

THE REAL AMERICAN FOLK SONG

A THESIS

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CHAPTER I

FOLK SONG

The most popular conception of what constitutes a folk song is based on the premise that they have no father and mother, but like Topsy, they "jes growed." Those who accept this theory usually make age synonymous with the term "folk." What they really mean is that these songs are so old that we just do not know who composed or made them up. While it may be true that many of these folk songs were never written in the literal sense of the word, some one made them up and sang or played them first. We may not know who their parents were but, unlike Topsy, they did have a father and a mother.

Age or even general characteristics do not make a folk song. Folk songs may be simple or complex in harmonic and rhythmic structure. They may be sad or gay, slow or fast; they may tell a story in their lyrics or may be pure nonsense songs. One thing is true of all of them and that is that they are songs of the people. The very word "folk"

is another way of saying "people." We might better call this music "Songs of the People."

Most people living in America today know and recognise many songs, and I am sure that, for the vast majority of them, it makes very little difference whether or not these songs were written on paper, since they probably have never seen the music, and if given the opportunity to do so, could not read it anyway. Yet parents still sing to their children and bounce their infants on their knees while singing "Pony Boy." They did not learn the songs from a wandering minstrel but, in a sense, we all have minstrels in our homes -- our radios and television sets. Our method of communication has improved so greatly that one minstrel can reach millions of people.

Is not this music also "Folk Music"? Many believe it is.

When jazz or the popular music of America is heard abroad, it is immediately classified by its listeners as American music. It is the music which has developed as a direct result and in step with the development of our nation. "Folk songs are the natural un-studied expressions of the common people, they are the

laughter and the tears of those who, hundreds of years ago, lived and loved as we do now."¹

This quote is accurate, but trace the American popular song and you will find that these songs too express the laughter, tears and growing pains of our country. This music is folk music today, and will be a picture of our people and times for eternity. "They sing as the lark or the nightingale sings, and their art is spontaneous."²

This was written of "folk" music, but a more accurate description of American jazz or "jam sessions" could not be penned.

¹Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia, Vol. 5, 1935, p. 134.

²Ibid.