

Give Peace (and Folk Song) a Chance:

American Folk Song and the Vietnam Anti-War Movement

“Folk song” is an oft-contested term. Pete Seeger sums it up best in his statement that “[n]o two people, not even the professors, have been able to agree completely on a definition of folk music” (62). He goes on to cite two conflicting definitions: 1) “A folk song must be old, carried on for generations by people who have had no contact with urban arts and influence. A folk song must show no traces of individual authorship”, and 2) “the definition of the late Big Bill Broonzy, the blues singer, when “asked if a certain blues he sang was a folk song” and he replied, ‘It must be . . . I never heard horses sing it.’ (Seeger 62). As Seeger points out, the definition of what constitutes a folk song has been greatly debated. Some folklorists have gone so far as to claim that folk songs, by contemporary times, either no longer exist (Bose 17) or are dying out (Nettl 13). Similar arguments have been made of American folk songs, claiming their disappearance or their continued decline in contemporary society (Bluestein 92; Nettl 13). This raises two crucial questions: what exactly are folk songs and are they really dead in contemporary society?

The definition of folk song most readily agreed upon is that they are the songs of the people (Bose 17). It is in the specifics of this description and in determining who the “people” are that things begin to get complicated. The purpose of this study is to unpack the notion of the folk song. While acknowledging “traditional” definitions of folk song criteria, I also plan to look at what many folklorists claim to be “unauthentic” folk music. Bruno Nettl writes,

Much misuse of the term has been caused by a new veneration for folk music by the public, a veneration that has been exploited by those who have found that their

sales increase when “folk” is put on the label. Consequently, the term has often been used to identify music which under no honest definition could be accepted as folklore. (20)

I will be expanding on the traditional definition of folk song in an attempt to break down the term and look at how it can be applied to some popular music. While the purpose of this study is not to negate traditional definitions of the folk song, I seek to question the exclusionary criteria that have been applied to it and the rejection of popular music, as Serge Denisoff claims, “on the grounds of its contaminations by the poisons of capitalism” (*Great Day Coming* 112). I argue that “popular” music should not be a totalizing exclusionary category and while not all popular songs can be considered folk songs, not all popular songs can be excluded.

This study will look briefly at “traditional” folk songs before exploring the American anti-war movement during the Vietnam War as evidence that popular songs can and should be included within the spectrum of folk song. While Jerry Rodnitsky claims that “American folk songs had traditionally vented individual emotions and problems, but were seldom connected to any political or social protest movements” (71), I contend that during the Vietnam war, folk songs *were* used within a social protest movement and *were* used, as Denisoff claims folk song can be, as “a medium to perpetuate social change or ideological ends outside the value structure of the social system” (16-17). Through the American anti-war movement during the Vietnam War, we can see how the traditional criteria of folk song can and should be expanded to include popular music adopted by a social group to give a communal voice to their movement.

Folk songs as a sub section of folk narrative are often looked at in terms of specific criteria. Elliott Oring characterizes folk narratives as oral, communicated face to face, existing in multiple versions with no text being authoritative, reflecting both the past and the present, and

reflecting both the individual and the community (122-123). R. Serge Denisoff adds that folk narrative comes from the people and is based on their everyday lives (*Great Day Coming* 15). Alan Dundes agrees with folklore as representative of the people, both descriptive of themselves and of their worldview (*Thinking Ahead* 54). These theories all reflect on the notion of folk narratives as being of the people, but who are these people?

Many concepts of the folk, often utilizing older theories, see them as existing in past societies. By ‘older theories,’ I refer to Dundes’ assertion that “twentieth-century American folklorists’ concepts of folklore are actually nineteenth-century concepts in disguise” (*American Concept* 227). Even though societies have changed over time with industrialization and urbanization, folklorists, including more modern folklorists, often look to a romanticized past (Doliner 56), where folk songs remain as “artifacts of bygone cultures” (Bluestein 3), according to Gene Bluestein. As folklorists continue to look at the past, it is no wonder that many claim that folklore is dying. Dundes writes that these claims of the ‘death of folklore’ are “in part a result of the misguided and narrow concept of the folk as the illiterate in a literate society, that is the folk as peasant, [...], as isolated rural community” (*Devolutionary* 13). Many of the characteristics associated with folk song therefore reflect these antiquarian notions of the folk making it difficult to conceptualize the folk and their songs in more contemporary, post-industrial societies.

While many folklorists cling to this notion of the romanticized past, there are some who see the merit in progressing the description into contemporary times. Alan Dundes claims that “the term ‘folk’ can refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor” (*American Concept* 232) and that it “does not matter what the linking or isolating factor is – it could be a common occupation, a common language, or common religion – but what is

important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own” (Dundes, *American Concept* 232). Dundes also asserts that the traditional conceptions of folklore need to be expanded to include literate people (*Devolutionary* 14). It is through Dundes’ extension of the folk that new conceptions of folk song are possible.

As described earlier, the term folk song has many different connotations. While this study is far too limited to be inclusive of all definitions of folk song, it is important to outline some predominant characteristics. Two major characteristics of folk songs are:

1. *Folk songs are oral* (Dundes, *American Concept* 233; McCann 73; Atkinson 458-459; Bohlman 14; Nettl 22; Denisoff, *Grand Day* 59). This may also include songs that do not begin as folk but become so by entering into the oral tradition (Glassie 52).

2. *Folk songs have anonymous authors* (McCann 53; Atkinson 464; Denisoff, *Grand Day* 170; Bohlman 7). In correspondence with anonymous authorship, folk songs are believed to be communally created or re-created (Nettl 25; Bohlman 24). Having said that, folk songs can be created by an individual and then scrutinized and recreated by the community (Bohlman 9).

Another characteristic of folk song is verbal alternation during transmission (Denisoff, *Song* 59), which is often a result of small changes over time rather than conscious alteration (Glassie 31-32). Other characteristics include spontaneous or improvised composition (Lomax 456) as well as the song’s ability to outlive performers as it is passed down over time (Szwed 150). Another seemingly obvious but quite complicated characteristic would be that they are ‘folk’ songs and therefore as Pete Seeger states, “if folks sing them they are folksongs” (qtd in Rodnitsky 28). Of course, this brings us back to that question of who can be categorized as folk. Mark Willhardt represents this conundrum: “Something is folk music because it comes from the folk who are defined as such because they generate folk music” (31).

Based on their attempts to conceptualize what constitutes a folk song, folklorists have theorized as to what makes up specifically American folk music. America is a relatively young country with an amalgamation of different cultures. Many folk songs therefore have origins outside of America. Numerous folklorists look to the British (England-Scotland-Ireland) folk songs in America (Dundes, *American Concept* 230; Seeger 142; Nettl 64) while others look to songs originating in West Africa (Seeger 142) and Asia (Dundes, *American Concept* 230-231). Some folklorists also look to Native Americans as a source of American folk song (Dundes, *American Concept* 230-231).

There is a wide array of American folk songs as a result of its scattered origins. While an exhaustive list of all folk songs is beyond the scope of this study, I will quickly outline some of the major recognized forms of American folk song. Some types of American folk songs include hymns, patriotic songs and union songs (Seeger 73) as well as nursery rhymes (Seeger 127) and propaganda and protest songs (Denisoff, *Sing* 21). American folk song also includes folk ballads utilized by a number of different groups including cowboys, sailors, coal miners and other occupational groups (Nettl 79-84) such as lumbermen, soldiers, and railroaders (Bluestein 97). Recognized 'authentic' folk songs include those collected in the nineteenth century by the likes of Cecil Sharp and Francis Child (James 125; Seeger 113). British folk songs such as those collected by Child were popular among European settlers but also among African American folksingers (Lomax 199). African American folk songs were also widely derived from psalms (Lomax 81) and work songs with its beginnings in slavery (Nettl 97). African American folk music and the styles which have grown from it include hoe-down, the spiritual, the minstrel tune, ragtime, jazz, the blues, rock and gospel (Lomax 203-204; Nettl 93-98). As shown, there is a considerable repertoire of American folk song, much of which fits into the traditional

characteristics identified above. One characterizing factor of this brief overview of folk song is that much of this music originated far enough in the past to fit into the antiquarian notion of the folk.

While there are recognized characteristics, origins and types of folk song, many folklorists also acknowledge that there are exceptions to the supposed rules. Folk songs are considered to be transmitted orally and many of the examples above would demonstrate this. This is not to suggest that the oral tradition stands in contradiction with literacy. Bruno Nettl claims that “many songs begin in written form [...]. If [...] they pass into the oral tradition, they can also be considered folk songs” (23). David Atkinson claims that a text does not imply *the* text, *the* pattern (468). He writes, “in practice, whether a sung version remains very close to a printed item or differs from it much more considerably is presumably a reflection of the individual singer’s exposure to different possibilities as well as his or her own artistic choice and temperament” (Atkinson 468).

The characteristic of anonymous authorship has also been bent by folklorists. Philip Bohlman counters the notion of anonymous authorship. He writes, “The folk music of the past was not substantially different – functionally or aesthetically – from the folk music of today. Folk songs no more composed themselves in a bygone golden age than in a modern, industrialized world. The origins of folk music in the present are just like those of the past” (3). For example, Woody Guthrie’s songs are considered folk song, despite the known authorship, because his songs are considered to be sung by the ‘folk’ (Dundes, *American Concept* 235).

While the traditional criteria has been questioned, many folklorists still consider capitalistic or popular folk music to be unauthentic or fake. When folk song is sold for profit, essentially becoming a commodity, it is met with much criticism (Dundes, *American Concept*

234; Bohlman 131). Fritz Bose claims that such marketed folk song does not have the character of true folk song because the performance of these songs “has not the character of a singing full of life and it is not addressed to a singing and participating group, but to a listening audience” (20). I contend that Bose’s argument is a generalization of the performance of popular song and I plan to undermine this through the example of the Vietnam anti-war movement.

During the 1960s, protest movements against America’s involvement in the Vietnam War were gaining momentum and folk song quickly became a central part of these protests. While America had been sending military advisors to South Vietnam since 1959, it was the bombing of North Vietnam shortly after Lyndon Johnson was elected president, and the deployment of nearly 50,000 American troops to Vietnam (Hall 9) that the movement really took off. Having said that, Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan trace the first American death in Vietnam all the way back to 1945 (13). Many Americans were opposed to the ideological reasons of the war and the killing of civilian Vietnamese (Turner 295-297), as well as the draft and the forced involvement of American citizens in the war. Protest against the Vietnam War took many forms, including the burning of draft cards, as well as marches, rallies, demonstrations, confrontations with and appeals to authorities and politicians. Protest also took the form of teach-ins at various colleges and universities. More drastic protests included veterans returning their war medals and eight individuals who actually burned themselves to death to protest the horrors being committed in Vietnam (Zaroulis and Sullivan 4-358; Hall 22). Finally, and more relevantly, protests within the anti-war movement also utilized music, notably, folk, rock, and folk-rock music. This protest movement and the songs which arose from it continued until the end of the war in 1975 (Zaroulis and Sullivan 420).

If we return to Alan Dundes’ assertion that folk can be made up of any group with

distinguishing commonalities, then the Vietnam anti-war movement could be categorized as a folk movement. The anti-war movement brought an eclectic group of people together in protest against the war. Zaroulis and Sullivan describe participants at a rally as including

students and adult professional groups, religious, trade unions, and political groups, local antiwar groups, active duty servicemen, veterans of previous wars, government employees, blacks, and Third World groups, as well as newer special interest groups such as women's and gay liberation. (359)

This exemplifies the diversity of people coming together in the anti-war movement. Each of these groups could fall under Dundes' criteria and their one distinguishable commonality is their investment in protesting and attempting to end the Vietnam War. The anti-war movement was a continual process, which developed and changed through the progress of the war, while at the same time, maintaining its one distinguishing factor. If the Vietnam anti-war movement can be identified with folk, then it would seem that the songs that spring from this movement would be folk songs, but is it really that easy?

David Atkinson correlates songs with social groups in which a song emerging from a specific time and place can be connected to a certain group (484). If a social group can be considered folk, and songs can be connected to a social group, then it is reasonable to assume that songs which arise from that group can be considered folk songs. In attempting to extend the boundaries of folk song criteria, however, my intention here is not to assume that every single song could be considered a folk song (although solely from the criteria of social group, one could posit such). There are many songs from the 1960s which refer to the Vietnam War or were written in protest of the Vietnam War or were popular with American soldiers in Vietnam. Some examples include Peter, Paul and Mary's 'Leaving on a Jet Plane,' The Animals' 'We Gotta Get

Out of This Place,' Pete Seeger's 'Ballad of the Fort Hood Three,' and Joni Mitchell's 'Fiddle and Drum.' Some songs only made brief mention the Vietnam War such as Creedance Clearwater Revival's 'Fortunate Son,' while other songs popularized the war, such as Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler's 'The Ballad of the Green Beret.' Other songs referred to the anti-war movement such as Crosby, Still, Nash and Young's 'Ohio' and the Beatles' 'Revolution' (James 127-135; Denisoff, *Sing* 184-188). The 1960's also saw what Rodnitsky refers to as 'do-it-yourself' protest songs as multiple issues could be read into them (18), such as Bob Dylan's 'Mr. Tambourine Man' and Paul Simon's 'Sound of Silence.' Another important song of the 1960s was Barry McGuire's 'Eve of Destruction,' which did not mention Vietnam but talked about the onset of a nuclear holocaust. Other popular songs were less explicit in their content such as The Monkee's 'Last Train to Clarksville.' Deena Weinstein writes, "you can't 'get' the anti-war sentiment in the lyrics unless you knew that Clarksville is a city near an army training camp in Tennessee" (11). These songs are only a limited sampling of many that had to do with a topic taken up by a vast social movement, some of the singers of these songs were even part of that movement, but are they really 'folk' songs?

In my view, some popular songs such as those I listed (but not all), can be considered folk songs. Dundes claims that if a text goes into oral tradition and is accepted by a folk group, then fakelore would become folklore (233-234). Many songs, even if they were mass produced or popularized, were accepted by the folk group of the Vietnam anti-war movement. In addition, some singers were active in the movement themselves such as Joan Baez and Bob Dylan (Woolgar 314), which may explain why they are more readily given the title of folk than other singers (coupled with their style of music, of course). Often it did not matter if the singer was very active in the movement, only if their song was taken up by the folk. Such songs include

Peter, Paul, and Mary's 'Blowin' in the Wind,' which was adopted by the movement (as well as the integration movement) second only to 'We Shall Overcome' (Ewens 358). Interestingly, the song was adopted by the folk even though theorists have criticized Peter, Paul and Mary as a commercial creation (Eyerman and Barretta 354).

Another significant song was John Lennon's 'Give Peace a Chance,' which became a standard at marches and demonstrations (Denisoff, *Sing* 98-99). Seeger writes that "if you think of folk music as a process, you know that words and melodies may not be so important as the way they are sung or listened to. The process includes not only the song, but the singer and the listeners, and their situation" (145). While not all songs created during, or even for, the Vietnam anti-war movement could be considered folk songs, the songs that were directly taken up by the movement and used communally during the numerous demonstrations should rightly fall under this term. In being explicitly taken up by the movement, the songs enter the oral tradition, are passed along and communally recreated through each performance, and therefore, even though they are not anonymously authored, it is not about the so-called 'authoritative' text originally recorded by the singer or composer but the oral folk song recreated by the folk within the Vietnam anti-war movement. While there are many examples of the communal singing at Vietnam anti-war protests, I choose to highlight two particular protests to serve as examples of the greater phenomenon. Zaroulis and Sullivan write of Vietnam Moratorium Day on October 15th 1969, when "the soft refrain of 'Give Peace a Chance' was repeated over and over as the solemn marchers, three or four abreast, reached the Nixon abode" (269). Of the November 15th 1969 protest, a month later, activist Louise Peck comments on the experience: "A very beautiful feeling...such a sense of community in that crowd...even alone, everyone you met was like a friend" (qtd in Zaroulis and Sullivan 289). Zaroulis and Sullivan write of the protest:

The power of the music message reduced the platform oratory to less than counterpoint, to empty pauses between sets. Typical of the afternoon was a moment when the whole audience joined hands in singing, along with Pete Seeger, ‘Give Peace a Chance,’ and the voice of Dr. Benjamin Spock at a speaker’s microphone could be heard as an obbligato rising above the chorus: ‘Are you listening, Nixon, are you listening?’ (290)

In the examples above, this is not a popular song sung to a passive audience, this is a song taken up by a group of folk and recreated in each performance. The song becomes a folk song as it is communally recreated by the folk. Lennon’s authoritative authorship does not matter as the group alters the song to their own purposes, as in the repetition of a chorus or the performance of Pete Seeger with the crowd singing along while Dr. Spock ad libs over top. In these examples, the stage does not imply distance between performer and audience as the two become communally connected.

Not all songs can be considered folk songs, or else the title would become completely meaningless. Having said that, strictly defining it in outdated terms will always exclude newer styles of music (and I say this acknowledging that my examples are already 50 years old at this time). As Dundes writes, “If folklorists were able to free themselves from so narrow and obsolescent a concept of folk, they could see that there are still numerous active functioning folk groups” (13-14). The music that was taken out of the popular sphere by the Vietnam anti-war movement to give themselves a communal voice exemplifies that many of the ‘traditional’ criteria can be seen within post-industrial urbanized societies if we only loosen those boundaries just a little bit. Seeger claimed that “where once it was argued that the pen was mightier than the sword, perhaps now the guitar could be mightier than the bomb” (153), and in that spirit a

folk group emerged using music (among other means) to urge their nation to give peace a chance. I now urge a new generation to give folk song a chance and extend it beyond antiquated notions.

Works Cited

- Atkinson, David. "Folk Songs in Print: Text and Tradition." *Folk Music Journal* 8.4 (2004): 456-483. Web. 10 Dec. 2012.
- Bluestein, Gene. *The Voice of the Folk: Folklore and American Literary Theory*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972. Print.
- Bohlman, Philip V. *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988. Print.
- Bose, Fritz. "Traditional Folksong and 'Folklore' Singers." *Journal of the International Music Council* 20 (1968): 17-21. Web. 10 Dec. 2012.
- Denisoff, R. Serge. *Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971. Print.
- Denisoff, R. Serge. *Sing a Song of Social Significance*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972. Print.
- Doliner, Gorana. "The Folk Idiom in Croatian Music of the 20th Century." *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 18.1 (Jun., 1987): 51-73. Web. 10 Dec. 2012.
- Dundes, Alan. "The American Concept of Folklore." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 3.3 (Dec., 1966): 226-249. Web. 10 Dec. 2012.
- Dundes, Alan. "The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 6.1 (Jun., 1969): 5-19. Web. 10 Dec. 2012.
- Dundes, Alan. "Thinking Ahead: A Folkloristic Reflection of the Future Orientation in American Wordview." *Anthropological Quarterly* 42.2 (Apr., 1969): 53-72. Web. 10 Dec. 2012.
- Ewen, David. *Great Men of American Popular Song*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc.,

1970. Print.

Eyerman, Ron and Scott Barretta. "From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States." *Theory and Society* 25.4 (Aug., 1996): 501-543. Web. 10 Dec. 2012.

Glassie, Henry. "'Take That Night Train to Selma': An Excursion o the Outskirts of Scholarship." *Folksongs and their Makers*. Ed. Henry Glassie, Edward D. Ives, and John F. Szwed. Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971. 1-70. Print.

Hall, Simon. *Peace and Freedom: The Civil Rights and Antiwar Movement in the 1960s*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2005. Print.

James, David. "The Vietnam War and American Music." *Social Text* 23 (Autumn-Winter, 1989): 122-143. Web. 10 Dec. 2012.

Lomax, Alan. *The Land Where the Blues Began*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1993. Print.

McCann, May. "Music and Politics in Ireland: The Specificity of the Folk Revival in Belfast." *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 4 (1995): 51-75. Web. 10 Dec. 2012.

Nettl, Bruno. *Folk Music in the United States: an introduction*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976. Print.

Oring, Elliott. "Folk Narratives." *Folk Groups & Folk Genres: An Introduction*. Ed. Elliott Oring. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1986. 121-145. Print.

Rodnitsky, Jerry. "The decline and rebirth of folk-protest music." *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest*. Ed. Ian Peddie. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006. 17-29. Print.

Seeger, Pete. *The Incomplete Folksinger*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972. Print.

Szwed, John F. "Paul E. Hall: A Newfoundland Song-Maker and Community of Song."

- Folksongs and their Makers*. Ed. Henry Glassie, Edward D. Ives, and John F. Szwed. Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971. 149-167. Print.
- Turner, Stephen. "High on Insubordination" *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties*. Ed. Alan Sica and Stephen Turner. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. 285-308. Print.
- Weinstein, Deena. "Rock protest songs: so many and so few." *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest*. Ed. Ian Peddie. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006. 3-16. Print.
- Willhardt, Mark. "Available rebels and folk authenticities: Michelle Shocked and Billy Bragg." *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest*. Ed. Ian Peddie. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006. 30-48. Print.
- Woolgar, Steve. "Ontological Disobedience – Definitely! {Maybe}" *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties*. Ed. Alan Sica and Stephen Turner. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. 309-324. Print.
- Zaroulis, Nancy and Gerald Sullivan. *Who Spoke Up?: American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975*. Garden City: Double Day & Company, Inc., 1984. Print.