The Rise of Folkum Music

by NAT HENTOFF

IN A GREENWICH Village refuge for apprentice sophisticates a few weeks ago, a smooth young man announced from the bandstand that he would let us in on a vintage Southern mountain ballad. "I don't know exactly where it came from," he said with what I presume was guilelessness. "In fact, I don't know much of anything about it. But I sure do like it." Predictably, the performance was as blandly amateurish as the Sunday afternoon come-all-ye's at Washington Square, where civil liberties triumphed over aesthetics earlier this year. ("Mayor Wagner," comedian Lenny Bruce observed at the time, "was simply expressing a musical fact. He didn't mean, 'They *can't* sing.' He was just pointing out they can't *sing*.")

Certainly not all the eager citybillies who are finding twangy status in rummaging through the Child ballads and other pre-Mitch Miller songs are ignorant of the music's context. Many of them have swallowed large parts of the Lomax books of collected folk tunes, and there are even a few who own some of the Library of Congress discs that were recorded in the field by farmers, lumberjacks, and housewives who weren't aware they were artists until the man with the portable recording machine assured them they were.

Those of the citybillies, moreover, who go on to make itinerant careers of their enthusiasm generally find it necessary to do some sporadic research, if only to defend themselves against querulous purists in their audiences. Nonetheless, an increasingly high percentage of what is being presented as folk music in night clubs, coffee houses and on records is much more folkum than folk. (So far as I can determine, the term "folkum" was first insistently used by the scathingly honest monthly *Little Sandy Review*, published at 3220 Park Avenue South, Minneapolis 7, Minnesota —the apoplectic conscience of the folk industry.)

It is easy enough to skewer the obvious medicine men—Harry Belafonte, the Kingston Trio, the Brothers Four, the self-parodying Limeliters—but there is another dispiriting trend among the more militant young toward twisting insufficiently comprehended folk music into shrill weapons for "the cause." In an interview in *The Realist*, cartoonist Shel Silverstein tells of a Sunday experience in Washington Square: ". . . this one eighteen-year-old kid is sitting there with his guitar, and on the guitar is a sign that says, 'This Machine Fights for Freedom.' This is too much—an eighteen-year-old with a freedom-fighting machine. It's a goddam *guitar*, is what it is. It's a guitar, and it don't fight for nothing'—it plays. Unless maybe . . . he hits with it."

On Folkways Records meanwhile there is a "freedom-fighting" singer, Bill McAdoo, who adds his own leaden lyrics to traditional tunes, and sings with a nearly total innocence of musical form or substance. The work song, *Jumping Judy*, becomes:

"I won't fight for Mr. Franco,
Chiang Kai-shek or Syngman Rhee,
I won't fight for Batista,
I won't fight for tyranny."

I won't either, but even the prose of Max Lerner has somewhat more inspirational grace than Mr. McAdoo's stiff sloganeering. As the Gospel singing of the Southern Negro students has indicated (*We Shall Overcome*, Folkways FH 5591), it's certainly possible to adapt folk material to current action; but the process usually is about as subtly executed as a *National Guardian* analysis of why Russia resumed testing.

Aside from this transmogrification of folk song into hoarse self-righteousness, there are the hopefully portentous artists among the new exploiters of the folk. Odetta, with a deep voice, choked diction, and as rigid a beat as Lawrence Welk, has somehow captivated large numbers of undergraduates into confusing her with the Earth Mother. Except when he sings Jewish and some Russian songs, Theodore Bikel is also far from the marrow of the folk, but he at least doesn't regard his flair for entertainment as solemnly as Odetta, who seems to have picked up the idea that most folk songs were originally sung in a state of immolation.

There are a number of exceptions in the spread of juke box and "high art" folkum. A shy, stubborn, twenty-year-old from Boston, Joan Baez, has proved that even if Cecil Sharp didn't collect some of his songs from her family, a singer with the imagination to penetrate folk music in a personal style that is luminously intense and meaningfully dramatic can contribute to a legitimate urbanization of the folk tradition. Miss Baez has occasional lapses of taste, but she is

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indeed an artist—one of the exceedingly few to have appeared among the non-indigenous folk performers. (*Joan Baez,* Vanguard 9078).

In another direction, the New Lost City Ramblers have lovingly absorbed the spirit—as well as the pungent lyrics—of such mountain string groups of the late 1920's and early 1930's as Gid Tanner and his Skillet Lickers and Ernest Stoneman and his Blue Ridge Corn Shuckers. Theirs, to be sure, is a form of revivalism, but they know the backgrounds of the music and its original styles and have added their own brisk, high-spirited personalities. In short, their work is a tribute to their sources, not a theft from them. (*New Lost City Ramblers,* Folkways 2396, 2397, 2398). In connection with the acquisitive approach to the folk tradition, there is the extraordinary grasping of copyright ownership to venerable ballads by the more prehensile performers. A case in point is a new Atlantic release of *The Golden Vanity* which appeared in one broadside version as early as 1682. The performer is Lonnie Donegan, a British young man who was once a guitarist in a quasi-jazz band. And the composer of *The Golden Vanity*—according to the record—is Lonnie Donegan.

Essentially, the most stimulating source of folk music is still the folk, or what's left of them; and the indefatigable editor-collector, Alan Lomax, continues to produce some of the most compelling authentic folk music on record. Having released a brilliantly illuminating *Southern Folk Heritage* (Atlantic 1346-1352), Lomax has more recently been represented as a reminder of the roots in Caedmon's three-volume *The Folksongs of Britain* (TC 1142, 1143, 1144). The folkum tide, however, continues to rise. In early September, Grossinger's in the Catskills was the site of the first Annual Folk Music and Guitar Festival, which included a collegiate folk singing contest. Presumably, the contestant whose announcing style is closest to Jerry Lewis will be most likely to prove his right to the folkum crown.

BOOKS

Drama as the Essence of Man's Tragic Confrontations

MODERN FRENCH THEATRE FROM GIRAUDOUX TO BECKETT. By Jacques Guicharnaud with June Beckelman. Yale University Press: $4.75.

By ALICE ELLEN MAYHEW

PROFESSOR Jacques Guicharnaud has written a brilliant series of essays on French dramatists of the last four decades which illustrates how the French theatre is approaching the terms of tragic art. While American writers are busily exposing the horizontal human conflicts, man in his milieu, in time, French theatre is committed to the vertical engagement, man in conflict with all that he confronts on every level of his peculiar and complex nature.

The result is an experiment with metaphysical theatre which takes the view that human crisis is philosophical (or dynamic) rather than sociological (or passive). Because socio-psychological theatre restricts itself to documenting the phenomena of daily life, it is directed toward the commonplace and boring. Because it excludes any transcendency—religious, mystical, or ontological—it can not transfigure our participation in existence: it merely repeats and lessens it. This kind of theatre, American theatre, has not even absorbed the preoccupations of tragedy. It is a theatre of systematic indolence.

French theatre has been searching for the form and language to express dramatically the essence of man's "tragic" confrontations. It demands a simultaneity of belief and disbelief, a sympathy for the hero on one level, and identification with him on the metaphysical level of his universal "condition."

Giraudoux, Cocteau and Claudel are exponents of a theatre of the supernatural: man involved in a universe that is larger than the total of its parts, informed and influenced by forces that are immutable. Giraudoux, the most eloquent of recent French playwrights (in a theatre of language), uses individual conflicts as metaphors of conflicts between universal themes. In his intelligible universe he arranges a drama of perpendicular tensions, intense because the two elements of struggle are mutually exclusive—war is everything that peace is not. The hero's crisis is one of choice.

Cocteau's theatre, "the double game," makes use of the supernatural mainly in terms of witchcraft and magic, by which the author raises illusion to the level of reality. But with Claudel, every drama must be perfectly integrated into an infinitely vaster drama—the Christian universe, a universe which is a parable, where the elements of conflict are not in doubt. The conflict is between shadow and light in a world enriched by the Christian dialectic but the crisis, or drama, lies in the hero's painful hesitations and complex struggles.

With Montherlant, Anouilh, Sartre and Camus the French theatre turns back to humanism. Man, isolated and tragic by his very nature, is the subject and the source of his own drama. Montherlant and Anouilh create intelligibility out of ambiguity. Sartre and Camus, more or less nihilistic, are concerned with the irony of intelligent man in the face of an unintelligible universe.

Anouilh transcends purely psychological drama to reach a certain definition of man and theatri-