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Antonio Barrera
University of Minnesota Morris

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Folk Contra Lore

Antonio Barrera

Folklore collectors by their nature require a people to draw material from. It is the people, the “folk,” that give the information from which any academic study can be done. Collectors are very aware of this, and a cursory look into folklore scholarship will reveal a number of articles addressing the question of what “folk” is and who makes it. One of the most popular criteria when it comes to folk collection is that of authenticity. Authenticity is an oft evoked trait in everyday life. People talk about authentic food, authentic culture, authentic musical performance, and even the notion of an authentic self. Authentic is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as “presenting the characteristics of the original; accurately reproducing a model or prototype; made or done in the original or traditional way.” It is also more implicitly a quality statement. In the academic context, the inauthentic is considered at best only unworthy of study; and at worst, the inauthentic is an “agent spoiling or harming the carefully cultivated, noble ideal” (Bendix 4). This is made especially clear if we consider that “authentic” is also defined by the OED as something “that truly reflects one's inner feelings; not affected, unfeigned.” The authentic is thus considered to be more “real” and therefore more desirable for serious study. This paper will present a brief history of the way “authenticity” was understood by American folklore collectors in the early through mid-20th century. It will also look at how these notions of authenticity affect performers as well as the impact on the way people collect folk materials today.

Folklore collecting in America did not begin with an interest in American stories or music. Instead, it focused itself on the collection of English ballads. Under the influence of Francis James Child’s scholarly collection of ballads, collectors saw the tunes they collected as antiques from an older English tradition rather than a uniquely American form. Authentic here, then, referred not to a unique tradition stemming from the American lower classes, but instead looks at the performers and texts as relics stretching back thousands of years to a European literary history. The interest was not in the (re)discovery of a unique American cultural tradition, but the collection of English cultural relics that still exist in a few isolated American communities. This kind of collecting held a serious influence over the early collectors of folk material. Most of these early academic collectors would hunt for the ballads already discovered by Child, and privilege them to the point where there was a “Child-and-Other” organization for their published collections (Filene 21). The quest for authenticity led back to a European, specifically English, past (Bendix 77). Further, it looked for the most accurate portrayal of historically authentic ballad texts, while dismissing any later additions as “corrupted” (143). The hunt for folklore was rigidly and inflexibly defined, and strictly belonging to a European past.

This changed when non-academic collectors came into the picture. Record companies began to capitalize on the novel market of folk music, especially music created by (or perceived to be created by) African Americans. This kind of interest in fact predated the academic pursuits of Child and those who later followed him. Benjamin particularly notes the popularity of minstrel shows and the white audience’s belief that the songs, dances, and mannerisms presented in such shows were authentic representations of slave life (27). But it was especially the late-nineteenth century popularity of spirituals that landed African American music on the map.

During the height of the music's popularity, the Fisk University Jubilee Singers, the group responsible for the initial dissemination of spirituals, even had a meeting with president Ulysses S. Grant (28). Yet the popularity of the music, as Benjamin is quick to note, did not translate into racial acceptance or even positive associations. In fact, advertisements for a number of imitators made it a marketing point to be "genuine slave bands" in "full plantation costumes" performing music that was "quaint and weird" (29). The need for capital and legitimacy necessitated that performers play into the role of slave as was understood by supposedly authentic minstrel culture. This is a sentiment that still echoes when we later consider the careers of later artists like Leadbelly. Still, the appeal of African American music then was considered in terms of the authentic, pre-civilized discourse. The appeal was to "appropriat[e] the sonic light of nature from the darkness of negro bodily insignificance" so that white Americans could use the raw materials as "the means by which to construct a racially transcendent, national selfhood" (Bendix 93). It is through this decidedly Other, "uncivilized" people that intellectuals could potentially create material from which a national identity could be formed.

As Cecil Sharp claims, the folk seem free of the "continuous, grinding, mental pressure due to the attempt to 'make a living,' from which all of us in the modern world suffer." And, as Benjamin Filene notes, this was not a view unique to Sharp (24). Authenticity held a strong association with the historical past for these collectors but was also a means of criticizing urban life and mass commercial culture. This could help explain the feeling of loss that many of these collectors expressed. What seemed to them an idyllic, perfectly natural way of living was being lost in the noisy hubbub of a "degrading" modernity. It is this particular anti-modern, anti-urban, and sometimes even anti-capitalist ideal that influenced many collectors. This same ideology also detrimentally romanticizes the very real poverty and social hardships that many of the "folk" were actually facing. This ideology impacted not just what was being collected, but how they wanted the people who they collected from to act. The career of Huddie Ledbetter, professionally known as Leadbelly, is a particularly insightful case study in what can go wrong with romanticizing for authenticity.

Leadbelly was "discovered" by the father and son song collecting team of John and Alan Lomax in 1933. He was serving a sentence for murder at Angola prison in Louisiana. Leadbelly seemed a reservoir of "folky" songs. His 11 years in prison seemed a blessing to the Lomaxes. He was also useful for giving the folk movement a "face." A person American folk music decidedly lacked until then. The Lomaxes were ecstatic. With Leadbelly, folk music no longer belonged to a distant past. Instead, they had an example of unique American folk music that belonged to a "precommercial" past being created in our very nation right now (Filene 55). But it was not enough to simply possess a repertoire of authentic songs. It was also necessary to perform in a manner deemed "authentic." It is this desire the Lomaxes had with performing the authentic where issues begin to arise. The Lomaxes wished to present Leadbelly to the world with two different, contradictory identities: as "the living embodiment of America's folk song tradition" (58) and also exoticized, "savage, untamed animal" with a criminal past.

Leadbelly was asked often to perform in his prison uniform, or to perform barefoot in the middle of a table in order to "shoc[k] his hearers into attention" (59). Authenticity here belongs to both a historical past, yet is also exotic. It was thought as both shared national heritage as well as Other to be reasonably distanced from. Furthermore, as could be seen with the earlier

popularity of spirituals and with Leadbelly, authenticity was at times tied to a history not necessarily belonging to the folk themselves. In order for Leadbelly to be “a nigger to the core of his being” as John Lomax wished to market him (59), he must be presented as uneducated and dangerous as possible. Authentic, then, did not mean Leadbelly should be true to his own desires, but instead that he should pander to a white audience’s conception of being African American. that, in this case, meant a distortion as informed through minstrelsy and other negative racial stereotypes. Such demands of authenticity not only impacted the way people wished to present and market Leadbelly, but even impacted his repertoire. Leadbelly showed interest in the “ersatz cowboys and crooning balladeers” the likes of Gene Autry and Jimmie Rodgers. Leadbelly saw no issues with including their songs into his repertoire. The Lomaxes, however, wished to restrict him to the “traditional” repertoire he had during his incarceration (71-72). This desire to keep Leadbelly’s song repertoire “pure” seems to stem from the earlier tradition to dismiss variations that appear in ballads as modern “corruptions.” In order for authenticity to exist, the subject must remain alienated from mainstream society and even contemporary history.

But it was not just racial stereotypes that limited Leadbelly. A number of ideological, largely Left-leaning factors played in as well. The American Communist Party, starting with their Popular Front policy in 1935, began to take a serious interest in folk music (70). They were attracted to the same sort of pre-industrial “purity” that earlier collectors emphasized. There was also an interest in allowing the working classes to tell their own stories. Yet this interest only went so far. Folk musicians were expected to express “high-minded sentiments,” and were harshly rebuked if they performed more scandalous songs like “Frankie and Albert” and were encouraged to compose more actively political songs, like Leadbelly’s “Bourgeois Blues” (72). Performing the authentic, as the case of Leadbelly shows, goes beyond just the inclusions of certain songs in a certain style. Rather, to be continuously authentic, one must be in (seemingly) authentic garb, as well as work hard to keep their repertoire as free from modern influences as possible. The popular use of folk music was no less restrictive. The ideological bent made for a number of striking and inconsistent demands of the artist. They needed to be both authentic, yet willing to break away from such notions when it went against what they wished to showcase as in the earlier case with the Communist Party. Both academic and popular definitions of authenticity constrict the artist, placing demands that are foreign to their own methodology of song collection and performance traditions.

The idea of authenticity also brings about strange questions in regard to revivalists, who are decidedly not considered “authentic” in academic contexts (Sommers 228). Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan both present illuminating cases in this regard. For Seeger, who actively engaged with a number of the American (among other) musical traditions, the idea of his performances fitting into any of the previously mentioned scholarly definition of authenticity would be absurd. Seeger was born into a well-educated family of above-average means. He was placed in “upper-crust boarding schools” by age four, and was educated at Harvard until he ultimately dropped out (Filene 187-188). Seeger is decidedly, then, outside of the realm of “authentic” folk personalities as far as his economic and cultural background is concerned. In order to “make up” for this, Seeger attempted to emulate the life of what he believes is the everyday, working class person (201-202). Despite this and other ideological idiosyncrasies, Seeger also worked with a significantly more flexible definition of “folk music” than did most collectors. Seeger believed folk performance to be a “process,” through which new traditions could be assembled. Even

popular tunes like “St. Louis Blues” and George Gershwin’s “Summertime” could be part of the folk canon (195). Further, he wished to show that “outsiders” to the folk tradition can join in too. Indeed, the concept of being an “outsider” is alien to Seeger’s entire ideation of folk music. Seeger showed a number of young revivalists that the seemingly alien world of folk music was not all that alien, not alien at all in fact. Seeger also highlights how folk music is a changing process. “Face it,” he says, “folk traditions will change as the folks who inhabit this earth change” (194-195). It is this concept of folk music as a living, participatory, and constantly changing process that made Seeger such an important counterargument to the regular, more academic notions of authenticity.

This all came to a sort of climax, even for Seeger, in an incident involving the then folk star Bob Dylan, who Seeger himself had a fondness towards (205), decided to incorporate electric guitar. Dylan’s infamous decision to go electric and be more influenced by contemporary rock-and-roll is recorded in many popular stories. During a recorded 1966 concert at Royal Albert Hall, a member of the audience can audibly be heard heckling “Judas!” Many felt betrayed by his decision to go electric. Dylan’s attraction and appreciation for the authentic roots music of Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie, along with his talent for topical and powerful songwriting made him a favorite in folk revivalist circles. But starting with his album *Highway 61 Revisited*, he allowed himself to be influenced by rock music in the vein of Elvis Presley. This artistic decision made him seem like a traitor to the “revival’s old guard” (184). But, as Filene notes, Dylan’s artistic decision is less a departure and more a reaffirming of Seeger’s values (217). Dylan, like Seeger, was influenced by the popular music of his time. Unlike the sound of Tin Pan Alley composers like Gershwin from the early twentieth-century, he looks to the popular music of his generation like Buddy Holly and Chuck Berry. Further, Dylan never lost his love for folk music, and continued to be influenced by it. The influence can be heard and is even alluded to in song titles like “Tombstone Blues” and “Ballad of a Thin Man.” I do not wish to call Dylan “authentic” folk music, but the case shows a number of points regarding the performer and authenticity. First, the application is hardly consistent. Seeger himself was performing popular songs like “St. Louis Blues” and the “folksy” compositions of George Gershwin. One possible reason for this is Seeger’s “one world” ideology, whereas Dylan after going electric “implicitly undercut the legitimacy of taking a committed political stand” (213). Further, the music of Gershwin and other jazz standards like “St. Louis Blues” were now seemingly old enough to evoke the same sort of nostalgia that the then-evolving rock music could not. The sense of purity not only impacts the “authentic folk musician,” but even forces standards on those who wish to incorporate the music into their own artistic image.

Notions of authenticity have impacted not just who and what are considered “folk,” but also limits the participation of those “folk” in commercial and artistic enterprises. Throughout these changing notions of authenticity, the folk have been and still are associated with the expressions of the working class, marginalized peoples, and grassroots activists (Sommers 230). While early collectors focused on these groups, especially the rural poor, because of their assumed isolation from modern society, their approach later took a more ideological bend. Such desire to locate the authentic folk musician leads to a number of seemingly arbitrary and confining performance and research studies. Even the incorporation of folk music is heavily surrounded by ideology. So what is to be done? I think a sort of modified Seeger view would be most effective. The idea of folk culture as a constantly changing process, not necessarily always

separate from contemporary popular culture, is a good starting place. Further, a less romanticized view of folklore as that which only belongs to the lower classes should be considered. Traditions hop across class and even racial boundaries, as Seeger himself exemplified. His ability to “cross the outsider-insider barrier without pretending to dissolve it—to become identified as a legitimate expositor of traditional cultures with-out disguising his status as an interloper” (Filene 201), while perhaps not “authentic,” can prove just as useful to the study and performance of folklore than the fleeting “originals.” The hunt and exclusion of so-called “corrupted” texts may not only just be counterproductive, but actively destructive. Rather than hunting the original, “authentic” text while dismissing variations as “corrupt,” we should explore these new strains of folklore as reflections of our changing cultural tastes, necessities, and trends.

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