Country Music in the Adirondack Region: Tradition and Innovation

by Ellen McHale

The country music of today's Adirondack communities reflects a rich blend of Anglo-American musical styles and traditions, beginning with the song and instrumental traditions of European settlers and continuing through the Twentieth Century into the present. Always there has existed the sharing of musical forms and styles and tuneful accommodations to the changing nature of society. In the forefront of this change and adaptation is the country musician as innovator, commentator, and artist.

As French Canadian and Anglo-American settlers moved into the Adirondack region in the Nineteenth Century as loggers, quarriers, or small-scale farmers, they brought the traditional music of their home countries or regions. The home or logging camp became the setting for social occasions with song and dance, often to the accompaniment of the fiddle. The house party (alternately known as the kitchen dance, kitchen junket, or housedance) provided an opportunity for socializing with one's neighbors in the sparsely settled areas. The traditional fiddling of yesterday and today retains this orientation to the dance.

Today, organizations such as the Adirondack Fiddlers aid in the promotion and perpetuation of this old-time fiddling.

Along with the instrumental tradition is an Adirondack song tradition which shows its roots in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century balladry from the British Isles but which also embraces topical songs, broadside ballads (narrative songs printed on sheets of paper which often served to chronicle a recent event or disaster), and sentimental lyric songs. Singers, as with other musical innovators, embraced and continue to embrace the music and songs which they appreciate and enjoy, whether religious songs, early ballads, vaudeville pieces, etc.

New influences were felt on the music of the Adirondack region with the rise of the commercial recording industry and the proliferation of radio. From its inception in 1888, the recording industry had generally ignored rural folk music. However, with the success of Mamie Smith's recording of "Crazy Blues" in 1920 came an awareness by the recording industry of a heretofore untapped "specialty" audience and market. Recording companies began to exploit regional,
Recording companies began to exploit regional, ethnic, and racial musical currents by producing "Race," "Ethnic," and "hillbilly" recordings.

Country music is a living, organic process in which various musical styles and traditions are borrowed from and traded. Repertoires and styles are various, as attested to by the artists themselves.
ized, ensemble style of playing (Malone 1968: 305-319). This recent innovation continues to shape the music of the Adirondack region, as musicians incorporate music from the bluegrass idiom into their performing. Country music has also recently seen influences from the infusion of rock musicians who have experimented with country music (Malone 1985:385). In the Lake George region, the Stony Creek Band is an example of the eclectic nature of contemporary country music, and they name a plethora of musical influences upon their performing.

Country music is a music which defines categories. It is a living, organic process in which various musical styles and traditions are borrowed from and traded. Repertoires and styles are various, as attested to by the artists themselves. Adirondack artists such as Smokey Greene name both the traditional roots of their family's music making and the influence of recorded music and radio on their development as country musicians. Smokey Greene, in a biographical sketch of “Smokey Green and the Boys” describes the group as “not Country,” “not Bluegrass,” “not Old Time.” Rather, it is “Good down home music” (Smokey Greene, n.d.). In grange halls, fire halls, and dance halls, advertised “round and square dances” offer a blend of traditional square dance music along with vocal renditions of bluegrass, honky tonk and gospel favorites. Regardless of the form which the music takes, country music in the Adirondacks remains a music which is social in its orientation. Its performances occur in the small tavern, dance hall, fire hall, dude ranch, or grange hall of rural Upstate New York and its lyrics portray everyday concerns and lifestyles. The proliferation of fan clubs, the continuation of country dances, and the distribution of the recordings of regional artists attests to the continued vibrancy of country music in the Adirondack region.

Bibliography


Ellen McHale, Ph.D., currently holds the position of the Director of the Folk Arts Program for the Rensselaer County Council for the Arts, Troy, New York. She has researched traditional music in New England, New York, and Pennsylvania. Ellen McHale is an officer of the New York Folklore Society and a former Fulbright Scholar to the University of Stockholm, Sweden.