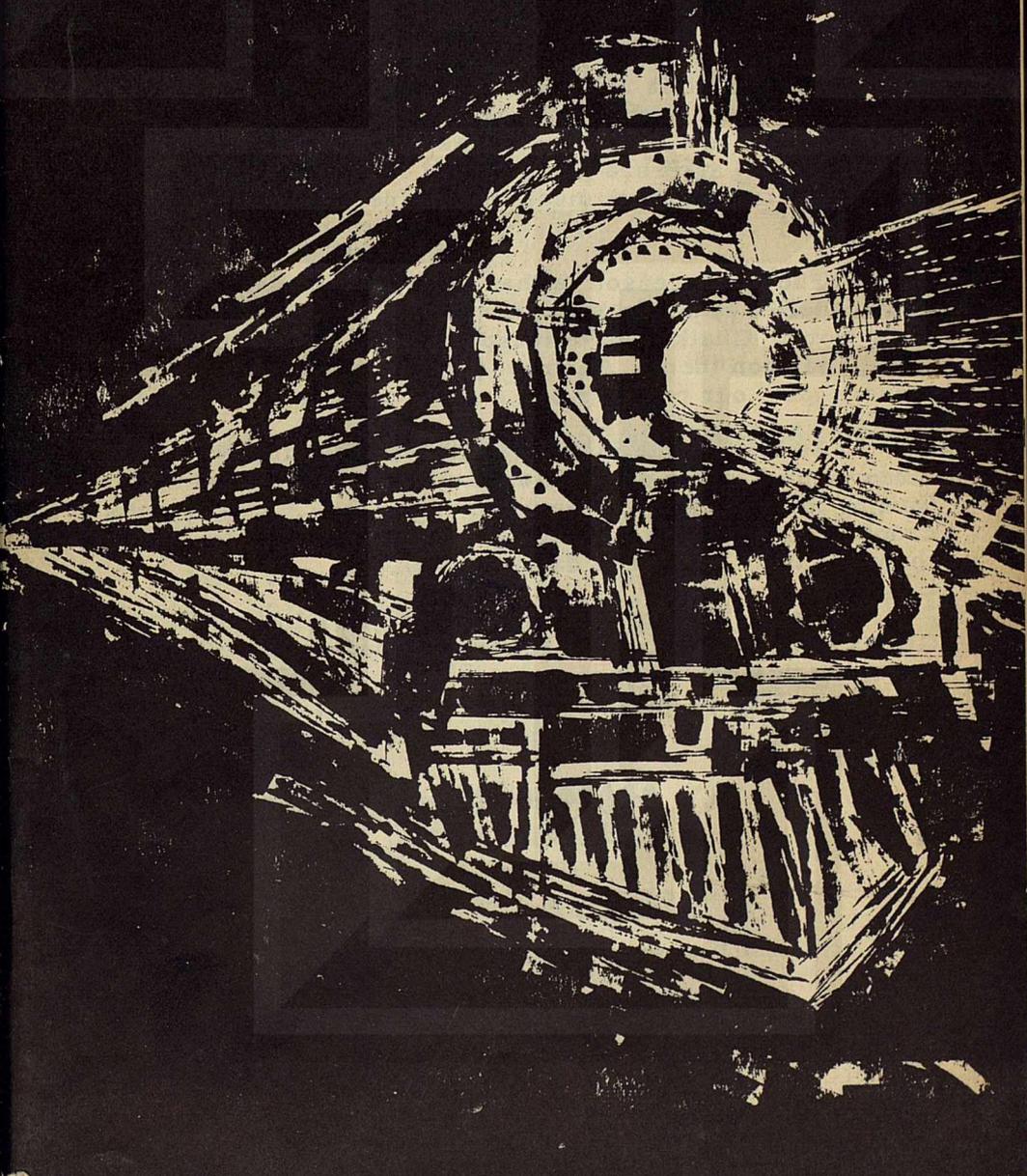


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CARAVAN

the
magazine
of
folk music



Editorial

Boy, is our face red ! We said we were going on a monthly schedule and we don't publish an issue for six months. We apologize to the readers whose letters we did not answer regarding CARAVAN's non-appearance. (We only answered the ones that threatened mayhem. They kept us busy enough.) The reasons for this lapse are twofold. We had to devote our energies, during September and October, to the task of earning a living. (In case any of our readers don't know, none of the CARAVAN staff are paid, except in the satisfaction of putting out the best folk music magazine in the country, if not the world.)

The other reason is that some of our advertisers who had agreed to take space in every issue of CARAVAN broke their word. Chalk it up to inexperience.. Alas, we had come to depend upon them. An angel (who wishes to remain anonymous), paid our printer's bill and put us in the running again.

As long as the material keeps coming in, (we have a three issue backlog of excellent articles, songs, and features waiting to be published) we will publish CARAVAN by hook or crook. You can help by getting friends to subscribe and having them get their friends to do the same.

We are glad to see Israel Young's FOLK MUSIC GUIDE*USA going strong. It contains listings of all folk music events in this country and some in other countries. Send 1 dollar to Izzy at the FOLKLORE CENTER, 110 MacDougal St., New York 12 N.Y. It's published monthly, except August and September.



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LETTERS to the editor

Dear Mr. Faier :

The letter I sent Caravan two issues ago said, among other things, "Believe me, I love scholarship, but there is already an abundance of heavy, deadly serious, often pretentious material in innumerable folklore journals published in the academic world. Who needs one more just like the rest ?" Your last issue contains letters from a Mr. Hoffman and Ellen Stekert accusing me of shallow attitudes, superficial interest, and ignorance of the meaning of scholarship, and with steely prose and biting commentary I am given my just deserts. I am tempted to make a few comments in return :

- 1) Scholarship consists of an ability to classify. Mr. Hoffman and Miss Stekert have failed to grasp that criticism of bad material published in abundance (but not in totality) in academic folklore journals is not criticism of the whole field of scholarship.
- 2) Scholarship consists of an ability to differentiate broad categories. Mr. Hoffman and Miss Stekert have failed to grasp that my letter was intended as an appeal to Caravan to keep on being a magazine about people and places where folk music is alive in the US, be those places city or country, and not a repository for occasional inferior articles that couldn't make it in academic journals. They have confused scholarship and news.
- 3) Scholarship consists of an ability to read. My letter said " I'm still pulling for you and the mag, but some of us here at IU are asking, 'For Christ's sakes, what's happened ?'." Stekert answers, "People like Tom Barton (who is not the only person at Indiana University) don't seem to realize...." May I suggest that reference to a dictionary will reveal the difference in meaning of the words "some" and "all" - (Unless Miss Stekert believes that I am in the habit of referring to myself in the plural, I am not now and never have been a King of England.) I would never dream of speaking for Miss Stekert.
- 4) Scholarship consists of the ability to discuss and disagree without indulging in personal vituperation. My criticism of Caravan was directed toward the content of articles. Mr. Hoffman in part and Miss Stekert almost in whole, indulge in vicious remarks about my personality and intelligence which, true or not, reveal a good deal about their own.
- 5) Mr. Hoffman says, "Although I am associated with the Folklore Department at Indiana University and keep fairly close tabs on the folklore activities in the area, I have never had the dubious pleasure of meeting Mr. Barton." Although I have lived in Bloomington since 1947 and attended Indiana Uni-

versity since 1954, I have not had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Hoffman either. Perhaps this is due to an inexcusable habit of associating with people who play and sing folk music, which tends to limit the time I have available for browsing in the library stacks. Check of the IU student and faculty rosters reveals no Mr. Frank Hoffman.

6) Mr. Hoffman attempts an analogy which he calls "good" to refute my contention that folk music and song is learned better by listening and watching than by reading. He draws the picture of a man refusing to study winds, tides, etc., saying he can learn more from watching the ship's captain than he can from a book. I am almost ashamed it must be pointed out to Mr. Hoffman that folk music is defined, by scholars, as traditional and oral. But then there are those who tolerate traditional music as quaint but raucous, and would prefer an evening of Josh White and the Kingston Trio to Leadbelly and the Carter Family.

Should either Mr. Hoffman or Miss Stekert wish more direct discussion, they are both welcome to visit me.

Tom Barton
940 S. Jordan
Bloomington, Indiana

P.S. - Last 2 issues were fine !

Dear Mr. Barton and Co.,

I hadn't realized that the anti-egghead movement in the United States (not a new one unfortunately, but exciting as a fad) had penetrated to the university level too.

So there is an overabundance of "heavy, deadly serious, often pretentious material" in folklore journals. The people who have to work with this "heavy, deadly serious etc.," do not think there is an overabundance. Quite the contrary. Money problems intrude even upon us ivory tower boys. Let me offer just one bit of proof. The Library of Congress Archive of American Folk Song is in an admitted state of near chaos because there are not enough people and/or money just simply to catalogue the holdings. Net result, only 40 or so Lps of real folksingers when there is material for literally thousands.

You continue, Mr. Barton: "You were writing about the young men and women who were and are bringing folk-music alive in American today." The last part of that is a little ambiguous and I am not inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt.

letters

First of all, if you read some of those "heavy, deadly serious, etc.," articles, you might realize that folk music is anything but dead in the United States. And I am not referring to those people Charlie Seeger called "city-billies."

I'm sorry that I didn't meet you in Bloomington when I was there this summer. I had a fine time collecting Negro gospel songs in the local Negro Baptist church. Not to mention the ditties the Terre Haute prostitute sang for me. (What I was doing with a prostitute is not germane.) Yet Terre Haute is just 50 miles from Bloomington. Oh, and the Bloomington police man (he introduced me to the prostitute) who sang the "old songs" and played the mouth harp for me.

Dead? I don't think so. It wasn't even sick.

And if you mean that the young men and women are bringing live folk music to the cities, you are equally wrong. There is a wealth of urban folk and traditional song (I'll split a few hairs just for tonsorial effect).

You infer that because Caravan's copy was "pseudo intellectual blather" (at times I am more than willing to agree) and it was like the scholarly journals that they too are "pseudo intellectual blather." Just who is intellectual then?

Let me just remind you of a few little points. The great Leadbelly (I use the commonly applied adjective here; my own prejudices don't count) was discovered by a working folklorist and his fledgling son, John A. and Alan Lomax. That's just one case.

The Seegers, the Lee Hayses, the Butch Hawses, etc., came out of People's Songs and related political-social movements. If these people used scholarship for ends which I don't approve of, they didn't snub it.

If scholars were actually responsible for embalming folk songs as you seem to think, it is a safe guess that you wouldn't be singing folk song today. (Unless you considered that the studied art song products of a Richard Dyer-Bennett and Burl Ives were worth imitating.)

There wouldn't even be a Belafonte or the Kingston Trio or half a dozen other commercial folk singers. (Not singers, songers, after Sam Hinton.)

I wonder if you would listen to the "race records" of a Guitar Slim or the "gospel songs" of the Pilgrim Travelers

if you hadn't been told that this was folk music and "in." (Or is it "out?") Who passed on the word? The early jazz scholars. Not "Beat", or "Billboard", - they were too busy making money.

A folk song is not a cultural isolate, but exists along with superstition, tales, customs, folk art, proverbs, folk speech and all the other wonderful forms of human expression. I suggest that if you knew that "Stagolee" is probably a rewrite of a devil tale you might sing the song better. At least you'd understand why that bad man kills Billy over a hat.

Enough ranting. I am one of those deadly serious etceteras and perhaps I have over reacted to your letter, Mr. Barton. One doesn't use a jackhammer to kill a gnat. I hope you are of gnat-size; I would hate to think that your anti-intellectual attitude was very common.

Sincerely,

Ed Cray

Dear Billy,

Your "responsible, informative publication" has done me, and possibly your readers, a great injustice by deleting the factual and critical statements I made of Odetta, Pete Seeger, The New Lost City Ramblers, Frank Warner, Cynthia Gooding, etc., and substituting your own views of Barbara Dane and Bob Gibson in their place. No two of my sentences were left in order and the rest you rewrote so that my sense, style, thought and integrity were violated grossly. You should learn to express your unique views in your own articles, and not add them to articles written by your friends for no pay and little prestige. As the article stands, it is rambling and vapid. I would especially like to apologize to Mr. Niles for your unfortunate rewording of the phrase "dramatic gestures" in reference to his performance of "The Maid Freed From The Gallows." I would like to have my ms. back so that I can make copies of it available to any readers of Caravan that might be interested in reading the original.

Sincerely,

Israel G. Young

Dear Mr. Faier,

Received your #18 issue of CARAVAN and like it very much. I think it is the most interesting magazine considering folklore on the market today. Keep up the good work and let's always put nothing but folk material in it.

I would like very much for you to publish something on the MAINERS MOUNTAINEERS. I have a listing of their discography, but it lacks master numbers, etc. Would also like to know if anyone has any kind of information on some of the "lesser known" artists such as Charles Baker (The Wyoming Cowboy), Alex Gordon, Lake Howard, and others. Baker recorded on Champion in the 45,000 series, Gordon made at least 2 conquerors (7269) and (7270). Howard appeared on Banner and others, such as Melotone for one. This is about all I know about them. More information, pictures, etc., would be greatly appreciated. Especially on Baker and Gordon.

Musically Yours,
August J. Vrchota
Batavia, Ohio.

Dear Billy Faier,

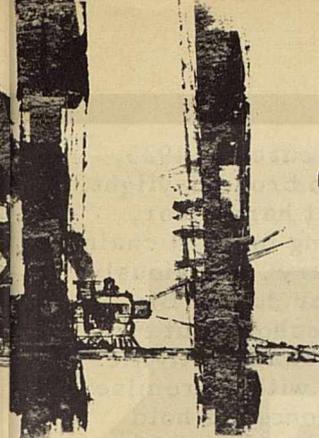
On the editor's page of your latest issue, you characterized your magazine as now aspiring to be a "responsible, informative publication." With this in mind, we would like to register a criticism of a remark made by your record reviewer, Roger D. Abrahams. In reviewing the Folkways record of Big Bill Broonzy, Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry as interviewed on WFMT by Studs Terkel, R. D. A. described Studs' remarks as "asinine." Such a statement, coming from the source that it does, about a man as respected in the world of folk music as Studs Terkel, can evoke in us only disgust!

It isn't necessary to go into any long evaluation of Studs Terkel. The high regard in which he is held by all the LEADING personalities in the folk song field is tribute enough. (We might just mention in passing that Studs' program "WAX MUSEUM" has won two major radio awards within the last three months.) As for the record in question we consider it to be a first rate example of an interview.

Although we realize it is necessary for CARAVAN to depend on contributed material, we had hoped it would be possible for the record reviewer to exercise better judgment and a more mature approach in writing about those who have earned a reputation in the field of folk music.

Yours truly,
Gerry and George Armstrong
Wilmette, Illinois.





A WHO'S WHO OF 'THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL'

by Mack McCormick

The overnight train to San Antonio used to roll out of the Houston depot a few minutes past 11 every night. The Southern Pacific called it "The Alamo Special." 25 miles beyond the city, where it crossed the Brazos River bottoms, the black men staring out of the grilled dormitory windows of Central Unit #2 called it "The Midnight Special." To them the train was a howl and a stabbing cone of light, a rush of yellow squares framing glimpses of freedom. In a moment it was gone, the thundering vibration fading, the song and the convicts to sing it left behind.

Oh, let the Midnight Special shine its light on me;
Let the Midnight Special shine its ever-lovin' light
on me.

Roaring across the dark prairie, the train seemed the embodiment of "freedom's chariot". It was escape from the prison described in one blues: "That Fort Bend County bottom is a burning hell." Escape in the sense of travel, escape by suicide beneath the grinding wheels. Many trains invade the prison, the tracks cut through the long-stretching, exact rows of corn, cotton, and cane worked by the prisoners. But this was a passenger train, a slice of an utterly different world. And it came just on the edge of midnight, when a prisoner gets "to studying 'bout my great long time."

James Baker, Moses Platt, and Huddie Ledbetter have lain in chains at Central Unit #2, watching this train. These three - better known by their prison names as Ironhead, Clear Rock, and Leadbelly - were among the thousands who have eased themselves by singing the stark reflections.

If you ever go to Houston,
You better walk right,
You better not stagger,
And you better not fight.

A notable failure to heed this advice occurred in 1923, when Jack Smith held up a bank messenger in broad daylight. Quickly captured and sentenced to 25 years at hard labor, Smith sat in the county jail at Houston, waiting to "pull chain." It was a bad time to be going to the penitentiary. Previously he could have bought a pardon, an easy matter during Big Jim Ferguson's administration as Texas governor. But Ferguson had been impeached for this and other shady activities. Pat Neff, the new governor, had campaigned with a promise to end the traditional practice of selling pardons. To hold the voters' confidence he was refusing to grant any pardons. (During his four years as governor, he released only five men. One of these pardons is the act by which history will remember Pat Neff.) Jack Smith sat in jail, brooding about the notorious transfer man, Uncle Bud Russell, who was to arrive shortly.

Apparently contemplating a variety of escape methods, Jack Smith got a friend to smuggle caustic acid, saw blades, and a pistol into his cell. Only the gun proved necessary, since it was then common practice for lawyers to see their clients in the courthouse lobby. During such a visit, Smith pulled his gun, clubbed a deputy, and dashed outside to jump on the running board of a passing auto.

At the time, the sheriff's residence was in its old-west location, adjoining the jail. Sheriff T. A. Binford was at home for his little girl's birthday party, when a groggy deputy ran over to tell him of the escape. Binford commandeered a second auto and a running gun battle ensued through the business district. Hundreds of pedestrians flattened themselves on the sidewalks as the Sheriff got his man.

Now retired to a farm on Houston's outskirts, Binford recalled the incident recently: "I stayed with Jack all that next night. Just the two of us in a dark cell. I didn't beat him like they say. Just talked until finally he told me who it was had slipped him that gun and stuff. I got that fellow and he went to the 'walls' too. Jack told me he prayed to get out. Said he figured if he prayed hard enough it could be done even though no one had ever broken my jail. 'But, Sheriff,' he told me, 'I just didn't pray not to get caught.'"

A few days later, with Jack Smith again sitting in his cell, the corridors began to echo with a song about the escape. Binford vaguely recalled the lines:

If you ever go to Houston,
Better not break that County Jail,
.....

Sheriff Binford went a-running,
Chased ol' Jack Smith down.
You can bet your bottom dollar,
He's Sugarland bound. ¹

Fragments of other lines remembered were " Jack Smith sittin' on appeal ", and " Sheriff got him 'bout forty years more."

With the Sheriff's name slurred in the singing, the song has been absorbed throughout the Texas prison system:

Or Sheriff Benson will arrest you,
He will carry you down.
If the jury finds you guilty,
Then you're Sugarland bound.

A trace of the earlier form can be found in the version recorded by John Lomax, Jr. (Folkways), where he mentions - with a typical interchange of names and titles - "Sheriff Jack Smith." Lomax's version comes from hearing James "Ironhead" Baker sing it shortly after his release from prison.

Following the jailbreak incident, Jack Smith was sent to the penitentiary and labeled # 50344 to serve his 25 year term for armed robbery. He served slightly over one year. During this first year, while Pat Neff was governor, pardons were exceptionally scarce. Leadbelly managed to obtain one after having charmed the Governor with an evening of songs, concluded by an especially composed plea for his release. Even then, Neff waited until the last few days of



1. Sugarland : Refinery town ten miles southwest of Houston where Central Unit is located. Geographic terms such as "Fort Bend" or "Brazos bottom" are equally synonymous with the penitentiary and are used interchangeably in this line.

his term before granting Leadbelly's pardon. A few months later, Jack Smith obtained a pardon by using different resources. The Ferguson regime succeeded Pat Neff. Unable to run himself after being impeached, Big Jim Ferguson blandly had the voters elect his wife and things were as before. Three months after "Ma" Ferguson came to office, Jack Smith, son of a well-to-do Austin family, was granted a pardon.

The distinctive text now associated with the "Midnight Special" seems to have begun as a progression from a cycle of jail songs common in Texas. Interchange of texts is particularly common between songs such as "Down In The Valley" (Birmingham Jail, etc.) and "Hard Times, Poor Boy" (Durant Jail, Cryderville Jail, etc.). The lines and fairly fixed rimes lend themselves to topical events.

"Negro Folk Songs as sung by Leadbelly" provides a transcription of his "The Shreveport Jail" which has verses and sentiments in common with, and seems to lie exactly midway between all three songs: "The Midnight Special", "Down In The Valley", and "Hard Times, Poor Boy".

Growing out of a loosely knit group of jail songs, the narrative of a 1923 Houston jailbreak seems to have then passed on to the prison farms, evolving finally as a person-by-person account of those foremost in a convict's mind.

Yonder comes Miss Rosie,
How in the world do you know?
I can tell by her apron,
And the dress she wore.

Umbrella on her shoulder,
Piece a paper in her hand,
Goes a-marching to the Captain,
Says, 'I want my man.'

Doubtless there were other songs which contributed to "The Midnight Special" 's formation - an old spiritual contributed the lines of the chorus and perhaps the tune - but the best known version mentioning a specific Houston sheriff must have taken shape during his term. Binford's eighteen years as Harris County sheriff began in 1919. Others mentioned in the song held office during this same period.

The deceptive titles of much folk music make it difficult to determine the earliest recordings of the song. Around 1925 there was a "Midnight Special" by Sodarisa Miller on the Paramount label. Sam Collins recorded a "Midnight Special Blues" for Gennett in 1927.

The song's first publication was in Carl Sandburg's "The American Songbag", in 1927. It is Alan Lomax's belief that this version was obtained from his father's early collections of Texas lore. Sandburg failed to credit his source. The later Lomax books "American Ballads and Folk Songs", and the Leadbelly volume published distinctive variants. Now of course, it is standard fare in all anthologies.

The Library of Congress archives include seven recordings, the earliest from the Texas penitentiary "walls" at Huntsville, sung by Jesse Bradley in 1934. Later recordings were made by Leadbelly while in the Louisiana prison at Angola, by the Gant family of Austin, by several convict groups at Mississippi's Parchman Farm, and finally by Woody Guthrie in 1940. All of these were obtained by John and Alan Lomax.

It was the title song of the historic RCA Victor album of prison songs made by Leadbelly in 1940. Pete Seeger's transcription of this record appears in B. A. Botkin's "A Treasury of American Folklore". Here Leadbelly sings, unlike his other recordings, the line referring to "Sheriff Benson". Leadbelly, who certainly knew the Houston sheriff's proper name, may have been influenced by the printed versions then circulating. Pete Seeger also admits he may have erred in transcribing the exact name Leadbelly sang.

Since then, the song has been recorded twice again by Leadbelly and by artists such as Odetta, Big Bill Broonzy, Pete Seeger, The Weavers, and Josh White. Blues shouter Joe Turner has contributed a rock'n' roll version, dance bands have recorded instrumental arrangements, and movie star Andy Griffith's recording has had a fling on the hit parade.

Well, you wake up in the morning,
Hear the ding-dong ring,
Go marchin' to the table,
See the same damn thing.

Knife and fork on the table,
Nothing in my pan,
If you say anything about it,
You're in trouble with the man.

Despite the song's widespread fame, Sheriff Binford had never heard it except from his own prison charges until Ed Badeaux, vacationing in his hometown, made a point of visiting the Sheriff to sing him the song as it is familiarly known, (and included in Ed's Folkways album "American Guitar"). The ex-sheriff snorted with surprise at hearing this odd memorial to himself. "They was always singing something you know - but I never thought anybody 'd be interested."

Commenting on the Sandburg variant where the name is given as "T. Bentley", he said: "That's closer in a way. Most people just called me T." A crusty individual who characterizes himself as a "hound dog man", Binford acquired his gun lore as a youth in the frontier west. He began police work as a mounted officer and came to public notice in the tragic riot of Negro soldiers in 1917. Northern recruits, unused to the southern caste system, staged a revolt against their officers and charged toward Houston's business district screaming their protests. Binford, among the first to meet the mob, was promptly wounded and woke next morning to find himself hero of the incident. Thirty-seven of the Negroes were hanged; Binford was made Sheriff in the next election.

Well, yonder comes Bud Russell,
How in the world do you know?
Tell him by his big hat,
And his forty-fo'.

Uncle Bud Russell is an oft-mentioned figure in songs originating in Texas. Like another prison transfer man who gave rise to "Joe Turner Blues", the folk-image of Bud Russell is one of an evil spirit wandering the land, kidnapping the men into slavery.

Often the sole guard to handle the transfer of large groups of prisoners from the far-flung Texas counties to the Huntsville "walls", and thence to the prison farms which spread along the Brazos and Trinity river bottoms, Bud Russell has been held in awe by all who have dealt with him. Both convicts and prison officials seem to have feared him. Two

generations of Texans have been brought up on the warning :
"Don't do it unless you want to see Uncle Bud come for you."

He walked into the jailhouse,
With a gang a' chains in his hand.
I heard him tell the trustee,
'I'm the transfer man.'

Binford described the 6-foot, 200 pound Bud Russell as "most successful" among the transfer men. The present Harris County jailer, C.K. McAlpine, remembers him as a "very strong man with a very big knife." On one occasion McAlpine turned over a total of 64 prisoners to the transfer man. As was the custom in those days, Russell chained the prisoners in one long line, then marched them across downtown Houston, boarding the train to Huntsville with only himself to guard the entire group.

In his song for Governor Pat Neff, Leadbelly chants between the verses, giving an account of his own experience : "Bud Russell, which traveled all over the state and carried de men down de state penitentiary, had me goin on down. Had chains all around my neck, an I couldn't do nothin but wave my hands."

Lightnin' Hopkins recently recorded a blues - adapting lines from "Ain't No More Cane On The Brazos" - which commemorates Russell's days as a prison guard : "They say you ought to been on the Brazos nineteen and ten, Bud Russell drove pretty women just like he done ugly men.." The old song "Uncle Bud" which describes a bullish, hell-with-women kind of man, has in Texas become associated with the specific menace of Bud Russell.

Uncle Bud's got this, Uncle Bud's got that,
Uncle Bud's got an arm like a baseball bat.

Uncle Bud's the damnest you ever seen,
Uncle Bud's got plenty of gasoline.

The last line has reference to the out-size gasoline tanks with which the transfer wagon, used in recent years, was supplied. These tanks enabled Russell to drive his charges to prison non-stop from any point in Texas.

Having died a few years after his retirement to his home

in Hill County, Uncle Bud Russell is vividly remembered in folk songs :

T.K. Erwin went to Austin,
With a paper in his hands,
To get the intermediate sentence
Passed on de convict man.

He hand the paper to the gov'nor,
And there it stood.
I know she gonna sign it,
Cause she said she would.

T.K. "Kirk" Irwin served as chief of city detectives at Houston for a number of years. Again a name is somewhat blurred in singing. Now 84 years old, blind with cataracts, Kirk Irwin is a lonely man who says: " I walk all downtown where I used to know everyone and now I don't see anyone and no one sees me." His lasting fragment of fame may be this verse of "The Midnight Special".

The stanza relates to the legal procedure under the Texas habitual criminal law which provides an indeterminate ("intermediate") sentence from five years to life imprisonment after a third felony conviction. The use of the feminine gender in referring to the governor identifies the stanza with Mariam C. "Ma" Ferguson who held office 1925-27 and again 1933-35. The stanza was published in "American Ballads and Folk Songs", and according to Alan Lomax came from either Leadbelly or Ironhead. Chances are it was the latter since Leadbelly was free of the Texas prison during her administration.

Kirk Irwin nodded vaguely when asked if he recalled anyone known as Leadbelly - who worked for the Houston Buick agency and gained a minor police record in the city following his pardon. " I remember a great big fellow, " Irwin said. "Always played guitar and sang when you'd take him in. That the one ? Some of the boys would see him on the street and pick him up just to hear him make up songs. Great big, black man. "

Four of those officers are recorded in one of Leadbelly's stanzas :

Bason an' Brock will arrest you,
Payton an' Boone will take you down;
The judge will sentence you,
An' you Sugar Land bound.

Three of these men have been identified as former members of the Houston police force. A. W. Brock was chief of police for a time. George Payton and Johnnie Boone were a team of city detectives who specialized in prowling the Negro wards. There was at one time a song devoted to these two although no text has yet been found. Boone is now deceased according to his former buddy, George Payton, who in recent years has served as house officer at the Texas State Hotel.

Well, yonder comes Dr. Melton.
How in the world do you know ?
Well, he gave me a tablet,
Just the day befo'.

Well, there never was a doctor,
Travel through the land,
That could cure the fever
Of a convict man.

No physician by this name was ever employed in the Texas prison system. Of the three Dr. Meltons listed by the Texas State Board of Examiners, none were in practice near any of the prison farms. Unlike the many other persons named and accurately described by the ballad, Dr. Melton eludes the grasp of research.

The consensus of ex-convicts and ex-guards who were asked about a "Dr. Melton" was that he may have been a hospital steward at one of the farms, titled by his fellow prisoners. Two men remembered in the vaguest way someone called by this name.

None of the physicians employed by the prison were found to have a first name such as Milton or Melton. The text can be taken to suggest a convict steward - who'd be handing out salt tablets, aspirin, and bromides constantly - rather than a physician who'd only appear in the event of more serious illness. Houston physician Robert K. Blair who was at one time medical officer for Clemens, Ramsey, Harlem, Retrieve, Darrington, Blue Ridge, and Central

farms, recalled the use of convict stewards as typical practice. " You take an intelligent murderer who's going to be in at least five or ten years and a doctor can train him and be able to depend on him just as you would on an Army corpsman." Among the hundreds of prisoners with either a first or last name such as Milton or Melton or even Belton, one was probably the "Dr" noted in the song.

One day, one day,
I was walking along,
I heard the Midnight Special
Blowing a lonesome song.

"The Midnight Special" is but one of the songs which have flown from the rich springs of the Texas prison system. This ballad remembers the jail officials just as "Black Betty" remembers the whip and "Shorty George" recalls the Sunday visitors' train from Houston. "Ol' Riley Walked the Water" and "Here Rattler Here" and "Long John" tell the escape legends. "Go Down Ol' Hannah" pleads with hot, hanging sun. "Ain't No More Cane On The Brazos" and "Hammer Ring" and "Pick A Bale Of Cotton" and "Choppin In The New Ground" describe the relentless "rolling" of a man on these vast convict plantations.

On the most recent recordings made at the prison farms, these songs were again found in tradition. Houston Folklore Group members John Lomax and Chester Bower, and Pete Seeger who accompanied them, found a new verse (above) to add to the "The Midnight Special" as well as new songs such as the eloquent and mystic "Grizzly Bear". The original tapes from this trip are now in the Library of Congress archives and an interesting but poorly organized selection of these has been released on a Folkways LP. This, and Lomax's recordings from Mississippi's Parchman Farm released by Tradition Records, are the only albums of actual convict singing now available.

Looked at from afar, prison songs are easily misunderstood. The understatement, the wry, almost comic tone is misleading. In singing for themselves the men need only hint at their meanings. An article such as this adds only literal understanding of the references. The songs themselves tell their story best. Listening to the entire group of songs from the Texas prison farms, one glimpses the reality of life on these slavery-oriented institutions. Ultimately,

the glimpse is terrifying. The songs are often a prisoner's last hold on his sanity. The escape of Long John is a glorious, treasured event in history. The blam-ba-lams of "Black Betty" are the scars on a man's body. "You ought to been on the river nineteen and four, you could find a dead man on every turnrow..." means exactly that. These songs are a proud evidence of suffering and the prisoners' ability to rise above it. Only the convicts themselves can enjoy the cynicism of such jokes " Get up dead man, help me hoe my row ..."

From time to time a Houston newspaper will run an item indicating present conditions in the prison. Recently a one paragraph note stated that several dozen convicts had cut their heel tendons and used other forms of self-mutilation to escape work in the fields.

Working 12 or more hours a day in the naked, sun-scorched land of the river bottoms, the men are subject to torture at the slightest mistake or a guard's whim. Routinely, they are kicked by mud-crusted boots and held under the perpetual threat of death from a shotgun blast. One famed guard employed a moron's method of counting. Collecting his gang at the beginning of a work day, he'd pick up a stone for each prisoner. In the evening he'd discard one for each man returning to barracks. If, for any reason, the men and stones failed to even out, the guard's solution was to beat the men with a chain.

A former inmate of the Ramsey farm has described the night hours. "You are placed on a narrow bench with your feet straight out and your hands behind you. Handcuffs are then snapped on. Sometimes a convict's wrists swell so much they lose the use of their hands. You have to get up and get just the same - they have a graveyard there all their own. "

I'm going away to leave you,
An' my time ain't long,
The man is gonna call me,
An' I'm going home.

Then I'll be done all my grievin',
Whoopin, hollerin, an' a-cryin ;
Then I'll be done all my studyin,
'Bout my great long time.





John

John Greenway is one of those rare phenomena in the folk-song field, a singer-scholar. His academic credits are long indeed, (B.A., M.A., Ph.D. in English, U. of Pa., prospective Ph.D. in Anthropology, U. of Colo.,) but not half as long as the number of discs he has recorded for folk music record companies. And his friends say that this number is dwarfed by the number of hours John can sit and sing and even more so by the number of folksongs and hillbilly songs that John knows.

Greenway has always seemed to thrive on diversity. At Penn., for instance, he was not only a brilliant student (as one would expect), but he also was a prize-winning playwright, a chess champion, and a star on the track team.

One is surprised not to find the debating team on John's list of activities, for to other folklorists he is known as the argumentative "angry young man" of the field. His attitude toward folksong has consistently been one of attempting to break down arbitrary academic strictures and make them conform with what he sees as the truth. Just a peek into the first chapters of his published thesis, "American Folksongs of Protest", (U. of Pa. Press, 1953) shows his attitude, for there, Greenway attacks the supposition that the ancient ballads of England and Scotland are presumptive evidence that the "folk" are not transmitters of protest material.

Greenway's attitude seems to boil down to this :

1. Ballad and folksong scholarship has been mainly aesthetic in its consideration, although the true importance of this material has been the social and historical commentary carried within the words.

Greenway

By Roger D. Abrahams

2. Scholars have been dragging their feet too long. In the recent meeting of the American Folklore Society in New York, (see Feb. -March CARAVAN) Greenway made this feeling very explicit. He said :

"It is exactly a hundred years since Francis James Child published his "English and Scottish Ballads", sixty years since the publication of his complete canon. What have we done in this time? The Standard Dictionary of Folklore says that since Child's collection, no new ballads have been discovered. Those iconoclastic radicals, Mac - Edward Leach and Kenneth S. Goldstein, in their important but temerarious works on the ballad, add fourteen and ten new British ballads to the collection, respectively. Is this all we have to show for a half-century of collective effort ? . . . - Stith Thompson, conceded by most American folklorists to be the dean of our discipline, . . . does not believe that 'John Henry' is a folk-song; he calls the WPA (Federal Writers' Project), collections "worthless", doubtless because these collectors had not been indoctrinated with the proper prejudices. . . . The literary framework in which folksong seems to be securely bound today was erected by Child and his followers. . . . Child had no acquaintance with the folk; his standards were perforce not ethnological but literary (though Child No. 27, "The Whummil Bore", has as much literary elevation as scribbling on lavatory walls)."

Greenway's position then, is that we should view folklore, and especially folksong, as living literature. We should-

n't study it to see what relationship it has with other forms of literature, but rather to see how it comments upon the life of the people who perform it. His records reflect just such an interest: such titles as "The Great American Bum" and "American Songs Of Protest" show where his interests lie.

Greenway's singing style betrays an early interest in hillbilly singing, especially the singing of Woody Guthrie. He sings very simply, without a great twang, but his guitar style and singing delivery are tinged with influences from country music. They are important records in many respects. They bring to light many songs that deserve to be heard and sung by others. They broaden one's attitude as to what folk-song is and where it can be found. Most important, of course, Greenway is a good and sincere performer who shows in every band a thorough love and knowledge of the songs he is singing.

Greenway Discography

American Industrial Folksongs. Riverside RLP 12-607. 12" LP, guitar accompaniment.

"The Great American Bum" and other Hobo and Migratory Workers' Songs. Riverside RLP 12-619. 12" LP, guitar accompaniment.

"The Cat Came Back" and "Tying a Knot in the Devil's Tail". Wattle Recordings (Australia) A 16. Guitar accompaniment, 78 rpm.

"Workin' on a Buildin." Wattle Recordings (Australia). Cl. 10" LP, with guitar and banjo accompaniment.

American Songs of Protest. Wattle Recordings (Australia) C2. 10" LP, with guitar accompaniment.

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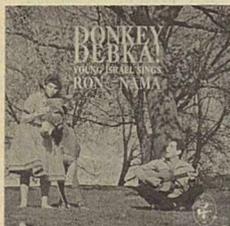
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Folk Music of France



by Sonia Malkine

Now that I have lived a few years in the United States where folk-music is increasingly popular, it seems strange to me that there is not a single, well known professional folk-singer in France. Many popular singers such as Edith Piaf¹ and Yves Montand² have included folk songs in their repertoire, but only intermittently and with moderate success; Suzy Solidor, a Breton from Saint-Malo, sang of the sea with love and sea-shanties as well. The fantaisist Henri Salvador once in a while will stop clowning to sing very lovely songs from his native Guadeloupe. (One of them, "Maladie d'Amour" became a hit record here, a few months ago, under the title "Melodie d'Amour", and was hardly recognizable!). Surprisingly enough, it was an art-singer, Madeleine Grey, who made the folk songs of Auvergne popular in this country. At the turn of the century and for many years, the famous Yvette Guilbert, star of French vaudeville, sang folk songs with a real feeling and deep understanding.

1 - "Le Roi Renaut" - "Dans les Prisons de Nantes", etc....

2 - "Chansons Populaires de France" Odeon OSX110

At this time, the only group who has made a specialty of folk-music is "Les Quatre Barbus" (The Four Beards) and a very lively quartet they are. They record folk and children's songs with French gaiety and students' and drinking songs with a very Parisian sense of humor.³ But they are an exception, and a phenomenon such as a Pete Seeger or a Jean Ritchie is completely nonexistent in France. The reason for it is very simple: Why would a musician try to make a career at singing songs that everybody knows? So far I don't know of anybody who has tried and succeeded. Folk-music seems to be a completely integrated part of French culture. It is learned at home, in school, and in Youth organizations such as the "Youth Hostels" for instance.

I belonged to the "Auberges de la Jeunesse" or A.J., as the Youth Hostels are called in France, for many years before coming to the United States. I have travelled all over my country, hitch-hiking with a friend or on bicycle-camping trips, for pleasure during vacations or working for the Underground during the war. Stopping in one A.J. or another along my route, by a fire-place in Brittany or around a camp-fire in Provence, always there would be folk-songs. Good tunes travel fast and far too. Some of them are so widely known that in many instances, we forget where they originated. "Se Canto", from the Pyrenees, is just as well known in the plains of Berry as in its own mountains, and "En passant par la Lorraine" is sung from Roussillon to Picardie. I learned a couple of sea-shanties climbing in the Alps and a shepherd's song from Auvergne in my own Parisian backyard. The best known version of "A la Claire Fontaine" in France, is the Canadian one, though I know of six or seven other different versions. The song that you will find printed on the next page is one of them, from Normandy. Though the title is different and there are some variations here and there in the lyrics, it is the same song. I learned it from my grandfather who was from Cherbourg.

But it does not really matter where our folk-songs are heard or who sings them, as long as they are sung and kept alive.

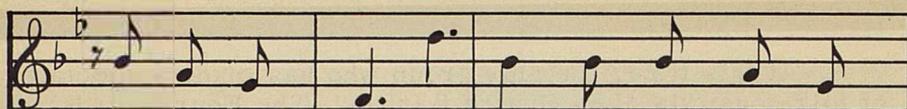
Continued on page 28

3 - "Songs in French for Children" Columbia CL 675

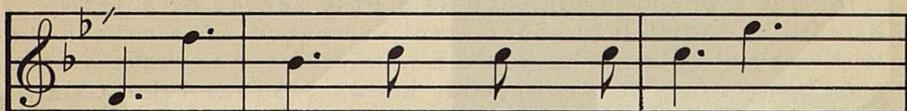
"Chansons a Boire" Microsillon B 76.073

"Chansons Paillardes" B 76.034

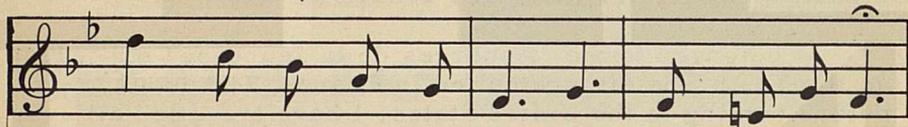
EN REVENANT DES NOCES
(Normandie)



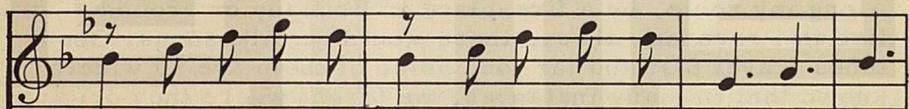
En re - ve - nant des no - ces, J'é - tais bien
Coming back from a wedding I got very



fa - ti - guée, Au bord d'u - ne fon -
weary, By the side of a fountain



tai - ne Je - me suis re - po - sée, La la la !
I rested a while



Tra la la dé - ri tra la la dé - ri tra la la !

- | | |
|---|--|
| 2-- Et l'eau était si claire
Que je m'y suis baignée,
A la feuille d'un chêne
Je me suis essuyée... | The water was so pure
That I jumped in,
With the leaf of an oak
I dried myself. |
| 3-- Cache dans le feuillage
Un rossignol chantait
"Chante, rossignol chante,
Toi qui as le coeur gai"... | Hidden in the branches
A nightingale was singing
"Sing, nightingale, sing,
Your heart is so gay"... |
| 4-- Je ne suis pas de même,
Je suis bien affligée;
Pour un bouton de rose
Que trop tot j'ai donné... | I am not like you,
I am very sad,
For a rosebud
That too soon I gave away.. |
| 5-- Je voudrais que la rose
Fût encore au rosier
Et que mon ami Pierre
Fût encore à m'aimer... | I wish that the rose
Was still on the bush
And that my lover Pierre
Was still loving me... |

THE COUNTRY BLUES

EDITED BY SAMUEL B. CHARTERS



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 JIM WINGFIELD & LAW TOWN BUCKWHEAT BLUES (1911-12)
 WASHBOARD SAM, WASHBOARD BLUES (1911-12)



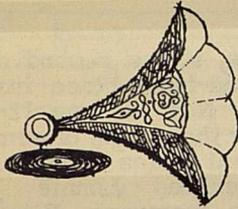
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RECORDS

ROGER D. ABRAHAMS
REVIEW EDITOR

As the saying goes, it's a long time between drinks, and the time has indeed been so long that the task of giving views on all of the records which have come in since the last issue is just too great to be essayed at all. Consequently, I will mention only those records which I feel to be the more outstanding ones which have been issued in the months since the summer, and will list later some of the others which may also interest some of the readers.

Because it would look somewhat foolish we will not have a record of the month this time, or even of the bi-month. Yet, if I were asked to pick the one outstanding record issued since the last column I would not hesitate to pick **THE MANY SIDES OF SANDY PATON** (Elektra 148). Sandy is one of the finest all-around folksingers, and his versatility, clean sound, good showmanship, command of many dialects, and lovely voice, is well exemplified in this record. Fred Hellerman's additional accompaniments are always in tune with the nature of the song, and in many cases, exceptionally good. For those who want a good, quick taste of Paton's work, go to your record shop and put on "Wild Mountain Thyme" or "Lang A-Growin'," both are representatively beautiful.

Another welcome addition, and probably no news to any of her fans, is Odetta's latest album, **MY EYES HAVE SEEN** (Vanguard 9059). Miss Felious is, as usual, in good form, and the songs she sings should please everyone, especially those who have seen her in concert in the last year and wanted a record of the songs they heard. As usual, she gives outstanding renditions of chain-gang songs, ("Jumping Judy"). She also has picked up another Uncle Dave Macon standard, "Saro Jane", and does that in her most spirited fashion. Due to the echo-chamber effects and the chorus in back of some of her songs, this record cannot be considered her best, but to this reviewer, Odetta would be great singing from 10 fathoms down, or from the top of Mt. Rushmore (off of Washington's nose, and I'm sure you could even hear her from there).

A record which you should all run and hear if you have not done so already, is Pete Seeger's NONESUCH AND OTHER FOLKTUNES (Folkways 2439). Pete made this one with Frank Hamilton, and the combination can, at their best moments, really generate a lot of excitement. Both Pete and Frank have a wide background in the folk music of the world, and they have attempted here to fuse various tunes with various styles. The effect is always unusual, often beautiful, and occasionally just plain unmusical. But the total effect of the record is what they seem to have intended, a whole lot of fun being had by two talented folk-musicians, and I, for one, am happy that they decided to share this with us. Frank is an exceptional musician, and too little heard on record.

Perhaps the most exciting package Folkways has come up with since they issued Leadbelly's Last Sessions, or the Anthology, is THE COWBOY, HIS SONGS, BALLADS AND BRAG TALK, (FH 5723.) This two-record set is of one cowboy, or used-to-be-cowboy, Harry Jackson. Mr. Jackson is now a world-renowned painter but back in his salad days he was a cowpuncher for a number of years and fortunately for us, he learned many songs, brags, calls, etc., from this fading but far from dead tradition. Not only does Jackson have amazingly good texts of his songs, all of them, but he also has a wonderful style of singing, one that holds up with any cowboy singer this reviewer has ever encountered, and that includes Gene Autry, Cliff Carlisle or any of them.

Of interest to fans of blue-grass, there are two new records of bands playing songs, that, for the most part, came from the folk. These are FOLK SONGS FROM THE BLUE GRASS (United Artists 3049) and MOUNTAIN MUSIC, BLUE-GRASS STYLE (Folkways, FA 2318). Both of these records feature Earl Taylor and his Stony Mountain Boys, the former being solely this group and the latter being equally divided between this group and a number of others (Smiley Hobbs, Tex Logan, Don Stover, B. Lilly, Chubby Anthony, Jerry Stuart, Pete Roberts, and Yellin, Seeger, and Weissberg, (whoever they may be.) The Stony Mt. Boys are an extremely fast moving bunch with a strong sense of beat (something Don Reno doesn't always have.) They sing in the typical blue-grass style, and are quite good at it. As anyone who reads Esquire Magazine knows, Alan Lomax feels that blue-grass is the most exciting form of new folk music to be heard today. He feels that the Stony Mountain Boys are the best at it, and he may be right. Their instrumental virtuosity is beyond question, as is their honesty and their zeal (i.e. in relation to their music). Yet to me the cliches of blue-grass wear very unevenly,

and thus a little of this music goes a long way. If blue-grass is your cup of cocoa, then you should look into these records.

Devotees of the New Lost City Ramblers will be happy on two scores. First they have issued a new record, OLD TIMEY SONGS FOR CHILDREN, (Folkways 7064,) and secondly because their record is not really just for children. They have, it is true, picked many songs that either have appealed to children in the past ("Over the Water to Charlie " "The Bell-Cow," etc.), but the level of the performance is up to their other record and is in no way geared down to children's level. This group continues to have the same sort of fun with old-timey (early recorded) mountain music. And this real enjoyment is completely conveyed on this record. I have played this record to a number of people and they all agree; a pure delight.

Some other records which we received were :

1. SONGS OF THE MARITIMES, (Folkways, FW 8744) Alan Mills gives us some more of his native Canadian songs in his usual lusty style.

2. MISSOURI FOLKSONGS, (Folkways, FH 5324.) Loman Cansler, a native Missourian, caught somewhere between the mountains and the plains, (i.e. the high-lonesome and the cowboy sounds) doing some old, some fairly new and many very sentimental songs.

3. VIVIEN RICHMON SINGS, (Folkways FG 3568.) - Miss Folkmusic of Pittsburgh doing folk-songs of Western Pennsylvania in an appealing manner; the songs are historically interesting, but for the most part, of no further interest.

4. CRICKET ON THE HEARTH, (Twentieth Century #2) George Britton, utilizing a sonorous voice and a trained touch on the guitar, delivering many old standards.

5. AMERICAN PLAYPARTIES, (Folkways FC 7604) - Pete Seeger, daughter Mika, and Rev. Larry Eisenberg doing playparties, obviously intended more to teach these wonderful games than to entertain aurally. Folkniks with teachable children should look this one up.

6. WILD BLUE YONDER, (Electra 168). Oscar Brand, in his usual delightful way sings folksongs parodies of the Air Force. As usual, there are many bawdy songs, and also some pleasantly gory ones (pleasant only in that we are not at war now and thus can laugh). He says in the jacket notes that the songs are unbowlerized but they obviously are (just slightly).

Roger Abrahams

SON OF DALLIANCE : sung by Ed McCurdy, accompanied by Erik Darling and Billy Faier. (Elektra 12", EKL 170.)

The spirit of Elizabethan sexual humor is again adequately captured by Ed McCurdy in this album, the fourth in the series. The songs which are by far the most humorous, (humor, of course, is the point of the collection) are those which employ sustained metaphor to carry their themes. They might be characterized as 16th century equivalents of modern Calypso songs in the same vein. The one exception to this is the Presbyterian Wedding, the humor of which is derived from the whimsical picture it presents and the hymn-like accompaniment by Billy Faier.

The accompaniments of Erik Darling and Billy Faier are at least as amusing and imaginative as the lyrics of many of the selections, and in some cases more so. Ed McCurdy treats his material quite well, but he is most fortunate to have such talented accompanists.

The album suffers only occasionally from songs which are either musically monotonous or textually trite. Fortunately, those few do not spoil the total effect. The level of sexual humor which is evident in these songs is an encouraging contrast to most modern obscenity.

ON THE ROAD : Sonny Terry, Sticks McGhee, and J.C. Burris. Folkways 12", FA 2369.

Sonny Terry - well known to most folk music enthusiasts - and his virtuosity on the harmonica is as usual evident on this disc. He adapts his techniques well to the songs on this recording, the majority of which are either fast blues or rock 'n' roll. Sticks McGhee (who is Brownie's brother) has always played a sort of jazzy variety of guitar, so that the idiom is familiar to him and he works well with Mr. Terry. Evidently, Sonny has been tutoring J.C. Burris because the latter's harmonica technique shows the influence of Mr. Terry who may live to be outdone by his talented nephew.

In general, the songs they do in this album are good, but a few of the vocals on Side I are off key. The second side is more harmonious and Mr. McGhee does a rousing rendition of a song he's been singing for some years, Wine Blues. It has my vote as the best band on the recording.

The members of this trio may work together even better with time. I, for one, would like to see them do more recording together, which is a concession, considering that their brand of music is far from being a favorite of mine.

BROWNIE MCGHEE SINGS THE BLUES - Folkways 12", FG 3557.)

In 1952, we used to go to a bar in New York called Felton's Lounge in which Brownie McGhee was playing at the time. He was backed by a pounding pianist and they produced a variety of rock'n' roll which was evidently what their audiences wanted to hear. When we asked Mr. McGhee to sing some of the folk blues with which we had become familiar via his records, he was quite willing to do so and seemed glad to see that a few people were interested in his non-commercial music.

The disc now in question seems to indicate that Brownie McGhee has succumbed almost completely to the demands of a public which is very unsympathetic to his folk blues. On most of the bands, his voice is either pseudo-sweet or forcedly loud, and his guitar harsh and wild. This is not the McGhee I used to know, whose voice had a fine spontaneous quality and whose guitar technique displayed, as it were, an ingenious simplicity. Some of the things he does on this recording are essentially good songs, but his rendition of them is without the qualities just mentioned.

One notable exception to this is the last band on the second side, on which Mr. McGhee sings an obviously heartfelt tribute to the late Big Bill Broonzy, called Gone but Not Forgotten. It reminds me of the McGhee of old, and points up the real problem which a professional singer like Brownie McGhee must face. He is, in my opinion, a fine blues singer and guitarist, when he remains within what I believe to be his true element - folk blues. Unfortunately, it is difficult to make a living in that field, but the musical area into which he is attempting to move just doesn't suit him. He does not sing or play well in the rock'n' roll idiom.

What is Brownie McGhee to do? Being broke and hungry is no way to live, as many of us know. I would lay the blame on an unsympathetic and tasteless public. If this sounds bitter, it is because I hate to see one of my old folk-heroes going down that long old commercial road - and doing it with so little grace. Continued on page 46

Children's Folk Poetry

These two fragments were learned in about the age of six in Palo Alto, California.* The first needs no comment :

Liar, liar,
Pants are on fire !
Go hang 'em up
On a telephone wire !

The second has a much longer history, closely tied to the history of racial tension in California :

Ching Chong Chinaman
Sitting on a rail;
Along came a cho-choo train
And chopped off his tail.

At the time I learned it, the overtones of hatred and fear seemed to have disappeared. It was just a jingle. In its original form, however, the third line was "along came a white man," an unmistakable reference to the cutting off of a Chinese's queue, an ultimate affront to a religious Chinese before 1911 and an unfailing source of merriment to the bully-boys of San Francisco. (There are still family friends who can remember when the deliberate shooting of a Chinese child with no motivation whatever, by a white teen-ager was completely ignored by the community and the law.)

The original version by the way, served as the basis of one of the most moving episodes in John Steinbeck's Cannery Row.

From Dave Beadle

* (learned in first grade, Peninsula School, Palo Alto, Calif., in 1937-38)

Another fragment -

" I stand before you to speak behind you, and to tell you a story I know nothing about. One bright day....."

(and it continues as in Caravan #18.)

From ,

Pvt. Steve Werdenschlag

A Discography of Columbia Rural Drama Records

By John Edwards

On Archie Green's suggestion (CARAVAN April-May), I have compiled a complete listing of the "Columbia Rural Drama Records" by the bunch of oldtime hillbilly artists he mentioned. Matrix-numbers are shown in parentheses; recording dates are approximate. It is likely that most of these sides were recorded in Atlanta, Georgia.

Gid Tanner - "that high-steppin' fiddlin' fun-maker from Dracula, Georgia" - wrote me last year that these "dialogue types" were worked out by the whole gang, which included the various personnel of the Skillet Lickers and other offshoot groups led by himself, Clayton McMichen and the late Riley Puckett. Most of the bunch were from Georgia and were pioneer hillbilly recording artists on Columbia and Okeh labels.

Although the discs in themselves were, as Archie puts it, a rich combination of singin', fiddlin', and humorous dialogue, they also served to introduce many of the songs and tunes which were recorded at full-length by the group on other Columbia records and doubtless were a good advertising medium.

Of course, this style of record was neither exclusive to these artists or the Columbia label. Okeh ran a contemporary series entitled "The Okeh Medicine Show" (running to 6 parts) which introduced their own roster of hillbilly artists; similar isolated items appeared on Victor by the Stoneman Family, (Possum Trot School Exhibition; Goin' Up the Mountain After Licker), and others; Brunswick included Buell Kazee's "Mountain Boy Makes His First Record", and so on. Even Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family had a couple of get-togethers on Victor in 1931. Very few items of this type, however, appeared after about 1934.

#

E.N. - Artists mentioned under their following corresponding numbers. -

- | | | |
|------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| (1) Bill Brown | (5) Uncle Fuzz | (9) Clayton McMichen |
| (2) Hugh Cross | (6) Dan Hornsby | (10) Bob Nichols |
| (3) Tom Dorsey | (7) Bert Layne | (11) Fate Norris |
| (4) Oscar Ford | (8) K.D. Malone | (12) Riley Puckett |
| (13) Lowe Stokes | | (14) Gid Tanner |

What is a "Good" Folksong?

By Kenneth S. Goldstein

In the following article, Kenneth S. Goldstein presents something completely new - an attempt to establish the criteria of "good" and "bad" songs of authentic folk singers. His article is adapted from the notes to "Harry Jackson, the Cowboy", a forthcoming Folkways record.

Reading folk songs out of collections, has, in recent years, become a favorite pastime of literary scholars. Many folklorists, themselves trained in the discipline of English or comparative literature, approach the subject matter as literary critics and dissect the poetry of these songs with knives sharpened on the honing stone of "art" literature. It is not surprising, therefore, that we come across such remarks about these songs as: "Artistically, they have relatively little to recommend them..." But by what standards has this evaluation been made? Shall we compare these rough-hewn boulders to the smooth gleaming nuggets of fine poets? By such standards, most folk poetry and song are, indeed, dross. Their rhythms, rhymes and meters, the essence of poetic form, are poor, second-rate and uninspired for the most part.

"Artistically, they have relatively little to recommend them..." But artistry is not the cold, calculating mass of matter which the objective, removed, impersonal critic evaluates in terms of culturally inappropriate aesthetic criteria. It must be viewed on an entirely different plane, if we are to explain its very existence, and to understand its meaning and function in the lives of those who place such a high value on it.

An old traditional singer in Western North Carolina once sang more than 50 ballads and songs to me in a joyous afternoon of recording some years ago. When asked for an explanation of his amazing memory powers, he answered: "It don't require no memory; these old songs just sing themselves." When asked to explain his cryptic (to me) remark, he said: "These songs are so full of the way we live and the way we think and speak, that it don't take no fancy mind work

to make it come out right. Give me a pretty air and a subject and all the remembering I have to do is back to some little happening when I was a boy or a growned man. These old songs got something to do with our living, and, after the first word comes out, those memories of living sing the rest of the words to us." Maybe the words of this gnarled sexagenarian can give us a clue to a set of criteria that should be used in evaluating traditional native American folk compositions.

A good song to this old man was one which expressed living, and which was, to him, itself the essence of life. The fabric of life was the material of his songs. A good song, then, must tell of life, in a manner consistent with the structure and realities of the lives of the people who sing it. It must also be consistent with the way they think and speak. The values expressed in it must be their values, and the language of its lines must contain their own idioms, phrases and folk speech.

Thus far we are talking only about the contents of a "good" song. But a song contains more than just poetry which is consistent with the way people live, think and speak. This poetic matter is wedded to a tune, and only in the marriage state is the song a whole thing. An old New England woman who had just buried her third husband and was about to embark on a new marriage, once told me: "If you're going to live life as God meant it to be, it doesn't much matter who you're married to, as long as you're married." The same can certainly be said for the text and tune of a folksong. Another of the North Carolina singers from whom I had collected songs frequently over a period of five years, on different occasions sang approximately the same set of words to three different tunes. When asked to explain this seeming inconsistency, he answered: "Hell, a man don't always ride the same horse. It's the same with a song. All a man asks for is a good tune, 'cause a good tune, like a good horse, will get you where you're going. And the Lord knows there are at least as many good tunes as there are good horses." The important thing, obviously, is that the text be wedded to a "good" tune, otherwise the song may not be a good one when applying the standards of the folk themselves.

There is still another matter to be considered when arriving at a set of culturally appropriate criteria for the criticism of folksong. Such songs are 'sung' and not merely

spoken or read. In their reading they may indeed be 'bad' poetry, when utilizing the standards of fine poetry. But rhyme, meter and phrase take on a new light when sung well to an appropriate tune. But how does one determine when a song is 'sung well' ? Again let us turn to the folk themselves for a definition of a good singer. Anyone who has collected in field will, in the course of his collecting, often hear some remark akin to : "He ain't got much of a voice, but he sure can sing!" (as one Adirondack singer commented to me some years ago.) When asked to explain what he meant by this remark, the 74-year-old man replied : "Well, he don't make pretty sounds like those record and radio men do, but you know just what he's singing about. The whole story's as plain as the nose on your face. If it's a story song (a ballad), he tells you all the details and you can read the rest between the lines. If it's a ditty (any non-ballad) you know when he's laughing and when he's crying, and you laugh and cry with him." Two things are implied in this quotation. The ballad singer gives you all the pertinent details. He may leave out an occasional detail, but these are only of secondary importance to the song.

A good singer knows the outline of his song thoroughly, so, despite the fact that he never sings the song exactly the same way in various performances, he always gives you the 'whole' song. Of equal importance to this problem of 'good' singing, is that the singer be emotionally expressive of the material which he is performing. This is especially important in non-narrative song, for the quality of such songs are based on the subjective interpretation of the singer. The laughter or melancholy of a voice raises the frequently non-descript text to a level of meaning not existent in the words alone. And, in the experience of this collector, ballad singers utilize this same emotionality, though to a lesser degree than is found in the performance of non-narrative materials. Nineteenth century collectors, generally, and some modern day collectors have stressed the seeming detachment and impersonality of the singing performance of a ballad singer. Such reporting may be the result of romanticizing the situation, poor perception, or, possibly, a factor which indeed exists in terms of cultural habit, variation from people to people. In my own experience in collecting in New England and the Southern mountain region, I have never found such a performance style. That the ballad singer uses less emotionality, letting the narrative line and poetic form supply some of the emotional expression, is indeed true, but no singer from

whom I have collected ballads could be called a detached or impersonal performer.

The above then, are the major criteria which the folk themselves utilize in talking about "good" songs and "good" singers. The modern urban folk enthusiast, 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. They may, at the same time, apply any other standards consistent with their own mode of living or expression, but the full appreciation of folksong and folk singing is directly dependent upon the reader or listener's understanding of how the folk themselves view and evaluate these things. ◆◆

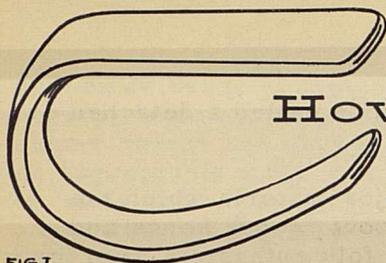
COLUMBIA "RURAL DRAMA" DATA Continued from page 37

All the selections were recorded in Atlanta, Ga.

Columb. 15 140-D	Apr. 1 / 1927	Columb. 15432-D	Apr. 12 / 1928
15201-D	Nov. 1 / 1927	15531-D	Nov. 1 / 1929
15258-D	Apr. 12 / 1928	15482-D	Nov. 2 / 1929
* 15253-D	Apr. 12 / 1928	15503-D	Nov. 2 / 1929
15298-D	Apr. 13 / 1928	15700-D	Nov. 4 / 1929
15468-D	Apr. 13 / 1928	15598-D	Apr. 19 / 1930
15366-D	Oct. 24 / 1928	15618-D	Apr. 21 / 1930
15332-D	Oct. 24 / 1928	15549-D	May. 2 / 1930
		15632-D	Dec. 8 / 1930
* (I may have omitted this item, - I forget; it is not actually 100% relevant.)		15667-D	Dec. 8 / 1930
		15703-D	Dec. 8 / 1930

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How To Make A Ryan Capo

By Joseph Z. Ryan

FIG 1

The capo in its finished form appears as in Figure 1. It consists of a piece of spring steel bent to a shape that will exert pressure sufficient to hold down the first four strings anywhere on the neck without interfering with the fifth string.

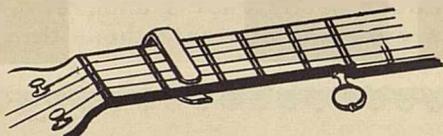
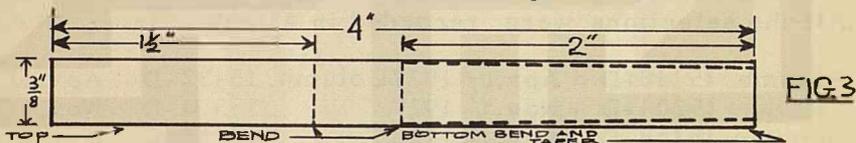


FIG. 2

Figure 2 shows the capo placed on the banjo, open end up, so that the fifth peg will pass through it.



Some general dimensions are given in Figure 3. Since banjo necks vary considerably in width and thickness, exact dimensions cannot be given for all instruments. Adjustments must be made for each banjo. Also, the dimensions of $3/8$ " width and 0.058 thickness are not critical. This was the size of the stock which was available at the time the model pictured was made. The important thing is that the top flat section be stiff enough not to bend under use.

Several other important factors affecting the performance of the capo are :

1. The taper of the lower leg : This must be filed or ground so that it will bend uniformly over its entire length when expanded. Considerable experimentation may be required before just the right amount of tension is obtained.

Some of the taper may be filed before the steel is bent, but the final adjustments should be made after the steel is bent to the correct shape. This correct shape is determined by slipping on the protective sleeving and actually trying the capo on the banjo. It should grip sufficiently tightly to hold down the strings at the first fret, and still be flexible enough

to slide up beyond the twelfth fret without breaking or bending permanently. Notice in Figure 3 that some taper is filed on the edges, as well as on the flat section shown in Figure 4.



2. The length of the top section : This should overlap the fourth string by about half the distance between the fourth and fifth strings, being sure that it will clear the fifth string nut when shifting positions.

3. The upper band : The steel must not be bent too sharply or it will break; about a 1/2" radius is recommended, as in Figure 5. This can be made by rounding one edge of a hardwood block, clamping the steel to it, and bending it by pounding with a wooden mallet.

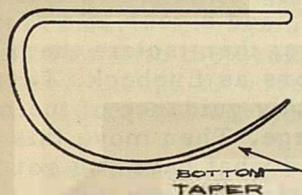
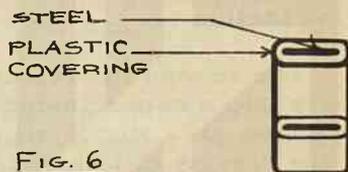


FIG. 5

Spring steel of these dimensions is quite stiff and considerable effort may be required to bend it. By shifting the wood, the rest of the lower leg can be bent. This can be done more easily by filing in some of the taper.

It is recommended that a piece of stock somewhat longer than four inches be used when starting, to allow something to hold onto. After the shape is roughed out, the excess can be cut off. The corners should be rounded and rough edges smoothed with emery cloth.

For the covering, 1/4" I.D. polyethylene tubing or a similar size of electrical sleeving or "spaghetti" can be used. Figure 6 is an end view of the capo with sleeving applied. The sleeving can be slipped over the steel, by warming it a little, and lubricating the inside of it. It may be necessary to do this several times before the correct spring tension is achieved.



Again, it should be emphasized that the success of this capo is mostly dependent upon craftsmanship and care in making it. ♦♦

From Square To Square

Some Observations On New York Folkery By An Immigrant
From Practically Nowhere.

By Dave Beadle

Take a cheap guitar, a copy of the Sandbag, and a small collection of Disc, Asch, Stinson and Keynote 78's; put them in the hands of a youngster in the "Glory Days" of 1948; send the whole collection through union-hall hoots, the "big letdown" of after-the-crusade, and a year at a small and progressive liberal arts college; then isolate them for nine years in such sundry backwaters as Lubbock, Texas and Tempe, Arizona, under the kindly guidance of the military and a cow-town teacher's college. Then move this assembly to New York all of a sudden, and what have you got? You got an overwhelmed folksinger, that's what you got.

And perhaps you have a somewhat different perspective on the situation, too.

The first, staggering impression is one of incredible abundance; folksingers everywhere, filling very little folding-chair auditorium in town, inundating a half-dozen record companies in a sea of tape, supporting the output of a couple of offset printers and Lord knows how many mimeographs; even, heaven help us, turning up on television (sustaining, to be sure, and infrequent, but still there.) And every single one of them playing a five-string banjo, twelve-string guitar and three-string dulcimer simultaneously (and a washtub with the feet).

The second impression is that one has wandered unwittingly into a concrete-mountain Asheville; and the bluegrass grows all around, all around. Good? Yes, within limits; the kinship of folk and "hillbilly" music has been recognized, instrumental technique is flowering, and there are more better banjo players in New York than there were in the whole country before. But one looks in vain for the lyric folksinger among the newer group.

Along with the rise in bluegrass - though probably

not particularly connected with it - there is the almost total absence of overselfconscious "protest" and "militant" fervor of the old days. A few eagerly rebellious class-consciousniks around the fountain, Guy Carawan's rather embarrassed and embarrassing apology for having chewed gum in high school (notes for first Folkways album) - but by and large Gideon's Army is reduced to a straggling Invalid Corps furtively scrawling "Earl Robinson never died" on back-alley walls.

And - who would ever have dreamed it ? - a sense of humor! Folk-singing has become fun again - not a dead-earnest back-to-the-soil three -cheers-for-the-worker-poet sort of thing in which "Quinte Brigada" elicited hushed reverence every time it was sung (usually five times in any given evening). Ellington and Van Ronk gleefully laying old cliches low with the broadsword of satire ? Once it would have been enough to warrant the culprits being stood in the hollow square and ceremoniously stripped of their fingerpicks.

And scholarship : a few diehards to the contrary notwithstanding, there seems to be more interaction between the folksinger and folklorist than ever before, with the happy result that the average folk musician (urban or suburban variety) has a much broader repertoire than he used to. There is an encouraging tendency for folklore scholars to think in terms of actual performance of material, either themselves or in conjunction with folksingers; there is a complementary tendency for folksingers to do more research and study.

The scholarly upsurge has had its problems, too; a tendency for some to put a bogus scholarly tone into their writing and performance, and some examples of pure flatulence in making simple ideas sound like pronouncements from Olympus (not all of CARAVAN's contributors are entirely innocent on this score).

That folk music has its share of immaturity, intellectual fraud and "my-family-doesn't-understand-the-need-for-me-to-be-really-free" adherents cannot be denied; it doesn't do us any good from the public relations standpoint probably, and doubtless contributes to a degree of "beat" identification, but what the devil ! It's harmless, and most of the "now-I'm-being-really-different" conformists will grow out of it or drift on to something else. In short, it's great to be back among the living.

RECORDS

Continued from page 34

Four recent Elektra releases exemplify the growing commercialism of recorded Jewish and Israeli music. Theodore Bikel Sings Jewish Folk Songs Vol. II is more "Theodore Bikel Sings" than Jewish folk songs. Bikel depends heavily upon complex orchestral arrangements and his acting talents to present the material. These songs would produce a much more honest emotional reaction if sung with fewer ornaments. There is no background information about the songs and no credit is given for three songs which are known to have been written. This record is for Bikel fans only.

Ron and Nama - Donkey Debka presents Ron and Nama, young Israeli with pleasant voices, who sing young Israeli songs. Their contrived harmony and instrumentation is not helped by the recording sound which is not up to Elektra's high standard. The entire disc is rather superficial and monotonous, but it somehow leaves one with the impression that they could eventually do better.

A Concert with Hillel and Aviva was recorded at Carnegie Hall and suffers from this concert presentation - applause - laughing - corn, etc., Their performance is a hodgepodge of Russian songs (previously recorded by Hillel EKL-20), embarrassingly incongruous American and Italian folk songs, and excellent Israeli material. They have made better recordings.

Around the Campfire is the third record of the lively sophisticated Oranim Zabar troupe. This disc is very similar to their other efforts for Elektra. Miss Gill's fine voice is ably supported by original instrumental arrangements and spirited singing from the rest of the troupe. This record is just one more example of their exciting and enjoyable style.

All these albums contain words of the songs in Yiddish or Hebrew, English, and transliteration.

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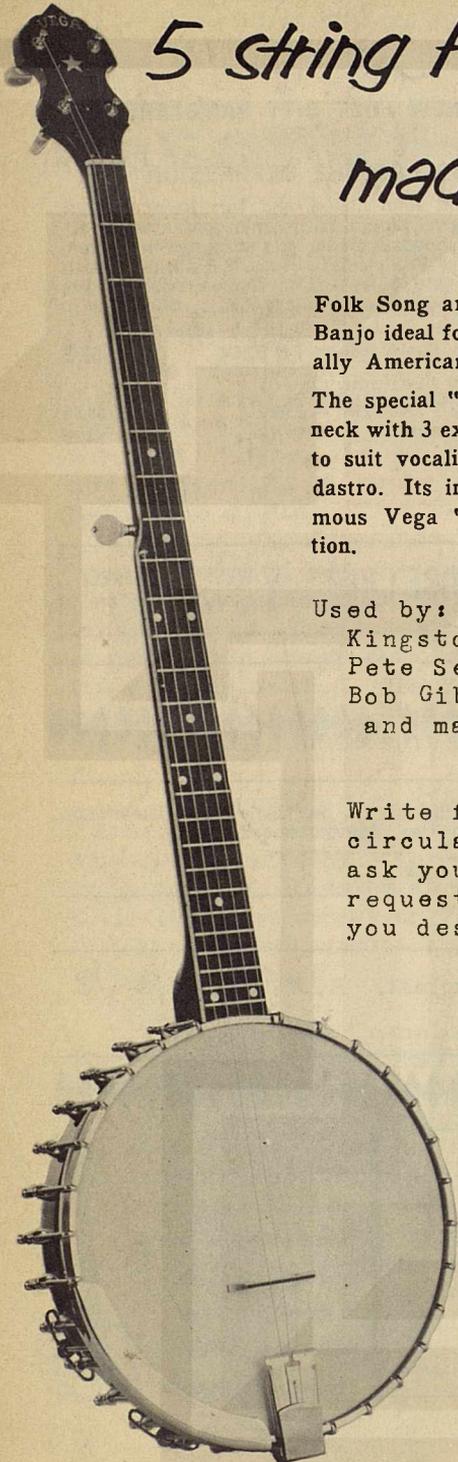
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