

*Media Sense: The Folklore — Popular Culture Continuum.* Ed.  
**Peter Narváez and Martin Laba.**

I. Sheldon Posen

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## I. SHELDON POSEN

THE DISCIPLINE OF Folklore divides the world into three different kinds of culture: high, folk and popular. High culture includes the “classical” arts enjoyed by a society’s elite. Folk culture is defined by time (usually measured in generations which “hand down” traditions from one to the next), by its scale (small) and by its occurrence among more or less unschooled tradition-bearers living in a relatively rural, sparse, isolated setting. Popular culture is the product of large-scale industrial nations and modern communications technology; its impersonality, commercialism and mass appeal epitomize what folklore is not.

Over the past thirty years or so, Folklore has been redefining itself, expanding its purview. One of the first and most influential movements within the discipline that has been rethinking the paradigms, especially the old opposition between small-scale folkloric performance and the mass media, has been folksong and country music scholarship. Spearheaded by two generations of researchers like D.K. Wilgus, Norm Cohen, Bill C. Malone, and Neil V. Rosenberg, Folklore is coming to terms with popular culture.

It is not surprising that *Media Sense*, a new collection of articles on the relationship between folklore and the mass media, should have come out of Memorial University of Newfoundland. The faculty of the MUN Folklore Department has always had a strong representation of folksong scholars, and there is a Departmental tradition of questioning the assumptions of the discipline by exposing them to the down-to-earth light of field research.

*Media Sense* is a collaboration by MUN Folklore students, alumni and faculty. The main message of its ten case studies is that while the materials and processes of the mass media *are* large-scale and impersonal, they are coopted and transformed by individuals or communities and tailored to their needs. Far from being passive consumers of what the media offer, people funnel the media into their own lives, scale down what they offer and essen-

tially render them both personal and interpersonal. In effect, they make the mass media act as a resource for ongoing local traditional processes — an extra mine of information, another means of expression, a way to enrich and extend the kind of face-to-face, generation-to-generation communicating that people are used to doing in folklore.

The topics discussed in *Media Sense* include tv soap operas, contemporary St. John's radio phone-in shows, photocopied jokes circulating in business offices, two old Newfoundland radio programs (Joey Smallwood's "The Barrelman" and "The Newfie Bullet"), Dick Nolan's hit song of the early 70s, "Aunt Martha's Sheep," Margaret Trudeau jokes, workplace stereotypes, the use of mass marketed holy pictures in Newfoundland homes and the connection between local and professional music making.

Despite its popular culture subject matter and the accessibility of most of its contributors' writing styles, the book is clearly meant for the academic Folklore audience. General readers and nonfolklorists will likely find the pileup of jargon and relative clauses found in some of the articles impenetrable. Even folklorists may consider some of the attempts at reducing subjects to Folklore-relevant issues forced. Most of the book, however, is apt and readable. In particular, Gerald Pocius links the placement of religious objects in Newfoundland houses to abstract notions of public and private space (I cavil only with his linking the holy pictures on bedroom walls to death but not to their role in providing a religious context for sex in a Catholic home). Michael Taft nicely demonstrates the debt owed by "Aunt Martha's Sheep" to local song tradition. Peter Narváez gives a tantalizing report on the importance of "The Newfie Bullet" to the island's popular culture and prints fascinating excerpts from interviews with Joey Smallwood about the former premier's experiences as "The Barrelman." And Neil V. Rosenberg provides a conceptual model showing the career stages that public performance musicians move through in their climb from local to national status.

Rosenberg's article is at once the anchor and foil for the whole collection of essays. Building brilliantly on years of research on individual musicians, Rosenberg synthesizes their experiences into a dynamic picture of how traditional and popular culture interact:

There exists within country music a hierarchy of musicians stretching from face-to-face situations which would clearly fit all the defining criteria for folksong, to mass media situations which we generally describe as popular culture . . . . When we realize that the local folk performer, a celebrated craftsman within the community, is potentially or in actuality an anonymous apprentice within a national situation, then questions of change and continuity within local musical traditions become more understandable. (160)

Rosenberg ends by seeming to call into question one of the major premises of the whole book, that the difference between folklore and popular culture is defined by, as the editors say in their Introduction, "media of transmission and group size." Rosenberg's conclusions are these:

I draw no clear-cut dividing line between small-group and mass audience performance. Instead I describe a broad spectrum. The interpretation of audience or market size as a defining characteristic of folklore presents a dilemma which folklore scholars create in using a performance-based definition of their subject, if it is indeed a dilemma and not a widening of perspective. (163-4)

The last phrase, of course, puts the conclusion completely in line with the book's (and editors') purpose: jostling at the boundaries of folklore definition. In fact, the subtitle chosen for the book implies an editorial position that the discipline of Folklore, like its subject matter, would seem to be healthiest when it balances tradition with creativity.

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