

## Folk Music: Socially Sound

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### Abstract

When thinking about folk music in the United States, the sounds and images that tend to arise in one's mind are of singers and instrumentalists who play simple, acoustic songs that pull at heartstrings and evoke nostalgia with their lyrics. However, folk doesn't technically have a "sound". The International Folk Music Council hastily agreed upon a definition of the genre in 1952, which describes folk as the result of oral transmission that also relies on a constant change of preferences in aesthetics. Today, this characterization is more relevant than ever. The progression of music technology has resulted in conveniences, from LPs to streaming services, that have allowed listeners a more constant access to music. This paper argues that this method of sharing is equivalent to what has been known in the past as oral transmission. Therefore, instances where modern musicians (who would be considered pop or rock artists, rather than folk, based on the sounds of their music) cover songs by other musicians from any and all genres, can be considered folk music. It does not matter if either artist lacks stereotypical folk sounds; through the passing of time and the musical torch they have become folk artists. This paper shows that "folk" is much more of a social construct rather than a musical genre, and that it relies on the phenomenology of humans performing music rather than the sound of the music itself.

### 1. Body of Paper

Determining the clear definition of a musical genre is no easy feat. There are so many songs, artists, sounds, and textures in existence that attempting to compartmentalize them into respective groupings can become maddening. Still, this categorical concept is constantly shoved into music consumers' faces and has been used to describe both the music and its listeners. Fabian Holt discusses the benefit of recognizing a fluidity in musical genres, defining the concept as "...a set of symbolic codes that are organized and constituted in a social network at particular moments in history, [with] boundaries [that are] negotiated in multilayered ontologies between different interpretative contexts"<sup>1</sup>. Essentially, musical genres are constructed based on a variety of factors including, but not limited to, sound, social, geographical, and environmental contexts. American folk music is no exception. In the late 1770s, German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder characterized folk by limiting its sounds to those composed communally and with "an aesthetic of 'dignity'"<sup>1</sup>. Cecil Sharp, a noted participant in the British Folk Music Revival of the early twentieth century, and who later went on to spend time in the Appalachian Mountains collecting folk songs, added "produced by artisan and laboring rural people" as well as "anonymous composition" to the growing list of folk music traits<sup>2</sup>. In 1952, the International Folk Music Council decided definitively on the following definition: "Folk music is music that has been submitted to the process of oral transmission. It is the product of evolution and is dependent on the circumstances of continuity, variation and selection"<sup>3</sup>. All of these descriptions make a common yet understated point: folk music is not officially defined by its sound, but by the process of its creation. Therefore, this paper proposes that, based on the technological, social, and artistic progression that music has made in order to get to where it is today, musicians who cover other musician's work are folk artists, no matter the sound or subject of the tune.

Erik Christensen defines the study of phenomenology as an investigation of "the relationship between the object and the process that allows the appearance of the object in consciousness"<sup>4</sup>. The general idea of this relatively new

philosophy and psychology-based research method is to look at things that exist as they are in the current climate of human consciousness, then trace these concepts back to how they may have originally formed in human minds. Using this method could help people recognize the potential vastness of folk because of how the genre has progressed over many years through changing political, social, and musical movements; these things are only made possible through human interaction and consumption. Another important aspect of phenomenology involves making sure that all known perspectives on the topic at hand are considered. That is probably impossible for a single paper written by a single person, but it is still necessary to embrace the idea that more than a few viewpoints exist, and all affect the outcome that is the present day. Music is extremely easy to experience without thinking twice about the decisions that make up why people like it, don't like it, or feel a particular emotion because of it. To dissect these feelings and reasons is to discover more about the subject as well as the human condition itself. Folk music would not be what it is today without having experienced extensive social and musical modifications, meaning that it successfully lives up to its original description (a product of oral tradition), just not in the way that casual music lovers and listeners might think.

Part of what has morphed the definition of folk music is the mass popularization of specific musics that are labeled 'folk'. The 1930s were a difficult time for working class Americans because of the Great Depression; the political turmoil and lack of jobs, among other things, made for poor quality of life both physically and mentally. Certainly, this does not mark the true beginning of folk music, as there were generations of Black and Indigenous peoples who lived through severe hardships and created and performed music about their situations<sup>5</sup>. However, this particular era of despair created a shift in focus to the arts from the perspective of political leaders in the United States. Their new interest in music as a productive and entertaining medium of expression for the masses prompted governmental change in the form of the Federal Music Project (FMP). Ronald D. Cohen describes the FMP as "[including] not just a paycheck but also a supportive creative environment that coincided with the emergence of radical political movements..."<sup>6</sup>. This allowed artists such as Earl Scruggs, Zilphia Mae Johnson, and Lee Hays to make themselves known for their folk music, which consisted entirely of protest-style lyrics set to acoustic instrumentation. Then, in 1945, musician Woody Guthrie would help define folk in a cultural sense with the song "This Land Is Your Land"<sup>7</sup>. This style of folk fits well into the two aforementioned, earlier dated descriptions, but then becomes too far-reaching for the International Folk Music Council's 1952 definition. It seems that those who had the authority to solidify a definition like this were striving to de-radicalize the idea of folk by omitting the 'working class' and 'rural' labels. This came on the tail of Joseph McCarthy's attempted purge of Communism in the United States through blacklisting, which included the names of folk artists like Pete Seeger, which greatly affected his career as a band member of The Weavers<sup>8</sup>. After this national occurrence came the aforementioned Council's updated genre definition, which changed the direction of folk once again.

In 1959, at the second annual Gramophone Awards (better known today as the Grammys), the title of 'Best Folk Performance' was introduced. It was won by a group called The Kingston Trio for their album *The Kingston Trio At Large*. This record is a mix of songs that strictly follow previously mentioned folk guidelines, like the track "Scarlet Ribbons", as well as songs written by members of the group. These newly-composed songs enter the multi-genre territory; for instance, the track entitled "Blow Ye Winds" could easily pass for an ancient sea shanty. The most popular single from the album is titled "M.T.A.", which is a well-sung slapstick comedy track about a man who isn't allowed off of a Boston train because ticket fares were raised after he already boarded, and he can't afford the increase. His wife even has to hand him a sandwich every day at 2:15 P.M. through the train window. The Kingston Trio were not making fun of the price hike or other economic despairs, however the song itself sounds much more light-hearted and void of sorrow and intense emotion in comparison with a Woody Guthrie tune. This clever, comedic songwriting, among other things, helped them win such a significant award and furthered the shift in folk.

Fast forward to 2021. When a listener types 'folk' into Spotify, one of the most popular music streaming services today, what immediately appears is worth noting. The top result is artist Taylor Swift, probably because she released a Grammy-winning album in December of 2020 entitled *folklore*. This record contains serene, well-produced, primarily acoustic songs, all of which were written by Swift and an interchangeable group of three producers and one other musician, Justin Vernon, who helped write and is featured on a single tune. It could be argued that this album fits under only one single aforementioned definition of folk: Johann Gottfried Herder's, which demanded that folk requires a sense of dignity within its musical product. However, there is no oral tradition involved, Swift is not a member of the working class, and there is nothing anonymous about this album. A further dive into the Spotify search reveals a number of playlists that involve the word folk: 'Fresh Folk', 'Folk Pop', and 'Infinite Indie Folk', just to name a few. Looking at the credits of the songs included on the 'Fresh Folk' list, just about every single one of them is at least co-written by the artist performing the song. This defies the original definition of folk and proves yet again that the genre has been through cultural changes that have silently, yet noticeably, moved the bar of expectation for content.

By this point, the meaning behind folk music has been stretched in many different directions, ultimately making room for the cover song. A piece of evidence that represents this comes from the state of general music today and involves the work of popstar Miley Cyrus. She is well known for starting her career as a young girl, taking the Disney world by storm by dressing up and performing as alter-ego Hannah Montana. Both Hannah and Miley released music worldwide that was, and still is, undeniably pop. As Cyrus grew up, her music and image began to change drastically, taking listeners through a journey of genres including, but not limited to, country, psychedelic, and a kind of alternative-electro-pop. Through the years, she has released videos covering songs by artists ranging from Dolly Parton to Janis Joplin to Incubus. When modern musicians like Cyrus perform covers, they are more than likely doing so because they heard the track on a music streaming service or the radio, or saw a video of it on YouTube, then decided they liked the melody or connected to the lyrics enough to put together their own performance. Although historically “oral transmission” has meant the learning of songs via face-to-face interaction, this process is a twenty-first century form of oral transmission that works in many of the same ways as a face-to-face interchange. Musician Lizzy McAlpine has made her way onto music listener’s radars by covering countless songs and uploading them onto the internet. Recently she covered a tune called “Hypotheticals” originally by the band Lake Street Dive. One of the lead singers of that band, Rachael Price, took note of the cover, and was able to express her appreciation and admiration for the sound of the recreation.<sup>9</sup> Even though the music is not being passed from person to person via face-to-face interaction, it is nevertheless making its way to people, allowing them aural access and the opportunity to transform it into a folk tune.

Oral transmission, in its simplest and most concisely defined form, means the distribution of information via the voice in time. There is nothing about that definition that restricts said distribution to sounding a certain way, or to being distributed in a live, non-electronic format. The ways that technology and music have advanced have made it immensely easy to share sounds instantly and without much effort, which is wholly a result of the direction of societal growth. As soon as an artist releases their music onto a streaming platform (of which there are many, e.g. Bandcamp, YouTube, Apple Music, SoundCloud, and more), it is capable of being heard endlessly around the world. Social media provides platforms for listeners to express their opinions and admirations directly to artists, extending the branches of communication even further. Now, on apps like TikTok and Instagram, users can partake in “duets”, where they record themselves singing along, harmonizing, or adding musically to a piece that someone has put onto the internet. The differences between that route of musical distribution versus the centuries-old method of live performance are grand. The sentiments, however, are still the same. Emma Patterson writes “The tradition of sharing and experiencing music and tradition together was the motivation behind oral transmission and could essentially be the motivation for music in general”<sup>10</sup>. While oral transmission has meant strictly dialogical and in-person in the past, that is clearly not the case for modern society. It is possible that listening to a great song alone, at home, and through speakers could have similar emotional and physiological effects as listening to it live while at a gathering around a fire on a cool spring evening. It can also be argued that listening to a musician croon directly into one’s ears via a pair of headphones is more intimate than watching them perform on stage from a distance. The tradition and transmission occurring in these situations lie directly within the music itself, using sound as a vessel for humanity. Although it is technically a monological experience, it still has meaning for both parties involved, as the music and its messages are being spread. Additionally, there is still opportunity for a dialogical experience to occur due to the technology available that allows listeners to potentially get in touch with musicians, just as if they were noticeably nodding their head to the groove at a live show or waiting afterwards for a chance to shake a hand and thank a player. The interaction between Lizzy McAlpine and Rachel Price of Lake Street Dive via Instagram serves as a prime example of the visible and aural continuation of oral transmission in modern times, therefore allowing a cover song to be folk music. Another aspect of cover songs that make them an important commodity to music as a whole is the fact that the covered songs have previously existed for some time, allowing for listeners to get to know them before they are then recreated (and potentially revitalized, based upon how long ago the original was released). The original version already holds the weight of being a song worth covering, potentially attracting fans of the original artist as well as the cover artist. This is the ultimate shared experience; getting music listeners with different musical tastes to find common ground is not always easy. This accomplishment is a true meaning of oral transmission, and therefore should be considered folk music.

Music journalist and producer Richard Carlin explains a potential argument against allowing any genre to have a place in the folk realm. Musician Lead Belly made it onto the folk scene in 1933 as an incredibly talented singer and guitarist that played with a blues-influenced sound. He was still marketed as folk, though, because it was not his sound that mattered most, but the fact that he was noticed for his talents while at the Angola State Prison in Louisiana. Carlin explains why this is relevant when he writes, “... [Lead Belly’s] songs were presented as ‘authentic’ outpourings of a folk performer; no attempt was made to trace them to their popular roots (because to do so would be to deny the genius of the folk and instead glorify the pop music industry).”<sup>11</sup> This authenticity trope plays a large part in the folk genre,

dating back to Herder and his requirement for dignity. The roots of folk are planted in real and sometimes very specific experiences, so welcoming the ideas of others that lack a certain depth of originality is understandably questionable. However, not everyone experiences music in the same way; a listener could hear a cover song before knowing the original even exists. Erik Christensen breaks down these sensations from a phenomenological perspective: “The listener intends to hear certain sounds as music, which implies that the sounds assume musical significance.”<sup>4</sup> That musical significance is what creates the entire concept of genre as well as these encompassing definitions of folk, in addition to everyone’s personal experiences. While those are separate ideas, the concepts and definitions cannot exist without the influence of listeners’ experiences. Simon Frith explains this further when he describes why disparities over labels in music occur in the first place. He writes, “Musical disputes are not about the music ‘in itself’ but about how to place it, what it is about the music that is to be assessed...Our reception of music, our expectations from it, are not inherent in the music itself.”<sup>12</sup> The world’s music listeners may be used to thinking and feeling that folk music sounds a certain way or comes from a certain background because of how it has been historically presented, but that does not mean there is no room for expansion, extrapolated interpretation, and evolution.

If people of all different backgrounds were to be asked about what kind of music they consider folk, the names of hundreds of different musicians and songs would be mentioned, accompanied by thousands of reasons as to why. It is also extremely likely that these musics could be labeled as being one or more other genres besides folk, as well. This is because that has been the purpose of folk all along: to change itself with the times. Currently, music is more accessible than it ever has been due to technology that allows people to interact with each other at all times of day and night. It is also at its most diverse, given the access that aspiring musicians have to online vocal and instrument lessons, or free software that offers things like basic electronic instrumental sounds. The abundance of cover songs that circumstances such as these create should be viewed as modern additions to the folk spectrum.

In conclusion, the definition of folk music has completely changed since its conception and has evolved to the point where cover songs should be automatically included in its breadth. This goes to show how powerful both the human perception of sound is, as well as the power of the labels we give these perceptions. Folk music is just one example of how time can reveal the flexibility of these labels, and challenge how we interpret them. Those who originally defined folk could not have predicted how much music would advance in a technological sense, changing the meanings of their original words. There is so much potential for folk, and music genres as a whole, to continue growing and expanding, and it is crucial for the world to keep open minds in order to see all of the possibilities.

## 2. References

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