

# Introduction

## *Lost Voices*

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express

A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:

What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape

Of deities or mortals, or of both,

In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?<sup>1</sup>

A copy of the 1963 album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* spins on a turntable. Toward the end of side one, after a short pause, we hear his impish introduction to a track spoken over strummed guitar: “Unlike most of the songs nowadays being written uptown in Tin Pan Alley, that’s where most of the folk songs come from nowadays, this is a song, this wasn’t written up there, this was written somewhere down in the United States.” It was written by a young Dylan, native of Minnesota, in the guise of Woody Guthrie—but it could pass as any relic of the American past, a Lomax-style field recording of an ageless songster drifting through southern sands. As we’ve since come to expect from Dylan, the message is never straightforward. A lesser songsmith might have prefaced the track with a simple claim on folkloric authenticity (“this is a *real* song, not like one by those Tin Pan Alley *hacks*”), but Dylan’s off-the-cuff framing paints Tin Pan Alley—that vilified producer of industrial trash—as a cradle of folk music.<sup>2</sup> On account of his diction, we hear not only “folk song” but also “folks’ songs”—that is, songs of the people, popular songs. So, what is the distinction being made, then? It is a claim about authorship: whereas most modern popular music is written by professional songwriters hammering away on weary pianos striving for lucrative reward, *real* songs emerge organically from some nameless *elsewhere*, growing amid the soil of those United States, a product of labor

and hinterlands, wild life and community. This is the folkloric polarity Dylan draws even as he applies the term to a paradigm of mass culture: individual vs. commune, untutored artistry vs. commerce, experience vs. cheap imitation, center vs. margins, the present vs. the past.

For Dylan, those Tin Pan Alley songwriters housed like industrious livestock in stalls at the Brill Building “had it down to a science”: “the world they knew and the world I knew were totally different.”<sup>3</sup> A few subway stops downtown, through Times Square past Bryant Park and the Empire State Building, would take you to 1110 MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village and the “citadel of Americana folk music,” a focal point of Dylan’s world—the Folklore Center owned by Izzy Young.<sup>4</sup> This music “glittered like a mound of gold,” testament to a rich and untapped seam running through the nation’s bedrock, linking Young’s shoe-box-sized chapel and its arcane contents with the people and their history, their inheritance and true worth:

There were a lot of esoteric folk records, too, all records I wanted to listen to. Extinct song folios of every type—sea shanties, Civil War songs, cowboy songs, songs of lament, church house songs, anti-Jim Crow songs, union songs—archaic books of folk tales, Wobbly journals, propaganda pamphlets about everything from women’s rights to the dangers of boozing. . . . A few instruments for sale, dulcimers, five-string banjos, kazoos, pennywhistles, acoustic guitars, mandolins. . . . I listened to as many [records] as I could, even thumbed through a lot of his antediluvian folk scrolls. The madly complicated modern world was something I took little interest in. It had no relevancy, no weight. I wasn’t seduced by it.<sup>5</sup>

Song, he implies, is not some kind of industrial science—it’s a living art eternally at risk of being lost, killed off by the high tides of modernity. Most of it is already extinct, antediluvian, Edenic. The instruments are acoustic and vernacular; the politics are radical, egalitarian, and opposed to the status quo; the subjects are rugged outlaws, wars, tragedies, hard manual labor, solidarity, loss, religion, and the untamed frontier. Whenever the modern world seems unbearably light, folk music brings us back down to earth, its weight a salvation to those averse to being buoyed up by the madness of time. Seduced by these talismanic folios and traces of the archaic, Dylan was following in the footsteps of an older generation of poets—Romantics and visionaries with minds beguiled by minstrels, peasants, and wandering bards.<sup>6</sup>



Poland, 1949. Three figures in a van, in the snow. They carry a microphone and portable tape recorders.<sup>7</sup> We watch them watching others,

listening intently as they perform—in the rain, a humble dwelling, a dance, in the cold, on rough-and-ready instruments. These musicians are poor, remnants of a rural way of life that seems of a different century entirely, paradigms of what an enthusiastic Czech musicologist from Milan Kundera’s novel *The Joke* describes as “a tunnel beneath history, a tunnel that preserves much of what wars, revolutions, civilizations have long since destroyed aboveground.”<sup>8</sup> The three figures listen to a recording in the van. The driver speaks: “You’re not afraid it’s too crude, too primitive?” The woman answers him, curt but polite, “No, why?” “Where I come from every drunk sings like this.” They are looking for folk music in Paweł Pawlikowski’s film *Cold War*.

This trio is not just on the hunt for recordings, however; they are collecting people. The camera follows two military transport vehicles heaving with young passengers as they pull up in front of a derelict mansion overrun with livestock. This stately home becomes their new abode—“a world of music, song, and dance,” as the driver, now revealed as a figure of authority, puts it. The two fieldworkers look on from a distance, smoking, their mutual reticence palpable as his soapbox address continues. Only the best performers among them will “step onto our nation’s stages, and the stages of our brotherly nations” as part of a “fierce and noble struggle”—the struggle for Sovietized communism led by the recently formed *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*, the Polish United Workers’ Party.<sup>9</sup> A banner declaring “WE WELCOME TOMORROW” falls down like a slapstick gag while being hung up over the entrance. The film cuts to an inner hallway lined with performers awaiting an audition: “Do we have to be able to read music?” asks a blonde-haired girl, who later emerges as the film’s protagonist. The figure to her right shakes his head: no, “they want it peasant-style.” This overcrowded mansion is proof, at last, that the peasantry have usurped the aristocracy, even if they’re merely playing a part—a ruse involving identical costumes, choreography, arrangement, artifice, and strict discipline. They are performing the state’s sanitized vision of the past as a conduit for the future, smiling socialist realism as a tool in the realization of socialism.<sup>10</sup>

As another character from Kundera’s novel puts it, what was required under communism was to “purge the everyday musical culture of hit-tune clichés” and “replace them with an original and genuine art of the people”—a national art that would overturn the damage done by capitalism and urban isolation to create a new social collectivity “united by a common interest.”<sup>11</sup> It was as if, in the words of his musicologist friend, such figures had “made a secret pact with the future and

had thereby acquired the right to act in its name.”<sup>12</sup> In Pawlikowski’s *Cold War* we find folk song dressed up as Soviet propaganda, orchestrated by experts who watch from the wings to ensure conformity. The ensemble’s directors are summoned to official meetings and encouraged to use their platform to educate and embolden the masses—becoming “a living calling card for our Fatherland” that sings about land reform and world peace, incorporating into their repertoire “a strong number about the Leader of the World Proletariat.” Soon, an enormous image of Stalin unfurls behind this peasant choir on stage, Orwellian eyes staring out into the audience. The ensemble begins to look more and more like a trained division of the army; the stately home is restored to its former glory; a tour schedule is arranged; and a girl named Janicka is singled out for looking “too dark,” failing to resemble the mandatory “folk appearance . . . a pure Polish, Slav look.” With events so close in living memory, it is a comment that cuts to the heart of the film’s unspoken message: the folk are symptoms of the kind of thinking that underpinned the political terrors of the twentieth century, pawns in a prolonged cold war of ideas stretching back into the Enlightenment.



These two vignettes represent strangely intertwined extremes: folk song as outsider antipathy to the modern world of capitalist industry and political injustice, untutored and with its face turned toward the past like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history; folk song as ideological machinery used to envision a new kind of future totalitarian modernity that excludes “impure” ethnic minorities. How can one seemingly coherent concept yield such contradictory outcomes? And why is there still so much common ground between them, both desirous (like Benjamin’s angel) of awakening the dead and attempting to “make whole what has been smashed” in the storm of progress?<sup>13</sup> Why are “the folk” themselves similarly absent from Dylan’s Greenwich Village underground and Cold War nation-state propaganda?

This book traces such ideas and quandaries back to a pivotal moment when, just as they appeared to be on the verge of disappearing, the folk resurfaced on both sides of the Atlantic as a key indicator of modernity’s changing pace—potential saviors, indexes of longing, ciphers of belonging. Although my focus throughout is on England, I follow Paul Gilroy in opposing nationalist or ethnically absolutist approaches to folk material by taking the Atlantic “as one single, complex unit of analysis” in order, as he writes, to produce “an explicitly transnational

and intercultural perspective.”<sup>14</sup> The tours of the Fisk Jubilee Singers—a pioneering African American vocal ensemble that received international acclaim—are only the most obvious example of what Gilroy refers to as “fractal patterns of cultural and political exchange and transformation.”<sup>15</sup> Other instances in this book include cultures and technologies of collecting (Edison’s phonograph revolutionizing the capture of sound across oceans), inquiry into non-Western musical practices, the history of the ballad (an enthusiasm shared by British and American scholars alike from Lucy Broadwood to Louise Pound), utopian dreams detailed by novelists such as Edward Bellamy and William Morris, legacies of race thinking and Atlantic slavery, literary modernism, early jazz, Cecil J. Sharp’s activities in Somerset and the Appalachian Mountains, and finally the online sphere in its manifestly globalized form.

Woven throughout the chapters that follow is one central claim: that folk music is a lot like shot silk. If you hold this fabric up to the light, its folds reveal a variety of colors depending on the angle and individual point of view. Much like the contrasting warp and weft of *changeant* fabric, folk music has several different and frequently antagonistic threads running through its history—utopianism, fascism, nostalgia, and revolutionary socialism, to name only a few. Unite these discursive strands into a textile and it begins to take on an iridescent appearance, at times impossible to resist. I began this introduction with a fragment of Keats’s urn: folk music is another such “sylvan historian,” believed to be made by some anonymous figures of the deep past. Somehow it expresses Arcadian truths, leaf-fring’d legends, and florid tales more sweetly than a cultivated art form, its verses infused with all manner of imperfect mortals and strange, otherworldly figures, sounds of forgotten pipes and timbrels, lovers and heroes, wild ecstasies of the imagination. Whereas the Grecian urn, that “foster-child of silence and slow time,” is voiceless, however, folk music sings—and yet in singing retains all of its mystery and mute allure.

But such allure has not always been felt by all. Indeed, the central problem facing scholars of folk music has been how to take its appeal seriously while (as good historians and deconstructive critics) revealing its boundless fallacies and fault lines. Charles Keil trailblazed this path in 1978 with a blunt, three-page article in the *Journal of the Folklore Institute* entitled “Who Needs ‘The Folk’?” Polemical and ironic, Keil essentially called for an end to this entire field of inquiry:

Long study of folklore and folklorists has convinced me that there never were any “folk,” except in the minds of the bourgeoisie. The entire field is a grim fairy tale. By an act of magical naming, all the peasantries and

technologically primitive peoples of the world can be turned into “folk.” . . . As always, the pros do it better. Sixteen or sixty-four tightly rehearsed whirling couples in matching costumes are certainly a lot more impressive than a bunch of shit-kicking villagers wearing whatever it is that villagers actually wear these days. . . . Unlike “primitive,” “folk” has only a positive, friendly meaning. The folk are not the oppressed whose revolution is long overdue, but the Quaint-not-quite-like-us, the Pleasant peasants, the Almost-like-me-and-you, to be consumed at leisure.<sup>16</sup>

Distinctions such as “high art” versus “folk art,” he argues, represent “a dialectic that is almost completely contained within bourgeois ideology” itself—one term requiring the other for mutual definition.<sup>17</sup> The folk, in other words, are an invention of the rising middle classes: their “low other,” a foil to set against the modern, a token of national character, a well of creative inspiration, a tame pastoral commodity.<sup>18</sup> This argument was later developed into a full-blown Marxist critique of mediation and class expropriation by the British author Dave Harker in his 1985 book *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British “Folksong,” 1700 to the Present Day*.<sup>19</sup>

What such a position aimed for was nothing less than to dismantle the folk in favor of a more radical history from below. For Harker, concepts such as “folk song” and “ballad” are “intellectual rubble” blocking the path of a truly materialist account of working-class experience, too compromised for rehabilitation as useful sources, too much the product of “cultural imperialism.”<sup>20</sup> Georgina Boyes likewise affirmed that folk song is best seen as an invented tradition sustained by revivalists who enact a “cultural transfer,” replacing the folk with performative proxies.<sup>21</sup> Writers arguing from this perspective emphasize, in short, that folk music is yet another example of what the historian E. P. Thompson once described as “the enormous condescension of posterity” (a claim I explore in chapter 2).<sup>22</sup> Although *The Folk* is indebted to such work and the New Left context from which it emerged, it nevertheless seeks to move beyond the well-trodden paths of revivalism and working-class history. I am less interested in attempting to sift the pure from the polluted (as books on folk song often do, even as they mount a critique of this gesture), than in the dynamic affordances of the folk at a crucial moment when the tectonic plates of a global political landscape began shifting into strange new formations. Previous scholars have, to a large extent, either misread or overlooked the politics of folk song during this era, describing it as “a bizarre mixture of radical and reactionary elements” or “an ideological tossed salad.”<sup>23</sup> What I demonstrate here is

that in spite of this heterogeneous mix, folk's politics are in fact perfectly consonant with what we might call an anti-Enlightenment tradition that finds expression in a tribal, organic vision of identity transcending existing states and nations.<sup>24</sup> “Radical” and “reactionary” in this tradition are not antithetical, but merely two sides of the same coin—signs of what Philip Bohlman characterizes as “a European metaphysics of authenticity” bound up with a distinctive form of pan-nationalism traceable to the work of Johann Gottfried Herder.<sup>25</sup>

It was Herder, of course, who had introduced the term *Volkslied* into German historiography during the 1770s as a way to name salvaged and anthologized songs that ostensibly gave voice to the nation, a collective entity defined by language and origin rooted in the instinctual creativity of a bardic past.<sup>26</sup> Despite Herder's work not being well known in Britain before the early nineteenth century and playing only a relatively minor role in Anglophone conceptions of the folk, British scholars reached strikingly similar conclusions.<sup>27</sup> The English term *folklore* first appeared in print in the pages of the London-based journal the *Athenaeum* in late August 1846. Writing under the pseudonym Ambrose Merton, the antiquary William Thoms suggested that what had previously been called “Popular Antiquities” or “Popular Literature” was more “aptly described by a good Saxon compound, Folk-Lore,—*the Lore of the People*.”<sup>28</sup> Thoms was self-conscious of having been the first to advance this particular epithet in English, citing Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835) as an inspiration for the preservation of vernacular literature and custom. In 1878 a Folk-Lore Society was set up in London, followed some twenty years later by a dedicated Folk-Song Society—both founded in response to what was perceived as the deleterious effect of the railways, Britain's industrialization, and the advent of mass consumerism.<sup>29</sup>

The term *folk-song*, however, had preceded Thoms's article by some years, appearing in print in 1843 in passing reference to the *Lai*, a medieval French poetic form.<sup>30</sup> Such a casual reference suggests that the term (or at least the concept) was in fairly wide circulation among an educated elite by the 1840s.<sup>31</sup> Although not a major concern of early folklorists, folk music had become a commonplace category by the 1870s, used to describe songs that were felt to be “the ‘wild stock’ whence the epic and the artistic lyric sprang” and “a vast storehouse of historical evidence of the manners and customs . . . of bygone times.”<sup>32</sup> The central period that I focus on in this book stretches roughly from the 1890s to the 1910s—from the activities of the Folk-Song Society and

the utopian thought of William Morris to the seminal work of Cecil Sharp and W. E. B. Du Bois. I nevertheless reach back to the theories of Karl Marx and John Ruskin and on to the ideology of the Third Reich (a theme extended up to the present day in the coda). As Stuart Hall points out, this span of time is vital to an understanding of the complex and mercurial nature of the popular.<sup>33</sup> It is an era that wrestled with its own modernity—in the process establishing a powerful and resilient dichotomy between primitive and modern essential to our idea of the folk.



In spite of its facetiousness, Keil's short article hints at a number of important points that I want to spend the remainder of this introduction exploring, before finally broaching the thorny issue of modernity. First, that the folk are essentially an artifact of the imagination and are thus notable only by their absence. Indeed, belief in the folk shares much in common with what the distinguished scholar of ancient literature Geza Vermes describes as "man's hopeful and creative religious imagination."<sup>34</sup> Such acts of ingenuity should not be dismissed outright, but read as signs: what might they tell us about those doing the imagining? What ideas did the folk afford at particular historical moments? What new revivalist communities did they help to bring into being?<sup>35</sup> Second, that the existence of the folk stems from "an act of magical naming." And third, that the discourse of folklore was formulated under the influence of colonialist epistemology. Whereas the first of these ideas is familiar within the literature on folk music, the second and third deserve more attention.

The notion of an "act of magical naming" suggests that something's identity subsists in relation to its being named as such, that there exists a circularity between the act of naming something and how we understand it. Slavoj Žižek calls this the "radical contingency of naming."<sup>36</sup> We might ask, however, what it is that links a name to something even when all of its features may have changed. For Žižek, such continuity is predicated on the enigmatic presence of a surplus "something in it more than itself"—the imaginary and unattainable object-cause of desire that we seek in the other.<sup>37</sup> In more simple terms, what he's suggesting is that when a thing is named, its identity is held together by some kind of desire or seductive enjoyment. Applied to the word *folk*, his theory is illuminating. Rather than having any true descriptive currency for music or culture more broadly, it is precisely through an act of magical