

Why folk music matters



Why does folk music matter? My first response is, probably it doesn't. Not really. By now each of us has unprecedented access to music and are allowed to make our own decisions on what matters to us and what can be left for others to consider. We have CD collections and some of us are back into vinyl. We have satellite radio, and we need only to pop in our buds to listen to music on a device that fits in a shirt pocket and can hold ten-thousand songs. We stream music for free, or for a fraction of a penny on the internet. If we like what we hear, getting more of it is no longer a problem.

It's interesting that recording companies began classifying music by category in the 1920s when mass-marketed 78 rpm phonograph records were first introduced. Consumers of early recorded music could buy records at the general store, or the furniture store, where a phonograph or Victrola could be purchased as a stylish accoutrement to the family living room. Back then, just as today, we who surf, and they who supply recorded music to the iTunes Store, need a framework with which to sort through and identify the types of music we wish to buy and enjoy. But genres can be slippery things. Their

boundaries change as does sometimes their very essence. Over time a given genre can divide into subsets or morph again into a new brandable category altogether.

And somehow through all of this, the term “folk music” has hung on. The term was initially used by scholars who collected and documented American indigenous music, mostly in isolated areas and small towns in the South and West. By the 1950s and 60s, “folk music” had become all the rage when a flood of traditional and traditional-sounding songs being written and performed captured the attention of the music industry. The term “folk” became a genre, and record stores and department stores across the country featured bins of folk song recordings right alongside rock and roll, pop, country, blues, jazz and all the rest.

But let’s step away from technology and consumption. The discussion becomes important I think, when we begin to look at and listen to music within the greater context of art.

Art is a universe. It is a Rossini opera, a Nigerian wedding chant, and art is the blues. It is children calling out jump rope rhymes on the playground, and it is high school kids cranking their amps out back in the garage. It is Picasso and Van Gogh and Norman Rockwell, and the comic strips in the Sunday paper. Art is ballet and art is a tipsy two-step at the VFW fish fry. Art is everything. It is movement. It is line and color and rhythm. Art is vibration. It is Beethoven and Mozart and Itzhak Perlman.

It is Maya Angelou and Walt Whitman and the shaky poem read at your cousin's eulogy. Art is the raw expression of Jackson Pollack and art is the cool darkness of Miles Davis. Art is Steinbeck and James Joyce. It is Gary Cooper and Lucille Ball. It is Martha Graham and Woody Guthrie. It is Shakespeare and it is Steve Martin. Art is John Ford and Frank Capra. It is Woody Allen and Spike Lee and Michael Moore too, and it is any one of a hundred eighty-million videos you can watch on YouTube. Art is Mies Van der Rohe, and the Panama Canal. It is the tree house the neighbor kids put up last summer. Art can be heard and can be seen and is felt. Art resonates within, and art changes our body chemistry. Art changes our lives. Art is LL Cool J and Chuck Berry, Stevie Wonder and the Rolling Stones. Art is the Avett Brothers and Steve Earle. It is Keith Urban and Willie Nelson. Art is the parking lot jam session at the bluegrass festival and is cello practice in the living room before Sunday's recital. Art is the Pieta in Rome, and art is the clay-fired pitcher from which your morning orange juice is poured. Art is your garden, and it is the drapery that completes your window treatment.

Art is our universe, and we share it together with all the plants and animals and rocks and oceans and somehow, I have always believed each of us carries an unspoken obligation as human beings, to explore it and try it, and taste it and move to it,

dig around in it, and make it, and learn from it, laugh to it, cry to it, and identify with it. Identify with art. Through art we are able to realize the precipice within, where perceived reality fades and a sweeping, sublime energy emerges, rising like the sun again, instructing us again, that in the end, living is a spiritual, creative act. That in the end, life is affirming.

Our universe of art is well-known and well-documented. It's preserved in museums and in books, and dissected by university English professors. Critics give context and set standards, while scholars and researchers sort and categorize. Over the years our artful universe has been chopped up and divided, and divided again by genre and sub-genre, by era and medium; by artist, region, ethnicity and technique. And every day new works arrive. Every day. From a fart joke told around the water cooler to a matinee performance of "Our Town" at community theatre, to the ribbon-cutting ceremony of a commissioned skyscraper in Tokyo, our universe of art renews itself constantly with the blossoming of new creation.

Historically the main disciplines of art are painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, poetry, literature and theatre. And in some form we find these being practiced all over the place by amateurs and professionals alike, by great masters, and by students and novices. And regardless of the quality or scope of a given work, we take away something more valuable

when we remember that at conception, art is born inside our heads as an idea and in our hearts as pain. Art comes from many places within and from many emotions, all drifting and swirling together, floating like clouds across a painted summer sky.

Art gives form to our deepest dreams. Art is a personal narrative expressed through image, symbol, sound, language and abstraction. Art is a human response to feelings of love and kindness. It is a human response to events both local and global, as perceived through the senses, or determined from ones own understanding of right and wrong. One kind of art requires a response and another kind compels us to take action. Another kind altogether awakens desire, whether it's the longing for a sexual partner or a thirst for the bottle of beer being advertised on television. There is art rich and profound that holds us in aesthetic arrest, suspending all thought or judgement, and there is art that is quick and cute and clever.

When we think of fine art, we think of the great painters, sculptors and composers throughout history. We think of classical music and opera. We think of ballet, and we think of beautiful concert halls and exquisite galleries. Fine art is the art of refinement. Themes drawn from deep within the psyche emerge on canvas as color and line and rise like the dawn with the first sonorous chords of an orchestral performance.

Students of fine art work under masterful direction at the conservatory and the academy, and their apprenticeship and life's work will in the end represent a very serious commitment of time, money and attention.

Popular art is created, produced and marketed professionally with the purpose of bringing attention to a particular product, service or personality. As the term suggests, popular art is intended to appeal to a wide, or specific audience, and by design is intended to grab attention quickly. All advertising is popular art. When we think of popular art, we think of celebrities. Movie stars and TV personalities. We think of the recording artists we see in concert or in a club.

Popular art appeals directly to our emotions and most often references the subject of love, or falling in love. Or breaking up. Comedy shows on cable make us laugh and sentimental movies make us cry. We are excited by the pyrotechnics and stirred by the heroism contained in action films. Popular art reacts to the news of the day and accents current trends. Popular art teaches us how to dress and wear our hair. It teaches us how to speak and tells us which apps to download. Popular art also has a shelf life. After a time, short or long, when a piece of popular art fades from public favor, it can be born again as nostalgia.

In its purest sense, folk art is created in response to the common experiences of a given group of people or community.

In folk art, the distinction between aesthetics and function is often blurred. A traditional quilt from Appalachia for example, was sewn together by a group of women in a social setting, out of pieces of cloth left over from making clothing or curtains. The mosaic of quilted squares in pattern or individually adorned, express something innate about the character of the people who stitched it together. And then the thing could also keep you warm on a cold winter's night. A native clay pot in a museum was first created perhaps, to carry water, or store grain. Group dances first designated for harvest and planting seasons function concurrently as a social event and religious ritual. The folk arts are flexible and accessible. The folk arts invite participation and improvisation and are principled by democratic attitudes and values.

And this is where folk music begins to matter. Our folk music is a bearer of history and custom, and has grown and spread by being needed and used. It has adapted itself to new circumstances and is not ever finished or crystallized. Folk music is relatively easy to learn and is a kind of art everyone can help make.

Here is what musicologist Alan Lomax wrote in his 1960 book, *The Folk Songs of North America*:

“Slowly our folk songs grew, part dream and part reality, part past and part present. Each phrase rose from the depths of

the heart or was carved out of the rock of experience. Each line was sung smooth by many singers, who tested it against the American reality, until the language became apt and truthful and as tough as cured hickory. Here lies the secret to their beauty. They evoke a feeling of a place and of belonging to a particular branch of the human family. They honestly describe or protest against the deepest ills that afflict us - the color bar, our repressed sexuality, our love of violence, and our loneliness. Finally, they have been cared for and shaped by so many hands that they have acquired a patina of art, and reflect the tenderest and most creative impulses of the human heart, casting upon our often harsh and melancholy tradition a luster of true beauty.”

Isn't that beautiful?

I like the term “folk music.” I like that it means different things to different people. I like its suggestion of commonality, and I like its one-size-fits-all uncertainty. The term “folk music” is a bit of an oddball and a leftover, and I like that too.

The term “folk music” represents something so much larger and far-reaching than what the iTunes store or CD bin can hold. It represents music that flies beneath the radar of the pop charts, and flutters beyond the grasp of The Grammys. The music we call “folk music” has less to do with a given performance and more to do with the ongoing participation of many. It is less about what we aspire to, and more about what we collectively

value and remember. Our folk music is something we have inherited with the earth and the wind.

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