

# FIELD INVESTIGATOR'S REPORT ON FOLK MUSIC IN EAST CENTRAL ILLINOIS

by Paul L. Tyler

## GOALS AND METHODS

As a folklorist engaged by the School of Fine Arts at Eastern Illinois University to help compile a profile of folk arts as practiced today in east central Illinois, I was given the task of identifying and documenting folk music activity in the vicinities of Macon and Vermillion Counties. As I began my field research, the first fact that I confronted was that people spend a great deal of time and energy producing and consuming music. Following the goals of the Folk Arts Project, I had to wade through the abundance of listening experiences and music events available in the area surveyed to locate those music performances that represent a regional folk tradition or traditions. More specifically, I was directed to collect data on folk music activity in the urban sites of Decatur and Danville, cities with populations of 91,000 and 42,500 respectively. I was also given the freedom to follow up any promising leads in the outlying rural areas of Macon and Vermillion Counties, or in the area between the two urban sites.

Obtaining leads on active and formerly active musicians was not a problem. My first challenge was to develop a set of working criteria that would enable me to discriminate between those musicians whose music was "authentically folk-derived" and those who represented only elite (classical) or popular (mass media disseminated) traditions. An attractive solution to this problem, a solution that has great validity for the ethnographic study of American musical culture, would be to assert that any music performed by the folk of this region is the region's folk music. The goals of the Folk Arts Project, however, demanded greater selectivity. Unfortunately there is no simple standard that enables an investigator to discriminate clearly in all cases between folk and non-folk music. My own judgment was that it would be better to be more inclusive than exclusive in the material I sought to document. So I applied a definition of folk music that set criteria along three parameters--the provenance of the music, the development of the musician, and the group dynamics of the music event--and admitted to the survey any music activity that could be deemed folk according to at least one parameter. Briefly stated, I defined folk music as that music which exhibits the qualities of traditionality--continuity and variability--and is performed by an informally trained musician on behalf of, and in the context of a social group that claims that music and the musician as its own. The three parameters of this definition will be explained further in the following paragraphs.

I. The most basic criterion that differentiates the folk musician from the non-folk musician is that articulated by the pioneering American folksong scholar Phillips Barry: "As folks make up the folk, so folks who sing make of any song a traditional folk-song by the process of singing from memory."<sup>1</sup> This is a helpful guide, but vernacular music in 20th century America is a very complex phenomenon that poses a variety of challenges to the folklorist. Several of the musicians I thought should be recorded performed with the aid of written materials (see notes on Cecil and Rowena Terneus and the Abundant Life Tabernacle), but on the other hand, I would not have considered recording a classical musician who was performing a piece committed to memory. The key point of Barry's definition is that the folk musician is one who performs a song or instrumental tune that exists, in some sense, in his or her head. People who have learned songs and the craft of music-making in an informal manner seek to reproduce the melody and lyrics as they carry them in their heads, so to speak. The song or tune has become their song, and it is not

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<sup>1</sup>. Phillips Barry, "Communal Re-creation," Bulletin of the Folksong Society of the Northeast No. 5 (1933): 4.

appropriate to judge their performance of it against the standard of a written score or recorded performance. The only appropriate standard against which a song or tune performed from memory can be judged is the performer's memory; and that memory is accessible to the observer only through that person's performance. Hence, the congregation at the Abundant Life Tabernacle, though they sing with the aid of songbooks, sings songs that belong to them in a way that a classical piece can never belong to a classically trained interpreter who has committed that piece to memory.

II. Besides focusing on the informal processes by which people learn and perform folk music, the qualities of the music itself also provide a way to discern that music which is authentically folk-derived. Folklorist Barre Toelken's concept of the twin laws of conservatism and dynamism is a helpful tool for identifying folkloric materials, including folk music.<sup>2</sup> Folklore is conservative in the sense that an item of lore produced or performed by one person shows continuity with items produced or performed by others at another time and place. The term 'traditional' is often used to express this quality of continuity in time or space. Continuity in time is found in music that has been transmitted trans-generationally; that is, tunes or songs that a musician has learned from the performance(s) of musicians from an older generation. Continuity in space is found in music that has been transmitted informally between contemporaries. The former type of continuity could be thought of as a vertical tradition, while the latter could be conceived as a horizontal tradition. This distinction is helpful for organizing the data I collected.

Besides continuity, traditional materials also have a dynamic quality; that is, they exhibit a degree of variability. Folk music, like all folklore, is informally learned by oral (or aural) transmission, observation and imitation. The process of informal learning accounts for the fact that a piece of music as performed by the 'teacher' and as performed by the 'pupil' shows variation. The nature of traditional music, in that it is performed from memory, means that no one variant can be presumed to be the "right" or original version. Even when written or recorded aids are used in the learning process, the aesthetics of folk music give to each performance of a tune or song its own artistic validity. When a current country hit song enters folk tradition, the folk versions of the song are accepted on their rights, rather than how closely or slavishly they imitate the recorded source (see Cagegory C)

III. The third important criterion by which folk music can be recognized is that it must be music that is performed within the context of some social group; such as a family, an age group, a religious group, or a group more or less identified by some other shared factor like locality or voluntary association. Folk music is that music that to some extent expresses the values, attitudes, ideas or tastes of a group of people who have in common some other sign of social identity, or who share other cultural resources. I do not mean to imply that all members of the group can perform a piece of music, or have a longstanding familiarity with it, or even like it or agree that it is appropriate to the group. Folk music is that music that fits in part, if not wholly, with the shared aesthetics of the group. This view of folk music as a communal property gives plenty of room to the dynamic interplay between individual tasters and group aesthetics. English folklorist Cecil K. Sharp's adage that "an individual invents, the community selects" refers to the place of group aesthetics in the dynamics of tradition. New songs or tunes can be accepted by the the community as theirs, while older items, in spite of their traditional pedigrees, are sometimes rejected and forgotten. This latter state of affairs has often been described as the passing of tradition, the decline of folk culture. A more accurate reading of the cultural life of people in 20th century America, including east central Illinois, is that the dimension of folk culture is still vital and current, but it is constantly changing and adapting to other social and cultural forces of change.

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<sup>2</sup>. Barre Toelken, The Dynamics of Folklore (Boston, 1979), pp. 34-36.

## FIELD INVESTIGATION: GENERAL FINDINGS

My primary areas of focus were the cities of Decatur and Danville. I had much more success locating folk musicians in Decatur than in Danville itself, though Vermillion county, which is considerably larger than Macon County, is rich in folk music activity. One reason why I was more successful in Decatur is probably that I encountered more good fortune when I started there, and as the work progressed there were more leads and concrete results there that grabbed early at my time and energy. Also, I received a great deal of help and co-operation from people and agencies in Decatur, especially from the Decatur Area Arts Council. For their assistance, I am very grateful.

In both sites I primarily documented the music of Black Americans and of White, Anglo-Saxon Americans, or those assimilated into mainstream White culture. In Danville I encountered some traces of Polish and Hungarian cultures, also of German or Bohemian music. But other than a few folks, these musical traditions were not recorded or fully explored, for they seem to be more extinct than extant. In Decatur I recorded some Irish-American songs. I also was aware of Indian and Scandinavian-descended immigrants, but found no active music traditions. The great omission of my survey was that I was not able to investigate the Greek-American community in Decatur. By and large, though, ethnic music traditions are not as publicly visible, if they are extant at all, in these cities in comparison with other Midwestern urban areas where I have done fieldwork. It should be understood that though I attempted to make this survey representative, it is in no way comprehensive.

Overall, I conducted 42 interviews, at 34 of which tape recordings were made. Also, I conducted ten shorter interviews at which some data was collected, but for one reason or another, I was not able to follow up these leads. Seventeen interviews, including 13 recording sessions, took place in Decatur or with informants from Decatur. Three interviews, including two recording sessions, took place in small towns in Macon County, while five interviews with three recordings took place in small towns adjacent to Macon County. Nine interviews and recordings were held in Danville or with Danville informants. Three interviews, including two recordings, were held in the nearby town of Westville, while two recording sessions were held in other Vermillion county towns. In addition, three recording sessions took place in the rural area between the two cities, and one recording was made in Champaign at a session at which a Danville musician was supposed to have been, but was not present. Finally, John Holliday, who served as a field assistant, held 15 interviews and recording sessions: three in Decatur, one in another Macon County town, and the rest in nearby small towns, including four sessions in Tuscola.

The most general classification scheme for the music and data collected is to characterize it as White Secular, White Sacred, Black Secular, or Black Sacred. Within these categories it is possible to make further distinctions in terms of musical styles or idioms, but these should be taken only as generalizations and not as hard and fast distinctions. Musical styles do not have the force of necessity. All musicians make decisions, within the limits of what is known and accessible to them, about what and how they want to play. These choices are further limited by the communal aesthetics of the groups to which musicians belong, or of groups to which they wish to belong. The pluralism and mobility of modern life allow musicians and audiences to seek out others who have made similar or complementary choices. Thus a folk group can form around a shared appreciation for a musical style or idiom. This is especially evident in the realm of County Music and its various substyles, e.g., bluegrass, old-timey, or contest-style fiddling. It is also evident in Black popular music in terms of jazz musicians and aficionados.

White Secular music, which is as predominant in the present collection as it is in the area surveyed, can be broken down into the substyles of traditional, popular, country, and bluegrass. These are not mutually exclusive categories. In fact, it is hard to define them on the basis of the

music alone. Yet these terms are used by people and they do have a degree of descriptive value. Generally, what these terms best describe is the relative aesthetic preferences of a particular group of performers and auditors. The term 'traditional' is not a word commonly used by the folk of central Illinois in talking about music. I apply it here to the more archaic songs and tunes that predate the other stylistic categories. Performers of traditional music almost always perform within the domain of one of the other styles. Thus, Charles Keele plays a standard traditional repertoire of hoedowns (fiddle tunes), and also plays Tin Pan Alley melodies from the early decades of this century. Arlin Dietz, on the other hand, plays much the same repertoire with melodies from the Nashville-based country music industry. 'Popular' refers to the kinds of songs and tunes that people often think of as standards. Many compositions from Tin Pan Alley have entered oral tradition. Performers in this idiom play a wide variety of songs and tunes, but pieces such as "My Wild Irish Rose" and "I'm Looking Over a Four Leaf Clover" are very common. 'Country' refers to the music associated with the institutionalized dissemination of songs through the music industry associated with Nashville, Tennessee. Again, there is a wide variety of music performed by musicians who identify with this idiom, and a number of pieces are heard, such as "Blue Moon of Kentucky" or "Waltz Across Texas With You." There is a substantial degree of overlap between the repertoires and performance styles of musicians who identify with either the popular or country idioms--in the industry today, this overlap is known as 'crossover'--but people who prefer one style over the other seek out others with like preferences in terms of organizing or attending music events. Bluegrass is the most stylistically specific of these categories, for there are a whole set of aesthetic factors--instrumentation, speed, vocal quality, performance techniques, etc.--that are commonly held by practitioners and fans of this idiom. A musician must meet these criteria before he or she will be thought of as a bluegrass performer by those inside the group formed around this aesthetic.

The White Sacred music in the collection includes both hymns sung by congregations and gospel songs performed by individuals or small groups. The hymns were recorded in a natural context, that is, at worship services. The gospel songs were recorded both in natural contexts and in special recording sessions set up by the investigator. Most performers of gospel music that I recorded also play some secular music. The Tennessee Street Travellers and the Ashby Family Group Singers perform only sacred music.

The Black Secular music in the collection can also be differentiated into styles, but again the categories are not clearly bounded simply in terms of artistic qualities of the music. In fact the situation with Black Secular music is one in which individual expression is dominant. The value placed on individual expression leads to greater stylistic variation than the form or style of any particular idiom. The collection includes examples of what was described to me as jazz, rhythm and blues, and disco, but different used different labels to describe the same performer's music. Wayne Carter's music, for example, was characterized for me as both "rhythm and blues" and "not rhythm and blues, but disco." Another example of the overlapping qualities of Black styles of popular music is the fact that L.T. Taylor, a jazz saxophonist in his 50s, is developing a self-fulfilling role for musical expression in a band made up of young rhythm and blues musicians. There is a give-and-take between these two generations that allows each to grow and develop in ways satisfactory to all.

In my fieldwork, I did not discover any Black musicians in whose repertoire was to be found much in the way of songs and tunes transmitted from past generations. But that does not mean that traditional Afro-American music has been eclipsed by developments in popular music in the 20th century. Instead, I found that among these Black musicians, even the most sophisticated and those with classical training, there persists some important stylistic elements that have been part of Afro-American music traditions dating back to the 19th century. Perhaps the most important of these is the form and feel of the blues. Though I found no country blues guitarists or classic blues singers--such as those discovered by recording companies agents who scoured the South in the 1920s and '30s as unwitting folklorists--I found that the structure and

spirit of blues music is still a vital part of the music of Black Americans in east central Illinois. Other features, such as rhythmic freedom, melodic improvisation, and variably manipulable attack and release of notes, are stylistic features found in both contemporary Black music and older traditional forms.

A similar situation exists in the case of Black Sacred music in the collection. the repertoires of hymns, spirituals, and gospel songs recorded in St. John Baptist and Mason Temple are not as traditional as the form and style of the performances. What I heard in the churches I visited was not old songs, but songs performed in a traditional manner. The basic structure of all the Black Sacred music I recorded is call-and-response. This is a musical pattern that is firmly rooted in African music traditions. This same pattern characterizes the various forms of religious speech--praying, testifying, and preaching--heard in the Black church services recorded. Rhythmic, melodic, and verbal improvisation are as much in evidence in Black Sacred traditions as in Black Secular music.

At this point I would like to advance one generalization about the difference between Black and White music traditions. The data from east central Illinois supports Henry Glassie's conjecture that "the norm for the European folk performer is repetition," and that "the Afro-American norm tends toward and beyond improvisation."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, whereas the White tradition encourages preserving whole items and adapting them to new stylistic rules and performance situations, the Black tradition encourages the preservation of stylistic elements and features and utilizes them in new musical creations. These generalizations hold for both Secular and Sacred traditions.

The preceding comments are meant only to familiarize the reader with the variety of musical performance encountered in the area surveyed. In terms of profiling folk music activity in the area, it is more in line with progress made in earlier phases of the Folk Arts Project to create a taxonomy of contexts of folk music. I propose, therefore, to categorize the findings in terms of whether they represent a vertical or horizontal tradition. Though in most cases I found evidence of both kinds of tradition, I will place each musician or music event in the category I judge to be of most interest in terms of the goals of the Folk Arts Project. Musicians who exemplify a vertical tradition, that is, those who have learned through trans-generational transmission, will be further sub-categorized into those who preserve a traditional repertoire and those who preserve primarily certain stylistic features of a music tradition. Musicians who exemplify a horizontal are those who perform a repertoire, or in a style, that fits the contemporary aesthetics of a social group or community to which they belong.

Another set of distinctions that guided my fieldwork should be clarified at this point. Because of the limits of time available for fieldwork, and because of the varying demands of the different contexts in which I carried out my investigations, it was often necessary for me to choose a certain focus in each interview and recording session. I was not able to give equal attention to all dimensions of the music activity in all cases. Generally, I had to focus on the individual folk musician and his or her music and biography, or on the music event within the context of a community and the dynamics of that social group. In most cases I chose to focus on the individual when trans-generational tradition seemed to be of primary importance, and on the group context of the music events in settings where contemporary communal aesthetics seemed the dominant factor. I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting that there are no social dynamics at work in the former, nor an individual dimension in the latter. The analytic taxonomy I am forwarding derives in fact from the judgments and observations I made on the spot while

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<sup>3</sup>. Henry Glassie, "'Take That Night Train to Selma': An Excursion to the Outskirts of Scholarship." in Folksongs and Their Makers, ed. by Ray B. Browne (Bowling Green, OH, 1970), pp. 32 & 43.

doing my fieldwork. On the plus side, that means that this scheme of analysis arises out of my immediate experiences, and is not some cold, hard model imposed upon the data. On the negative side, it is inescapable that the choices made in the field will continue to color the analysis and interpretation. Hopefully, nothing of great importance has been obscured by the choices already made.

All of the musicians and music events documented in my field work will be placed in one of three categories. Category A includes individuals or groups whose musical repertoire represents largely or in part the trans-generational transmission of folk songs and tunes. Category B includes individuals or groups whose style of musical performance exemplifies primarily the persistence of traditionally transmitted stylistic elements and features. Category C includes individuals or groups whose musical performance represents largely the contemporary acceptance by a social group of a certain repertoire of songs and tunes or of a particular style or idiom of music.

In the classification that follows, I will list all of the musicians and music events I investigated according to the category they best exemplify. If their repertoire or performance is highly relevant to another category, that will be noted. A few names will be listed in more than one category. The lists below will also contain short descriptions of the music performed in terms of the categories discussed earlier in this report. Finally, I will advance some further observations about both the individuals and the music events documented. Individual musicians may be described as preservers, innovators, or maintainers. By preserver I mean an individual whose objective in performing music is primarily to preserve something of the past he or she received through tradition. An innovator is one who is primarily concerned with expressing personal ideas and values in music. A maintainer is a musician whose performance primarily expresses communally accepted aesthetic norms and values. Music events may be described in terms of whether the role of music in the event is primarily instrumental or artistic. In an event where music is instrumental, some other social activity or objective is dominant: e.g., worship is of primary importance at church, while music is used to attain worshipful ends. Music is used artistically when it is the primary purpose for the event: e.g., the music is what brings people together at the jam sessions in Murdock and Potomac. The interpretive material offered in this classification is no more than a summary. Further data can be obtained from the biographical or descriptive reports made for each musician or event, and from the topical analysis and synopsis made for each recording. An index is included to help locate the relevant material in each case.