

Editorial

I was never one of those who were afraid of classification. Remember that late 60s, early 70s move? "Hey, man, you shouldn't label things." For the most part, this always struck me as merely one more manifestation of North American anti-intellectualism. Nevertheless, I do think that labelling ought to be done consciously and carefully and that we ought to think about the effect of the labels we employ. I agree, for instance, with those who feel that the term "Celtic" has become virtually meaningless—or, perhaps, that it has acquired a mystical feelgood aura that went out of some circles by the time Yeats was old enough to need monkey glands. But like "roots," it has commercial value, so we're going to be stuck with it until the next fad comes along.

"Folk," of course, is another troubled word, which has sometimes been fought over in the pages of this Society's publications, and will probably disappear from this publication's title (nearly its final resting place) when I've relinquished my role here. (All of this reminds me of Stalin's airbrushes or the chisels of ancient Egypt.) And I'm bringing this up because I suspect that some folks (ah, hem—couldn't resist it) will wonder why the three items on rock music appear in this issue. I'd answer that by noting that I define *folk* culture rather like the Young Turks of folkloristics did during the 60s, as culture produced relatively informally within small groups. ("Classical" culture is produced within and/or for some sort of elite, and "popular" culture is market-based and aimed at as large a market as possible.)

Note that I haven't said a word here about sincerity or esthetic value. Note also that there are plenty of grey areas and that these different modes of cultural production can and do overlap. And note, finally, that the definition of folk culture is qualified by "relatively." It doesn't take a lot of cleverness to note that performers and cultural items may move from one mode to another or that the former certainly do borrow from different modes.

I think the distinctions among these modes are worth making because they help to illuminate some aspects of human creativity. I also (romantic and out of date as it may seem) (but I've never been afraid to be *avant garde*, so why should I be afraid of being out of date?) suspect that in the move towards audience-based culture (which, relatively speaking, both classical and popular culture are), we're in danger of losing some important human values.¹

Rock and roll is a genre that, I think, has moved *among* these modes. Obviously, it's primarily an industrial culture, dependent upon technology and tied to the marketplace. I would suggest that at times (some of Dylan's work, of course) it at least veers into the classical. And it has some folk roots—in the very old blues, of course (though the blues is industrial as often as it is informal), but also in the regional/garage/high school band traditions from which it comes and which I assume (I have not paid attention to it for a while) continue to refresh it.

Rock is conscious of this aspect of its heritage, perhaps too conscious. Going back to Chuck Berry (a middle-aged black man singing songs about white high school life!), rock has been full

of contradictions and outright fakery. As much as anything else, rock is music created by an industry to be sold to teenagers. This often means posing as something more community-based than it in fact is.

But it seems also that the form regularly tries to recreate itself and remake the connection between performer and audience. This presumably is what punk was all about. (*Was?* Not really knowing how much continuity exists between the early 70s and the present day, I'm really not sure what tense to apply here.) The two essays on mosh pits here reflect just this participatory urge in rock. I haven't followed punk or moshing enough to cipher out the extent to which the latter can be called a "folk" element, but these accounts do suggest that the custom was created in part from the frustrations of being mere audience members.

Interestingly enough, a rock icon passing through town (I think it was Courtney Love, but I must apologize that I was not swift enough to think to make a note of it) this summer pronounced anathema upon moshing. It's now *o-u-t*. Or so she says. Rock has long suffered tension between industrial tastemakers and local urges, and it might be interesting to watch the scene for a while to see whether the custom Justin Hartman celebrates in this issue survives.

I collected these essays from students at about the same time I was transcribing Jon Bartlett's autobiographical session from last October, and some correspondences between his comments and at least the first two struck me.² Bartlett is interested in participation, to the degree that he'd almost like to avoid concerts altogether. (The folk music revival is as plagued with contradictions as the rock tradition—I remember Pete Seeger once bemusing himself with advice to amateur musicians that they remain amateurs, conscious all the time that it was advice he did not follow.)

At any rate, these essays do not appear in the *Bulletin* because "All songs is folksongs, horses don't sing" (*hohum*), but because there are folkloric elements in these accounts of what is only a marginally folkloric music. The *Bulletin* has always (as far as I've seen) and will always (if I can help it) consider musical genres that border on folk traditions or employ folkloric elements, be they formal or contextual. But the fact that distinctions are not easily made or that they need not be applied in every circumstance doesn't mean that they are not worth making.

I referred earlier to the North American dedication to anti-intellectualism. It's probably the major cause of the gap between the general public and academics (though many of the latter help dig their side of it through careerism), and while it was also a major cause of my loss of interest in rock and roll, there's considerable anti-intellectualism in folkie circles, I'm sorry to say. Readers with a heavy case of it will wonder why Jon is going on about all of this stuff. Why not just sing whatever songs tickle your fancy and go to concerts?

Why not? One reason, as feminists reminded us a couple of decades ago, is that *the personal is the political*. What we do has effects beyond our own pleasures and needs. I propose that peo-

ple who are concerned about the current direction of society ought to think carefully about the social, political, and psychological ramifications of their cultural activities. Several decades ago, Peter Yarrow (of Peter, Paul and Mary) wrote a silly article (in a magazine called *Hootenanny ... blat!*), in which he declared, "Folk music cares!" Absolute nonsense, of course. Music cannot care, but people can.

What you or I do won't affect the industry or society right away because the music industry is pointed at middle class teenagers, which few of us are. But teenagers grow up, and many, if not most, of the trends of pop culture come from outside the middle class. Many observers have pointed out that much pop culture is narcotic, and consciousness may be an antidote. Consciousness begins with questioning, which is precisely what we see Jon doing on this occasion.

Some years ago, I basically quit buying records produced by major labels; I am concerned, not only with what I get for my money, but what my money does when it leaves me. This surprised some people, who'd bought into the the neoconservative message is that there is limited good in the world and that all purveyors of *quality* deserve our top dollar. The ethnomusicologist John Blacking, among others, has exposed the ideological underpinnings of this attitude; somewhere he notes that among the Venda, an African people he studied, it's assumed that everyone has some ability to sing and dance, and he saw that virtually everyone does sing and dance, whereas our culture assumes that these abilities are *talents* which only a few possess, and we can all observe how few of us in fact do these things. We buy them. It's not surprising that money and power continues to trickle upwards in North America. (By the way, when I stopped putting money into the pockets of Columbia, RCA, &c., my pleasure level didn't drop one iota. We don't really need those guys, you know.)

Many readers will know by now that the Digital Tradition, about which Jon speaks at the conclusion of his discussion, was off the web last year because of questions about the copyrights of some songs on it. This is something I wondered about from the moment I first visited the site, to be honest. I remember noticing right off the bat a large number of songs which I knew were only "folksongs" in the middlebrow sense that somebody (somewhere, sometime) sang them to acoustic guitar accompaniment. I've gathered that the new and peculiar status of the internet leaves copyright in as unclear a status as the right (ability? what makes right?) of a judge to maintain a news blackout over a glamorous trial. Nevertheless, I think that Matt McGinn has some sort of legal ownership of a song he has written.

Of course, as Dick Greenhaus notes in his request for help in the matter, "The question of copyrights and folk music is a deep and knotty one. It's an admittedly difficult task for a tradition of oral transmission to coexist with the concept of in-

tellectual property." On the one hand, I think that it's not an obvious fact that the founders and users of the Digital Tradition constitute an "oral tradition." (Isn't the internet some sort of extension of literacy? I mean, you do have to read—at least marginally—to use it, unless you just use Windows icons to reach pictures of naked women and pretty whiskey bottles.)

On the other hand, I seem to remember Pete Seeger writing with some admiration of the Soviet (remember the Soviets?) attempt to do away with copyright. At the risk of sparking controversy, it's occurred to me that if we were to have, say, a guaranteed annual income, then James Keelaghan and Pete Seeger (not to mention Margaret Atwood and Mickey Spillane) might be willing to do without "intellectual property." I'm afraid that we're a long way from that at the moment, and if TS Eliot can't *sell* his wares, he's gonna have to go back to work at the bank, isn't he?

Greenhaus points out that it's even more complicated than this, however: "The difficulty of identifying copyright holders is compounded by the fact that ANYONE can claim a copyright on ANYTHING." Remember all those notes on Kingston Trio records? Something like *Arrangement and new lyrics ©Guard, Reynolds, and whatever the other guy's name was?* What constitutes an arrangement? How could someone setting up an admittedly useful tool like the DT possibly know who has done what to what song? And what is the status of, say, a song written (or even collected, in an informal way) by Blind Lemon Jefferson, for which the writer's credit was claimed by some recording company jerk, which goes back into tradition in Jefferson's native east Texas? It's difficult enough to figure out what's legal, let alone what's fair.

The last time I checked into the website, Greenhaus was still looking for help with the situation. While I am not as thrilled about the role of DT as Jon Bartlett—I'm not convinced, for example, that it's a substantially different tool from the printed *Folksinger's Wordbook* or *Rise Up Singing*—I admit that I have from time to time checked into it.

In fact, I discovered that it was kerplunked when I went looking for the words to Matt McGinn's "Swan Necked Valve." I say "McGinn's," but I don't know that he wrote the song. He sang it on the lovely old Topic compendium, *The Iron Muse*, but it may predate him. Now, the fact is, that in 15 minutes, I could sit down with the LP and copy the words down. So, if it *is* McGinn's song, taking it off the internet isn't gonna stop me from stealing it (it's not in print anywhere that I know of)—but, then again, is this kind of cheapskate time saving really any sort of great world and cultural improvement (which they keep telling me that computers are offering us)? I'm not sure it's anything other than plain old laziness.

Anyway, drop by Greenhaus's site and see what you think: <http://pubweb.parc.xerox.com/docs/DigiTrad/9607letter.html> > [GWL]

¹ For some interesting thoughts on this might happen, I recommend Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Theory and History of Literature Volume 16. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1985.

² The three students were in two different sections of English Composition, 2201, during the Winter 1999 semester at Mount Royal College. These are far and away the most impressive student essays on musical subjects I've seen in nearly 20 years of teaching; I still shake my head at the coincidence that all came in at once—I did not solicit these topics.