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AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC

FINAL EXAM

Submitted to

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American folk music has traditionally been a community-based phenomenon, drawing its strength equally from the forces of imitation, interpretation and variation. It displays characteristics of being a mercurial phenomenon, changing and adapting to fit the rules, conventions and expectations of the performer and his audience. American folk music, like all folk musics, cannot be understood outside of its cultural context; to remove the music from its context is to change its form and function. Yet, to a large degree, the early commercialization of American folk music did just that - it removed the music from its true context, packaged and promoted it, often disguised it as something it was not, and, whether consciously or unconsciously, altered its meaning and purpose.

The history of the commercialization of American folk music begins in the 1920s and ranges from recordings made in the back rooms of Southern grocery stores and gas stations to symphonic arrangements recorded in urban studios. This history is populated by the people who played the music and those who imitated it, by those who sought it out and first recorded it, and by those who promoted and sold it for reasons seemingly as varied as the music itself.

Amiri Baraka, in "Black Music: Its Roots, Its Popularity, Its Commercial Prostitution," described black music as "the music of another nation, one that exists inside of the American nation-state." This definition can easily be applied to all forms of American folk music. Though it may be argued that the commercialization of folk music has a "melting pot" effect whose end result will be one homogeneous form of music, it is evident that the music has historically fit better into the context of a "salad bowl" - crammed full of distinctly different elements, tossed vigorously and served to the American public. Though the ingredients may tend to overlap one another, they inevitably

retain their own distinct flavors.

In the 1920s, ethnic music - here the term "ethnic" is used to describe cultures set apart from the dominant culture of the United States - was performed as a sort of cultural badge. It was a means of binding together groups who had immigrated to the United States or migrated from regions within the United States. Its function was to maintain the cultural heritage of ethnic groups as they fought total assimilation into the American mainstream, to entertain, and to teach traditional values. As record companies began to "discover" ethnic music, it was being performed at social gatherings, in living rooms and parlors, at picnics and dances, at parties and on street corners.

The record companies first sought out this music at its source, often setting up temporary recording facilities in small towns and rural areas. Their methods of locating musicians ranged from advertising in local newspapers to tracking them down on leads supplied by other musicians and local record retailers. In many cases, recording companies relied on foreign affiliates to supply them with material for release in the United States. Though some companies thought true ethnic recordings were less salable than professional imitations of ethnic music, they soon discovered, as Charles Wolfe has reported, that "customers wanted the real thing." Wolfe, in "Tracking the Lost String Bands," wrote that many companies also tried bringing performers to existing urban studios. This failed frequently because the repertoire of some of the best singers and musicians was severely limited in the companies' opinions, but more often the companies opted for field recordings because they were less "cumbersome and expensive."

Though it may seem unlikely, the recording companies pursued ethnic performers of all kinds - Gaelic, Yugoslavian, Italian, Greek, Armenian, Serbian, Finnish, Arabic, French-Canadian, Swedish, the list goes on and on. As Pekka Gronow has stated in "Ethnic Recordings: An Introduction," these

recordings "did not have to sell by the thousands to satisfy the companies."

The reasons for this attitude seem to be underlined by two facts: First, many of the larger companies made less off the sale of records than they did from the sale of record-playing machines. By catering to the narrow markets for ethnic music, they simultaneously created a broader market for the machines, often recovering more money from the sale of a single machine than from the sale of a few hundred recordings. Second, many pressings were made in relatively small quantities. Fewer pressings meant fewer sales had to be made to recoup the company's investment. By carefully promoting the records in the areas where the ethnic groups were concentrated, and by advertising them in ethnic publications, the companies were able to achieve sufficient sales to justify their investment.

Because of the success of ethnic recordings, many record companies began to change the way they recorded the music. The permanent studio began to replace the traveling field recorders. With this change, companies often tried to introduce "music business" elements into recordings. For instance, music that had traditionally been performed by a single musician was recorded with back-up musicians, and arrangements were put together for ethnic tunes to broaden their appeal to the mass audience. Traditional music, as has been noted, was performed by non-ethnic professional musicians, and many companies eager to cash in on the growing market for the music began listing certain pieces of "imported" music under several categories of ethnic origin.

These ethnic recordings also spawned imitators, perhaps most notably, in the case of Irish music. Irish ethnic recordings became so popular that "Tin Pan Alley" began to produce a staggering collection of pseudo-Irish tunes and songs. This interaction with and imitation by popular music produced some frustration among Irish musicians. In the film, "Does Your Mother Come From Ireland?," host Mick Maloney interviews musicians that were incensed by members of the audience who, after listening to them perform for a while,

would shout, "Why don't you play some Irish music?" These listeners of course meant the Tin Pan Alley-variety of Irish music, which featured such songs as "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling," and "Mother Macree." In some cases, this frustration led leading Irish musicians to retire from public performing rather than compromise their musical heritage.

The influence of popular music also began to dilute the performance of traditional musics. Gronow cites artists such as the Barry Sisters who performed Yiddish songs in an Andrews Sisters syncopation, and Slim Jim and the Vagabond Kid who mixed traditional Swedish songs with Norwegian hymns and country and western. Ukrainians recorded Hawaiian music and artists began to defer to mainstream America linguistically, singing alternating verses in their own language and in English.

The impact of these occurrences on musicians was somewhat unpredictable. Some joined in the trends, others got out of music altogether, still others maintained their musical integrity. Some musicians capitalized on the changes to enter a new phase of performance. One such musician was Muddy Waters, whose musical roots were in the blues of the Delta, played on plantations and in grimy beer halls and at small parties. Waters, guitar in hand, migrated to Chicago, where his music became urbanized, electrified and, eventually, popularized. Waters' music retained much of its original character, but grew into a new form that was more easily promoted and more widely accepted.

Other musicians, such as Charlie Patton, after being used by the companies, died while still, in the words of Robert Palmer, looking for "shelter from the cruel wind that had blown him so precipitously through the world." Musicians such as Uncle Dave Macon adopted vaudevillian styles of performance that were based largely on the concepts of the minstrel show, the first commercially successful musical-variety format. Still others, such as Hans Wilfahrt, later known as "Whoopee John," and Will Glähe, Edmund Terlikowski and Frankie Yankovich made the transition to the newer styles of music, abandoning all

but the basic ethnicity of their music.

These changes in traditional musics had an undeniable impact on the communities that had spawned them. Younger musicians, well-versed in the traditional elements of their musical heritage, began to produce new music in a traditional mold. Stylistically, their music was traditional; in content, it embraced the Americanization of authentic themes, or purely American themes. This assimilation of new content and old styles is illustrated in Wolfe's "Tracking the Lost String Bands." Wolfe describes a visit to Nonnie Presson and her brother, Bulow Smith, in which they performed a popular trucker's song. When informed that it was not in the mold he was looking for, Wolfe reports that Nonnie wrote, in less than two weeks, a song that "captured beautifully the feeling of trucking 30 years ago, before the diesels and CB radios and air conditioning." This song, hot off the press but performed in a traditional format, was included in a "scholarly paper on trucking songs" within six months. This approach to music blends the traditional and the contemporary, drawing strength from each. According to Charles Camp and David Whisnant, this blending of the old and the new "offers a positive outlook for the music of the region" in which it occurs.

During the 1950s, commercialization of American folk music began to supplant oral tradition as the driving force behind innovation in music. The success of race records, of ethnic recordings, and of popular music inspired recording companies to find artists that could consolidate divergent styles (and divergent audiences) into a new musical form (with a bigger audience). When Sam Phillips said, "If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars," he summarized this new approach to promoting music. The concept of fusing elements of different musics into a new and exciting form laid the foundation for the commercial and artistic success of hillbilly music, rock-a-billy, country and western, Texas swing and rock and roll.

Where does this leave truly traditional musical styles? Are the historically and ethnically-accurate musicians a thing of the past? Hardly. Today, many of these musical forms are being studied by scholars and musicians alike. While record companies searched the outlands for musical talent that could be exploited, folklorists such as Alan Lomax and Mike Seeger worked to preserve the same music for different reasons. Scholarly interest in American folk music has led to the rediscovery of musicians who recorded in the back rooms and gas stations during the 1920s. These expeditions, coupled with the surviving recordings of the '20s, have documented musical forms for posterity. The reborn interest in traditional musical forms has led to a resurgence in their performance, both by older musicians who lived the music and by younger musicians who sense its true complexity and value.

American folk music is alive and well. It is mercurial, yet strangely constant. Its heritage is as diversified as its direction. American folk music, like all folk musics, will survive the onslaught of changing tastes and irreverent commercialization because it is the origin of all contemporary music. If it is threatened with extinction, there will inevitably arise a champion dedicated to its preservation, but should that champion fail, the music will still survive within the context of its descendant forms.

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