

5. ARGUE THE CASE FOR A NEW DEFINITION OF FOLKMUSIC

If none of our fantastic means of electronic sound reproduction had been invented, and if kids were educated more in homes than in schools, a new definition of folk music would not be necessary. As it now stands, however, the old standard of "oral transmission" has gone somewhat by the board. Since the huge baby boom of the 1950's, both science and education have progressed so fast that a cultural gap has quickly developed to the point where music continuity, variation, and selection is no longer applicable to today's folksongs.

The stodgy, old collectors can maintain until they're blue in the face that folkmusic is typified by the songs of inebriated Maritimers and lumberjacks, and to a certain extent they are entirely correct. Folkmusic must be an expression of different lifestyles. But "authorities" who draw the line when it comes to songs by Dylan or Jackson Brown, are completely discrediting a segment of society which has as much right to express itself musically as does a Newfoundland fisherman. What determines true folkmusic today? Is it still only music created by untrained, non-professional musicians? If it is, then every culture affected by the trend of Westernization is out of luck. Youth today is being educated to compose its own

music. Just because we now have musical training under our belts, is the music we create any less an expression of our culture?

And just what is our culture? It is no longer a fixed set of various nationalities and races spread throughout our ten provinces and two territories. Urbanization has turned out a generation that is conscious not of the many changing lifestyles around it, but rather of the way of life that has erupted in our social centres - cities complete with racial tension, violence, drugs, pollution, and every other social evil you can think of. And that's what our songs refer to and sometimes try to forget.

The question remains, however, of whether or not this music will be accepted by everyone. A fifty-year old executive may look on with utter disgust at a long-haired, jean-clad guitarist making guttural sounds into the microphone, accompanied by six blaring amplifiers. But so would many young people because this form of music has no meaning - protest must be effective to be worthwhile, and by deafening listeners many performers are completely missing the point.

The point is that we have a right to be heard - listened to and accepted or rejected on a basis that is free of qualifying adjectives like "dirty", "lazy", "self-centered", "hippies", who need a few good Depression years to "straighten them out". The fact is we've already hit the hard times - an

age that is so foreign to the pre-war generations that they can't even recognize that what we're singing about is equivalent to the conditions they grew up in. That is why it is so shortsighted to try and categorize current songs and singers differently from the music of Eskimos, Dukabors, or Voyageurs. Even if today's music is not "selected" by everyone, at least it will be preserved long enough for future generations to study protest as expressed through folkmusic of the '50s, '60s and '70s.

... if we retain an interest in the musical cultures of nations and peoples rather than of a musically professional elite, and if we are willing to bend our definition of folk and traditional music to include such things as "popular" music, jazz, and urban folk songs, we may be in a position to investigate the kind of music which will replace, in its social function, the folk and traditional music of the past and present.

Folk and Traditional Music of Western Continents
by Bruno Nettl
(New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. p. 204)

Barbara Long
1974

The following article arrived just in time for inclusion in the stop press of a late Newsletter. It describes one practical and rewarding way of giving relevance to, and having fun with, Canadian folkmusic.

Editor