Ronald D. Cohen, *Depression Folk: Grassroots Music and Left-Wing Politics in 1930s America*

Konstantinos Blatanis
Ronald D. Cohen, *Depression Folk: Grassroots Music and Left-Wing Politics in 1930s America*

Konstantinos Blatanis

1 Ronald D. Cohen, *Depression Folk: Grassroots Music and Left-Wing Politics in 1930s America*
3 Konstantinos Blatanis
4 National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
5 This most recent installment of Ronald D. Cohen’s authoritative research career in American folklore history provides readers with a detailed account of the course folk music followed during the years of the Great Depression. The author’s wide expertise in the field and his significant work as both an historian and an editor of archives and letters allows him to chronicle incisively “the role folk music played in the clash between capitalism and the emerging grassroots proletarian movements” (6) in the U.S. in the 1930s. The fact that this is a study which rests on solid professional experience becomes evident in multiple ways, as Cohen explains instructively the eclectic nature and democratic character of American folk music. Specifically, *Depression Folk* focuses on the production of hillbilly songs and spirituals, of rural blues and strikers’ songs, of western swing and African-American protest songs but also discusses the impact all these forms of musical expression had on public life in the thirties. Aiming precisely to elucidate all aspects of this multisided artistic output, the historian directs his attention not only to the achievements of well-known and celebrated musicians but also to the contributions of the anonymous songwriter and performer. Similarly, he details the efforts of musicologists and collectors who worked under the auspices of the different New Deal Federal Programs but also considers the labor of the people who remained on the fringes of the cultural scene.
6 This concise yet highly informative study of the different routes through which American folk music found expression in the 1930s and allowed people to account for their
experience in authentic and unadulterated ways serves primarily as a valid, introductory guide to a complex yet captivating history of public events and performances, of demonstrations, strikes, and union activism, in general, of field recordings and archive compilations, of songbooks, and of radio programs. At the same moment, Cohen manages also to voice valuable commentary on the larger cultural and sociopolitical history of the Depression. Thus, for example, he intently underlines that “President Roosevelt depended on the solid Democratic South to pass the bulk of his legislation, but he often had to make compromises to bolster that section’s rigid racial lines and policies, reinforced by both legislation and violence” (2-3). Furthermore, in his assessment of the particular historical moment he does consider the fact “the era was marked [also] by strongly conservative, even reactionary, voices” (3), when he carefully traces the trails of those cultural agents that worked with the credo that “folk songs could promote labor consciousness” (30). On the whole, the most valuable observations articulated in this book relate, appropriately enough, to the ways in which folk music of the 1930s helped shape and was itself shaped by trade unionism and political activism.

Cohen’s primary concern in the first chapter is to situate adequately this historical study. Thus, he starts with an overview of the great variety of outlets through which folk music had circulated over the span of several decades up until the late 1920s. In particular, the author registers major highlights in the history of folk songbooks and surveys important instances of archival work carried out in this area. In particular, he comments briefly on the significance of the publication in 1927 of Carl Sandburg’s *The American Songbag*, and discusses equally briefly the pursuits of music collectors such as Robert Gordon, Lawrence Gellert, and John Lomax. This panoramic outlook captures also outstanding occurrences and consequential developments such as the introduction of African-American performers to the phonograph industry, the emergence and proliferation of workers’ songbooks, and the growing popularity of radio programs. The historical account proper of the role folk music played in its interaction with left-wing politics in the 1930s begins in the second chapter, titled “Depression’s Beginnings and Labor Songs.” The very opening pages provide the reader with substantial evidence of the historian’s ability to touch upon the most intimate aspects and minute details of this facet of American history as well as of his competence with broad and comprehensive reviews of this area of interest. Thus, for instance, Cohen comments carefully on Aunt Molly Jackson’s song “Hungry Ragged Blues” and her 1931 performance, when the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, headed by Theodore Dreiser, visited Pineville, Kentucky, as a piece which, “while labeled a blues [...] had no relation to the structure of African American southern blues [and which] [r]aw and graphic [as it was] deftly captured the miners’ plight from the woman’s viewpoint” (22). Furthermore, the author manages also to add quick yet informative notes on issues such as, for example, the ways in which the Depression literally crippled the music industry in the early 1930s. However, more importantly, Cohen focuses attentively on how strikes and the workers’ overall struggle produced songs all over the country, and proceeds to discuss the mediocre success of the Communist Party members’ efforts to compose and publish songs that were meant to ignite class awareness.

Chapters Three and Four chronicle the early and mid-years of the Depression and interest is once again devoted to all different spheres of creativity in folk music. Thus, the work of collectors John and Alan Lomax, their publications of songbooks and their archival work at the Library of Congress are discussed while attention is also allotted to the songs of the
cowboy, the miner, the lumberjack, the soldier, the sailor, the plantation African-American laborer, the boatman. Furthermore, the study attracts attention to the works of classical musicians and composers such as Charles Seeger and Aaron Copland but also to identified radio programs of the thirties which promoted, even if indirectly, a conservative nationalistic agenda. Simultaneously, Cohen explains to his reader that, at the other end of the spectrum, National Folk Festivals offered vital space to amateur musicians and dancers. In this thorough sketching of this vibrant moment for folk music, the historian highlights also the fact that “African American musicians were becoming part of the political upsurge in folk music, in particular Lead Belly and Josh White” (70). It must be noted that, more than anything else, the work of Alan Lomax serves as a focal point for Cohen’s endeavors to chronicle adequately the significance of folk music in culture and politics of the 1930s.

In Chapters Five and Six, which span the late 1930s, the account of Alan Lomax’s collecting trips and his varied collaborations with all different artists and cultural agents continues with valuable encyclopedic information such as the fact that his “influential position at the Archive of American Folk Song [...] remained safe from the fiscal cutbacks, although its budget remained tiny” (83). In addition, Cohen comments on Lomax’s work on national radio and specifically notes that “progressive politics was never far from his mind, although he knew he had to walk a fine line when appearing before a national radio audience” (111). In the author’s estimate, Alan Lomax as a folklorist had always been committed to exploring the cultural roles and musical influences of poor whites and African Americans, along with the widespread class conflict, not just in the South but across the country” (87). In these chapters, Cohen highlights also the significance of labor schools and their publications during the late thirties such as those of The School for Workers at the University of Wisconsin and The Pacific Coast School for Workers in Berkeley, California. Similarly, he emphasizes the value of unions such as the interracial Southern Farmers Union that “while battling the brutalities of southern racism along with the iron rule of the planters and their political allies, used song as a recruiting tool” (81). In addition, the major contribution of Woody Guthrie to American music and culture, in general, and the fact that he offered an outlet of expression to those who suffered from the dust bowl disaster are briefly discussed here. Cohen’s review of the late thirties ends with an insightful note on the fact that as the nation was heading towards the forties and the Second World War “the conservative onslaught had crippled many government programs, but folklorists throughout the country continued their work in collecting, publishing and performing folk music” (117).

Chapter Seven and the Epilogue focus precisely on how the work of these folklorists endured well after the 1930s and thus light is shed on the significance of the legacy of the Depression. Cohen manages to pass a valid remark on the value of his own study when he specifically quotes the comment John Steinbeck made in his foreword for the joint project of Alan Lomax, Pete Seeger, and Woody Guthrie by the title Hard Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People—compiled in 1940 and published in 1967—that “[t]he songs of the working people have always been their sharpest statement and the one statement which cannot be destroyed [...] you cannot prevent singing” (133). In the aggregate and in the same vein, Cohen explains that he intently follows the trajectory of Alan Lomax’s work precisely because it constitutes a paradigm of an all-inclusive, truly democratic agenda which proved that folk music does help Americans—in Lomax’s own words—to explain for themselves what America means and has meant to them” (137). Cohen’s kaleidoscopic
overview of the varied folk musical creativity of the 1930s and his thorough account of the interaction between the cultural workers of this scene and left-wing politics allow him to comment convincingly on the legacy of the Depression. In brief, this is a study which indeed establishes folk music of the thirties “as a vital catalyst” (157) for future developments in American culture.

On the whole, Depression Folk delivers its promise, first and foremost, as a valuable guide that helps navigate the reader’s way through a complex grid of intense and multileveled cultural creativity. Furthermore, this chronicle of the role folk music played in the 1930s undoubtedly invites further research into this area. Last but not least, this is indeed a source of inspiration published at a time of deep economic and political crisis on global scale, a moment which witnesses an unprecedented backlash against democratic rights throughout different parts of the world, and a historical instance when definitions of what America means within, outside and across borders are precariously at stake.

AUTHOR

KONSTANTINOS BLATANIS
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens