

From Volke to Folk to Roots:
How recording technology influenced folk music in North America

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ETEC 540
July 2015

Humans have probably been singing since they developed language. In the late 18th century European intellectuals began looking at rural populations for a more authentic expression of their historical cultural values than the current elite representations. The leader of this movement was a German named Johann Gottfried Herder, who contrasted *Kultur des Volkes* (“culture of the people”) against the *Kultur der Gelehrten* (“learned culture”). Herder believed that folk forms could cleanse the artificiality that was poisoning modern life (Filene, 2000). These ideas captured the minds of a generation of intellectuals and a rush to identify and understand folk cultures began. Herder himself published a collection of folk songs in 1778 in which he would use the new term, *Volkslieder* (“folk song”). In England, the popularity of folk ballads was well enshrined by this time with at least three notable collections including Thomas Percy's *Reliques of English Poetry* of 1765. While Percy depicted these ballads as works of high culture, the poets and intellectuals of the era took them as poetry from the masses and proof of the creative prowess of untrained 'folk'.

In Britain and in continental Europe people came to believe that for a country to have a distinct cultural voice, it must know its folk culture. This was the era of the famous Brothers Grimm and they would publish their first collection of folk tales in 1812. Foreshadowing one of folklores enduring debates, questions of authenticity regularly arose. Herder himself distinguished between true *Volk* (usually rural peasants) and what he called, “rabble in the streets,” who, “never sing or rhyme but scream and mutilate.” (Filene 2000). Even the songs and stories found among 'authentic' folk were carefully screened and sometimes edited to ensure the original cultural aspects that collectors were seeking were indeed present. Percy admitted to, “corrections and editions” of the ballads in *Antiques* and this controversial practice continued among folklore collectors more or less until the mid 19th century (ibid). Francis James Child was a Shakespearean scholar and Harvard professor whose interest in British ballads took the ideals of people like Herder, Percy and the Brothers Grimm and applied a level of scholarship and scientific rigor that laid the foundation for the American folk song movement. He was

a literary folklorist for whom the ballad was, “narrative song, a short tale in lyric verse,” and always saw the poetry as separate from the melody. He also believed the oral art of ballad creation and transmission was already dead at the hands of the printing press which had arrived in England in 1475. Child only accepted ballads as true folk creations if they recorded in manuscripts transcribed before that date. (Filene, 2000). In 1882 master work, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, he printed all variants he found—1300 versions of the 305 different ballads. This standard of scholarship and collecting became the standard to which folk songs were judged. Therefore it was natural when people began to look for the songs Americans sang, they looked for ballads and Child ballads in particular.

The late nineteenth century was also the dawn of recorded audio in the United States. Thomas Edison constructed the first functional phonograph in 1877, mechanically recording straight from air. The cylinders of original recordings produced copies of lower sound quality and the copying process rendered master cylinders unusable after 25 copies. In 1887 Emile Berliner received a patent for the flat disc gramophone and making multiple copies became more economical. Berliner even released a few early “traditional” commercial recordings in the 1890’s that included “Dixie”, “Virginia Camp Meeting” and, “A Day in a County School”. He would co-found the Victor Talking Machine Company in 1901. By 1905 family parlor time often included listening to short recorded music performances on the “talking machine” (Katz 2004).

In his 2004 book, *Capturing Sound*, Mark Katz calls the consequences of the ability to record music ***Phonographic Effects***. At this point in time, the phonographic effects of most concern were the *Temporality* and *Receptivity*. *Temporality* refers to the storage limits of the recording medium--3 minutes for phonograph tracks meant that shorter performances were the preferred subject of early recordings (Katz, 2004). *Receptivity* is the consequence of the recording device not being able to sense sound the same way as the human ear. The earliest recordings were made with a stylus at the end of a

huge audio horn that performers played into. In order not to overwhelm the stylus or in some case because the stylus was not sensitive enough, performers had to change physical position with respect to the cone to get acceptable recordings. Some instruments did not record well and substitutions like tubas for upright basses and wood blocks for skinned drums were necessary.

Katz mentions other phonographic effects of the recorded music their effects on folk music and its transmission will be discussed later. Briefly, they are *Tangibility*, *Portability*, *Invisibility* and *Repeatability*. Recorded music was now more than just sound or performance art—it was a tangible physical object that could be purchased and stored for use any time in the future. It allowed selective, solitary listening where music had normally been consumed at live performances in community. It also allowed listeners to hear music that they did not have physical access to for geographic or economic reasons. Playback of recorded audio out of context also removed many of the visual aspects of music performance—rendering it invisible. Finally, like print, audio recording made previously short lived sounds almost eternal. This *repeatability* meant entire performances could be listened to word for word and note for note an almost unlimited amount of times.

Concurrent with the dawn of the recording at turn of the 20th century, American folklore interests became focused on the Appalachian Mountains of the eastern United States. The earliest published folksongs in the US were a collection from North Carolina in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1893. Early collectors were ballad focussed and carefully noted the number of any Child ballads they found. Songs were rarely contextualized nor was much commentary on the singer provided. In 1916, Cecil Sharp arrived from Great Britain and began 12 months of collecting over three expeditions from 1916-18. Sharp was a collector in the Child tradition and collected 1600 versions of 500 songs from 281 singers--almost all of British-derived material (He actually refused spirituals (Campbell & Sharp, 1917, Intro page ix) and other forms. While in the mountain communities, he was struck by the

vibrancy of the folk tradition, which he described as oral, remarking that he did not have to collect solely from older members of the community as everyone seemed to have songs to contribute (ibid).

While Sharp followed Child's lead in documenting every variant of ballad he heard with notes on the singer, his book, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, strayed from previous Child disciples in that it presented the songs with music so they could be sung. He believed this was of great importance for (British) national education so that future musicians could be well versed-in the nation's musical vernacular (Filene 2000). He and the other British folk revivalists in also hoped that folk culture like his collected songs would rescue society from what they considered the present era's vulgarity and restore the previous wholesome simplicity. (ibid)

At this point, the late 1910's, American folk music was still generally considered old songs, usually ballads from Great Britain, sung by isolated, white mountain people. African American music enjoyed some popularity as well but the myth of 'true' American folk combined with racial prejudice prevented African American song from being acknowledged as American folk music (Filene, 2000). In the 1870's during the wake of the Civil War, and almost fifty years before Cecil Sharp landed on American shores, northerners had become interested in spirituals sung by African Americans themselves (as opposed to blackface Caucasians of the earlier minstrel shows representing African American culture).

Unfortunately this interest in the music did not seem to extend to the perception of the performers themselves. By 1909, one of the most famous groups, The Fisk Singers, dressed conservatively, performed focussed arrangements, and their song book had gone through five printings but a Cincinnati newspaper still referred to them as, "A band of Negro minstrels..." (Filene, pg 28). At the time only Howard Odum was studying and recording black vernacular music but this only for documentary convenience and from a sociological perspective. He was not really interested in preserving the music or sympathetic to the position of African Americans in society (Filene, 2000).

Although the technology to record and playback music and was available to collectors as early as 1904, many of like Sharp didn't see the value in recording the singers performances as the preservation of the ballad—the text—was seen as primary (Filene 2000). Some field collectors like John Lomax and his son Alan in the US and Marius Barbeau in Canada (Rosenburg, 1998) would eventually amass large collections of a wide variety of songs like Blues, Gospel, Prisoner Songs, Cowboy Ballads, Sea Shanties, Fishing and other work songs but when these were recorded it was usually with the goal of preservation and/or transcription of better texts. Record companies had not begun to record much American folk material instead choosing to target recent immigrants in urban settings (Signell, 1997). This meant recording traditional material and selling records back to the communities that had produced the music since record executives couldn't see any other market for them (Cohen, 2002 p. 10). Columbia's 1913 catalog has two pages of “Folk songs and Traditional Melodies” but only six of 48 selections were American in origin. In total there were more than 200,000 recordings of ethnic music recorded in the U.S. between 1893 and 1942 on U.S. Victor, Columbia, and other small and large labels (Signell, 1997). In the case of two Irish fiddlers, the early recordings of Michael Coleman and James Morrison demonstrated the power of the portability and repeatability of the new medium or records. These made-in-the-USA recordings would become major influences on the standard repertoire of Irish musicians—one that present day musicians continue to draw on (Hamilton, 1996:277 as cited by Proctor 2015).

The first commercial AM radio broadcast originated in Pittsburgh in 1921 and with the expansion of the radio network, southern folk music styles began to gain popularity and the record companies took notice of new demand. Artist and Repertoire (A&R) men like Ralph Peer from Okeh records headed out in search of music that would sell. In this way, corporate decisions began to influence rural culture based on what was selected for recording and what was not. (Cohen page 10). This provided another

example of how the repeatability of recorded music could affected the repertoire and style choices of folk musicians. Unlike the folklorists, Peer and other record company representatives were not beholden to a specific type of traditional song like ballads and that music didn't have to 300 years old to be old-timey. They were more likely to focus on the lively and fluid repertoire played at modern public gatherings. In this way, artists who were comfortable playing traditional music in styles that appealed to hillbilly audiences but who could also contribute original material in that style came to be in demand.

Recordings of country and folk styles—the category now dubbed “Hillbilly” by Peer—at this time were a mix of field and studio. At first instrumentals were considered a safer sell but later in the 1920's vocal songs became more popular. Remote recordings, like Peer's famous sessions with Fiddlin' John Carson in 1923 and with The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers in 1927 followed this timeline. These southern sessions shared space in the record catalogs with 'City Billy' studio recordings using professional musicians and singers like Vernon Dalhart covering traditional and in some cases original songs (Huber, 2014).

While the recording industry was influencing hillbilly recording artists, the sounds from the south were beginning to capture the imaginations of the urbanites as well. According to musicologist Charles Seeger, radio and recording technology enabled an exchange of cultural material like never before:

“Almost overnight, the constant, slow ages-old interchange of materials between city and country and between folk, popular and fine arts of music was vastly speeded up. Country singers were recorded by phonograph and folklorists were drawn into radio programs. City people always on the lookout for new things and for broader cultural life heard the records and broadcasts...But in the process the songs themselves—even the idiom in which they were molded

—began to change. Thus the “hill-billy” and the “city-billy” though using the same musical materials, crossed paths while going exactly opposite directions.” (Cohen, 2002, p. 10)

Popular (non-classical) records produced in this era were now categorized in three ways, hillbilly (white southern folk), race (African American music), and ethnic (other cultural traditions) each with their own catalog numbers and marketing. Sometimes these categories and artist were recorded by the same A&R men in the same studios on the same trip. Indeed it was Ralph Peer who created Okeh's Race Records series in 1921 that was imitated by the other big players and by 1927 the record industry was issuing 500 plus race record titles per year including blues, string bands, jazz bands and jazz singers (Cohen page 16). When many record of these companies went out of business during the depression many of the bluesmen like Blind Willie Johnson stopped recording. The phonographic effects of *tangibility*, *portability*, and *repeatability* afforded by their records allowed enthusiasts of the 60's dig through bins and collections to rediscover some of these performers during the folk revival. This would lead to some of the surviving artists performing once more on the folk festival circuit.

Hillbilly recording artists from the South were also influenced by the blues to the point where white artists would sometimes mistakenly end up on race records, Jimmie Rogers' Blue Yodel No. 1 sold over a million copies and other artists like the Monroe Brothers incorporating the blues into their proto-bluegrass sound (Cohen, 2002). This level of cross-pollination might seem strange given the segregation in place at the time but the *invisibility* (Katz, 2004) of recorded and broadcast music may have enabled more mixing of musical genres than would have been possible in person (Cohen, 2002).

Recording technology continued to evolve before and after the Second World War. Electric recording using condenser and ribbon microphones eliminated the need for the audio cone and improved the sound quality of recordings. The 78RPM disc became standard as did its 4.5 minutes of playback.

Audio recording on magnetic tape, developed by the Germans during the war, was brought home by the victorious American side in 1947. A company called AMPEX releasing the first American model in 1948. Finally the development of the LP by Columbia in the late forties allowed folk music collectors increased *portability* with more songs on one disc (Aes.org, Wikipedia 2015).

In 1952 magnetic tape masters were used by the small record company Folkways to reissue the sounds of 1925-32 with great fidelity on the 6 LP set *The Anthology of American Folk Music*. The *Anthology*, compiled by one Harry Smith, was like a sonic time machine carrying the listener to the pre-war past (Rosenburg 1998). Its release inspired people like Ralph Rinzler to track down living artists like Doc Boggs and Clarence Ashley from the *Anthology* and bring them to the famous Newport Folk Festival (ibid). While sales of the *Anthology* were not massive (it was a six LP set that retailed for almost \$35 at a time when a regular LP was \$3-4) (ibid) sales to libraries and schools appear to have expanded the reach of the release (Skinner 2006). Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, prominent artists from the New York folk scene of the late fifties and early sixties both report that while people knew of the compilation few in the scene had access to the *Anthology*. Most had heard songs from that era on borrowed records or as part of a secondary oral process when the songs were performed by other singers (ibid). This seems plausible given the regular hootenannies in Greenwich Village's George Washington Park. These were attended by young people carrying guitars, banjos and other stringed instruments (Powers 2008). Songs heard from other singers, from early 78rpm records or from the recent releases by groups like Weavers (featuring Pete Seeger) or The Kingston Trio, were shared as part of what the singers believed was a living tradition.

By the mid sixties, strains began to develop in the folk community as some artists moved out of the Greenwich folk clubs and onto the national stage adapting their performances and style for broader appeal. Many observers believe the signal for the end of the end of the folk boom was Bob Dylan's

Electric (non-acoustic) performance at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. The controversial moment pitted the purists who saw folk as expression of a community against those who felt the artistic expression of the individual artist was more important. (Skinner). The folk boom itself was an inspiration for many to begin their own exploration and collections (Roud, 2005). Among these was British Columbia's own Phil Thomas whose *Songs of the Pacific Northwest* showcases songs from ranchers, loggers, fishermen and political activists over the 250 year history of the colony and province. The folk boom was also a catalyst for a lower level but enduring interest in folk in the English speaking world (ibid) that continues today. Indeed, the author has played still regularly attends local folk clubs populated mostly by survivors of the 60's revival and accesses the old recordings on vinyl for inspiration and enjoyment.

In the years since the folk revival, the development of wider musical categories like American Roots Music\ began to encompass styles that were not part of the original conception of American folk music, such as Spirituals, Blues, Hawaiian, as well as bluegrass, old-time, jug bands, Cajun and Native American among others (Wikipedia, 2015). Roots music is so named because these forms of music are now considered the roots of many American music forms like rock, r&b and jazz. The 'bigger tent' of roots music allows modern roots artists to absorb inspiration and influences from anywhere and to mix electric and acoustic sounds without fear of being betraying a 'community'. *The Anthology of American Folk Music* was re-released on compact disc in 1997 by The Smithsonian to much acclaim (Rosenburg 1998, Skinner 2006). Now access to the sounds of the 20's and 30's is again available for those with out access to a vinyl copy. Being able to listen to the recordings of the songs that inspired the artists of the folk revival as well as the early forms of jazz and blues continues to inform and inspire Roots and Americana musicians all over the world. The tangibility, portability, repeatability of these and other early recordings of American musicians played (and continues to play) a significant role in the development of these unique American sounds and forms of expression.

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