

## OH BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU? ...AFTER FIVE YEARS

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In 1994, the first edition of *The Rough Guide to World Music* was launched as a successful survey of the whole scene; in addition to the predictable genres, there were chapters devoted to old-time music, bluegrass music, and gospel, areas that were already extracted. Wide interest in World Music came about from a need to find new locations of inspiration; there was a need to get out from the grooves of Elvis's pioneering single <sup>1)</sup> whose one side was rooted in blues and the other in bluegrass music. That was why the editors of *Rough Guide* felt the need to explain in the introduction why some notorious genres were included in their encyclopaedia.

Browsing the Internet, which was just starting out at that time, really proved the point that the newly grown generation had no idea about things which were considered second nature in this area by previous generations. In the 1990s, Cobain's song "Where Did You Sleep Last Night?", which was an unplugged version of the traditional song "In the Pines", sounded new and fresh. Not that the generation of the 1960s knew it from Sharp's collection, but at least they could link it to the Leadbelly recordings <sup>2)</sup> for Moe Asch <sup>3)</sup>.

In that time, singer-songwriter Beck not only rediscovered Mississippi John Hurt <sup>4)</sup> for his fans (in the late 1920s, Hurt was a songster star for the Okeh label; in the 1950 he represented a mysterious name from the Smith's anthology; and in the 1960s he was loved by the

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1) "That's All Right"/"Blue Moon of Kentucky" (Sun Records, 1954).

2) Ledbetter, Huddie William, songster (1885-1949).

3) Asch, Moses, folk music producer (1905-1986).

4) Hurt, Mississippi John, songster (1893-1967).

crowds at the Newport Folk Festival), but added to his list of idols the very obscure name Nimrod Workman<sup>5)</sup> as well. This was proof that there were still things to discover.

In the 1990s, Hurt's collected recordings were included in the Sony Music catalogue on the Legacy label in the Roots 'n' Blues series and in dozens of similar re-editions. As part of the same [Sony] edition, an attempt came to prepare a new anthology of American folk music<sup>6)</sup>. The whole effort passed almost unnoticed, like similar projects at that time, including two traditionally oriented Dylan's albums<sup>7)</sup>.

It is worth noticing that there were also some unexpected hints of the revival of traditional rural blues among African American musicians such as Alvin Youngblood Hart and Keb' Mo'. The legendary Okeh label was revived for a short period of time, and the Fat Possum label started the exorbitant project of updating the authentic country blues in its production.

The Rounder Records Alan Lomax project, which the company launched in 1997<sup>8)</sup>, aroused interest in more professionally oriented circles. It equally represented the common and the dividing sources of folk music and world music, featuring the likes of Fred McDowell<sup>9)</sup>, *trallaleri* from Genova, Woody Guthrie<sup>10)</sup>, Calypso music stars, Indian musicians from the Caribbean, [American] sacred harp singers, and boys and girls from the suburban schools of Edinburgh.

In the same year, the re-edition of the *Anthology of American Music*, a collection that Harry Smith<sup>11)</sup> put together almost fifty years ago, was a more significant breakthrough. The deluxe publication gained two Grammy Awards, and most of all, it was thoroughly analyzed by Greil

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5) Workman, Nimrod, folk singer (1895-1994), father of singer-songwriter Phillis Boyens.

6) *Roots N' Blues. Retrospective 1925-1950*. Sony, 1992.

7) *Good As I Been To You* (Sony, 1992) and *World Gone Wrong* (Sony, 1993).

8) *The Alan Lomax Collection*. Rounder Records, 1997.

9) McDowell, Fred, bluesman (1904-1972).

10) Guthrie, Woodrow Wilson, folk singer (1912-1967).

11) Smith, Harry (1923-1991).

Marcus<sup>12)</sup>.

Smiths' connections to the Beat Generation environment, whose representatives in the meantime had attained fame in academic circles, perhaps helped raise a wave of new interest in the collection. Above all, there was the irresistible magic of his masterful choice of recordings, which far exceeded the horizon of today's compilations, which in a very simple way illustrate the roots of rock'n'roll.

Smith came to the recordings from which he made the selection in a roundabout way almost at the end of his journey around the music world. Thanks to his unique sense for systemization in collecting various music types and other curiosities, he owned a worthy collection of ethnic recordings. He then came across a shellac recording of Tommy McClennan<sup>13)</sup>, a common Southern race record from the 1920s, which really gave him a shock.

Then it would be easy to imagine a contemporary aficionado of world music, who just as diligently goes around the musical world enjoying the sounds of the didgeridoo and slack-key guitars, finally reaching the imaginary Johnson crossroads. There he would be enchanted by the still unknown to him slack-key jingle of Washington Phillips' *dulceola*<sup>14)</sup>, and the didgeridoo-like vocals of Blind Willie Johnson<sup>15)</sup>.

This is how we could – to a certain extent – explain the unexpected success of the soundtrack from the Coen brothers movie *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou...?* at the turn of the millennium. The film itself did not bring any new music, but it found a grateful audience that was not laid up with prejudices, and gave a clear aim to the above-mentioned misleading streams of the 1990s. Of course, you can say that the following ransacking of companies' own archives, as a reaction to the unexpected trend, was more or less a business matter; however, when we recall

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12) Marcus, Greil. *Invisible Republic*. 1997.

13) McClennan, Tommy, bluesman (1908-1962).

14) Phillips, Washington, singing preacher (1880-1954).

15) Johnson, William, singer of holy blues (1902-1947).

where the term world music originated, we can stop being so narrow-minded.

The Coen brothers, or better yet, the producer of the soundtrack, T-Bone Burnette, presented hillbilly music and blues from a point of view which was very close to that of Harry Smith's. The booklet especially followed the inflated concept of Smith's original design: it was presented as colourful, bizarre, and often almost morbid material, focused on the class which Flannery O'Connor<sup>16)</sup> used to call white trash, who after a very long time were playing in a completely different key than that represented in the folk image of what until then had been the class-conscious Okies of Steinbeck's writing. The material used for the film's music draws from a raw field recording by Lomax to a pleasant parody of mountain music.

It needs to be said that the songs in the film are just on the better side of average in its area. For a slightly more informed connoisseur of interwar Southern history, geography, and music, they are more interesting because they offer some hidden tricks or in-jokes. Nevertheless, more than anything else before it, this movie aroused a significant new wave of interest in blues, bluegrass music, and gospel. The extent of the film's influence was made most evident when British publicists called for a similar deed in cinema to inject the British folk music scene with new life.

At the beginning of the "Oh Brother" wave, there were several Grammy awards and then the live project *Down from the Mountain*. After that there was a flood of CD titles that followed (for instance, the *Oh Sister* compilation on Rounder Records) which openly used the "Oh Brother" wave both in the CD names and jacket covers. There were other "Southern" movies as well.

It is evident that it was not only old goods in new jackets. As mentioned above, race records catalogues and ethnomusicology

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16) O'Connor, Flannery, American writer (1925-1964).

archives still have many things to offer. This newly discovered old music already has its heroes: for instance, multi-instrumentalist Dirk Powell and singer Ginny Hawker. These two music conservatives share, among other things, the fact that their music activities are based on marriage ties. Powell married into the Cajun music dynasty of the Balfas; Hawker married Tracy Schwartz, the veteran of the legendary New Lost City Ramblers. We could add traditionally oriented singer/songwriter Gillian Welch to these representatives of higher levels of music show business.

The past five years have revealed that the “Oh Brother” boom has joined the last bastions of spontaneous music performance in the United States, so the music which is still alive is unexpectedly fusing with music which is being played anew. What else could you wish for?

In the late 1990s, nobody would dare to predict a similar development. It shows continuing interest in this music based on local traditions, homemade music and sometimes even on family ties. The saying that the music must fit the era can be turned inside-out. After years of fantasizing about folk music of the nuclear age and the haunting image of the so-called “contemporary listener”, it seems that music itself can begin to call the shots a little (if only we listen to it and not just to shop assistants) in regards to who should actually play music, where, how, for whom, and most of all, to what extent.

Just like when Robert Johnson sang, “*Come on in my kitchen...*”<sup>17)</sup>, let’s turn back to music – at least in folk, world, and roots music – with an aspect of the home-made dimension in it. Let’s see what kind of a critic will blame us first for killing music this way. Let’s give the mass media to the crowds, resign to the purchasing giants of the mega stores, and leave the festival PA systems to those who cannot hear. Let’s change over to a concept whereby the most current listener is anyone who at any given moment – in a local hall, on the street, or in the kitchen – can gain enough ability to relax and listen through my or your playing and singing.

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17) Robert Johnson: *The Complete Recordings* (Sony, 1990).