

Editor's introduction to Volume 1

The obvious subject for the first issue of a new publication in the field of popular music is the definitional one: what *is* popular music? But, however important demarcation of the field might be, the daunting nature of the task and the pre-emptive tendency of any (probably arbitrary) claims of success were against this. A more promising way in – more likely to cast light, less likely to blow up bridges – seemed to be to tackle a particular aspect of the topography of the area, which in turn has a bearing on the definitional question. The relationship between so-called folk and so-called popular music is relevant here, in at least two ways: it is at work on a theoretical level – for to define either ‘folk’ or ‘popular’ music is inevitably to offer at least a partial definition of the other (not to mention ‘art’ music too) – and also on a historical level – it is widely assumed that folk music gives way to, is destroyed by, develops into, at any rate *precedes*, in some sense, popular music: a simple matter of successive stages in social evolution. Within both theory and history is usually hidden the *threat* of popular music, and this, or rather its dismantling, is a suitable topic for a first issue too.

Of course, the folk–popular relationship has been discussed often before, but usually approached, it seems, from the folk end, not the popular end. Here, for example, is the definition of folk music drawn up in 1954 by the International Folk Music Council (greatly under the influence of the work of Cecil Sharp):

Folk music is the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the tradition are: (i) continuity which links the present with the past; (ii) variation which springs from the creative impulse of the individual or the group; and (iii) selection by the community which determines the form or forms in which the music survives.

The term can be applied to music that has been evolved from rudimentary beginnings by a community uninfluenced by popular and art music and it can likewise be applied to music which has originated with an individual composer and has subsequently been absorbed into the unwritten living tradition of a community.

The term does not cover composed popular music that has been taken over

ready-made by a community and remains unchanged, for it is the re-fashioning and recreation of the music by the community that gives it its folk character. (IFMC 1955, p. 23)

This is clear about what folk music is supposed to be, and it is clear that this music exists, is fenced off, in opposition to other kinds of music. What is left unwritten, but is vital and underlies the whole of the text, is that the concept of 'folk' is part of an ideologically constructed field. *Folk*; *popular*: these are terms with their own histories, produced by particular societies, cultures, classes, intellectual traditions, and inseparable from an accumulation of usages and connotations. Can we dig out from these histories enough to make them *generally* useful?

In England at least, by the sixteenth century, 'popular' began to lose earlier neutral usages ('belonging to the people'), and to take on an evaluative function: the implication was that this was a term applied to 'them' (the 'common' people) by 'us' (see Williams 1976, pp. 198–9), and it represented a progressive withdrawal by the upper and educated classes from previous notions of a common culture (see Burke 1978, pp. 270ff). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, major changes in the class and cultural structure relocated this usage, notably through the growth – again among the *élite* – of *enthusiasm* for the culture of 'the people', now thought to possess virtues disappearing from 'civilised' society, and through the resulting structuring of the 'popular' field in a split, *mass* or *popular* on the one hand, *folk* on the other (see *ibid.* pp. 3–22). The 'folk' was *invented*, primarily in Germany, by Goethe and Herder, who already in the late eighteenth century wrote in terms of the opposition which was to characterise subsequent thinking: 'The people are not the mob of the streets, who never sing or compose but shriek and mutilate' (quoted in *ibid.* p. 22). Of course, minor changes of usage took place (for instance, 'popular' has in some, usually leftist circles acquired the connotations formerly attached to 'folk' – that is, 'authentically of the people' – and now must be opposed to different terms, such as 'commercial'). But the basic opposition, never used by the people themselves but only by those looking in, is still, even in the IFMC definition, the same as that classically expressed by Hubert Parry on the occasion of the inauguration of the English Folk Song Society:

in true folk-songs there is no show, no got-up glitter, and no vulgarity . . . and the pity of it is that these treasures of humanity are getting rare, for they are written in characters the most evanescent you can imagine, upon the sensitive brain fibres of those who learn them, and have but little idea of their value. Moreover, there is an enemy at the doors of folk music which is driving it out, namely, the common popular songs of the day; and this enemy is one of the most repulsive and most insidious. If one thinks of the outer circumference of

our terribly overgrown towns, where the jerry-builder holds sway; where one sees all around the tawdriness of sham jewellery and shoddy clothes, pawnshops and flaming gin-palaces; where stale fish and the miserable piles of Covent Garden refuse which pass for vegetables are offered for food – all such things suggest to one's mind the boundless regions of sham. It is for the people who live in such unhealthy regions – people who, for the most part, have the most false ideals, or none at all – who are always struggling for existence, who think that the commonest rowdiness is the highest expression of human emotion; it is for them that the modern popular music is made, and it is made with a commercial intention out of snippets of musical slang. And this product it is which will drive out folk music if we do not save it. (Parry 1899)

Does, then, the demystification of the terms necessitate abandoning them – to 'the pathologists of bourgeois and ruling-class culture', as Dave Harker would argue (1980, p. 24)? Should we say, with Charles Keil, that

there never were any 'folk' except in the minds of the bourgeoisie. The entire field is a grim fairy tale . . . Culture versus counterculture, 'high art' versus 'folk art' represents a dialectic that is almost completely contained within bourgeois ideology. One requires the other . . . Can't we keep 'the folk' concept and redeem it? No! and no! again. You can't, because too many Volkswagens have been built, too many folk ballets applauded, too many folksongs used, too much aid and comfort given to the enemy. (Keil 1978)

But if the terms are suspect, they are not necessarily *empty*; they were evolved to cover *something*, notably certain differences in musical processes; without them we shall need new terms and distinctions, if we are not to sink into a hopelessly vague relativisation of the whole musical field.

One effect of the first two articles in this volume is to offer possible (differing) 'solutions' to this problem. In a sense, both John Blacking and János Maróthy are addressing the traditional folk–popular demarcation, which is still surprisingly widely held, at least in the 'folk' camp (but also within 'popular' music, as, at the other end of the book, Simon Frith demonstrates). Even A. L. Lloyd, whose great work *Folk Song in England* did so much in this country to extend the boundaries of the 'folk' sphere by adding an urban–industrial corrective to the rural romanticism of earlier scholars, feels compelled, when confronted by the music of Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones, to draw much the same kind of distinction as Parry, merely moving it a bit across the cultural map (Lloyd 1969, pp. 393–412). In the end (or rather the beginning – pp. 17–19), Lloyd settles more or less for the IFMC definition. In what ways, then, can a song like 'Blowin' in the Wind' or 'Satisfaction' – not so much the initial recording but the song-processually-at-work in society – be held not to conform to the definition's criteria of 'folkness'?

Only by means of quite particular (and loaded) notions of time ('continuity'), creativity ('variation') and above all community (in this case rooted still in old romantic conceptions of *Gemeinschaft*).

As Blacking argues, over-concentration on musical *categories* obscures the more necessary attention to *processes* of music-making. The differing processes being very vaguely pointed towards by 'folk' and 'popular' take place in reality in many different kinds of music, though in different forms, different mixtures, different social contexts, different periods, following different histories. The cumulative effect of the remaining articles in the book is to establish how little the simple folk-popular dichotomy measures up to the complexity and specificity of real musical practice. Their subjects follow a roughly chronological order, from Dave Harker's study of the music of an industrialising English region to Wilfrid Mellers's discussion of the most recent songs of Bob Dylan. And geographically they come from a wide area, covering parts of Europe, America, Asia and Africa. All – in very varied ways – are looking at developments within that sphere which conventionally would be thought of as the folk-popular interface. It is clear that no one schema (from rural to urban, feudal or tribal to capitalist, agrarian to industrial, subculture to mass culture, or whatever) can cover all these cases. The relationships between different cultural groups and audiences in the USA, which Charles Hamm examines, are quite specific and cannot be transferred elsewhere; the cultural effects of industrialisation in nineteenth-century North-East England are not duplicated in, say, twentieth-century East Africa: for one thing, as Gerhard Kubik makes clear, there are new factors, in the influence of colonialism and the pre-existence of international capitalism, with its mass media and global musical styles; the impact of the media and 'modern' life in general, even within one country, can be different and occur at different times for different groups and musical traditions – see, for the USA, the articles by John Cowley and Charles Wolfe, and, for Afghanistan, John Baily's contribution; and so on. There are many other contrasts to be picked out. Various patterns emerge, but no single pattern, no simple binary switch.

Can this multiplicity of musical experiences be subsumed under even *one* term, 'popular music'? More important, can suitable methods of study be proposed, appropriate for all the manifestations? This will be the subject of the next issue.

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