

What Is The Folk Tradition ?

A View Of Folklore And Popular Culture

Alan Musgrove



Since Paleolithic times, people have had a need for cultural expression to describe the connections amongst themselves and with the world around them. Poetry, song, dance and story lore are present in every society's folk traditions. A position held by many, is that British, Irish and Australian folk traditions have a direct cultural lineage stretching back centuries. This is also associated with the common prejudice that folk culture is in some way

pure and unadulterated, and popular culture crass and manufactured – an idea that has pervaded for many years. But is this really true? Both popular culture and folk culture serve the same end and the relationship between the two is worth exploring. The perceived divide between folk and popular culture is very fuzzy, if in fact it exists at all. The question of what folklore is, then, has caused some consternation.

Let us start with a definition of terms. Folk means any group or sub-group of people. It could be an entire society, an ethnic group within that society, people within a trade or occupation, political movements, sporting groups or children and adolescents etc. Lore means any legends, myths, beliefs, customs or practices (religious or secular) that have currency amongst societal groups. It is a broad canvas and it may be more useful to speak of *folkways*; a term that encompasses not only musical, poetical and story lore, but also food, sport and the ever-changing manners, mores and morals of a society which are reflected in the creative output of the folk. However, for the purposes of this article, I will stay mostly within the parameters of folklore.

The term 'popular culture' is often used to describe cultural expression produced to entertain a mass audience, particularly when it is marketed and sold for profit. Over time, however, popular culture can become folk culture – a grass roots expression of the people. An example of this is in the broadside ballads produced in the major cities of Britain and Europe in the 18th and 19th Centuries. These works were not written by poets or librettists, but by journalistic hacks in the employ of the broadside publishers, and were churned out on a daily basis. The scansion was rough and the content included love ballads, satires on popular figures and current

events and other topics. Some of these songs, which were originally consumed as popular culture, struck a chord with people and remained in oral circulation long after their initial publication.

The most successful of the broadside ballads were the ‘goodnights’, or gallows confessions. These were written in advance and sold to crowds on the day of a public execution, purporting to be the true words of the criminal. One such composition *The Murder Of Maria Marten By William Corder*, printed in August 1828, eventually sold a million copies. It concerned a murder that took place in Polstead, Suffolk in May 1827. Variant versions of the ballad have been collected in oral tradition in Britain, and also in Australia as recently as the 1990s.

A number of early English folk song collectors misunderstood what they were dealing with. They asserted that broadsides were not folk songs because they did not have the pedigree of the old ballads, denying the interaction between popular and folk culture that was taking place. They insisted that authorship should be anonymous and the carriers of the songs unlettered. Some of these early collectors also believed in inadvertent variation and communally agreed composition only, as the means of creating new variants, which takes away from society the role of the creative individual. These ideas have long been out of favour among serious scholars, and were indeed considered fallacious contemporaneously by collector Cecil Sharp. In fact, as Sharp noted, individual performers actively contribute to the dynamic folk traditions to which they belong as they select material for their repertoires. To a traditional singer a good song is a good song regardless of its origin.

The migration of popular songs into folk tradition has been going on for centuries. Between 1698 and 1720 Thomas D’Urfey published six volumes of *Pills To Purge Melancholy* which used regionally collected folk tunes with D’Urfey’s own lewd lyrics, as well as satires on government and society, love songs and drinking songs, all accompanied by contemporary tunes, many by well known composers of the day. These volumes proved very popular all over Britain and his collected tunes and popular compositions returned to oral circulation where they were collected, remote from their place of origin, a century and a half later – folk or popular culture? Acceptance of this phenomenon has been a long time coming for some. Collector and folklore academic Chris Sullivan informs us in *Castles In The Air*, (Baalgammon Music & Folklore 2006) that the late social historian and folklore scholar, Edgar Waters, presented a program for BBC radio, and a lecture at Cecil Sharp House in the mid 1950s, while resident in London. During these he played a number of field recordings of Australian traditional singers performing ‘bush’ material, “None of which

was a folk song” according to doyen of the English folk song movement, Maud Karpeles.

Of the Australian bush songs which are now widely regarded as folk songs, many were created by known writers, and most set to popular tunes of the day. Field collection of folklore began in Australia in the early 1950s – relatively late compared to the rest of the world – and other folkways even later. Pioneers in the field, such as John Meredith, at first only recorded what they thought was ‘traditional’ material, which they typically defined as material of anonymous authorship. When Meredith encountered traditional singer Duke Tritton, who composed his own work as well as performing traditional material, he only collected Tritton’s traditional songs. As time went on however, more information was gathered in the field, and more archival research undertaken. It became clear that most of Australia’s bush songs were of relatively recent vintage and the identity of many of their composers traceable.

There are many iconic songs concerned. *Brisbane Ladies* was composed by Saul Mendelsohn, shop keeper from Nanango, Queensland. He was born in Germany circa 1844 and wrote the song around 1880. He died in Nanango in 1897. Mendelsohn used a well-known English tune, *Spanish Ladies*, to carry his text. It was first printed in *The Queenslander*, and later in A. B. Patterson’s *Old Bush Songs*. Another iconic bush song, *The Broken Down Squatter* was written by Charles Flower and also printed in *The Queenslander* in 1894. It was set to the popular tune, *A Fine Hunting Day*. Charles Flower’s brother Horace, composed, *The Dying Stockman*, which was set to *The Tarpaulin Jacket* and published in *The Portland Mirror* in 1885. The original song is long forgotten, but the bush song remains very much part of the traditional bush singer’s repertoire. There are many more examples.

Folklorist, collector and publisher, Ron Edwards began self-publishing in the 1950s and continued until his death in 2008. His work culminated in his massive 12 volume work, *Australian Folk Song*, in 2005. Included in his publications were songs by amateur songwriters he encountered in the field, such as bushman Jack Crossland, and meat worker Des Byers. Furthermore, Edwards didn’t see any conflict with popular songs, folk songs and parodies sharing the same pages, and as such, may have been the first in his field to acknowledge this relationship.

Popular and folk culture are not opposite ends of the spectrum and technology has always been a factor in dissemination. Advances such as the printing press had a huge impact. Modern technology has only changed the medium and speed of transmission of cultural material. To some extent print, recording and the internet tend to freeze versions of songs, stories

and poems, but creative individuals also intervene and re-work their own arrangements. Sometimes these people are professional, sometimes not. This is no different than it has ever been. Gordon Hall Gerould's chapter on the nature of ballad variation in *The Ballad Of Tradition* (Oxford University Press 1932) is instructive.

"In the sense of re-creation, ballad making has continued to be a living art down to our own times. To put it otherwise, variation cannot possibly be due to lapses of memory only, else good versions would not be multiplied. It seems to me that we are forced to accept belief in a tradition of artistry current at least in certain groups or families and in certain regions.

A large number of individuals were so affected by a sound tradition of music and verse that they could compose or adapt ballads in such a way as to make them worthy of remembrance. Some of them may have been middle class folk rather than peasants, and some of them were certainly 'minstrels' – professionals of a sort.

The art they practised, however, was beyond all doubt distinguishable from that by which the higher classes were beguiled, a popular if not rustic art. There has been too much stress on the illiteracy of folk-singers, with the implication that they are and have been ignorant. It cannot be too strongly urged that they have been, first and last, well trained in the music and poetry they have loved and perpetuated."

This shows that professional entertainers have always influenced what goes on with 'the folk' and reinforces something we know from field collection work: that people will make up material to fill a need or a perceived gap in some tune, song or story. One striking example of this is traditional musician Bill Case from Mount Gambier, South Australia. Not only did he make his own compositions and endlessly vary traditional tunes, but had in his repertoire a localised two-part variant of *The Prisoner's Song*. This song was originally recorded by American hillbilly artist Vernon Dalhart and released in Australia on the Brunswick label in 1924. It only had one part, but some Mount Gambier musician felt it needed a second to be a good dance tune, so one was created.

Australian folk dancing is a good example of how popular culture is appropriated by 'the folk' and made their own. The dances that have been danced in rural Australia from roughly the 1820s until the last decades of the 20th Century, (and in some isolated areas until the present day) have their roots in popular dance crazes of the 19th Century. During that period in Europe, folk dances were regularly polished up for the ballrooms of Paris, Vienna and London, and released as the latest fad. These popular dance crazes swept the whole world. Probably the best known of these

today is the Waltz, but other dances such as the Varsoveinna, the Schottische, the Polka, the Mazurka, the Barn Dance, the First Set Of Quadrilles, the Lancers and the Alberts (these last three known collectively to rural Australians as ‘the sets’) were introduced to Australian ballrooms between 1820 and 1880 or so. These became the folk dances of Australia.

It should be emphasized that it was the polished-up ballroom versions and not the original folk forms that found their way to Australia. These dances remained popular in regional areas long after they had disappeared in the city. The sophisticated ballroom steps were simplified by country people, and the execution made a little more rambunctious. Although these dances were popular nation-wide, each region had its own subtle variations of the steps.

The accompanying music was also reduced from grand, semi-classical pieces with long introductions and codas, sometimes running to hundreds of bars, to simple 16, 32, and 48 bar tunes, with mostly diatonic melodies. Traditional instrumentalists re-worked, adapted and composed dance music in the same way as singers altered, and varied the old ballads, bucolic folk songs and broadsides.

This is where it is important to stress environment and intent in production. Nowadays amateur songwriters in local folk and country music clubs sing their songs, and others within the group learn them if they like them. These songs are usually, but not always, composed for the sheer pleasure of creation and often express a point of view shared by others. They frequently depict local events or people, and are in a style familiar to the group, whether that be country, pop, rock or traditional folk.

Bearing in mind that many folk songs we now know and love had very limited dissemination geographically, the aforementioned compositions may well be the contemporary folk songs of Australia. This is in contrast to the so-called ‘contemporary folk’ material written by performers who ply their trade professionally and create songs with the intent of advancing a career. These belong purely to the realm of popular music. Having said that, this does not exclude these same songs from being given folk status when performed in the amateur environment.

Songs like *Alexander’s Ragtime Band*, *The Pub With No Beer*, *Stairway To Heaven*, or *Bad To The Bone*, for instance, have become endemic with different generations of musicians. When they are belted out in the back room of a pub, or around a table over a few beers, if not actual folk songs, they could be considered folk performances – a pretty fine line. As a lover of traditional music they are not to my taste, but we can’t control what ‘the folk’ will like. Folk music is going on all around us; it has just changed its

sound, that's all. It is no longer based on rural music of the 19th Century but popular music of the current era.

It must be remembered that folk singing, dancing, storytelling and the like are social pastimes and are influenced by changes in the social life of any group. This is a slow evolutionary process, for ideas don't change suddenly, but change is inevitable. Social evolution is not an accident either. It is the result of development within a society driven by changing perceptions brought about by important events such as world wars, depressions and social revolutions like the one brought about by the contraceptive pill. When considerable numbers of people have embraced the new ideas, and the values of the society have changed, shifts in the folk culture will follow.

Mythology is another area of folklore that has undergone major change. While bushrangers such as Ben Hall and Ned Kelly have been elevated to mythological status, and quasi-factual tales about them abound, true mythology as known by the ancients has faded with modern rational thinking – although Hollywood's current romance with vampires has popularised and made fashionable, monsters of the metaphysical world beyond our imagining. This is giving rise to a new folklore popular with young people, influenced as they are by media-sponsored film franchises.

Outside of these commercially driven creations, other cultural oddities such as urban myths have currency amongst the population. These fill a primal need in people to have something mysterious, macabre or unexplained in their experience. Some people fill this void with religion, and others with stories of occurrences beyond their ken or control.

Myths of any sort are the stuff of forbidden desire, inexplicable motivation and essentially everything in the psyche that to the rational mind is unreal, crazed or abominable. Since it is now largely unfashionable for modern, educated individuals to believe in ghosts, pixies, trolls or other malevolent creatures, urban myths have found their niche. Sometimes these stories are so convincing that they appear as news items, but they always occur in a distant location, in the same way as some old ballads and folktales took place in castles and kingdoms beyond the experience of the listener, teller or singer. This is an essential element of the urban myth, creating a verisimilitude in the same way as "they say that so and so" does, when nobody really knows who 'they' are.

The need of people to group together is part of the human condition, and folk and popular culture are palpable manifestations of that need. Any social group requires a shared paradigm for the individuals within to feel comfortable with each other, and it also serves as a means of distinguishing

itself . This is basic to all culture. Nicholas Tawa, describing this in *The Way To Tin Pan Alley*, (Schirmer Books 1990) quotes Lawrence K. Frank.

“All men everywhere, face the same life tasks, share the same anxieties and perplexities, bereavements and tragedies, seek the same goals in their cultures: to make life meaningful and significant, to find some security, to achieve some social order and to regulate their conduct toward values that make life more than organic existence.”

In summing up it must be said that it is the urge to express one’s self culturally that is the folk tradition, rather than any particular canon of material. While it is tempting to think we have changed and become a lot more sophisticated since medieval times and beyond, at the most basic level, we have remained the same. Our creative endeavors are driven by the same needs and desires to make sense of the physical and cultural environments in which we exist. The bodywork may be new and shiny but it is the same rusty old engine underneath.

ALAN MUSGROVE.
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