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Roots of the Revival: American & British folk music in the 1950s

Ronald D. Cohen and Rachel Clare Donaldson

Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2014

ISBN: 978-0-252-08012-8

182 pp. Illus. Notes. Bibliog. Index. £?? <www.press.uillinois.edu>

Review by Fay Hield

While there are several excellent accounts of folk music revivals, Cohen and Donaldson spotted a gap in coverage of the 1950s – a period they claim as ‘wrongly characterised as “the bland leading the bland”’ (p.1). Taking the opportunity to document this period they present an account of key players such as Lomax, Pete Seeger, McColl, Peggy Seeger, Guthrie, Lloyd, The Kingston Trio, The New Lost City Ramblers and a multitude of others, drawing information from record catalogues, magazine articles, correspondences and published memoirs. They break new ground in their attempt to highlight the associations between the distinct but related revivals that took place in American and British contexts.

To set the scene we are brought up-to-date on the collecting movement prior to 1950, detailing paper-based and recorded publications. The chapters then take us chronologically through the 1950s, each covering two years and highlighting themes dominating the period. How the Weavers’ music sparked progressive hopes for peace and social equality begins a thread on Civil Rights which, unsurprisingly, permeates the book. The impact of blacklisting in the US on both key performers and the media infrastructure underlying their activities is described. Sympathetic associations in Britain are charted, including Lloyd’s focus on workers songs and Topic’s left-wing heritage though, as governmental pressure was less pervasive, Britain is here presented as a sanctuary for American’s unable to work at home.

The mingling of different cultural traditions is raised at several points, including the eclectic festival line-ups of the early 1950s. This spread beyond diverse collections or programming, and multiculturalism was seen within individuals. Belafonte in particular is highlighted as not wanting to be associated with one place, but a performer of all the world’s music. Similarly the Clancy Brother’s ‘Songs of Israel’ is mentioned (p. 89-90). The short lived skiffle craze in Britain is celebrated as central to mobilising the British folk revival, and the book notes how British musicians, developed first a love first of Black American heritage, then stepped sideways into the materials of the UK (p. 97).

Reference to grass roots musical practice is scarce and mostly confined to political rallies and events of large enough scale to be documented in the press. Conversely links are made with the major music industry throughout, with significant attention given to Belafonte and The Kingston Trio, and acknowledgement that commercial

folk music was quashed early in the decade due to governmental fears around delinquency and counter culture. This was clearly insuppressible and by the end of the decade, Cohen and Donaldson show that despite debates about commerciality, authenticity and 'citybillies', the scene was set for major money to be made from folk music. Record companies, the Universities, live events and media industries are well documented, demonstrating the importance of infrastructures necessary to develop repertoires and relationships. We learn, for example, the *Sing Out* magazine published over 400 songs in 5 years to support grass roots playing. The importance of festivals and places like The Folklore Centre in Greenwich Village as hubs of activity is also made manifest. By the final chapter, a picture has been painted of the music industry and cultural climate that adeptly demonstrates a fertile environment to facilitate the more heavily documented folk music boom of the 1960s.

The authors provide a meticulously detailed portrayal of the development of the folk genre around exhaustive lists of recordings, publications and key performances drawing connections within localised and national events in America whilst also demonstrating links and cross-over with the British scene. The authors acknowledge key issues of civil rights, ethnic origins of the music etc alongside these activities however it is unfortunate that these are not more deeply engaged with, not only because to do so would provide deeper understanding of the implication of the facts presented, but because the barrage of names and dates with little discussion makes it hard to find space to draw breath and absorb the quantity of information provided.

It is notable that the two countries are not treated equally, with British concerns typically presented in relation to its American counterpart. For example, discussion on Sharp's work is limited to his Appalachian trips and there is a bias on Lomax's work in Europe over native collectors. While British folk music in this period was indisputably heavily influenced by American events, this American-centric focus means a wealth of activity goes undocumented. Both authors have previously published on American revivals so this is perhaps inevitable, but acknowledgement that this is primarily a study of 'American music in America and Britain' might have been more representative.

Heavily researched and thoroughly footnoted, the lack of engagement with critical literature places this as a high quality volume of great interest to folk music enthusiasts rather than an academic text. As a document describing an underrepresented period between revivals it is invaluable, drawing key figures and events together with explicit links showing both the impact of Britain on American music, and the importance of Americans on the development of the British scene.