

When We Were Joyful

Bess Lomax Hawes

I am one of those who grew up during the Great Depression, and even in my teens I began to perceive that the moving force then was the interaction of the economic and the political. Indeed, most of my generation seemed to feel that this combination was the only really interesting thing to think about, along with peace.

Most of this I knew just by sniffing the air, but when I was fifteen my folklorist father, John A. Lomax, drove me through Appalachia from Texas to Washington, D.C., and for the first time I really saw poverty and heard it in the thin, hungering voices of the women who sang for Father when he stopped to visit.

You got to walk that lonesome valley,

You got to walk it by yourself...

Later in Washington I confronted the proceedings of the LaFollette Senate Committee's investigation of poverty in the United States, and truly I never looked back, even though other issues such as ethnicity and labor rights came along. To me they all seemed to flow from the primary problem of economic inequity.

By 1941 my generation had also observed the procedures of the WPA, which demonstrated to us that shoemakers should be able to earn money by making shoes (not by taking low-skilled jobs or going on relief); similarly, that carpenters should be paid for doing carpentry and musicians for making music. It followed then that singers should earn their living making and singing songs.

And so the Almanac Singers, originally four young people including Pete Seeger and Lee Hayes — and, during the middle period of their activity, me — with varying mixes of musical and poetic talents came together to try to reach and excite new audiences and break through the music industry's obsession with romantic love. They sang songs that were about something — the pioneer values of courage and endurance, the pursuit of equal justice, the needs of the poor, the importance of unions, the dangers of war. They struck an emotional range — brash, comic, angry, ironic, tragic — above all, interesting.

And they did this in large part because they simply followed age-old models. They studied the greatest traditional songs, the greatest traditional singers. They paid passionate attention to

the two largest, deepest, and most creative streams of song to influence our nation and later the world — the blues and spirituals of African Americans and old-timey music and balladry from Great Britain.

They rewrote some of these songs to convey a newer message; they slowed some tunes down and speeded others up for differing effects. But because of their learning habits — hours and hours daily in front of the record player absorbing into their bones the intonations and nuances of great folk musicians, as well as continually presenting and studying such locally available traditional singers as Woody Guthrie, Cisco Houston, Josh White, and Lead Belly — Almanac performances had a surety, a brio, a subtlety that later groups had to struggle for.

The Almanacs also invited portable stringed instruments into the recording studio and the concert hall. This had of course been done before but generally for blues and country and western records, and discs of each of these genres were designed to accommodate listeners of a different color. But larger audiences turned out to be amazed at the excitement, vigor, and intriguing rhythms they had been missing.

Gosh, we had fun. Every day: Woody at dawn, sleeping over the typewriter, the floor littered with his commentary, diary, and songs; Lee, clearing his massive throat and tuning up his massive bass; Pete, banjo always on the alert and always with a new idea or a great tune we hadn't really listened to before.

My own life has been essentially joyful. In the "Peanuts" comic strip, Linus once recommended that every baby be issued a banjo at birth. I'll go along with that but also suggest that a banjo, together with a good cause to play it for, is twice as interesting. Everyone needs one or more good causes, for how can you not be joyful with solid problems to work on? I am forever grateful that I came along in time to catch into the indignant, positive, life-affirming atmospheres of the thirties and forties that carried me right on into the nineties. I wish my successors the same fate.

Bess Hawes, one of the singers connected with the Almanacs, later led an active life with the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife and at the National Endowment for the Arts, where she was Director of the Folk Arts Program. She received a National Medal of Arts from President Clinton in 1993.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The title of this article parallels that of Robert Cantwell's recent volume, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival*.