

***Folk Music and Modem Sound.* William FERRIS and Mary L. HART (eds.) (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1982. Pp. 224, \$7.95 (paper), ISBN 0-87805-157-0**

**Robert Witmer**

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# Folk Music and Modern Sound

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*William FERRIS and Mary L. HART (eds.)*

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This volume brings together fifteen essays originally presented as lectures at a conference on "Folk Music and Modern Sound" held at the University of Mississippi in April, 1980. The essays are all from established figures in the fields of "folklore, ethnomusicology, history, music criticism, poetry, anthropology, and music bibliography" (p. 10). Together they present a useful survey of a number of British and (primarily) American ethnic, regional, subcultural music traditions.

The essays have been grouped topically by the editors under six headings (probably corresponding to the 'session topics' framing the original conference). Section one, titled "The Anglo Connection" is the only one to deal with British, as opposed to North American, traditions. It comprises contributions by Kenneth Goldstein and A.L. Lloyd on the mid-twentieth century 'folksong revival' in England, and the implications of this development for traditional notions of folk product and process. Section two, "Ethnic Voices," has three articles. Mark Slobin chronicles early twentieth-century Jewish-American popular music in New York; Charles Keil presents an account of his fieldwork on midwestern polka culture; Richard Spottswood gives an overview of 'ethnic' music on early twentieth-century American commercial phonorecords. In section three, "The Religious Sound," there are articles by Doris Dyen ("New Directions in Sacred Harp Singing"); Charles Wolfe ("Gospel Goes Uptown: White Gospel Music, 1945 and 1955"), and Anthony Heilbut ("The Secularization of Black Gospel Music"). Section four, "Pure Country," has an article by Bill Malone on 'honky tonk' music and another by William Ivey on the 'Nashville Sound.' The penultimate section, "Myths and Heroes," throws together Vivian Perlis's piece, titled "Charles Ives: Victorian Gentleman or American Folk Hero?" and Dena Epstein's "Myths About Black Folk Music." The sixth and final section, "Blacks and Blues," combines

contributions by David Evans, Amiri Baraka, and Robert Palmer. Evans gives a brief overview of the contributions of the blues to U.S. music and a rather rosy prognosis for the future of the blues. Baraka provides a passionate piece reminding us of some unpleasant realities in the present and historical socio-economic backdrop of American vernacular music. Palmer's piece is concerned with mid-twentieth century black popular music of New Orleans.

Despite the wide range of topics, and the diversity of disciplinary allegiances of the authors, the essays have a number of things in common. Most of them are short (10-12 pages is average), musically non-technical, clearly written and free of professional jargon. In these features the essays show, in my estimation, the salutary effects of their genesis as communications to be received 'by ear' rather than 'by eye'. Admittedly, some of the contributions have survived the translation from oral presentation to printed page less well than others. This is especially the case of the papers which in their original guise were essentially lecture-demonstrations with recorded musical examples, e.g., the papers of A.L. Lloyd and Robert Palmer. One really needs the sounds to get the essence of Lloyd's and Palmer's contributions. If any approaches predominate in this set of papers they are those of the narrative historian and, to a lesser extent, the ethnographer: in their essence most of the papers are either chronicles of 'how it was and how it changed' or accounts of 'how it is' in a particular corner of modern musical reality. A surprising number of the accounts surpass, or at least equal, anything else available in print in their ability to remove basic—and sometimes not-so-basic—ignorance about their respective subjects. The volume under review here is therefore, in my estimation, an important contribution to our knowledge of what some scholars have taken to calling 'vernacular' music (and music-making).

For better or worse, there is little attention given in these essays to theorizing about, or clarification of, concepts and terms important to most, if not all, of the essays, e.g., "folk music," "modern sound," "commercialization," "modernization," "urbanization." Perhaps many of the essayists would endorse the cautionary notes with which Charles Keil concludes his essay on polka culture:

And what is an appropriate conclusion to draw from this material for a conference on "folk music and modern sound?" I have argued elsewhere that the "folk" concept is a dangerous mystification, especially when it is used to folk over the working class. And I'm not very happy with "modern sound" to designate what "folk" evolves into, since its denotive center is amorphous and the connotations of slick, commercial, alienated, mass mediated, all the heavier. . . . Why not just talk about people's music, or the working people's music that's not dependent on state subsidy or corporate mediation, and then celebrate the fact that it changes in striking ways from old country to new, from rural to urban settings, from one city to another, and from generation to generation.

(p. 58)

Robert WITMER  
York University  
North York, Ontario