

FOLK MUSIC: A KEY TO THE PAST

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Immigrants who came to Colonial America brought with them a rich heritage of their ethnic background which was embodied in their music. While folk music was mainly regarded as a means of recreation, it played a large role in the everyday lives of the people of Southern Appalachia, where the music thrived among people who valued isolation.¹ Because of the role of folk music in the everyday lives of these people, its presence should be noted. To the archaeologist, a brief survey of early American folk music is valuable in trying to determine the culture of the people who once inhabited sites such as those now being excavated in Northeastern Appalachia and throughout Southern Appalachia. Historical records of these people are nonexistent, and the only written information which these people created is within the words of the songs which they sang and played. Also the observations of people who collected the tunes is extremely valuable, a primary example being Cecil Sharp's "Introduction" to his major collection of folk songs, English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians (Oxford University Press, 1918) which he compiled between 1916-1918. Since the early twentieth century, most of the old folk songs have been forgotten as people learned to read and write and

¹ Cecil J. Sharp. English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians, (Oxford University Press, Amen House: London, 1932), XIV.

a cumulative repertoire of folk songs became less important as a replacement for formal education, which had previously been unavailable. New values of money and schooled education attracted the rural frontiersman toward cities, where ^{his} ~~their~~ music became commercialized by the music industry.² In this paper I will first examine the evolution of American folk music and its social significance in these isolated communities, and then will discuss how the music has survived until today, how these people made their instruments, and the possibility of musically related archaeological evidence.

The music which the people of Southern Appalachia played was the product of an interaction between European immigrants and African slaves, with the musical style of each group affecting the other's in a new cultural situation and environment. The Scotch-Irish immigrants who came to America brought with them the folk songs of Europe. Their main instrument was the fiddle which went well with singing, the most common form of folk music. Likewise, the Negro slaves, though unable to carry their instruments on the slave ships because of cramped conditions, retained their African musical talents of rhythm and syncopation and "managed to improvise drums and other instruments such as the "banjar" (banjo) out of whatever materials they could find."³ The banjo, clearly an instrument

² Bill C. Malone. Country Music U.S.A. (University of Texas Press: Austin, 1968) p. 11.

³ Irving Sablosky. American Music (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1969) p. 41.

of African origin, found its way into American folk music after a fifth string was added by an American inventor in the mid 1800's. Meanwhile, slaves were experimenting with the European fiddle:

Drums were frowned upon by slave owners ; they ~~They~~ might stir excitement and lead to rebelliousness. But the masters did not fail to note a musical bent among their slaves and turn it to their own purposes. The Negro fiddler was a familiar figure at dancing parties from the Seventeenth into the Nineteenth Century, in the plantation houses, in the frontier settlements, in Williamsburg mansions, and even in the North. How much of his own musical accent crept into the Negro's performance of the white man's minuets, reels, and jigs is impossible to know.⁴

White people and slaves began to congregate with each other on a more social basis, where music was involved, as at Methodist and Baptist camp meetings which were, according to John Hope Franklin, "The most effective means of releasing pent up emotions that the barren life of the rural South created ... Under such circumstances, whites and Negroes sang together, shouted together, and spent themselves emotionally together."⁵ In the 1820's, whites began putting on black face and doing their own minstrel shows, first advocating song and dance impersonations, and later adopting the fiddle, banjo, and

⁴ Ibid., p. 41-2.

⁵ Ibid., p. 43-4.

^{tam}~~yam~~ bourine into the act. In this situation, these instruments, by now shared by both Negroes and whites, were played in the white man's style, "wholly different from the enduring music created by the Negro himself out of his own experience."⁶ Folk music which resulted from the contact between European and African musical style became the new American folk music sound, which became an important part of oral tradition as new songs were created through generations and became valued as a replacement for education in an illiterate society.⁷

The social significance of folk music to the Southern Appalachian community was great. Where value was placed on isolation, folk music flourished, as is made apparent by Sharp's collection of folk songs (Most tunes were collected in isolated areas of North Carolina and Kentucky.)

Folk songs are generally common to people whom civilization has touched the least, where society and life in general is the least organized. Isolation from other people, hand labor, and lack of printed literature are factors which nourish and perpetuate folk music. A certain naïveté is essential to the true people's song; sophistication is its deadliest enemy.⁸

The Appalachian settlers were people who were extremely isolated, and liked their position. There was no need for money, as bartering was their only means of trade. These people enjoyed

⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

⁷ Sharp, XXV

⁸ John Howard, Our American Music (Thomas Y. Crowell Co., New York, 1939) p. 634.

life to the fullest, and being independent and self-sufficient, the people of the isolated communities probably spent their spare time playing music. From Sharp's observations, although they appear to be romanticized, it is evident that the folk song was the only medium of recording oral tradition; oral tradition, which captured major and minor events and put them into song was these people's means of learning about their heritage. This harmonious blend may have been the basis of their leisurely lifestyle, making prestige through educational advancement unknown, and social stratification nearly impossible. In this type of society there was probably no need for competition, and no need to achieve and "be successful in life" provided that the people remained isolated from unknown mainstream values.

Folk music is alive and well today, both in the isolated rural communities where it originated and in communities like our own, Lexington, Virginia. Today's folk music, the traditional style relabelled as old time music, is played today on fiddles, banjo, guitar, mandolin, and bass. Although sometimes profitable on the stage, old time music today is mainly a means of recreation in populated areas. However, in isolated 18th Century style communities, such as the Rainbow Society in Southeastern West Virginia (examined in my Anthropology 101 paper) old time music is playing a more important cultural role, not only as a means of recreation but also as a ritual which supports the values for which the

community exists. Old time music is still played in areas like Lexington, where perhaps an inherent desire or ability to play music has remained in the blood of the descendants of the original settlers. Music was a cultural tradition for hundreds of years, since the arrival of the first settlers to America. The momentum gained in the development of oral tradition in 18th Century folk songs acted as a driving force which perpetuated the music still further. Today folk music in the traditional style plays a less important cultural role in communities, such as Lexington, Virginia, than it did a hundred years ago. As a cultural value, in Lexington, Virginia, old time music provides a means of recreation through which new friends are made and old friendships sustained, and is usually played in a party atmosphere (as in the White Column Inn). In contrast, in communities which have either remained isolated or have recently appeared in isolated areas, playing folk music is a means of recreation as well as a ritual which supports these peoples' values of isolation, peace, freedom, and love. From this example, we can conclude that folk music of the Nineteenth Century could have been a ritual which was valued as a means of expressing and supporting the cultural values which these isolated societies may have shared.

Where and how, did the people of Southern Appalachia acquire their instruments? No doubt that fiddles came from Europe with the flow of immigrants, and that the banjo was made by slaves who longed for the African version which had been

left behind. But as the music became a true American style, naturally there was a demand for American instruments. The fiddle, banjo, and dulcimore (a three-stringed, box-like instrument which is played on one's lap) are all made entirely of wood, except for metal strings and modern metal tuning machines which have been added to traditional designs since the late 1800's. Exactly how the Nineteenth Century instrument maker made his instruments is not known. However, by examining methods used by contemporary inhabitants of Southern Appalachia, we can get a good idea how these instruments were made a hundred years ago. Foxfire 3 and Foxfire 4 have covered some techniques of banjo, dulcimore and fiddle making which are used today, and the books provide instructions to the reader on how to make his own instrument. A few years ago I took advantage of this opportunity, and made a banjo in the traditional style. The banjo I made is fretless and made entirely of cherry, sporting a groundhog hide head, and held together by nails. The banjo was made by first cutting out a neck, which was later attached to three rings of wood which made up the body of the banjo, that part which holds the skin head in place and also acts as a resonator. Of crude design, parts of the banjo can be cut from boards with a coping saw, although the neck must be carved from a larger piece, using files. The dulcimore is simply a box-like instrument of wood, of some long shape, with a peghead added

on one end to hold the string tuners, and an end block on the other to tie the strings to, plus the fingerboard, which is glued directly in the center of the top of the instrument. No metal parts were used on either instrument. The fiddle continues to be made with a spruce top, and maple back sides, and neck. The top and back are carefully carved from thick blocks of wood. The thickness of different areas of the plates is extremely important to the sound of the finished fiddle. Today, with the absence of power tools, rural people rely on chisels, saws, and files when making their instruments, and it is possible that they are using the same techniques and designs that earlier generations used. Also part of folk music in the Nineteenth Century was the guitar and mandolin, two more expensive instruments which were probably rare. It is unlikely that the archaeologist will find any remains of any of these instruments, not only because they are made of wood, which disintegrates, but also because it is unlikely that any of these people would leave their instruments at an abandoned homestead.

However, the archaeologist should not abandon the possibility of finding musically related artifacts such as the remains of small, metal instruments which are commonly lost. Jews harps and harmonicas were present at most homesites. A pair of brass ^ered plates from a ten-hole harmonica were found at the Bane Site. Similarly, though at a totally

different site, a Jew's harp was dug up at Liberty Hall. Metal strings, likely to have been made of steel, were on most instruments, and would most likely be found in trenches on the inside of a house's perimeter. Metal hardware was common on commercial instruments toward the end of the nineteenth century. However, it is unlikely that any of these artifacts can be found because the people of Appalachia probably could not afford these expensive factory-made instruments (which is why fine old 5-string banjos were a rarity, since these companies catered to the wealthier commercial four-string banjo players who entertained in city areas). Also, metal instrument hardware, if ever obtained, was probably highly prized, and not apt to be lost. Given the scarcity of musically-related artifacts, it is more important for the archaeologist to be aware of the role which folk music played in isolated communities of Appalachia than to attempt to base his interpretation on only a few musically related artifacts. Because of the nature of musical instruments, which were made of biodegradable wood and unlikely to be left behind when it came time to move, it is unlikely that the archaeologist will recover musically related artifacts which will give an adequate representation of these people's total musical instrument inventory.

In writing this paper, I have learned that playing folk music was a popular past time at many Appalachian homesites, such as the ones which we have excavated this spring. The music

itself made up for any educational inadequacies which these people may have had, as in the largely non-competitive societies these people valued their folk songs as a way of enjoying life.¹⁰ In these societies, knowing how to sing and play an instrument was probably looked at the same way as we view becoming educated in today's American societies. The style of the American music grew out of the contact between the European immigrants and the African slaves, with the musical heritage of each group affecting the other's they experimented with each other's traditional instruments. The art of singing became almost universally enjoyed.¹¹ Folk music in Nineteenth Century Southern Appalachia was a valued form of recreation in isolated communities, where outside values of economic advancement were not found. Since, the music these people played has moved to other areas of the U.S., becoming commercialized and changing to other styles: dixieland jazz, western swing, country and western, and bluegrass music.¹² Yet the old folk music sound still remains, under the label of old time music, a music style which is alive and well in communities such as Lexington, Virginia, and in isolated communities similar to the ones where it originated in Nineteenth Century Southern Appalachia. When interpreting artifacts to determine the lifestyle of

¹⁰ Sharp, XXV

¹¹ Ibid., XXV

¹² Malone, p. 11.

residents of the Cunningham, Bane, and Hostetter sites, the archaeologist should be aware of the non-representative nature of musically-related artifacts and also of the important role which folk music may have played in these people's everyday lives.

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