Folk Music and Religion

Vaughan S Roberts
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Folk Music

Introduction

The word ‘folk’ embraces a wide range of meaning. As Mark Slobin, Professor of Music at Wesleyan University, observes in his introduction to folk music: ‘Sometimes it just means “people” in general, while other early citations suggest subordination to God or the higher classes of society. But it can also go down home, as “the people of one’s family,” or even connote the individual, as opposed to the group’ (2011: 53). A common theme across all these uses of ‘folk’ is identity – religious, social, familial and personal. This complexity increases when that term is placed alongside ‘music’.

Sociologist of religion, Robert Bellah (1927-2013) argued that music and religion are fundamental to human evolution, and in the case of music it can cover a similar breadth of meaning as folk. Thus, he wrote: ‘Whether we think of music as representing feelings, or as representing order (and disorder) in the soul, society, and the cosmos, music has a characteristic that is common to all forms of socialization: it participates in that which it represents’ (Bellah 2011: 27).

Bellah proceeds to describe how religion and music are central to the processes of establishing all forms of identity through narrative acts and storytelling. Against this multifaceted background, we can readily see why folk music has always been (and remains) difficult to define (Lloyd 1967, Woods 1979, Slobin 2011, Partridge 2014).

Two figures who observed at first-hand the revival of folk music in the British Isles during the 1950s and 1960s make this point. A. L. (Bert) Lloyd (1908-1982) was a folk singer, collector of folk songs, writer and broadcaster and in his 1967 volume on Folk Song in England he noted how: ‘Folklore definitions vary from country to country, epoch to epoch, scholar to scholar’ (p 16). Whilst Fred Woods (1932-1995), the founder-editor of Folk Review magazine and author of Folk Revival: the rediscovery of a national music (1979), commented that, as a result of the changes brought by the

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1 For example, Lloyd’s version of “Blood-Red Roses” with Euan McColl and Peggy Seeger can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jz3Ee0jsAUc
folk revival itself: ‘Clearly, there is a fair amount of rethinking to be done in terms of definition, or the line between a “traditional” traditionalist and a revivalist are going to blur into uselessness. Already the accepted categories are largely meaningless in the case of some singers working within the Revival’ (1979: 24-5).

The question of what is folk music and how we can locate it has become even more complex since both those remarks were made. In reflecting on how folk music is hard to pin down, Slobin acknowledges that: ‘while folk music is clearly “there,” it springs from an act of imagination or academic analysis’ (2011: 3). These processes of imagination and analysis have a history in both popular culture and the academy which involve concepts such as national music, peasant song, ethnic music, roots, world music as well as an understanding of their cultural, religious, social and musical contexts. Thus, Partridge argues that a helpful understanding of folk music should be informed by: ‘a recognition of its hybridity as a subgenre of popular music, a musically distinct subgenre that tends to articulate ideas and evoke feelings inspired by Romantic, quasi-mythical concepts of “the people” and “the land” (2014: 21).

Folk music forms its various identities through the songs and music played by artists and entertainers, and through the stories that are recounted about its creation, evolution and continued development. Picking up on those opening insights from Slobin, Bellah and Partridge this chapter will explore three elements of that story in relation to key aspects of identity within folk music: National Identity, Musical Identity and Personal Identity. Each of those identities will have ‘religious’ components to them, although that too is a difficult term to pin down. Lyden (2015: 8-10) has provided a helpful review of recent discussion in this field and resists giving his own definition, whilst noting that: ‘The term is one that is under constant negotiation’ (2015: 10).

In exploring religion and folk music through National, Musical and Personal Identity I shall make particular use of two concepts. First, the idea popularised by Charles Taylor of the ‘social imaginary’ which he defines as the way that people: ‘imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met,
and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie those expectations’ (Taylor 2007: 171). Second, an understanding of the affective space in which all kinds of music is listened to (including folk music). Several approaches have been developed towards this concept (for instance, Callaway 2013, Marsh and Roberts 2012, O’Neill 2013, Partridge 2014) and in this chapter I shall focus on the use of acoustic axes that Clive Marsh and I have explored in analysing how people describe their experience of listening to popular music (Marsh and Roberts, 2015b).

**Folk Music and National Identity**

Although music of the people has existed throughout the human story it could be argued that the concept of ‘folk music’ is a relatively recent part of the social imaginary. A number of authors locate its origin in the Romantic theology and philosophy of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) who encouraged classical composers to draw upon *Volkslieder* (folk songs) in their work (Lloyd 1967: 11, Ross 2009: 84, Slobin 2011: 53). Herder was a supporter of the ideals behind the French Revolution and any search for the songs of the people was bound to have political and nationalist implications. In addition, Herder had a significant impact on the literary world particularly through Goethe, whilst his musical quest has also been seen as part of the artistic search for the ‘real’ in the work of painters such as Van Gogh (1853-90), Monet (1840-1926), Cézanne (1839-1906) and others (Ross 2009: 84).

The musical challenge articulated by Herder was met by such classical composers as Liszt (1811-1886), Dvořák (1841-1904), Bartók (1881-1945), Kodály (1882-1967) and more. However, this was not solely a matter of musical style and composition since those in power have always had a strong interest in music of all types. Civic authorities have always sought some control over folk music which only increased with the growth of nation states. Mark Slobin observes that for the different forms of folk music: ‘Whether for monarchist, socialist or democratic agendas, bureaucrats have taken charge of what is supported, allowed and sent abroad’ (2011: 59) and these attempts to exert control of national musical expressions are not necessarily benign. As Howard Goodall explains: ‘The
flaw in describing it as “nationalist” is that, while it was sometimes identified with political movements seeking self-determination, as in the case of Liszt’s *Hungarian Rhapsodies* or Sibelius’s *Finlandia*, in other cases it was merely an excuse for inserting ethnic idioms and sounds into salon or concert hall with no national or political motivation whatsoever ... Likewise, the magpie-like composers of the nineteenth century sometimes even made use of such material from regions that were not their own, or, as members of the imperial ruling class, found inspiration in the music of subjugated tribes and communities within their empire’s domain – in which cases the term “nationalist” is, surely, highly inappropriate’ (2013: 177).

We shall come back to folk music and the politics of national identity in a moment but perhaps the most significant British manifestation of this quest for ethnic songs and music was Cecil Sharp (1859 – 1924), noted for his collections of folk traditions from the West Country and Northern England, as well as the USA. Although his work was foundational, inspired others and continues to be valued it was also informed by a particular understanding of folk culture. For example, Sharp believed that folk songs were created by the common people and must be anonymous or it was not a folk song. Sharp was part of a widespread and ongoing movement in England which included Anglican clergy such as Sabine Baring-Gould (1834-1924) and Charles Marson (1859-1914); and internationally by, for example, Percy Grainger (1882-1961), John Lomax (1867-1948) and his son Alan (1915-2002). However, as Partridge contends, the approach of many early collectors was based on ‘largely idealized notions of a bucolic past’ and a false dichotomy between that romanticized rural antiquity and a profane industrial modernity. In fact, there was ‘no pure folk culture that could be distinguished from popular culture’ (Partridge 2014: 21). Folk music and popular music are branches from the same tree, which already points ahead to our discussion of folk and musical identity in the next section.

The matter of folk music and national identity remains a live issue. A good example can be found in Woody Guthrie’s ‘This land is your land’ written in 1940 as a response to Irving Berlin’s ‘God bless America’ and covered by many artists since – perhaps most significantly by Pete Seeger and Bruce
Springsteen at the inauguration of Barak Obama in 2009. The melody is similar to that of a Baptist hymn recorded by the Carter Family as 'When the World's on Fire'. Springsteen originally released a version on his Live/1975-85 album. Interestingly his biographer says of this rendering that:

‘Springsteen’s interpretation of what the song was about was smack dab in the middle between Woody Guthrie, who wrote as a Marxist disillusioned with the America of fable and Irving Berlin, who wrote as a man who had seen his every dream fulfilled’ (Marsh 2004: 278). Whether we agree with Dave Marsh’s assessment or not, it is clear that ‘This land is your land’ continues to be a key folk marker in both the national identity and civil religion of the USA and, strikingly, other nations.

Of course this is not confined to Western expressions of folk music, for example North and Hargreaves draw attention to the wide range of folk, popular, classical and religious musical traditions that exist in India and how (at least in theory) that nation is at the crossroads as far as ‘the resolution of these diverse and sometimes conflicting influences is concerned’ (North and Hargreaves 2008: 342). At this point we are touching on the roles that music, ritual and tribalism play not only in folk music but across all musical expressions.

If we follow Bellah’s modification of Durkheim’s definition of the sacred as ‘a realm of non-ordinary reality’ (Bellah 2011: 1) then we can appreciate the strong links between religion and music across human society. In his analysis of the role that sociability and place has within musical culture David Hesmondhalgh argues that music is linked to sociality and community more than any other form of communication (Hesmondhalgh 2013: 84). This is expressed in singing, dancing and playing together. He notes some research which records: ‘a number of remarkable accounts of strong emotional experiences of musical performing, from classical, folk, jazz, and popular musicians, many of them positive, including feelings of “blissful intoxication” and deep communication with other performers and the audience’ (Hesmondhalgh 2013: 113). In other words, folk music is part of that wide musical

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2 A video of which can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnvCPQqQWds
3 A recording is posted at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxo-zayl6tE
4 See the UK version recorded by Billy Bragg and Heathens All https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjJLDjIYXM
5 See also Hesmondhalgh’s helpful discussion of national music in Afghanistan (Hesmondhalgh 2013: 157).
stream which creates social experiences which can be seen as sacred or transcendent in religious and non-religious terms.

Thus, we can see in this overview that in folk music we are encountering expressions of national identity, which themselves have important religious components. We are also touching upon social order and the political debates and conflicts which arise between nations, cities, tribes, families and other groupings. And we are encountering a form of non-ordinary reality which is related to notions of the sacred and the emotional or affective space in which religious experience is perceived and practised. In the next section we explore another strand to the identity of folk music, where this musical expression stands within the wider world of music culture.

**Folk Music and Musical Identity**

Don and Emily Saliers have explored music and spiritual practice from their perspective as theologian (Don) and folk musician (Emily). Speaking of musical identity they comment: ‘At some basic level, musical taste is *tribal*. By this we mean that most people experience special bonding with others who prefer the same songs and music’ (2005: 98 – authors’ italics). We have seen how folk music impacts upon national identity, we now turn to how musical identity is a force in itself and how this has implications for the relationship between religion and folk music. In his discussion of why someone prefers a particular pianist’s rendition of Beethoven’s piano sonatas over another’s Philip Ball concludes that deviance from the precise score influences listeners’ personal preferences. However, he believes that: ‘Western classical music has grown abnormal in its relative rigidity, for many musical traditions, whether ‘folk’ or ‘classical’, offer a great deal more scope for injecting spontaneous invention into a performance, for which the ‘composition’ is little more than a skeletal framework’ (Ball 2010: 304). Ball notes how both Bartók and Grainger observed repeated irregularities in the folk music they were collecting and that these deviations provided artistic expression. But this tension between a true reproduction of a score and improvisation for emotional
effect is not only symptomatic of a ‘sacred’ tension within all music but points to some fundamental
dialectical relations identified within folk music itself.

Each era brings its own ideological perspectives to folk music, for example A. L. Lloyd was critical of
what he saw as the moralizing editing of songs by Victorian collectors. Writing after the cultural
upheavals of the 1960s and in the midst of the musical disruption of punk rock, Woods contends:
‘folk music has always been a sort of “underground” music’ (1979: 94) which has resisted the efforts
corrall it whether by gentry, collectors or the music industry. Thus Woods finds Benjamin Britten
(1913-1976) guilty of cheapening folk music far more than electric bands by turning it into ‘a twee
middle-class entertainment’ (Woods 1979: 102). This brings us to an important ‘religious’ boundary
in folk music itself – between that which is pure and that which is tainted, between that which is
‘sacred’ and that which is seen as ‘profane’.

A good example of this can be found in Partridge’s discussion of the reaction to Bob Dylan’s use of
electric guitar on albums and in live shows. He argues that when Dylan was denounced as ‘Judas’ at
Manchester’s Free Trade Hall in 1966: ‘There was a sense that something sacred had been profaned
... for those who felt betrayed, it signified more than a difference in taste. Like Judas’s kissing of
Jesus in Gethsemane, Dylan’s picking up of an electric guitar was a deeply profound event, a profane
moment’ (Partridge 2014: 124). Writing at around the same time as this significant development in
folk but without discussing Dylan’s move from acoustic to electric, A. L. Lloyd argues that the vital
dialectic for folk music is: ‘the perpetual struggle for synthesis between the collective and the
individual, between tradition and innovation, between what is received from the community and
what is supplied out of personal fantasy, in short, the blending of continuity and variation’ (Lloyd
1967: 17). A similar dialectical pattern in folk music has been identified by Partridge, which he sees
as a set of binaries between Paganism and monotheism, modernity and pre-modernity, rural and
urban, nature and technology (2014: 133). He argues that quasi-mythical discourse around folk
culture reflects (at least in part) a search for sacred authenticity: ‘There is an emotional continuity
with the imagined values of an idealized past when our ancestors, those “noble savages,” used to
live in a harmonious, symbolic relationship with the land’ (ibid).

Lloyd and Partridge’s dialectical approaches share common ground with the definition of the social
imaginary for popular music outlined by the acoustic axes in Marsh and Roberts 2015b. In our work
we analysed how people self-described their experience of listening to a wide variety of popular
music. The most frequent terms used to describe the moods created by music included: uplift/relax;
inspiration/memory; energy/calm; happiness/sadness; which formed a series of axes. We can extend
this model out to embrace some of the common terms that are used to describe the social imaginary
of folk music. Thus, one way of setting out folk music’s affective space would be:

![Diagram of Folk Music: Axes of Sacred and Profane]

Figure 1: Folk Music: Axes of Sacred and Profane

Some of these key signifiers clearly have overt religious components (monotheism/paganism).

Others have religious aspects not far below the surface, such as the notions of modernity/pre-
modern. Whilst others (as we have already seen) transfer concepts from the vocabulary of religion
to a broader, contemporary discourse. To this end we can see the apparently tribal musical debates about performance and improvisation, social conformity and social disruption, acoustic guitar and electric guitar as manifestations of the axes of sacred and profane, pure and corrupt, authentic and false which shape the social imaginary of folk music and, I would argue, in one form or another shapes the musical identities of all types of music. Robert Bellah concludes his account of the evolution of religion by quoting the social and political philosopher Thomas McCarthy and his appeal for ‘dialogue across differences’ (2011: 606). We can see this being explored and modelled with differing degrees of success as folk music explores its own identity within the variety of folk communities and across the wider scope of musical culture. Furthermore, within this dialogue across difference there are many experiences and vocabulary that are religious and religion-like which continue to play a central role in defining collective musical identities.

In the third of these three sections we turn to folk music and how that relates to an individual’s personal identity before moving to some concluding remarks.

**Folk Music and Personal Identity**

Daniel Levitin tells the story of attending the annual meeting of Kindermusik teachers one summer and hearing fifty young children between the ages of four and twelve presenting a traditional German folk song, with children of different nationalities singing lines in their native languages of Cantonese, Japanese, Romanian, !Xotha, Portuguese, Arabic and ending with the refrain sung in English (Levitin 2010: 39-40). This is a wonderful image of folk music bringing together representatives of future generations whilst also affirming their own personal identities through the use of their particular languages. However, the wider context in which this act of folk singing was taking place raises some significant questions about how and in what circumstances folk music shapes our personal identities in the 21st century.

As we noted earlier, folk music has played a significant role in the development of national identity. Nationhood remains an important factor in 21st century globalised culture but other influences
shape individual and communal lives as much as nationality, if not more so. Consumerism in the Western culture and the ‘wall-to-wall commodification of everything’ (Gregory 2012: 237) has impacted lives across the world – those living directly under capitalism and those who service it in one form or another. An outcome from this social change is what Taylor calls the ‘contemporary ethic of authenticity’ (Taylor 2007: 476) which he links to the same 18th century Romantic movement identified in the first section as shaping the emergence of ‘folk music’ as a recognized social form. Authenticity has emerged as a significant factor not just within the social imaginary of folk music (as we saw in the second section) but across a much wider cultural spectrum – including economics and sovereignty, culture and fashion, religion and the public sphere.

The emergence of what might loosely be called the ‘music industry’ is one manifestation of those social and intellectual forces, from which folk music is not inured. Once again, we noted earlier Cecil Sharp’s definition of folk songs as anonymous creations by the common people which has been lost during the second half of the 20th century. From say, Woody Guthrie to Gillian Welch in the USA, Euan McColl to Kate Rusby in the UK, Ladysmith Black Mambazo to Tinariwen in Africa, and many other examples across folk, roots and world music; the names of artists, writers and composers are well-known. We can see how this development links in with the sacred and profane dialectic already identified within the world of folk music in the previous section. But furthermore, as Hesmondhalgh observes: ‘despairing of the corruption of creativity by commerce, movements from the folk revival to the hippies to punk to rave, sought to reinvent art by returning it to the people … holding that the best thing for humanity was for people simply to decide what they liked’ (Hesmondhalgh 2013: 132).

To put it another way, the commercialisation and commodification of folk music means that people are free to access those brands that they like, which until the rise of the internet, placed great power in music consumer and music company alike.

The commercial and social changes brought by the internet cannot be underplayed. What was a relatively slow process of discovering traditional music and innovative new music, which often required geographic relocation – such as when Paul Simon came to the UK in the early 1960s to work
with British folk singers\(^6\) or (more controversially) to South Africa in the 1980s to work with local township musicians\(^7\) – has now become both a faster yet more sedentary process facilitated by a myriad of sharing websites. In Slobin’s discussion of the internet and YouTube he notes: ‘What used to take hours or months to track down now takes a few seconds. Unreliable as the sources may be, unstable in terms of production values, and impermanently housed as they are, the endless samples of the world’s folk music available online through this and many other sites have blurred the line between commercial and collector mentalities, retail, and research in ways that will only multiply in the future’ (Slobin 2011: 78-79). He is surely right to conclude that no one knows what the long term implications of these developments are for the future of folk music but, given there is no turning back and that we are where we are, is there something that we can conclude from these changes? Indeed, are there implications for how we see the relationship between folk music and religion, within the context of personal identity?

If we return to Don and Emily Saliers’ work on music and spiritual practice, they comment theologically and sociologically on the nature of human busy-ness that is found and reflected on the internet: ‘The sense that the human heart is restless also appears in a thousand ways in popular song and is echoed in folk music, tribal song, and western classical music traditions. Human beings are restless for many things – for love, security, a good harvest, a reason for being, home – and music has found countless ways to express this restlessness’ (Saliers and Saliers 2005, p 171). As this observation suggests, an individual’s quest for meaning, understanding and identity can be made manifest in numerous different forms.

In the research that Clive Marsh and I undertook into how people were using all kinds of popular music (Marsh and Roberts 2015a and 2015b), we note how Charles Taylor cites poetry as an art form where the relocation of the social imaginary from religion and spirituality might occur (Taylor 408-409). We argue that in contemporary Western society, all forms of music (like poetry) help to

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\(^6\) An example can be found here with Paul Simon’s own rendition of Scarborough Fair from 1964 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvt3r6Xs-CM

\(^7\) A good example is Paul Simon’s live rendition of ‘Homeless’ with Ladysmith Black Mambazo from 1987 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UzZu25QukYs
articulate the restlessness and fragmentation that writers such as Slobin, and Saliers and Saliers have identified. Music shapes a coherent world, locating the basis for social imaginaries in ‘inner, individual experience, in personalized meaning’ (ibid.). We concluded that: ‘In this respect, music creates a social imaginary which functions as religions have in the past (and still do for many) and it is therefore not unreasonable to speak of the ‘spirituality of music’, constituted by [these] axes:

(Marsh and Roberts 2015b: 303)

Figure 2 Acoustic Axes as a musical-spiritual social imaginary

Folk music contributes to these axes which help shape the affective space for many in our contemporary world. I noted earlier Hesmondhalgh’s observation about how performers have recorded a sense of blissful intoxication when in front of an audience but audiences too and those listening to music at home, in cars, at the movies, out shopping and in the myriad number of other places where music is played can have a sense of that same intoxication.
Thus I have argued that we should see folk music as part of the broader canvass of popular music, both in terms of its impact upon personal identity and an individual’s affective space. However, it also has its own distinctive acoustic axes as set out in Figure 1 which define the affective space of folk music for the personal identities of artists and listeners alike. Not only do these axes share common ground with religion and religious behaviour, religion can also have an overt role in defining folk music’s social imaginary. These are fundamental in creating an identity that is apart from the worlds of Beyonce, Metallica, Eminem, One Direction and other streams of popular music.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have outlined some of the challenges in providing definitions for ‘folk’ and ‘music’ and therefore ‘folk music’. In addition, we have to accept that distinguishing this genre alongside close cousins such as ‘national music’, ‘roots’ or ‘world music’ is difficult. Nevertheless, we have proceeded on the basis that this phenomenon certainly exists and it shapes national, musical and personal identities. In terms of national identities, folk music can become immersed in the complex political and religious dynamics which accompany nationhood. This is a significant part of the history of folk music as well as a feature of its ongoing story.

With respect to its musical identity I have suggested a number of acoustic axes (Figure 1) which shape the social imaginary of folk music and the affective space of fans. These can include facets of religion that are both explicit and implicit. Finally, with regard to personal identity I have argued that folk music maps onto a broader and inclusive set of acoustic axes (Figure 2) and is part of the process of musical commodification which shapes our individual worlds of personal meaning and experience of non-ordinary reality (the sacred).

Mark Hulsether has observed the importance of a wide range of music in creating a sense of transcendence. He notes how for many in American culture this has involved folk-rock guitar music and this can be extended to wider Western musical culture as well. He argues that: ‘We cannot attribute this solely to traces of African sensibility in the rock portion of folk-rock – although this is
probably a significant factor to consider – because people have also had experiences in a similar vein listening to Handel’s *Messiah* and traditional hymns. If our goal is to identify music with spiritual depth and potential to move a community, we can find popular forms that fall on *either* side of a distinction between African blues-based music and “Western” music heard in religious contexts’ (Hulsether 2015: 129-30 – author’s italics). It is my contention that although folk music is played and enjoyed both inside and outside religious contexts, there will be spiritual depths to those strands which explicitly acknowledge a religious component and those that do not. This is part of the dialogue across the differences and across the acoustic axes which happens in folk music and across all forms of musical expression.

**References**


