscar Brand.”<sup>29</sup> When Podell left New York for greener pastures out west, he had no real plan. He and his partner at the time, Paul Potash, stopped off in Denver to try their hand. From there they were lucky enough to hitch a ride with someone from the audience out to LA. He remembers his arrival in California this way:

I think we were among the first wave of folkies to leave New York and head for the coast... In Los Angeles, we soon found out that we were the quintessential folk music misfits. Too polished for The Ash Grove which catered to the authenticity of the ethnic crowd, too smooth and not radical enough for the coffee house scene, not enough fancy chords in our music to qualify us for the jazz clubs... On a friend’s advice, we phoned Doug Weston, owner of The Troubadour. Doug met us on a street corner in Hollywood one June-gloom evening, and promptly deflated our dreams of appearing at The Troubadour. He was considering turning it into a jazz club or just plain shutting it down.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Art Podell interview by Stephen I. Moore, July 05, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Art Podell, *How the Troubadour Was Rescued From Being an Auto-parts Store*, (Folk Works, 2021), <https://folkworks.org/how-the-troubadour-was-rescued-from-becoming-an-auto-parts-store>.

Weston decided to give Art and Paul a chance in a last-ditch effort to salvage the club.

The duo proved to be a palpable draw, enjoying an extended, then reextended engagement at the Troubadour. When they began playing, they slept in the dressing room, but

By the end of July, business was so good, we moved into The Tropicana Motel down the block at the corner of La Cienega and took our meals in real coffee shops. Stardom and fame were sweet... Art and Paul played The Troubadour fourteen consecutive weeks in the summer of 1961... By the time we left, the folk music scene in Los Angeles had erupted and a flood of performers from all over the country were filling the clubs seven nights a week.<sup>31</sup>

The Troubadour quickly developed into the center of the popular folk boom in Los Angeles. In 1961 Weston allowed Richard Davis and Randy Boone to start a Monday night hoot, a music gig filled with slots for aspiring musicians. In theory it was open to anyone, but it helped if you knew the emcee and it helped even more if you were good. This attracted much of the local talent that was looking to make it as professional performers. With the success of the Monday night Hoot, the incredible run of Art and Paul and the popular success of folk music generally, Weston turned the Troubadour into the epicenter of the LA popular folk scene.

The Troubadour also became an informal audition space for folk musicians. The Monday night Hoots allowed New Christy Minstrels founder Randy Sparks an easy way to assess new talent that may have just arrived in town, and the main stage provided him one of his more reliable performance spaces. In a mark of the centrality of Troubadour to this arm of the revival, the New Christy Minstrels first concert album was recorded there.

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<sup>31</sup> Art Podell, *How the Troubadour Was Rescued From Being an Auto-parts Store*, (Folk Works, 2021), <https://folkworks.org/how-the-troubadour-was-rescued-from-becoming-an-auto-parts-store>.

Richard Davis became a mainstay of the LA popular folk scene. While working at the Troubadour he met Podell and Sparks and he eventually worked as tour manager for a later addition to the popular folk craze, The Back Porch Majority. Davis described the crowds at the Troubadour as mostly young middle-class collegians looking for a fun night out.<sup>32</sup> The audience there was looking for the latest thing in entertainment, “Doug [Weston] even put it in his advertisement, he called The Troubadour Los Angeles’s home of folk entertainment, the emporium of Folk. And [Randy] Sparks when he opened Leadbetter’s, advertised it as the emporium of fun and folk music. The idea of it was, they were selling entertainment.”<sup>33</sup> Yet, even though it was a show, these performances still used many of the well-worn tactics of the folksinger, particularly the sing along. It served audience expectations and helped to get them involved in the proceeding rather than some kind of explicit consciousness raising effort. Per Davis, “Most acts deliberately included something that the audience knew and could sing along to.” Was everyone singing along? “Absolutely, they wanted to part of this. I think their parents probably wouldn’t let them go to the Ash Grove... They wanted to part of something they understood.”<sup>34</sup> If young urbanites wanted a safe way to participate in the going trend of folk revivalists, they went to the Troubadour. LA developed a reputation for vapid musicianship. In 1962, Leo Gottlieb described the LA folk scene this way, “I saw a couple or three new ‘folk groups’ in Los Angeles last week. God, did that ever make

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Davis, interview by Stephen I. Moore, October 27, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Davis, interview by Stephen I. Moore, October 27, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Davis, interview by Stephen I. Moore, October 27, 2022.



me feel old! I felt about them like the editors of the Little Sandy Review feel about us. And that's no way to feel about anybody and live."<sup>35</sup>

Much of the folk revivalism outside of the club scene happened invisibly to the media and those outside the scene, in the homes of the revivalists themselves. Davis discussed how LA functioned as a scene:

Here's the thing. There's a wide gulf between the San Francisco scene and the Los Angeles scene. The San Francisco scene definitely thought the LA scene didn't exist. I talked years later to a production designer that I was working with and he said, the big misunderstanding between San Francisco and Los Angeles is that nobody went to anybody's house in San Francisco because you couldn't park your car. Everything that happened, happened in the coffee shops and the coffee shops just never closed. So, there was an ongoing musical scene in North Beach... dusk till dawn. And they didn't understand that in Los Angeles, when the bars closed, everybody went to somebody's house and sat around till dawn and sang music and that is true. It was a very open group, people, you could say were competitors on the stage, were not at all. They were friends after hours they would sit around smoke marijuana and play music... The people that actually wrote songs played them long before they were published to their friends and contemporaries in somebody's living room.<sup>36</sup>

While the Troubadour was the center of popularized folk, just over a mile away, a club catered to revivalists with more anthropological understanding of the music, the Ash Grove. Davis explained the divide in the LA scene in this manner, "That was the key to why the Troubadour and the Ash Grove were different places. The Troubadour was focused on entertainment. The Ash Grove was focused on authenticity."<sup>37</sup> Though there were some acts that played at both the Troubadour and the Ash Grove, "crossover" artists

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<sup>35</sup> Leo Gottlieb to Archie Green, July 25, 1962, Archie Green Collection, 1844 - 2009, University of North Carolina Folklife Collection, Collection Number: 20002.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Davis, interview by Stephen I. Moore, October 27, 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Davis, interview by Stephen I. Moore, October 27, 2022.

like Taj Mahal or Tim Buckley, most artists stuck to either one scene or the other. Similarly, fans were either a member of the Troubadour or the Ash Grove crowd, and there was not much overlap. Davis remembered why he tended to stick with the Troubadour and stay away from the Ash Grove, “They took their politics more seriously... It was firebombed more than once... Not wanting to be firebombed, me and a bunch of friends didn’t go there a lot.”<sup>38</sup>

The Kingston Trio manager Werber came to realize the vital aspect of their formula was the live performance. Early in their career, he saw how they froze in television performances, how they tensed up under the lights without any feedback from an audience. He remembered:

Cameras was never their forte. It was the natural performance live before a crowd and getting themselves off that worked but you try to put that in front of a TV camera and it just became 3 guys singing into a machine – and they were never good at that... If Nick would override his fears, and Bobby and get focused and Dave could get loose, you’d have the wildest fucking thing going, and by being onstage, they helped each other do that. And if they did, that thing was dynamite – it could knock you over.<sup>39</sup>

Werber decided to book the group with as many live concerts as they could manage. He zeroed in on the college market. The touring work of The Kingston Trio led the way in opening up the college campus circuit as major arena of touring. These venues were eager to book acts and longtime Kingston Trio manager Frank Weber used the guaranteed draw and relative captive audience to his advantage. He would accept a low upfront fee

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Davis, interview by Stephen I. Moore, October 27, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Frank Werber, November, 17, 1974, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 29, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

in return for a larger cut of the box office and it gave the performers direct access to markets where they could sell their records.<sup>40</sup>

Their success on the college circuit paved the way for future acts, in a kind of “farm team” style.<sup>41</sup> International Talent Agency, a booking agency formed on the backs of the success of the Kingston Trio, used this multi-tier system to their advantage as well by offering colleges the chance to book bigger acts, but only if they would book up-and-coming acts first.<sup>42</sup> This supplied lesser-known talent with a captive audience and bred a stable of performers all working along the same channels. Moreover, colleges boasted that they could attract the latest, most popular acts to their august institutions. An administrative secretary for Ohio State University bragged that his school could bring in, “the first top 10 in folk music for the Hoot.”<sup>43</sup> The school had added state of the art sound systems in an effort to attract modern, top-tier talent.

Smaller, remote universities and those without folksong clubs likely only experienced the popular side of the folk revival. These communities only had access to those popular folk performers supported by the college circuit and the widely available recordings they produced on major labels. The lesser-known independent performers could not risk the travel outlay with no guaranteed interest, and the biggest names filled

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<sup>40</sup> Bush, *Greenback Dollar*, 101.

<sup>41</sup> Bush, *Greenback Dollar*, 132.

<sup>42</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Dave Guard, June 23, 1973, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 17, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>43</sup> Sandor M. Polster, “Buckeyes Draw Top Talent,” *Billboard*, *Billboard Music on Campus*, March 29, 1964, 41, 42.

their schedule with better paying gigs at larger schools. Consequently, these second-tier colleges tended to book only those popular acts that zig zagged across the country on near constant touring. Charles R. Rothschild, from the Albert Grossman booking agency lorded this power imbalance over the smaller college publicly in an interview in *Billboard* magazine, “Acts managed by ABGM get a guarantee of from \$1000 to \$6000 a date, and keep from 50 per cent to 90 percent of the gate. Generally, the further out in the boondocks the college, the higher percentage of the gate is kept by the act. It’s the law of supply and demand.”<sup>44</sup> The Journeymen never achieved marquee status, as a result were relegated to the second tier college tours. Weissman remembered the big reactions of the college crowds at these smaller schools:

I would say there was more of a difference between the coffeehouse scene and the college concert scene. Colleges that we played are what I would call the secondary colleges... The first list had more money and that’s where Peter, Paul and Mary and Kingston Trio were playing. It was the easiest gig that I’ve had in my life. We’d go out there, and they’d go crazy. I don’t know how to explain this. I never confused it with... we’re really that good. Usually, we were in an isolated place, there was nothing else to do. So, we were an evening of fun... The Coffeehouse thing was a little more specific in that... part of our career we wore suits on stage. You do not wear suits to a coffeehouse and expect the audience to regard you as being credible. So, we didn’t. We didn’t always go the coffee houses together.... The people felt they were more knowledgeable. Whether they were or not is debatable. In the college, they just wanted to have fun.<sup>45</sup>

The vast preponderance of college students who participated in the folk revival did so through mass produced albums and concerts performed by the popular folk groups.

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<sup>44</sup> “It’s ‘Folkthink’ at ABGM,” *Billboard*, *Billboard Music on Campus*, March 29, 1964, 20, 21.

<sup>45</sup> Dick Weissman interview by Stephen Moore, March 25, 2022.

## Middle-Class Respectability

Performers like The Kingston Trio did not aspire to high art; they presented an act that they hoped would appeal to everyone. In practice, this did not actually include everyone, rather popular folk acts targeted middle-class consumers. Not only did this segment of the population have the expendable cash to buy records, but in the culture of the Cold war the middle-class became essential, universal American identity.<sup>46</sup> By appealing to the middle-class, popular folk groups appealed to the vast majority of Americans, both those who were and those who aspired to be. The band members themselves became avatars of middle-class respectability. Audiences could self-identify with the personas projected by these groups. Moreover, the arrangements and edits made to folk music were all done to highlight the importance and essential nature of the middle class as the most fundamentally American. Folk music, under the guise of popularized folk, was no longer working-class music nor even the music of the rural poor: it was repurposed to sell to and speak for the middle-class.

A key aspect of this appeal was the self-identification of the audience with the performer. White audiences both young and old liked The Kingston Trio because they could see themselves in them. Werber mused about their wide appeal, "Identification is strong. The eight to 28s can look at them and say, 'that could be me.' The older group identifies with them as parents. 'That could be my son.' College kids see them as college

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<sup>46</sup> Alan Brinkley places the middle class as the normative American image in Alan Brinkley, "The Illusion of Unity in Cold War Culture," in Peter J. Kuznick and James Burkhart Gilbert, eds., *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).

kids having a ball.”<sup>47</sup> In a departure from the previous generation of folk interpreters, who bolstered their credentials as intrepid explorers bringing esoteric rural cultures back to the city, the popular folk musicians presented themselves as just like their audience. Talent manager and friend of Werber, Rene Cardenas, characterized the importance of self-identification this way, “I think the open shirts symbolize a youthful resistance to the marketing ideal: ‘You, 10 years after college!’”<sup>48</sup> The performers themselves understood the importance of identifying with the audience. One Brothers Four member offered this quote to the press, “There’s a lot of identification when we play college concerts which we do most of the time,” said John. “We find there are folk music groups on every campus. Since we’re the same age and singing the kind of songs they enjoy and our patter is on the college level, it’s just like we’re one of them. Technically, I guess, we are.”<sup>49</sup>

Popular folk groups, usually in groups of three, four or five, also safely replicated the euphoric highs of a group sing-along. Even in studio recordings, the performance of the popular folk groups formed an instant sing-along. The audience did not have to participate for the act to function. Audience participation had been a staple of folk performance since the time of the anthropological folk interpreter of the 1930s. The performer sought to give the audience a sense of how the song would have been

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<sup>47</sup> Ralph J. Gleason, “There’s no word for this Group – or It’s Show,” *San Francisco Chronicle: The World*, April, 24, 1960, 22.

<sup>48</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Rene Cardenas, December, 21, 1974, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 11, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>49</sup> Mary Pangalos, “Brothers 4 Find Success Sans Gimmicks,” *Newsday*, Dec. 27, 1961, 2C.

experienced in the original context. Songs were often not performance pieces, but a means to pass the time working, or as a means of group celebration. Pete Seeger became infamous for turning entire concerts into choir lessons. Modern folk performers kept this aspect alive, yet with a safe reliability. Popular folk acts, with their simple and repetitive harmonies, could create the feel of a sing-along without depending on the audience. The audience could sing if they wanted, or not; it did not change the essential nature of the act. Instead of the unpredictable dynamics of actual singalongs, the popular folk concerts were a replicable, known quantity. The strong identification between performer and audience, the inclusive feel of the singalong quality to the music, the familiar, comfortable sound of the music combined to create product aimed squarely at White middle-class consumers.

Popular folk appealed to their audiences in three ways that embodied and brought to life concurrent Cold War values. First, they played on an ideal of American wholesomeness. They were not dangerous bad boys, like Elvis, nor smooth sex symbols, like Frank Sinatra. They embodied a clean-cut, youthful, boy-next-door charm. Second, they highlighted their preference for the nuclear family and the domestic sphere. Both through their public persona and in the way they altered songs, these groups placed the heterosexual nuclear family at the center of contemporary American life. Third, they emphasized an ethic of upward mobility. Their songs cast a vision of ascendent personal progress onto the folk that reflected the contemporary American optimism for a brighter future.

The Kingston Trio portrayed themselves as fun-loving scamps from the beginning of their collaboration. Overtime, they emphasized more and more their essential wholesomeness. After the group demonstrated their sustained popularity in that first year, the popular media looked for a label to describe The Kingston Trio that would distinguish their approach to folk music from the communist sympathizer labor advocates of the recent past or the underground beatnik style concurrently taking shape. The print media echoed the public image of the band and labeled their brand of folk music as “clean cut” or “collegiate.”<sup>50</sup> This referenced both their short-cropped hairstyles, their neat matching shirts, as well as the content of the act. There was nothing dangerous about popularized folk - it was good clean fun. The moniker signaled to the buying public that the group could be enjoyed without a danger of moral decline. One magazine article observed, “The impression you get from their record jackets is one of three well-scrubbed, well-adjusted, clean-cut All-American types having a ball. (They are.)”<sup>51</sup> The Brothers Four positioned themselves this way on their album covers, by describing the band as, “tall, clean-cut, all-American types.”<sup>52</sup> The fans themselves also celebrated this as an appeal of popular folk. In one fan-made magazine, one writer emphasized one

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<sup>50</sup> “Sight and Sound,” *McCall's*, April, 1959. “The Trio... happens, unlike most overnight sensations, to be gifted, tasteful, and no contributor to the delinquency of minors. Made up of three clean-cut, engaging college graduates, it has a winning way with folk songs.”

<sup>51</sup> “Special Survey: Folk Music USA,” *Rogue*, October 1960, 56 – 77.

<sup>52</sup> The Brothers Four, *The Brothers Four*, vinyl (Columbia, 1960).



reason she liked The Kingston Trio was that they were “wholesome guys.”<sup>53</sup> The clean-cut image signaled to wary consumers that popularized folk was safe.

In a similar manner, popular media also typically used “collegiate” to differentiate popular folk from the rest of the field. While The Kingston Trio and the Brothers Four both got their start playing college frat parties, it was their matching oxford shirts and massive popularity among college student that led popular media to persistently describe their music as “Ivy league” even long past the singers’ college days.<sup>54</sup> These descriptors complimented the ideas connoted by “clean-cut” with an added element of middle-brow intellectualism. “Ivy league” did not mean their performances were boring lectures or esoteric naval gazing; rather, their patter targeted those segments of the crowd passably familiar with a liberal arts education.<sup>55</sup> Guard reveled in his pseudo-professorial stage persona, which lent credence to the collegiate style of the act as well. In one song introduction, Guard detailed for the audience the practice of Trinidadian Calypso competitions in which:

The various native groups down there vie with one another, musically, in order to find out which one is the best extemporaneous composer... Lord Invader and his 12 penetrators took the title with this next song, based on a theme by Goetha and

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<sup>53</sup> Jacqueline Yale, “Why I Like The Kingston Trio,” *Kingston Trio Notes*, fan made magazine, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1, Folder 32, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, 1959.

<sup>54</sup> “The Kingston Trio,” *San Francisco Chronicle: This World*, April 2, 1960, 10 – 13. This article comments on their dress, “It’s a kind of collegiate dress designed to appeal to a youthful audience.”

<sup>55</sup> Warren Bareiss, “Middlebrow Knowingness in 1950s San Francisco: The Kingston Trio, Beat Counterculture, and the Production of ‘Authenticity,’” *Popular Music and Society* 33, no. 1 (February 2010): 9–33.

his 'Dance of the Dead.' Invader could only draw on his own experience, so he called it "Zombie Jamboree."<sup>56</sup>

Guard's esoteric references mixed with his subtle superior attitude combined to produce a satirical version of the smug academic.

The term collegiate tied the groups to the university system itself, which in the post-war economy, represented a new brand of middle-class American success. Americans went to college to do better than their parents. It signified a place to increase earning potential, expand one's understanding of how the world worked, and find a suitable, homogenous mate. Werber described the period this way, "Kids of the 50's in college weren't concerned about the shackles or the blacks. They were not and should not make believe that they were. Those were the Eisenhower years. They were coming from the school telling them they should not be juiced up or ten minutes late for class."<sup>57</sup> Through an association with a "collegiate" style in the early 1960s, popular folk groups possessed a legitimacy with the next generation of American leadership. One Capital Records executive was quoted on the appeal of The Kingston Trio, "College boys and co-eds identify with Dave, Nick and Bob, because they're clean-cut, intelligent, well-behaved."<sup>58</sup> Respectable people listened to popular folk.

Inversely, the safety implied in "clean cut" contrasted with a danger found in other kinds of folk acts. The audience would have most likely understood this to mean

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<sup>56</sup> The Kingston Trio, *From the "Hungry i,"* Vinyl (Capitol, 1959).

<sup>57</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Frank Werber, November, 17, 1974, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 29, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>58</sup> Lloyd Shearer, "The Kingston Trio: The Hottest Act in Show Business," *Parade*, December 4, 1960, 24.

the beatnik-style underground approach to folk music. Those musicians wore baggy work clothes and sung in a harsh, even abrasive manner. “Clean cut” indicated to the consumer that they could have confidence in the quality of the product, and not worry about corrosive effects of morally deficient entertainments. This appeal to the group’s non-corrosive appeal comported with the Cold War obsession with individual containment.<sup>59</sup> That is, the imperative for everyday citizens to protect themselves from corrupting influences, particularly those influences that directly undermined the American project. American Cold Warriors were called upon to steel themselves as atomic units of anti-communist resistance. The music of the clean-cut folk groups could be counted on as non-dangerous; it was not a communist threat. The threat posed by beatniks was often conflated with a general sense of subversive undermining of American

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<sup>59</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 2nd ed., *The American Moment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 53 – 58. Historians have examined multiple aspects of identity as reified through containment. K. A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy, Culture, Politics, and the Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), Matthew W. Dunne, *A Cold War State of Mind: Brainwashing and Postwar American Society, Culture, Politics, and the Cold War* (Amherst, [Massachusetts]; University of Massachusetts Press, 2013). Also, Christian G. Appy has examined the ways in which daily life was militarized during the Cold War. Christian G. Appy, “‘We’ll Follow the Old Man’: The Strains of Sentimental Militarism...” in Peter J. Kuznick and James Burkhart Gilbert, eds., *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).

Bruce A. McConachie calls this prediscursive: “Containment and similar cognitive processes are prediscursive; they work at an unconscious level that precedes and shapes representation... This method involves a version of symptomatic interpretation in which the critic-historian reasons backward from the material results of cognitive processes – in the case of cold war American theatre, the success of certain types of productions with audiences – to deduce the kinds of cognitive enjoyments that made them popular.” Bruce A. McConachie, *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War: Producing and Contesting Containment, 1947-1962*, *Studies in Theatre History & Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), ix.

values. The popular press created a boogeyman out of the threat of beatnik culture.<sup>60</sup> While beatniks may not have been read as explicitly communist, they did represent a corrupted form of modernity, a primrose path of decadence and moral turpitude. Popular folk allowed for a middle path, a way for young people to explore the world without the threat of undermining a fundamental Americanism, or as one cultural critic phrased it, “a way to be different without being a long-haired and burlap beatnik.”<sup>61</sup>

The clean-cut image was revealed to be an invented marketing strategy by Shane who admitted he suffered under the weight of the image. He began to pull back the curtain in quotes he gave to the press at the time, “Man! Most of the college boys I’ve known were NOT clean-cut. They were booze hounds and had foul mouths.”<sup>62</sup> Years afterward, he recalled just how much it took a toll on his psyche. In an interview in 1973, he recalled wanting to title one of the later albums, “We’ve been putting you on for 10 years.” The cover would feature pictures of the group in a sports car filled with empty beer cans and shaggy beards. “When I was seeing a psychiatrist in 1962, it came out that I was embarrassed that we had such a clean image with the collegiate thing yet I know I wasn’t that way. After boozing, gambling, messing around, I was guilty enough as it was without adding that as another problem.”<sup>63</sup> The clean-cut image of the group was an act,

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<sup>60</sup> Stephen Petrus, “Rumblings of Discontent: American Popular Culture and Its Response to the Beat Generation, 1957-1960,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 20, no. 1 (1997): 1–17.

<sup>61</sup> Meryle Secret, “They Explore in Song... Love Money and Disaster.” *Washington Post*, May 5, 1963, F3.

<sup>62</sup> Al Ricketts, “On the Town,” *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, Jan 31, 1961.

<sup>63</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Bob Shane, November, 17, 1973, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 20, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

a marketing tool designed to appeal to consumers. And it worked with a broad range of Americans who desired to see themselves in that image.

### **Domesticity**

As a part of the clean-cut image, popularized folk music also promoted an association with domesticity. The public image of the personal lives of the musicians as well as the rewritten song lyrics contributed to an overall sense that the group spoke to and for their middle-class fans. A significant feature of promotion for The Kingston Trio included slick articles on their wives and home life. Even from the first days of the Trio's success, manager Frank Werber marketed the band members as stable family men. They also reedited many of their folk songs in ways that erased their contexts of rural poverty and inserted a vision of modern suburban life.

Publications often featured their wives alongside the group in pictorials and glossy magazine coverage. Likely the highest profile coverage of the emergent folk boom came in the form of a *Life* magazine cover article on The Kingston Trio in 1959. While the magazine devoted a relatively small word count to the story, it featured many large photographs. The pictures portrayed the group as young professionals with their wives in tow having a ball. The consummate claim to middle-class respectability came in recounting their marital status and financial stability. Each had married well. Shane ("our Sex Symbol") married an heiress from Atlanta; Guard ("our acknowledged leader") married the daughter of the treasurer of a chain of department stores; and Reynolds ("the Runt of our Litter"), who will inherit a sizable fortune from his great-uncle, married a

West Coast comedienne. Thus, their busy round of singing dates makes some family travel a necessity. Explains Reynolds, ‘We may look like tennis bums, but man, underneath we’ve got stability.’”<sup>64</sup> The magazine was far more interested in the group’s middle-class bona fides than their qualifications to play folk music. This emphasis on domestic stability came from the band itself. “All three members of The Kingston Trio are now married,” a souvenir fan book proudly declared, “The boys’ families travel with them on all trips except for one-night stands.”<sup>65</sup> Glossy magazines and promotional publications portrayed the trio as devoted husbands and fathers.

Exposés also underscored the group’s stability as homeowners. Guard and his wife Gretchen bought a sensible place in Palo Alto, Shane alongside Louise purchased a more modern house in Tiburon, and Reynolds and Joan upgraded from living on a houseboat in San Francisco Harbor to a charming bungalow in Sausalito. *Parade* magazine described the rise of The Kingston Trio by accenting their respectability:

What makes The Kingston Trio so refreshingly welcome to the show business scene is that they are normal, decent, intelligent, educated, clean-cut, wholesome, happily married Americans. Unlike some singers who are frustrated ‘hoods’ or members of a ‘clan’ they do not surround themselves with sycophants or stooges. They refuse to traffic with the underworld, which controls many U.S. night clubs. All three families are regarded by the northern California communities in which they live as honorable, civic-minded citizens.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> “A Trio in Tune Makes the Top,” *Life* Aug 3, 1959.

<sup>65</sup> *The Kingston Trio*, Random House, Inc. New York, NY, 1960.

<sup>66</sup> Lloyd Shearer, “The Kingston Trio: The Hottest Act in Show Business,” *Parade*, December 4, 1960, 24.

The group also claimed a preference for domestic relaxation over wild partying. In a bid of suburban, domestic identification, biographies of the group mentioned their hobbies - Nick liked fast cars and tennis, Bob looked for a singalong on and off stage, and Dave was an avid reader. This marketing of the group as young, hardworking, loving husbands helped bolster their image as decent and accessible. Talent manager Cardenas remembered their image this way, "It was virility of a new America that was finding strength in the folk arts so to speak... they represented the psychic virility of the 1950s, the rough-shod carelessness of the youth living in urban America in a very rich America at the time."<sup>67</sup> The members of the trio could very well be guys from the office having a cut-up at a weekend neighborhood barbecue.

Popular folk groups also made changes to the music which embodied an ethic of domestic tranquility as an essential aim of American life. For example, "Dedicated Undertaker" a song by the Gateway Trio, successor to the Gateway Singers, exemplified how the popular folksinger wove the viewpoint of the modern suburbanite into their performances. Their concert album, *The Mad Mad Mad...*, captured some pre-song stage patter that set the premise of "selling and salesmanship" as an essential "part of American life."<sup>68</sup> This song used the domestic marketing industry as a reference point for older folk themes of death and burying a husband too soon departed. In the story of the song, the two male band members, Jerry Walter and Milt Chapman, are selling coffins and funerals

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<sup>67</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Rene Cardenas, December, 21, 1974, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 11, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>68</sup> The Gateway Trio, *The Mad, Mad, Mad*, Vinyl (Capitol, 1963).

to a homemaker. The woman in the group, Betty Mann, plays the part of the new widow. The salesmen attempt to upsell the housewife at every turn, “Don’t let seepage disturb your loved ones.” But the poor, put-upon housewife wonders why she needs such modern conveniences for a seemingly simple task, “A box is a box, ain’t it?” This song turned the process of mourning, a common trope in the music about the arduous life of the rural folk, into a consumerist chore for a housewife. The process of selling and of managing household chores was elevated in its juxtaposition to the process of shepherding a soul to the afterlife. What’s a savvy housewife to do? The humor in the song relies on an identification with the thousand choices made every day by suburban women managing their households. In this way, popular folk music updated the music to a modern context by placing the funeral arrangements in the framework of selling an appliance. Even as the song playfully satirizes its subject, it re-purposed the folk form in the service of middle-class concerns.

The evolution of the song “Worried Man Blues” illustrates how popular folk groups wove a sense of domestic respectability into their re-interpretations. As with many folk songs, it is difficult to pin the exact origins of the song, though there are milestones that are apparent in various interpretations. The Carter Family, giants of what would be eventually called “country music,” recorded the song in the 1930s, Woody Guthrie recorded his own version in the 1940s, and John and Alan Lomax included it in their collection *Our Singing Country*. These are the most likely sources from which The Kingston Trio discovered the song, recording it for their third studio album “Here We Go Again!” released in 1959.



In the Carter Family and Guthrie versions, the song centered around a man who was (perhaps wrongly) imprisoned. Incarceration separated him from his love. His heartbreak is compounded when his former sweetheart took the train out of town, leaving him behind with only his worry. The song concludes:

The train arrived, sixteen coaches long  
The girl I love is on that train and gone

In The Kingston trio recording, Guard's altered the lyrics to include the band members themselves into the narrative. Rather than a short court appearance and a life on the chain gang, as in previous versions, Guard detailed how he was prospering in the post-war economy. He described the new Cadillac that he recently bought for "thirty dollars down," a new house purchases in the suburbs just, "Five miles out of town," and a pretty young wife which completed the domestic ideal.<sup>69</sup>

Further, in the story of the song, Guard's work takes him on business trips. While he is away, Shane made advances on the housewife. As Guard returns from a business trip the narrator reveals he is about to discover his wife with his friend. Meanwhile, little Reynolds was holed up in the closet about to watch the whole thing unfold. Through The Kingston Trio update, the story of the imprisoned man was altered to speak to the modern middle-class man and his attendant worries, an unfaithful housewife. However, in updating the lyrics, The Kingston Trio version does more than modernize the *mise en scène*. It also erased the compounding problems found in the previous version's commentary on the forces of the carceral state and the hardships of poverty.

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<sup>69</sup> The Kingston Trio, *Here We Go Again!*, Vinyl (Capitol, 1959).

## Upward Mobility

Popularized folk artists appealed to their urban and suburban audience's sense of values and one of the fundamental values of Cold War American society was the professional drive of upward mobility. This ethic manifested individually in producing more, putting in more hours at the office and displaying that wealth through consumer goods. While these values can be traced historically to post-Enlightenment capitalist logics, the Cold War placed these ideals on a modern pedestal and labeled it "American."<sup>70</sup> Popular folksingers reinforced this ethic by portraying American folksongs as exhibiting the middle-class values of upward mobility.

Folk revivalists have deployed folk songs to defend a range of positions on labor. Many folk songs extolled the virtue of hard labor, many also lamented the futility of labor or the process by which powerful forces extract labor from the lower classes. These songs spoke to the complex position of labor in the lives of rural workers, who could see both the literal fruit of their work in the harvest and recognize the exploitation of that labor through the underpayment of wages, or through forced labor in chain-gangs or enslavement. However, popularized folk ignored the critical thrust of the folk canon in order to reinforce the ethic of upward mobility as an integral aspect of American life.

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<sup>70</sup> Cohen and May discuss how conspicuous consumption reflected American desires to broadcast their professional success. And Whitfield discusses an overall corporatism pervading in Cold War American culture. Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 2nd ed., The American Moment (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2004); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound American Families in the Cold War Era*, Fully rev. and updated 20th anniv. ed. / with a new post 9/11 epilogue. (New York: Basic Bks, 2008).

Rather than celebrate the heritage and wisdom of working-class life, popular folk exhibited the ambition to leave it behind.

The evolution of the song “John Henry” illustrates how the modern ethic of personal upward mobility became infused into the work of the popular folk artists. In the earliest recorded versions of the song, the story revolved around the character of John Henry, a Black man working for the rapidly expanding railroads in post-Civil War America.<sup>71</sup> Early iterations tended to focus on the relationship between John and his wife, Polly Ann. In the narrative of the song, because John was laid low by exertion of the work, his counterpart took up his share of the labor, “Polly Ann drove steel like a man.” While the story may have emphasized the strong love between John and Polly Ann, the plot hinged on labor’s dependence on continuous work. This impelled Black women to labor in male areas in order that the family might continue to receive income.

Later iterations emphasized the physical prowess of John Henry and introduced a staged match between John and a steam drill. Each version of the song brought out different viewpoints about labor. Pete Seeger emphasized the story for a labor organizing perspective, Harry Belafonte framed John Henry as a figure of Black respectability, and Burl Ives emphasized the hardship of labor.<sup>72</sup> The steam drill can variously be framed as a potential replacement for the laborers, who would ostensibly then be out of work, as a

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<sup>71</sup> Roark Bradford, *John Henry: Roark Bradford's Novel and Play* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40.

<sup>72</sup> Pete Seeger, *American Ballads*, Vinyl (Folkways Records, 1957); Harry Belafonte, “*Mark Twain*” and *Other Folk Favorites*, Vinyl (RCA Victor, 1954); Burl Ives, *Historical America in Songs: Songs of Expanding America*, Vinyl (Encyclopedia Britannica Films, 1950).

challenge to the physical dominance of John Henry, or as the hubris of man to put unquestioned faith in his own technological genius. In the end of this story, Henry dies in the contest. He exerts himself to best the piece of technology but goes beyond his limit and expires. By omitting Polly Ann, these versions tend to end in one of two ways, both with interrelated moral implications. One, the train goes by the graveyard where John Henry has been buried and the narrator points out, “There lies a steel driving man.” Or, the narrator ends at the final result of the contest: John Henry dug 15 feet, “But the steam drill only made nine.” Both of these versions center the indomitable human spirit. Even with the cold advance of technological progress, the ability of the steam drill to work without effort, the triumph of technology cannot dominate the human spirit. Ultimately in these iterations, the technological advance effectively replaced crude human muscle. The lesson to a modern audience, even though we appear to be at the mercy of tremendous forces, our connection to our own human spirit will be what is remembered, what endures, and what advances humanity.

As a counter point, in 1963, Johnny Cash’s version emphasized the dignity of learning a trade and the ingenuity of the laboring classes. There is some view of the exploitation of labor by the middle management, but in a way the laborers aren’t fussed by the hardness of labor, because they are made of steelier stuff. “You can’t replace a steel driving man.”<sup>73</sup> Cash’s version puts Polly Ann back in as a major character, but only to immediately dismiss her as insufficient. Here, the dignity of specifically

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<sup>73</sup> Johnny Cash, *Blood, Sweat and Tears*, Vinyl (Columbia, 1963).

masculine labor was the central story, not the threat of unemployment, the pressed service of Polly Ann, nor the exploitation of labor by the railroad. He accentuates the means by which hard labor reveals moral superiority. Johnny Cash mines rural folk wisdom as an antidote to the softness engendered by modern urbanity. Even as Cash plays on a vision of working-class masculine toughness, there was an element of rugged individualism that complimented notions of building a better life. Cash may not cut an image of a corporate ladder climber, but he also envisions an America where he owns the fruit of his own labor.

The Brothers Four turned John Henry into a modern “thinking man.” Their version rewrites the narrative altogether, moving the contexts of the song to the modern day. Henry was no longer a railroad man, but someone looking to better their position in life. When Henry was just a baby, instead of a hammer, he “Picked up a slide rule and book on mathematics/ Saying thinkings going to be the job for me.”<sup>74</sup> He used his drive for education to get into college. Now Henry the working man comes up against a great technological innovation aimed at replacing human labor, the computer. Similar to earlier versions, Henry challenged the machine to contest, this time using just his brain. The result was the same, he died from exertion. Though the song follows many of the same beats as other iterations, by moving the setting into the modern corporate office, the Brothers Four relocate the center of American labor. This was a move that resonated

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<sup>74</sup> Brothers Four, *In Person*, vinyl (Columbia, 1962).

with their audience of white-collar workers. They could personally identify with Henry's struggle to keep up with an increasingly computer driven workplace.

This vision of upward mobility also came from the social positional of the performers. It looked quite different when Ledbetter sang his song, "Cotton Fields," then when the Highwaymen, a five-man all-White folk group that hit later in the revival, played their version. Ledbetter was a prolific singer who came out of the American South in the 1930s. His renditions of many folk songs became the template for later versions, including "Midnight Special" and the 1950 #1 hit for the Weavers, "Goodnight Irene." The legend of Ledbetter has gone through several iterations, and some credited John and Alan Lomax with rescuing him from a Louisiana prison and bringing him before the world as a salvaged genuine folk specimen.<sup>75</sup> Other versions emphasize his strategy of using the legitimacy of the Lomaxes for his own advantage.<sup>76</sup> Whatever the nature of their relationship, Ledbetter's race and social position remained pertinent in his public performances through the 1940s. Ledbetter had been singing for groups of urban socialites who often urged him to sing another and another. In response, he allegedly made up "Cotton Fields" on the spot, claiming it to be a song from his youth.

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<sup>75</sup> John A. Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*. (New York: Hafner PubCo, 1971); Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*, Cultural Studies of the United States (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 65.

<sup>76</sup> Paige A. McGinley, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), 120.

When Ledbetter sang “Cotton Fields” he did so as a formerly incarcerated Black man living through the Depression.<sup>77</sup> The song connected him to a history of labor marked by the exploitation of chain gangs, sharecroppers, and the enslaved. This represents the extraction of labor for the benefit of others and the oppression of the carceral state in maintaining economic relationships. In his performance of “Cottonfields,” Ledbetter referenced the steady rhythms used by chain gangs to keep the labor in time. The Black-ness of the laborer informs the economics of the labor performed in “Cottonfields.” [clarify how the laborer doesn’t own his labor - and how the present otherness of the performer informs the interpretation of the meaning]

The Highwaymen picked up Ledbetter’s song and worked it into their act. They had already scored a #1 hit in 1960 singing “Michael Row Your Boat Ashore,” and in 1962, their version of “Cottonfields” made it to the top 20. The Highwaymen’s version, though it did not differ significantly in melodic nor lyrical content, changed the position of the singer and by implication the narrator of the song. A White folk group singing about working on the farm impacted the historical meaning of the text. The folk in this context, that is the historical people group implied by the song, were the agricultural forebearers of the current modern society. Here the position of the singers as college graduates and modern professionals recasts the end of the story of the song. The singers in the Highwaymen have already emerged from the manual labor of their ancestors. Where Ledbetter’s personal history on the chain gang brought out a continuity with the

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<sup>77</sup> Sometimes the song was listed as “Cotton Song.” Leadbelly, *Rock Island Line*, vinyl (Folkways Records, 1951).

cottonfield workers, the Highwaymen show the past to be truly in the past. The Highwaymen could sing a song to honor the hard work and ingenuity of their ancestors, because they no longer need to labor in the fields. The song intones, “It might sound a little funny/ but we didn’t make very much money,” a statement that can only be seen as a comment on a situation long past coming from five, well-groomed college students.<sup>78</sup> As sung by the Highwaymen the song became a story of progression. The distance between the singer and the song reinforced the ethic of upward mobility. It served as a reminder that the current audience no longer labored like their agrarian ancestors. That the Highwaymen identified with the idea of progression was further confirmed in a reunion concert in 2002, where the group demonstrated a new sensitivity to just how close an association they could claim to their agrarian forerunners. They changed the lyric to “They didn’t make very much money.”<sup>79</sup> This small rhetorical adjustment revealed an awareness by the group of the insurmountable distance between themselves and the field laborer. Whereas in the 1960s they felt they could claim a personal, direct identification with the struggle of the folk. The commercial success of this particular track indicated the degree to which mainstream audiences embraced the re-racialization of folk material and re-conceptualization of the historical folk.

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<sup>78</sup> The Highwaymen, *Standing Room Only!*, Vinyl (United Artists, 1961).

<sup>79</sup> *This Land is Your Land*, DVD (WQED Productions, Rhino Home Video, 2002).



## Historicity

As performers of folk material, The Kingston Trio often took on the position of the folklorists who curated a slice of the world for their audience. Not only did Guard assume the professorial tone in his stage patter, but they often talked about the general contexts and history of the songs. The audience understood that while the group played in a popular idiom, the songs they sang came from far flung sources, both geographically and temporally. Their set lists maintained a safe kind of worldliness.<sup>80</sup> In one concert introduction the announcer prepared the audience for a trip down America's past saying:

American folk songs give us an enduring picture of our colorful heritage. Songs of sinners and saints, pin-up girls and stick-up men, songs of heart-break and hallelujah. Whenever the settler traveled, he had a song to sing. To take us down some of these roads, here are the popular Kingston Trio.<sup>81</sup>

Guard often credited the folk scholars of the previous generation, who collected the works they played, "We are simply three musically inclined collegians who get a genuine kick out of singing together... Our debt to the scholars and serious collectors of music is enormous. They have done the research that we have not had the time to do."<sup>82</sup> In this way, he tied their song selection to the legitimacy of academic folklorists, even as they distanced themselves from any claims of personal scholarship.

Reciprocally, the college market and the suburban youth markets were united in their desire to move away from old vocal standards, like Frank Sinatra or Perry Como,

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<sup>80</sup> George B. Leonard, Jr., "The Kingston Trio: The Big Change in Teen Listening Habits," *Look*, January, 1961, 60.

<sup>81</sup> "The Kingston Trio," *San Francisco Chronicle: This World*, April 2, 1960, 10 – 13.

<sup>82</sup> The Kingston Trio, "Folk Singers Need Material," *Music Journal*, January 1961, 34.

but not to rock ‘n’ roll. Popular folk offered a more intelligent alternative to teenybopper pop music while retaining a youthful enthusiasm. As one music critic observed, "The Kingston Boys are also comforting to teenagers in another way: Those who buy Kingston records can assure themselves they are listening to a ‘better kind of music’ than rock ‘n’ roll. The trio forms a bridge on which teen-agers can safely escape from subteen music.”<sup>83</sup> The Trio could have it both ways: they played more serious, genuine folk material, but they themselves were merely interested amateurs looking to have fun. By modernizing folk music as the music of the middle-class, popularized folk positioned the middle-class as the proper inheritors of folk culture. Just as changing the singer of “Cotton Fields” changed the implications of the songs, as it did between Ledbetter and the Highwaymen, the popular folk singers made claims of ownership over the story told in the folk songs they sung. They placed themselves into the narrative of the song. Thereby they equally made a claim that the folk were their ancestors. As one album cover declared, “all the singers on this recording bring their own individual feeling and respect to this music which is the common heritage of us all.”<sup>84</sup> It was self-reinforcing proposition; the values of the middle-class could be read backwards onto the folk and the folk could be seen as predecessors to the modern middle-class. Popular folk artists were not only the inheritors of folk culture, they represented the progression of the folk out of their stage of history.

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<sup>83</sup> George B. Leonard, Jr., “The Kingston Trio: The Big Change in Teen Listening Habits,” *Look*, January, 1961, 60.

<sup>84</sup> Ed McCurdy, back cover text on, Highwaymen, *Hootenanny with the Highwaymen*, vinyl (United Artists, 1963).

The Kingston Trio created a sense of the historical without an added lecturing egghead-ism or a scolding political screed. They kept it light by musing about the past without fussing over the details.<sup>85</sup> Kingston Trio performances could be “‘sincere’ without being ‘serious.’”<sup>86</sup> They did not engage nationalistic hero worship or heavy-handed celebrations of specific national accomplishments. Rather, their performances emphasized a sentimental, emotional patriotism. Even the darker elements weren’t so bad when sung back in uplifting harmonies with a pulsing beat. The thieves and murders of the American west, the hard-scrambled gunslingers who terrorized the pioneers of westward expansion, were reduced to irascible scamps. As Guard described it, the Trio played “‘hard luck stories broadcast in a cheerful manner.’”<sup>87</sup> The smoothed-out harmonies of the folk popularizers also served to smooth out the complex history of the nation. Randy Sparks, of the New Christy Minstrels, saw folk music as providing hope to a potentially despondent generation. He claimed, “The future looks pretty grim to most young people. They turn to the past for enlightenment, for something simple and strong – their history as Americans.”<sup>88</sup> These comments played on an underlying sense of nostalgia. Guard similarly claimed the appeal of popular folk came from their ability to

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<sup>85</sup> Historian Cantwell theorizes how the revival resulted as a reaction to Cold War paranoia which increased a drive to reclaim traditional American values. This led to a revival of folk music as a way of embracing traditional American ground up understanding of the world. Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), 170 - 180

<sup>86</sup> George B. Leonard, Jr., “The Kingston Trio: The Big Change in Teen Listening Habits,” *Look*, January, 1961, 60.

<sup>87</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Dave Guard, June 1, 1973, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 17, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>88</sup> Art Seidenbaum, “Minstrels Ease Folk Music Pain,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 9, 1963, B7.

inspire audiences with feel-good nostalgia. Or as he put it, “‘Hey, get up and holler again.’ That’s the message... if you have access to the past, something that once may have made you feel good, your first score, your first A on a paper, first kiss... you can revisit the good events in your head.”<sup>89</sup> Performances were more about using historical cultural as a jumping off point for entertainment, which resulted in a general sense of positivity about American history.

The strong connection between popular folk and historical presentation in the public imagination became all the more apparent when film studios began tapping popular folk groups to provide the soundtracks for their historical epics. In 1960, The Brothers Four recorded the theme song, “Green Leaves of Summer,” for the Hollywood version of the Battle of the Alamo.<sup>90</sup> While the music group was not responsible for the content of the film, nor indeed the content of the song, as it had been written expressly for the film by industry stalwarts composer Dimitri Tiomkin and lyricist Paul Francis Webster, their version indicated a close association of the popular groups with this kind of historical retelling. Both mediums complimented each other by creating palatable versions of the past. In director and star John Wayne’s hands, *The Alamo* told the story of masculine freedom fighters working to protect their family and their way of life. The film portrayed Mexican general Santa Ana as a brutish tyrant and the slave owning

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<sup>89</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Dave Guard, June 1, 1973, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 17, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>90</sup> *The Alamo*, directed by John Wayne (1960, United Artists) DVD. Jane Bowers, collaborator with The Kingston Trio wrote “Remember The Alamo” in 1955 as a counterpoint to the Davey Crockett theme song. Richard W. Johnston interview with Jane Bowers, April 30, 1974, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 11, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

American squatters on Mexican territory as faithful family men. The Black characters were depicted as simple, obedient servants, happily wedded to their masters. “The Green Leaves of Summer” provided the nostalgic soundtrack. The sweet, placid singing of the group underscored the longing for a better time gone by: “Twas so good to be young then/ In the season of plenty.”<sup>91</sup> The song raised the profile of the Brothers significantly. The mainstream critics raved, “The Brothers Four just about top anything they’ve ever done with one of the songs for the film.”<sup>92</sup> A Golden Globe win and an Oscar nomination also gave the group added legitimacy.

The centering of popularized folk as a historical reference point not only whitened American history, it also centered the American perspective amongst global cultures. The changes to these musical works reflected more than merely rearranged compositions in a popular style, the placement of the music in the mouths of White performers served to sever foreign persons from their culture. In this way, fans of popularized folk could lay claim to a kind of safe worldliness that remained within their pre-established proclivities. It allowed them to adopt a position of friendliness to the world as a part of America’s civilizing mission, while absolving themselves of the responsibility to engage with foreign ways of being. By modernizing global culture, the American Cold Warrior improved the music as matter of taste, just as American politicians attempted to improve foreign governments through the application of a

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<sup>91</sup> The song featured on both, Dimitri Tiomkin, *The Alamo*, vinyl (Columbia, 1960), and the Brothers Four, *BMOG: Best Music On/Off Campus*, vinyl (Columbia, 1961).

<sup>92</sup> Eddie Gallaher, “‘Alamo’ Explode with Good Music,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 9, 1960, G6.

Western political system. If the final stage of history was Americanization, global cultures would converge in a single American-led hegemony. With America as the aspirational standard for global culture, folk popularizers homogenized the world for American consumption and placed America as the successor of all culture, the end of history. But, this view of the global village as bendable to the will of American culture, as indeed assimilable into American understandings, was a political commentary on American centrality in global affairs. It placed the American perspective as the central, neutral gaze, through which all other cultures could be understood, and it asserted that foreign cultures were fodder for American leisure activities.

Historians have examined how American perspectives on foreign cultures evolved in the post-war era. Nils Gilman connects the work of social scientists to the foreign relations imperatives of the Cold War. He claims the theory came out of social scientists' efforts to build a "comprehensive theory not only for understanding what was happening in postcolonial regions and for promoting change that would make these regions more like 'us' – and less like the Russian or the Chinese."<sup>93</sup> Michael Hunt and Michael Adas portray the ethical leadership position of the United States during the Cold War as an evolution from the civilizing mission ideology of the colonial period. New rationalizations for cultural hierarchy replaced scientific thinking on racial hierarchy.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>94</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 48, 159 – 62; Michael Adas, "Modernization Theory and the American Revival of the Scientific and Technological Standards of Social Achievement and Human Worth," in *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War*, eds. David C. Engerman et al. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 26.

This scholarship agrees on a particular contemporary view of historical progression as “an inexorable process, but one which could be accelerated by the right kinds of leaders,” academics and policy wonks advocated for a “pro-capitalist vanguard of technocratic social planners” to carry out their vision of modernity.<sup>95</sup> American politicians used the language of cultural hierarchy to defend their international machinations. Equally, the American public became accustomed to treating foreign culture as both quaint and as trending toward an American present. The inevitable progression to modernity also prompted a particular view of traditional cultures. Echoing earlier sentiments regarding the importance of scientific progress, W. W. Rostow claimed that it was because traditional cultures lacked a western scientific perspective that they remained traditional.<sup>96</sup> Traditional society was a barrier to growth.<sup>97</sup> By following the guide of American consultants, traditional cultures entered a linear historical progression founded in a Western European past and fully realized in the American present. Moreover, proponents understood their project as non-ideological because it was universal.<sup>98</sup> They held a benevolent view of other cultures, one that wraps them into an American way of doing things not out of explicit domination but as a mission of goodwill to the world at large, at least when it conformed to an American ideal.

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<sup>95</sup> Nils Gilman, “Modernization Theory, the Highest State of American Intellectual History,” in *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War* eds. David C. Engerman et al. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 49, 50.

<sup>96</sup> W. W. Rostow, *The Process of Economic Growth*, 2nd ed. (W.W. Norton and Company, 1962), 311.

<sup>97</sup> Rostow, 314.

<sup>98</sup> Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 27 – 28.

The fascination with exotic culture was not a new phenomenon in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American pop culture. The Egyptomania of the early 19th century, the Tiki fad of the 1940s and 50s, and the Calypso craze that immediately preceded the folk boom, were all instances when Americans took foreign cultures and commodified them for domestic audiences. What set the folk boom apart was how singing groups adapted the foreign culture. Rather than reproductions of artifacts, or postcards of foreign scenes, American in the folk boom reproduced foreign cultures themselves. The folk groups, full of All-American boys, sang the songs of the world.

Folk musicians have a long history of reinterpreting source material for their audience. In the days before easily portable recording equipment, folklorists often performed the songs of remote cultures for their audiences. This was a way to bring the aural quality of the subject into the folkloric discussion. Folklorists like Alan Lomax used performance as object lessons in enculturation.<sup>99</sup> Other folk interpreters envisioned their concerts as opportunities to build solidarity with other cultures. Even as they necessarily arranged the material to fit their abilities as musicians, they sought to retain the spirit of their sources. Pete Seeger, for example, argued against carelessly translating folk songs into English: "If you run across a beautiful song in a foreign language do one of three things: learn to sing it well in the original, pronouncing the words right, or else locate or compose really poetic English lyrics for it, or leave the song for someone else to sing.

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<sup>99</sup> John Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Viking, 2010), 152 – 156.



*What not to do*: ruin it for young ears by singing a second-rate English translation.”<sup>100</sup>

Seeger allowed for some alterations by the folk interpreter if they served the greater purpose of expanding the listeners’ perspective. Identification with other people groups triumphed over perfectly mimicking foreign cultures. Seeger readily admitted his limitations as a musician because his ultimate goal was to get the songs into the mouths of the audience. “As a performer, yours truly does not have much of a voice, and there are plenty of young people who can play rings around me on a guitar or banjo. But I’m proud that I’ve hardly met an audience I couldn’t get singing.”<sup>101</sup> By singing, the audience connected themselves to something larger, the communal experience of singing together in a crowd and the imaginative work of connecting to other people by appreciating their culture. The folk interpreter taught the audience about other cultures and helped them to identify with them.

However, over the 1940s and 1950s the advancement in portable recording technology and the ubiquity of the record players meant that rural cultures could now be directly represented to urban or suburban audiences.<sup>102</sup> Why then did the technique of reinterpretation persist in folk performance, especially in the popular performance of folk material? Because audiences preferred folk group reinterpretations to field recordings and they voted with their pocketbook. The buying public preferred modernized versions

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<sup>100</sup> Seeger, *Incomplete Folksinger*, 532.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 197.

<sup>102</sup> Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 14 – 15.

of folk songs over and above field recordings and folk interpreters attempting faithful recreation. Their preferences for popular folk reflected their penchant to view other cultures through a familiar lens, which was the modernized and popularized version of foreign cultures as offered by popular folk groups.

Popularizing and modernizing foreign cultures had two effects. First, it muted the strangeness of non-American culture. The folk boom gave Americans a venue for exploring the world in a safe way. This was a guided tour, especially of the Third World. These areas tended to not be separated out by national identity, but by ethnic grouping. African and South American music functioned as a sort of window into all of those geographic regions. The Kingston Trio roamed freely through material from Central and South America and grouped them all under the guise of Spanish Language songs. Their song about running afoul of the authorities while on vacation abroad was a palpable hit - "Tijuana Jail." In this song they affect "Looney Tune" Mexican accents and reinforce stereotypes about third world corruption.<sup>103</sup> This popularizing effect was common to all the work output by popular folk artists. They made the unfamiliar familiar. Second, their adaptations reinforced the primacy of the American point of view. It allowed a type of global engagement on safe terms, while it wrapped global culture into an American narrative. All other cultures became fodder for American repurposing. American Cold Warriors might hold Hawaiian luaus, shop for a themed dinner in the "ethnic" aisle of the grocery store, or hold a backyard Hootenanny where they sang the

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<sup>103</sup> Ron Radosh, "Commercialism and the Folk Song Revival," *Sing Out!*, 8 no. 4 (1959), 27 – 29.

songs of the world. The popular folk artists freely re-contextualized and modernized global cultures in the image of an American present. They not only brought global cultures to an American audience on their terms, they literally replaced the artists. In so doing, they grafted the global past into an American-lead future.<sup>104</sup>

### **Kingston Trio Break up**

In 1961 The Kingston Trio split up. There had been growing division in the group for more than a year and when things came to a head, they decided to part ways. While each member had their own perspective as to the reasons for the split, the disparate directions the former bandmates took after the break signaled a broader shift in the world of popularized folk. Guard, who wanted to continue to develop the group's sound and take on more challenging and obscure work, left the group early in the year. Shane and Reynolds were content playing the same songs in the same style. They built a brand and wanted to defend it.<sup>105</sup>

The immediate problem that prompted a reckoning was money mismanagement by their publishing company. Guard was incensed that a check he recently wrote

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<sup>104</sup> Gilman examines the intellectual history of modernization theory as a view of American centric historical progression, Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America*, New Studies in American Intellectual and Cultural History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). This work looks at the development of the ideology of the west generally as an alternative to the Stalinist view of historical progression, Annette Vowinckel, Marcus M. Payk, and Thomas Lindenberger, *Cold War Cultures: Perspectives on Eastern and Western Societies* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012). This work examines the application of this ideology in US foreign policy, Eva-Maria Muschik, *Building States: The United Nations, Development, and Decolonization, 1945 - 1965* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

<sup>105</sup> Bush, *Greenback Dollar*, 129 – 130.

bounced and he began asking around. Though there was never definitive proof, word made its way to Guard that Artie Mogull had been using the publishing funds to sign new talent and cover gambling debts.<sup>106</sup> Guard called a meeting in Chicago with the other band members and Werber. He wanted to hold Mogull fully accountable. Reynolds and Shane disagreed, they reasoned that they were making so much money, it hardly mattered if a little went missing. Guard's hard stance mystified Reynolds who, in a later interview said:

I remember thinking, 'Dave! We stole the fucking money. It's illegal money in the first place!' Goddamn public domain tunes, stealin' tunes from other people, is shitty money. If we got \$50, we should be thankful. Dave on the other hand contend, 'I worked very hard on those tunes,' and he did, but it was not 'our' money.<sup>107</sup>

Reynolds and Shane did not want to force the issue; they wanted to play it cool, live and learn. The disagreement revealed underlying tensions within the group. The group fractured over both long simmering interpersonal issues and divergent views of how to progress as a commercial folk group. What was most important to the success of the group: the variety of their wide-ranging source material, or their recognizable brand?

Guard, in his position as song arranger, began to think of himself as the indispensable center of the group. He selected the material and he taught the songs to Reynolds and Shane. Guard pursued the music business with industriousness and dogged

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<sup>106</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Frank Werber, November, 17, 1974, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 29, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive; Richard W. Johnston interview with Nick Reynolds, September 27, 1973, Box 1 Folder 16, Kingston Trio Records, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>107</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Nick Reynolds, March 25, 1975, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 16, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

determination and he began to view Reynolds and Shane as lazy. Werber characterized it this way:

(Dave) He learned by striving. It didn't wear well that Dave should work so hard and Shane so little, and yet when they got up on stage, it was at least even. That worked on Dave. Bobby's a lot looser. He may have been a silly ass who resorted to very obvious things to get reactions, but it always got the audience off, whereas Dave had sifted through material and extracted pearls, Bobby would go goofy and still get as much.<sup>108</sup>

As for Reynolds and Shane, they had started to grow tired of Guard's heavy-handed leadership and disagreed with some of his decisions. Guard had passed on "The Green Leaves of Summer" which turned into a hit for the Brothers Four and he refused to play for the Kennedy inauguration because he was a registered Republican.<sup>109</sup> More than these interpersonal squabbles, the group was moving in different directions musically. Guard wanted to continue to look for new sources and push their sound in new ways. Shane and Reynolds, on the other hand, felt as though the group had worked hard to build a brand and they wanted to give the public what they wanted.

Guard felt that the act in its current form had just run its course. *Sold Out*, recorded in December 1959, was the last rehearsed album.<sup>110</sup> Per Guard, "From then on, we used pots and overdubbing... By that time, we were scrapping the bottom of the

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<sup>108</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Frank Werber, Kingston Trio Records, January, 18, 1974, Box 1 Folder 29, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>109</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Dave Guard, March 31, 1975, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 17, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive; Richard W. Johnston interview with Frank Werber, January, 17, 1974, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 29, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>110</sup> Kingston Trio, *Sing Out*, vinyl (Capitol, 1960).

barrel.”<sup>111</sup> When the group turned against him in Chicago, he felt ready to walk away. In a 1974 interview he reflected on the group falling apart:

It was easier for Nick and Bobby and Frank to lump together by 1961 even though they were getting a little tired of each other’s number anyway. I was just trying to get some relief – looking for some way off of this griddle in some decent way. So, the only real solution looked like captain badass because I had stopped drinking for one thing... It was time to get off the Ferris Wheel – go home from the Fair – all the cotton candy had been eaten – this plastic shit can’t last.<sup>112</sup>

When Reynolds and Shane stood firm together and Werber took their side; Guard decided to demand a buyout, which they accommodated.

The direction the two sides took after the breakup provided a window into those underlying differences. Since Guard had been bought out, the two remaining members retained the rights to the band name. They immediately began to audition for a replacement. John Stewart emerged as an early favorite. He had already been an occasional collaborator, having submitting several songs to Trio and he had experience working in the folk idiom with his group, The Cumberland Three. But Stewart’s early influences came more from Elvis than Woody Guthrie. He spent his teenage years as a greaser in rock n’ roll bands. Stewart brought a level of musicianship commensurate with Guard, but little of the folkloric spirit that animated their early forays into Caribbean and Latin music. Consequently, the second iteration of the group focused on producing work in the already established The Kingston Trio sound rather than challenging their fan

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<sup>111</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Dave Guard, February 18, 1974, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 17, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>112</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Dave Guard, February 18, 1974, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 17, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

base with diverse sources. The track listing after 1961 reflected this inclination with the inclusion of more modern composers and Stewart increasingly used the trio as a platform to showcase his own compositions.

Guard, for his part, founded the Whiskeyhill Singers, a new folk group modeled even more closely on the Weavers. He recruited David “Buck” Wheat, longtime bass accompanist for The Kingston Trio, Judy Hensky, White blues singer and self-proclaimed queen of the beats, and relative newcomer, tenor Cyrus Faryar. Much like the early work of The Kingston Trio the group recorded a wide range of sources in a popular style. Guard pushed his eclectic tastes even further in an Australian produced television show titled *Dave’s Place*. Staged in the style of a night-club tiki bar in the South Pacific, Guard played the host with all his characteristic wry, ironic sense of humor. Much of the talent was drawn from local Australian performers, but the show also attracted a few American acts, notably folk re-creationists The New Lost City Ramblers. The show straddled the divide between night-club act and folkloric exploration.<sup>113</sup>

Guard displayed his commitment to folkloric, historically based presentation when he signed the group on to record several songs for *How the West Was Won*. The film was a sweeping, epic retelling of American westward expansion, told through a gauzy and sentimental lens.<sup>114</sup> The narrative unfolded through a series of vignettes which

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<sup>113</sup> Dave Guard, host, performer, *Dave’s Place*, directed by Robert L. Allnutt, Australian Broadcasting Company, originally aired October 3 to December 26, 1965, shooting scripts, Kingston Trio Collection, Box 3 Folder 6, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

<sup>114</sup> *How the West Was Won*, directed by John Ford, Henry Hathaway, Geroge Marshall and Richard Thorpe (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1962) DVD.

tell the story of various White Americans as they ventured west. The film highlighted the personal striving and nobility of spirit exhibited by the strong-minded women and rugged men who sought a better life through honest hard work. Alfred Newman's orchestrations used classic American folk songs, like Shenandoah and Greensleeves, as leitmotifs in each vignette. The Whiskeyhill Singers punctuated the Overture with a version of the "Ox-driving" song done in a recognizable popular folk style. While the lyrics had been undated for the film, the tune came from a John Lomax collection.<sup>115</sup> Much like the early popular folk groups, the film did not purport to represent an absolute recreation of history but was grounded in historical material and updated for modern audiences.

### **American Myth and Nostalgia**

After the split and reformation of The Kingston Trio, popular folk moved even further in the direction of pure entertainment. These groups decreasingly attempted to portray their songs as grounded in real folk experience and embraced mythological narratives steeped in a sentimental view of history.<sup>116</sup> One music critic emphasized the fantasy at the heart of popular folk when he theorized why some young people were so attracted to it, stating "folk songs accent chivalry, romance and adventure, all things people have always dreamed about... they are seldom neurotic, frustrating or frenzied.

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<sup>115</sup> Lomax, John A, Ruby T Lomax, and Herman R Weaver. *Ox-driving Song*. Merryville, Louisiana, 1939. Audio. <https://www.loc.gov/item/lomaxbib000220/>.

<sup>116</sup> Cantwell recognizes the revival tendency to mythology, but he does not track the value systems of these myths. "The folk revival and the establishment were together dipping into the historical resources of culture to fashion a new public life, a mythology and a counter mythology each seeking to establish itself as the fountainhead of value in postwar society." Cantwell, 173.



Folk songs come from a gentler age.”<sup>117</sup> Of all the popular folk groups, The New Christy Minstrels were the most likely to engage in this ahistorical mythologizing. Two of their albums, *Tall Tales Legends and Nonsense* and *Land of Giants*, freely mixed fanciful folk tales with historically adjacent material and newly written songs.<sup>118</sup>

The mishmash of folk and folk-like material combined into a fog where truth and fiction co-mingled. On the back cover of *Land of Giants*, Randy Sparks prefaced the album this way, “The folk heroes of our country, real or imagined, are a great part of the heritage we enjoy as Americans... Together they compose a veritable army of colorful personalities whose collective character is representative of the American image — eager, free-wheeling, inventively creative, self-determining, freedom loving — fashioned of a clay born out of wanderlust and colonialism, fired in the battles of a revolution for independence, aged and mellowed by the blessings of a common cause: conquest of the vast frontiers.”<sup>119</sup> This framing of the album acknowledged the fictitious nature of the subjects, while affirming that they held deeper truths about the American character. Though the songs wove in and out of fictional stories, the exact, verifiable truth behind the songs mattered less to the popular folk artists than the ideas. The casual attitude to the source material reflected a casual attitude to the actual truth. These popular folk groups effectively replaced textual authority with stories that felt true. This fictionalized

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<sup>117</sup> Josephine Lowman, “Why Grow Old?,” *Newsday*, Mar. 14, 1961, 34.

<sup>118</sup> The New Christy Minstrels, *The New Christy Minstrels Tell Tall Tales! Legends And Nonsense*, vinyl (Columbia, 1963).

<sup>119</sup> The New Christy Minstrels, *Land of Giants*, vinyl (Columbia, 1964).

American history was not an outright fraud, in that it did not claim to be actual history, rather it confirmed the audience's sense of goodwill about the national past. It reflected what the audience wanted the past to be, the past that American Cold Warriors agreed America ought to have had.

When Sparks secured a contract for the Christies to play on a movie soundtrack, it was not in service of a historical epic like *How the West Was Won*, nor a Westernized retelling of American grit as in *The Alamo*; it was for a B-movie comedy titled *Advance to the Rear*.<sup>120</sup> Sparks wrote several new songs in a modern folk style to underscore a screwball romp through the Civil War. The story was populated with soldiers on both sides who sought to keep the war going in a way that did not inconvenience or indeed hurt anyone. In one scene the junior officer protagonist asked his superior why the cannons are stationed so far away from the enemy. He responded that every morning the “rebs” fire 30 rounds at the Union and they fire 30 rounds back. It keeps the generals happy and no one gets hurt. In another scene, a Union sergeant was reluctant to go into battle because he was afraid he might shoot his own kin.<sup>121</sup> The film portrays the soldiers as well-meaning tools at the mercy-of out-of-touch leaders. There was no higher call for them, no greater purpose to the war, simply a small group of blow-hard generals out to prove a point and a cadre of good intentioned men caught in the middle. While Guard's portrayal of the American past may have begun with existing materials and smoothed out

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<sup>120</sup> *Advance to the Rear*, dir. George Marshal, (Metro Goldwyn Meyer, 1964).

<sup>121</sup> In another scene, the movie skewers the perception of Native Americans as childlike. The general decides to ship the company of misfits out west. Another character asks if that isn't that a dirty trick to play on the Indians – “These Indians will just have to learn to take care of themselves.”

the rough parts, Sparks invents his history out of whole cloth. The main theme “Company of Cowards” accentuates the comic inversion of the soldiers running away, but it retains the fondness for the Union soldiers, “’Tis a company of cowards/ And they've come to save the day.”<sup>122</sup> Instead of the revised history of the early popular folk groups, the film trades on a reading of the war as an exciting adventure. This view of the Civil War absolved White folks for their defense of slavery and softened the moral righteousness of the national cause. It all amounted to a unfortunate disagreement between sides that remained fundamentally friendly. *Advance to the Rear* created a mythologized past, a reinvented national history made palatable for the present.

### **Good Clean Apolitical Fun**

The popular folk acts kept one trump card up their Oxford button down sleeves: whenever a critic or folk enthusiasts derided the groups as inauthentic, or as distorters of the historical record, they defended themselves by claiming their work was simple entertainment, not to be taken seriously. Crowds and critics should not get overly preoccupied with their exact musicianship nor their textual accuracy, because their act was all in fun. Popular folk groups positioned themselves as simple entertainers operating outside the realm of politics. However, by depoliticizing the voice of the folk, the folk popularizers effectively put them in service of the Cold War status quo.

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<sup>122</sup> The New Christy Minstrels, *Today (Advance to the Rear)*, vinyl (Columbia, 1964).

Album covers broadcast the position of the groups themselves. They presented an image steeped in the language of light entertainment. These were not learned scholars, nor were they far out beatniks, they were a group of young people having fun. The Highwaymen's first live album described it as "Informal, very good fun."<sup>123</sup> The Kingston Trio's *At Large* album called them, "vividly entertaining."<sup>124</sup> The Limeliter's jacket cover lightly satirized the stuffiness of certain folk performers when it claimed, "In the Limeliter's hands, the folk ballad is no longer a museum piece."<sup>125</sup> And the Gateway Trio described their act in this way, "Of course, they're just as like to poke fun or carry on as they are to harmonize. They're pretty far out, all right. But you won't mind; it's all in good fun."<sup>126</sup> These covers emphasize the fun to be had at a popular folk concert. And the critics agreed. Robert Shelton, folk critic for the *New York Times* described the New Christy Minstrels as, "entertaining, frothy and smiling, but rather inconsequential as stylists."<sup>127</sup> The popular folk acts presented themselves and largely were received as inconsequential entertainment. While this allowed many folk enthusiasts to dismiss them out of hand, it also muted any potential serious critiques.

In order to keep the focus on entertainment and appeal to the widest audience possible, The Kingston Trio agreed that they should avoid anything scandalous and

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<sup>123</sup> Ed McCurdy, back cover text on, Highwaymen, *Hootenanny with the Highwaymen*, vinyl (United Artists, 1963).

<sup>124</sup> The Kingston Trio, *At Large*, vinyl (Capitol Records, 1958).

<sup>125</sup> The Limeliter's, *Tonight: In Person*, vinyl (RCA Victor, 1961).

<sup>126</sup> The Gateway Trio, *The Mad Mad Mad Gateway Trio*, vinyl (Capitol Records, 1963).

<sup>127</sup> Robert Shelton, "Christy Minstrels Offer Folk Songs," *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 1963, 20.

anything that took a clear political position. Werber molded the Trio as a “non-offending protest;” a kind of “vicarious catharsis” that allowed audiences an outlet without stumbling into subversion.<sup>128</sup> Reynolds remembered Guard as the one who insisted they do “absolutely nothing controversial.”<sup>129</sup> Whereas Guard remembered Werber as the architect of their clean image. “Werber was the one who laid the ‘No Controversial Stuff’ on us early. I wanted to do Venjo Jaleo, that’s the most exciting thing the Weavers did... I had no idea what it meant, but whatever it was, it was super. To him it meant McCarthy.”<sup>130</sup> Likely, Guard used his leadership role in the group to enforce Werber’s marketing impulses. Guard may have agreed that broad likability was an intelligent business move, but he expressed very little awareness of the larger potential pitfalls of subversion. Werber remembered the precarious cultural landscape this way, “There was very vivid memory of McCarthyism for us just 4 or 5 years prior. So, the country was very much in the mood of ‘Don’t rock the boat.’”<sup>131</sup> Coming only a few years after the blacklisting of Pete Seeger and the resultant collapse of The Weavers commercial viability, Werber sought to inculcate the group from claims of subversiveness. The folk

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<sup>128</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Frank Werber, April 2, 1975, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 29, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>129</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Nick Reynolds, September 26, 1973, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 16, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>130</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Dave Guard, March 31, 1975, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 17, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>131</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Frank Werber, November, 17, 1974, Kingston Trio Records, Box 1 Folder 29, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

artists themselves may have actually believed in their apolitical position, but in the case of The Kingston Trio, this was calculated choice by Werber.

These claims to apolitical entertainment obscured how the popular folk artists embraced a commonsense, centrist political position.<sup>132</sup> The New Christy Minstrels put the disposition of the popular folk groups in psychological terms, which reinforced the Cold War tendency to equate communist leanings with pathology. In one interview, a member of the band explained:

Songs of a melancholy nature are carefully avoided by the Minstrels. This extroverted group of unmixed-up performers happily point out that they have no political connections and no psychological problems that anybody would be interested in – particularly Freud... ‘A grouch can’t sing happy songs, and a neurotic can’t associate with traditional Americana.’<sup>133</sup>

The smiling apolitical entertainment of the popular folk artists was a confirmation of the bright American present. It redeemed the past as a source of pride and encouragement as it looked to an exciting future. Atomic age folk music provided the soundtrack for a brighter tomorrow and a better yesterday.

## **Hootenanny**

Television opened up markets for popular folk that would not have been accessible even a few years earlier. By the time the popular folk fad hit its height in

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<sup>132</sup> Popular folk musicians weren’t the only artists to present their work as apolitical. Ansari examines this impulse amongst classical musicians in, Emily Abrams Ansari, *The Sound of a Superpower: Musical Americanism and the Cold War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>133</sup> Robert Shelton, “Smiling Minstrels: Folk Nonet Strums Lucrative Chord in Happy, Uncomplicated Songs,” *New York Times*, Aug. 2, 1964, 91.

1963, television had come of age as a modern communications force and the center of family entertainment in the home. As such, it had the capacity to launch musical acts into super-stardom. A well-received television booking could start a career. The myriad acts clamoring to get on the Ed Sullivan show were proof of the power of television in establishing entertainment careers.<sup>134</sup> Because the popular folk musicians fashioned themselves as first and foremost entertainers, they were predisposed to pursue television as promotional tool. Other folk artists may have been turned off by the fast-paced format or the drive by producers to keep song content family friendly. Indeed, producers often asked acts to play edited versions of songs for length or content. However, since popular acts already tuned their repertoires for broad mainstream appeal, they often had already edited their material for a general audience and were predisposed to perform it in a crowd friendly manner. In the first few years of the 1960s, popularized folk acts dominated the television performance slots. The New Christy Minstrels featured on the *Andy Williams Show* as resident performers. The Kingston Trio played on variety and talk shows for years. The Smothers Brothers were a favorite of Johnny Carson at the *Tonight Show*. Programming that followed the pop charts, like *The Dinah Shore Hour* and *Perry Como's Kraft Music Hall*, booked more and more popular folk acts. The trend was so hot, ABC decided to launch a folk only concert program in 1963 called *Hootenanny*. *Hootenanny* became the centerpiece of popularized folk music at the height of the revival. It both

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<sup>134</sup> Nachman examines how the Sullivan show reflected American tastes. He also provides many back stories of the acts that performed. Gerald Nachman, *Right Here on Our Stage Tonight! Ed Sullivan's America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

reinforced the Cold War values regarding the centrality of the middle-class and commodified the very notion of a hootenanny.

The history of the word hootenanny remains contentious and somewhat mythical. Pete Seeger's memory of the origin of the term has become an unofficial standard history amongst folk revivalists. Seeger recalled first hearing the word on a trip with Woody Guthrie through the American Northwest. They arrived in a Seattle lumber camp where the workers welcomed them to attend. "The Seattle hootenannies were real community affairs. One family would bring a huge pot of some dish like crab gumbo. Others would bring cakes, salads. A drama group performed topical skits, a good 16-mm film might be shown, and there would be dancing, swing and folk, for those of sound limb. And, of course, there would be singing."<sup>135</sup> Seeger and Guthrie took the word with them when they traveled back to New York. They staged regular hootenannies on Sunday afternoons where they charged 35 cents at the door to help with the rent of their Almanac House. Once established in New York, the term came to connote a multi-performer, extended concert where the audience would be expected to participate in group singing and might even be allowed to perform one of their own songs. In Seeger's words, the best hoots in this era, "would have an audience of several hundred, jammed tight into a small hall, and seated semicircular-wise, so that they face each other democratically. The singers and musicians would vary from amateur to professional, from young to old, and the music from square to hip, cool to hot, long-hair to short."<sup>136</sup> In other words, they were

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<sup>135</sup> Pete Seeger, *The Incompleat Folksinger* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 327.

<sup>136</sup> Pete Seeger, *The Incompleat Folksinger* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 329.



democratically-minded music concerts. Simultaneously, the West Coast off-shoot of People's Songs also began to hold period concerts they called hootenannies.<sup>137</sup> Because the Almanac Singers and Peoples Songs, on both the East and West coasts, believed in the use of culture for political consciousness raising, these informal gatherings included political advocacy as an essential function.

The "Bitter End," a New York music club which became integral to the Greenwich Village folk scene, picked up the term for its Sunday showcases of folk music. In Village venues, the format began to shift, from informal gatherings to more structured multi-performer concerts. Yet, the format retained an expectation of audience participation and a democratic sharing of the spotlight. Seeger remembered these hootenannies as important to keeping folk music alive in the public imagination, as well as a place where audience contributions were key to the performance. He wrote, "Artists can also shape and build audiences as twenty years of New York hootenannies built up an audience for folk music in New York City. Ideally, there should be a constant interplay, action and reaction, between artist and audience."<sup>138</sup> From its supposed origins in Seattle to the early 1960s, hootenannies were understood to be informal gatherings of many folk singers where audience participation was an essential aspect of the performance. This kind of casual musical gathering went by other names as well. For example, folksong clubs at the University of Illinois and Indiana University called informal,

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<sup>137</sup> Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 47, 55.

<sup>138</sup> Pete Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 216.

amateurish gatherings “folksings.”<sup>139</sup> The Los Angeles scene called them hoots, or community sings or song picnics.<sup>140</sup> One New York scene revivalist, Barry Kornfeld, called the weekly gatherings in Washington Square “group singing.” He defended the informal atmosphere, “Sure, it’s loud! It’s a lot of fun to sing loudly and let off steam.” He held the group singing in the square in contrast to the staid song trading of the folkniks, which Kornfeld described as “self-conscious in-group jam sessions and round robins.”<sup>141</sup> All of these venues had heightened permeability between performer and audience. But a concert series television show would change the public perception of the term hootenanny.

ABC television Vice President Daniel Melnick reasoned that because folk music enjoyed wide popularity amongst college students, he would hold the concert series on university campuses throughout the country.<sup>142</sup> This had two advantages. Using the university as backdrop, the production would not need to occupy a New York sound stage. The concerts could also draw their audiences from the ready-made youth population on campus who were predisposed to enthusiastic, breathless engagement with the artists.

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<sup>139</sup> “Announcement,” *Blue Yodel*, Vol 1 no 2, January 1963; “Coming Events,” *Autoharp*, Vol 3, no 2, November 30, 1962.

<sup>140</sup> *Good News* vol 1, no 3, June 1961.

<sup>141</sup> Barry Kornfeld, “This is not a How-To article on Group Singing,” *Caravan*, no. 12, August – September 1958, 7, 8.

<sup>142</sup> John P. Shanley, “‘Hootenanny’ Goes on the Air,” *New York Times* April 14, 1963, 111; Cecil Smith, “Strum Along with ‘Hootenanny,’” *Los Angeles Times* January 19, 1964, C3.

Emcee Jack Linkletter approached the role like a cross between a sideline reporter for a football game and an on-the-scene announcer at a parade. According to producer Richard Lewine, “He [Linkletter] operates as if he were a sports reporter covering a game.”<sup>143</sup> Each episode began with a short introduction to that week’s host university. Sweeping B-roll of the grounds ran as Linkletter extolled the virtues of the campus, the sporting teams, and the academics. The production team shot the concerts like a sporting event, with long panning crowd shots and zoom shots of the performers. These establishing shots placed the home television viewer in the heightened atmosphere of the concert hall, usually the school gymnasium.

The pacing and editing produced an overall effect of breathless excitement. The production team often required songs to be shortened, as each act was allowed just one or two songs before moving on to the next one. The show consistently integrated several popular folk groups into its weekly programming. The Limelites featured in nearly half of the concerts in the first season and the Brothers Four recorded the theme song for the show. Re-creationist acts like the New Lost City Ramblers never appeared, though they did audition. And while some performers with rural origins like Doc Watson or June Carter Cash appeared once, they tended to be treated as exotic samples. The preponderance of the acts were in the vein of the New Christy Minstrels, the Serendipity Singers, and the Chad Mitchell Trio. Groups would be placed in combinations

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<sup>143</sup> John P. Shanley, “‘Hootenanny’ Goes on the Air,” *New York Times* April 14, 1963, 111.

throughout the show, building to the final culmination of a mass sing-along to close the concert.

*Hootenanny* tried to spin its status as folk revival newcomer as a positive.

Linkletter admitted, “before I started on this show, I knew nothing about folk music... My job is to become accepted by the insiders and act as a catalyst to get the information out.”<sup>144</sup> Because the show tried to be the crossroads of all the emergent folk trends in this era, they wanted to hold the audience’s hands with approaches that might seem foreign. The show then functioned on two levels: it was both a chance for fans on campus and at home to get close to the stars and it was an explanation for bewildered bystanders who wondered what the fuss was about.

Those acts that the *Hootenanny* producers decided needed additional explanation revealed what they thought about the audience at home. For example, country and bluegrass acts like The Carter Family, Flatt and Scruggs, and The Dillards, mainstays of rural performance for a decade or more, were treated like esoteric niche acts. In one episode, an instrumental piece by Flatt and Scruggs received a post-production narration over the performance by Linkletter who described the instruments and playing styles. The announcer explained the music to the viewer as it was happening. Before a song by South African Singer Miriam Makeba, the host familiarizes the audience with the “click” aspects of the Xhosa language, comparing it to the “popping of a cork.”<sup>145</sup> The producers incorporated these less familiar groups in an effort to replicate the broad-spectrum of acts

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<sup>144</sup> Aleen MacMinn, “Who Gives a Hoot?” *Los Angeles Times* April 28, 1963, M2.

<sup>145</sup> *The Best of Hootenanny*, dvd (ABC Television, 1963/ 1964, Shout Factory, 2007).

included in a typical folk festival. The cumulative effect of the show's strategic explications designated clear lines between the familiar and the exotic, between the in-group and guests to the party. In the world of *Hootenanny*, popularized folk was the norm.

*Hootenanny* not only became the flagship show of popularized folk music at the height of the revival, it epitomized how folk songs could embody Cold War culture presented through folk material. First, the look and presentation of the acts reinforced a sense of middle-class respectability. Second, the production attempted to maintain an apolitical position. Third, the historical vision presented placed the perspective of the United States as the first amongst nations, while presenting the cultures of the world as the raw materials for American entertainment.

The performers all held to a rather narrow vision of middle-class attire and affect. The musical acts chosen for *Hootenanny* were a far cry from the barefoot publicity photos of Leadbelly a generation before. On the college campuses of the major land-grant institutions, and broadcast into American television on Saturday nights, the folk performers on *Hootenanny* donned the short-sleeved Oxfords made popular by The Kingston Trio, or the modest black suits that were the usual uniform of the night club act. The female performers tended to wear long straight cut dresses and modern styled hair dos. All of this would have been very close to the dress of the college audience. This was not an audience of t-shirts and blues jeans, nor of work boots and dungarees. The only small exception were the gospel singers who often wore more formal dresses. But their acts approximated the look and feel of a Sunday worship service.

The diction and presentation of the performers were read as middle class as well. Not the high diction of the mid-Atlantic, which signaled an aristocratic heritage, nor the southern drawl, or Appalachian accent. These performers all presented their songs in what might be called an American neutral accent aspired to by the middling classes. Even when rhyme schemes or melody lines called for a drawl, the vowels tended to be even, the diction clear and clipped making each work distinct, and the group singing in clear unison.

The location itself also reinforced this middle-class perspective. By choosing to host the concerts on college campuses, the producers placed the folk phenomenon in proximity to the emergent class of white-collar ladder climbers. In 1963, a university degree increased earning potential over a high school graduate by nearly 50%.<sup>146</sup> The concerts were held before an audience of aspirants to the middle class. Linkletter's opening monologues introducing the university of the week, highlighted the depth of intellectual heritage as well as the cutting-edge advancements taking place on campus. He described the University of Pittsburgh's so-called Cathedral of Learning as a "Skyscraper school" while touting the fact that the polio vaccine was developed at the university health center. He commended Southern Methodist University's "very vital role in community life" in Dallas, a metropolis he depicted as "as a jet-age city of old-fashioned friendliness."<sup>147</sup> The university setting placed the folk revival nearest to an

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<sup>146</sup> "Income of Families and Persons in the United States: 1963," Report Number P60-43, September 29, 1964, census.gov

<sup>147</sup> *The Best of Hootenanny*, dvd (ABC Television, 1963/ 1964, Shout Factory, 2007).

important demographic while it framed it as the music of the upwardly mobile new American jet-setters.

The producers hoped to focus on the music, without much consideration of historical contexts or indeed politics. But they did not anticipate the degree to which folk music revivalists had equated the music with specific leftist programs, particularly unionism and civil rights. Due to this misread, the producers were caught off guard by a backlash even before the first show aired from the Greenwich Village based folk revivalists.

A group of folk musicians, headed by columnist and musician Billy Faier, decried the apparent blacklisting of Pete Seeger and the Weavers. The group signed a letter demanding inclusion of these acts and deriding the use of any loyalty oaths.<sup>148</sup> For their part, ABC denied any blacklist or the use of loyalty oaths. They first attempted to paint the exclusion of Seeger and The Weavers as merely a difference in taste. Those acts, they claimed, simply did not fit the format. Producer Lewine attempted to put the focus on the youth appeal of the show and position the whole affair as separate from politics. He asserted, “There has been no political talk in my office or any work from the ABC management over who is or is not to appear on this show. Our only consideration had been to seek the most entertaining talent suitable for this particular show.”<sup>149</sup> In this way, the approach of *Hootenanny* producers to meet claims of political complicity with claims

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<sup>148</sup> “Seeger-Weavers Sympathizers Plan Minow Appeal in 'Hootenanny' Ban,” *Variety* Vol. 230, Iss. 5, Mar 27, 1963, 35.

<sup>149</sup> “Seeger-Weavers Sympathizers Plan Minow Appeal in 'Hootenanny' Ban,” *Variety* Vol. 230, Iss. 5, Mar 27, 1963, 35.

of apolitical position match the general approach of the popularized folk field. Lewine publicly maintained that any omission of a folk act was simply due to the format of the show. For example, Joan Baez, who had been early to join the artist boycott, had asked for more than 15 minutes of performance time which cut against the fast-paced presentation. This allowed an easy excuse for her exclusion.

The Kingston Trio also joined the *Hootenanny* boycott movement. By 1963, the group was big enough that they did not need the added exposure of the program. Even more importantly, they saw the boycott as an opportunity to advocate for the larger folk community.<sup>150</sup> However, the close association of The Kingston Trio with popular folk had already been set in the minds of many revivalists. Even when the group exhibited political instincts sympathetic to the left, their popular approach to the music categorically disqualified them among this group. To much of the revivalist community, popular folk itself was the problem, not the discrete choices of any individual artist. To escalate the boycott, the folk committee registered their complaints with the Federal Communications Commission requesting their support. They hoped the FCC would use this as an opportunity to condemn all blacklists against artists for their political leanings. The Greenwich village group reasoned that a statement from the government would put pressure on television producers and potentially spook advertising dollars. However, the FCC declined to discourage the policing of performers' politics. It released a statement in response to the demands of the committee of folk singers. The agency affirmed that

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<sup>150</sup> Bush, *Greenback Dollar*, 180 – 181.



“because of the nature of the cold war and the Communist Party,” investigations into performers’ political membership were “not inconsistent with the public interest.”<sup>151</sup> According to the FCC, anti-Communism was still in the public’s best interest. ABC showed their cards as well.

Whatever apolitical tightrope walking Lewine might have attempted in the initial days of the program was dropped with a heavy-handed official statement from the ABC top brass ahead of the second season. “The Management of ABC has asked me to inform you that it has a long established and firm policy, insofar as entertainment program are concerned, against allowing the use of its facilities by performers identified with the Communist Party... In the circumstances, ABC will consider Mr. Seeger’s use on the program only if he furnished a sworn affidavit as to his past and present affiliations, if any, with the Communist Party, and/or with the Communist front organizations.”<sup>152</sup> ABC firmly placed itself in the mode of policing the political associations of its performers. Both the FCC and the corporate executives agreed that association with communists and communist organizations was disqualifying for inclusion in mainstream entertainment. Anti-communism, as far as ABC and the FCC were concerned, was apolitical. In this way, in a priori terms, the presentation of folk music on *Hootenanny* was anti-communist. Though the performers, presenters, and producers would continue to claim that their approach focused only on the music, only on entertainment, and not on

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<sup>151</sup> “Radio-Television: Six More Folkniks Nix 'Hootenanny' In Sympathy With Seeger-Weavers,” *Variety* Vol. 230, Iss. 7, Apr 10, 1963, 26, 38.

<sup>152</sup> “ABC Finally Puts Itself on Record Re 'Hootenanny',” *Variety* Vol. 232, Iss. 3, Sep 11, 1963, 1, 66.

politics, the underlying structure of governmental and corporate power ensured only certain political perspectives were available to mass audiences. These firms may have claimed that their approach to folk music was apolitical, they may have even believed it, but the sum total of their approach reveals a preconceived bias in favor of the political status quo.

Though the general presentation of the music on *Hootenanny* framed the proceedings as exceedingly modern, they still reminded the audience, when they wanted to, that the music was ostensibly rooted in history. That view of history was neatly tied to a unified national image as well. Canadian folk duo, Ian and Sylvia, made several appearances on the show, and given their proximity to popularized folk, needed no special introduction. Yet before one performance, Linkletter primed the audience in this way, “Ian and Sylvia are from Canada and yet they’ve been completely taken by our traditional folk music. And now they’re going to do a Mississippi ballad, ‘Ole Blue,’ it was popularized by the finest teacher, Burl Ives.”<sup>153</sup> This short introduction does two things at once. First it simply asserted a single, national folk music for the United States and it placed the tradition of the song in line with Burl Ives. The song, “Old Blue Dog” traced its history from minstrel shows, and likely found its way into the folk revival canon due to Harry Smith's inclusion of the Jim Jackson's blues version on the “Anthology of the American Folk Music” record compilation. Linkletter's framing recast

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<sup>153</sup> *The Best of Hootenanny*, dvd (ABC Television, 1963/ 1964, Shout Factory, 2007).

the music in the tradition of Burl Ives, that is, as simple entertainment, and it wove this material into a monoculture of national identity.

In another instance, Linkletter introduced “Stackolee” by The Journeymen, by describing the song as, “one of the many inspired by that fascinating character of the American frontier life, yes, the gentleman gambler. And like many songs of the 19th century, it’s based on a real incident.”<sup>154</sup> As much as popular musicians wanted to highlight their role as simple entertainers, they also underscored their performances with claims about real history. The gentleman gambler was not simple a fun song sung to pass the time, it reinforced a view of the frontier life where honor pervaded in the absence of law, where American rectitude did not require legal proceedings. Stackolee shot a man and for that he was hung. The song may have been mythological, but it was only winkingly so. It presented, in myth form, deeper historical truths about American culture and identity, namely that justice prevails.

*Hootenanny* not only elevated the popularized version of folk music; it also changed the public understanding of what a hootenanny was. When Seeger and Guthrie began using the term to describe all day concerts, the term carried a valence of informality. Even in contexts where promoters used the term to indicate a staged concert, the word signaled a certain unpretentiousness to the lineup. The word signaled an unpretentiousness to the audience experience as well. At a hootenanny, the crowd might

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<sup>154</sup> *The Best of Hootenanny*, dvd (ABC Television, 1963/ 1964, Shout Factory, 2007).

clap and sing and holler and join in as they saw fit. After the success of the television show, certain aspects of this public understanding changed.

The formality and distance between the audience and the performer increased. This was no longer a semi-circular, democratic event. The performer stood above the audience and sang through amplification to the degree that the voice of the singular performer dominated the performance. The college audience in the *Hootenanny* tapings still often energetically clapped and sang along, but their voices became immaterial to the overall quality of the performance. In a similar way, fans may clap and sing along to rock or pop performances, but their participation was not required, nor essential to the success of the song. Hootenannies were increasingly understood as staged concerts by professionals. Moreover, in the public iconography, they became closely associated with the modernized, popularized version of folk music specifically. The term had come to represent boys in pressed short sleeves, and girls in apron dresses with shoulder length hair.<sup>155</sup>

Record companies increasingly used the word hootenanny to sell compilation albums. Producers could dip into their archives of previously released tracks and repackage a collection of material by professional folk musicians as a hootenanny. In these contexts, the word was used to bundle together artists that would never have shared the same billing. For example, Columbia Records released one such album featuring

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<sup>155</sup> Ronald D. Cohen collected many examples of this commercial ephemera, including paper doll kits, plastic guitars for children, and a host your own Hootenanny kit sponsored by the soft drink Orange Crush which instructed the consumer on the “Whos, Whats, and Hows to have a Hootin’ party. Boxes 7, 30, 39 Ronald Cohen Collection, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa, Ok.

Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and the Brothers Four. Even though Seeger would not be allowed to perform on ABC on Saturday nights, his back catalog was grafted into the popularized folk trend. Seeger the man was too controversial to appear himself and sing folk songs, but his name recognition could be utilized. Linkletter advertised *Hootenanny '64* in direct connection to the show.<sup>156</sup> The Highwaymen released a live album with hootenanny in the title. There were myriad issues of folk compilation albums under the heading Hootenanny. The cache of the term even branched out into other genres, with several surf rock albums issued with names like *Surfin' Hootenanny*.<sup>157</sup>

The idea of a hootenanny made its way into theaters in the summer of 1963. The plot of the summer jukebox movie *Hootenanny Hoot* hinged on the idea that hootenannies were a cultural practice specific to college students.<sup>158</sup> The movie was an excuse to trot out a lineup of music acts, in the same vein as an Elvis movie. Indeed, the director would go on to helm several movies starring Elvis, and the young ingenue who organized the film's big concert also featured in *Blue Hawaii*. Shot in just 9 days, the plot of film centered on a hard-up New York City TV producer, Ted Grover, looking for this next hit.<sup>159</sup> On a drive through the mid-west he chanced upon a group of young

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<sup>156</sup> Various Artists, *Hootenanny '64*, vinyl (Columbia Special Products, 1964).

<sup>157</sup> Al Casey, *Surfin' Hootenanny*, vinyl (Stacey Records, 1963).

<sup>158</sup> *Hootenanny Hoot*, directed by Gene Nelson, VHS (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc., 1963), UCLA Film and Television Archive, VA16948M.

<sup>159</sup> Philip K. Scheuer, "Nelson Up a Rung on Director Ladder: Grunwald Tells Liz-Burton Woes in Casting 'V.I.P.'s" *Los Angeles Times* [Los Angeles, Calif] 10 Sep 1963: C11.

people singing folk songs at a college concert. Punctuating the performances, a duo of dancers performed Jerome Robbins style choreography to a perfunctory bluegrass.

The hero could not understand what was happening, so he demanded the ingenue explain it to him. The young concert organizer, Billy Joe, responded:

Billy Joe: "You've never been in a college town for a Hootenanny?"

Ted Grover: "The only time we were at a jam up like that was at a football game or something."

The movie established this form of music as belonging to college students, living in college towns. Oddly, Ted, who was from New York, seemed to be simultaneously ignorant of folk music and aware of the Greenwich Village scene. After he raced back to the city, he attempted to convince a television executive to fund a concert series, to be held on college campuses.

Executive: "Folk singing and country music go back to the roots of this country. The songs are really a part of our history. We want this thing to have a theme, Ted, it has come off big, Americana."

Ted: "What you're getting at is you don't want any of this coffeehouse type jazz, right... with Beatniks flopping all over the place?"

In the same way that ABC marketed the *Hootenanny* show, the film presented popular folk as a wholesome alternative to the antics of the beatniks.

Hootenanny as a marketing tool came to be used in all manner of commodified kitsch. It was printed on t-shirts, paper doll sets, pinball machines, and Edith Henry low heeled women's shoes.<sup>160</sup> The soft drink Orange Crush produced a home hootenanny kit, complete with an instruction pamphlet that explained the, "Whos, Whats, and Hows to

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<sup>160</sup> These items are held in the Ron Cohen collection, Boxes 07, 30, 33, 39, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa Ok.

have a Hootin' Party," banjo decorations and a record single with folk music examples. The term became synonymous with popularized, slick presentation of folk music, especially amongst folk revivalists and academics that rejected the trend. The Detroit Folk Festival in 1963 included a panel debate, "Hootenanny vs. Folk Music," a premise that would have been unintelligible just a few years prior.<sup>161</sup> Though *Sing Out!* magazine persisted in calling their periodic concerts at Carnegie Hall hootenannies, folkniks generally stayed away from labeling group concerts in this way after 1963 for fear of association with the television show. However, other promoters were happy for the free association. Hootenannies proliferated in local concert halls and as titles for national tours. The oversaturation of the term helped to seal the demise of the folk revival generally. The amateurism of the average hastily staged hootenanny grated popular folk fans, who were accustomed to the professionalism and production values of major television and record labels. By the mid-1960s the brand had become diluted, the television show was canceled and the public began to move on.

The brief moment of relevance of popular folk has been largely eclipsed in the public imagination by the roaring success of the politically infused folk approach which came directly after. The rejection of popular folk by certain wings of the folk revival also contributed to its relative erasure in the memory of the revival. As will be explored in the next chapters, political and anthropological revivalists attempted to portray popular folk

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<sup>161</sup> *Detroit Folk Festival Program*, Detroit, MI, October 12, 1963.

as illegitimate and inauthentic. This rift between different approaches in the revival has further obscured the impact of the popular folk groups on the musical landscape.

Yet, many folk musicians of the second half of the 1960s privately claimed the Kingston Trio as their initial inspiration. Henry Diltz, of the Modern Folk Quartet, discussed the influence of the Kingstons on his playing in an interview many years after the revival:

I remember when the Kingston Trio albums were coming out, like a couple times a year, you'd know when it was going to come out, you'd run down to the record store, get that record, run home put it on a record player and you just move the needle back and back and listen, 'what is that thing he's playing' back again, 'what is that?' Just sit there and just devour that album.<sup>162</sup>

In an interview in 2001, Bob Dylan also affirmed the importance of the Kingston Trio to the larger awareness of folk music:

It was a way of life. And it was an identity which the three-buttoned-suit postwar generation of America really wasn't offering to kids my age: an identity. This music was impossible to get anywhere really, except in a nucleus of a major city, and a record shop might have a few recordings of the hard-core folklore music. There were other folk-music records, commercial folk-music records, like those by the Kingston Trio. I never really was an elitist. Personally, I liked the Kingston Trio. I could see the picture. But for a lot of people, it was a little hard to take. Like the left-wing puritans that seemed to have a hold on the folk-music community, they disparaged these records. I didn't particularly want to sing any of those songs that way, but the Kingston Trio were probably the best commercial group going, and they seemed to know what they were doing.<sup>163</sup>

Even as he affirmed the distance between the “three-buttoned-suit postwar generation” and his own generation, Dylan acknowledged that popular folk records were the only exposure many young people had to this kind of music in the early days of the revival.

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<sup>162</sup> Paul Surratt, producer, *The Kingston Trio: Wherever We May Go*, DVD, (Shout Factory, 2006).

<sup>163</sup> Mikal Gilmore, “Bob Dylan, at 60, Unearths New Revelations,” *Rolling Stone*, November 22, 2001, 58 – 69.



Even if they moved on to other folk material, many of the folk artists and fans started with the Kingston Trio.

Popular folk groups also influenced the way that music was marketed. The college circuit forged by the Kingston Trio remained a persistent avenue of direct marketing by musical groups. Also, their iconic branding, particularly the striped shirts, became a model for other groups. Al Jardine of The Beach Boys was impressed by the groups sense of self-assuredness and identity. He remembered lifting the idea directly from the group, “We need an identity; we’ll get some striped shirts too.”<sup>164</sup> The look and vocal sound of the earliest records of The Beach Boys took their cues, in part, from The Kingston Trio.

The significance of popular folk in the larger context of popular music in the mid-twentieth century is better viewed as an extension of Cold War norms into the early 1960s. Historians have tended to treat groups like the Kingston Trio as an aberration, or as a purely commercial exercise, devoid of cultural impact. Yet, the popular folk groups affirmed the Cold War ethics of the affluent society: clean-cut aesthetics and domestic sensibilities, with songs that presented a historical narrative of upward mobility. Their collective success in the popular market underscores the degree to which audiences still welcomed the retelling of these narratives in this manner.

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<sup>164</sup> Paul Surratt, producer, *The Kingston Trio: Wherever We May Go*, DVD, (Shout Factory, 2006).

## Chapter Three

### Scholastics and Folkniks: The Anthropological and Political Folk Revivalists

“I’d get on the stage, sing and play/ The man there say comeback another day/ You sound like a Hillbilly/ We want folksingers here”<sup>1</sup>

Bob Dylan, “Talking New York,” (1962)

At the same time that popular folk music took shape in the nightclubs and television screens across the country, two other approaches to folk revivalism developed in basement coffee shops and college dorm rooms. This dedicated group of revivalists played the music for reasons other than entertainment. While the Kingston Trio discovered college campuses as a fertile ground for touring, many college students had already discovered folk music as an anthropological pursuit. They played and studied it for cultural appreciation and academic interests. Similarly, though New York City boasted its share of night clubs and popular music venues, it also fostered a community of revivalists committed to an application of folk music for political ends. Folk music provided a moral grounding and gave voice to a political awakening.

These factions envisioned their participation in folk revivalism on differing terms, but they both rejected popular folk. The more that popular folk acts rose in public profile, the more college folklore societies and folk revival fanzines in New York railed against them. While the anthropological and political folk revivalists disagreed about much, they both turned to the music as an avenue to escape the oppressive conformity of

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<sup>1</sup> “Talking New York,” Bob Dylan, *Bob Dylan*, vinyl (Columbia, 1962).

Cold War middle-class Whiteness. To relieve the homogeneity of the mainstream, they turned to the ethnic.

### **The College Scene and the Anthropological Approach**

College campuses became a vital space for folk revivalist activities during the revival. The great popular folk boom occurred just as colleges campuses were in the midst of a decades long process of transformation. Folklore studies and nascent ethnomusicology departments began to form as distinct disciplines, separate from anthropology or musicology. These tiny, burgeoning interest groups started organizing student clubs and holding concerts. At some of the larger programs, students held symposiums, conferences, and even concert festivals. But, students at universities without departmental support also formed their own special interest clubs. These clubs manifested in a range of ways, from pseudo-academic societies, to popular music fan clubs. For the vast majority of college students, their participation in the revival had no formal structure at all. They listened to records in the dorms, held impromptu sing-alongs in the quad, or attended concerts in the gym.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The archive at the University of Illinois Oral History project has helped me to reconstruct this view of campus life in his era, <https://www.library.illinois.edu/voices/collections/campus-folksong-club/>. Also, their archive of Autoharp magazine, the publication produced by the Campus Folksong Club afforded a view into the mindset of club, <https://digital.library.illinois.edu/items/3f2c6ed0-5cdb-0132-3334-0050569601ca-6>. Ronald Cohen's extensive collection of college folksong magazines in the Woody Guthrie archive provided a window into other similar scenes on other. Box 1 and 2, Ronald Cohen Collection, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa, Ok. The Archie Green Papers at the University of North Carolina aided in my reconstruction of his thinking, <https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/20002>. Michael Kramer has constructed an excellent public history project on Folk Festivals at the University of California at Berkeley, <https://sites.northwestern.edu/bfmf/>. See also, David K. Blake, "University Geographies and Folk Music Landscapes: Students and Local Folksingers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1961–

The student folksong club with arguably the most widespread influence formed at the University of Illinois. The Campus Folksong Club (CFC) produced the music magazine *Autoharp*, which, at its height, boasted a circulation that reached throughout the Midwest. The magazine ran student written articles on music instruction, song histories, and collection trips into the rural hinterlands of nearby Tennessee or Appalachia. They also organized regular folksings, special talks, and concerts.

Archie Green first organized the club with several graduate students. Green was a singular force in both establishing the club and setting its tone. Lou Gottlieb, of the *Limelinters*, described him as a “new breed of folklorist-musicologist who is aware of today and the oral tradition.”<sup>3</sup> F. K. Plous became a major player in the club as it evolved. He remembered club membership as being informally *bestowed* by Green,

Archie Green sat us down, sometimes individually over a cup of coffee, sometimes have us over to his house for dinner, or sometimes it would be during meetings of the club. And he would point out the distinctions between true ethnic music that was originated and was being performed by people living in a real folk community. And he defined what that was, and he told us there were controversies among anthropologist [sic] about who, what was a real ethnic group and who was a real folk performer, was it pre-literate? Or was it okay if they knew how to read? And so on... We wanted the authentic five-star, bodily bond, aged in oak, traditional ethnic music. Not coffeehouse music, not political, topical humor; we had nothing against that sort of stuff, except we didn't like it being branded as folk music.<sup>4</sup>

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1964,” *The Journal of Musicology* 33, no. 1 (2016): 92–116. The national press also covered the phenomenon of folksong on college campuses, *The New York Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Billboard*.

<sup>3</sup> Lou Gottlieb to Archie Green, July 25, 1962, Archie Green Collection, 1844 - 2009, University of North Carolina Folklife Collection, Collection Number: 20002.

<sup>4</sup> Fritz Plous, interviewed by Tracie Wilson, *Campus Folksong Club Oral Histories Project*, May 23, 2007, digital audio, <https://digital.library.illinois.edu/collections/f00244a0-a7be-0131-4a42-0050569601ca-1>.

In this way, Green and the CFC defined its approach as much by what it was not as by what it was. It was not frivolous fandom.

Anthropologically-minded folk revivalists engaged in an informed appreciation of folk music. The CFC fulfilled a felt need by the student body for deeper, more authentic cultural roots. Plous recalled the draw of the club this way,

Remember this, at the University of Illinois at that time, there was no ‘folklore’ department, Archie was the closest thing we had to a folklore department, so if you were seriously interested in folklore, and folk music, and folk culture, the club was the only place you could do that on campus... Second, I think this was terribly important, we brought real folk music, and very exciting folk music performers to an audience, a huge audience, who otherwise never would have heard them.<sup>5</sup>

But they were more than just an appreciation club; the CFC also conducted its own folkloric research and produced collections of music. The University of Illinois recording project, for example, published a field recording of Illinois music titled “Greenfields of Illinois,” which garnered mainstream attention.<sup>6</sup> Robert Shelton at the *New York Times* described the album booklet and liner notes as providing, “almost everything one could ask for in terms of background, sources, biographies, texts of lyrics and melody line.”<sup>7</sup> For the CFC, folk revivalism involved more than just appreciation, or fandom, or even sing-alongs. It ought to also prompt the folk fan to participate in collection and preservation activities.

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<sup>5</sup> Fritz Plous, interviewed by Tracie Wilson, May 23, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Campus Folksong Club, *Green Fields of Illinois*, vinyl (Campus Folksong Club Records, 1962).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Shelton, “Student Recording Project Unearths Local Folk Music,” *New York Times*, September 29, 1963, 127.

The anthropological scene was the most likely to treat the music as purely historical. Even though adherents to this approach often performed the music themselves, they did so in the spirit of presenting historical research. Their participation in folk appreciation often exhibited anti-capitalist behaviors. They avoided presenting themselves as aspiring professional performers, or much less, popular entertainers. Of all the folk revivalist groups, they were the most likely to encourage people to purchase extant material, such as old blues records, or to look for songs to play in published materials at the library, not to buy their own newly recorded reinterpretations of folk material.

For these students, the essential point of folk revivalism was the formation of a greater global and cultural imagination. These folk fans sought greater perspective of their own lives and historical moment, and folk music provided the conduit for this imagination. Green summarized this disposition in the pages of *Hootenanny*, “Illinois students have viewed folk song participation as a passport to adventure, to a new scene.”<sup>8</sup> One Illinois student represented the purpose of folk appreciation as,

This ability to get outside of one’s own culture, class, or race, leads to a second quality which folk music demands from serious listener – empathy. The listener must attempt to identify himself with another person and thereby hope to understand the attitude, customs, and experiences which shape the singer’s musical expression.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Archie Green, “Campus Report: University of Illinois,” *Hootenanny*, vol. 1 no. 2, March 1964, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Dave Martin, “On Listening to Folk Music,” *Autoharp*, vol. 3 no. 3, February 8, 1963.

Another student remembered, “it was a means of allowing yourself into places that you would never be, or hear things that you would never hear, do things that you would never do. It built a lot of awareness.”<sup>10</sup> The club members saw their activities as providing an important gateway for urban, middle-class students to expand their perceptions, “We were giving them a real entrée into traditional American music, rather than popular performance...”<sup>11</sup> Anthropological folk revivalists remained keenly aware of their impact on the music, the propensity for alteration or misuse. But they also retained a commitment to the vitality of live performance.

This approach emphasized the roots and heritage of the music as a historical fact. Folk music had a lineage that performers ought to study and respect. Through a full and proper historical contextualization of the song, the emotional content would ring out, perhaps even in spite of poor musicianship. In the pages of *Caravan*, a folksong magazine based in New York, one reviewer contended that folksingers ought to “recreate the basic emotional experience and action behind the song.”<sup>12</sup> In order to learn this history, folk singers followed in the footsteps of Lomax into the Library of Congress and discovered the origins of a song. Folklorist G. Legman spelled out the differences between “fake folklorists, and folk fakelorsists, and phoney fakers and similar folk” in an article for *Sing Out!*:

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<sup>10</sup> Doyle Moore, interviewed by Tracie Wilson, *Campus Folksong Club Oral Histories Project*, June 04, 2007, digital audio, <https://digital.library.illinois.edu/collections/f00244a0-a7be-0131-4a42-0050569601ca-1>.

<sup>11</sup> Doyle Moore, interviewed by Tracie Wilson, June 04, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Feldman, “A Note on Singing Styles,” *Caravan*, April 1959, 6, 7, 38.

The rule is therefore: real folk-singers are intelligent people with an amount of shrewd common sense and dramatic flair, who do their best to learn good ballads from the best sources they can find – printed or otherwise... Folkniks are homey, uneducated bums (when they are not teaching college) who never read a folksong collection in their life.<sup>13</sup>

In practice, these terms Legman used were continually in dispute throughout the revival. To some groups folkniks were aspirational, to others, they represented an intellectual laziness. At the heart of this sentiment was a desire to treat folk song like other academic subjects. In anthropological folk circles, folk music persisted as a stable, empirical fact of history that could be learned. Singers of folk songs, then, should learn not only the most textually accurate songs available, but also the conditions that brought those songs about. “The modern urban folk enthusiasts, and for that matter, the folklore scholar as well, are asked to keep these culturally appropriate aesthetic criteria in mind when listening to a folksong performance by a traditional singer.”<sup>14</sup> Decontextualizing the songs or editing the lyrics detrimentally obscured the meaning of the art.

Even better, a dedicated folk singer went into the backwoods of rural America themselves and reported back to the city what they had seen and heard. This was the path taken by New Lost City Ramblers founder John Cohen in 1959. Cohen escaped the “second-hand folk music” of the city and embarked on a “field trip” of folk discovery to the backwoods of Kentucky in the spirit of the old collectors. His subsequent report in *Sing Out!* aimed at preparing folk enthusiasts who aspired to the same. The article is

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<sup>13</sup> G. Legman, “Folksongs, Fakelore, Folkniks, and Cash,” *Sing Out!* 10, no. 3 (Nov 1960): 29; Irwin Silber, “American Folk Song of Protest,” *Sing Out!* 3, no. 10 (1953): 30 – 31.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth S. Goldstein, “What is a Good Folksong?,” *Caravan*, no. 19, Jan 1960, 38 - 41.



peppered with a mix of travel tips, sociological insights and musical commentary.

Cohen's final thoughts on the people and music he encountered, "If we feel a desire towards their outlook on music, we must be willing to understand their way of life."<sup>15</sup>

This encapsulated the anthropological perspective. The act of folk revivalism depended on a curiosity about other ways of life.

The anthropological revivalist project considered folk music a source of fun as well. In one particularly didactic article in the pages of *Autoharp*, University of Illinois student F.K. Plous summarized the position of the anthropologically-inclined folksong communities as a desire for both historical relevance and enjoyment. He lamented that the current trend had brought "a good deal of disorganization, ignorance, and – God help us – lack of taste in the traditional music recording business."<sup>16</sup> Of course, for Plous the popular folk field was generally full of poor taste. Rather, he zeroed in even on those music producers who specifically targeted traditional music. He conceded that the anthropological approach could be overly dogged in pursuit of material with historical significance, that it could ignore the beauty and joy that the art was supposed to also bring. "In their desire to be 'objective' they turn out discs which, were it not for their historical and anthropological value, would be worthless as music." Musical collectors and anthropologists "often display abominable musical taste for the simple reason that they are using the recording not as sources of musical enjoyment, but as tools for

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<sup>15</sup> John Cohen, "Field Trip – Kentucky," *Sing Out!* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1960): 15.

<sup>16</sup> F. K. Plous, Jr., "Notes on a Country Fiddle..." *Autoharp*, no. 21, October 7, 1964.

studying history.”<sup>17</sup> The anthropological approach was more than a historical recreation society.

Even the most ardent purists affirmed that some alteration in the material happened as a result of the revival process. Consequently, they too chose when and how to compromise with adaptation. For this group, the most vital question was the original intent of the folk. While the performance should hew to the original musical approach as much as possible, the original message and feeling of the song were vital to maintain. Folk revivalists that came from folklore studies programs or campus folk music societies tended to elevate the importance of textual accuracy and historical contextualization above all else. In the inaugural issue of *Autoharp*, Green stated:

Is there any value in twisting a rough and brutal blues into an entertaining bit of froth so as to turn the image of a chain-gang into a children’s summer camp? ... To wrench a ballad or blues out of its culture context for concert presentation is, by definition, an act of violence. Yet college audiences cannot invade, en masse, Appalachian Mountain hamlets, or Nova Scotian fishing villages to hear ‘pure’ folksong. If traditional folksong is to be heard on campus, other than via record and tape, it must be heard by importing true folksingers, or by imparting to collegiate singers of folksongs some respect for traditional material and styles.<sup>18</sup>

To those revivalists, folk music was like any other esoteric subject that could be learned and appreciated. Folksingers ought to take the subject seriously, in the same way a scholar soberly studies their field. Singer and audience alike ought to learn the historical and sociological origins of the music. This included studying the musical style of their

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<sup>17</sup> F. K. Plous, Jr., “Notes on a Country Fiddle...”

<sup>18</sup> Archie Green, “Folksong on Campus,” *Autoharp*, vol. 1. no. 1, April 7, 1961, 3

subject and the history of their songs.<sup>19</sup> The many folklore societies that blossomed on college campuses further fostered this conception of folk music as an academic pursuit.

Though they held sway in folk song clubs and in university lecture halls, the strict anthropological view had a relatively limited cultural impact. Irwin Silber, editor for New York's *Sing Out!* magazine, criticized the field of folklore research as dominated by "ivory tower scholasticism."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, many academics distanced their work from the popular revivalism. Academic discussions remained primarily technical, related to social function and unified definitions.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, most folklorists did not believe that any of the folk revivalist activities could be considered folk music.<sup>22</sup> To a large extent, academic circles were disengaged from the debate happening in the popular press.

Still, the CFC was wildly influential within its smaller reach. The success of the club attracted huge numbers of students to their gatherings, particularly their folksings. The wider student body did not necessarily view group events as educational activities. These tangentially connected students brought their own proclivities and presuppositions. McColluh described the folksings this way,

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<sup>19</sup> Irwin Silber, "Ewan MacColl – Folksinger of the Industrial Age," *Sing Out!* 9, no. 3 (Winter 1959 – 60): 7; Harry Belafonte, "My Repertory Must Have Roots," *Sing Out!* 8, no. 4 (1959): 29 – 31; Shelton, "Folkways in Sound," 42 – 44.

<sup>20</sup> Silber, "American Folk Song of Protest," 10.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Wiora, "Concerning the Conception of Folk Music," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 1 (1949): 14 – 16; Bruno Nettl, *An introduction to Folk Music in the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962), 1 – 7; Sam Hinton, "The Singer of Folk Songs and His Conscience," *Western Folklore* 14, no. 3 (July 1955): 170 – 73; John Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, Inc., 1953), 1 – 12, 243.

<sup>22</sup> Neil Rosenberg, *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, ed. Neil Rosenberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 10.

Archie met Lyle Mayfield... and discovered that he and his wife were traditional musicians from down there... They played the whole gamut, whatever people wanted to hear, which is how it usually is, as you know. And so he said, "Come pick a few songs at the folk sing." And Lyle at first thought, "These college kids are just gonna ridicule us hillbillies." But he came and everybody made over them, and they just got taken in. And you'd hear about somebody living up here on Hickory in Urbana, who was an old time singer. And somebody went to visit and said, "You know, you can really sing some great songs, why don't you come sing with the folk sing?" and so that person would show up... They were very well-received because what counted was the music; and it wasn't the status or the race or the economic status or the political persuasion. If they had started talking politics, it would have been sparks, I'm sure.<sup>23</sup>

The folksings were fluid and liminal spaces where many ideas about folk revivalism interacted. While the club members saw their role as one of education and enculturation, many of the attendees at the sing-alongs saw the music as entertainment. Many of the students at the folksings were fans of popularized folk, and did not mind alterations and popularization. Indeed, they preferred it because they felt it spoke to them more directly.

Some students cited folk revivalism as a starting point for their political awakening, which they expressed as a piece of their developing broader enculturation. Collegians claimed that folk music opened their eyes to new ways of being and thinking, which informed their political perspectives. The anthropological scene sought a return to origins - the democratic roots of the nation, and authentic ways of being freed from the constraints of modern society. They pursued folk music both out of intellectual curiosity and a desire for liberation. By focusing on authentic culture, the music freed their minds from inauthentic modern society. The prefabricated, mass-produced culture available on

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<sup>23</sup> Judy McColluh, interviewed by Tracie Wilson, *Campus Folksong Club Oral Histories Project*, May 22, 2007, digital audio, <https://digital.library.illinois.edu/collections/f00244a0-a7be-0131-4a42-0050569601ca-1>.

television and in movies lead to an existential dissatisfaction. They preferred the intimate, profound messages produced by acoustic instruments played by amateurs, singing sturdy songs filled with old wisdom for a small group of fellow travelers. Their approach was not so much a rejection or critique as it was a refuge - a place to find purity and truth in a false society obsessed with newness and status. Many of the students who participated in the CFC did not see their activities as political at all,

I think that the folksong club was completely devoid of that, but again through Archie's influence, we were aware of the value of the ballads and things that were made and sung by the people who were part of the Wobbly culture and who were part of the union, and all that that people were aware of that had significance. Many of those heroes would be singing protest songs for a real reason rather than entertainment. As a group, we were not particularly attracted to getting up and making a spectacle of yourself by preaching, that just wasn't a part of it.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, others saw this kind of enculturation as deeply connected to the major political issues of the day. Plous reflected,

Because of the Civil Rights Movement, I think we became much more intensely aware of poor people, marginalized people, ethnic minorities. And as part of that awareness, I think we became more appreciative of what those people had to bring to the American party... I think a lot of us became aware that the White middle class in which we had been brought up did not have all the answers, certainly did not have all the experiences to some extent.<sup>25</sup>

Still, others saw their work as having profound value, if in some diffuse, undefinable way. They simply had a notion that the work would open people's eyes. Judy McColluh, in a latter-day interview, remembered the culture of the club this way,

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<sup>24</sup> Doyle Moore, interviewed by Tracie Wilson, *Campus Folksong Club Oral Histories Project*, June 04, 2007, digital audio, <https://digital.library.illinois.edu/collections/f00244a0-a7be-0131-4a42-0050569601ca-1>.

<sup>25</sup> Fritz Plous, interviewed by Tracie Wilson, May 23, 2007.

I think we all had the sense that what we were doing counted for something. It was really important to do it, and the people we were working with... everybody merited some attention for whatever reason. And I think for those students who were maybe a little elitist when they came here, that was a good corrective. And for those of us who didn't come out of an elite background, it was affirmation that we were worth something too...<sup>26</sup>

The students participating in this kind of folk revival saw themselves as having some kind of awakening, though they did not always understand that awakening as having political application. They saw folk music as a portal to deeper understanding of the world and themselves.

The CFC members controlled the printing press, through *Autoharp*.

Consequently, they influenced the public image of the folksong club as having been particularly focused on the anthropological approach. However, on college campuses the anthropological and popular approaches intermingled and competed. On one hand, many of the people who organized the folksong clubs saw their activities as a clear extension of their academic studies. On the other hand, popular folk music fans tended to tie the music into the national popular folk phenomenon and treated the music much like any other popular music fandom. In general, the divide on college campuses was between the organizers of the folksong clubs and the multitude of casual fans. Sometimes this resulted in tense alliance with those who were interested in folk music as a popular entertainment and those who ran the club and saw their role largely as cultural educators. When large groups of people came to the "folksings," the organizers were elated, but

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<sup>26</sup> Judy McColluh, interviewed by Tracie Wilson, *Campus Folksong Club Oral Histories Project*, May 22, 2007, digital audio, <https://digital.library.illinois.edu/collections/f00244a0-a7be-0131-4a42-0050569601ca-1>.

when those throngs only wanted to sing Kingston Trio songs, they were horrified. This cleavage divided the folk activities in this arena, but like the differing scenes around the country, each campus had its own proclivities and preferences.

One former member wrote a post-mortem of the club in 1967 that illustrated the divide on campus. He reflected:

Four years ago I was a member of the Campus Folksong Club. At the time the “American Folk Music Renaissance” was at its peak. The Club, which had been formed to further the study and performance of traditional music, swelled to a membership of about 400. Most of these people considered Pete Seeger or Joan Baez to be traditional performers. The hardcore traditionalists who formed the nucleus of the club, were constantly at odds with the pop-folk addicts, but cooperation of a sort did exist in the form of an uneasy truce. The Folksings usually came off as an amalgam of Bluegrass, Baez and traditional Appalachian music. Although most of the membership had little interest in the grass roots of music or the folk process, or in much other than listening to their Kingston Trio records and banging their newly bought Stella guitars, the policy of the Club continued to reflect only the interests of the traditionalists.<sup>27</sup>

One CFC member acknowledged his feelings about the club activities years later, admitting, “it was just a big social event”<sup>28</sup> He also confessed, “I actually have to admit I liked the Kingston Trio, and that was an early thing that we used to play, but after Archie touched me on the head then it became less acceptable. But it was nice music.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Rich Charlton, “Where it’s Gone,” *Autoharp*, no. 30, October 20, 1967.

<sup>28</sup> Jont Allen, interviewed by Tracie Wilson, *Campus Folksong Club Oral Histories Project*, July 9, 2007, digital audio, <https://digital.library.illinois.edu/collections/f00244a0-a7be-0131-4a42-0050569601ca-1>.

<sup>29</sup> Jont Allen, interviewed by Tracie Wilson, July 9, 2007.

## Other Anthropological Scenes

Though the CFC in Illinois exercised outsized influence as a college scene, the experiences there were not universal across the nation's campuses. The folksong clubs on these campuses tended to focus on the academic pursuit of folklore, rather than engaging with the wider popular phenomenon.<sup>30</sup> They explored folk music like any other student-run academic society, practicing the tools of their discipline and speaking to an academic audience. Songs published in the student run newsletters often had lengthy descriptions of provenance and studied details of alternate lyrics. They did not tend to run articles on the "state" of folk music or about popular music. There was very little notice of the Kingston Trio, good or bad.

At the University of Indiana, for example, there were very few collective folk revivalist activities, despite the fact that it had one of the biggest folklore departments in the nation. Professor Richard Dorson, in particular, ran the department in a way that squashed unregulated popular revivalist activities. Neil Rosenberg, a student at Indiana, remembered the culture on campus, saying, "some folklorists were interested in music and played an important role in the club, but there was virtually no encouragement or interest on the part of the faculty. Dorson was very much opposed to the whole

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<sup>30</sup> This observation comes from reviewing the folksong newsletters. These privileged the voice of the dedicated members, but it also reveals that these clubs did not hold folksings or hootenannies. *Colorado Folksong Bulletin, and Folkways*, and the University of Michigan *Folklore Society Magazine* are both good examples of this kind of publication. Box 2, Ronald Cohen College, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa, Ok.



popularization.”<sup>31</sup> Ellen Stekert, a contemporary of Rosenberg, echoed this assessment of Dorson’s impact on the folklore activities on the Indiana campus, “he just absolutely hated folk singers. He called us all ‘Popularizers.’ I was a good student but he made it as hard for me as he could. So, I left Indiana University to finish my Doctorate in Philadelphia at the University of Pennsylvania where they actually had a better folklore program for students like me, who were working in the area of folksong.”<sup>32</sup>

Other schools, particularly the University of Chicago, the University of California at Berkeley, and UCLA, participated in folk revivalism through large music festivals. The Berkeley Folk Festival developed as a cross-section of traditional and urban folk revivalists.<sup>33</sup> UCLA staged a fiddle contest for several years under the direction of D.K. Wilgus and with the help of Bess Hawes. These festivals were all a mixture of amateur and professional performers, and included panels on the state of folk music or collection techniques, or lecture style presentations on folklore material. In this way, these festivals, while open to the cache of the popular urban performer, retained an essential anthropological perspective. In these festivals folk music could be seen as both entertainment and an object of serious study. These temporary, liminal spaces allowed the popular and anthropological folk approach to coexist.

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<sup>31</sup> Neil Rosenberg, interviewed by Tracie Wilson, *Campus Folksong Club Oral Histories Project*, July 13, 2007, digital audio, <https://digital.library.illinois.edu/collections/f00244a0-a7be-0131-4a42-0050569601ca-1>.

<sup>32</sup> Ellen Stekert recounted this in an interview dated 05/25/2020. <https://musicguy247.typepad.com/my-blog/ellen-stekert-folklorist-folk-singer-and-educator>

<sup>33</sup> See Michael J Kramer’s comprehensive exhibit on the Berkeley Folk Festival for Northwestern University Archives. <https://sites.northwestern.edu/bfmf>.

Very few popular music venues could afford the exclusivity of the anthropological approach. One club in Los Angeles was a rare example. The Ash Grove, owned by Edwin Pearl, featured folk musicians who brought an anthropological and political sensibility to the music. Because the Ash Grove crowd seriously concerned itself with the meaning of the music, it tended to reject those acts that played folk just for fun. In 1959 Billy Faier characterized the Ash Grove as catering to “those who like their “folk music fairly straight... Without any commercial coating.”<sup>34</sup>

More than just a split in types of acts, the Ash Grove also further cemented its role as a center for revivalist activities by holding classes on musicianship and folklore. Bess Hawes, led classes on performance and folklore there throughout the revival. Daughter of John Lomax and sister to Alan, contemporary of the Almanac Singers and longtime friend of Woody Guthrie, Hawes was a force for folk revivalism in her own right. After she moved out to LA in the 1940s, she developed connections to both the Ash Grove and folklorists at UCLA. In a window into her approach to folk education, she titled one class “folklore for singers.” It was based on the idea that singers should be aware of the contexts of the songs, so they could perform and present the songs more accurately.<sup>35</sup> In an interview recollecting her approach to this kind of instruction, she said, “This was period when I was teaching folk music in college. I had everybody take one piece of folk music whatever it was they liked or were interested in and try to imitate

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<sup>34</sup> Billy Faier, “Folk Music, Los Angeles,” *Caravan*, April 1959, 4, 5, 19, 20.

<sup>35</sup> *Good News*, vol. 1 no. 5, September 1961, 9.

it. Just to have the experience and try to really see if you can duplicate the sound.”<sup>36</sup>

Musical appreciation facilitated direct identification for the audience. So integrated into the Ash Grove scene, one advertisement in 1963 described Hawes as “Our most popular ‘hooter’ and guitar song teacher. The founder of Southern California’s folk movement.”<sup>37</sup>

Though the Ash Grove was central to anthropological folk revivalism in Los Angeles, it represented one piece of a larger picture. For example, Pearl also sponsored folk and fiddle playing festivals at nearby UCLA. In promoting one festival Pearl opined on the success of folk in his side of the scene, “Los Angeles is leading the country because we are the most detached from real life...people are looking for roots.” Pearl claimed, “It’s the symbol of simplicity that first attracted the audiences... They went first for the symbols rather than the real thing – the commercialized type of folk music. They could not immediately go whole hog for the traditional; they had to be seduced.”<sup>38</sup>

### **The New York Scene and the Political Approach**

The New York scene could reasonably make claims of an uninterrupted folk scene all the way back to the 1930s when Woody Guthrie and the Almanac singers used

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<sup>36</sup> Bess Lomax, Interview with Joe Klein, December, 06, 1978, Joe Klein Interviews Collection, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa, OK.

<sup>37</sup> *Hoot!*, Advertisement for the Ash Grove, August 10, 1963, Ron Cohen Collection, Box 04 Folder 19, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa, Ok.

<sup>38</sup> “UCLA Folk Festival,” *Topper*, September 1963, 26 – 28, Ron Cohen Collection, Box 01 Folder 44, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa, Ok.

folk music to build support for labor organizing. New York City, with its historic ties to folk revivalism in the late 1940s, had an informal institutional infrastructure in place before the great boom. *Sing Out!* magazine, which Irwin Silber began publishing in 1950, still enjoyed a sizeable presence on the scene. Israel Young founded his Folklore Center on MacDougal Street in 1957.

By the mid-1950s, the scene had gone underground, literally, into basement clubs in the West Village. These venues catered to the beat generation's desire for cheap places to listen to jazz. For the most part, these were simple basement clubs with little overhead and little service. Because the owners relied on small musical acts who would play for free, the folk community began to adopt these clubs as well. The beatniks tolerated the folk fans, though they much preferred jazz. By 1960, however, the folk fans came to dominate the scene. Sunday concerts in Washington Square also took shape as a well-known feature of the scene, years before the Kingston Trio topped the charts. Up to 1959, folk music in New York was a scattershot of different approaches and preferences. The floodgates opened in the early 1960s as folk performers and music industry hopefuls poured into basement coffee houses and newly established folk music night clubs.

The size and diversity of New York meant that it housed multiple, independent scenes, or music scenes that could overlap tangentially. For example, while Odetta performed at Gerde's Folk City, just a short walk from Washington Square, she also performed at the tony supper clubs on the east side. The Blue Angel also featured other popular acts like Harry Belafonte, and The Chad Mitchell Trio. It was where the Kingston Trio played when they toured through. Though these clubs tended to cater to

the more affluent, White middle class, it represented an active vein of folk performance during the boom. To many folk fans, however, the beating heart of folk scene in New York was Greenwich Village.<sup>39</sup>

As early as the 1920s, Greenwich Village developed the reputation of being a bohemian enclave; a home to artists and social misfits. By the 1950s, beatniks began to dominate the burgeoning coffee house scene. Venue owners found they could skirt the cabaret license law if they did not serve alcohol. The law stated that venues did not need a license if the music was incidental, or if there were three or fewer musicians. The coffee house owners found that beatniks would show up for three-person hard bop jazz combinations or beat poets. They would also tolerate bad coffee and terrible food. By the end of the 1950s, the Village developed a reputation as home to outlandish characters.<sup>40</sup> In the post-war era, a locus of anti-authority discontentment developed around a few artists and intellectuals, the urban subculture centered around jazz, and the

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<sup>39</sup> My reconstruction of the New York scene relies on, Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 136 – 149, 157 – 164; Ron Eyerman and Scott Barretta, “From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States,” *Theory and Society* 25, no. 4 (1996): 524–35; Devon Powers, “The ‘Folk Problem’: The Village Voice Takes on Folk Music, 1955–65,” *Journalism History* 33, no. 4 (January 2008): 205–14; David Hajdu, *Positively 4th Street: The Lives and Times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Fariña, and Richard Fariña* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001). My oral history interviews with Dick Weissmann and Art Podell helped to get a sense of the scene as experienced by the musicians, Dick Weissmann interview with Stephen Moore, March 25, 2022 – April 19, 2022; Art Podell interview with Stephen Moore, July 05, 2022 – August 30, 2022. Also, I have used biographies and auto biographies of musicians’ testimonies to help construct this image. Michael Schumacher, *There But For Fortune: The Life of Phil Ochs* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Dave Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street: A Memoir, Sixties--Primary Documents and Personal Narratives, 1960-1974* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2013), 41 – 75; Dick Weissman, *Which Side Are You On?: An Inside History of the Folk Music Revival in America* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 86 - 113. I have also made extensive use of scene magazines in portraying fans’ and musicians’ thoughts about the music, especially *Sing Out!*, *Caravan*, and *Broadside*.

<sup>40</sup> Ned Polsky, “The Village Beat Scene: Summer 1960,” *Dissent*, vol 8 1961, 346.

White bohemian subculture known as the beats.<sup>41</sup> One journalistic investigation into the Village also observed a simmering racial uneasiness amongst the new counterculture. It concluded that White beats did not want White girls sleeping with African Americans in the scene, but they could not articulate why because it contradicted beat values.<sup>42</sup> By the end of the 1950s, the activities of the beats became widely reported and tourists from the other boroughs come to the village to gawk at the bohemians.<sup>43</sup> “‘The Village used to be a refuge from Iowa,’ one Villager notes, ‘but now it’s a refuge from Brooklyn and the Bronx.’”<sup>44</sup>

Like the jazz musicians and beat poets with whom they shared small Greenwich Village stages, folk revivalists searched for an authentic experience amidst the consumerism and consensus of Cold War America. Folk music enthusiasts were attached to the authenticity of folk music because it offered a resolution to the existential dilemma presented by the modern condition. Being modern, according to music scholar Ingrid Monson, included “not only musical craft but also an entire ‘authentic’ persona mixing aspects of rebellion, originality, social criticism, progressivism, and being ‘true to oneself.’”<sup>45</sup> Jazz artists in their own way had taken up the “mantle of the modern artist as

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 270.

<sup>42</sup> Ned Polsky, “The Village Beat Scene: Summer 1960,” *Dissent*, vol 8 1961.

<sup>43</sup> *The New Guide to Greenwich Village*, Corinth Books, 1959.

<sup>44</sup> Michael James, “Free Show in Washington Square Is a Hit,” *New York Times*, May 25, 1959, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 17.

a means of legitimizing their music and as a part of a broader-based transformation of America from rural to urban.”<sup>46</sup> They not only strove to establish jazz as modern music but also as a way to “be modern” themselves. For the revivalists, folk music, unlike the artifice of pop, was something real, an unrefined representation of actual people and events. In one contemporaneous assessment, “This generation of college students is not exactly beat, but it is composed of young people who are desperately hungry for a small, safe taste of an unslick, underground world.”<sup>47</sup> John Cohen expressed the existentialist dilemma for his generation in this way, “In the city, each individual is constantly in search of values – from which there are many to choose. This search for values is becoming the tradition of the city... If we from the city are attracted to folk music, it is because we appreciate the clarity of the limitations within which folk music developed. But ultimately what we appreciate is the order that comes out of these limitations.”<sup>48</sup> The authenticity of folk provided a resolution to the crisis of modernity. The folkniks, as they came to be called, found kindred alienated spirits among the beats in the Village.

As the folk revival surged in popularity, these coffee houses became the perfect place for new musicians to get their foot in the door. Venue owners liked folksingers

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<sup>46</sup> Monson examines how Black Jazz artists in the 1950s repurposed syncretic sources, including classical, vernacular Black music, and vocal Jazz, as a way of being modern that differentiated from mainstream White society. Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 70, 74 – 90. Similarly, Kodat situates modern dance in the Cold War as a form of modern art adjacent to Abstract Expressionism. These new artistic expressions of modernity elevated individuality. Catherine Gunther Kodat, *Don't Act, Just Dance: The Metapolitics of Cold War Culture* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

<sup>47</sup> Susan Montgomery, “Folk Furor,” *Mademoiselle*, December 1960, 98 – 100.

<sup>48</sup> John Cohen, “In Defense of City Folksingers: A Reply to Alan Lomax,” *Sing Out!*, 9 no. 1 (1959), 32 – 34.

because they played solo or in pairs, which skirted the cabaret laws, they played on acoustic instruments, which did not need to be amplified (or amplified well), and they worked cheap, perhaps the strongest reason of all. Oscar Brand claimed coffee shops were a kind of refuge of the folk singer. It was one of the few places they could get work. For a while the beats and the folk crowd shared the venues with an uneasy tension. Dick Weissman remembered his early time in a so-called basket house, where after performers played, the waitress would hand around a basket and patrons could donate money. On a good night, a musician could end up with 10 dollars. Weissman favored *The Commons*; an underground coffeehouse that presented, “a something for everybody show.” One act would sing folk songs, another would sing acapella opera songs, “Everybody was a little nuts, you know like, you’re singing opera in a folk coffeehouse? That’s kind of weird. But he [the opera singer] was from the neighborhood. He was Italian.”<sup>49</sup> Friday and Saturday were when the venues made most of their money. They turned over the house and had the same performers do a second show. Over time, the crowds developed a taste for folk music, which began driving the scene.<sup>50</sup> For a brief moment the city government attempted to hold the coffee shops to the standard of the cabaret regulations, but the coffee shop owners successfully challenged their attempts in court.<sup>51</sup> This meant that the folkniks had a secure home, and thriving venues to ply their trade.

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<sup>49</sup> Dick Weissman interview by Stephen Moore, May 05, 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Dave Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, 127 - 128.

<sup>51</sup> Oscar Brand, *The Ballad Mongers*, (New York: Fun and Wagnalls Company, Inc., 1962), 170.



By the late 1950s, folk singers enjoyed a multiplicity of performance opportunities throughout the Village. Art Podel remembered the vibrant and non-stop culture of performing,

You'd go to a club, you'd go to a coffeehouse and you'd run into all of your friends. And when the coffeehouses closed at 4 am, 3 or 4 am, you wandered out for breakfast, everybody had breakfast together. And if you still were up, you wandered over to Washington Square you sat on the steps and sang some more songs. We all sang each other's songs. It wasn't... songs were not jealously guarded property at that time. If somebody came up with a song that had just come up from the Appalachians, people like Mike Seeger and Peggy would bring up all these wonderful songs. As soon as you learned them you couldn't wait to sing them for everybody you knew and to teach them to them. In our community we weren't the smart guys. We were the fodder that was used, we were the mulch that created the folk scene.

I asked him if this brotherhood felt open to newcomers,

Oh Yeah. If anybody showed up, they were welcome. I remember at *Café Wha?* especially, any time somebody new would come in that was good, we'd all gather and get together and become friends immediately. I mean, I don't think it was as idyllic as that. There was still, you know, the competition, and the jealousies and all that. I mean, were all human beings... But still, it was a community.<sup>52</sup>

New York, home to myriad trends and subcultures, could easily accommodate the new generation of folk revivalist. Yet, the folk trend remained somewhat underground even up to 1960.

Robert Shelton, folk music editor of *The New York Times*, equated the trend to any other niche interest. In a memo to his editor, he proposed covering “the relatively recent phenomenon of folk-singers moving into a whole lot of coffee shops in Greenwich Village. They are on a bill with beat poets and mimes and other off-beat ‘acts.’” He proposed that he could cover these acts as a phenomenon similar to other unusual music

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<sup>52</sup> Art Podell, interview by Stephen I. Moore, July 05, 2022.

popping up over the city, including, “Greek-Turkish nightclubs... German places in Yorkville... Czech and Bohemian areas of the upper East Side.”<sup>53</sup> At this point, Shelton portrayed the strange folknik subculture as just another oddity in the city. The folksingers, however, did not think of themselves as either niche entertainment or a fad.

Dave Van Ronk, a staple of the Village scene, made a bid to establish folksingers on a par with other professional musicians. The Folksingers Guild operated out of Greenwich Village and attempted to attract artists based in New York City. This may be interpreted as an attempt to legitimize folk music through professionalism, or a move to honor the labor of musicians as deserving of fair compensation. The amateurism in folk music did not simply harm the music itself, it also harmed the artist in a particularly sensitive place, their pocketbook. If venues were to hire folk musicians, they should not do so because they will work for little compensation, but because the venue wanted and respected folk music. The quickest way to cheapen the art was to cheapen the artists. By acting as a musicians’ union and booking agent, the Guild could enact pro-union political values through the business operations of their art. The purpose of the Guild was to ensure that club owners could not undercut acts, nor play them off each other.

Unfortunately for Van Ronk, the Guild never got off the ground. The artists were too disorganized and individualized, such that the Guild could never establish any leverage over the club owners. Van Ronk remembered one cafe owner chiding his

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Shelton to Seymore Peck, June 9, 1960, The Robert Shelton Archive, Box 041, University of Liverpool.

efforts, “If you were a dog, you couldn’t organize a pack of fleas.”<sup>54</sup> Weissman remembered the guild as an attempt to paper over the cracks that were beginning to show in the musicians’ union. “I was involved in the Folksingers Guild, which Van Ronk started as a sort of a folksingers’ union. I was in the musician’s union because I did the commercial work... But most of the people playing at these cafes were not in the union. And the union was beginning to lose control of public appearances.”<sup>55</sup> The guild limped along for a while through the late 1950s, but when the treasurer ran off with the meager holdings of the treasury the outfit folded for good.<sup>56</sup> Though the Guild never made much of an impact on the music scene in New York, its very existence represented how the scene attempted to blend folk music performance with their political ideology. The fact that the group gained any traction at all demonstrated the political awareness of the New York scene.

A unique phenomenon to the New York scene developed around the free amateur performances of folk music in a public park. Washington Square, just a few blocks from the coffee houses on Mac Dougal St., became a flashpoint where young developing folk performers met on Sunday afternoons to play and trade songs. A cacophony of informal, amateur contemporaneous concerts filled the square from mid-morning until dusk. Up until 1957 singing in Washington Square was a seasonal and occasional occurrence. One folk fanzine declared in November of 1957, that the Washington square “season” was

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<sup>54</sup> Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, 71.

<sup>55</sup> Dick Weissman interview by Stephen Moore, May 05, 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, 125.

“over until Spring.”<sup>57</sup> After the boom, however, locals and weekend tourists packed the square nearly every week.

Playing in the square was a decidedly informal affair. Groups would form organically, every attendee simultaneously a performer and audience member. One early *New York Times* exposé on the gathering described all the musicians as simply “ballad singers.” On the whole he described them as a good bunch of kids having a nice time. Though they may have been “colorful in the extreme,” they were “very well behaved.”<sup>58</sup> In 1958, banjo player, and Village resident Barry Kornfeld exalted the joyful act of group singing in the square. His article defended the Sunday concerts from the perceived attacks of the purists, who saw it as amateurish or juvenile, to which Kornfeld responded, “Sure, it’s loud! It’s a lot of fun to sing loudly and let off steam. I get a big kick out of this personally. Sure it’s not art; it doesn’t claim to be! It’s fun, which is more than I can say for much of the self-conscious in-group jam sessions and round robins. As far as the dullness goes, that’s only because the folkniks have been around longer than the Wash Sq kids, therefore they have heard the same songs too many more times. Frankly I consider the folknik putting-down of the Square as simply snottiness, snideness, and unnecessary cynicism; all unfortunately folknik characteristics.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> “New York Scene,” *Caravan*, no. 4, November 1957, 18.

<sup>58</sup> Michael James, “Free Show in Washington Square,” *New York Times*, May 25, 1959, 1, 34.

<sup>59</sup> Barry Kornfeld, “This is not a How-To article on Group Singing,” *Caravan*, no. 12, August – September 1958, 7 - 8.

By the next year Kornfeld asserted that the standoffish-ness and exclusive attitude had crept into the playing at the square too. The folk scene as early as 1959 began expressing a nostalgia for the early 50s. Kornfeld compares the two eras, “Sessions would start at about 2 in the afternoon and go on ‘til it got fully dark or people got hungry. Unlike our current chaos, with several small and large groups vying for attention all over the circle, the original setup was one large group all singing to George’s [Margolin] leadership and guitar accompaniments.”<sup>60</sup> As the square attracted more singers it lost some of the altruism and delight. “Today’s ‘folkniks’ have a trace of cynicism which overshadows the sheer joy of their gatherings. Who, today, would dream of partaking in five, six, or seven-hour group sings with little instrumental work and mostly ‘old favorites’ (Can you imagine ‘Old Smoky’ being sung today?) for song material?”<sup>61</sup> But this did not mean that the folk scene somehow wanted to move on from the square. When rumors swirled that the city government might pave over the park for an expressway, the folksong magazines took up the cause to defend their park, especially *Caravan*, which had grown out of the amateur intellectualism of the Washington Square scene.<sup>62</sup>

As more and more groups of enthusiasts congregated in separate circles, the concrete fountain at Washington Square became a public display of the fissures and

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<sup>60</sup> Barry Kornfeld, “Folksinging in Washington Square,” *Caravan*, no. 18, Aug – Sep 1959, 6 – 12.

<sup>61</sup> Barry Kornfeld, “Folksinging in Washington Square,” 6 – 12.

<sup>62</sup> Lionel Kilberg, “The Washington Square Problem,” *Caravan*, no. 7, Feb 1958, 16; Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 122.

factions within the New York folk scene. One popular article that described the group sing-along as a series of various archetypes: 1) The Madrigal singer who played ribald Elizabethan songs, 2) The scholar of folklore who concerned themselves with explaining each song to death, 3) The weeper, which the article claims only wailed about lost love, 4) The peacemonger, who sang belligerent protest songs “of the people,” which the author calls, an “injustice-collector,” and 5) The creative folk singer, who absorbed the traditions of the past but refused to imitate.<sup>63</sup> The variety and specificity of that summary signaled that the national appetite for folk revivalism tolerated a fairly variegated, if not necessarily nuanced, understanding of the factions. Weissman remembered that playing in the square required a certain kind of performer, those that were willing to shout over the noise to be heard,

I didn't do well in Washington Square because I don't play loud and I don't use picks. And I didn't fit in to the factions too well. I wasn't a bluegrass player; I wasn't really a traditional player. Nobody wanted to hear my original stuff. Dylan hadn't come along yet, it wasn't cool to write original music.<sup>64</sup>

I asked him about the kind of political songs people played in his time in the early 1960s, he responded, “Everybody sang ‘Which Side are you on?’” Their politics still revolved around labor organizing. The protest songs were all, “labor and coal miners.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Grace Jan Waldman, “Life Among the Guitars,” *Mademoiselle*, May 1959, 32, 88.

<sup>64</sup> Dick Weissman interview by Stephen Moore, May 05, 2022.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Political Approach

Theo Bikel, a singer, actor, concert emcee and board member for the Newport Folk Festival, was a major player in the Village Scene. In 1961, he wrote *Folksongs and Footnotes*, a book that demonstrated how the New York scene blended taste with an implicit political understanding of the folk. He began his work by considering and ultimately dismissing the position of the “purists” and those that argued folk music was the exclusive domain of academic study. He paraphrases Pete Seeger as having claimed that if folks sing them then they were folk songs. Rather dryly, he responded, “This, incidentally, is not as all-embracing a definition as would appear at first glance, for I suspect Pete to be rather choosy when it comes to the business of defining who are and who are not ‘folks.’”<sup>66</sup> With this assertion, Bikel made an implicit claim to definitional exclusion beginning with the folk themselves. But once the folk, which Bikel never defines, create folk songs, he advocated for an interpreter position. Folk songs were flexible and changed over time, but, he countered, some innovations harm the material. Still, folk music has the potential to offer deeper truths than popular music, so it was worthwhile on those terms,

I have no objection when a folksinger uses not only the physical means and abilities at his own command, such as his voice and his dexterity at playing at instrument, but also the further embellishment of several instruments, a whole orchestra, if need be, or a vocal group behind him. There is nothing in my book that frowns upon the use of showmanship, nothing that forbids spotlights, microphones, loud-speakers, ritardando or crescendo toward the end of a song, or

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<sup>66</sup> Theodore Bikel, *Folksongs and Footnotes*, (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1961).

a resounding end chord. One this, however, is absolutely essential and indispensable: the original intent of the song must be preserved.<sup>67</sup>

Bikel positioned himself as a reliable judge as to who the folk were and what they wanted. While it depended on the performer and their artistry to convey the intention of the songs, the song possessed a true and easily identifiable correct interpretation. If it was a work song, you must work; a protest song must carry the banner of protest; a funny song should laugh. Here Bikel took an ambiguous stance on changeability. A folk song was both changeable and enduring, adaptable in approach, but static in meaning. This simultaneous double thought undergirded the New York scene's sense of politics in the music. Taste and political position intertwined and cultivated a political aesthetic that would be further developed by topical folk songwriters. Bikel mixed style, taste and interpretation into a holistic cultural political stance.

The politically minded performers drew a folk wisdom from the music and played it in an effort to reinforce folk values. For these folk enthusiasts the music was the domain of the marginalized and the oppressed; it derived from the struggles of real historical people.<sup>68</sup> From its earliest editions in the 1950s, *Sing Out!* magazine established an integral connection between class conscious organizing and folk music performance. It pointedly observed, "The learned economists who proclaim that 'there is

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<sup>67</sup> Bikel, *Folksongs and Footnotes*.

<sup>68</sup> Fred G. Hoepfner, "Folk and Hillbilly Music: The Background of Their Relation, Part II," *Caravan*, June – July 1959, 28; John Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), vii.



no class struggle in America' would do well to study American folk songs."<sup>69</sup> The music spoke for the people and in this capacity, it was necessarily political.

Woody Guthrie, who forged this position a generation earlier, inspired this syncretic combination of politics and art. When asked to sing a concert of "non-political balladsongs" Guthrie responded in an open letter:

I've never practiced about how to sing a song and how not to sing a song at the same split second; I mean how to spend a whole afternoon and a whole nightlong too trying to hunt up some kind of a folksong that just don't protest about nobody nor nothing; that doesn't speak out one noted word about anything you can so plainly see to be wrong that's happening here in eyeshot of you right this very minute if look enuff to find it. [sic]<sup>70</sup>

In 1956, artists from the New York Scene produced a concert in honor of Guthrie, which was attended by Guthrie himself. *California to the New York Island* combined narration punctuated with Guthrie's songs. Mythic stories canonized Guthrie's life and wove a history of the United States that highlighted the ideals of the folk. The songs he wrote not only spoke to political situations; they illuminated the very thoughts of the people. Folk music gave voice to the hopes and desires of the folk throughout history. The folk wanted equal opportunity at the American dream and they stood against systematic oppression. This kind of progressive history cemented Guthrie as a class hero of the revivalists. A few years later, Irwin Silber, with the help of the Woody Guthrie Children's Fund, published a work that encapsulated many of the themes of the

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<sup>69</sup> "Heritage U.S.A.," *Sign Out!* 2, no 12 (June 1952).

<sup>70</sup> Woody Guthrie, "Folk Songs – 'Non-Political' Pink," *Sing Out!* 2, no. 11 (May 1952): 10.

relationship between folk revivalism and history in this period.<sup>71</sup> The revivalists after 1958 thought of themselves as continuing the work started by Guthrie. They positioned the folk as anti-authority because authority was anti-democratic. The camaraderie of group singing in Washington Square may have replaced the solidarity of the Union, but they continued to approach folk music as intrinsically political. According to the politically-oriented revivalists, those artists that obscured or negated the political origins of folk created a dishonest work.

From the perspective of the political approach, artists must retain the social commentary, and the social position of the original authors. Playing folk in a popularized style removed it from the “struggle, the harshness, the genuine streaks of brilliant folk hunger and sorrow that are woven into song by our traditional singers and serious interpreters of folk music.”<sup>72</sup> Because folk songs were written by the folk to comment on their everyday situations and desires, modern performance of those songs should maintain that immediacy by commenting on current situations in a similar way.<sup>73</sup> As the connection between unionism and revivalism waned, folk revivalists attached the political aspirations of the folk to the ideals of peace, freedom and civil rights. Joan Baez remained focused on the music as a political matter throughout her career. For her, the music must retain its relevance as a means to bring about change. “The basic issues were

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<sup>71</sup> Woody Guthrie, *California to the New York Island*, ed. Irwin Silber (New York City: The Guthrie Children’s Fund, 1958).

<sup>72</sup> Josh Dunson and Moe York Asch, “Is Cash Killing Folk Music,” in *The American Folk Scene: Dimensions of the Folk Song Revival*, eds. David A. DeTurk and A Poulin, Jr. (New York: Dell, 1967), 310.

<sup>73</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 113.

clear, and they were indisputable,” she said, “Peace. Equity. There was no question about the issues. I felt them in my bones. I knew what I had to sing about.”<sup>74</sup> This explicit connection between the music and certain political positions became an indicator that the performer cared about the folk and advocated on their behalf.<sup>75</sup> *Sing Out!* especially used the political application of folksong as a way to gauge authenticity.

Why were peace and freedom considered folk values? Wars were the providence of the rich and an outgrowth of greed and lust for power. Naturally communal and cooperative, the folk opposed the avarice of the rich.<sup>76</sup> Unconcerned with border disputes or treaties, preferring instead their simple peaceful lives, the folk defied the power of the rich. The singing of folk songs then brought to light for modern audiences the “struggle between the peaceful peoples of the world and the imperialists who would divide them and use them against each other.”<sup>77</sup> Similarly, the oppressed and the marginalized naturally yearned for freedom. Increasingly, over the course of the revival, folk singers used their performances to advocate for the civil rights and liberation of African Americans - a noble, commendable and authentic purpose. The authenticity of the cause trumped any concerns about playing style or personal origin of the performers. *Sing Out!*

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<sup>74</sup> Quoted in David Hajdu, *Positively 4th Street: The Lives and Times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Fariña, and Richard Fariña* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 144. For more about Baez’s political philosophy see also, Joan Baez, *And A Voice to Sing With: A Memoir* (New York: Summit Books, 1987), 115 – 126.

<sup>75</sup> Steve Redhead, and John Street, “Have I The Right? Legitimacy, Authenticity and Community in Folk’s Politics,” *Popular Music* 8, no. 2 (1989): 177 – 184. Redhead and Street refer to the audience’s acceptance of the political positions advocated by performers. This piece examines the connection between certain political positions and perceptions of authenticity.

<sup>76</sup> Felikova Ruza, “Our Music Fights for Peace,” *Sing Out!* 2, no. 1 (July 1951): 8 – 11.

<sup>77</sup> “Sing Out – One Year Old,” *Sing Out!* 2, no. 1 (July 1951): 2.

openly aligned itself with the civil rights movement by framing their efforts as preserving and redeeming the music of African Americans. It not only provided its audience with instructions on organizing for civil rights using folk music, but Silber, in 1951, also forwarded a clear justification for the connection between revivalists and civil rights.

One of the greatest crimes of Jim Crow America in the cultural field has been the consistent debasement of the folk cultures of national minorities... But it is in the debasement of Negro culture that the monopolists of culture have reached the pinnacle of racist ideology... Negro music, like all forms of cultural expression by oppressed peoples, has within it the seeds of revolt and protest, and much of the music was actually used in the struggle against slavery. When they [the White supremacists] could no longer deny the greatness of the Negro people's music, they tried to steal it. And if they could not steal it outright, they tried to re-make and distort it.<sup>78</sup>

Or, they used it as a marker of authentic expression in the face of the artificiality of modern mass culture. Folk offered “freedom from the mass non identity sitting at the receiving end of millions of televisions sets broadcasting real or imaginary horror; and freedom from the implications of a history in which we are trapped.”<sup>79</sup> Because the folk had always longed for liberation, modern politically aligned folksingers sought to respect this heritage by supporting the civil rights movement and advocating for a personal liberation from conformity.

At times the mass media viewed the political approach as an attempt to bend the music to a political will. The political label could be applied satirically. The image of the “peacemonger” folk singer became an ironic symbol implying that peace and folksingers

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<sup>78</sup> Irwin Silber, “Racism, Chauvinism Keynote US Music,” *Sing Out!* 2, no. 6 (Dec 1951): 6 – 7; “Songs for Peace and Freedom in Washington D.C.,” *Sing Out!* 2, no. 8 (Feb 1952): 2.

<sup>79</sup> David A. DeTurk and A. Poulin, Jr. “Introduction” in *The American Folk Scene: Dimensions of the Folk Song Revival*, DeTurk, David A. and A Poulin, Jr., eds (New York: Dell, 1967), 23 – 24.

might have been more closely associated than peace and the folk ever were. One popular article defined the politically minded folk singer archetype as “*not* a sincere reformer of social injustices but rather an injustice- collector.”<sup>80</sup> The most pointed example of the blurry line around the political and the authentic was the fact that some outlets embraced popular artists because they were non-political. When New Christy Minstrels founder auditioned band members, he looked for “the all-American boy or girl who had no political complaints and no sexual problems anybody would be interested in.”<sup>81</sup> The intrusion of politics, for some, falsified the music. The lack of political grandstanding allowed the music to stand on its own.

### **The Newport Folk Festival**

The Newport Folk Festival maintained extensive ties to the Greenwich Village scene and its evolution mirrored the evolution of the New York scene. At first, the festival was somewhat friendly to the popular folk acts; the Kingston Trio played at the inaugural event and the Brothers Four played in 1960. Over time, though it drew performers from all over the country, Newport relied more heavily on the Village scene for its organizers and tastemakers.<sup>82</sup> Festival organizer Alan Grossman invited a wide range of folk music artists.<sup>83</sup> In an effort to encapsulate the entire contemporary folk

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<sup>80</sup> Grace Jan Waldman, “Life Among the Guitars,” *Mademoiselle*, May 1959, 32, 88.

<sup>81</sup> “Take a Boy Like Me,” *Time*, March 29, 1963.

<sup>82</sup> Rachel Clare Donaldson, “*I Hear America Singing*”: *Folk Music and National Identity*, Folk Music and National Identity (Temple University Press, 2014), 136.

<sup>83</sup> Israel Young, “Newport Folk Festival,” *Caravan*, August 1959, 25 – 27.

scene, he put acts together in somewhat of a hodgepodge. The festival featured southern string bands, like The Stanley Brothers, and Earl Scruggs; African American folk and blues singers, such as Odetta, Rev. Gary Davis, Memphis Slim, and Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry; and academics and presenters and performers, like John Jacob Niles and Alan Lomax. Still, it pulled a great deal out of the nearby New York scene with performances from Pete Seeger, Cynthia Gooding, Billy Faier, Oscar Brand, Bob Gibson, The New Lost City Ramblers, and Ed McCurdy.

In the program for the first festival Billy Faier, banjo player and sometimes editor of *Caravan*, laid out the ethos of the event. His history of folk music included a broad understanding of “folk” culture in America, looking at White migrants, Native Americans and Black music. He also tied the labor movement as an essential aspect of folk music in America, pointing to advocates like Joe Hill and Aunt Molly Jackson. He proposed the closest thing to a thesis statement for the event: “The Scholars, the city-bred folksingers, and the ‘authentic’ singers are here to give you what is probably the very first representative picture of American Folk Music ever held on the concert stage.”<sup>84</sup> It also included academic panel discussions in the afternoons which explored, “What is American Folk Music?”<sup>85</sup>

The press corps largely embraced the event as an unqualified success. Shelton glowed, “The range of the program last weekend stressed the American idiom, and within

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<sup>84</sup> Billy Faier, “Folk Music Today,” *Newport Folk Festival Program*, 1959.

<sup>85</sup> Irwin Silber and David Gahr, “Top Performers Highlight 1<sup>st</sup> Newport Festival,” *Sing Out!* 9, no. 2 (1959): 21.

that framework it was far-reaching, if not encyclopedic. It went from the abrasive cries of a minister and former street singer, Rev. Gary Davis, to that fusion of folk song and show business call the Kingston Trio.”<sup>86</sup> He gushed over the wide selection of performers and the performances. “Here was folk music identification married to theatrical vocal artistry at its best.”<sup>87</sup> His primary concern was that the festival might suffer in its inability to bring in or showcase talent that was “more at home in a kitchen or at a small concert hall”<sup>88</sup> That is to say, the form of the venue lent itself to loud, bombastic performers, and not the quiet, staid performances of the more amateurish folk musician. Privately Shelton admitted that he was perhaps overly verbose in his praise, knowing that the success of the festival would be good for folk music. In a private letter to Archie Green, he admitted that he “held back on negative criticism... I may be wrong, but I think a new venture like this needs public support now.”<sup>89</sup> Shelton pinned his primary apprehension about the festival on the divide in folk music, namely the issue of the Kingston Trio. “It seems to me that when they get an advisory panel that a good many of the fights about the Kingston Trio vs. ethnic singers can take place there and the festival will ultimately move in a more representative direction.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Robert Shelton, “Folk Joins Jazz at Newport,” *New York Times*, July 19, 1959, X7.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Robert Shelton to Archie Green, August 22, 1959, Archie Green Collection, 1844 - 2009, University of North Carolina Folklife Collection, Collection Number: 20002

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

The success of the 1959 festival drew a larger audience for the 1960 festival as Newport became established as the place to see and been seen. The audience at Newport was just as eager to perform as they were to listen.<sup>91</sup> Small groups of musicians played for each other and traded songs. One magazine noted, “boys from Yale’s folk-singing clubs exchanged songs and instrumental solos with students from the University of Michigan folklore society.”<sup>92</sup> And they wore their folkloric subgroup on their sleeve, dressed in clothes that indicated their affiliation, “The badge of identity was sometimes a beard, worn as if in defiance of its owner’s Shetland sweater or expensively tailored madras shorts.”<sup>93</sup> At its height, Newport was both an annual national reckoning on the state of folk music, and a grand spectacle of folk revivalism.

The program from the 1960 Newport festival revealed the deepening connection to the New York scene, with re-print pages from *Sing Out!* magazine. In “The Folkniks and the Songs they Sing,” Lomax presented his view of the current crop of popular folk revivalists, and by extension places himself outside and above their efforts, like an all-seeing observer with access to greater truths. *Sing Out!* traded on Lomax’s influence in an attempt to establish itself as the locus of folk criticism during the revival.<sup>94</sup> By printing that article in the 1960 program, Newport signaled that it was the annual official review of the state of folk music in America.

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<sup>91</sup> Robert Shelton, “40 Amateurs Join Hootenanny as Newport Folk Festival Ends,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1960, 21.

<sup>92</sup> Susan Montgomery, “Folk Furor,” *Mademoiselle*, December 1960, 98 – 100.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Newport Folk Festival Program*, 1960.



The festival and the press began to question who *deserved* to play at Newport. While the previous festival had cast a wide net, this year Shelton thought that perhaps only certain folk acts ought to be awarded stage time. This debate was evident in the performances too Brothers Four: “really little more than pop singers using folk themes, and rather shallowly at that.”<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile, Shelton described John Lee Hooker as “Bedrock sullen Blues.”<sup>96</sup> If the lines of folk authenticity were somewhat murky in the inaugural festival, they became increasingly clear the following years. By 1961, Newport was ground zero for the debates over folk approach. Shelton observed, “Newport had become a symbol of the frequently bitter division of taste between fans.”<sup>97</sup> Just like the New York scene, Newport gradually pushed out the popular folk performers in favor of the cadre of artists that frequented the Village coffeeshops and small number of artists with rural origins who had begun touring with the rise in interest in folk music.<sup>98</sup>

## **Ethnics**

The anthropological and political scenes in the folk revival fostered new ways to think about White and non-White culture. While artists experimented with different source material, they also transgressed expressions of racial identity. The transversions

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<sup>95</sup> Robert Shelton, “40 Amateurs Join Hootenanny as Newport Folk Festival Ends,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1960, 21.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Robert Shelton, “Second Thoughts,” *New York Times*, August 20, 1961, X14.

<sup>98</sup> Ronald D. Cohen, *A History of Folk Music Festivals in the United States: Feats of Musical Celebration* (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 83 – 98.

of these old divisions needed new language. Over the course of the boom performers and media critics altered how they used the term “ethnic” to act as a shorthand for this dividing line. “Ethnic” became an oppositional category to the White, middle class. The term encompassed both non-White culture and White rural culture. By the end of the revival, “an ethnic” indicated a White person who defied their class and race by singing non-White music or rural White music in a non-modern style. It was not just about the songs the artists played; the term also included an aesthetic valence. Performers described in this way did not dress in modern clothes, such as The Kingston Trio, or the dark suits and ties of the Chad Mitchell Trio and the Limelighters. Ethnic described artists who neither adapted material to popular standards, nor dressed in modern fashion. Ethnic was the linguistic tool that cutting a division between the White middle-class and everyone else. In this way, the anthropological and political folk revivalists found a common enemy in the popular folk artists. Further, this division encouraged the grouping together of all non-White ethnicities; they were all similar in their status as non-White. Ethnic Studies scholar Michael Omi and Sociologist Howard Winant developed a theory of Whiteness as a form of "Racial despotism," which consolidates oppositional racial consciousness in a "panethnicizing" process. In the United States, "Every racially defined group is a panethnic group."<sup>99</sup> In this process “ethnic” definitionally comes to mean non-White. Reciprocally Whiteness, as a non-ethnicity, operated invisibly.

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<sup>99</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Third edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 130 - 132.

During the earlier folk revival of the 1930s and 1940s, ethnic tended to be used in the academic, anthropological sense: to describe a subset of people who shared cultural and racial heritage. Generally, the use of ethnic in this era stemmed from a spirit of inclusion. Festivals boards sought to include one of every type, in a feeling of international kinship.<sup>100</sup> One festival declared in its program,

For every foreign-born person and his children, for every racial and cultural group, assimilation consists not only in accepting America, but in being accepted by other Americans. It consists not only in receiving from America but in giving something more than labor in return – in sharing one’s very own ethnic heritage while accepting in return America’s composite cultural traditions.<sup>101</sup>

While another festival program optimistically opined:

It is our hope and prayer that this festival and others of kindred spirit the world around may inspire all men to search and to share with each other their treasure of folklore and music, and that in their sharing men of all nations may discover common expressions of their emotions in work, in joy, in sorrow, in life which bind them together in a world-wide brotherhood.<sup>102</sup>

Ethnic in this era held a meaning as a simple descriptor of people groups. The underlying question, however, was who was recognized as a type? In 1949, Moe Asch launched the *Ethnic Folkways Library* as a sub-label of his *Folkways Records*. This special catalog focused on music outside of the United States, usually using national identification markers. This also included music from Native American tribes, like the Sioux, and a

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<sup>100</sup> Program, *International Folk Festival*, Saint Paul Auditorium, MN, April 27 and 28, 1934. Box 01, Folder 11, Ron Cohen Collection, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa, Ok.

<sup>101</sup> Program, *Festival of Nations*, 1942, Box 01, Folder 11, Ron Cohen Collection, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa, Ok.

<sup>102</sup> Program, *International Folk Festival*, Wilmington College, OH, March 7 – 9 1953, Box 01, Folder 11, Ron Cohen Collection, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa, Ok.

series on *Negro Folk Music*.<sup>103</sup> In short, the *Ethnic* label signified non-White, or non-U.S. music. The move toward categorical inclusiveness resulted in categorical erasure. It laid the groundwork to establish White as beyond category, as default.

Over the course of the folk boom, artists changed how they used ethnic as a descriptor. Dave Guard, in discussing how the Kingston Trio made changes upon the source material, used ethnic as a state of being. That is, things that *were* ethnic could, through adaptation, lose that status. “When we find something we like, we adapt it. It may not be ethnic when we get through with it, but after all – what is ethnic? It’s what’s true in the time and place it’s sung, right? So why should we try to imitate Leadbelly’s inflections when we have so little in common with his background and experience?”<sup>104</sup> For Guard, ethnic was a performance. Conversely, an artist like Leadbelly displayed a kind of ethnicity through his “inflections.” If the Kingston Trio were to be true to themselves, they should retain their natural, non-ethnic, accents and musical proclivities. Yet, this personal authenticity made the music not ethnic. This confused authentic/ethnic two-step demonstrated just how the term was in flux. In this same time, banjo aficionado and folk columnist, Barry Kornfeld, used ethnic to describe Leadbelly this way, “Leadbelly is the prime example of an ethnic folk who undoubtedly was a conscious artist.”<sup>105</sup> For Kornfeld, ethnic represented a static identity marker. Though they came at

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<sup>103</sup> Various Artists, *Music of the Sioux and the Navajo*, vinyl (Ethnic Folkways Library, 1949); Various Artists, *Negro Folk Music of Alabama, Volume 1*, vinyl (Ethnic Folkways Library, 1950).

<sup>104</sup> “Special Survey: Folk Music USA,” *Rogue*, October 1960, 56 – 77.

<sup>105</sup> Barry Kornfeld, “Folk Music as Art,” *Caravan*, no. 13, Oct-Nov 1958, 10.

the issue from different perspectives, Kornfeld and Guard agreed that ethnic was a binary. Either through behavior or intrinsic attribute, one was an ethnic, or one was not.

As the folk revival reached its height, average fans applied the terminology in complex and contradictory ways. As participants wrestled with the significance of young White middle-class people adopting cultural products, they also wrestled with how to describe different factions. As one article in *Autoharp* demonstrated, “ethnic” became a noun describing revivalists who committed to a complete aesthetic that rejected White middle-class respectability. The author forwarded a theory regarding the differences between a folknik and an ethnic. At this point in other scenes, the two terms would have been interchangeable, yet the article draws lines around the motives of the different approaches. The author defines as ethnic as “a person who digs particular cultures, has respect for the people in them, understands and empathizes with their mores and folkways, and tries to sing their song as they do, from their point of view.” Meanwhile, “a folknik is a person who digs folk songs and tries to fit them, no matter what the expense, into the framework of his own cultures.” From her perspective, the Kingston Trio “epitomize the folkniks.”<sup>106</sup> While this article was a notable outlier in defining the Kingston Trio as folkniks, it showed how much the term ethnic was in the process of developing into a type. Moreover, it offered a strong moral defense of the ethnic folksingers.

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<sup>106</sup> Kandeef Trefil, “Ethnics versus Folkniks,” *Autoharp*, vol. 3 no. 2, November 30, 1962.

By 1963, in general parlance a folknik *was* an ethnic. Once ethnic stabilized as a description for a particular type of performer, the term signified performers who wore work boots and blues jeans, sang songs that focused on the hardness of labor or inequity in society, and rather notoriously prefaced songs with long monologues on the meanings and contexts of the music. Press coverage used the word to delineate between ersatz commercial music and genuine music. Commercial, polished, modern, or fake could all be adjectival contrasts to ethnic. Or as one op-ed asserted, authentic folk music scenes produced “the honestly ethnic performers, and the lovers of the honestly ethnic.”<sup>107</sup> Another critic observed that revivalist circles were committed to a “deification of the ethnic.”<sup>108</sup> In contrast, the pleasing musical performance of The New Christy Minstrels could not conceal their inauthenticity; “They sing well, but they’re not even slightly ethnic.”<sup>109</sup> Ethnic signified a rejection of the modernized, polished folk music of the popularizers.

Those that used ethnic to describe performers also made gestures toward class. At times ethnic could be applied without making divisions around race at all. It could mean rural, working-class, poor, or in short not middle-class. Shelton recounted a story of a coffeehouse owner who rejected the music of two White musicians who specialized in Appalachian string band music,

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<sup>107</sup> T. E. Rafferty, “Folk Music vs. Fake Music,” *Hootenanny*, vol. 1 no. 1, December 1963, 52, 53, 62, 63.

<sup>108</sup> Harvey Siders, “On Separating Folk Music from Fake: Verbal Hootenanny Fails to Clear Air,” *Boston Globe*, Feb 16, 1964, 61.

<sup>109</sup> Alan Levy, “Meet the Christy Minstrels” *Cavalier*, Vol 14 no 137 November 1964, 80 - 85.

Two of the finest Southern mountain musicians, Tom Ashley and Doc Watson, did a recent guest appearance at a New York coffeehouse. The audience went wild for their skillful traditional performances... But the coffeehouse owner wouldn't hire them. 'I'm not running an ethnic club,' he insisted, while the cheers of the listeners in his 'non-ethnic club' were reverberating for the two ethnic performers.<sup>110</sup>

For the owner of the club, ethnic was not a statement of national group identity, nor did it indicate performers playing the music of non-White races, nor did it appear to have anything to do with authenticity. Here the use of the term can only be attributed to the presentation of the music in a way that did not appeal to modern middle-class audiences by performers who did not conform to these standards. White people who rejected the aesthetic of the middle-class were ethnics. This meant that even performers playing music formerly known as hillbilly, or old time, that is, music coded as White, would have been called an ethnic. Consequently, Dave Van Ronk, an artist who specialized in old time jazz and blues first played by Black performers, and the New Lost City Ramblers, a group that played White string band music, and Bob Dylan, who dressed in work boots and dungarees and wrote his own music using rural White music themes, could all be described as ethnics.

Parody once again showed how the idea of an ethnic had become firmly established in the public's mind. As usual the Smothers Brothers were ahead of the curve in their incisiveness. Their album *Think Ethnic!*, included a spoken bit by Dick Smothers where he extolled the benefit of reaching out of one's comfort zone to explore new cultures. He pleaded with the audience to keep an open mind, "We should not think them

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<sup>110</sup> Robert Shelton, "Art or Pap?," *New York Times*, April 5, 1964, X20.

as being strange. Because they dress differently and act differently and their language is different, we should not think of them as strange or different.... They're weird."<sup>111</sup> The drive of the ethnic singer to bring new culture to folk fans was contrasted with the persistent common wisdom of even the most committed folk music crowd to reject the new. The folk fans may not have been as open-minded as they presented themselves; some of this ethnic material was simply strange, even if the folknik would not admit it publicly.

Other parodies highlighted hypocrisies in ethnic performers playing poor while raking in cash. *Pointer* magazine took special aim at Bob Dylan with a parody song titled, "It's So Damn Hard to Look Ethnic."<sup>112</sup> The song took several shots at the discrepancy between Dylan's working-class act and the small fortune he had amassed by 1965. How could he continue to "look ethnic" with all this cash bulging out of his pockets? The article sends up those who enriched themselves by performing the culture of the rural poor, while it demonstrated that adopting that culture was an artistic choice. Meanwhile, comedic duo Allen and Grier targeted the rest of the ethnic singers, who toiled away in obscurity with their song "It's Better to be Rich Than Ethnic." Ethnic was again treated like an aesthetic choice by an artist; an option that someone getting in to the folk field could simply select. But, as Allen and Grier pointed out, the path to financial success for the ethnic was much harder than for the popular artist, "It's better to be rich

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<sup>111</sup> Smothers Brothers, *Think Ethnic!*, vinyl (Mercury, 1963).

<sup>112</sup> "It's So Damn Hard to Look Ethnic," *The Pointer*, 1965, Box 20, Folder 35, Ron Cohen Collection, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa, OK.



than ethnic, that's the American way/ Money is the root of all pleasure/ Art for art's sake doesn't pay."<sup>113</sup> These inversions of ethnic folk performers, while they comment on differing aspects, both affirm the general perception that ethnic was an artistic choice made by artists. Anyone, with the right clothing, performance style, or opinions, could be an ethnic.

Peter, Paul and Mary, in a high-profile interview, attempted to distance themselves from the idea of an ethnic performer by moving the discussion away from the equation of ethnic as authentic. They wanted to forward the idea of personal authenticity as an essential marker, while still honoring the ethnic performer. They simultaneously hoped to avoid the trap that all interpretations were equally valid. In sum, they side-stepped the question of urban ethnics altogether, in an effort to open new discursive space for their own approach. The interviewer asked the group, "What about the conflict between ethnic folk music and the sort of thing Peter Paul and Mary are doing?" Mary Travers used the term ethnic in the contemporary revivalist sense, meaning aesthetic. She responded, "At one time, Peter, Paul and myself were the ethnics. We gradually broke away to form our own tradition."<sup>114</sup> Travers confirmed the artistic choice of the ethnic aesthetic, while giving herself space as no longer following that trend. In an unintentional echo of Guard's comments four years prior, Peter Yarrow defended the approach of the urban folk singer by drawing a hard line between ethnic and urban. He

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<sup>113</sup> Allen and Grier, *It's Better to be Rich than Ethnic*, vinyl (FM Records, 1963).

<sup>114</sup> Mort J. Golding, "We Have Something to Say: Trio Talks About Honesty and Taste," *Hootenanny*, vol. 1 no. 1, December 1963, 10, 11, 72, 73.

asserted the validity of urban folk singers only if they understood, “the tradition of the material being sung.” As for his own performances, he felt that “to affect any ethnic style would be hypocrisy. If I were to be anything other than my total self in performances, I feel I would lose any validity I possess.”<sup>115</sup> The urban folk singer can thus escape the trap of ethnic posturing by claiming empathy for the source material coupled with a commitment to personal authenticity. Of course, in so doing, Yarrow still substantiated the place of ethnic as non-White. Yarrow was a White middle-class performer; for him to sing in “any ethnic style would be hypocrisy,” because he was a man without an ethnicity.

Over the course of the folk revival, ethnic as a term transformed from an anthropological description of social groups, to an aesthetic adopted by White performers. The use of this term demonstrated the degree to which Whiteness could operate invisibly in the public imagination. White was not an ethnicity, and if White people adopted the culture of non-White groups, they became ethnics. Also, the degree to which ethnic came to be associated with poor, rural White people, indicated that the true invisible ethnicity was the mainstream culture of the White middle-class. Moreover, the use of ethnic helped to flatten the entire global culture into White and non-White.

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<sup>115</sup> Peter Yarrow, “Folk Music Cares!,” *Hootenanny*, vol. 1 no. 4, November 1964, 21.

## Chapter Four

### Discerning Consumers Choose Commercial Folk

On March 17, 1959, as The Kingston Trio sped along an Iowa highway in one of their nearly continuous cross-country trips, they came upon a hitchhiker and decided to pick him up. Once in the vehicle, the man quickly realized who his travel companions were. The music group told him they were on their way to nearby Grinnell College to play a show. The hitchhiker warned them, “You guys aren’t welcome here.” This bit of cold-water worried tenor Nick Reynolds, even though the Trio had been riding high for more than a year and the outlook remained incredibly sunny. Yet, the ominous warning from the mysterious stranger punctured Reynold’s bubble. On the other hand, there was no reason to lend any credence to the hitchhiker and the contract had already been signed, so they went ahead with the gig.

When they arrived at the school, banners had been hung in the hallway reading, “Kingston Trio go back to Madison Avenue.”<sup>1</sup> A faction of the Grinnell student body had had gotten word a few weeks prior that the Trio were slated for a campus concert. They objected to The Kingston Trio booking and moved to force the student organization to cancel. When they were outvoted, the faction decided to publicly protest the concert. Their message: The Kingston Trio reinforced the corrupting influence of commercialization. Reynolds remembered the gig as one of the worst in his career. It was an eye-opening moment that some folk fans had turned against them.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Nick Reynolds, September 26, 1973, Box 1 Folder 18, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

Over the course of the boom, the anthropological and political factions increasingly saw the popular folk groups as anathema to the project of folk revivalism. These two camps attempted to marginalize popular folk in the minds of the public by undermining its authenticity. To some extent the attempt worked - the question of folk authenticity became a near constant side conversation in coverage of the music. After a bevy of attacks, anti-popular folk fans hit upon what they saw as popular folk's fundamental inauthenticity: its commercialism. In short, they argued popular folk groups were not authentic because they were merely commercial. Popular folk artists lacked any higher calling in their performances, namely enculturation or political awareness. However, fans of popular folk remained unbothered by the charges leveled by the anti-popular factions. These fans embraced the Cold War ethic of consumerism, and found it rather natural to spend their leisure dollars on consumer products.

### **The Split in Folk Revivalism**

In the early days of the revival, some proponents of the anthropological and political approach viewed the commercial success of the Kingston Trio as an opportunity. They reasoned that exposure in the popular market would open the door to a wider audience for folk music generally. At the 1959 Newport festival Alan Lomax attempted to marry the weight of his credentials to the financial prosperity of the group. He reportedly said to Dave Guard, "I've got all these great songs. All you have to do is say

you got “Tom Dooley” from me because it appeared in my book.”<sup>2</sup> Some revivalists even favorably viewed the adaptations done by the Kingstons as having the mark of good taste. *Caravan*, a fanzine out of New York, observed in 1959, “It is wonderful when a folk song makes the Hit Parade, especially one with as little alteration as the Kingston Trio’s *Tom Dooley*. It is only another proof that songs created by the people have more appeal to the people than the Tin Pan Alley and Brill Building brand.”<sup>3</sup> Even those revivalists who disliked the musical arrangements predicted that the popular success of the Trio represented a generally positive trend in folk interest. This feeling led them to make claims such as “... the atmosphere of acceptance should make it easier for the *real* folk singers and musician to find an audience.”<sup>4</sup> Once audiences tired of facile popular arrangements, they would surely move on to the more challenging, *pure* stuff.

When financial success did not spread to all areas of the folk field, anti-popular factions coalesced and began to ratchet up the pressure in the public arena in an attempt to persuade casual fans. They also sought to keep those in their faction from going commercial. This may have stemmed from professional jealousy or from a drive to protect the image of folk music in the public imagination. In either case, the anthropological and political strands of folk revivalism forged an uneasy alliance against the common enemy they found in the popular folk artists. The success of the Kingston

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<sup>2</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Dave Guard, September 25, 1973, Box 1 Folder 17, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>3</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, “Records,” *Caravan*, no. 15, Feb – Mar, 1959.

<sup>4</sup> T. E. Rafferty, “Folk Music vs. Fake Music,” *Hootenanny*, vol. 1 no. 1, December 1963, 52, 53, 62, 63. (Original emphasis)

Trio posed the question as to what could be included in the definition of folk music, and the anthropological and political revivalists were determined to definitively answer on the public's behalf.

An article in *Hootenanny* magazine by Theodore Bikel revealed the special place that those operating in Greenwich Village saw for themselves in terms of setting the taste for the nation. While Bikel wrestled with the issue of the popularization, his main issue was taste. He wished the audience had some. Popularization could cut both ways, on one hand "it is prostituting what we loved," but on the other, "one single exposure of "Rock Island Line" on TV reaches more people than heard Leadbelly during his whole lifetime!" All would be well if the real folk revivalists with good taste could set the stage for the nation. Alas, he concluded, "Folk on TV is still a wasteland, with those of us who care deeply standing on the sidelines mournfully echoing the old Negro slave's prayer in the fields: Use me Lord, use me – if only in an advisory capacity!"<sup>5</sup> In this one article Bikel revealed the love/hate relationship revivalists had with the popular music industry and how they viewed themselves as special purveyors of culture and taste.

By 1960, the revivalists gave up completely on the Kingston Trio as some kind of gateway and began to marginalize them as illegitimate. It was clear then that the average listener could not discern the difference between popular music and authentic folk and needed to be instructed on the difference. Consequently, folk concerts and music festivals developed a didactic sensibility that sought precise definitions and exclusions, including

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<sup>5</sup> Theodore Bikel, "Random thoughts on the Folk Scene," *ABC-TV Hootenanny Show Magazine*, vol. 1 no. 1, 1964, 16

academic and pseudo-academic panel discussions. This signaled a persistent belief that audiences must be educated before they could appreciate folk music. Music writers also delineated between the authentic and the inauthentic as a way to enlighten their audience. To the untrained observer, some music acts may have seemed like folk singers but in actuality were “utterly false.”<sup>6</sup> Folksong magazines featured an increasing number of full articles that examined or expounded on the form and function of folk music. They used authentic as a shorthand to mean both real and worthwhile.<sup>7</sup>

As a means to exclude popular folk specifically, anti-popular factions attempted to perpetuate a view of authenticity which emphasized both the academic definitions of oral transmission and community ownership and the social activist definition that focused on the political application of the music. Both the anthropological and political approaches maintained that the appreciation of folk music depended on the contexts. This idea of authenticity centered on the intention of the performer and the context of the performance. Further, it was incumbent on the performer to establish those contexts. From an academic and political perspective, performers of folk music should either be members of a rural community or performers who had studied and truly appreciated the music. Concerts included descriptions that placed performances in their cultural contexts by defining “what the music meant in the lives of the people who made it.”<sup>8</sup> Only those

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<sup>6</sup> Blind Rafferty, “The Electra Catalog – A Sarcophagus,” *Caravan*, August 1957, 3 – 4.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Shelton, “Folkways in Sound: Or the Remarkable Enterprises of Mr. Moe Asch,” *High Fidelity*, June 1960, 42 – 44.

<sup>8</sup> Shelton, “Folk Music Festival,” 59 – 60.

who understood the context of when it was written and recreated that intention were qualified to play folk music. Their idea of authenticity also included the politically charged conception of being “for the folk.”<sup>9</sup> Those who played folk music in the stead of genuine rural or ethnic performers had a responsibility to speak for the folk. Yet, with the confusing application of contradictory definitions, and the rush to fill the commercial airwaves with new records, those performers who were qualified to sing *for* the folk became unclear.

The anti-popular forces did not simply not like the popular folk groups, they saw their versions of the songs as destructive. Greenwich Village mainstay Dave Van Ronk succinctly described the way that popular folk acts denigrated the music stating, “There was an obvious subtext to what these Babbitt balladeers were doing, and it was, ‘Of course, we’re really superior to all this hayseed crap -- but isn’t it *cute*?’”<sup>10</sup> To the political and anthropological scenes, the use of folk music as apolitical entertainment necessarily included an element of exploitation.

Unfortunately for those arguing for strict lines of authenticity, musicians often proved to be too variable to be contained by inflexible categories. Clinging to one conception too tightly could unintentionally alienate apparently authentic performers. For example, if a writer argued for a definition of folk music based on the performer’s adherence to a political agenda, he or she may have inadvertently classified a rural

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<sup>9</sup> Richard A. Reuss with Joanne C. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 19; Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Dave Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street: A Memoir, Sixties--Primary Documents and Personal Narratives, 1960-1974* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2013), 120.



community singing for entertainment as inauthentic. As a response, writers adapted these categories over and over again to accommodate any number of musicians or styles. To soften these categories, discussions of style or approach tended to imply that performers existed on a scale. Musicians or folk revivalists were rarely described as purely authentic, but rather as possessing more or less of a desired characteristic. In this vein, artists were described as more “popular” or “sincere” or occasionally just “more authentic.”<sup>11</sup> With these shadings, discussions could recognize hard limits to what did and did not constitute folk music while maintaining a spectrum of acceptability. The muddled ways in which the popular press and folksong magazines discussed folk music only further reinforced the perceived need for a clear definition.<sup>12</sup>

As the popular media coverage of the folk boom phenomenon developed, general interest outlets increasingly wrestled with the apparent contentiousness across the “folk field.” While writers referenced palpable differences in the approaches to folk revivalism, they often obscured nuance. At the start of the boom, articles focused on young people’s interest in folk music as an undifferentiated mass, but by 1962 there was a pervasive awareness of subdivisions. At the height of the revival, journalists and critics exhibited a clear understanding between the purists on one side of the debate and the popularizers on the other. The popular coverage of the folk scene can be considered a lagging indicator of common-sense ideas about revivalism. The way the press covered

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<sup>11</sup> Harriet Schwartz, “Please Don’t Pick on the Kingston Trio,” *Seventeen*, no. 20 (1961), 36; International Music Fair Vol 26, Chicago: International Music Fair Inc., (1959).

<sup>12</sup> Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 136, 144.

the controversy revealed their expectation of the readership's evolving expectations regarding folk performance.

In 1958, if popular journalists talked about some division in folk music, they did not mean between folkniks and popular acts. Robert Shelton mentioned a split in the folk field in his early coverage when he commented on one set of records as demonstrating the “two poles” of American folk music. Here Shelton described the division as between trained musicians and folk interpreters on one hand and untrained rural performers with “raw feeling” on the other.<sup>13</sup> These divisions were not between different types of revivalism, but between folk interpreter and the folk. Urban performers were adopters of a culture to which they were not native. But the genuine folk played from their own experiences. Early on, discussions about different folk interpreters and professional musicians tended to paint them all with the same brush. Even when *The New York Times* reported on the divisions in folk fandom, it tended to cover differences in style. When Robert Shelton observed the divide, he framed it as between “folklore purists, to whom tradition is sacred, and the eclectics, who will take their music as it comes just as long as it is well performed.”<sup>14</sup>

As early as 1959, the Kingston Trio were singled out from the larger folk field as their own recognizable “type,” a branded subgenre of folk performance.<sup>15</sup> They were

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Shelton, “Popular American Folk Songs on LP,” *New York Times*, January 26, 1958.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Shelton, “Tradition vs. Art in Folk-Music Circles,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1959, X16.

<sup>15</sup> Page Stegner and Zonweise Hubbard, “Message from the West,” *Caravan*, no 15. Feb – Mar 1959, 27, 32.

soon recognized as controversial figures playing “semi-folk material.”<sup>16</sup> By the next year, discussion of authenticity crept into the national conversation. One article in *Time* described the state of folk music as split between real folk singers and “Pseudo folk groups such as the Kingston Trio.”<sup>17</sup>

After the Kingstons had been grouped together with other popular folk groups as a distinct subgenre, music critics began to take sides. Shelton oscillated between a conciliatory and combative attitude toward the folk popularizers. In one review, Shelton praised a new record by Ed McCurdy for managing to “keep both the popularized camp and the purist camp happy”<sup>18</sup> But, in another report on the newly formed Prestige records, under the supervision of folklorist Kenneth S. Goldstein, he opined that the new company, “is not going to give us the popular pap that is masquerading under the name folk music in so many places these days.”<sup>19</sup>

The popular press divided up the folk field in an attempt to convey its many textures. One article describes the folk field this way:

Folk singers come in at least four varieties: the genuine articles, such as Louisiana Convict Pete Williams; the ‘city-billies,’ who pick up their material at second hand but try to retain the original flavor; the ‘art singers,’ who transform the materials in carefully stylized arrangements, and the frankly commercial groups, which fit folk lyrics into a pop format.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *International Music Fair*, vol. 26, Chicago IL, 1959.

<sup>17</sup> “Folk Frenzy,” *Time*, July 11, 1960.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Shelton, “Americana for the Tyro,” *New York Times*, October 1, 1961, X16.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Shelton, “A New Folk Label with Serious Ideas,” *New York Times*, June 25, 1961, X15.

<sup>20</sup> “Folk Frenzy,” *Time*, July 11, 1960.

The Newport Folk Festival in 1959, which put the full range of the folk artists in stark relief, prompted a reckoning with the meaning and scope of modern folk music. Shelton attempted to reconcile the disparate categories of performers, groping to locate each act in an intelligible place. He noted that definitions emerged out of the proceeding and offered some categories: “Theatrical,” “ethnic,” “collector-singers and popularizers,” “blues singers,” “Bluegrass country music,” “gospel and religious singers,” “city folk singers and instrumentalists,” and “popular and commercialized folk singers.”<sup>21</sup> He even placed the audiences into various boxes: “Predominately youthful, it was mainly a Northeastern urban slice of the national audience. From Wellesley College in trim blazers, from Washington Square in faded blue jeans a year too old and a size too small, from the campus dens of Chicago and the coffee houses of the West Coast the listeners came in pilgrimage.”<sup>22</sup> Once the popular press embraced the narrative of differing folk camps, it proved difficult for them to consistently navigate.

Some folk fans found themselves pulled in two directions and saw the split as a stark division with two bad outcomes, popularizers and folkniks. One op-ed in *Autoharp* lamented, “Today the word folkniks is both a symbol and stereotype for the far-out singer/performer on a folk-kick, making the scene in a bohemian coffee house or a slovenly campus pad.”<sup>23</sup> The author lamented the false choice presented by coverage of the folk revival, a choice between ethnic dress-up or commercialized drivel. “It is

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Shelton, “Folk Music Festival,” *The Nation*, August 1, 1959, 59, 60.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> “Folkniks: Fact or Fiction?,” *Autoharp*, vol. 2 no. 1, October 6, 1961.

obvious to even the casual listener that the Kingston Trio, Odetta, Richard Dyer-Bennet, and Susan Reed, are concert singers with no real commitment to traditional modes or values. It is equally obvious that the uninitiated listener on first hearing Aunt Molly Jackson, Horton Barker, Maybelle Carter, and Huddie Ledbetter often responds with disapproval: Harsh, discordant, nasal, difficult, off-key. Conflict is sensed and the newcomer to folklore is torn between the poles of popularity and purity.”<sup>24</sup> This author drives home the prevailing impulse to choose sides. In this era of folk fandom, some felt that there could be no fence sitters.

Divisions became such a ubiquitous aspect of the folk scene that articles persistently included a perfunctory acknowledgment of the controversy and disagreement. The *Washington Post*, in navigating the intricacies of the controversy to an uninitiated readership, stated, “most observers concur that personalities such as Harry Belafonte and the Kingston Trio have been able to bridge the gap between the specialized folk genre and the more widely accepted popular idiom.”<sup>25</sup> The journalist appears compelled to include the controversy in his micro history of folk interest in America: “The purist complains that this has tainted true folk music with objectionable commercialism. The popularists maintain that the commercial approach has introduced folk music to millions of persons who would never have known it existed.”<sup>26</sup> Shelton, for his part, put the controversy rather more bluntly, “The debates are endless over such

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Leroy F. Aarons, “Folk Music Bridged the Gap,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 18, 1962, G9.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

questions as political bias vs. music for music's sake, authenticity vs. pop style, singing for fun vs. singing for profit, and on into the night."<sup>27</sup> *The LA Times* offered a similar assessment, "Why there are intra-folk wars between the pure ethnics and the no-so-pure-nics – violent arguments about whether it is depraved to dream up new lyrics for some boozey old ballad. Folk music is feeling so fine, thank you, that its factions can split and still outnumber most of the rest of us."<sup>28</sup>

At times, the complex nature of an individual performer made reporting on the split nearly impossible. Take the case of Jimmie Driftwood, whose backstory and musical approach tied one reviewer up in knots. Driftwood had "traditional" folk roots, but wrote new songs that garnered popular success. The article lamented, "This really makes it difficult for 'folksong purists.' A 'purist' should admire Jimmie Driftwood as a traditional Ozark singer, but should shun him as a popular composer and singer. You almost have to have the Child Collections at your side for reference during a concert in order to know which numbers to applaud and which ones not to."<sup>29</sup> Conversely, folk acts that found favor with certain scenes, could be lumped into different categories by the national press. Peter, Paul, and Mary, who got their start in the Village scene, produced records that shot up the pop charts. One review in 1962 described them as, "Slick, polished, and brittle performances of folk music for city sophisticates. Nothing folksy

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Shelton, "Bluegrass, From Hills and City," *New York Times*, September 30, 1962, X15.

<sup>28</sup> Art Seidenbaum, "Minstrels Ease Folk Music Pain," *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 9, 1963, B7.

<sup>29</sup> Dick Adams, "Jimmie Driftwood: Traditional Singer and Pop Composer," *Autoharp*, vol. 2 no. 3, December 1, 1961.

about this kind of singing... the trend back to 'honest' doesn't start with this disc."<sup>30</sup>

While the media consistently confirmed a split in folk fandom, it often could not agree on the contours of the separation.

By 1964, the popular media treated the subdivision in the folk field as commonplace and well understood, so much so, that they turned to satirical deconstructions of "types." One article offered a wry take on the folk scene, describing devotees as including the clean-cut kid, from CCNY [City College of New York], the primitive, also from CCNY, the shy girl with natural hair, the jug band, the egghead trio, the Welsh-Irish-English-Scandinavian revolutionaries, The "Lonesome Traveler" sensitive singer who is emotional and "Sings of Suffering and grief. Also specializes in Guilt songs."<sup>31</sup> Another article portrayed typical tropes in the folk revival using the format of a coloring book. It included pictures of common revival objects, such as a guitar: "it's the folksinger's baby – color it blue and pink," and a guitar student who is told she'll be famous in 5 years, "color her wishful." It ended with, "A capo – it makes the guitar higher, like a higher priced singer – color it Joan."<sup>32</sup> Once the clarion voice of folk interpretation, Joan Baez had been reduced to just another folk type, like the Kingston Trio.

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<sup>30</sup> Henrietta Yurchenco, "Folk Music: Peter, Paul, and Mary," *The American Record Guide*, November 1962, 65.

<sup>31</sup> Jean Sheperd, "folkbiz forever more!," *ABC-TV Hootenanny Show Magazine*, vol. 1 no. 1, 1964, 41.

<sup>32</sup> "The Folksingers Coloring Book," *Tune Up*, May 1963.

This awareness of type by 1964 illustrated not only how divided the folk field became between 1958 and 1964, but how nuanced the discussion in the media became. No longer simply a division between folk interpreters and the folk themselves, the folk music industry was rife with disputed subgenres and potential fakers. One advertisement for a local folksong society, published in the program for the Detroit Folk Festival in 1963, summarized the ubiquity of the split when it posed the snarky questions, “Enjoy a good argument? Interested in folk music? Folklore?”<sup>33</sup> The order of those questions was no mistake. The entire field of folk music had become inextricably linked to contentious argumentation in the minds of the public.

### **The Commercial Label**

The three approaches to folk revivalism operated with an uneasy coexistence, especially in the minds of a public who may have only intuitively perceived the differences in folk performers. While the political faction and anthropological faction had their differences as to the correct approach, with the rise of the popular performers they decreasingly attacked each other and united against their common enemy. After a full year on the pop charts, the Kingston Trio proved they would not act as a gateway to ‘authentic’ performers. The Kingston Trio fans who came to the campus folksings only wanted to sing and play like the Kingstons. The out-of-towners who crashed a Greenwich Village open mic sang the same tired songs in the same tired style.

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<sup>33</sup> *Detroit Folk Festival Program*, Detroit, MI, October 12, 1963.



In response, a backlash rose to marginalize the popular approach in the public imagination. In the first few years of the revival, they tried to disqualify the popular acts definitionally, but found that every category ultimately disqualified one of their own. Arguments about performance style, or the background of the arts could usually be turned against an ally. What stones could they throw, that they could endure? The two factions hit upon a cutting blow. They asserted the Kingston Trio and their ilk did not play the music for the right reasons, but only for the sake of a greasy buck. The general public should reject the popular folk artists because they were commercial.

The label 'commercial' acted as both an easy identifier, as the popular groups certainly used the language and iconography of commercial music to communicate with their audience, and it inculcated the anti-popular factions from association with commercialism. It associated the anthropological and political folk fans with a higher calling. As a rhetorical tactic, it placed historical appreciation, political awareness, or artistic merit over and separate from commercial endeavors. The political and anthropological factions happily distanced themselves from claims of commerciality by placing that mantle on the popular group. On the other hand, this also had the effect of allowing popular groups to claim their own distance from politics and historical claims. That is, the popular groups embraced the moniker of commercial, because it fit neatly with their self-identified aim of entertainment, and it allowed them to further claim an apolitical view of history.

The argument over commercialism reinforced for each faction that their approach to revivalism was the correct one. The anthropological and politically motivated hoped

to escape the falsity of commercialism and mass-produced culture; their turn to folk authenticity was itself an anti-commercial attempt to solve the dilemma of modern alienation. Commercial as a fundamental critique not only severed to distinguish popular folk music from the rest of the field, it emboldened them as to the purity of their purpose. It served to paint the popular artists as unserious band-waggoners who cravenly exploited the source material, while it distanced the political and anthropological folkies from their own commercial activities. The folkniks played the music for a higher purpose, while the popular folk fans played the music *just* for commercial reasons. Or put another way, “...the Brothers Four turn folk songs into TV commercials.”<sup>34</sup>

Concerns about the potential ruinous effects of the commercial market on folk music have accompanied discussions about collection and performance since the early days of the folk collector. Even before the boom, mainstream publications occasionally expressed worries that the “Broadway shellacking” of source material might cheapen it.<sup>35</sup> As early as 1950, *Sing Out!* included a satiric notice from the “Dept. of Folk Music Going Commercial.”<sup>36</sup> A similar article in 1951 warned, “we can expect an increasing deterioration in the artistic quality of this material in direct ratio to its growing commercial use.”<sup>37</sup> While in 1957, *Caravan* asserted that commercialism and popularization represented an inferior style. “A commercial folksinger has a lack of

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<sup>34</sup> T. E. Rafferty, “Folk Music vs. Fake Music,” *Hootenanny*, vol. 1 no. 1, December 1963, 52, 53, 62, 63.

<sup>35</sup> Roy Harris, “Folk Songs,” *House and Garden*, December 1954, 112, 165, 170.

<sup>36</sup> Irwin Silber, “Singing People,” *Sing Out!*, 1, no. 7 (Dec 1950), 15.

<sup>37</sup> Irwin Silber, “The Weavers: New ‘Find’ of the Hit Parade,” *Sing Out!*, 1, no. 9 (Feb 1951), 6.

confidence in folk music's audience appeal so he elaborates upon it and adds all sorts of saccharine... Such performances leave one with the feeling of coldness and sterility."<sup>38</sup>

But these comments, rather than portentous doom-saying, are better understood as relatively amorphous apprehensions. Before "Tom Dooley," commercialism amounted to a tolerable strain in an overall healthy interest in folk culture.

Leading up to the great boom, commercial tended to be a simple descriptor of style. Outside of those few examples above, it was rare for media about folk music to use commercial to mean undesirable or false. Some even made a case for adaptations in folk music, specifically to compete on the popular charts:

The 'purists' seems to regard a bad voice as a prime requisite to authenticity... The person who objects to a good voice and new arrangements, in folk music, is simply saying that the entire field isn't good enough to compete with modern composers. The man who says that Dyer-Bennett's voice is too good for his material, is saying that the material isn't worth doing well.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, an article in *Caravan* complimented the Kingston Trio on their ability to combine a folk sound with a "a smooth commercial sound."<sup>40</sup> Another review in *Down Beat* described a Terriers record as applying "a gloss to the tunes which is always tasteful and quite commercial."<sup>41</sup> Before commercial took shape as a damning epithet, *Caravan* celebrated the commercial activities of singers in the scene, declaring in a bulletin,

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<sup>38</sup> Kafka, "From the Dead," *Caravan*, no. 3, Oct 1957, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Coulson, "Commercialism in Folk Music," *Caravan*, no. 3, Oct 1957, 9 – 11. It should be noted that this article still maintained that alterations can go too far. By the end he conceded that, "some commercial versions of folksongs destroy the basic beauty of the song, turning into just another pop song."

<sup>40</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, "Records," *Caravan*, no. 15, Feb – Mar, 1959.

<sup>41</sup> D.C. "Music in Review: The Terriers," *Down Beat*, May 30, 1957, 21.

“Folksingers of commercial: The cowboy balladeer on the Cheerios commercials is Oscar Brand. Ed McCurdy is singing the praises of L&Ms. Bob Gibson recommends maple syrup (donno what brand yet). Dave Sear is expected to record for Chicklets.”<sup>42</sup> This report was presented as laudable efforts of known members of community. They were not sell-outs, but local talent making good.<sup>43</sup>

By 1959, anti-popular factions turned to commercial as the fundamental measure to cordon off the music of the popular artists. An exchange over several issues in the pages of *Sing Out!* illustrated how the success and musical style of The Kingston Trio prompted a fresh reckoning over commercialization. Columnist Ron Radosh wrote a scathing article lambasting the commercialization of folk music. The following issue, Alan Lomax, back on the scene after an extended trip throughout Europe, wrote an assessment of folk revivalism in America that lumped together the work of both the urban revivalists and the popular groups. In response, New Lost City Ramblers member John Cohen, attempted to carve out a niche for the activities of the urban folk revivalist by distinguishing them from the popular artists. This series of exchanges demonstrated how folksong magazines like *Sing Out!* sought to rather surgically isolate the popular artists, while still endorsing the alterations and commercial activities of select performers.

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<sup>42</sup> “New York Scene,” *Caravan*, no. 8, Mar 1958, 29, 30.

<sup>43</sup> Just before the Kingston Trio broke through, Pete Seeger understood the division in folk revivalism irrespective of commercialization. He penned a column that attempted to bridge the differences between the “purists” and the “hybridist.” Pete Seeger, Johnny Appleseed Jr.: The Purist vs. The Hybridist, *Sing Out!*, 7, no. 4, 1958, 32.

Radosh's piece sought to explicitly exclude commercial artists that played folk music in a pop style from the acceptable definition of folk music. According to Radosh, when a musical group does not express sensitivity to the source material, "then the merit of the group disappears and the removal of the music from its origins and derivations takes place."<sup>44</sup> Yet, selling folk music as a commercial product did not always diminish the art form. It was possible to put music on the marketplace while maintaining respect for this music. The adaptations made by The Weavers, for example, "did not detract from its art... The Weavers reached the Hit Parade while maintaining the meaning of their music along with the dignity of presentation it demands."<sup>45</sup> Popularized folk disqualified itself not simply for its commercial activity, but for its lack of respect for the source material. Radosh criticized the Kingston Trio's irreverent attitude, "...the jokes are of the worst sort and take away from the dignity of the numbers they do. When the group finally does a number which reveals the possible potential they have, their introduction and their attitude towards the music leaves the audience with none of the excitement which a group like the Weavers produced."<sup>46</sup> For Radosh these adaptations harmed the folk tradition: "This type of arrangement is destroying what was good in the music and adapting it to a stereotyped beat and style of a decadent musical culture."<sup>47</sup> He

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<sup>44</sup> Ron Radosh, "Commercialism and the Folk Song Revival," *Sing Out!*, 8 no. 4 (1959), 27 – 29.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Radosh, "Commercialism and the Folk Song Revival," 27 – 29., Weissman also comments that the pop folk practice of joke telling on stage was particularly galling to revivalists, in Dick Weissman, *Which Side Are You On?: An Inside Story of the Folk Music Revival in America* (New York: Continuum, 2005) 75 – 76.

<sup>47</sup> Radosh, "Commercialism and the Folk Song Revival," 27 – 29.

ended the piece with an ominous warning, “Every folk music fan who may have thought that groups which ‘popularized’ a music which otherwise was too ethnicky or might not be understood and thus rationalized a destructive and non-creative development, will literally be shocked into a realization of what is going on by listening to this album.”<sup>48</sup>

Radosh’s diatribe sought to cordon off the popular artists from a general understanding of folk music. Commercial artists should be understood as fundamentally different, and their activities were destructive to art and culture.

Lomax, in the next issues of *Sing Out!*, wrote about the general state of folk revivalism in America, and in so doing disqualified much of the work of the current crop of revivalists. Lomax grouped together urban revivalist and popular artists categorically, “The American city folk singer, because he got his songs from books or from other city singers, has generally not been aware of the singing style or the emotional content of these folk songs, as they exist in traditions.”<sup>49</sup> Revivalists and pop musicians alike altered the music in their performance. Artists changed and adapted folk music in this process and the result was very seldom still a folk song. According to Lomax, “when a good jazzman, symphonist, or gypsy snatches up a folk song and plays with it, the results may be interesting or, occasionally, important, but important as jazz, symphony or gypsy

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Alan Lomax, “The ‘Folknicks’ – and the Songs They Sing,” *Sing Out!*, 9 no. 1 (1959), 30 – 31, original emphasis.

music, not as a folk song.”<sup>50</sup> Lomax stuck very close to the strict preservationist view of authentic folk music. This equally implicated both popular folk groups and revivalists.

Cohen responded to Lomax on the very next page with a point-by-point refutation. Lomax, he said, “suggests that the use of books and records has been inadequate and unfortunate in that these sources have not communicated the singing style and emotional content of the folk songs. Yet these very books and records have been the products of the work of folklorists such as Alan Lomax for the last twenty years.”<sup>51</sup> For Cohen, urban revivalists were different because they treated the music with respect. Moreover, revivalists may have traveled first hand to research songs or study field recordings in the Library of Congress. Indeed, “The general level of understanding is higher than it was when Lomax left these shores some years ago. The emphasis is no longer on social reform or on world-wide reform. The effort is focused more on a search for real and human values.”<sup>52</sup> This reasoning allowed Cohen to carve out a space for the authenticity of his approach. For Cohen, the project of the revivalist was more than political commentary; it was humanist. This exchange, over two issues, illustrated how *Sing Out!* as a self-appointed spokesperson for the folk revivalists attempted to draw a fine, but bright line that excluded popular artists.

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<sup>50</sup> Lomax, “The ‘Folknicks’ – and the Songs They Sing,” 30 – 31.

<sup>51</sup> John Cohen, “In Defense of City Folksingers: A Reply to Alan Lomax,” *Sing Out!*, 9 no. 1 (1959), 32 – 34.

<sup>52</sup> Cohen, “In Defense of City Folksingers,” 32 – 34.

Some publications, like the *Little Sandy Review*, were quick to disqualify large swaths of folk revivalism as so much hokum. The magazine became notorious for its caustic tone and dismissal of nearly all the popular folk song activity as ersatz nonsense. Consequently, its pages recognized no functional difference between any of the “city” folk singers, regardless of political alignment. The fact that they did so with such snark and style only enhanced the critique. In one issue the editors took special aim at how the folk popularizers adapted music for a general audience: “People must come to folk music themselves. You don’t change or dilute the music and make it come to them... Arrangement is not necessary and if done, must remain within the folk form (which the Weavers, Kingston Trio, Odetta etc. do not do.) You do not add a pretty girl to a Cezanne painting so it will communicate with more people.”<sup>53</sup> Here, even folk acts well regarded by other so-called purists, were lumped together as inherently false by the *Little Sandy* editors.

The issue that concerned revivalists most about commercialization was the confusion it caused in a crowded market. *Little Sandy*, in another issue, expressed the problem this way, “We’re afraid that it and the Kingston Trio-type folkum are going to displace real folk music.”<sup>54</sup> Those that rejected popularized folk recognized the limited real estate on record store shelves and began see the public understanding of folk music as a zero-sum game. As a result, they focused their ire squarely on the popularizers. The issue required loud and persistent criticism from the folk enthusiast community because

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<sup>53</sup> *Little Sandy Review*, no. 3 (c. 1959), 25.

<sup>54</sup> *Little Sandy Review*, no. 6, 21.



“great numbers of students are not aware of the difference between folksingers and exploiters of folksong.”<sup>55</sup> The folksong community found that it needed to differentiate itself. As one article in *Hootenanny* magazine put it, the problem were “the commercial nabobs popularizing only the more superficial aspects of it, garbling the deeper meanings, and leaving the veteran folk singers and folk-music lovers out in the cold... without even the comfort of being as different as we used to be?”<sup>56</sup>

The *Little Sandy Review* expressed these fears of market confusion in the midst of what was supposed to be a record review of a Cumberland 3 album. To the editors, the album demonstrated:

...just how far the pop-music Kingston Trio influence has gone. The resemblance in sound between the two groups is nothing short of fantastic... Practically every record company in the business now has a Kingston Trio cover-group and they all sound practically alike – and this is what they are trying to achieve. They all want a pop-music sound that will appeal to both parent and teenager alike – something nice, fresh, and bouncy, something musically pleasing to the ear and mentally unchallenging.

But this was not simply a question of style. The author argued that popularization and commercialization pointed to deeper issues: “Ethics are completely out of the question. Everybody screams, ‘I wrote this, I wrote that’ at the top of their lungs. Yet, there are a few honest companies who do record good folk music.”<sup>57</sup> This article laid bare the double tactic used to marginalize popularized folk. Not only was it derivative, the

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<sup>55</sup> “The Stoneman Family: An Editorial Comment,” *Autoharp*, vol. 3 no. 5, May 24, 1963.

<sup>56</sup> T. E. Rafferty, “Folk Music vs. Fake Music,” *Hootenanny*, vol. 1 no. 1, December 1963, 52, 53, 62, 63.

<sup>57</sup> “Record Review: Cumberland 3: Folkscene USA,” *Little Sandy Review*, no. 4, 1960.

listener could likely hear the pervasive influence of the Kingstons across the popularized folk field, it was also dishonest. The review concludes, “Mediocrity has become the key word, and traditionalism, authenticity, and scholarship have fallen by the wayside.”<sup>58</sup> Revivalists use this line of argumentation around authenticity to denigrate the quality and integrity of the popular folk acts.

Commercial became a handy label to attach to any music that was mass produced, unfeeling, and false. An editorial in the University of Illinois’s *Autoharp* grieved the throngs of students who “turned out in droves for the IBM programmed and music business assembly line produced ‘folk’ groups.”<sup>59</sup> Commercialism and dishonesty were more than just coincidental; they were co-causal. Conversely, if folk music could be presented in an authentic manner, this would diminish its associations with commercial products.

The rejection of commercialism became a commonplace platitude. Audiences had learned not only the ubiquity of the critique, but many of its contours as well. F.K. Plous, the replacement editor for Archie Green at *Autoharp*, finally concluded in 1964 that the Kingston Trio was incompatible with an anthropological understanding of the music.

No one in the Campus Folksong Club needs to be told that a fat percentage of the national huckster crowd has tried to exploit the folk-boom by bastardizing its material and palming off folk-derived songs and discs for the sake of a buck... Merely to join the Club requires the showing of credentials, and the easiest and

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> “The Stoneman Family: An Editorial Comment,” *Autoharp*, vol. 3 no. 5, May 24, 1963.

quickest way to establish oneself is to give a short tirade on the evils of commercialism.<sup>60</sup>

Plous echoed the equation of anti-commercial with pro-authenticity, and his comments revealed how pervasive this sentiment was on university campuses. However, to simply be anti-commercial was no longer sufficient. Plous urged his reader to press on in discover more obscure and more “authentic” material. He warned, “Alas, Alas! The decision to thumb one’s nose at commercialism does not magically purify the soul and free it from tastelessness; it merely turns the soul loose to chase other values, any one of which may turn out to be equally false.”<sup>61</sup>

One parody song, called the “Unauthentic Talking Blues,” played on public perceptions of commercialism and authenticity. It appeared only as a set of lyrics in the L.A. folksong publication, *Good News*. Within the story of the song, the singer drops out of college, buys a pair of “fives” and a book of folk songs by Burl Ives, and went to Washington square. The singer does not fit in there, so he goes to RCA<sup>62</sup> where he says, “I’m a folk singer and I’ve got something new. I sang ‘Molly Malone’ with a rock and roll beat. When I play ‘Lord Randall’ they danced in the street. Played ‘Barbara Allen’ like the Tennessee Waltz, Made ‘Betsy From Pike’ a ballad with schmaltz.”<sup>63</sup> The author of the Blues takes aim as popular modernization specifically, and the treatment of folk arts as entertainment. But, again in the story of the song, the record company loves it and

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<sup>60</sup> F. K. Plous Jr., “Notes on a Country Fiddle...” *Autoharp* no. 21, October 7, 1964.

<sup>61</sup> Plous Jr., “Notes on a Country Fiddle...”

<sup>62</sup> “Unauthentic Talking Blues,” *Good News*, vol 1 no 6, 1961.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

it launches the singer's career. The final lines drip with sardonic irony as to the corrupting influence of money in folk music,

I may prostitute art in certain respects  
But Chase-Manhattan honors my checks  
You won't find me on the folkways label  
By my Jaguar's upholstered in Russian sable<sup>64</sup>

When confronted with the possibility that some may criticize his commercial approach, the singer concluded, "Time speaks louder than the Village Voice."<sup>65</sup>

Just like the contentious divisions in the folk field, the debate about commercialization filtered up into the popular press. Major media outlets treated the debate as a curious sideshow to folk revivalist activities. They assumed an agnostic position that tended to merely observe that some corners had concerns. "This crescendo of interest has worried many strict traditionalists, who fear the effects of commercialization on folk art."<sup>66</sup> Of course, by repeated repetition of those concerns they validated them. Coverage of the revival reinforced a negative stereotype of those artists who were "only being in it for the money" as severely endangering an artist's authenticity.<sup>67</sup> However, popular outlets also tended to show little concern for authenticity. Consequently, in the popular press the debate lacked real teeth.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Grace Jan Waldman, "Life Among the Guitars," *Mademoiselle*, May 1959, 32, 88.

<sup>67</sup> Josh Dunson and Moe York Asch, "Is Cash Killing Folk Music," in *The American Folk Scene: Dimensions of the Folk Song Revival*, eds. David A. DeTurk and A Poulin, Jr. (New York: Dell, 1967), 310.

Once the popular press caught on to commercialism as an issue in the folk field, reporters regularly queried acts as to their position on the great debate. This meant that as the revival wore on, more and more acts were forced to address the question in interviews. The success of the anthropological and political revivalists of planting this idea in the minds of the press paid dividends as each act put themselves on the record defending their commercial or non-commercial credentials. This usually meant that each particular act defended their approach as acceptable under their specific definition of folk music.

Musician Barbara Dane, in one interview, wrestled with how much to openly engage the commercial market. She pinned the issued on the propensity of market forces to corrupt art. As Dane described it, a person who played the blues for their own sake had no conflict, but:

As soon as he wants to concentrate completely on music, to spend all of his available time at it in order further to increase his proficiency, he is forced to find ways to make the music feed him... And now he faces entirely different creative problems. Suddenly he has to consider the consumer's as well as his own wishes, and think about the employer and what the employer thinks his public wants. This is where the corruption of the music often begins.<sup>68</sup>

While Dane did not identify a way out for the artists, she showed compassion for the conundrum.

The popular press more pointedly called folk super group Peter, Paul and Mary to account for their apparently commercial activities. In one interview the group attempted to reconcile the kind of music they perform with other music labeled commercial. They

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<sup>68</sup> Barbara Dane, "The Meaning of the Blues," *Down Beat*, March 31, 1960, 17,

also justified the selling of folk culture for profit. The interviewer asked Mary Travers if there was a conflict between “ethnic” folk music and the PPM approach. Travers responded, “At one time, Peter, Paul and myself were the ethnics. We gradually broke away to form our own tradition. No, I don’t believe we are commercial. In fact, I don’t believe that there is such a thing as commercial folk music – except that which is done in bad taste.”<sup>69</sup> The marker of “taste” divided the field for Travers.

In the same interview, Peter Yarrow attempted re-frame the debate altogether. “The word applies,” he said emphatically, “to those who produce strictly for commercial gain. It should not be applied to a performer simply because he makes money.”<sup>70</sup> Commercial gain on its own should not disqualify a performer as inauthentic. Yarrow conceded that while the group made money, they did so through honest art. Yarrow continued, “Dishonesty... comes when a group or a singer does a song in a style in which he doesn’t believe, merely because he hopes to be successful. A few folk singers are dishonest, not because they want to be, but simply because they are not intelligent enough!”<sup>71</sup> Commercialism and inauthenticity remained hand in glove for Yarrow, but intelligent artists, like him, could navigate the thorny issue.

By 1964, anti-commercialism in the folksong community was so commonplace as to be cliché. Some areas of the country felt that the rejection of popularized folk had

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<sup>69</sup> Mort J. Golding, “We Have Something to Say: Trio Talks About Honesty and Taste,” *Hootenanny*, vol. 1 no. 1, December 1963, 10, 11, 72, 73.

<sup>70</sup> Golding, “We Have Something to Say: Trio Talks About Honesty and Taste,” 10, 11, 72, 73.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

reached an undue, stringent fervor. In a letter to the editor, a fan mused on the hollowness of the folk community which had been disdainful of the “Madison Avenue and Hollywood types who dictate and feed the public taste for crass, super-slick, commercialized folkum. Further, one also sees the anger and pity felt for the public which is gullible enough to eat it up.” In response to this, however, the author claims that folkniks “are being grossly hypocritical, for our response or reaction to the faddism has been the initiation and support of our own fad, one which is not less horrendous.”<sup>72</sup> While the folk revivalists were largely successful in planting doubt in the minds of the public as to the authenticity of the popular artists, some found their protestations too “narrow-minded.” They in turn questioned the legitimacy of the “so-called and self-appointed purists who scorn the ‘commercial’ folk...”<sup>73</sup> One article in *Autoharp* from later in the revival satirically observed that the folksong club had developed a game called, “Running down the Kingston Trio.” “The champions at this game are generally those who profess a deep scholarly interest in traditional folk music...” To win the game, one must quickly and authoritatively assert, “The Kingston trio (and other similar groups) as just too commercial.”<sup>74</sup> By the end of the revival the critique lost much of its power.

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<sup>72</sup> “Letters to the editor,” *Broadside of Boston*, vol. 2 no. 24, February 1964.

<sup>73</sup> H. W. Grookett, “Letter to the Editor,” *Hootenanny*, vol. 1 no. 2, March 1964, 3.

<sup>74</sup> Dick Adams, “In Defense of the Kingston Trio,” *Autoharp*, vol. 1 no. 4, May 19, 1961, 7, 8.

## Discerning Consumers Choose Commercial Folk

While the label commercial may have shored up the ranks of folk fans against the popularizes and seeded some doubt in the mind of the public, the epithet failed to deter fans of popularized folk. Also, the popular folk acts, instead of running from the label, embraced their commercial appeal. They justified their commercial approach as a natural outgrowth of their overall commitment to producing professional, high-quality products for consumers. While other folk acts highlighted their homespun talent or unpolished sincerity, or Peter Paul and Mary attempted to thread the needle of good taste in a commercial field, popular folk acts emphasized their professional credentials as proof of their quality. Rather than distance or minimize the performative aspects of musical production, the popular acts proudly broadcast their position as entertainers. This broke with other factions who emphasized the folk song as artifact or a communal act of political solidarity. Political and anthropological folk revivalists catered to audiences who thought of themselves as connoisseurs or activists. Popular performers treated their audience like discerning consumers.

In television performances, newspaper advertisements, or on album jacket covers, popular folk acts highlighted their professional credentials and accomplishments. When Milton Berle or Perry Cuomo introduced the Kingston Trio in their various performances on the Kraft Music Hall, the emcees only mentioned the success of the group up the pop charts.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the talk show style interviews after the performance focused on the

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<sup>75</sup> *Kraft Music Hall*, NBC, November 11, 1958; Perry Cuomo's *Kraft Music Hall*, NBC, January, 1959.



performers' time in the music industry. In these performances on television, there was virtually no discussion of the nature of folk music, and no mention of who the folk might be. In the Brothers Four debut album, the back cover spent much of its copy detailing the rise of the band in securing a record contract and lauded their diligent work ethic.<sup>76</sup> In every opportunity, popularized folk groups presented themselves to their audience as highly professional artists. They not only spent hours perfecting their craft, their commercial success was a testament to their quality.

The Kingston Trio, in their own narration of the group's success, emphasized the development of a ladder climbing work ethic. In a slim fan-service biographical book they discussed how they worked hard on arrangements and instrumentation until they "were in top professional shape."<sup>77</sup> In one interview Dave Guard openly discussed how the Trio was run like a business, saying, "While it's rare to find folk singers who can think like accountants, the Kingston Trio can."<sup>78</sup> But to seem too cravenly greedy would rob the music of some its appeal as good clean fun. Consequently, the trio attempted to balance claims of professionalism and justifications of making money off folk culture, against accusations of greed. Guard demonstrated the balancing act in one interview, "The three of us decided that the nine-to-five world was simply not for us. Bob and I were raised in Hawaii where early in life we learned that happiness and music came before money. Nick Reynolds is a Navy brat, and in the Navy they measure success by

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<sup>76</sup> The Brothers Four, *The Brothers Four*, vinyl (Columbia Records, 1960).

<sup>77</sup> *The Kingston Trio*, Random House, Inc. New York, NY, 1960.

<sup>78</sup> David Dachs, "Hottest Guys in Show Biz," *Teen Digest*, April 1960, 8.

rank, not money... We happen to be three guys who love music more than we love business administration. And fortunately we can make a good living doing what we love.”<sup>79</sup> As a piece of their public image, the group affirmed that they both loved what they did and appreciated being able to make a living.

Guard provided the clearest defense of the professionalism in folk performance in the 10th anniversary issue of *Sing Out!*. Silber invited Guard to participate in a symposium of views on folk music.<sup>80</sup> In his editorial, Guard asserted that the job of the folk singer was to find and practice material. This was an exercise in acquisition and redistribution by skilled artists. He also sees himself as an entertainer singing folk material. He had several rules for engaging an audience, including “1- Be as good a performer as you know how... 2- Don’t preach. People pay for entertainment unless otherwise is advertised.”<sup>81</sup> The audience had not come to receive a sermon; they came to have a good time. In this way, Guard made a space for his approach by recontextualizing the purpose of the folk concert itself. Other folk singers may think cultural edification was fundamental, but Guard audaciously reminds the audience of *Sing Out!* folk music was just for fun. Guard concludes the piece by elevating professionalization as the primary metric of music performance, stating, “Don’t criticize me, Buddy. Learn to play

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<sup>79</sup> Lloyd Shearer, “The Kingston Trio: The Hottest Act in Show Business,” *Parade*, December 4, 1960, 24.

<sup>80</sup> Irwin Silber to Dave Guard, September 12, 1960, box 1, folder 4, Kingston Trio Collection, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>81</sup> Dave Guard, “The Professional Performer of Folk-Oriented Material,” *Sing Out!*, 11 no. 1 (Feb-Mar 1960).

it better than I do.”<sup>82</sup> Guard’s thinking in this piece demonstrated how the role of professionalism and entertainment joined together in the minds of the popular folk performer.

The anthropological and political folk artists had their own concerns about amateurism in folk performance. Yet, their concerns stemmed from desires to represent their subject well, rather than the specific defense of professionalism among the popular folk performers that rested on ideas about the quality of commercial products. When Dave Van Ronk tried to assemble a folk singers guild in the late 1950s, he too made arguments to defend the dignity of musicians performing professional services. He sought to distance the guild from the amateurism they saw as rampant in the field. Van Ronk, in an effort to demand consistent pay and prevent competitive undercutting, advocated for a generally professional approach by musicians. He claimed, “singing in front of an audience is work like any other job.”<sup>83</sup> But, Van Ronk balanced these comments with a special recognition of the kinds of effort necessary to be a legitimate folk performer. “The individual singer who decides to be a performer of folksongs and something of a folklorist must realize that he is a performer and must be judged as one, to some extent. He must adopt some of the standards of the performer and the conscious artist, in order to create a decent performance and an artistic experience out of his material...”<sup>84</sup> Professionalism would lead to greater respect for the material. This kind of

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<sup>82</sup> Guard, “The Professional Performer of Folk-Originated Music,” 28, 30.

<sup>83</sup> Dave Van Ronk, “Ethics and the Folksinger,” *Caravan*, no. 7, Feb 1958, 29.

<sup>84</sup> Peter Feldman, “A Note on Singing Style,” *Caravan*, no. 16. Apr – May – 1959, 6, 7, 38 – 40.

professionalization was a means of protection for the arts, a defensive measure against exploitative business practices and generally not used to sell music to an audience.

For this faction of the revival, professionalism came from personal and artistic integrity. Restrictions on performance conditions, expectations of performance proficiency, or the expectation of compensation derived not as a market function, but as a recognition of the gravity of their artistic endeavor. In 1963 Joan Baez refused to play a concert at the University of Indiana after a dispute over the contract. Baez insisted would only perform at events sponsored by the campus Folksong Club. The deal fell through and Baez cancelled. The student newspaper blasted the singer as “uncooperative” and implied she behaved in an aloof and difficult manner. However, the Folksong Club defended her decision stating, “Miss Baez has maintained respect for the integrity and traditions of folk music that will not allow her to lend either herself or the songs she sings to commercial exploitation. ... The Folksong Club is devoted to presenting music not only as entertainment but as education in tradition.”<sup>85</sup> Baez’s specific standards for presentation confirmed for the club her commitment to folk revivalism as a serious endeavor worthy of respect.

Popular artists, on the other hand, highlighted their professional credentials in order to flatter the audience for their good sense in purchasing a superior product. These acts eschewed the studied amateurism of certain corners of revivalism, in an embrace of their position as entertainers. Folkniks were amateurs who refused to bathe or couldn’t

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<sup>85</sup> Open letter to the student newspaper by the IU Folksong Club executive committee, *Blue Yodel*, vol. ii no. 4, February 1964. The letter is in response to “Baez Somewhat Unco-operative,” *Daily Student*, January 14, 1964

play their instruments. Popular folk groups were pros. Or, as one op-ed in *Autoharp* described the position, “folk performers, whether they like it or not, are actually in competition with all other forms of entertainment. They must appeal to a ‘neutral’ public.”<sup>86</sup> Professionalism amongst the popularizers became such a contemporary aspect of these acts that articles offered advice for aspiring performers as to the “presentation of professional folk music.” These kinds of articles advised that the performer must be heard, must be seen, must be dressed neatly, and must keep the audience’s interest. They even went so far as to offer specific advice for staging a music gig, such as, “You must vary your program...Try to do at least one sing-along per set.”<sup>87</sup> Absent from these kinds of articles was any discussion of individual responsibilities of scholarship or self-identification with the (variously imagined) folk. Professionalism in this context did not simply mean not amateur; it meant that artists catered to audience expectations about the conventions of a popularized folk performance. The marketplace was the proving ground of quality and consumers voted with their pocketbooks.

The audience for popularized folk not only did not mind the label commercial, the label comported with their self-perception as consumers. To this segment of the buying public, art and commerce quite comfortably aligned. Also, these patrons of the mainstream arts self-identified as consumers in a culture that reinforced consumerism as fundamentally American. Marketers and the artists themselves appealed to these sensibilities by presenting the music as a superior product that had been uniquely suited

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<sup>86</sup> Dick Adams, “In Defense of the Kingston Trio,” *Autoharp*, vol. 1 no. 4, May 19, 1961, 7, 8.

<sup>87</sup> Manny Rubin, “Singing Commercially,” *Tune Up*, January, 1963.

to their audience's tastes. These tactics played on understandings of performance as commodity and the audience-performer relationship as transactional. The popularized folk field represented an intuitive merging of art and commerce presented in the language of commercialism. While anthropological and political folk revivalists spoke to audiences who thought of themselves as connoisseurs or activists, popular performers treated their audience like consumers.

As much as anthropological and political folk revivalists attempted to differentiate their music from popularized folk, popular folk artists also distinguished their music from other folk subgenres. Popularizers highlighted their direct identification with the audience in a way that made it clear to their fans that the products they created were just for them. Moreover, the artists and marketers proudly broadcast that the music was not like the other strands of folk revivalism. It was neither stodgy like the anthropological performers, nor was it full of political "hangs ups" like the new topical singers. The listener could feel comfortable singing along with the performers, without some judgment, and its messages were safe. To put it another way, a white audience might have felt out of place singing along with an old delta blues-man or a black gospel group, but ought to feel no compunction when it came to singing along with the Kingston Trio. Yet, this was not a children's record, like *Sing Along with Mitch*, this was aimed, quite specifically, at teenagers and college students.

Performers presented themselves as young and energetic, just like the audience. Album covers honed-in on specific subsets of the popular market in an effort to sell the product sight unseen in the record store. Ideally a consumer would have been able to

pick up the album, read the back cover and understand that this was the right kind of folk music for them. These descriptions presented the popularized folk acts as similar to their intended audiences, young, fun and out for a good time. The Brothers Four debut album described the boys as “tall, clean-cut, all-American types” who played an “enthusiastic, collegiate kind of performance.”<sup>88</sup> This was not a scratchy old field recording, nor a feel-bad diatribe by a folknik in dungarees and work boots. Neither still did it aspire to high art. Unlike the album cover for a Joan Baez concert record, which compares her singing to great literature and concludes, “Joan’s triumph is that she is a consummate interpreter of folk song, and her expressive power is inseparable from the beauty and greatness and startling contemporaneity of the music and poetry which speaks through her to us.”<sup>89</sup> In the marketing of Baez, the folk interpreter was a vessel bearing great art. Meanwhile a group like The New Christy Minstrels were described as possessing “irresistible, youthful buoyancy.”<sup>90</sup> Record companies used personal identifications with the audience as a primary selling point for popularized folk.

Fans confirmed their position as consumers by critiquing the marketing of their favorite groups when it fell out of their expectations. In one fan letter to Capitol Records the author criticized the cover picture for the Kingston Trio *At Large* album. The letter reveals her thinking about the relationship between the fans and performers and her expectations as to Capitol’s role in producing a product for her consumption. Her letter

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<sup>88</sup> The Brothers Four, *The Brothers Four*, vinyl (Columbia Records, 1960).

<sup>89</sup> Joan Baez, *Joan Baez in Concert*, vinyl (Vanguard, 1963).

<sup>90</sup> The New Christy Minstrels, *In Person*, vinyl (Columbia Records, 1962).

scolds the record company for irresponsibly misrepresenting the band. She was particularly focused on their appearance; she wanted them to look like sexy *matinée* idols, not disheveled party goers. She evaluated the look of the band, “Dave Guard’s hair... hangs down in his face as if he had forgotten to comb it... Bob Shane is giving forth with a very seductive stare which I fully appreciate. In the other pictures I’ve seen of him -- and indeed, when I saw him in person – I was tremendously impressed with his masculinity (especially in glasses!); on this cover, he looks practically feminine.” As for Nick Reynolds, “I honestly think that he’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen. But on your cover, he looks like he was on a wild binge the night before and hasn’t quite recovered.” She concludes this analysis by bluntly stating why Capitol should take her ideas seriously, “I’m only one small segment of the buying public, but I am an all-important consumer.”<sup>91</sup> This kind of thinly veiled threat to the record company that they ought to conform to the contract of consumerism in how they present the band shows how deeply ingrained the consumerist identity was in the minds of the popular folk fans.

Folk song parodies could also reveal the primacy of the consumer identity in the minds of the public. For example, comedian and parodist Alan Sherman, best known for his later single “Hello Mudduh Hello Fadduh,” produced a comedy album in 1962 capitalizing on the folk fad. The track listing is full of songs designed to appeal to an audience familiar with the foibles of urban living, and passingly knowledgeable of the folk canon. One song, “Jump Down, Spin Around (Pick A Dress O’ Cotton),” uses an

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<sup>91</sup> Victory VanDyck to the Kingston Trio from June 2, 1959, UWM Manuscript Collection 16, Box 1 Folder 3, archive at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.



African American work song as the basis for an observation about the labor of consumerism.<sup>92</sup> In Sherman's update, the labor of the slave in the field, "Pick a bale of cotton," was parodied with the activity of shopping. The singer details the work of going to the department store in order to "Pick a dress of cotton/ Pick a dress of wool." The humor of the song derives from the juxtaposition of the work of the field with the work to buy the products and the vast distance between those two types of labor. The joke lands when the audience strongly identifies as a consumer. Sherman's urban and suburban audiences recognized how traveling to department stores and sorting through the racks could feel like drudgery.

As the folk fad wore on, popular artists increasingly moved from presenting their music as a consumer product to presenting themselves as consumers as well. They did this by trading on their fame to endorse consumer products. These endorsements communicated that the popular folk acts were consumers, just like the audience. The trend of popular folk acts working hand in hand with advertisers became so pervasive, *Variety* published an article summarizing the phenomenon. Working with advertisers, "has become a lucrative and building part of the pop-folk boom and one which is continuing to grow as products like cigarettes attempt to corral the teeners, and particularly the college crowd."<sup>93</sup> The Brothers Four inked a deal with Viceroy Cigarettes where they recorded mini radio shows as advertisements. The Limelites

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<sup>92</sup> Alan Sherman, *My Son, the Folksinger*, vinyl (Warner Brothers Records, 1962).

<sup>93</sup> "Music: Combos Clean Up Ad Jingle Coin As Performers," *Variety*, vol. 228, iss. 3, Sep 12, 1962, 46.

recorded a version of the “Things Go Better with Coke” jingle for Coca Cola. In all the speech throughout the folk revival, I found no evidence of folk fans even mentioning these product endorsements. The absence of this kind of speech indicates that consumers of popularized folk did not see a contradiction with this kind of behavior. For popular folk fans, artists worked within a consumer-centric system; consequently, their work in the advertising field was unremarkable.

The Kingston Trio provide the most visible example of folk acts working with advertisers. Their advertisement campaigns also demonstrate how they were presented to stand-in as the average consumer. The Trio signed a deal with 7UP reportedly worth up to \$200,000 to produce a “saturation campaign” of television and radio slots.<sup>94</sup> Werber liked the 7UP deal because it was a “combination of money and exposure,” and represented another opportunity to get the boys on television.<sup>95</sup> The radio slots used melodies from their folk hits with reworked lyrics. The television spots redeployed the same audio and put the band members into several comedic situations, a western saloon, a circus, wandering lost in the desert. Each commercial spot played like a silent comedy skit underscored with one of the re-worked songs. A bottle of 7UP acted as a MacGuffin the boys sought after and Nick always got the worst end of the deal.<sup>96</sup> Each scenario conveys the message that the members of the band are thoroughly satisfied with such a

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<sup>94</sup> “Radio-Television: Kingston Trio's 7-Up Spiels in 200G Deal,” *Variety*, vol. 216, iss. 3, September 16, 1959, 31.

<sup>95</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Frank Werber, November, 17, 1974, Box 1 Folder 29, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

<sup>96</sup> 7UP, “The Kingston Trio Sing for 7UP,” 1961, Kingston Trio Collection, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI.

high-quality consumer product which had been made just for their demographic. These commercials provided another avenue for the fans of the Kingston Trio to identify with them and that identification could be achieved through purchasing a consumer product.

The charges of commercialism and inauthenticity as deployed by the political and anthropological folk fans could not fully disqualify popular folk in the public marketplace. Though the debate did serve to sever those artists off from the rest of the revival. After 1961, popular folk artists lost out on bookings at the Newport Folk Festival. They took, instead, high-profile spots on the *Andy Williams Show* or ABC's *Hootenanny*. Anthropological and political folk revivalists marginalized popular folk as both ersatz and destructive to the public understanding of folk music. Popular folk artists, on the other side, recognized the marketing advantage to maintaining their image as professional entertainers and distanced themselves from stereotypes about folk performers as agitators or purists. Commercialism as a dividing line in the revival only tended to assure people that they were on the right side of the debate.

The focus on commercialism, on the other hand, obscured the transformations of American historical mythologies that came out of popular folk. By attempting to disqualify the approach altogether, critics of popular folk missed an opportunity to take its messages head on. While this may have worked to reinforce the in-group's understanding of what was and was not folk, it left a large majority of Americans to decide for themselves if they agreed with the Kingston Trio. Since the epithet "commercial" did not dissuade many Americans from purchasing popular folk records,

groups like the Kingston Trio were incentivized to continue presenting their view of history as apolitical. The political revivalists ceded the political middle ground to the popular approach even as they attempted to exclude them in the popular imagination.

For the buying public, the embrace of popular folk echoed their embrace of the free market and their belief in the American way of doing business. Commercialism as a positive ethic was of a piece with the larger cultural trend, identified by Historian Lizbeth Cohen, as “a complex shared commitment on the part of policy makers. Business and labor leaders, and civic groups to put mass consumption at the center of their plans for a prosperous postwar America.”<sup>97</sup> The majority of Americans did not make a conscious political choice when they supported popular folk, so much as they liked their style and bought their approach. The added fact that they were savvy businessmen only bolstered their reputation.

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<sup>97</sup> Lizbeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 11.

## Chapter Five

### ‘New Day Coming’: Black Folk in White Spaces

On December 10, 1959 one of the biggest music stars in the nation, Harry Belafonte, took television viewers on a musical journey through American history. Belafonte was one of the most popular musicians in country, rivaling even Elvis Presley. His album, *Calypso*, was the first LP to sell a million copies and his matinée idol good looks were plastered on magazine covers nationwide.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the hour special Belafonte sang songs from the Black tradition of American folk music. Narratively, the special presented a historical view of Black contributions to American life and culture. Belafonte alongside his select group of guest artists told this story using labor songs, blues, and gospel. The grand finale took place on a staged Black church with the congregants singing triumphantly of a “new day coming.” Belafonte condensed the broad range of American Black culture into one grand presentation. He also demonstrated many ingenious ways that Black performers navigated White spaces.

For the majority of participants in the revival, the music they played was understood as either Black or White. When I asked Dick Weissman about the different factions in Greenwich Village, he characterized the scene binarily. For the most part, performers either played White music or Black music. Musicians tended to pull from White rural sources and European folklore, or they played the blues:

The people in New York that I knew... the folkies that hung out in Washington Square. There were two basic factions, black music and white music, and not

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<sup>1</sup> In a novelty, one-off issue, one magazine speculated who would come to dominate the music market. *Tommy Sands vs. Belafonte vs. Elvis*, The Girl Friend The Boy Friend Corporation, New York, 1957.

many people crossed that line. Either you were like the New Lost City Ramblers, and you were aware of black music, but everything you did was Charlie Poole or various string bands of the 1920s, all white stuff. Or, you were Dave Van Ronk, who was a friend of mine, and you studied blues singing with Dixieland jazz, you listened to Robert Johnson... I used to go down to Tiny Ledbetter's house, Leadbelly's niece, and Gary Davis would play once a week... That was a sort of an interesting dichotomy, and if you liked one of these kinds of music, it was almost like you were obligated not to like the other, or at least not to pay any attention to it. And that was a source of tension, I think in the movement.<sup>2</sup>

There were a small number of performers in the popular market who did not fit into this Black and White divide. Joan Beaz and Mimi Farina at times emphasized their Hispanic heritage. Trini Lopez was known as a Mexican performer, but his connection to the folk revival was tenuous as he usually presented himself as a rock and roll artists. Buffy Sainte-Marie incorporated her Native American heritage into an overall political commentary. The few performers with Asian backgrounds tended to be Hawaiian born, like Larry Ramos the Filipino and Spanish banjo player for the New Christy Minstrels. These examples, however, represent the exception to the larger trend of the folk revival operating as a field dominated by Black and White performers.

The Black performers in the revival did not fit as neatly into the categories of performers explored in previous chapters. They often pulled from elements of each approach. They drew from and presented conceptions of historical culture, just as the anthropological folk revivalists had done and they played the music for entertainment, in a manner similar to the popular folk artists. Yet, Black artists very rarely claimed to be apolitical. Unlike White popular artists, the fact of the Black performers race inevitably

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<sup>2</sup> Dick Weissman interview by Stephen Moore, March 25, 2022.

pulled them into addressing contemporary politics. Though White folk singers and folk fans may have debated the correct approach to revivalism and musicianship, very rarely did they bring up the subject of their own race. Black artists, on the other hand, could hardly escape the question of their race as a public issue. Scholar Frank B. Wilderson affirms this idea when he characterizes the social position of Black folk in American society as definitionally limited: “The Black is needed to mark the border of Human subjectivity.”<sup>3</sup> Blackness itself was a political question.

Black performances of folk music were also a performance of Blackness. Black theorists have observed how Blackness is a performance, with different expectations for different contexts.<sup>4</sup> Black Studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson describes Black performance as containing both a dialectic and dialogic.<sup>5</sup> Dialogic indicates Blackness as performance - the superficial perspective of Blackness as a set of behaviors and visual iconography. Dialectic refers to the disconnect between the living Blackness, as performance, and the experience of Blackness, as personal psyche. Performance Studies scholar Malik Gaines describes how Black artists used their exclusion to subvert expectations: "In terms of cultural production, blackness operates a theater across the border from modernity's privileged territory. A spectacle of difference, the insistent demand for blackness' reenactment points to a powerful performativity, founded in

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<sup>3</sup> Frank B. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, First edition. (New York, N.Y: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 164, 168.

<sup>4</sup> J. Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance*, New Americanists (Durham [N.C: Duke University Press, 1999), 16 - 23.

<sup>5</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.

negativity, but which, in performance, may be deployed resistantly."<sup>6</sup> Because Black artists were always already othered, they inverted this outsider status as a form of social commentary.

Black artists in the folk boom often found themselves in spaces controlled by White people. For the most part, participating in the folk revival meant playing to majority White audiences or even all White audiences that had been pre-segregated before admission. This is not to say that the folk revival was a phenomenon exclusively amongst White folks, but the levers of power in terms of club ownership, media gate keeping, and purchasing power were all in the hands of White people. These White dominated levers of power funnels Black artists into neat musical categories. Though not expressed in such rigid terms at the time, Black performers had three options if they wanted to be seen in the market place of folk albums; they could be a representative of their ethnos, they could play the blues, or they could sing gospel. While White acts like The Kingston Trio could re-interpret folk material from a range of sources, Black performers were expected to play Black folk music. Yet, Black performers found ways to subvert the limited artistic range expected by White audiences.

Even in negotiating White expectations and limitations, Black artists found ways to control how they conveyed politicized messages through their performances. These artists tended to deploy one of three primary tactics: appeals to respectability, displays of suffering, and professions of the social gospel. Respectability sought to uplift the image

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<sup>6</sup> Malik Gaines, *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left: A History of the Impossible*, (New York: University Press, 2017), 2.



of Black folks.<sup>7</sup> If the musician could demonstrate the dignity and contributions of Black people to American society, they could advance their political causes as well. The performance of suffering sought to humanize Black people through empathetic identification. The social gospel created a vision of a new society guided by Christian good will and mutual aid. In all three of these tactics the singer implored the listener to think about Black folks in new ways. When will White folks recognize the respectable contributions that Black folks have made throughout history? When will White folks have sympathy for the suffering endured by Black folks? When will charity and mercy extend to all Americans?

White audiences, on the other hand, viewed Black performance through what scholar Joe R. Feagin calls the “white racial frame.”

What the dominant racial framing ignores or suppresses is critical to the continuation of oppression. Collective *forgetting* is as important as collective remembering, especially in regard to the prevailing narratives of this country’s developmental history... white Americans and their acolytes in other groups have long tried to sanitize this country’s collective memories and to downplay or eliminate accurate understandings of our extraordinarily racist history.<sup>8</sup>

The White frame selectively read out resistance from Black performance by both wrapping stories of Black resilience into a narrative of American progress and historicizing narratives of Black suffering. While Black Studies scholars have focused on

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<sup>7</sup> Gains and Edwards both explore the processes of Black racial uplift from differing perspectives. While Gains focuses on Black leadership, Edwards calls the single charismatic leader a myth. Kevin Kelly Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Erica R. Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Joe R. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*, 2nd ed. (Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2013), 17.

resistance, there is value in also examining the dialogic of Black performance, not because it reinforces the White gaze, but because it demonstrates how Whiteness willfully accepted convenient narratives.

In this chapter, I will examine how Black performers navigated the predominantly White spaces of the folk revival. These artists all chose moments to conform to genre or break expectations in an attempt to simultaneously access these spaces and communicate their messages of Black respectability, Black suffering and the social gospel. The White power structures that controlled these spaces, on the other hand, framed the Black artists in ways that historicized racial inequality and discounted persistent systematic prejudice.

### **Harry Belafonte and Respectability Politics**

Over the course of just over a decade, Harry Belafonte built a brand of respectability and it paid dividends in access to the powerful megaphone of broadcast media. He used his great reach to tell a revised story of Black history, especially aimed at White audiences. His ability to communicate with White audiences as equals reinforced his appeal as a respectable artist. Belafonte also used respectability as a political tool, marching in dignified solidarity with civil rights leaders.

Born to a working-class family in New York City, Belafonte spent much of his formative years with family in Jamaica. From a young age he knew he wanted to perform. As soon as he was able, he enrolled in acting classes at the New School in New York, where he met fellow artist and a lifelong companion Sidney Poitier. Belafonte began his performance career as a journeyman theater performer in small venues. This

exposure led to a series of nightclub performances where he worked as a contemporary pop singer. By the mid-1950s his music recording projects eclipsed his acting career and he came to be seen as primarily a singer. Belafonte's phenomenal break-out came in the form of an "ethnic genre" craze, Calypso.

Since the 1930s, White audiences had entertained fleeting fascinations with tropical music, which occasionally developed into full-blown fads. The Samba and the Rhumba all had their moments in the spotlight, and Calypso had even experienced a short previous moment of popularity in the 1940s in the form of Big Band renditions. But, before the mid-1950s, these tropical fad songs were generally performed by White singers, like the Andrew Sisters, or by light skinned performers with European roots, like the Portuguese/Brazilian Carmen Miranda. Calypso as a musical form also acted as a platform for artists to comment on local or global politics. However, in Americanized versions the satirical commentary could be watered down. For example, Lord Invader's song "Rum and Coke-a-Cola" criticized American occupation and exploitation of young girls. However, the Andrew Sisters turned the song into a celebration of American occupation, where native girls gratefully threw themselves at occupying soldiers. Songs produced for the American market often softened or muted the explicit political critique and biting satire.

In the 1950s Calypso craze, the American market created kitsch versions of material fan culture. Several one-off magazines were published to capitalize on the trend and instruct the audience on the forms and mores of the medium. In one such magazine, the writers invented a Calypso dance. It featured a pictorial choreography modeled by a

White couple. The man was fitted in a tasteful dark suit and tie and the woman wore a modest below-the-knee dress. As to the form of the dance, the magazine instructed its audience, “Just as Meringue, Cha-Cha, Samba and other tropical dances have been changed for the needs of the American public, certain patterns have been created for the Calypso, modifying the abandoned movements of the West Indies to the limitations of necessarily confined dancing areas found in night clubs...”<sup>9</sup> In a jumbled mix of cultural appropriation, *Teen* magazine coached its readers on how to have a Calypso Luau - “To make the Calypso Luau authentic you’ll have to dig out a few items that are standard equipment; a hibachi, charcoal, wild straw hats, loud Hawaiian shirts, at least one uke, bongo drums, and a grass skirt if possible...”<sup>10</sup> The popular press repackaged the exotic culture of the Caribbean into a form more comprehensible to its White audience. Another music fad magazine defined the ideal Calypsonian in racial and ethnic terms, “First, he is a native-born Trinidadian. Second, he has the ability to make up lyrics on the spot about any subject at all, ranging from philosophy to prostitution... The humorous twist, however, is a necessary part of any true calypso song.”<sup>11</sup> Trinidadians Lord Invader and Lord Kitchener dominated the Calypso field in the early 1950s. That was until Belafonte’s 1956’s record eclipsed them all.

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<sup>9</sup> *Calypso Album*, Modern Music Publications, 1957, 13, Box 03, Folder 13, Ron Cohen Collection, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa Oklahoma.

<sup>10</sup> *Teen Magazine*, July 1957, page 16 - 18, Box 03, Folder 13, Ron Cohen Collection, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa Oklahoma.

<sup>11</sup> *Calypso Stars*, no. 1, 1957, page 4, Box 03, Folder 13, Ron Cohen Collection, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa Oklahoma.

Belafonte's brand of Calypso played well to White audiences.<sup>12</sup> For example, even the soft critique of labor found in "Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)," was wrapped in a package of White accessibility. Unlike Lord Invader's biting satire of racialized exploitation in "Run and Coke-a-Cola," the commentary present in Day-O was leveled only at the hardness of labor not systematic inequality.<sup>13</sup> The narrator in the song simply wished to go home: "Daylight come and me wan' go home."<sup>14</sup> This kind of widely-acceptable lament gave audiences a flavor of the Calypso form without the potential alienation of social commentary.

When Belafonte broke through onto the national consciousness, the American media was ready to treat him like any other novelty act. Media coverage played upon his sex appeal and pigeonholed him as the King of Calypso. Special-run magazines devoted to Belafonte celebrated the usual fan-service subjects - his professional biography and his personal interests. Though Belafonte traded on his handsomeness and charm, he resisted this two-dimensional caricature created by this kind of coverage. He wanted to be known as a respected artist and attempted to position himself as more than a Calypso singer.

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<sup>12</sup> Belafonte contested whether he actually qualified as a Calypso performer, given the range of music he played even at the start of his music career. Here, I take his celebrity as a Calypso performer as an overriding factor over technical genre conventions. "Harry makes a point of the fact that he is a folk singer and his repertoire consists of grass-roots music from all over the world. Calypso, he says, is just one type of folk music." *Calypso Stars*, no. 1, 1957, Box 03, Folder 13, Ron Cohen Collection, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa Oklahoma.

<sup>13</sup> Lisa D. McGill, *Constructing Black Selves: Caribbean American Narratives and the Second Generation*, Nation of Newcomers (New York: University Press, 2005), 54.

<sup>14</sup> Harry Belafonte, *Calypso*, vinyl (RCA Victor, 1956).

Belafonte's appeal to artistic respectability came through the impeachability of the source material and the high artistry of the performance. When Belafonte repositioned himself as more than a Calypso singer, he did so by defending the artistry and integrity of folk music generally. He elevated the importance of folk as cultural touchstone and a warehouse of profound human truths.<sup>15</sup> Belafonte persistently defended the uniqueness of folk, especially as compared to popular music. In one interview he asserted that "folk music is the root from which all music stems."<sup>16</sup> Much of the popular media acceded to his right to sing it. Reviews highlighted both his great voice and his "sense of integrity."<sup>17</sup> Belafonte reasoned that if he, as an artist, took on the great responsibility of performing music drawn from this deep well of human wisdom, he must do so with tremendous integrity.

As an actor who had turned to singing, he found in folk music a vast array of characters and emotions which he could embody from moment to moment.<sup>18</sup> He may not write his own songs, much of his material came from the Library of Congress archive, but his authenticity came through the talent evident in the performance. In the slow ballad "Scarlett Ribbons" for example, he tenderly holds the vibrato of nearly every vowel in the opening stanzas, which creates the feel of a quiet prayer.<sup>19</sup> He emulates the

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<sup>15</sup> Harry Belafonte, "My Repertory Must Have Roots," *Sing Out!* 8, no. 4 (1959): 29 – 31

<sup>16</sup> Dom Cerulli, "Belafonte: The Responsibility of an Artists," *Down Beat*, March 6, 1957, 17, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Howard Taubam, "A Folk Singer's Style," *New York Times*, February 7, 1954, X7.

<sup>18</sup> Harry Belafonte and Michael Shnayerson, *My Song: A Memoir*, 1st ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 101.

<sup>19</sup> Harry Belafonte, *Belafonte*, vinyl (RCA Victor ,1955).

quivering, unsure voice of the child who asked for ribbons for her hair. Then, in the close of the song, his tender approach brings out the dumfounded narrator's observance of the mysterious appearance of the ribbons. Unlike The Kingston Trio, or even Perry Como, who sing the number like a child's lullaby, Belafonte's tender rendition emphasized the anguish of the narrator.<sup>20</sup> He used his acting training and penchant for high drama to place the audience into the emotional reality of the songs.

This demand to be taken seriously extended to a demand to be treated as a respectable artist. He would not settle for acting roles that called for him to act weak or obsequious, nor would he stand for inferior accommodations and contracts. He demanded that venues and audiences take him seriously and regard him as they would any other major artists. Experiences with segregation in his early professional career left a deep impression on him. As a result, he defied requests from hotel managers to quietly take the back entrance. Or, when the Thunderbird hotel in Las Vegas booked him to perform the main stage but made him stay in a ratty motel across town, Belafonte responded by calling in favors from well-connected friends, who pressured the venue to house him and his whole crew.<sup>21</sup>

The respectability of Belafonte's concert and television performances were designed to meet the expectations of etiquette for White audiences. He did not lecture or sneer while he established gently and firmly the dignity and worth of the Black cause.

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<sup>20</sup> The Kingston Trio, *At Large*, vinyl (Capitol, 1959); Perry Como, *When You Come to the End of the Day*, vinyl (RCA Victor, 1958).

<sup>21</sup> Belafonte and Shnayerson, *My Song*, 105 – 107.

Audiences at a Belafonte show could rest assured they would feel comfortable. Wilderson identifies the tactic of Black accommodation of White feelings this way, “Make them feel safe, the cardinal rule of Negro diplomacy.”<sup>22</sup> Belafonte himself revealed that this was a key strategy of his performance, “for white audiences, I carried a reassuring presence...Black, but... not *too* black.”<sup>23</sup> In his act he neither chided, nor lectured, nor raged; he charmed.

He often used humor as a way to ease tension in a set, or to transition from serious piece to lighter fare. He parodied the over-blown pomposity of the serious art singer, even as he himself used a theatrical sentimentality to emotionally connect with audiences. Belafonte’s full wit and charm came on display in his concert closing sing-along performances. He often used the calypso inflected song “Matilda,” a hit from 1953 that he re-recorded for the *Calypso* album. After teaching the song to the concert-goers, he brought them in to the performance, conducting them louder and then softer, just the men then the women. The improvisational nature of Calypso provided leeway for Belafonte to devolve into anarchic antics and comedic repartee, teasing the instrumentalists for their poor singing, or calling the audience in the orchestra section, the big spenders and the people in the balcony, “Those people on scholarship.”<sup>24</sup> The upbeat, looping chorus meant the audience could easily join in as they pleased. Belafonte concerts engaged the audience emotionally, dazzled them artistically, and ushered them

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<sup>22</sup> Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Belafonte and Shnayerson, *My Song*, 146-147. Original emphasis.

<sup>24</sup> “Matilda,” Harry Belafonte, *Belafonte at Carnegie Hall*, vinyl (RCA Victor, 1959).



out of the theater tapping their toes. By the end of the concert, he proved the respect he had earned by becoming the conductor of the audience itself, leading them with gentle jibes. The crowd responded by performing for him.

Belafonte also played upon his sex appeal to make himself attractive as a respectable potential partner to White women. Scholar Lisa D. McGill theorizes Belafonte's selective use of his Caribbean roots as a tool of triangulation, "The ideal of West Indian warmth engendered by his musical repertoire, and Belafonte's Caribbean otherness provided a means of exploring Black male sexuality without fully alienating white America."<sup>25</sup> One magazine included a tantalizing article titled, "The Girls are Wild about Harry,"<sup>26</sup> which featured lurid and sexualizing commentary on Belafonte's impact on women. Descriptions of his physique lingered on the details, "Thirty years old, Harry is six feet tall and weighs a lithe 180 pounds. His tummy is flat and his shoulders broad. His smile is quick and easy, and his eyes flash fire when he sings."<sup>27</sup>

Belafonte reasoned he could sell the cause of Black respectability if he could sell himself as a sexual partner. In his memoir, he reflected on his particular appeal to White women, and his reciprocal proclivity towards them:

At the venues I played, almost everyone was white -- not many blacks could afford the freight -- so I'd fooled myself into thinking there wasn't anything notable about this. In fact, the taboo of mixed-race romance intrigued me, as it did so many. On a deeper level, my sexual desire for white women was linked, I

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<sup>25</sup> Lisa D. McGill, *Constructing Black Selves: Caribbean American Narratives and the Second Generation*, Nation of Newcomers (New York: University Press, 2005), 27.

<sup>26</sup> *Harry Belafonte*, published by Hillman Periodicals, 1957, Box 03, Folder 12, Ron Cohen Collection, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa Oklahoma.

<sup>27</sup> *Calypso Songs*, vol. 1 no. 1, 1957, page 5, Box 03, Folder 13, Ron Cohen Collection, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa Oklahoma.

began to see, with the underlying anger that never quite went away. The white world had done its best to deny me every chance. What better way not that I'd triumphed despite it, to extract me revenge? What irked white men more than anything else? Seeing white women choose black men over them!<sup>28</sup>

The sexuality on display in Belafonte's act was not dangerous, or even transgressive. He adopted a sensitive, sensual persona, one that softly lured. Just as White audiences could expect to feel safe at a Belafonte concert, White women could imagine his embrace as a safe place.

The success of Belafonte's brand of respectability opened access to White dominated spaces. Television variety programs showcased his comfortable chumminess with White presenters, which demonstrated how he could be seen and treated as an equal. This comfortability put his ethic of Black respectability into practice for the benefit of the largely White middle-class television audience. Belafonte reflected on how he differed from other Black performers, "I was a black entertainer who engaged the crowd without reference to color at all. In its own subliminal way, that sent a powerful message. No shucking and jiving here, no ole black Sam. Everything about the way I comported myself on stage made clear that I assumed my audience and I were equals. So, they reacted in kind."<sup>29</sup> This type of performance of Blackness meant that Belafonte could access White circles in ways denied to other Black performers. Once he gained entry, he comported himself as an equal. His easy charm allowed him to play along and be in on the joke rather than the butt of it.

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<sup>28</sup> Belafonte and Shnayerson, *My Song*, 137.

<sup>29</sup> Belafonte and Shnayerson, *My Song*, 146-147.

In a 1961 appearance on *Perry Como's Kraft Music Hall*, showed how much the entertainment industry has accepted Belafonte as an equal.<sup>30</sup> Throughout the show, the theme of which was "Men Only," Como, Belafonte, and comedian Buddy Hackett sang parody songs and performed skits that reflected on what it meant to be a man in the contemporary world. Much of the material came from anti-woman humor, especially pointing out what terrible nags they were. In this context, Belafonte's status as a man gained him access. Though tongue-in-cheek, the show implied Belafonte's equality to White men. He dealt with the same modern inconveniences and the same trouble with women. Certainly, White men and (respectable) Black men had more in common than did men and women.

Belafonte began this appearance in a way that exhibited his sex appeal and artistry. In one number, a rendition of the Scottish folk tune "I Know Where I'm Going," the camera pushed into an extreme close-up while the accompaniment dropped down to a single acoustic guitar. Belafonte's face fills the screen and his voice seems to reach past it into the living room. The result was an intimate, personal performance. The usual cool Como could only sigh, "That Belafonte is really something."

Comedic skits and parody songs predominated the second half of the show. In one skit, the host and two male guests sat in a lounge reading newspapers using lines from the *My Fair Lady* song, "Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Man" as though it

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<sup>30</sup> *Perry Como's Kraft Music Hall*, 02/01/1961, NBC Television, Featuring Harry Belafonte and Buddy Hackett, VA12017T, UCLA Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles, California.

was a casual conversation.<sup>31</sup> All the performers adopted high status roles and Belafonte was at home right alongside them. In another skit telephone calls and crossed wires wreak havoc on modern socializing. Belafonte expressed frustration over navigating this modern life, just like any White man. The overall effect of these sketches established Belafonte as a true member of this group. Hackett was the one to play the fish out of water, Belafonte and Como were persistently at ease and in command: equals.

Once he established the respectability of his folk sources, the high artistry of his performance, and his special position as intermediary between White and Black audiences, Belafonte could then connect his work to the larger political project of civil rights and integration. Respectability was not just a tactic to make his music more palatable to mainstream audiences, it was also a means to elevate the cause of Black Americans. Interdisciplinary scholars Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, in their examination of the methods of political protest in the Civil Rights era, define respectability as a way of re-purposing the mores of the oppressor to reveal the underlying hypocrisy. These scholars determine, "It has been common practice among oppressed peoples to employ the key ideological and moral touchstones of the dominant culture in order to find leverage within a hostile system."<sup>32</sup> Even as groups reject certain aspects of the system, they re-deploy other aspects strategically. While segregationists

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<sup>31</sup> Perry Como's Kraft Music Hall, 02/01/1961, NBC Television, Featuring Harry Belafonte and Buddy Hackett, VA12017T, UCLA Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles, California.

<sup>32</sup> Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, "Dress Modestly, Neatly -- As If You Were Going To Church": Respectability, Class, and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement," in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, 1st pbk. ed. (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 70.

sought racial domination as a means to preserve American civilization, Black Americans used the language of respectability to demonstrate their worthy inclusion as co-equals.<sup>33</sup> Belafonte presented himself as an example of the possibility of Black integration. He was not just an artist producing respectable work, he portrayed himself as a respectable person, worthy of the respect of his majority White audiences. Belafonte's performances of respectability brought to life the aspirations of his political mission. As his memoir states rather bluntly, "respect was what it was all about. It *was* the moral mission."<sup>34</sup>

The cause of civil rights could be better advanced if Belafonte could convince his White fans of the dignity and purity of the cause. McGill observed how Belafonte's "image encouraged discursive spaces for protest and struggles against the status quo *within the African American culture industry.*"<sup>35</sup> This space challenged what it meant to be a Black citizen in Cold War America.<sup>36</sup> Belafonte used his repertoire of folk songs as an entry point for political commentary:

Folk songs were anthems of the dispossessed, rallying cries for justice, and when White audiences listened to this Black singer bring them to life, they were doing more than enjoying the tunes, or the way I sang them, or even the sex appeal I brought to the mix. If you liked Harry Belafonte, you were making a political statement, and that felt good, the way it felt good to listen to Paul Robeson, and hear what he had to say. If you were a white Belafonte fan, you felt even better. You were connecting with your better angels, reaching across the racial divide.

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<sup>33</sup> Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, "Dress Modestly, Neatly -- As If You Were Going To Church": Respectability, Class, and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement," in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, 1st pbk. ed. (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 70 - 73.

<sup>34</sup> Belafonte and Shnayerson, *My Song*, 158. (original emphasis)

<sup>35</sup> Lisa D. McGill, *Constructing Black Selves: Caribbean American Narratives and the Second Generation*, Nation of Newcomers (New York: University Press, 2005), 26. (original emphasis)

<sup>36</sup> McGill, *Constructing Black Selves*, 20-21.

Consciously or not, you were casting your vote for equality, and for a phrase about to hit the mainstream: *civil rights*.<sup>37</sup>

Mainstream, center-left White audiences could have their support of civil rights wrapped in a package of safe entertainment. Belafonte had aspirations beyond keeping White liberals engaged in supporting Black folks, he wanted to take his message to the segregationists as well. In one print interview he stated, “Under the guise of an entertainer I was able to make a few white Southerners see a Negro as an individual for the first time in their lives.”<sup>38</sup>

Belafonte took inspiration from the example of Paul Robeson as to the integration of politics and art.<sup>39</sup> Robeson advocated fiercely for labor rights throughout his career by blending artistic performance with political advocacy. This resulted in a powerful and persuasive theatrical experience, where the art became inseparable from the political advocacy. For example, in a joint concert with Pete Seeger in 1948, Robeson staged a highly dramatic conversation between himself and the ghost of radical labor advocate Joe Hill. Robeson recounted to Hill the losses labor recently experienced, especially the bipartisan compromise of the Taft Hartly Act. Robeson laid out the stakes of the bad deal in no uncertain terms, “In this kind of unity, there is Death. Death for the Unions. Some labor leaders may not know it, but Labor knows it. Labor knows what it means to have

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<sup>37</sup> Belafonte and Shnayerson, *My Song*, 147. (original emphasis)

<sup>38</sup> *Harry Belafonte*, published by Hillman Periodicals, 1957, page 61, Box 03, Folder 12, Ron Cohen Collection, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa Oklahoma.

<sup>39</sup> Belafonte and Shnayerson, *My Song*, 63, 64.

its back bend, its head broken. Labor remembers Joe Hill.”<sup>40</sup> Robeson utilized all the theatrical tools at his disposal, dramatic staging, sloganeering, a clear-eyed political perspective, and entertaining singing. He injected his concert performance with polemical invectives that informed and built solidarity.<sup>41</sup>

Like Robeson, Belafonte used his artistic expression to forward his political ideals, yet he would take a less didactic approach. In his autobiography, Belafonte recalled a specific night where Robeson impressed upon him the vital importance of political activism through artistic performance.

What I remember, more than anything Robeson said, was the love he radiated, and the profound responsibility he felt, as an actor, to use his platform as a bully pulpit. I had no expectations that my acting on a basement stage in Harlem would lead me anywhere. But I knew I’d found my role model, and that I’d never look at theater the same way again. My mother had told me to wake up every morning and know how I’d wage the fight against injustice. That night, Paul Robeson gave me my epiphany: It would guide me for the rest of my life.<sup>42</sup>

That dinner opened his eyes to the need for mass action by Black Americans. He also had a newfound epiphany that that mass action could be inspired by art. Whereas Robeson envisioned unionism as a pathway to bring about a more just society, Belafonte turned his attention to civil rights and racial integration.

One appearance on the *Steve Allen Show* revealed Belafonte’s facility for ingratiating himself to his audience, then leading them where he wanted them to go.

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Robeson and Pete Seeger Concert, Madison Square Garden Oct 26, 1948, Box 04, Folder 08, Rob Cohen Collection, Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa Oklahoma. Original emphasis.

<sup>41</sup> For other examples of this, see Sheila Tully Boyle, *Paul Robeson: The Years of Promise and Achievement* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 381; Murali Balaji, *The Professor and the Pupil: The Politics of W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson* (New York: Nation Books, 2007), 208 – 227.

<sup>42</sup> Belafonte and Shnayerson, *My Song*, 63, 64, 83.

First, he used his artistry to establish himself as a legitimate artist, then he used humor and wit to convey messages of racial equity and integration. He began the show in spotlight dressed in his hallmark wide collar and deep “V” dress shirt. In a typical move for Belafonte, he established himself first as a serious artist. His first two numbers were slow, vocally indulgent laments, where Belafonte could reveal his talent for dramatic emotionality. Then he moved on to lighter fare in his next song, “Man Smart (Woman Smarter),” a silly Calypso song which inverted many stories about women in the Bible. Throughout the performance, Belafonte took his time with musical breaks to mug and speak back to his back-up singers. It ended with the narrator expecting to find his own love interest home alone, but unfortunately, her mother is also home. In this performance, he alters the final line to, “You take her home thinking she’s alone/ You open the door [pause] you find Steve Allen home.”<sup>43</sup> Even when he did play the clown, he stayed in control. Moreover, the trick is double, as Belafonte implied cross-racial romance. If Allen and Belafonte were engaged with the same woman, then one way or the other, one of the romances would have been inter-racial. But that fact did not bear mentioning, as in the totality of the presentation, he and Allen were presented as equals.

Later on in that same appearance, Belafonte used real world examples of folk traditions as an object lesson in the possibilities of racial integration. Allen set him up with a comic premise about his recent European tour. Allen asked Belafonte if he noticed something about Europeans on a tour. Belafonte replied, “Oh, you mean the people and

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<sup>43</sup> The Steve Allen Show, 11/09/1958, NBC Television, featuring Harry Belafonte and the Belafonte Singers, VA22674T, UCLA Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles, California.



their customs, how much it fits their folk music.” Allen countered, “I noticed the same thing of American folk songs.” Finally, Belafonte connected the dots, setting up the gag, “I wonder what it would sound like if “Oh, When the Saints” was written as an English madrigal.”<sup>44</sup> Belafonte launched into a version of the song with an exaggerated choral affect and posh accent. But it quickly transitioned into a gospel version of the song, complete with the back-up singers approximating a Black church experience, clapping and throwing their hands in the air. They end the medley with variations on a New Orleans funeral march. Under the guise of harmless entertainment, Belafonte seamlessly integrated Black culture with White culture in a manner that revealed them to be equals.

Once he charmed the White folks, he introduced the political message. In his tour du force concert album, recorded at the Greek Theater in Los Angeles on August 23, 1963, just 5 days before the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Belafonte exhibited his facility for intertwining entertainment and political messaging. In his rendition of “Merry Minute,” an anti-bomb Sheldon Harnick number made famous by The Kingston Trio, Belafonte altered the lyrics to make a tongue-in-cheek commentary on segregation. The song was a sardonically cheerful lament about the possibility of atomic annihilation, which enumerated the contentious state of global affairs where each nation was set against another. The Germans hate the Poles and “South Africans hate the Dutch.” The original comic punch line was “I don’t like anybody very much,” but Belafonte altered the next line to say, “I don’t like Governor Wallace very much.” By

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<sup>44</sup> The Steve Allen Show, 11/09/1958, NBC Television, featuring Harry Belafonte and the Belafonte Singers, VA22674T, UCLA Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles, California.

personally singling out the pro-segregationist Alabama governor, he inserts social injustice as a personal injury wrapped in a punchline. He tagged the joke commenting, “Well, we just blew the Southern market... we never had it anyway.”<sup>45</sup> After he used humor to broach the topic of segregation, he went further in the introduction of the next song, which brought the subject of racial inequality into sharper focus. He prefaced a South African folk number with a serious account of the current economic and political conditions in that country. The men and boys competed for the same low paying jobs, begging for work on the street. The political and economic stakes of the songs heightened the emotional impact.

Beyond the ways that Belafonte suavely incorporated political messaging into the entertainment of his act, he also materially supported political activism through ordinary means: time and money. He financially support Martin Luther King Jr. throughout the 1960s, even arranging for domestic services for the household so Loretta Scott King could maintain the appearance of respectability. He also arranged for entertainers to appear at marches in the South to raise the morale of the rank and file. He thoughtfully considered how to use his celebrity to support the movement without stealing focus. Consequently, much of his financial assistance was behind the scenes and his appearances were calculated to draw media attention.

By 1962, Belafonte’s appeal to respectability was so successful it had become an integrated aspect of his brand. In that year, he appeared on a talent search television

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<sup>45</sup> “Merry Minuet,” Harry Belafonte, *Belafonte at the Greek*, vinyl (RCA Victor , 1963).

program where celebrities brought along up-and-coming acts to perform. Demonstrating the high status he had achieved, the emcee introduced Belafonte in near reverent tone, “One of the great entertainers of our time, and besides that one of the great gentlemen of our time.”<sup>46</sup> Such was the status of his performance career, that during the interview segment he hardly needed mention music at all. Instead, Belafonte highlighted his work as a cultural attaché for the Peace Corps. He spoke as a diplomat, particularly on his recent work in Tunisia. He had assembled teams that sought to help the Tunisians develop their own cultural institutions. The singer Belafonte showcased, Valentine Pringle, sang a version of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” that incorporated lyrics from the “Marching Song of the First Arkansas Colored Regiment.” That adaptation, taken from a regiment of Black soldiers who fought during the Civil War, had become a rallying cry for the civil rights movement. The lyrics elevated the fighting prowess of Black men and glorified their mission to be free citizens. In this short appearance, Belafonte affirmed his place in White spaces, reminded the audience of the gravity of his political mission, and presented a performer who used folk music to speak directly to the civil rights movement.

Yet, some corners of the folk revival viewed Belafonte’s bids to respectability, or his appeal to White audiences, as its own kind of falseness. Though they may have agreed with Belafonte’s goal of integration in principle, his suave demeanor and conciliatory attitude to power turned them off. Some mainstream reviewer regarded his

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<sup>46</sup> *Talent Scouts*, Directed by Grey Lockwood, Featuring Jim Backus, Harry Belafonte and Valentine Pringle, aired August 28, 1962, VA2450 UCLA Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles, California.

slickness as proof of his true nature as an “organization-man.”<sup>47</sup> His smooth appeal to middle-class White fans exposed him as a corporate shill. *The Little Sandy Review*, a folk fanzine, aimed its harshest critiques of popularized folk specifically at Belafonte, even more than the Kingston Trio or the Brothers Four. They even invested the invective “Belaphoney” to punctuate their distaste. In one album review, they ridiculed his bland rendition of labor songs, “If you sent your child to summer camp last year, perhaps you made a mistake. Maybe this year you should send him down on the chain gang. They have all kinds of facilities: orchestras and choruses by the hundreds.” Belafonte made, “the chain gang seem like a pretty nice place: all the boys sit around at the end of the day reading dialog credited to Lee Hays...”<sup>48</sup> It was not just that the recordings were highly polished, or that they used complex modern orchestrations, the White record-buying consumer also demanded a sense of suffering from their Black folk musicians that Belafonte refused to indulge. The *Little Sandy* critic went on to complain that, “None of the terrible suffering, the nobility, or the feel of the real thing is contained in either one of these records. Negro chain-gang music is one of the most moving things in the world and there are many fine LP’s available of the real thing – the commercial and Archive documentaries of Lomax. For heaven’s sake buy one of them and not this incredible pap...”<sup>49</sup> Belafonte may have achieved a theatrical emotionality that played well with mainstream White audiences, yet his pop sensibilities tended to temper the profundity of

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Shelton, “Record Reviews: Folk,” *Cavalier*, December 1961, 21;

<sup>48</sup> “Record Reviews,” *Little Sandy Review*, No 2, 1959, 29, 30.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

Black suffering. The popular press and the folk revivalists both found authentic expressions of Black pain in the performance of the blues.

### **The Blues, Odetta, and the Performance of Black Suffering**

Many different kinds of music played by African Americans have at various points been described as the blues. Before the revival, the blues were understood as a state of mind more than a specific genre. This perspective led some music analysts to associate all music by Black artists with the blues.<sup>50</sup> If Black folks were a people who had the blues, then any music they played came out of that disaffection. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the recording industry began to divide the music market into stable genres, which could be more easily marketed. For music that would later be broadly categorized as folk, the recording industry segregated the market into “race” records and “old-time” or “hillbilly” music. These delineations did not relate so much to style or content as they did to the race of the performers and intended market. Race records signified music by Black artists while hillbilly indicated White performers. The history and iconography of minstrelsy deeply influenced the marketing of race records, while rural and frontier imagery dominated in hillbilly.<sup>51</sup> The race record trend declined at the height of the Great Depression, when major labels like Columbia and Victor

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<sup>50</sup> Amiri Baraka (as LeRoi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York, NY: William Marrow and Company, 1963); Paul Oliver, *The Meaning of the Blues* (New York: Collier Books, 1963).

<sup>51</sup> Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 196; Ryan Carlson Bernard, “The Rise and Fall of the Hillbilly Music Genre, A History, 1922-1939.” (East Tennessee State University, 2006), 85.

slashed their catalogs in cost cutting exercises. Yet, just as these corporations stopped producing these records, folklorists, like Alan Lomax, rediscovered similar acts in the field, framing them as rural, historical artifacts.<sup>52</sup>

Even as Black artists continued to innovate and reinvent the blues, White revivalists created a pigeonhole for the blues as a historical expression of rural Black folks. In popular parlance the blues could signify a range of styles and audiences, from country blues to electrified rhythm and blues. By the early 1940s, most of the Black artists who played for urban audiences moved away from the jazz blues and country blues of the “race record” era in favor of rhythm and blues, doo wop, urban blues and boogie-woogie. Chess Records, established in 1950, featured artists like Muddy Waters, who played an electrified blues that stood between urban sophistication and rural roots music.<sup>53</sup>

For folk revivalists at the height of the boom, *the blues* meant blues songs collected by previous generations of folklorists and the race records from the 1920s. These recordings enjoyed a renaissance in the mid-1950s fueled in no small part by Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music*.<sup>54</sup> Increasingly folk revivalists came to regard the blues as specifically the 12-bar blues, which strung an AAB lyrical form over a I, IV, V chord progression. As with all subjects over inclusiveness or exclusiveness,

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<sup>52</sup> Paige A. McGinley, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), 84.

<sup>53</sup> Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*, Cultural Studies of the United States (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 84 - 88.

<sup>54</sup> The anthology was originally released as 3 two-disk sets covering Ballads, Social Singing and Blue singing. Folkways Records first released the albums in 1952.

however, opinions varied. Smith's *Anthology* help to establish the blues as a stable subgenre of American folk music. Amongst revivalists the term signified rural country blues rather than the electrified Chicago sound. The complex picking patterns on single acoustic guitars fascinated the younger generation, hungry for different arrangements done in a folk style.

A small set of folk fans began a search for the origins of these songs. Tom Hoskins, while listening to his vintage record collection, idly wondered what had happened to the performers. He decided to try and find out. The story of the White folk fan following leads throughout the South became the stuff of legend.<sup>55</sup> One article on the discovery of Son House and other old blues-men bluntly stated, "No one knew whether they were alive or dead."<sup>56</sup> Hoskins eventually did locate Mississippi John Hurt in Avalon, Mississippi, where he helped Hurt remember some of his old songs.<sup>57</sup> Once prompted to play, Hurt took right back to it.<sup>58</sup> After his "discover" Hurt ingratiated himself with the east coast scenes, playing extended gigs in Boston and Philadelphia. He

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<sup>55</sup> Lee Lescaze, "Famed Blues Singer Resumes Career After 35-Year Break," *The Washington Post*, Jul 21, 1963, B3; "Legendary Mississippi John Hurt To Sing Blue at Folk Festival," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Jul 18, 1964, 11; Robert Shelton, "City Lends an Ear to Country Singer: Mississippi John Hurt," *New York Times*, Jan 16, 1964, 28; Richard Arkin, "'Dead' Blues Singer Is Making Big Comeback," *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 2, 1964, 11; William A. Shumann, "Singer Mississippi John Hurt Dies at 74," *The Washington Post*, Nov 5, 1966, B6.

<sup>56</sup> "Looking for the Blues," *Newsweek*, vol. 64, no. 2, Jul 13, 1964, 82-83.

<sup>57</sup> Philip R. Ratcliffe, *Mississippi John Hurt: His Life, His Times, His Blues*, American Made Music Series (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 122 - 130.

<sup>58</sup> Lawrence Cohen, "Mississippi John Hurt," *Sing Out!*, Vol. 14, no. 5, 1964, 16-21.

also spent much of 1964 and 1965 in Greenwich Village, where he taught the young generation his three fingered picking style.<sup>59</sup>

Some outlets heralded White revivalists “rescuing” the blues as a story of heroic guardians salvaging a forgotten culture. This contributed to a new-found common wisdom that the blues had been rediscovered. One reviewer declared that the blues revival, “has seen the emergence of a group of White city youngsters who, from recordings, have conquered the intricacies of the Negro blues styles of the 1920s and 1930s well enough to re-create them with great accuracy and often with individual strokes of brilliance.”<sup>60</sup> Another exposé on a White blues player retold the story of the decline and revival of the blues this way:

Blues singers of this genre disappeared along with the Depression. The tent shows and vaudeville circuits (notably the all-Negro theatrical Owners’ Booking Agency circuit) that they had traveled collapsed, and the recording companies that had spread their disks throughout the South and into the Negro ghettos of the North no longer found them profitably. Today they are only a memory, heard on old recordings or reflected in the self-conscious imitations of young would-be revivalists. But although the style is now long gone, the blues resurgence had not missed the ‘classic’ blues touch entirely.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Philip R. Ratcliffe, *Mississippi John Hurt: His Life, His Times, His Blues*, American Made Music Series (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011). 156 - 160.

<sup>60</sup> Leroy F. Aarons, “Folk Festival Growing Enough to Endanger Seams,” *The Washington Post*, Aug 2, 1964, G4.

<sup>61</sup> John S. Wilson, “Surviving Stylist: Ida Cox Sings Blues In “Classic” Way,” *New York Times*, September 10, 1961, X16.



This narrative of rediscovery overlooked certain Black artists, like Josh White and Muddy Waters, who had performed continuously since the 1940s.<sup>62</sup> These versions tell the story of a true revival of a dead artform.

Folk fans, for their part, held up the rediscovered blues players as living examples of a dying tradition. The reemergence of Hurt and Son House bolstered the belief that the blues were a static historical artifact that this generation had uncovered. A *Newsweek* article on the Newport Folk Festival gushed over the living legacy that Hurt represented, “Best of the ancients rediscovered at Newport was Mississippi John Hurt, a wrinkled, 69-year-old Negro singer-composer, who made hit Okeh records in 1928 and 1929 and then disappeared.”<sup>63</sup> Just like ever-disappearing folk, the blues were always on the verge of dying out. One concert review described Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee as, “two of the last survivors of the magnificent tribe of strolling folk musicians that included the great Leadbelly, Blind Willie Johnson, Blind Boy Fuller, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Big Bill Broonzy.”<sup>64</sup> The delta blues represented more than just an artifact of historical playing style; they reminded the listener of a vanishing pastoral way of life. These depictions evoked a simpler time with rural folk singing songs for non-commercial entertainment.

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<sup>62</sup> Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 267 – 268; Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*, Cultural Studies of the United States (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 118 - 125.

<sup>63</sup> “The Milk Drinkers,” *Newsweek*, August 12, 1963, 80.

<sup>64</sup> “Terry, McGhee Make Campus Scene,” *Autoharp*, vol. 1. no. 1, April 7, 1961, 1.

The media coverage praised blues performers for their ability to convey suffering, especially if it came from an embodied, experiential perspective. Even for those folk artists whose acts included a broad range of sources and interpretation, the popular press fawned when they sang the blues. In short, the press had a penchant for Black suffering. The genius of Black artistry was understood as springing from a well of deep anguish.<sup>65</sup> Robert Shelton, at *The New York Times*, summarized this genre this way, “the country blues is the proud product of the American Negro, an outgrowth of the work song and field holler, rooted in personal experience, wrapped in trouble and performed in a manner that is catharsis as well as entertainment.”<sup>66</sup> The bodily representation of the blues, further added to the authentic presentation of that emotional release. He described John Lee Hooker’s voice as “immediately arresting, a deep dark-leather-timbred instrument that turns sullen, nostalgic, brooding or sensuous.”<sup>67</sup>

Columns often lingered on descriptions of their physical deterioration, as a proof of their suffering. These lurid descriptions of the old-men’s bodies created a sense that the flesh retained the memory of the toll of labor. This not only heightened the difference between the old blues-men and the young folk enthusiasts, it also revealed a life of

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<sup>65</sup> Wilderson identifies the White need to fixate on Black suffering, “If, as Afropessimism argues, Black are not Human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies, and sadomasochistic pleasures, then this also means that, at a higher level of abstractions, the claims of universal humanity that the above theories all subscribe to are bobbed by a meta-aporia: a contradiction that manifests whenever one looks seriously at the structure of Black suffering in comparison to the presumed universal structure of all sentient beings.” Frank B. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, First edition. (New York, N.Y: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 15.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Shelton, “Country Blues: Growing Field for Research,” *New York Times*, December, 11, 1960, X15.

<sup>67</sup> Robert Shelton, “Several Styles of Blues Singing,” *New York Times*, April 7, 1961, 25.

hardship. These were men who had sacrificed their vitality to the alter of work. On article on Mississippi John Hurt described him as, “a short, stoop-shouldered former railroad-gang worker, cattle herdsman and farmer. His face is a study in time’s erosion don in corrugated bronze. Deep furrows between his eyes point down a large nose to a strong projecting jaw, where two crescent creases seem to place the singer’s mouth in parentheses.”<sup>68</sup> Other articles highlighted his “Hounddog eyes gleaming from a time-worn face,” or as “a wizened old man in a stained mail order hat.”<sup>69</sup> Hurt’s validity as an artist surely drew from his musicianship, but his physical decline acted as another proof of his authenticity. The evidence of the blues could not only be heard in Hurt’s music, it could be read on his face. Legendary blues performer Son House affirmed that his act, at its core, was a performance of suffering. He critiqued those that might play the blues in an upbeat, or dance style, “The real blues don’t cause no jumping. If you got to jumping that’s not the blues. The blues is just by itself, when you got a lonesome worry and you don’t know what to do.”<sup>70</sup> He beat his chest as he spoke, intimating a feeling in the chest that drove the blues player. He embodied the driving, repetitive, solitary beat of the blues.

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<sup>68</sup> Robert Shelton, “City Lends an Ear to Country Singer: Mississippi John Hurt,” *New York Times*, Jan 16, 1964, 28.

<sup>69</sup> Marvin Schiff, “Folk Singer's Voice Grows on Audience,” *The Globe and Mail*, Feb 25, 1965, 11; Richard Arkin, “‘Dead’ Blues Singer Is Making Big Comeback,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 2, 1964, 11.

<sup>70</sup> *Festival*, Lerner, Murray, director, (Patchke Productions, Eagle Rock Entertainment, 1967), DVD.

The press gravitated toward narratives of suffering in Black performance, and no one could embody suffering like Odetta. While not a strict blues singer, she built a reputation as a forceful performer who could move audiences with her powerful voice. She might more accurately be described as a singer of laments, but the press at the time, given its limited imagination, grouped her together with other Black blues performers artists. Odetta used her theatrical training to convey the deep well of sorrow found in Black folk songs. And she developed an empathetic identification among her White folk fans.

Born Odetta Holmes in 1930, she moved from Birmingham, Alabama to Los Angeles at the age of 13 where she began formal operatic training. After 1950, she transitioned to folk material as she learned to accompany herself on the guitar. She established a following amongst the supper club set, playing at nightclubs like the Tin Angel in the Bay Area and the Blue Angel in New York. While the press reviewed her early albums well, she had trouble breaking through to more popular success. Her partnership with Belafonte launched her into another realm. She featured in the *Tonight with Belafonte* television special in 1959 and his *Belafonte at Carnegie Hall* double album that same year. She developed a respected reputation amongst folk music promoters in the Village and earned a special place at Chicago's *The Gate of Horn*. By the height of the revival, Belafonte endorsed her with the moniker, "First Lady of the Folk Song."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Harry Belafonte, *Belafonte Returns to Carnegie Hall*, vinyl (RCA Victor, 1960).

Like other folk-based acts she varied her sets, drawing from Negro spirituals, work songs, children's songs, and old-time ballads. She earned the distinction of being one of the few solo Black performers characterized as a folksinger, but this description was often modified to clarify that she specialized in Black music. The press occasionally attempted to place Odetta in a category with other Black performers, which produced comparisons to Leadbelly, Bessie Smith and other ancestral giants, but her unique approach and broad ranging material defied such reductive comparisons.<sup>72</sup> Because she was not purely a gospel singer, nor a blues singer, the media often had trouble characterizing Odetta in definitive terms.

Music reviewers even as they struggled to pigeonhole her approach, spent their columns marveling at her voice. Shelton, in nearly every one of his reviews of her concerts, gushed over the quality of her singing describing it as the "rich contralto," of an, "extraordinarily gifted singer."<sup>73</sup> In another review he was astonished by her "intense and heroic music-making."<sup>74</sup> The sheer size of her voice had music journalists scrounging for metaphors such as, "Her voice is like some big brassy horn that rolls out from a deep bass to a shout on high that cuts through every other sound."<sup>75</sup> Her operatic training remained evident to the reviewers who venerated her "quality and control," or

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<sup>72</sup> John Wilson, "Odetta Recital is Wide in Scope," *New York Times*, May 9, 1960, 32; "Odetta's Concert Is A Victory For Folksinger," *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 28, 1964, 17.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Shelton, "Popular American Folk Songs on LP," *New York Times*, January 26, 1958, X10.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Shelton, "Odetta is Heard in Song Program," *New York Times*, March 6, 1961, 28.

<sup>75</sup> Paul Hume, "Folk Singer Odetta Thrills Audience," *The Washington Post*, August 2, 1961, A27.

how her voice could be “deep, yet unmistakably feminine, with a wealth of warmth and clarity.”<sup>76</sup> Her rendition of Negro spirituals made one reviewer gape that he could not “believe the tenderness and belief.”<sup>77</sup> While music journalists admired Odetta’s technique as a singer, they were equally awed by the emotional impact of her performances.

Odetta’s melancholic, theatrical approach, where she appeared to embody the suffering of the ancestors, made her into a vessel for the great river of Black history. Music critics especially fixated on her performances of laments and blues; they respected her capacity to embody the suffering of her forbearers. She appeared to her majority White nightclub audiences to access the depths of pain in the Black experience. The cavernous sound and her ability to linger longingly on blue notes reached back in history to awaken the pain of her songs. Biographer Ian Zack describes Odetta’s ability to embody suffering this way: “When she became the prisoner, or the railroad worker in “John Henry,” or any of the other desperate characters she inhabited, she allowed her audience to empathize, however briefly, with their plight, making it more likely that the history might genuinely sink in.”<sup>78</sup> Even though Odetta was not considered a blues performer in the traditional sense, she shared its performative disposition of staging suffering.

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<sup>76</sup> “Odetta’s Concert Is A Victory For Folksinger,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 28, 1964, 17; John Pagonis, “Odetta in Her Element at Shadows,” *The Washington Post*, April 12, 1963, B13.

<sup>77</sup> Paul Hume, “Folk Singer Odetta Thrills Audience,” *The Washington Post*, August 2, 1961, A27.

<sup>78</sup> Ian Zack, *Odetta: A Life in Music and Protest* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2020), 55.

Through the force of her performance alone, Odetta could infuse her songs with a sense of suffering and of defiance in the face of oppression. For example, Odetta's version of "Take this Hammer" conveyed a profound sense of suffering not through a revision of lyrics but by an enactment of anguish by the singer. In story of the song, the singer/narrator informed the listener that they have had enough of the chain gang and have decided to abscond. The singer instructed the listener to tell the captain that they have gone. It included several direct indictments of the prison labor system, like the chains or the cornbread and molasses, but it also included some inversions of power between the narrator and the captain, such as "If he asks you, was I laughing/ Tell him I'm crying" or "If he asks you was I running/ Tell him I'm flying."

Like many folk songs, the exact genealogy of the song can be difficult to pin down, but most known earlier renditions of the song portrayed the firm resistance of the narrator, or the playful interchange between singer and audience. Different versions in Carl Sandburg's *American Songbag* and John and Alan Lomax's *American Ballads and Folk Songs* both emphasized the durability of the narrator.<sup>79</sup> Mississippi John Hurt's version, which featured on Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, played it much like his other country blues, with a thumping consistent bass line and the melody dancing on top.<sup>80</sup> The Delmore Brothers released a version in 1948 that turned the song

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<sup>79</sup> Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & company, 1927), 457; John A. Lomax, Alan Lomax, and George Lyman Kittredge, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Dover, 1994).

<sup>80</sup> Hurt also performed this version years later on Pete Seeger's television show, *Rainbow Quest*, Episode 36, Sholom Rubinstein director, Pete Seeger producer, Advertisers Broadcasting Company Inc., featuring Mississippi John Hurt, Hedy West and Paul Cadwell, <https://archive.org/details/RainbowQuest36>.

into a fast-paced rag, with an upbeat call and response.<sup>81</sup> Their version was like a gleeful casting off of work. Throw down your shackles and go fishing. It ends playfully with the spoken line, “Boy, I’m really going to take off too.” These versions emphasized the escape, and embraced the new found freedom. Odetta’s narrator was crushed by the work.

Odetta’s rendition took inspiration from Leadbelly’s 1942 recording.<sup>82</sup> In Leadbelly’s renditions, he recreated the feel and rhythm of a of a chain gang.<sup>83</sup> He ended each line with an emphatic “ahhhh,” which would have signaled the men to land their hammers as they sung. Odetta went even further than Leadbelly in portraying how the labor had ravaged her soul and body. Her rendition was steeped through with the bone-tired exhaustion of someone truly fed up with the work. In her version, the narrator was not skipping out on the work, but making a bold statement of defiance. She refused to take it anymore. She instructed the listener to tell the captain, not because she did not want to face him, but because she could not stand another minute on the line. In other renditions the listeners was encouraged to tell the captain some kind of a yarn; in Odetta’s portrayal, it was clear the listener could tell the captain whatever they wanted. She owed him nothing, not even an explanation.

The press tended to overlook Odetta’s lighter songs in favor of a fascination with her capacity for deep sorrow. Nevertheless, Odetta’s act included many moments of joy

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<sup>81</sup> Delmore Brother, “Take it to the Captain,” *King Records*, 1948, K-2095.

<sup>82</sup> Odetta, *Odetta at the Gate of Horn*, vinyl (Tradition Records, 1957).

<sup>83</sup> Lead Belly, “Take This Hammer,” *Work Songs of the U.S.A.*, vinyl (Asch Recordings, 1942).



and celebration. Her version of “He’s got the Whole World In His Hands” was a crowd favorite. Her duet with Belafonte on “Hole in the Bucket,” a joke song with playful interplay between the singers, charted in Europe. The press virtually ignored those moments that celebrated Black joy in favor of fawning over those songs that spoke in the “idiom of trouble and anguish,” especially when she sang with, “Her characteristic bite, drive and passion.”<sup>84</sup> One critic was amazed that she appeared, “to have all the woes of all the downtrodden synthesized in her remarkable voice.”<sup>85</sup> Another observed how her voice could possess a “lifting, lilted cry.”<sup>86</sup> Still another appeared shocked at how her performance of “Hangman,” “holds a terror.”<sup>87</sup> These same reviews do not hold the same breathless accolades for her joyful renditions of Negro spirituals, not do they exhaust their thesauruses lauding her sex appeal. They focused acutely on her facility for portraying Black suffering.

Odetta used the White penchant to witness Black suffering to her advantage, redeploying this as both a performance technique and a calculated political strategy. Critical theorist Rebecca Wanzo discusses how African American women engage in a “assertive utilization of historical sentimental narratives about suffering.”<sup>88</sup> This

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<sup>84</sup> Robert Shelton, “Odetta Returns for Song Recital,” *New York Times*, March 15, 1965, 38; Robert Shelton, “Odetta is Heard in Song Program,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1961, 28.

<sup>85</sup> Percy Shain, “Pat Was Not So Pat, But Ernie Had It, Man,” *Daily Boston Globe*, March 11, 1960, 10, quoted in Ian Zack, *Odetta: A Life in Music and Protest* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2020), 94.

<sup>86</sup> John Wilson, “Odetta Recital is Wide in Scope,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1960, 32.

<sup>87</sup> Paul Hume, “Folk Singer Odetta Thrills Audience,” *The Washington Post*, August 2, 1961, A27.

<sup>88</sup> Rebecca Wanzo, *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American Women and Sentimental Political Storytelling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 5

approach required a sense of uplift coupled with a progressive narrative of sentimental storytelling. In this way the listener can view the suffering as prelude. The civil rights movement, for example, carefully curated the image of suffering in the example of Rosa Parks, so as to draw the injustices of segregation into the greatest relief possible. In a similar way, performers used the staging of suffering as a means for “sentimental identification” between the viewer and the performer, even if the suffering was fundamentally different.<sup>89</sup>

Like Belafonte, Odetta took inspiration from Paul Robeson in blending artistic performance with politicized messaging.<sup>90</sup> However, rather than labor solidarity or Black respectability, Odetta humanized the plight of Black folks in America through sentimental identification. She found her political voice at a progressive summer camp, where she asked the all-White campers to cut off her straighten hair. She remembered, “learning the folk songs and the stories that came along with the songs, which was a history of us, and was definitely not in our history books, and I often said it straighten my back and kinked my hair.”<sup>91</sup> She would advance the cause of civil rights by telling the terrible history experienced by Black Americans in a way that was profoundly human and

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<sup>89</sup> Rebecca Wanzo, *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American Women and Sentimental Political Storytelling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 28 – 30; 82.

<sup>90</sup> Odetta also engaged in more traditional form of political engagement especially in her support of the civil rights movement. She went on a cultural exchange trip to Africa, sang at the march on Washington, and marched in Selma, Alabama and the Bloody Sunday march. Nevertheless, she retained the reputation in certain corners of Civil rights activism as not doing enough. Ian Zack, *Odetta: A Life in Music and Protest* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2020), 126.

<sup>91</sup> Ian Zack, *Odetta: A Life in Music and Protest* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2020), 33 (Quote from Odetta memorial recording).

accessible to White audiences. To achieve this, Odetta felt the message must be deployed strategically, “There was a period in my early career when I needed to learn what to say and what to leave out, but I felt I had to say a lot because our schools certainly weren’t teaching us anything about ourselves.”<sup>92</sup> As a result, she chose to engage with White spaces in order to tell her story. To do that, she used inference and tact.

Odetta used the storytelling elements of the folk songs to implicate injustice against Black Americans. In an appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, she sang, “Poor Little Jesus,” a track from her album of Christmas songs.<sup>93</sup> Through the performance, she turned the nativity story into an analogy of an immigrant family. In Odetta’s hands, the unimpeachable central story of Christian faith became a tangible metaphor for the current state of poverty in America.

In the folk stories that Odetta embodied through her performance, Black laborers lived and died by the sweat of their brow. Like “Take This Hammer,” Odetta’s rendition of “Water Boy,” a song about Black labor and the threat of the carceral state, exhibited the extreme exhaustion of the worker, put upon by the relentless demands of the overseer. “There ain’t so sweat, boy/ That’s on a this mountain/ That runs like mine.”<sup>94</sup> The songs ended with an extended sequence where Odetta holds out each note, only to give out with a breathy gasp which represented the narrator of the song worked to death. The retelling

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<sup>92</sup> Zack, *Odetta*, 55.

<sup>93</sup> Odetta, *Christmas Spirituals*, vinyl (Vanguard, 1960); Ian Zack, *Odetta: A Life in Music and Protest* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2020), 106.

<sup>94</sup> Odetta’s first rendition appeared on Odetta and Larry, *At the Tin Angel*, CD (Fantasy Records, 1954); Another notable version appeared on Harry Belafonte, *Belafonte Returns to Carnegie Hall*, vinyl (RCA Victor, 1960).

of the story, the witness to the suffering, was a form of accountability. For Odetta, the sacrifice of the Black worker on the altar of labor would not be forgotten, not swept under the rug as the cost of progress. She conveyed this message through the sheer force of her performance.

Odetta could also alter lyrics to bring out the contemporary political comparisons. In one interview she discussed her version of “Another Man Done Gone.” The typical narration of the song detailed a murder ballad, where the principal character does wrong and is punished. But Odetta changed the final lyrics from, “He killed another man” to “They killed another man” which changed the perspective from an unreformed recidivist to the oppression of the state. On this change Odetta said, “When a man escaped... blood hounds were put on the trails and usually the prisoner who tried to escape was killed in some fashion or another.”<sup>95</sup> Her recontextualization of suffering exposed the careless disregard the state had for Black life. In all these cases, she used the narrative elements of the folksong to convey images of social injustice.

The blues were a means to humanize Black suffering and one of the few avenues available to Black performers in the revival. The physical suffering and age of Son House and Mississippi John Hurt put a human face on the history of inequality. And Odetta’s theatrical ability to personify Black anguish engaged the audience’s capacity for sentimental identification. The characters in an Odetta song found themselves swept up in merciless labor arrangements, or at the hands of pitiless sheriffs and judges. These

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<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Zack, *Odetta*, 45.

statements compelled the audience to view the narratives in light of contemporary racial politics.

### **Gospel and the Black Social Gospel**

The final niche that White audiences accepted for Black performers in folk revivalist spaces was gospel. Gospel sat at a unique intersection: it was understood simultaneously as both modern Black church music and historical Negro spirituals. This meant that it was tied to present day Black church life and the experiences of the enslaved. For folk fans, gospel's proximity to the history of slavery meant it held an immediacy to low, folk culture. Consequently, folk festival line-ups often included a single gospel act as a way to cover the genre. But these acts did not tend to play in a historical recreationist style, rather they performed modern iterations of the songs. White audiences were thrilled by the charismatic high energy performances. The nostalgic connection to religious music also appealed to those raised in the church. Black artists, for their part, used gospel as a means to communicate both theological and social reform messages. The messages of liberation, couched in biblical illusion, made them palatable to White audiences.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> As early as 1960 *New York Times* reporter Robert Shelton recognized the unique trend of Black Gospel as popular entertainment, and wanted to cover it as a part of his folk music beat, but he received a flat rejection from the editor; Robert Shelton to Lewis Bergman, September 13, 1960, The Robert Shelton Archive, Box 041, University of Liverpool. A year later he would get his wish. He envisioned gospel as working to better enculturate white audiences, "When the white listening audience gets to hear more of the undiluted music of the Negro gospel movement, some sort of an explosion in taste is bound to happen. Occasionally a giant of gospel-singing such as Mahalia Jackson reaches out to extend the influence of the music." Robert Shelton, "Complex Genre," *New York Times*, March 19, 1961, X21.

The history of gospel music in America goes back to when enslaved Africans first began rearranging European hymns with new rhythms. They remained a form of informal low culture until, In the wake of the Civil War, The Fisk Jubilee Singers attempted to legitimize Black spirituals as a form of high art concert music. They sought to establish the dignity of Black culture through wide-spread touring and public engagement. While musically their compositions tended to conform to the standard of White composers, they succeeding in elevating Black spirituals as a form of cultured entertainment.<sup>97</sup> Later generations departed from the Jubilee Singers by pushing the conventions of the style mixing popular music and the blues.

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, gospel benefited from a general increase in interest in all recorded music. Homer Rodeheaver founded Rainbow Records, the first label dedicated to gospel music, in 1916. By the 1930s several musicians and composers developed the specific attributes that made gospel a distinct, Black art form. Thomas Dorsey began arranging church music in the more recognizable style of gospel. The Golden Gate Quartet developed the kinds of harmonies that would become prevalent, moving from barber shop to pop vocals and early doo wop. Sister Rosetta Tharpe used spirituals as a basis for popular songs, blending the conventions of the blues with gospel sources.<sup>98</sup> By the 1950s, gospel displayed a rich combination of syncretic styles.

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<sup>97</sup> Andrew Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise: The Story of the Jubilee Singers, Who Introduced the World to the Music of Black America*, First edition. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000); Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, Postmillennial Pop 17 (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016), 134.

<sup>98</sup> Gayle Wald, *Shout, Sister, Shout!: The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 66 – 73.

During the folk revival, gospel singers tended to present their songs in the context of a sincere and abiding Christian faith as a way to remind the audience of the true purpose of the music. While they may have entertained, they also ought to edify and enrich the soul. White media outlets and television emcees emphasized this aspect of the performance for their largely White audiences. One newspaper review of a series of concerts noted, “The Grandison Singers, however, feel that the entertainment worth of their material justifies its use anywhere. Their leader, Mary Grandison, believes ‘there might be some people we can’t reach in a church, so we’ll reach them in a night club.’”<sup>99</sup> Clara Ward would often tell journalists, “If people won’t come to hear gospel, we’ll take the gospel to them.”<sup>100</sup> These artists upheld the primacy of the Christian messaging as a fundamental reason for the performance. Or, as Gertrude Ward declared in her rules for presenting gospel music, “Don’t forget that the world will not be saved by halfhearted service. Put all you have into it. Your singing is ‘Praising God from Whom All Blessings Flow.’”<sup>101</sup> She sought to keep gospel a fundamentally religious experience, developing her ideas into a printed pamphlet which she offered it to anyone who requested it.

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<sup>99</sup> Robert Shelton, “Singers Spread Gospel in ‘Village’ Cabaret,” *New York Times*, February 16, 1961, 25.

<sup>100</sup> Robert Shelton, “New Fields Found by Gospel Singers,” *New York Times*, February, 18, 1962, 94.

<sup>101</sup> Willa Ward-Royster, *How I Got over: Clara Ward and the World-Famous Ward Singers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 114 - 115.

Beyond direct biblical and evangelical messages, gospel performers also infused their performances with a mix of ideas grouped as the Black social gospel.<sup>102</sup> The 1950s were an important time for establishing Black theology as a distinct and valid doctrinal approach.<sup>103</sup> Black theologians in this era conceptualized politics and culture as intimately tied to theology. This, in turn, encouraged socially and politically engaged artistic endeavors.<sup>104</sup> The Black social gospel purported that the Christian message compelled a social responsibility to all peoples and promised liberation through action. Christians ought to foster equity and compassion for the entire brotherhood of man. This would act as a liberating force for all peoples. For gospel singers, the mix of social, political and religious ideas were integrated into a single message.<sup>105</sup> When Black folks sang gospel to White audiences, they communicated historical, religious and political messages simultaneously.

Mahalia Jackson was the most well know gospel singer at the time of the revival and she often performed in folk oriented concerts. Jackson's restrained seriousness and passionate concerts earned her the respect of the popular media gatekeepers as well. On

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<sup>102</sup> This is connected to, but separate from, the Social Gospel of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This articulation of the social responsibility of Christians connected to a theology of liberation. Gary Dorrien, *A Darkly Radiant Vision: The Black Social Gospel in the Shadow of MLK* (New Haven, UNITED STATES: Yale University Press, 2023), 1 – 4.

<sup>103</sup> Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1999), 29 - 32.

<sup>104</sup> Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1999), 45.

<sup>105</sup> Theologian James H. Cohen maintains that is true of all Black music. While this may be accurate by implication, only gospel explicitly made these claims in the popular music market. James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1991), 5, 6.



the *Kraft Music Hall*, for example, Milton Berle gestured toward Jackson's propriety and musical excellence when he introduced her in solemn tones, "Today through her dignity, sincerity of purpose and her God-given voice"<sup>106</sup> Her stage presence was the model of dignified restraint. She often performed alone in television appearances, with an unseen piano or organ player for accompaniment. This meant the camera could focus solely on her, zooming into a tight close-up right on her face. She often sang with her eyes closed, appearing the focus intently on each word and emotion, only opening her eyes occasionally to look to heaven in a kind of personal acknowledgment of God. It did not seem to be done for the benefit of the listener at all. It created the effect that the audience was sitting in on Jackson's personal communication with God. She used her incredible breath control to hold back on lines, bringing the listener in, only to then blow them over with a great crescendo up to a high note, held long and free. The great power in her voice allowed her this contrast. The effect was a hypnotic oscillation up and down, with a prodigious dynamic range, loud and soft.<sup>107</sup>

The Black social gospel, as articulated by gospel singers, became an important organizing principle in the struggle for civil rights. Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) co-founder Ella Baker articulated the strategy of integrating religion and politics this way, "if you're confronting the power structure, you might be less suspect being call Christian. And you would, perhaps, avoid being tagged as 'Red' by

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<sup>106</sup> *Kraft Music Hall*, featuring Milton Berle and Mahalia Jackson, aired January 14, 1959, NBC Television, VA12285, UCLA Film Archive, Los Angeles, California.

<sup>107</sup> *The Ed Sullivan Show*, April 14, 1962, CBS Television, edsullivan.com

being called Christian.”<sup>108</sup> In 1960, Jackson decided to deploy her celebrity and prestige to advocate for largescale political change. She stumped for the Kennedy campaign and, alongside other Black luminaries such as Ella Fitzgerald and Belafonte, performed at JFK’s inaugural gala. By 1963, the link between gospel music and the civil rights movement had been firmly established. Jackson sang “I’ve been ‘buked and I’ve been Scorned,” a lament based on the Book of Job, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. It was Jackson who called out to Martin Luther King Jr. during his passionate speech and implored him to, “Tell them about the dream, Martin.”<sup>109</sup>

The confluence of gospel, the Black social gospel, and the folk revival intertwined in the reapplication of the song “We Shall Overcome.” First penned by a Black Methodist minister in 1901, the song remained a little used hymn until its rediscovery in the 1950s. Zilphia Horton first heard the song when visiting members of the Food and Tobacco Workers’ Union sang it to her at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee.<sup>110</sup> Guy Carawan connected the Freedom movement to the song sometime in the 1950s and it came to be integral to their protest organizing by the early 1960s.<sup>111</sup> After Joan Baez

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<sup>108</sup> Quoted in, Mark Burford, *Mahalia Jackson and the Black Gospel Field*, Oxford Scholarship Online (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 315.

<sup>109</sup> Gary J. Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 2018), 351.

<sup>110</sup> Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer, eds., *Song of Work and Freedom* (Garden City, N. Y: Dolphin Books, 1961), 34.

<sup>111</sup> Pete Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 111, 112; Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 184; David King Dunaway and Molly Beer, *Singing Out: An Oral History of America’s Folk Music Revival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 141 – 143.

released a version in 1963, the popularity of the song amongst the political folk revivalists took off.<sup>112</sup> While the original text envisioned the overcoming of sin and suffering through God's help, the emergent political movements performed the song as an expression of longing for material change in the earthly realm. We shall overcome the divisions of segregation and build a new, just society.

The song became a symbol of the civil rights movement. Pete Seeger called the song, "The theme song of the Negro freedom movement."<sup>113</sup> Or, as one music journalist observed, "[We Shall Overcome] has also become the primary means of expression by both Negroes and whites seeking peaceful methods for awakening this country to the Civil Rights issues."<sup>114</sup> Within the context of folk revival activities, politically minded revivalists latched on to the power of the social reform message and the possibility of a new and salubrious day. In addition to "We Shall Overcome," they chose songs that highlighted perseverance and freedom, not the specific divinity of Jesus. The result was a secularized message of social reform. Popular selections included "Cry Freedom," "We Shall not be Moved," and "Down by the Riverside." Phil Ochs cheekily lampooned the ubiquity of the song by 1965: "At the end of the presentation, the whole folk scene joined hands and sang, "We Shall Overcome" so many times that everybody passed out."<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Joan Baez, *Joan Baez in Concert Part 2*, vinyl (Vanguard, 1963).

<sup>113</sup> Pete Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 248

<sup>114</sup> Linda Solomon, "What's Happening to Gospel," *ABC-TV Hootenanny Show Magazine*, vol. 1 no. 1, 1964, 50 – 51.

<sup>115</sup> Phil Ochs, *I'm Gonna Say It Now: The Writings of Phil Ochs*, ed. David Cohen (Guilford, Connecticut: Backbeat Books, 2020), 131.

Folk revivalists deployed the moral clarity of the negro spiritual, as definitively established by artists like Jackson, to critique American hypocrisy regarding segregation.

Gospel also had the power to emotionally move an audience. If there were two gospel artists a folk fan had heard of, the second one was likely The Clara Ward Singers or the Staples Singers. These groups displayed a talent for ushering the audience through an enthusiastically charged religious encounter in the secular setting of the concert hall. Clara Ward especially developed a reputation for her up-tempo, energetic performances. For a religious audience, their style of music opened up an ecstatic spiritualism, intended as a charismatic shout of joy to God. They may have viewed her as overcome by the Holy Spirit, expressed through joy and fierce devotion. The power of the spirit within her is barely contained as a volatile and emotive performance. In the context of the folk festival, they represented a marked antidote to the relatively staid performances of the White musicians. In one episode of *Hootenanny*, the Clara Ward singers performed their version of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot."<sup>116</sup> In their typical fashion, the group cranked up the tempo to a breathless pace. Ward shout-sang the lead vocals, while the backup singers drove the paces with their relentless clapping. The crowd full of White college students can barely keep up with the pace. The group further set themselves apart from the other performers on the folk stage by singing in their Sunday dresses and high beehive hairdos. They did not comport themselves in the style of the popular folk artists; they brought Black church to the folk fans.

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<sup>116</sup> *The Best of Hootenanny*, DVD (Shout! Factory, 2007).

Gospel had a long history outside of folk revivalism and it developed and grew separate from the influence of the boom.<sup>117</sup> Nonetheless, gospel represented one of the few roles that Black performers could assume in the folk revival and White audiences went wild for both the staid, venerable presentation of religious faith and the ecstatic explosions of joyful rapture. These performers captured the dignified endurance of suffering many found integral to both the Christian faith and the Black experience. Their rapturous joy was positively infectious and represented the ecstasy of release.

Gospel singers capitalized on the opportunity presented by folk concerts to expand their audience and preach their religious/social message. They tended to treat folk audiences as another group to preach to. The historicizing work of folk revivalism, which presented the work as both historical artifact and prescient commentary, enabled the largely non-religious communal experience of the folk festival to embrace the explicitly religious work of the gospel singer. Folk festival organizers booked gospel acts for their historical significance. Their association to the history of religious expression in the country and their connection to the experiences of previous generations of African Americans qualified it as a form of traditional art.<sup>118</sup> The political folk emulated the Black social gospel application of Negro spirituals in their critique of power.

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<sup>117</sup> The Clara Ward Singers' appearance on Hootenanny didn't even raise to the importance of being included in Willa Ward-Royster's autobiography. Willa Ward-Royster, *How I Got over: Clara Ward and the World-Famous Ward Singers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

<sup>118</sup> Robert Shelton, "Singers Spread Gospel in 'Village' Cabaret," *New York Times*, February 16, 1961, 25.

## **Tonight with Belafonte: A Portrait of Black History**

When Belafonte secured the contract for a one-night televised concert, he wanted to capitalize on the chance to impress the nation with his talent and communicate a specifically Black view of the United States. *Tonight with Belafonte* represented the culmination of his work up to that point.<sup>119</sup> It proved definitively that he could operate in White circles, speak simultaneously to both White and Black audiences, and maintain the vision of his art. The special was more than a staged concert, it presented a grand re-telling of American history through the perspective of African Americans. In telling the story, Belafonte made use of all the tactics explored above; he appealed to Black respectability, revealed profound Black suffering, and ended with a optimistic restatement of the social gospel.

The simple fact of Belafonte's centrality in the planning and execution of the special was itself a radical act in the context of network television in 1958. Networks rarely produced specials that centered on a single Black performer, let alone ones that explored the Black experience.<sup>120</sup> But the strength of Belafonte's draw as a musical superstar was too much to pass up. Belafonte knew how to use his star power as leverage over the network and negotiated a contract that gave him complete creative control.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> "Tonight With Belafonte," aired December 10, 1959, a Belafonte Presents, Inc. production, executive producer Phil Stein, producer George Charles, director Norman Jewison, CBS Television, VA19843 T, UCLA Library Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles California.

<sup>120</sup> Phoebe Bronstein, "Southern Projections: Black Television Hosts, Madison Avenue, and Nationalizing the South in 1950s Primetime," *Television & New Media* 23, no. 2 (February 1, 2022): 226 - 227.

<sup>121</sup> Zack, *Odetta*, 83.

The special offers a comprehensive window into how Belafonte used folk as a medium to convey deeper messages.

Belafonte's appeal to polite White society was nowhere more evident than in the sponsorship of Revlon, a cosmetics company which catered to White middle-class women. As was the style at the time, the special opened with an extended commercial pitch by former film star from the 1940s, Barbara Britton. Through her profile had faded by the late 1950s, the 39-year-old actress, surrounded by Revlon products in an opulently appointed set, cut a glamorous frame in her long white gloves and ball gown. She was the perfect aspirational model for suburban housewives quickly approaching middle-age and clinging on to their youthful beauty. CBS and Revlon clearly understood Belafonte's remarkable appeal to White middle-class viewers.

Belafonte devoted the special to retelling the story of Black Americans in the United States, from slavery to the present day. The story of African Americans in the United States began with forced, hard labor. The first image after the advertisement was a chalk drawing depicting Black laborers in chains. The lights rose on a set with chains hanging from the ceiling; singers in tattered garb in the background pantomimed swinging hammers and in the foreground, Belafonte alone. The rhythmic cadence of the labor song and the force of vocal performance emphasized the power and endurance of the workers. Though the enslaved have been compelled to work, they reclaimed their dignity through the masterful performance of their work. The song ended with a camera close-up on a pile of chains upon which Belafonte stomped forcefully. In its visual

symbolism, Belafonte asserted that Black folks had endured through slavery and ultimately, they trod upon the symbols of their oppression.

The special then moved on to create a broad-spectrum vision of Black life. The theatrical set for these numbers resembled the front porches and shacks of a poor rural community. Belafonte's love song "Sylvie" captured romance. Odetta's version of "Water Boy" explored suffering as only she could. Belafonte portrayed Black folks as multifaceted, deeply moved by the world around them, fully human. He also included joy and play as essential elements of the Black experience. In one quick sequence, he led a group of children in a nonsense song written by Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter, "Mo-yet," followed by a dance number to a Negro spiritual. The children and the dancers joined together for a rollicking version of "Pick a Bale of Cotton." Afterward, backup singers hung around on the porch fronts, giving Belafonte an audience to engage with as he strutted around the set. The culminating effect of all these numbers, especially coming as they did one after the other, was a sense of vibrant community, of collective celebration and support. This was a place where everyone knew and cared about each other. It embodied the social gospel of mutual care.

Belafonte also used the platform to create a vision of integration. Blues players Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee performed a fast-paced number, which gave the integrated dance team a chance to take center stage. In the context of the special, it was a moment that did not comment on race in any way in particular, but the mere presence of White and Black dancers side by side caused controversy with the studio and the sponsors. Musical director and longtime Belafonte collaborator Robert De Cormier



remembered, “Revlon could not stand that, and I don’t think CBS could either really... They tried to get Harry to make it all Black, which they would have accepted. But they were really concerned about having Blacks and Whites together. But Harry absolutely refused to give in on it.”<sup>122</sup> But Belafonte refused to relent and the dance number stayed in as an integrated performance.

The finale of *Tonight with Belafonte* took place in a modern-day church set. The culminating number, a gospel song, communicated an optimistic message, “There’s a Better Day Coming.”<sup>123</sup> The iconography of the set mixed with the message of the song would have reminded viewers of the growing civil rights movement. By ending in a modern setting, Belafonte also reminded his audience that Black folks were still there. They had endured through slavery and they remained a vital part of the country. Moreover, the song spoke to contemporary views of American progress by created a progressive vision for the future.

In a media environment that allowed very few opportunities to Black performers, and maintained a high level of suspicion for any material deemed subversive, Belafonte’s commitment to Black representation was itself a risky gambit. The simple inclusion of Black folks in the narrative of American history, in a way other than as servants or props, was itself the radical act. In order to elevate his message of Black respectability, he avoided naming white culture, and by extension the capitalist logic of white domination.

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<sup>122</sup> Zack, *Odetta*, 90.

<sup>123</sup> When showing the television special to media scholar Jeff Sharlet, Belafonte said, “All these songs were about the coming of justice, the coming of a greater social truth.” Jeff Sharlet, *The Undertow: Scenes From a Slow Civil War*, First edition. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2023), 12.

In the opening number, for example, the staging of the Black laborers omitted the White overseer, whip in hand, belly bouncing as he drove the workers. In these small ways, Belafonte created a version of Black history made more palatable for White audiences. Slavery through this telling was a thing that happened to Black folks; and not a thing that was done to them by a particular guilty party. The special recognized the great national sin of slavery and the hardship of labor, yet it did so without a condemnation of the enslaver. The White audience could empathize with the burden of forced labor, without the added guilt of personal responsibility. Similarly, in the final number, both White and Black audiences could look at “There’s a Better Day Coming” and see a triumphant spiritual message and a civic vision of a just society. It projected an image of victory over injustice, but like the missing slave-driver of the first number, it never clearly identified the source of injustice. It appealed to the better angels of our nature, without reckoning with the devils among us. The crimes of division and strife will soon simply be “over.” Had Belafonte been more confrontational, he would have opened himself up to claims of communist collaboration. Better than to leave the oppression unnamed and unseen so that he could emphasize the narrative of overcoming. Instead, Belafonte crafted a narrative of Black ascendancy and hopefulness as a framework for the special. He created a non-subversive vision of Black advancement and possibility. Belafonte softens the radicalism of Black inclusion, by wrapping the narrative in the familiar language of progress and optimism.

In the same year that Belafonte staged his televised concert special, another musical presentation of Black history hit movie theaters. Samuel Goldwyn produced a classic Hollywood musical adaptation of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.<sup>124</sup> Gershwin wrote the folk opera in the 1930s in an attempted to sincerely portray Black culture and elevate the idiom of the Black spiritual to high art.<sup>125</sup> Set in the fictional southern ghetto of Catfish Row, the musical explores the lives of the residents of the town. The titular Porgy was a disabled beggar, living in a shack, while Bess was a drug addled mistress to an abusive lover, Crown. The residents of Catfish Row are squeezed by poverty, drug addiction, and violence. Over its long and storied career, the musical developed a reputation in some corners of the Black community as reinforcing negative stereotypes.

When Goldwyn began looking for talent, the debate around the depictions of Black life discouraged many Black actors from taking roles. Belafonte publicly rejected the role of Porgy, calling it demeaning. Sidney Poitier eventually accepted the role, but only after he felt cornered into doing so. His agent had accepted the role on his behalf and when Poitier tried to back out of the production, Goldwyn warned he would be in breach of a verbal agreement. If he didn't go through with the production, Poitier feared he may derail his career entirely. He took the job, but later regretted it.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Otto Preminger dir., *Porgy and Bess*, Featuring Sidney Poitier and Dorothy Dandridge, producer Samuel Goldwyn, VHS (Columbia Pictures, 1959), UCLA Library Film and Television Archive, M31843.

<sup>125</sup> Ellen Noonan, *Strange Career of Porgy and Bess: Race, Culture, and America's Most Famous Opera*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 146.

<sup>126</sup> Noonan, *Strange Career of Porgy and Bess*, 265 - 66.

A particular point of contention among many Black artists was the exaggerated dialect of the characters. Gershwin had used this phrasing as a means to portray Black culture in a way that was more accurate than the minstrel show, but by the 1950s, critics found the stylized slang condescending. Poitier refused to deliver the exaggerated dialectal dialog as written and the rest of the cast followed suit. Brock Peters, the actor who played Crown, remembered his time on the set, “We all used Sidney’s intelligent performance as our model... He set the example for how we spoke, no ‘dems,’ dese,’ ‘dose.’ We were determined not to demean ourselves and language was one way to keep it straight up, to avoid caricature.”<sup>127</sup> Yet, the attempts by the cast to elevate the problematic source text only went so far. They still found themselves in the hands of an old-fashioned mega-producer.

Director Otto Preminger frequently clashed with Goldwyn over the tone of the film. Preminger hoped to create a gritty exploration of Black oppression, but Goldwyn wanted a big budget glossy musical.<sup>128</sup> The controversial original text combines with a troupe of artists pulling in various directions resulted in a confused production. Opinions on the resultant film were mixed. Some saw it as a chance for the nearly all Black cast to star in a properly produced big budget Hollywood film. Despite the stodgy old source, the movie showcased their talent. Others saw the content of the film as a retread of tired old narratives about Black folks.<sup>129</sup> It showed them as drug dealers and thugs. James

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<sup>127</sup> Quoted in: Hirsch, *Otto Preminger*, 293.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, 297.

<sup>129</sup> Noonan, *Strange Career of Porgy and Bess*, 273.

Baldwin attacked the film as fundamentally incapable of depicting Black life, given its White authorship and White director. Even with excellent performances from some in the cast, it remained a White man's vision of Black culture.

The film fared poorly in the box office earning back only half of its estimated \$7 million dollar budget. While tickets sold well in urban areas, they hit a wall south of the Mason-Dixon line where Black folks were segregated to the much smaller sections of the balcony. As a result, Black audiences in the South were largely unable to view the film, or they stayed home in protest. Goldwyn publicly recognized the abject failure of the production and slinked out of the movie business, his final film a bomb. The film has since been lost due to a lack of preservation. All "road show" prints of the film, which included color, 6 track stereo sound and large scale 70mm format, have been lost or destroyed and no master tapes remain. Whatever versions of the movie exists cannot be publicly exhibited without the express consent of the Gershwin estate, which they have not allowed since 1972.<sup>130</sup>

In the wider culture, *Porgy and Bess* prompted a conversation about Black representation. Should Black folks remain content with stereotypical representations, or should they push for more complex, more accurate characters and dialog? Baldwin, in his critique of the film, pinpointed how the story accommodated White feelings about Black people. "What has always been missing from George Gershwin's opera is what the situation of *Porgy and Bess* says about the white world. It is because of this omission

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<sup>130</sup> Hirsch, *Otto Preminger*, 296.

that Americans are so proud of the opera. It assuages their guilt about Negroes and it attacks none of their fantasies.”<sup>131</sup> Though the story does feature White police officers who come into Catfish Row to enforce external control onto the ghetto, they are not depicted as abusive or cruel. They are simply a cog in a larger unfeeling machine. This leaves the sociological forces that keep the Black folks *in* Catfish Row unnamed and unexplored. Both *Tonight with Belafonte* and *Porgy and Bess* focus on the status of Black folks to the exclusion of White folks. But, where Gershwin focused on the lurid danger running through the Black community, Belafonte highlighted the humanity and joy. While *Porgy and Bess* asked the audience for pity, Belafonte demanded respect.

In the same year that produced Belafonte’s hit TV special and Goldwyn’s final flop, a new strand of Black culture developed. *A Raisin in the Sun* also debuted on Broadway in 1959. Lorraine Hansberry’s play and subsequent 1961 film created a frank portrait of the pressures experienced by Black folks in contemporary America in a way that did not attempt to accommodate White sensibilities. Though set in present-day Chicago, it also offered a meditation on Black history. In one pivotal scene in Act I, Mama excoriates Walter Lee for what she sees as his greedy ambition. She reminds him of their history of oppression marked by palpable physical threat, lynchings and beatings. Looking at him with disappointment she said, “You’re my children but how different we’ve become.”<sup>132</sup> Even as Black Americans sought a new life and a new sense of

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<sup>131</sup> “On Catfish Row,” in James Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, The Library of America 98 (New York: Library of America, 1998), 618 - 619.

<sup>132</sup> Daniel Petrie, director, *A Raisin in the Sun*, DVD (Columbia Pictures, 1961, Criterion Collection, 2018).

equality, the play implores them to remember their history. *A Raisin in the Sun* marked a watershed moment for what would come to be known as the Black Arts Movement. This movement of Black artistic and revolutionary political thought blossomed in American urban centers.<sup>133</sup> It spawned a new conception of Black nationalism, which further prompted a revision of Black history.

*The History of the Negro People*, a multi-part mini-series created by Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee offered a marked evolution in popular representations of Black American history.<sup>134</sup> Davis and Dee got their start in the New York theater scene and quickly made a name for themselves as dynamic, singular talents. In 1965 they produced a short form television that took a wide-ranging look at Black folks in America and around the globe. The piece does not shy away from holding White society to account for its treatment of Black people. Episode II, the Negro and the South, takes on the White myths of a genteel antebellum past and how that did not hold true for the Black Americans.<sup>135</sup> The following episode on Slavery captured the resilience, the tragedy, and the plain meanness of slavery. The performers act out recorded testimony of the enslaved interposed with narration and group singing.

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<sup>133</sup> Smethurst sees Hansberry, Davis and Dee as transitional figures from the Old Left to the new Black nationalism. James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>134</sup> Dee recalled the tremendous pressure in this time to create meaningful art to forward the cause of civil rights and to materially participate in the struggle. Ossie Davis, *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together*, 1st ed. (New York: W. Morrow, 1998), 312 – 314.

<sup>135</sup> Norton Bloom, Director, *History of the Negro People*, “Part II: The Negro and the South,” featuring Ossie Davie, Ruby Dee, National Education Television and Radio Center, 1965. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/exploring-hate/2022/10/12/full-series-history-of-the-negro-people-1965>.

Rather than the implied presence of White society in Belafonte's rendition, Davis adapted the material to focus specifically on the closeness of Black/White relations. The piece explored the ways that the White overseers brutally drove the Black folks, or how the Black folks would get one over on the White masters. The monologues created a picture of the fully racialized experience of the enslaved, how their Blackness separated them, marked them, held them in constant contrast with their White counterparts. The episode also included stark examples of the dehumanization engendered by the peculiar institution: suicide by the captured Africans on the ships, mothers who killed their newborn child rather than allow them to be sold into slavery, and slaves hung for rebellion.

The episode on slavery also uses Negro spirituals to punctuate the monologues and thematically tie the narration together. In every instance, the music projects a feeling of resistance. Whereas Belafonte used music to display the range of humanity experienced by Black folks and to ultimately instill a sense of optimism, *The History of the Negro People*, used Negro Spirituals as a site of communal resistance against oppression. For example, the episode began and ended with a stirring chorus of "Oh, Freedom."<sup>136</sup> When the historical retelling reached the battles of the Civil War, the chorus broke into "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," sung as a powerful warning of the coming judgment. Even as the actors embody the story of the unfree, their very soul cries

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<sup>136</sup> Bruce Minnix, Director, *History of the Negro People*, "Part III: Slavery," featuring Ossie Davie, Ruby Dee, National Education Television and Radio Center, 1965.  
<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/exploring-hate/2022/10/12/full-series-history-of-the-negro-people-1965/>



out in unison for freedom. In order to tell the story of the enslaved, Davis included their abiding desire for freedom told through song.

*Tonight with Belafonte* sat as an inflection point between *Porgy and Bess* and *The History of the Negro People*. *Porgy and Bess* represented the old fashioned White mediated form of Black representation; *The History of the Negro People* was at the vanguard of a new generation of Black intellectual production. For as much as *Porgy and Bess* found itself hopelessly out of step by the end of the 1950s, Belafonte understood how to get his message across to White and Black folks alike. But Belafonte would did not push against his White audience as firmly as the coming Black Arts movement.

The experience of producing the special ultimately left Belafonte unsatisfied. On commercial and artistic counts the special was a resounding accomplishment; it drew a significant viewing audience and played well with the critics.<sup>137</sup> Additionally, Belafonte prevailed in his efforts to keep the dancers integrated and even more importantly to reconsider American history from a Black perspective. But, for all the ways that the concert special succeeded, it led Belafonte to reconsider his approach to political culture. His frustration with the network led him to an epiphany; he decided that he must beyond movies and television as a means to change the culture, he also needed direct action.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> “Television Reviews — Tonight with Belafonte,” *Variety*, December 16, 1959, 27; Fred Danzig, “‘Night with Belafonte’ Wins Praise of TV Fans,” *Chicago Defender*, December 14, 1959, 17; ‘Night With Belafonte’ Real ‘Socksationaler’ *The Chicago Defender*, December 19, 1959, 19; John P. Shanley, “‘Tonight With Belafonte’ Offered,” *New York Times*, December 11, 1959, 67.

<sup>138</sup> Belafonte and Shnayerson, *My Song*, 220 - 221.

This may have been the most important lesson from this kind of approach. The limits of performing to White audience did not allow Black artists to speak as frankly nor as urgently as they wanted.

After 1963, Belafonte, Odetta, and Jackson all moved away from cultural political arguments and toward more direct political action. The 1963 March on Washington was a watershed moment for all of these artists. They seized their moment on the national stage as a springboard to discuss racial injustice more directly and forcefully. While respectability, Black suffering, and a religiously inflected social gospel may have gotten the White liberals to nod and clap, it did not materially change conditions for the average Black American. In the ensuing years Black artists increasingly abandoned the integrationist approach in favor of cultural production that emphasized Black nationalism. Rather than humanizing Black folks for general audiences, these new movements sought to engender pride amongst Black audiences in their own history and cultural achievements.

## Chapter Six

### **Just Americans: The End of the Revival and the Legacy of Popular Folk**

On the afternoon of April 9, 1961, a crowd of young folk music enthusiasts clashed with New York City police officers at the entrance to Washington Square Park. The day included incongruous scenes of peace-loving folkniks defiantly singing labor songs at the cops. The conflict came out of a bid by neighborhood residents to restore tranquility to the park and to drive out the folk fans who had invaded from the outer boroughs. To achieve this return to normalcy, the Washington Square Association alongside the City Parks Commission rejected a long held singing permit held by the folksingers. The police decided to use the opportunity to crack down on the informal concerts by clearing the park entirely. Word got around that the Parks Commission was trying to shut down folk singing in the square, and around 3,000 folk fans marched in support. The police received orders to stop any attempts to perform. The folkies knew, however, that free speech laws prevented the police from arresting individuals for acapella singing. Chorus after chorus swelled through the protests. The press coverage gawked at the spectacle of the throngs of scruffy folk fans by detailing, “many of the boys with beards or banjos and many of the girls with long hair or guitars.”<sup>1</sup> Some protesters “in beatnik clothes and beards” defied the police order and began to also play

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Hoffman, “Folk singers Riots in Washington Sq.,” *New York Times*, April 10, 1961, 1, 25.

their instruments.<sup>2</sup> This was all the opening the police needed. A scuffle broke out and ten demonstrators were arrested.<sup>3</sup>

The Beatnik Riot, as it has come to be known, revealed long simmering tensions between the folk music fans and the Greenwich Village neighborhood locals. The folk performances in Washington Square in particular had been a source of tension between the two groups. Not only were their amateur concerts perceived as brash and intrusive, the folk fans also hopped between coffeeshops on MacDougal Street, loudly walking around the neighborhood well into the night. The residents also disapproved of these outside elements coming to their block to engage in racial mixing. One article covering the Village scene observed rather glibly, “The Italians engage in anti-beat violence, mostly against negroes.”<sup>4</sup> Dick Weissman remembers the scene this way:

There was a ritual, which is that young black males would come down and so to speak, integrate with white suburban females, coming from Long Island and New Jersey. So, there was a lot of, shall we say sexual interchange going on, and the people that lived there were largely Italian, they hated this. So, it probably wasn't a great idea to be walking about MacDougal Street at 3 o'clock in the morning.<sup>5</sup>

The amateur concerts in Washington Square became the symbol of this outside invasion.

Though the folk revivalists cited the vitality and excitement of musical appreciation in the square, the young urban professionals, who used the park as a space to

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Hoffman, “Folk singers Riots in Washington Sq.,” *New York Times*, April 10, 1961, 1, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Dan Drasin self-produced a documentary on the riot titled, “Sunday.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEvKe2WLumI>; He also wrote a reflection on the riot and his film in, Dan Drasin, “On Making ‘Sunday,’” *Vision: A Journal of Film Comment* 1, no. 1 (1962): 20–21.

<sup>4</sup> Ned Polsky, “The Village Beat Scene: Summer 1960,” *Dissent*, vol 8 1961, 344.

<sup>5</sup> Dick Weissman interview by Stephen Moore, May 05, 2022.

walk their babies in strollers, saw the free concerts as a public nuisance.<sup>6</sup> “They [the residents] couldn’t conceal their distaste as long-haired girls paraded the Village, dressed in the new uniform of nonconformism – black leotards and formless sweaters. There were stunned by such libertine sights as homosexuals walking hand in hand. And – this is probably one of the major causes of Village tension – they glowered as the sight of Negro boys walking with white girls, or Negro girls hand in hand with white boys.”<sup>7</sup> As a response the residents closed ranks to crackdown on the weirdos. The resultant clash of the Beatnik Riot helped to awaken political activism amongst the younger folk revivalists in the Village scene.

As early as 1960 some in the New York scene were ready for a change, having grown tired of the folksong imitators and the recently arrived bandwagoners who played the same set of songs over and over. One New Yorker lamented, “one looks in vain for the lyric folksinger among the newer groups,” and the new crop lacked the “‘militant’ fervor of the old days.”<sup>8</sup> He reflected that the scene had grown self-indulgent, “That folk music has its share of immaturity, intellectual frauds and ‘my-family-doesn’t-understand-the-need-for-me-to-be-really-free’ adherents cannot be denied...”<sup>9</sup> For this author, the current generation lacked a certain earnestness. This article stood as an early warning

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<sup>6</sup> Michael James, “Free Show in Washington Square Is a Hit,” *New York Times*, May 25, 1959, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Oscar Brand, *The Ballad Mongers*, (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, Inc., 1962), 166.

<sup>8</sup> Dave Beadle, “From Square to Square,” *Caravan*, no. 19, Jan 1960, 44, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Dave Beadle, “From Square to Square,” *Caravan*, no. 19, Jan 1960, 44, 45.

shot in the New York scene: the folk revival was overrun with unserious imitators and hangers-on.

Following the Beatnik Riot, the New York scene evolved quickly as it increasingly embraced topical song writing and direct political action as essential facets of folk revivalism. While participants still referred to the newly written music as “folk,” they also created a special sub-category of “topical songs.” Many of the old faithful, like Irwin Silber and Izzy Young, pushed for a political awakening among the folk fans for years, but they had advocated for an awakening of class-consciousness and labor organizing. This new breed of folksinger took aim at inequality and hypocrisy in myriad forms. The topical songwriters also diverged from the anthropological folk fans’ historical appreciation, favoring instead new songs that commented explicitly on current affairs. This trend effectively split the New York scene off from the anthropological approach altogether. The folklore societies connected to burgeoning ethnomusicology departments on college campuses sought to study pre-modern, historical culture, not create their own. This new generation of writer/performer thought of their work as a modern iteration of the folk process. They did not want to simply reapply Woody Guthrie’s songs in a new context, they wanted to emulate Guthrie by writing new folk songs as a weapon. When the Village scene broke toward modernizing folk music, it moved on quickly. Only 10 months after the Beatnik Riot, *Broadside*, a fanzine dedicated to topical songwriting, published its first issue.

## Topical songs

After 1962, the folk community in New York increasingly contextualized the work of the new topical songwriters as an extension of the larger history of folk and protest. For example, *Sing Out!* magazine drew a straight line from the revivalists of the 1940s to contemporary songwriters. They advertised their Carnegie Hall concert series as a direct connection to the work begun “over twenty years ago by the Almanac Singers.” Pete Seeger provided the “spark” of the revival while Bob Dylan represented the “new voice on the folksong scene.”<sup>10</sup> In its pages *Sing Out!* also represented the topical singers as the rightful inheritors of folk authenticity. One op-ed writer, as he portrayed popularized folk as the product of “Instant Culture,” traced his own history of authentic folk:

This is the tradition of men working and building and trying to get along in hard times and singing to make it all a little easier and meaningful. Pete Seeger is years of traveling and singing and absorbing the music and creating something out of it all. Woody Guthrie is picking fruit and tomatoes and being hungry and politically aware and helping others along and not to be so hungry; and lots more. Jimmie Rodgers was working on the railroad and being sick and singing and making a lot of money but dying anyway and knowing it, yet singing about that too. John Lee Hooker is hard times and disappointment and being cheated but still singing his own story though hundreds of blues. And all singing different facets of the same thing... This is the tradition I speak of; no doubt imperfectly and maybe romanticizing too much, but recognizable when heard... I hear it in Bob Dylan, too and Jack Elliot... It's all a part of the same tradition to me, even though I won't say I realized it all along.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Hootenanny at Carnegie Hall*, presented by Sing Out! magazine, Carnegie Hall, New York City, September 22, 1962.

<sup>11</sup> Dan Armstrong, “‘Commercial’ Folksongs – Product of ‘Instant Culture,’” *Sing Out!* 13 no. 1 (1963), 20.

Even though the new crop of folksingers might not be able to claim rural roots, nor time in the field, they did possess a newly conceptualized form of folk authenticity. This scene of folksingers and songwriters cast themselves as the heirs of the folk tradition by writing their own work into that history.

Initially folksong magazines tentatively embraced the new topical folksingers. They communicated to their audience that while they still sympathized with the old models of authenticity, they began to branch out. Though the inaugural issue of *Broadside* hedged over including topical songs as valid folk music stating, “*Broadside* may never publish a song that could be called a ‘folk song,’” it settled rather quick on a broader definition of authenticity that included emotional truth and moral certitude.<sup>12</sup> Over the course of their initial year the publication increasingly associated the topical singer-songwriters, not simply as a valid approach, but as the heart of folk revival itself. By March 1963 *Broadside* published an article written by Phil Ochs that outright equated modern topical songs with historical folk music. Ochs argued that because folk music had always spoken to its contemporary situations, he considered the current crop of topical songs to be the new folk music. They were simultaneously the direct descendant of and the functional equivalent to historical folksongs. According to Ochs, “Folk music is an idiom that deals with realities and not just realities of the past as some would assert... Folk music often arises out of vital movements and struggles... The news today is the natural resource that folk music must exploit in order to have the most vigorous

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<sup>12</sup> “Introducing *Broadside*,” *Broadside* 1 (Feb. 1962), 1.



folk process possible.”<sup>13</sup> The personal authenticity of the troubadour folk poet came to overshadow folkloric historical accuracy. In a few short years, *Broadside* became an important forum that embraced topical songwriting as the vanguard of authentic folk expression over and above historical recreation. The topical folk singer took the aesthetics of the class-oriented protest of the earlier revival and internalized them in a personalized rebellion where authenticity came from the modernist ethos of being true to oneself.<sup>14</sup>

The changing approach to folk performance started in the New York scene reflected the emergent political strategy of the mid-1960s known as the New Left. Just as the Old Left had redeployed folk culture to bolster their political objective, the New Left re-contextualized folk culture to speak to contemporary issues. While the New Left grew out of the Old Left, it can be understood as a separate, new movement, filled with the energy and spirit of young people.<sup>15</sup> Scores of these young people across the country formed organizations for political action. These included Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Berkeley Free Speech Movement (FSM).

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<sup>13</sup> Phil Ochs, “The Need for Topical Music,” *Broadside* 22 (March 1963).

<sup>14</sup> Simon Frith, “‘The Magic that Can Set You Free’: The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community,” *Popular Music* 1 (1981), 164. According to Frith, “When the folk-rockers individualised the folk concept of authenticity, they changed the political principles of their performances, but they continued to offer an experience of community.” See also, Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 324.

<sup>15</sup> Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer--: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

The designation New Left had been applied to organizations with a range of political objectives. In general, the New Left placed a high priority on participatory democracy and egalitarian ideals. Political action groups took their messages to the streets in the form of public protest and consciousness raising campaigns.<sup>16</sup> This also included voter registration drives and advocacy for expanded voting rights. In their calculation, direct action through direct education and high voter participation would result in a new egalitarian political reality. The New Left also saw the economic and political marginalization of people of color as impediments to progress and national cohesion. SDS leader Carl Oglesby identified the moral indignation over racist policies as, “the soul-basic explosion against injustice which is the one redemption of the damned.”<sup>17</sup> Groups like the Freedom Singers mixed performance and political commentary into a holistically politicized culture.<sup>18</sup> After the widespread destruction of

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<sup>16</sup> Daniel Geary’s essay is a good example of this ethic in action. Daniel Geary, “The New Left and Liberalism Reconsidered: The Committee of Correspondence and the Port Huron Statement,” in Richard Flacks and Nelson Lichtenstein, eds., *The Port Huron Statement: Sources and Legacies of the New Left’s Founding Manifesto*, Politics and Culture in Modern America (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: PENN/University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Douglas C. Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America*, Contemporary American History Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 167.

<sup>18</sup> Bradford D. Martin, *The Theater Is in the Street: Politics and Performance in Sixties America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 20 - 48. Ronald D. Cohen and Will Kaufman trace the innerworkings of the peace movement within folk revivalists circles in, Ronald D. Cohen and Will Kaufman, *Singing for Peace: Antiwar Songs in American History* (Boulder ; Paradigm Publishers, 2015), 64 – 79.

Operation Rolling Thunder, the saturation bombing campaign in Vietnam, the New Left increasingly focused on an anti-war platform as well.<sup>19</sup>

The leftist political/cultural critique addressed the alienation caused by modern consumer society with a firm commitment to living an authentic life and engaging in authentic politics. Artists and activists alike spoke to a New Left sense of authenticity with new linguistic strategies and visual grammar.<sup>20</sup> The new form of authenticity particularly prized a performer's ability to speak independently, to genuinely express what they truly felt, un beholden to music industry executives or critics. Historian Grace Elizabeth Hale theorizes how this view of authenticity came out of an emotional truth.

This new emphasis on feelings helped transform authenticity into an internal rather than an external quality. Being alike on the inside, as people who shared emotions and the need for self-expression, could replace being alike on the outside, as people who shared a history of oppression and isolation. The folk music revival taught many young, middle-class Americans to think about authenticity in this new way.<sup>21</sup>

The embrace of this form of emotional truth enabled young people to “imagine a new political terrain.”<sup>22</sup> Between the drive for participatory democracy coming from the New Left and the call to action by performance artists of the new counter culture, activists

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<sup>19</sup> Van Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 89.

<sup>20</sup> Steve Redhead and John Street, “Have I the Right?: Legitimacy, Authenticity and Community in Folk's Politics,” *Popular Music* 1 (1989), 177 – 184.

<sup>21</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, “The Romance of Rebellion,” in Richard Flacks and Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Port Huron Statement: Sources and Legacies of the New Left's Founding Manifesto*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: PENN/University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 68.

<sup>22</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, “The Romance of Rebellion,” in Richard Flacks and Nelson Lichtenstein, eds., *The Port Huron Statement: Sources and Legacies of the New Left's Founding Manifesto*, Politics and Culture in Modern America (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: PENN/University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 75.

tried to shake Americans out of their passive consumerism. That message took the shape of direct political action, artistic expression, and street performance.<sup>23</sup>

In the context of the folk revival, audiences now expected the music to connect emotional and political truths. As music theorist Simon Frith describes it, “They combined the folk conventions of sincerity with literary devices drawn from beat poetry; their 'authenticity' was the result of a combination of soulbaring and poetic vision.”<sup>24</sup> When music Critic Greil Marcus first heard Dylan sing “With God on Our Side,” he found a new, usable American past. He recalled, “the whole book of American history seemed to open up in that song, the country’s story telling itself in a new way.”<sup>25</sup> The folk troubadours of the New Left were emboldened to envision a new, authentic folk culture which, rather than espousing the fundamental values of national identity, spoke for the marginalized and the oppressed.<sup>26</sup>

Topical folk singers retained the aesthetics of an earlier generation of revivalism, while adapting to the transformed political milieu of the early 1960s. The ideals of peace and freedom had become more concretely realized as critiques of domestic racial politics and foreign policy. They personalized the search for political and artistic authenticity in

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<sup>23</sup> Ryan Moore, “‘Break on Through’: Counterculture, Music and Modernity in the 1960s,” Volume 1. *La Revue Des Musiques Populaires*, no. 9: 1 (September 15, 2012): 34–49.

<sup>24</sup> Simon Frith, “‘The Magic That Can Set You Free’: The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community,” *Popular Music* 1 (1981): 159–68, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026114300000970>.

<sup>25</sup> Greil Marcus, *Bob Dylan by Greil Marcus: Writings 1968-2010*, 1st ed. (New York, N.Y: PublicAffairs Books, 2010), xiii.

<sup>26</sup> Rachel Clare Donaldson, “*I Hear America Singing*”: *Folk Music and National Identity*, *Folk Music and National Identity* (Temple University Press, 2014), 140 – 157.

the face of the existential crisis presented by the modern condition. Audience participation and political engagement through artistic practice complimented the renewed importance of participatory democracy which was stirring on college campuses nationwide.<sup>27</sup> The topical folk song again found purchase as an authentic form of social and political critique.

The mainstream press slowly grasped the new phenomenon of the topical folk singer as they struggled to keep up with the shifting tides of the folk scene. Robert Shelton, operating out of New York, was one of the first to recognize that, “An important trend of the year has been the emergence of a creditable body of contemporary folk songs written by city song-makers in folk-based idioms.”<sup>28</sup> The trend continued through 1963, and by 1964, the mainstream publications also made the connections between the new songwriters and the earlier generation, especially the newly venerated Woody Guthrie.<sup>29</sup> The topical songwriters sought to embody the folk ethic in a holistically authentic, artistic lifestyle. Sis Cunningham, in *Broadside* magazine, called the new topical songwriters “Guthrie’s Children” and Shelton called them, “Guthrie’s Heirs.”<sup>30</sup> By 1964, it was widely accepted even by the major press outlets that newly written songs were indeed

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<sup>27</sup> James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1987), 141 – 154.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Shelton, “New Trend: City Musicians Writing Folk Songs,” *New York Times*, December 15, 1963, 132.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Shelton, “New Folk Singers in ‘Village’ Demonstrate a Pair of Trends,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1963, 28.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Shelton, “Guthrie’s Heirs,” *New York Times*, Jun 14, 1964, X13, 16.

folk. Should these rightly be called “topical” folk songs or “contemporary” folk songs? Shelton concluded that it did not matter. It was all folk.

Out of this shift, Bob Dylan emerged as *the* voice in the topical song writing scene. His lyrical skill and unique performance style captivated audiences. Shelton, whose review of Dylan’s performance at Gerde’s Folk City helped launch his career, described him as:

Resembling a cross between a choir boy and a beatnik, Mr. Dylan has a cherubic look and a mop of tousled hair he partly covers with a Huck Finn black corduroy cap. His clothes may need a bit of tailoring, but when he works his guitar, harmonica or piano and composes new songs faster than he can remember them, there is no doubt that he is bursting at the seams with talent.<sup>31</sup>

Even in that early review, Shelton recognized that Dylan’s appeal came not from his ability to replicate folk sound, but from his own artistic production and iconoclastic performance.

The old guard in the Village took to Dylan right away. Izzy Young, proprietor of the Folklore Center, wrote favorably of him almost immediately.<sup>32</sup> From Dylan’s early days in the Village scene he showed he learned its grammar, but he did not feel compelled to take up their mantel nor limit himself to their cause. When Dylan started writing new songs very early on, the folk revivalist community, which might have rejected such innovations as self-important heresies, instead saw Woody Guthrie re-born.

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Shelton, “Bob Dylan: A Distinctive Folk-Song Stylist,” *New York Times*, September 29, 1961, 31.

<sup>32</sup> In Young’s notes from some early interviews with Dylan, he explores his approach and philosophy to songwriting and how he fits into the New York Scene. Israel Young, Notes on conversations with Bob Dylan, c. 1962, The Robert Shelton Archive, Box 001, University of Liverpool.

Dylan soon began to incorporate new and varied influences into his repertoire, blending rock and popular influences into his work. The folkies had sided with Dylan and would from then on embrace adaptation and newness as an essential aspect of folk consciousness. Dick Weissman remembered feeling mystified by the apparent incongruity:

I ran into John Cohen [of the New Lost City Ramblers] – he had a loft in the Village. We had kind of an odd relationship. He didn't like what I was doing because... it was too revisionist for him. He once told me... I had not earned the right to write original music. That belonged to Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie and I found that sort of mystifying. And even more so when he became this fanatic Bob Dylan groupie. Which to me was anomalous and sort of amusing that somebody that was so purist became enamored of Bob Dylan when every bit of his rhetoric would have been to hate Bob Dylan.<sup>33</sup>

Dylan transitioned to writing and performing new material almost exclusively. His first self-titled album, released in 1962, contained only two tracks that listed himself as the author, both of which reused melodies from earlier songs. By his second album, the breakout success *Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, there was only one track listed as traditional, all the rest Dylan claimed authorship.

The musical and political shifts in the New York scene reverberated outward to the Newport Folk Festival, which increasingly spotlighted the topical songwriters. Dylan had his national breakout moment alongside Baez where they sang the anti-war anthem "With God on Our Side." Phil Ochs' acerbic wit and biting satire also gained a wider audience. The integrity of Newport became so unimpeachable that appearances there could act to launder public perceptions of an artist. Or as one audience member put it,

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<sup>33</sup> Dick Weissman interview by Stephen Moore, May 12, 2022.

some performers come to Newport “as an act of contrition for going commercial.”<sup>34</sup> Dick Weissman felt this anti-commercial sentiment when he played Newport the following year. He had been invited to play accompaniment with Jean Ritchie, but never felt at ease in front of this audience. Weissman remembered, “I don’t feel like I was treated particularly well at Newport, of course I was a part of the dreaded commercial universe.” I asked him, “Do you feel like you... had that label around your neck after your work with The Journeymen?” Weissman, “Yeah.”<sup>35</sup>

It was the stunning visual that ended the festival that became the headline and the singular enduring image of this era. In the closing song of the festival several of the most prominent white artists crossed arms and joined hands with the all-Black, Civil-Rights focused singing group The Freedom Singers and sang “We Shall Overcome.” The photograph of this moment, which featured in much of the news coverage of the event, helped to establish Newport as the moral center for folk fans and the national debut for up-and-coming artists.

After 1963, the popular media treated Newport like an annual national assessment of folk revivalist activities. One outlet fawned, “We owe a debt of thanks for a job sincerely well done in preserving the spirit of folklore.”<sup>36</sup> Shelton amplified his superlatives of the event declaring, “the folk festival can be praised for its high aesthetic

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<sup>34</sup> “The Milk Drinkers,” *Newsweek* August 12, 1963, 80.

<sup>35</sup> Dick Weissman interview by Stephen Moore, May 19, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> “Scenes of ‘The Newport Folk Festival’ 1963,” *BMOG: Best Music On and Off Campus*, October – November 1963, 29 - 33.



level, for imaginative programming and skillful choice of performers.”<sup>37</sup> The whole affair was “more concerned with artistic purpose than commercial considerations.”<sup>38</sup> Many of the folksong magazines also heaped praise on the 1963 festival as an exemplar of the possibilities of folk revivalism. The festival fortified one reviewer’s opinion that the future of folk was in the hands of the folksingers and not “a number of loosely principled promoters whose major concern is the fast buck gleaned from the innocent hand of both the new and wide-eyed audience...”<sup>39</sup> Newport ‘63 inspired an optimism that thoughtful music with genuine integrity would “outlast” the “plague” of popular imitators.<sup>40</sup>

The following year, Newport shifted even further in the direction of the New York topical songwriter scene crowning the 1964 festival, “The Year of the Topical Song.” In an editorial, Ochs opined “In spite of the Fire and Police Research Association of Los Angeles and the Little Sandy Review, the topical song movement has continued to expand beyond its phenomenal growth of last year.”<sup>41</sup> The Fire and Police Research Association of LA had called on Congress to conduct an investigation into the folksong community for evidence of communist sympathies. And the *Little Sandy Review* had a notorious reputation for only approving of the most purely sourced, historical folk music. Ochs, in his glib and economical style, referenced the ascendancy of the topical

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Shelton, “Folk-Music Fete Called a Success,” *New York Times*, July 29, 1963, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Shelton, “Folk-Music Fete Called a Success,” *New York Times*, July 29, 1963, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Dave Wilson, “Ramblin’ Round,” *The Broadside* [Boston], vol. II no. 12, August 21, 1963, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Dave Wilson, “Ramblin’ Round,” *The Broadside* [Boston], vol. II no. 12, August 21, 1963, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Phil Ochs, “The Year of the Topical Song,” *Newport Folk Festival Program*, 1964, 9.

songwriting faction of folk revivalism in spite of attacks from the right or the purists. And the festival was again well attended by a dedicated audience. Or as Shelton observed, “Not only was the audience numerically large, it was also knowledgeable and respectful.”<sup>42</sup>

The concert concluded, similar to the finale in 1963, with songs from the integration movement. This close identification further solidified the politics of the New York scene as the default position of folk revivalism nationally. Odetta finished the concert and the festival when she “led other performers and an audience of 15,000 in two songs of the Negro integration movement. The social commitment of folk music blended with its esthetic core in a triumphant conclusion. There was a democratizing spirit about this fusion of Negro and white musical forms and about the people who are the conveyor belts of these traditions that was little short of inspiring.”<sup>43</sup> Between 1963 and 1964, the political approach, with its internalized view of authenticity, overtook the anthropological approach on the national stage.

The emergent topical songs and folk-rock approach both represented authentic ways to engage with the popular market. Unlike the strict anti-commercial ethic, especially of the anthropological folk, proponents this new syncretic approach to folk authenticity were more apt to view commercial success as a sign of the efficacy of its message. Though, the nagging question of whether authenticity was possible in a

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Shelton, “Symbolic Finale,” *New York Times*, August 2, 1964, 89.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Shelton, “Symbolic Finale,” *New York Times*, August 2, 1964, 89.

capitalist space never went away completely.<sup>44</sup> As the New Left increasingly came to dominate and frame left wing political stances, their concern with authenticity led them to view their opposition as inauthentic. Popular folk's use of folk culture was inauthentic just as the wider mainstream culture was inauthentic. They both displayed an underlying vapid reductiveness. The changing nature of authenticity not only made popular folk irrelevant in a folk revivalist sense, it made them unpalatable in the changing tastes of the marketplace. By 1965, popular folk was both inauthentic and passé.

### **The End of the Revival**

The shift in the New York scene away from historical folk music presaged a wider national downturn by about a year. The folk craze began to exhibit some weakness as early as 1964 when ABC television canceled *Hootenanny* after its second season. Shelton threw dirt on its grave calling it the "late, unlamented 'hootenanny' craze."<sup>45</sup> Later that year, Dave Van Ronk wrote his own preemptive public obituary for the revival in what turned out to be the last issues of *Hootenanny* magazine. He wondered if there was something "Beyond Folk Music."<sup>46</sup> Dedicated folk clubs also started to move toward other formats. The LA nightclub Hootenanny, which had only just recently opened, increasingly moved toward jazz.<sup>47</sup> However, folk did not simply die out, it

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<sup>44</sup> Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 242 – 244.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Shelton, "Cream of the Newport Folk Festival," *New York Times*, July 19, 1964, X11.

<sup>46</sup> Dave Van Ronk, "Beyond Folk Music?," *Hootenanny* Vol 1 no 4, November 1964, 25.

<sup>47</sup> Joex, "Night Club Reviews: The Hootenanny, Calif," *Variety* Vol. 234, Iss. 3, Mar 11, 1964, 51.

began to evolve and meld with other genres. Bob Dylan understood, perhaps better than anyone, that folk must evolve to survive. By the summer of 1965 the days of the folk scene, as it had existed since the late 1950s, were numbered.

As the folk revival wobbled and transformed, the New York scene became more mercenary, more cut-throat. Van Ronk described it this way, “(B)y about 1962 two thirds of my close associates were people who had blown into town in the last year or so.”<sup>48</sup> The recent migrants to the city came specifically to be professional musicians. While the previous generation of New York natives could always just move on to something else if playing folk music didn’t work out, this new group of players wanted it more. They “would claw their way into a job; they would just camp out on a club owner’s doorstep until he hired them.”<sup>49</sup> One contemporary magazine exposé interviewed new migrants about their feelings on trying to make it in New York. One local singer, Bruce Farwell, was pessimistic on the prospects, “I wouldn’t recommend coming to the Village with a thought in mind of making it big.”<sup>50</sup> The scene had developed into a bifurcated class system. The coffee shops housed all the new talent

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<sup>48</sup> Dave Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street: A Memoir, Sixties--Primary Documents and Personal Narratives, 1960-1974* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2013), 149.

<sup>49</sup> Dave Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street: A Memoir, Sixties--Primary Documents and Personal Narratives, 1960-1974* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2013), 149.

<sup>50</sup> Mary Pekar and Bob Swann, “What Goes on in Greenwich Village” *The Folk Scene*, vol. II no. 5, January 1965.

trying to make it and playing for nothing, while a handful of stars dominated the bigger stages that could charge more at the door, like Gertie's Folk City or the Gaslight.<sup>51</sup>

The tensions within the New York scene came to a head at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. This was the year made famous by Dylan's contentious electric set, but the singular influence of that moment over folk revivalism has been oversold. Not only was Dylan not the first to "go electric" at Newport, he wasn't even the first that day. The Paul Butterfield Band had an electric blues set earlier that same day. The concert reflected the wider divisions between the topical song movement amongst the politically-minded folk fans and the anthropological folkies, even as the whole festival had already moved to embrace more popular music.<sup>52</sup> Festival board member Peter Yarrow, in a message in the festival program, was equally eager to turn Newport from a learned discussion of folk processes into a pure Utopian celebration of music. He decried the "academic hair-splitting about the definition and nature of folk music" which had formed the basis of earlier festivals' panel discussions. For him, folk music was an act of empathy by contemporary people. It was not "a collection of little ethnic corners or notes and styles. Folk music is people caring. And that's where it's at."<sup>53</sup> The New York scene no longer needed to conciliate with the anthropological folks; they dominated the places of power and their albums had begun to outsell anything else labeled folk. Dylan justified his

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<sup>51</sup> Mary Pekar and Bob Swann, "What Goes on in Greenwich Village" *The Folk Scene*, vol. II no. 5, January 1965.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Shelton, "Banjos and Ballads," *New York Times*, June 13, 1965, X15.

<sup>53</sup> "Greetings from the Directors," *Newport Folk Festival Program*, 1965, 4, 5, 47, 48.

decision to move away from topical songs to more diffuse poetic protest, arguing that “what’s wrong goes much deeper than the bomb. What’s wrong is how few people are free.”<sup>54</sup>

Though Yarrow hoped the 1965 festival would be a gateway to musical paradise, other observers viewed the result as a display of excess and shallowness. *The Little Sandy Review*, never one to pull its punches, put lie to Yarrow’s expectations of freedom and harmony. According to one concert reviewer, Friday night at the festival was full of:

...fraternity folklorists, the Bronx Baezes and Ramblin’ Jack Somebodies, the record company presidents, the press agents, the ambitious young up-and-comers hoping to be noticed and asked to perform, the stars-in-their-eyes worshipers who came to touch the hems of some garments. The spectacle was asserting itself; love was beginning to crush all. Neophyte non-conformists, the young men were courteous, polite, affected in a sort of pseudo-Western manner, all dressed in blue or tan jeans, all trying hard to look, walk, talk, act in a way both highly humane and casually road-weary. The hair was erratic, the clothes as rumped as parents would allow; the accent was drugstore cowboy, that non-regional dialect of the Shangri-La West that Bob Dylan and Jack Elliott hail from, that mythical nowhere where all men talk like Woody Guthrie and are recorded by Moses Asch.<sup>55</sup>

Folk music as an avenue of iconoclastic pop expression shook it loose from the old modes of communal experience. Big money had already turned heads and stomachs and folk artists came to be seen as much as heard. All of this tension simmered before Dylan supposedly scandalized the faithful with his sacrilegious electrification.

*The Little Sandy Review* hardly noted Dylan’s highly anticipated closing set, instead they savaged what happened just after the set. A crowd of folk performers rushed

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<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Brian Lloyd, “The Form Is the Message: Bob Dylan and the 1960s,” *Rock Music Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 70.

<sup>55</sup> Paul Nelson, “Newport: Down There on a Visit,” *Little Sandy Review*, no. 30, 1965, 48 – 66.

the stage in an effort to be a part of the final “We Shall Overcome” sing along. There was a collective push by the attending artists that they too might be a part of an iconic snapshot of the festival, like had occurred at the close of the 1963 festival. They knew that if they were a part of that moment then their musical careers could be sealed, as they may get the chance to grace magazine covers across the nation. The review observed that the crowd fought “tooth-and-nail for the cherished image areas next to the Freedom Singers. Bad to the point of negating everything positive and beautiful the song stands for, it was a brilliant and sickening microcosm of the cast and seedy macrocosm that is the current urban folk scene.”<sup>56</sup> What optimism or collective consciousness that may have existed in the movement was in danger of being smothered by craven self-promotion.

While Dylan may not have outright killed the folk revival with an electric axe, he certainly prompted a soul searching amongst the faithful. Should revivalists, many of whom so eagerly embraced the new folk poet in 1963, stick with him through this transformation? Would they still be folk revivalists if they did? If they defended Dylan’s turn towards rock, they must also admit that folk revivalism was not truly interested in maintaining historical appreciation as its primary mode. If they condemned him, they would lose both his clout by association and the clarity of social critique he represented. Folk fans equivocated as they tried to reestablish their footing. The conversation turned from textual purity to personal authenticity to accommodate a wider range of approaches.

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<sup>56</sup> Paul Nelson, “Newport: Down There on a Visit,” *Little Sandy Review*, no. 30, 1965, 48 – 66.

Perhaps rock was the folk of the modern age.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps folk music was a state of mind. By the end of the summer 1965, there was a palpable sense that the scene had changed. Shelton attempted to put a name to the new approach, “There is not a clear-cut name for this trend, although ‘folk rock’ or ‘folk pop’ are frequent. Essentially, the trend is toward a marriage of the vitality and popularity of rock ‘n’ roll with the folk movement’s general concern for saying something about reality and injustice.”<sup>58</sup> Generally, they abandoned arguments about folk authenticity and embraced the hybrid “folk-rock” to bridge the old with the new.

In early 1966, the *New York Times* published a symposium that considered the significance of the new trend of folk-rock. Irwin Silber lamented how the new innovation in folk mirrored the old. Silber ominously portended, “Folk Rock is integration once again on the white man’s terms.”<sup>59</sup> Shelton fired back that Silber’s magazine *Sing Out!* maintained a “disdainful insularity.”<sup>60</sup> He invited Silber to get off his high horse and join the current happenings. But this was not just a division between the old left and new pop. Folk scene stalwarts, Paul Nelson and Nat Hentoff also resisted Silber’s criticisms.<sup>61</sup> However, the issue turned personal after this public rebuke of the long-standing New York standard bearers. Israel Young sent a letter directly to the *Times*

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<sup>57</sup> Stephen M. Hickey, “Letter to the Editor,” *Broadside* (Boston), vol. IV no. 23, January 1966.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Shelton, “The Beatles will Make the Scene Here Again, but the Scene has Changed,” *New York Times*, August, 11, 1965.

<sup>59</sup> “A Symposium: Is Folk Rock Really White Rock?,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1966, 22.

<sup>60</sup> “A Symposium: Is Folk Rock Really White Rock?,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1966, 22.

<sup>61</sup> “A Symposium: Is Folk Rock Really White Rock?,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1966, 22.



editor attacking Shelton's ethics in covering the music scene. Shelton responded, in a private, but widely circulated letter, with an apoplectic defense that excoriated the self-righteousness of the purists. In the end, Shelton wrote off the old folk establishment as having allowed their personal preferences to blind them to the bigger picture, stating "The anti-folk-rock voices have lost their sense of reason. They are howling in the night..."<sup>62</sup>

Shelton viewed Newport '65 as simply indicative of a new direction for folk. Those in the audience that booed Dylan were too stuck in their ways, unable to see the forest for the trees, and they risked missing out on the chance to be a part of something new. "Perhaps the saddest thing revealed about both festivals was the waning sense of fraternalism within the folk community."<sup>63</sup> One folk fan, in a letter to the editor, put voice to just how fed-up folk fans were with all the infighting and posturing, "I'd like to object to all the God-almighty folkies who think they know all about it, and who disown Dylan because he's 'going rock 'n' roll.' Then there are those who have the gall to claim that protest songs aren't even folk music...If you're going to say that Dylan is 'unpure,' forget it – because he's a helluvalot purer than you are."<sup>64</sup> By the end of 1965, folk-rock had successfully displaced the old understanding of folk music: "It is startling to recall that only four months ago, at the Newport (RI) Folk Festival, the audience was hostile to

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<sup>62</sup> Mimeograph letter Robert Shelton to Israel Young, Archie Green et al. February 28, 1966. Archie Green Collection, 1844 - 2009, University of North Carolina Folklife Collection, Collection Number: 20002.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Shelton, "Folk Music Marathon," *Cavalier*, vol. 15 no. 149, November 1965, 42, 43, 60-62.

<sup>64</sup> Evvie Nathan, "Letter to the Editor," *Broadside* (Boston), vol. IV no. 5, April 28, 1965.

Bob Dylan's introduction of electric instruments and a surging beat. Now, the new music is obviously in with the crowd and the 'jolt music' bandwagon is moving quickly."<sup>65</sup>

New acts like the Byrds and the Lovin' Spoonful paid little attention to debates about folk music as they blended folk and pop sensibilities.<sup>66</sup>

The debate over popularization and commercialism in folk music no longer seemed important. The folk fad, as it had existed since 1958, was well and truly over. By the end of 1966, Shelton pondered aloud, "Whither the Folk Scene?"<sup>67</sup> Magazines stopped running articles covering arguments about folk adaptability. Popular folk acts fell off the pop charts.<sup>68</sup> The anthropological folk fans, who no longer needed to defend their territory in the public sphere, went back to their appreciation clubs and academic conferences.<sup>69</sup> The irrelevance of popular folk solved the problem of commercialism in folk music. The artists with hits on the pop charts no longer modernized traditional music; they infused their modern music with traditional influence. The unimportance of

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<sup>65</sup> Robert Shelton, "Folk and Blues Echo Over the Holiday," *New York Times*, November 29, 1965, 45.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Shelton, "Byrds Fuse Jazz, Rock 'n' Roll and Con Edison," *New York Times*, October 7, 1966, 37; "The Year that Was in Folk" *Cavalier*, July 1965; Danny Kalb, lead guitarist of the Blues Project: "One of the encouraging things to me, I saw this in folk music too, has been the growth in taste of an audience. In folk music many people started out with the Kingston Trio and ended up with Robert Johnson. This is a fact. I saw this evolution in a lot of people. I think the same good thing is happening in rock. People who are really going into rock are finding the blues. It's very encouraging and it's a synthetic thing, the kinds of music that are around to choose from, the be influenced by and to create on that the basis of. Like the Spoonful influenced strongly by jug band music, plus Chuck Berry, and the Indian thing is around now." Danny Kalb, "The Meaning of Folk Music," *Rock Folk*, no. 4, Winter 1966-67, 23. By then next issue, *Rock Folk*, no 5, Spring 1967, the whole magazine has moved on from folk.

<sup>67</sup> Robert Shelton, "Whither the Folk Scene," *New York Times*, October 30, 1966, D16.

<sup>68</sup> Leroy F. Aarons, "1964 Not Vintage Year for Folk Music," *Washington Post*, Feb. 7, 1965, K8.

<sup>69</sup> John Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Viking, 2010), 324.

the commercialization debate amongst folk circles was captured by the re-branding of the *Little Sandy Review* in 1966. The first issued of their “Volume 2” relaunch began this way:

What we’re saying is that we no longer have to spend half the magazine on a soapbox, exhorting ‘Traditional Folk Music! Hear! Hear!’ and the other half yelling ‘Commercial Folk Music! Burn! Burn!’. Everyone who reads this already realizes that Roscoe Holcomb and Big Joe Williams are worthy of much respect, while other, better-known performers are worthy of much less. So we won’t spend our time reviewing new records by the Kingston Trio just for the sake of putting them down.<sup>70</sup>

If the debate was over for the *Little Sandy*, it was over for everyone else as well.

Discussion of commercialism in the post 1965 folk scene focused on personal integrity and artistic vision, not on a historically informed vision of folk purity.

After the ascendance of folk-rock, counter-cultural performance groups continued to create new visions of socio-cultural-political-theatrical culture. While they reinvented performance as a holistic enterprise that integrated the audience and moved beyond the confines of the theater, they also re-imagined how artistic expression could enact cultural commentary.<sup>71</sup> They defied the possibility that performance could be simply for entertainment, and created performance pieces which confronted the viewer to think differently about the world and their place in it. Also, the personal authenticity which undergirded the movement politics of the 1960s transitioned to the deeply personal introspection of the singer/songwriter era of the 1970s. These artists, while they focused

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<sup>70</sup> *Little Sandy Review*, vol. 2 no. 1, July 1966, page 3.

<sup>71</sup> Bradford D. Martin, *The Theater Is in the Street: Politics and Performance in Sixties America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).

on interior realities more than social injustice, still related their art to contemporary politics, they still presented their music as a form of commentary on political issues.<sup>72</sup>

After years of trying, Robert Shelton finally published a sweeping look at the folk revival in 1968. His *The Face of Folk Music* intended to encapsulate the moment as it unfolded; by the time it was published, however, it acted as a eulogy for a time already past.<sup>73</sup> David Gahr, already a respected music photographer, provided the visual record of the revival with his extensive collection of concert and festival photographs. Shelton's narration acted as a first draft for the memory of the revival. It elevated the place of the blues musicians, further canonized Woody Guthrie, and credited Pete Seeger as the father of the revival. Even in this early retelling, the popular groups had already begun to be written out of the story. While Shelton gave the Kingston Trio credit for infusing a "youthful drive" into the proceeding, the group did not feature in a single picture. Meanwhile the *Hootenanny* television show was framed as a crass and naked cash grab. *The Face of Folk Music* set the model for how the revival would be remembered. It was a simple time of acoustic guitars in the fields of Newport. It was the rise of the folk poets and of unapologetic belief in the power of music to change the world. The popular acts and the commercial acts, they were merely fakers trying to make a buck. This memory of the folk revival has served to downplay the impact of the popular folk groups on the

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<sup>72</sup> Bradford Martin, "Cultural Politics and Singer/Songwriters of the 1970s" in Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008), 128 - 147.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Shelton, *The Face of Folk Music* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1968), 110, 132.

public understanding of folk music. Since the writing of *The Face of Folk Music*, the popular folk groups have continued to be marginalized in the popular memory. The true, authentic folk revival only included those artists that engaged with politicized culture. In an echo of the debate at the time, the popular groups have come to be seen as just commercial.

### **The Legacy of Popular Folk**

After 1965, most of the popular folk acts disbanded. The Chad Mitchel Trio, the Highwaymen, and the Limelitters all called it quits by 1966. Which is not to say that all these musicians left the industry. The pop charts in the second half and the 1960s and all through the 1970s were filled with former members of folk groups. After the Journeymen broke up in 1963, John Phillips formed the Mamas and the Papas, and Scott Makenzie began a successful career as a solo artist. Dick Weissman, while he never recorded a hit record, went into record producing and commercial recordings.<sup>74</sup> Glenn Yarborough, formerly of the Limelitters, had a long career as a pop ballad singer.

The folk acts that did maintain a consistent touring schedule eventually ended up as empty brands, staffed with compatible parts. Art Podell was one of the few artists who stayed with the New Christy Minstrels throughout the entirety of its heyday. He became responsible for training new recruits. But the high turnover rate turned out to be too much. “I stuck with the group for the longest for really one reason... I knew all the

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<sup>74</sup> Dick Weissman interview by Stephen Moore, May 19, 2022.

arrangements... people were being replaced on a weekly basis and I was training them. Once a week I'd get a new member and I would have to train them over night."<sup>75</sup> The group, which once prided itself as a collection of individualist performers, was now an undifferentiated monolith. Burned out by the constant performing, Podell retired from the group and never looked back. He has continued to perform live and worked as a radio DJ for folk oriented programming.

Even the powerhouse Kingston Trio decided to disband in 1968. At that point, the original members of the group had toured nearly continuously for a decade. John Stewart wanted to branch out on his own as a songwriter and Nick Reynolds was tired of the grind. Bob Shane, as always, was the one who wanted to keep things as they were. Forced with no real alternative, he too set out on his own. But that move did not last long. Fairly quickly after the split, Shane reverted back to the old name. He leased the name under the group, "The New Kingston Trio." This attempt was short lived, however, and Shane found himself searching around for a way to sustain the act. In 1976 Shane secured the Kingston Trio brand outright and he found George Grove, a multi-instrumentalist and self-described music geek who already knew all of the numbers. Grove was not as cerebral as Guard, nor as quick with a joke as Reynolds, but at that point Shane was happy to build the act around himself as frontman and principal raconteur. Shane and Grove spent the next decade with a revolving cast in the third position. These additions were a mix of long-time professionals from the revival and

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<sup>75</sup> Art Podell interview by Stephen Moore, August 30, 2022.

newcomers looking for a break. The chemistry with each group varied widely as the group struggled to find an identity.

In 1980 Public Broadcasting contacted the Kingston Trio to inquire if they would be interested in a reunion concert. Original member Dave Guard, Shane, and Reynolds set their differences aside for the night.<sup>76</sup> The result was an uneven mess. The group had difficulty reconnecting musically. For example, in preparation for the concert Guard attempted and failed to persuade the group to play a new complex arrangement of “Tom Dooley,” a song that used only two chords in the original recording.<sup>77</sup> Shane began the night with his new trio, which meant, at their own reunion, the audience was first met with a version of the group unrecognizable to many. All of the original members had issues singing. Reynolds, out of the limelight since the breakup, appeared timid, Shane’s voice showed the wear of two decades of near continuous touring, and Guard attempted odd and ostentatious vocal lines. Only John Stewart retained an amount of polish. For an event designed ostensibly to celebrate the band’s history, the former members presented an image divorced from their roots, as though they were determined to establish that they had evolved. None of the members wore their iconic striped shirts, seemingly out of embarrassment. The reunion failed to capture the old magic and afterwards the former bandmates all went their separate ways.

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<sup>76</sup> John Robins, director, *Kingston Trio and Friends: Reunion*, DVD (PBS Production 1981, White Star 2003).

<sup>77</sup> Paul Surratt, producer, *The Kingston Trio: Wherever We May Go*, DVD (Shout Factory, 2006).

While that attempt had fizzled, other folk groups sensed that the time was right to revive their acts as well. The following year, the new version of the Kingston Trio hosted a reunion show for a slate of folk groups.<sup>78</sup> The Limelitters, The Brothers Four, Mary Travers of Peter, Paul, and Mary, and Tom Paxton all performed. This production unfolded much more smoothly. The central focus remained on their shared love of the music and their mutual respect for a life in music. These reunion shows demonstrated that there still was an audience for this kind of music, and many of the acts returned to regular gigging. Shane and Grove convinced Reynolds to rejoin the Kingstons in 1988.<sup>79</sup> The Brothers Four held on to all of its original members and continued as they always had. The Highwaymen had given up popular music altogether in the mid-1960s, but joined back together in the 1990s. The Limelitters only reunited for occasional shows, but, like the Kingston Trio, they experienced a slow hollowing out of the band, until only non-original members remained. Randy Sparky who had sold his interest in the New Christy Minstrels in 1964, bought it back in 1990, when he reformed the group with some of the original members.<sup>80</sup>

In these reunion tours, popular folk groups began to play on a nostalgia for the early 1960s. By the 1980s, political centrists began to view the late 1960s, not as a time

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<sup>78</sup> Thomas V. Grasso, producer, *The Folk Music Reunion*, DVD (Showtime Entertainment, Grossman/Putnam Productions, 1982).

<sup>79</sup> Paul Surratt, producer, *The Kingston Trio: Wherever We May Go*, DVD, (Shout Factory, 2006).

<sup>80</sup> Brian Murphy, "Randy Sparks, Who Gave Folk Music a Big Choral Sound, Dies at 90," *The Washington Post*, February 16, 2024.



of political awakening and direct action, but of turmoil and division.<sup>81</sup> Conservative viewers saw the cultural politics of the New Left as propaganda projects aimed at sowing disunity and mistrust. They began to feel as though the entire culture had been politicized. The pessimism and divisiveness of the liberal reformers made people feel bad about America.<sup>82</sup> To this group of centrists, Ronald Reagan engendered a renewed sense of confidence in the American experiment and in its essential goodness. In his first inaugural address, Reagan laid out a framework for this rekindled optimism, “Let us renew our determination, our courage, and our strength. And let us renew our faith and our hope. We have every right to dream heroic dreams.”<sup>83</sup> When Americans took to Reagan’s vision of the country, they demonstrated an eagerness to move on from the failures of Vietnam and the political upheavals of the decade before. Reagan also equated previous left-wing criticism of foreign policy with Un-Americanness. The war in Vietnam was not lost by generals, and it certainly was not lost by the troops; it was lost

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<sup>81</sup> Shepherd argues that this framing began contemporaneously, with counter campus groups forming to advocate for conservative values. Lauren Lassabe Shepherd, *Resistance from the Right: Conservatives and the Campus Wars in Modern America*, 1st ed., Justice, Power, and Politics Series (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2023). McRae examines how suburban mothers resisted the social changed of the Great Society and awakened their anti-left political power. Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>82</sup> William Kleinknecht, *The Man Who Sold the World: Ronald Reagan and the Betrayal of Main Street America* (New York: Nation Books, 2010), 101.

<sup>83</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1981, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/reagan-quotes-speeches/inaugural-address-1/>

by the protesting traitors who undermined the noble American cause of defending freedom.<sup>84</sup>

The popular folk groups themselves played into a revised memory of the early 1960s. Shane recognized that the audience for their concerts through the 1990s was made up almost entirely of fans who had first heard them at college concerts during the revival. In an interview he said, “In the first three years of existence we played 400 colleges in the United States, which got [us] basically the audience we have to this day.<sup>85</sup>” This group yearned for the days of a national, apolitical mono-culture with an apolitical, unproblematic national history onto which they could hang their pride of national identity. The stage patter between songs no longer included long, winding, possibly specious back stories and folk tales, but nostalgic tales from their career. Shane often told the story about the first time they played a song, or how radio stations made them censor the word ‘damn’ in “Greenback Dollar.” Popular folk came to represent a nostalgia for the early 1960s.

These re-formed and re-imagined groups rarely talked about the folk, instead they told stories about the early days of the band and what the music meant to them. Occasionally, they reminded the audience of the significance of folk music in a broader sense by playing on ideas about fundamental national identity. Those messages about folk’s power to preserve essential values were subsumed by a nostalgia for the early

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<sup>84</sup> Toby Glenn Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric: History and Memory in 1980s America*, 1st ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 47 - 63.

<sup>85</sup> Paul Surratt, producer, *The Kingston Trio: Wherever We May Go*, DVD (Shout Factory, 2006).

revival. The way they talked about this time revealed more than just a yearning for lost youth, or the freedom of their college years, it correspond to a desire to return to a time when the White middle-class could make plausible claims that there was such a thing as apolitical entertainment. With the increased polarization and overt politicization of popular culture of the late 1960s through the 1970s, the heyday of the Kingston Trio represented a time before internal strife, campus protests, and urban riots. For popular folk fans, the music reminded them of the sanguine Kennedy years; a time driven by the indomitable, triumphant American spirit to explore the final frontier. In an interview in 1974 Rene Cardenas, manager for the Journeymen and longtime friend of Frank Werber, reflected on the historical moment that saw the rise of popular folk: “It was virility of a new America that was finding strength in the folk arts so to speak... they represented the psychic virility of the 1950s, the rough-shod carelessness of the youth living in urban America in a very rich America at the time: no gas problems, no pollution problems, no conscientious awareness of Army-McCarthy hearings. We just lived a beautiful life.”<sup>86</sup> The brief few years when popular folk was a force on the Billboard charts represented a time before popular culture was divided against itself, before popular artists felt obligated to comment on politics, when music was simple, unpretentious fun.

By the 1990s, Shane re-imagined the history of the Trio as independent from the folk revival at all. He argued that what they were doing had never been folk music exactly. They played “folk oriented material,” they appreciated folk songs, and they

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<sup>86</sup> Richard W. Johnston interview with Rene Cardenas, December 21, 1974, Box 1 Folder 11, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Library Archive.

loved to entertain. The Brothers Four incorporated these kinds of claims into their stage patter as well. At concerts in this era Shane narrated the founding of the group this way:

We started this group in 1957, at the Purple Onion in San Francisco, it seated about 90 people. We started playing entirely Calypso music, which is how we got the name Kingston. We noticed, by the way, that other people seemed to play that kind of music quite a lot better than we did. So, we even tried to sell ourselves off as an albino steel band. That didn't work. In 1958, we released our first album, it was part Calypso music, but by that time we started doing folk-oriented material. We never called ourselves folksingers, to this day. Maybe someday they will. In 1958, we put this album out. They pulled the song "Tom Dooley" from it and they plugged the single. And it sold, basically about 3 to 4 million in two weeks. And a fella' from Capital Records came to us with a lot of money in a suitcase and said, 'Here, you're folksingers.' And we said, 'You bet your ass we are.' [laughter] I mean we were just out of business school.<sup>87</sup>

As described by Shane the group was not in the revival, per se, but adjacent to it, simultaneously folk musicians but not *that kind* of folksinger.

In 2000 Stewart and Reynolds started a fantasy camp in Scottsdale, Arizona.<sup>88</sup>

This provided an occasion for fans to get close to their heroes. It also confirmed for the relatively affluent crowd that could afford the entry price that they remained co-owners of the American folk tradition. Stewart especially waxed poetic on the enduring meaning of the music and its place in individual and national memory. Disc Jockey and independent folk revival historian Jim Moran captured his experiences at this annual event in a series of blog posts.<sup>89</sup> The photos of the event show it was attended

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<sup>87</sup> *The Kingston Trio Play Seattle*, KCTS Television, 1990, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZSKSgkIvqM>. See also: *An Evening with the Kingston Trio*, M.T.A. Productions, 1991, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44Ev9pzzV2k>.

<sup>88</sup> Ed Masley, "Tracing Folk Sensation's Final Days in Phoenix," *Arizona Republic*, August 15, 2021.

<sup>89</sup> Jim Moran, "A Trio Fantasy Camp Retrospective, 2002-2010," <https://compvid101.blogspot.com/2010/08/a-compvid101-special-edition-trio.html>.

predominantly by White middle-aged and elderly men, in matching replica striped shirts. Attendees exuded a relaxed sense of belonging. They defied conventional wisdom that folk music had been coopted by leftist radicals. It belonged to folks like them too.

Public Broadcasting staged another reunion concert in 2002. Like many of the reunion concerts in the 1980s and 1990s, this concert focused on the importance of the music to those that lived through the revival. Co-host Dick Smothers recalled that, “folk music allowed us to express the emotions and feelings of our generation.”<sup>90</sup> Randy Sparks used his time to feature a new song, “Just Americans,” which he had written in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Sparks likened the national response to the tragedy to earlier times of heightened national identification. Sparks recontextualized the Christy’s first album for the audience recalling, “We were right in the middle of the Cuban Missile Crisis when it was released. And every disc jockey in the country played it night and day because our country was in a patriotic mood. Well just the other day we got to thinking, you know we’re kind of in that same mood again.” The song that followed expressed the optimistic vision that all Americans, when confronted with national tragedy, would rise above markers of identity: Black, White, religious affiliation, etc. In the face of the terrorist attacks, Sparks asserted, American held on to their better angels. “On September 11<sup>th</sup>, we became just Americans.” They closed the concert with a sing-along rendition of “This Land is Your Land.” Sung as it was in these contexts, the song reaffirmed the singers’ and audience’s place as co-

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<sup>90</sup> *This Land is Your Land*, DVD (WQED Productions, Rhino Home Video, 2002).

inheritors of the land. Popular folk reminded them that they were just Americans and this was indeed their land. The Christy's expressed a version of folk culture that placed national unity above politics; the shared love of folk music was beyond politics as well.

The popular folk groups remained committed to their apolitical position as entertainers, and thus, the folk they sang of were apolitical as well. The memory of these groups encapsulated a time when being a White middle-class person desiring upward mobility was not only apolitical, it was marker of being a real, authentic American. No longer the provenance of the beatnik basement coffeehouses, nor the esoteric academics, nor exotic foreign climes, folk music became the plaything of average suburban middle-class White folks. In the hands of the popular folk groups, folk music did not scold, and it did not demand change; it was unambiguous fun. Fans of popular folk did not need any special knowledge, like the anthropological folks insisted, nor did they need to comment on current events, as the political folks insisted. They could simply sing fun songs, have a good time, and experience a sense of belonging.

Popular folk groups helped to establish the White middle-class as the indispensable American identity. The popularity of these groups went along with a host of other media representations, everything from television sitcoms to presidential speeches, that sought to place the White middle-class at the heart of Americanness.<sup>91</sup> The

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<sup>91</sup> I see this work as complimenting other examinations of Cold War culture, including: Emily Abrams Ansari, *The Sound of a Superpower: Musical Americanism and the Cold War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018); Paul S. Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); K. A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2004); Stephen R. Duncan, *The Rebel Café Sex, Race, and Politics in Cold War America's Nightclub Underground*, 1st ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018); Matthew W.

elevation of the domestic sphere, the embrace of upward mobility, the view of a progressive history, these were not just latent cold war values, they were realized and reified by the Kingston Trio and projected on to the historical folk as essential national values.

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Dunne, *A Cold War State of Mind: Brainwashing and Postwar American Society*, Culture, Politics, and the Cold War (Amherst, [Massachusetts] ; University of Massachusetts Press, 2013); Philip Gentry, *What Will I Be: American Music and Cold War Identity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017); Catherine Gunther Kodat, *Don't Act, Just Dance: The Metapolitics of Cold War Culture* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Michael Kackman, *Citizen Spy: Television, Espionage, and Cold War Culture*, Commerce and Mass Culture Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound American Families in the Cold War Era*, Fully rev. and updated 20th anniv. ed. / with a new post 9/11 epilogue. (New York: Basic Bks, 2008); Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture*, Film and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

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