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# THE OLD-TIME HERALD

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO OLD-TIME MUSIC



Ramona  
Jones

## IN THIS ISSUE:

Contradancing • Galax Photo Essay • Banjo Tablature • Tommy Jarrell,  
Part II • Mike Seeger's Favorite Old-Time Fiddle Music • Gerry Milnes  
...and more!

## Voices From the Villages

by Paul Tyler

On May 17 and 18, 1991, a group of folklorists, performers, promoters, and others interested in and associated with the urban folk revival of the 1950s and '60s met on the campus of Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana for two days of lectures and panel discussions. The symposium was sponsored by Indiana University's Folklore Institute and was held in honor of Richard Reuss, a recently deceased alumnus of the Indiana University Folklore department who had a special interest in the folk revival. The event was unusual and heartening both in its focus and in its inclusion of live music in the evenings as part of its official program.

Over the next couple of issues we will be publishing an article or two based on John Cohen's (of *New Lost City Ramblers* fame) keynote address at this conference. John's talk, the one which most pertained to traditional music, was fascinating, informative, and touched on a number of issues associated with old-time music.

With its historical perspective on the whole issue of the "revivalist" movement the OTH feels that these excerpts will be of interest, and help readers to better understand how the movement bears very directly on the present old-time music community.

We begin the series with an overview of the conference by Paul Tyler, a folklorist, musician, and caller from Chicago. —Linda Higginbotham and Alice Gerrard

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Here are some stimulating springtime comments from the pen of Israel G. Young: "Reverend Gary Davis and his sidekick Barry Kornfeld, made a hit at Boston's Golden Vanity recently. Despite all the renewed interest in the Reverend, no LP of his work is available today. A lucky few can hear the tapes Fred Gerlach has been making. . . ."

"Joe Hickerson, Indiana U's embattled scholar, writes that folk music has reached the Ivory Tower and can be heard live at the Quiet Answer Coffee Shop in Bloomington, on week-ends. . . ."

"Folksinging seems to be moving from the living room concert hall and hootenanny to the Coffee House and Night Club...But it is getting difficult to hear folksinging for fun today, as anyone capable of leading a group finds it almost impossible to resist the commercial possibilities folksinging offers now. I can't wait till the sun shines on Washington Square when Roger Sprung will again lead his banjo-laden troops through the park. . . ."

As you may have already guessed, these words were written many years ago. They appeared in the column "Frets and Frails" in *Sing Out!* as the New York-based

folksong magazine began its 10th year of publication in 1960.

Before he left for Sweden, his home for the last 18 years, Izzy Young was a keen observer of the personalities, performances, and politics that percolated through the Greenwich Village folk scene of the late fifties and early sixties. As proprietor of the Folklore Center—a most important Village hangout—and as a concert promoter, he was also an influential force on the urban folk music revival that gained much of its momentum from what was happening around MacDougal and Bleecker Streets and in Washington Square. Pop music historians usually remember Izzy as the promoter responsible for Bob Dylan's first appearance on a concert (as opposed to a coffee house) stage. It was a box office flop.

Izzy Young's introduction to things folk was through Margot Mayo's American Square Dance Group in New York City back in the 40s and 50s. Now busy publishing a Swedish folklore magazine and calling one-night stands in Sweden, Izzy took time off for a return to the United States this past spring to take part in a spectacular gathering of folk music luminaries—including both those who stood before the spotlights and those who worked behind the scenes. Sponsored by the Indiana University Folklore Institute, the Richard Reuss Memorial Folk Music conference brought to the fore a number of the artistic controversies and ideological debates that enlivened the folksong revival during the Eisenhower and Kennedy eras. As many of the conference's formal presentations assumed the character of personal stories, it became clear that the values and issues that shaped the folk music world back in its supposed heyday are still close to the hearts of many.

Epitomizing one major controversy was, on the one hand, Lou Gottlieb of the Limelitters, the ultimate of populizers. On the other hand, there was John Cohen of the New Lost City Ramblers, a group that regularly left the city to seek out rural singers and musicians who knew old songs and tunes. These so-called "purists" not only strove to stay close to the spirit and style of

the traditional artists they learned from, but also tried to bring some degree of fame and fortune to their teachers. While less idealistic, groups like the Limelitters and their ilk were much more commercially successful and brought traditional music to a much broader audience.

Record producer and writer Dave Samuelson, formerly of Evanston, Illinois, summarized the artistic quandary represented by these two key groups. He emphasized that popular renditions and traditional versions of folksongs, though stylistically different, are both valid musical expressions. (Samuelson and conference organizer Ron Cohen are currently arranging a massive reissue on the Bear Family label of the Almanac Singers, the Weavers, and other long out-of-print recordings of the World War II era.) *OTH* readers doubtless have their own preferences. And, like this reporter, most would have been more in tune with John Cohen's memoir of how a big-city dweller discovered traditional music makers tucked away in the rural nooks and crannies of America, and less impressed by the aggrandizements and profit margins realized by Dr. Gottlieb.

Caught up in this issue are the tougher questions of the ownership of songs from oral tradition and the treatment of traditional artists. Popular performers, such as the Kingston Trio, readily copyrighted and received royalties on their arrangements of traditional material. No one, not even the traditional singers from whom the songs were collected, could legally own the songs. But the issue was muddied when a group made a hit, and consequently a lot of money, with a recording of a song from a known traditional source.

Joe Hickerson, current head of the Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress, illustrated the most famous case of this type by showing how "Tom Dula"—a ballad from Frank Proffitt's family tradition in North Carolina—traveled by way of song collector Frank Warner to Washington. There it was warmly received *(continued on next page)*

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by folk song enthusiasts in the federal government, centered around impresario Alan Lomax, then head of the Folk Song Archive at the Library of Congress. The song next made its way to Greenwich Village where it was performed in a bluegrass version by Roger Sprung and friends in the weekly Washington Square jam sessions. Their distinctive bluegrass rendition was picked up and adapted by the Kingston Trio, whose recording of "Tom Dooley" reached the top of the pop charts in 1958. The question of whether Frank Proffitt should have been compensated as the source, even though

he had no legal claim to the song, was hotly debated once again at the Bloomington conference. The question was also raised as to what claim Roger Sprung might have had since his arrangement was substantially borrowed by the Kingston Trio.

Another source of contention resurrected at the conference was the role politics played in the ascent of the folk music revival. This issue was the concern of the late Richard Reuss, whose 1971 doctoral dissertation, *American Folklore and Left-Wing Politics*, explored the involvement of the Left and the Communist Party with the folk and protest

song movement led by the Almanac Singers in the '30s and '40s. America's pervasive Marxophobia has made Reuss' landmark work unpublishable for the last two decades, and has inhibited any honest appraisal of the role of the Communist Party in the labor movement in particular or American cultural life in general.

At the Reuss conference Irwin Silber, a former editor of *Sing Out!* and its precursor, the Party-sponsored *People's Songs*, was a compelling apologist for the aims that led the CP to embrace folk music as an instrument for social justice and progressive politics. Bernie Asbell, the People's Songs' Chicago representative during the Henry Wallace presidential campaign of 1948, and David Dunaway, Pete Seeger's biographer, both called for a critical reevaluation of the tactics and doctrines employed during the Party's highwater days and the ensuing dark night of McCarthyism.

Much more happened during those two May days in Bloomington than can be recounted here. John Pankake of Minneapolis, founding editor of the sagacious fanzine, *The Little Sandy Review*, and Old Town School of Folk Music co-founder Frank Hamilton were among those who reported on local music scenes in the provinces outside of Greenwich Village. Mimi Farina, Bob Gibson, Dick Weissman, and Pat Sky gave personal accounts of their lives and times as performers and songwriters. Oscar Brand sang a portrait of Leadbelly. Len Chandler gave a most moving account of how a conservatory-trained musician from the urban north found his calling as a songwriter while participating in civil rights marches in the south. Barry Hansen, a.k.a. Dr. Demento (who has an M.A. in Folklore), donned top hat and tails to host a Friday night Hootenanny that featured a fine set by Cohen joined by Bloomington's Brad Leftwich, Linda Higginbotham, and Bob Herring. Izzy Young got back to his roots by calling a Saturday night dance that featured a variety of figures from the so-called Kentucky Running Set. Fiddling was supplied by John Bealle and Bert Feintuch, while Neil Rosenberg added some tasteful three-finger banjo licks, and Joe Hickerson and Rich Remsburg sat in on guitar.

The whole history of the American folk music revival will be more thoroughly documented as a result of *Wasn't that a Time? The Richard Reuss Memorial Folk Music Conference*. Plans are being made to publish the proceedings of the conference, (continued on page 56)

It's quite an enjoyable read, sometimes thought-provoking, and very entertaining. I'll reiterate, it would have been nice to have heard some of the interesting people found between the covers of Mr. Bronner's excellent book.

KERRY BLECH

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## Additional

## Releases

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## Issues

*continued from page*

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issue a recording from the hootenanny, and publish, at long last, Reuss' dissertation. Also eagerly awaited is the book on this phase of American cultural history that is currently being written by Ron Cohen of the History Department at Indiana University Northwest, who took time out from his research to pull off this once-in-a-lifetime gathering. ■

NOTE: A previous version of this report was published in *The Lead Sheet*, the Old Town School's newsletter for members.

## Luthiers

*continued from page*

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seconds. Another contest, the guitar throwing challenge, was sponsored by C. F. Martin IV, president of Martin Guitars. Approximately 40 luthiers put their names in a hat to be chosen for a chance at throwing a guitar. The world's record of 92 feet was established for electric guitars. Acoustics, being lighter and less aerodynamically designed, fell short of the electrics. A mere 64 feet was the best throw in the acoustic category.

I have to give a special public thanks to Dick Boak and Susan Ellis. They got the