Tangled Roots

A Workshop On American Folk And Field Recordings
November 23, 2002
Organizer: Heather O'Donnell

The warmly received PBS series American Roots Music, which appeared in the fall of 2001, reflects the increased visibility (and audibility) of pre-war folk and field recordings over the past five years: the Smithsonian's enhanced-CD reissue of Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music, the success of T Bone Burnett's O Brother, Where Art Thou? soundtrack and the launch of his DMZ label, Moby's remixing of Alan Lomax's Sounds of the South on his bestselling Play and 18. Last October, the Wall Street Journal praised American Roots Music for coming "at a moment when Americans are counting on the many blessings that sustain us - and distinguish us from our foes." The richness and diversity of this music are certainly "blessings," as the Journal claims, but the extent to which they "sustain us - and distinguish us from our foes" is an open one. Who, exactly, are "we," when it comes to the folk? For that matter, who are "the folk"? What is this music -- and why this music, now?

In Terry Zwigoff's Ghost World, the spooky, alien sound of Skip James's 1931 "Devil Got My Woman" cuts through the "modern monoculture" of strip malls, franchise restaurants, and corporate sponsorship, emerging as a rare medium of human communication. Certainly, one reason for the present appeal of "hillbilly" and "race" records is that they satisfy a longing for directness in an age of spin, a longing for place in an age of globalization. The voices and styles on the old 78s, captured before radio permeated every region of the country, lift us out of our own heavily produced commercial soundscape and connect us to what Greil Marcus calls "the old, weird America": an America largely opposed to the look, sound, and feel of the United States today. What collective American identity can this locally produced "old-time music," already experienced as nostalgia at the time of its original release, be said to represent? How does the current interest in roots music recall earlier folk revivals? How does it depart from them?

The American Studies Program and the Society of Fellows in the Liberal Arts at Princeton University invite you to a one-day workshop on pre-war American folk and field recordings: blues, ballads, work songs, fiddle tunes, spirituals, Cajun, zydeco, field hollers, cowboy songs, gospel, bluegrass. Four invited speakers, including Greil Marcus, will discuss the artistic and historical questions raised by the roots music of the 1920s and 1930s. Each will be
followed by a respondent from the Princeton community and an open discussion. Dinner and a performance by The Handsome Family to follow.

**TANGLED ROOTS**

**A WORKSHOP ON AMERICAN FOLK AND FIELD RECORDINGS**

**SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2002**

210-211 DICKINSON HALL, 9:30-5:30

**FEATURING**

Dean Blackwood, co-founder of Revenant Records
Robert Cantwell, University of North Carolina, historian of the folk revival
Marybeth Hamilton, University of London, historian of the Delta blues
Greil Marcus, author of Mystery Train and The Old, Weird America
Heather O'Donnell, Princeton University, Society of Fellows
Dick Spottswood, discographer, folklorist, WAMU radio
Sean Wilentz, Princeton University, History and American Studies

**Musical Guests**

SPIDER JOHN KOERNER, DAVE RAY & TONY GLOVER
Blues, Rags, & Hollers
"Every time they play the lights shine" - Bob Dylan
Friday, November 22, 8 PM
Taplin Auditorium, Fine Hall

The Handsome Family
Odessa, Milk & Scissors, Through the Trees, In the Air
and
Twilight, "One of the Ten Best Records You Didn't Hear This Year" - Spin, 2001
Saturday, November 23, 8 PM
Taplin Auditorium, Fine Hall

**Both Concerts Free and Open to the Public**

Co-sponsored by the Program in African-American Studies,
the Department of Anthropology, the Department of English,
the Department of History, the Department of Music,
and the Council of the Humanities