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Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival

Stephen Petrus & Ronald D. Cohen

New York: Oxford University Press (2015). 320 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0190231026

Review by Alexis Bennett

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This impressive volume, impeccably presented and lucidly written, accompanied the major 2015 exhibition held at the Museum of the City of New York. Its authors, the exhibition's curator Stephen Petrus, and Ronald D. Cohen, Emeritus Professor of History at Indiana University Northwest, have achieved a remarkable feat in researching the complex narrative of the various folk musics blossoming in New York in the mid-20th Century, and in collecting together hundreds of rare and fascinating documents and images.

It was clearly a massive undertaking: the list of acknowledgements that precedes the main body of the work shows how closely interlinked the book and exhibition were in terms of funding and scholarly or creative approaches. Furthermore, the impressive list of photo credits at the end will be awe-inspiring for any academic who has ever attempted to clear the rights for an image of uncertain origin.

Each of its eight chapters is punctuated with personal contributions from individuals closely connected with the artists, record companies or communities described in the text, and throughout the work there is a strong sense place and vivid personal memory. Concert venues, outside spaces (such as Washington Square Park), clubs, cafes and bars are recollected and conjured with flair.

The early chapters concern the paradox central to the emerging New York folk scene: much of the music that was performed and celebrated in the folk revival was of rural origin, but in order to build a community of singers and musicians, and create infrastructure by which to record, market and distribute the music, a major urban centre was required. Key pioneer figures (Alan and John Lomax, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, John Hammond, Bessie Smith, Lead Belly, and others) are introduced and given due attention. The treatment of the former prisoner Lead Belly in the music press brings home the reality of the deep-rooted racism and mistrust that his criminal background provoked. As noted by the authors, the *Herald Tribune* wrote, 'Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here To Do a Few Tunes between Homicides.' (p.48) Indeed the authors refuse to see even the Lomaxes through

unnecessarily rose-tinted spectacles, reminding the reader that their recording contract with Lead Belly was basically exploitative, and quoting Alan Lomax's letter to the New York media, 'Lead Belly is a nigger to the core of his being. [...] In addition he is a killer.' (p.44)

The authors devote important and illuminating passages to the evolution of record companies' categorization of various kinds of music. The text charts the exploratory nature of the labels, which in the 1920s began sending out crews to record rural music in the South; there was also a steady flow of musicians travelling to the city to cut their first records. 'Race records' was the preferred term for releases of music recorded by African-Americans, whilst those by white groups or singers was variously called 'hillbilly', 'old familiar tunes' or 'old time'. (p.33) Publishing trends began simultaneously, with sheet music of both black-origin music and white folk styles becoming popular.

This important context gives way to material of a more political nature, as the authors explore the way that folk music was adopted by the radical left to promote socialist ideology. The sense that boundaries were rather blurred between those New York activists who simply espoused leftist views and those who might have considered themselves Communists proper (and indeed everyone in between) in the years before the entry of the US into the war, is well handled and assessed clearly. The focus remains on key examples of groups like the Almanac Singers or events like the 'Grapes of Wrath' concert in 1940 to demonstrate the constantly shifting sands of ideology associated with the music. Antiwar material, for example, is shown to have been a subject of much debate among these musicians as soon as Germany invaded the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941. Later, the fate of groups such as The Weavers as the Red Scare turned nasty is recounted with care.

Bob Dylan looms large over the second half, and the danger here is that so much has been written about him that studies like this might end up being absorbed into the great body of Dylan literature. Petrus and Cohen avoid this by focusing on the city and its musical community on the one hand, and the political activism that surrounded Dylan, even if his engagement with it was reluctant. Events like his bungled speech to the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee in late 1963, during which he seemed to empathise with Lee Harvey Oswald, take priority over material focused on the man and his songs. A great strength of the book is how it uses moments like this clash between one musician and a political organisation to deconstruct wider social and political issues arising from music-making in New York.

These latter parts of the book are thus admirably supported and sustained by the first chapters' detailed scrutiny of the pre-1960s city, where the music's left-leaning roots are meticulously exposed.

One problem with the book is its seemingly rushed index – it is neither comprehensive nor particularly useful. For a serious book that holds the 1960s in America at its core, and explores the firm links between folk music and political activism, labour disputes, civil rights and pacifism, the index certainly falls rather short. And whilst it is undeniably a beautifully presented tome, the column layout and bold image-heavy style means it occupies that rather awkward place between scholarly publication and coffee table hardback. Nonetheless, it will appeal both to fans of the musicians chronicled in its pages and those unfamiliar with the history of New York's close association with American folk music.