

MYTHS AND FALLACIES SURROUNDING FOLK MUSIC

Miloš Janoušek, Slovakia

As a man who plays folk music, writes about folk music, and prepares folk music broadcasting programs, I often get asked about what folk music actually is. Sometimes, though, I get *told* what folk music is. There are as many people who are unsure about it as there are many who are too sure. Unfortunately, we find among this group an unexpectedly high number of journalists and publicists, television and radio music editors, and repertoire and program advisors in various music scenes and clubs. Folk music is shrouded in loads of opinions and myths which, although honest, are at the same time false and misleading. And therefore I have summarised some of the most frequent myths surrounding folk flying throughout the world:

A girl/boy with a guitar: This archetype dates back especially to the 1960s and is represented, for example, by Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and Donovan. The "Folk-singer with a guitar" model is very popular, but it is hard to explain to the layman that it is not the only one. The superstructure of this idea is the equal-sign between the above-mentioned man or woman with a guitar and folk - i.e., the singer with a guitar is a priori folk-singer. The problem arises when we suddenly realise who falls into the box marked folk. To classify someone as folk musician only because he/she is coincidentally holding a guitar when interpreting songs is just as wrong as to consider every accordionist to be a cabaret singer.

Folk = protest song. Let's put this straight: Folk music in the world gained a political dimension mainly thanks to Woody Guthrie and the people around him; in the wide public's view it definitely established itself at the beginning of the 1960s, led by Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Phil

Ochs, and Country Joe McDonald. The protest song was above all an American speciality focused against the establishment, so it was strongly left-wing. In socialist Czechoslovakia, folk music was also against the establishment, and considering the very different political strength layout, was very anti-left-wing. The comments of real life were somehow always among the weapons of folk musicians, though it wasn't the only reason that they composed songs. So, after 1989, when people were asking me, what are the folk singers going to do when there is no one to fight against, I replied: "The same as before. Compose and sing songs." And that is true in most cases.

Folk music is acoustic music. This statement has general validity similar to the declaration that blues is a "twelve-bar" pattern in the A-A-B scheme. Once it really was like that and sometimes it is still today, but its development hasn't stopped. The first serious crack in the understanding of folk music as an exclusively acoustic genre was probably made by Bob Dylan in his legendary electrified performance at Newport in 1965; similarly, other musicians led by the British Fairport Convention and Pentangle laid down the foundations of a new branch called folk-rock. Nowadays folk music is played on all kinds of things, sometimes even on acoustic instruments too.

Folk song is a song about something. A subtitle connected with folk music in Czechoslovakia during the 1970s and 1980s. This significantly elitist slogan, though, considered only the official scene and music that got through to the media. For the songs, which really were about something, and for the singers, standing outside the official stream, there was never any good word to spare, nor even a slogan. The proclamation that folk song is about something, on the one hand significantly increased the credits of this genre, but what to do about the instrumentals and traditionals, which do not solve the problems of the world? Do they stop being folk music?

Folk music is the antithesis of the mainstream of popular music. Another elitist opinion, which is not based on truth or reality, because

there are many examples of folk singers whose work took from the mainstream of popular music all the bad things which nonetheless sell well. I can only add that, in the old days, musicians used to be excommunicated from the folk community for much smaller trespasses.

Folk singers are terrible musicians, who compensate their lack of musical ability with singing and lyrics. This is an argument that I hear above all from jazzmen. In my opinion, the instrumental ability of musicians as Richard Thompson, John Renbourn, Bert Jansch, Dave Swarbrick, or the Chieftains is a good counter argument. On top of that, many of them are such great instrumentalists that, unlike jazzmen, they can both sing songs and write lyrics.

Folk music is a minor genre. This statement has to be taken with a pinch of salt, and with comments - how, where, and for whom. For example, in the Czech lands this division has not been valid for a long time, and contemporary folk music is a business, complacently subject to the merciless market rules - from the number of albums sold to the sky-high incomes, and to the gossip in the tabloid press and media. In Slovakia, folk music still maintains its clear name, modesty, and minor status.

This point is followed by another argument:

Folk music is not interesting to anyone. In Slovakia, this is a statement often made by musical program advisers, especially from radio and television, as well as by program managers of clubs and concert halls. Their argument is that since folk music is a minor genre and folk singers are unknown, they can't broadcast them on radio or television, and they can't let them play in clubs. They are not lying. It is true that nobody knows folk singers, because they are not being broadcast on the radio or television, and they don't perform in clubs. Some people call it a vicious circle, the more educated ones call it Catch 22.

Folk music is just one type of music: One might think it easy to define folk music as a type of music in just a few words, but it soon

becomes a nightmare. It might be easier just to name the differences between American and British folk music than to find their common characteristics. The *All Music Guide* presents more than 50 style variations within folk music - e.g., folk revival, contemporary folk music, urban-folk, country-folk or folk blues, as well as Celtic, Irish, and Scottish folk music - and the Guinness's *Folk Encyclopaedia* widens this list with other categories like acidic folk, noise folk, or country cow punk. The simple answer then becomes incredibly complicated.

World music is folk music for the intelligentsia. When producer Joe Boyd in the mid-1960s laid down the foundations of folk-rock with the first recordings of the Incredible String Band and Fairport Convention, he defined at the same time the form and contents of a new category. When, twenty years later, the same Joe Boyd, together with other personalities of the music business and media, invented and introduced the term "world music", they created an empty box without clearly defined form or contents. Almost everything that was supposed to fit precisely within the term world music was soon rejected, so that there was nothing left to demarcate its borders. By the end, the new term gradually encompassed something that has already existed. Even before the invention of world music, Pete Seeger sang "Tshotsholosh", and Paul Simon played around with Peruvian folklore ensembles and with American gospel ensembles. Simon fully developed his enthusiasm for exotic folklore on the albums *Graceland* and *Rhythm Of The Saints*, two years before that [world music] foundation meeting in Islington. The Stones guitarist Brian Jones, twenty years before the term world music was institutionalised, produced [the albums of] the Moroccan Pan Pipers. Today, a quarter of a century after the creation of the category world music, it is possible to stuff practically everything into it - even classical folk music - so, for example, the Internet World Music Institute under the flag of world music offers, aside from Bulgarians, Senegalese, and Aborigines, folk classics such as the Chieftains, Altan, Martin Carthy, June Tabor, Watersons, Dick Gaughan, and Planxty. The good

old folk has gained nobility and trustworthiness somehow only under the name of world music. On the other hand, if one of the primary objectives of world music was to improve sales, then this succeeded magnificently.

For those years that I have spent with folk music - either as a musician or as a journalist - it is evident to me that many myths and fallacies were created around folk, myths and fallacies which would be difficult to explain or to disclaim. The only thing that keeps me optimistic is the fact that, for the majority of normal people, the important thing above all is still the music itself.