
Preface

Folk Music in Terra Incognita

In 1976, the year of America's bicentennial, the Smithsonian Institution produced the summer-long Festival of American Folklife on the mall in our nation's capital. The festival's Regional America section was dominated by a huge map of the United States. Reproduced from Alan Lomax's classic *Folk Songs of North America* (1960), the map was shaded to indicate musical regions and festooned with place names invoked in songs. While names abounded in the East, the South, and the Far West, the Upper Midwest was terra incognita. Complete voids yawned in Iowa and the Dakotas, while the only place dotting Wisconsin was, improbably, Northfield—as if that Minnesota city had been run across the border after Jesse James's bank heist.

It is past time to fill the void, to place "Driving Saw Logs on the Plover" and "Aye Bane a Swede from Nort' Dakota" on America's folk song map. Although little noted by scholars and the general public, the Upper Midwest's folk music is as rich and complex as that found anywhere in the United States. Here is the territory with the greatest variety of Woodland Indian cultures. Here are the nation's densest enclaves of Belgians, Finns, Germans, Norwegians, South Slavs, Swedes, and Swiss. Here is the place where the world's greatest variety of polka styles flourish. Here are growing populations of African Americans come north from the Mississippi Delta, of Mexican Americans who followed the migrant workers' trail, of refugees from Southeast Asia. Their music has become the region's music, and the region's music has much to tell about the American experience.

The Region on Radio

Since its broad inception in the 1920s, radio more than any other medium has encompassed the musical pluralism of the Upper Midwest. Potentially on the air for anyone, it has given performers not only the means to reach kindred audiences across geographical space, but also the opportunity to captivate strangers across cultural space. From the late 1930s through the 1950s, for example, stations like Rice Lake's WJMC typically appealed to their entire community with eclectic musical programming that included various live ethnic hours, a rustic "barn dance" show, local church services, and an array of country, rock, pop, and classical recordings. Certainly today's AM talk radio and FM monogeneric formats have narrowed the musical range considerably. Yet even in the homogenized 1990s the region's adventurous sonic travelers can tune in Finnish dance tunes on KAXE, Ojibwa drums on WOJB, Croatian tamburitza on WJMS, Czech brass bands on WAUN, Slovenian accordions on WTKM, Hmong songs on WORT, Swiss yodels on WEKZ, and a good deal more.

Wisconsin Public Radio, this country's first public radio station, has broadcast eclectic programs, including regional music, for a long time. In the late 1970s Tom Martin-Erickson and Judy Rose began producing "Simply Folk," a program chiefly of upper midwestern musicians working within the folk revival and singer-songwriter traditions that have been a significant part of the American musical scene since the late 1950s. In 1984 Rose also produced "The Wisconsin Patchwork," thirteen half-hour programs that distilled the more than seven hundred performances recorded in the 1940s by Helene Stratman-Thomas—a University of Wisconsin music professor acting on behalf of the Archive of Folk

Song at the Library of Congress—from Wisconsin loggers, miners, farmers, Woodland Indians, and European ethnics.

The involvement with the Upper Midwest's traditional music, however, extends nearly to the beginnings of radio. Founded in 1917, Wisconsin Public Radio featured occasional performances of Irish, Norwegian, and Winnebago traditional music in the 1920s. By 1933 Grover Kingsley, "the Old Time Fiddler," held forth on a weekly noon farm program, and Saturday afternoons included a fiddlefest with such regulars as Blanchardville's Arne "Swede" Mosby and George Mattson.

Mattson, a fiddler from a Deerfield farm family, was pumping gas on Madison's Williamson Street amidst the Depression when he joined with guitarist K. W. "Wendy" Whitford, a farm kid in his late teens from Albion. For their stint on public radio, Mattson combined lively Anglo-Celtic fiddle tunes (like "Cleveland Two-Step," "Kentucky Hornpipe," and "Flop-Eared Mule") with the Norwegian lilt of "Auction pa Strømmen's"; and Whitford drew upon his family's store of such old-time songs as the sentimental "Mother's Picture on the Wall" and the Irish immigration ballad "Barney McCoy." Nearly sixty years later, on January 12, 1992, Whitford's "Barney McCoy" resounded once more over Wisconsin Public Radio—this time as part of a "Down Home Dairyland" program, "Wendy Whitford: The Soul of Wisconsin's Country Music."

Down Home Dairyland

We (folklorists Rick March and Jim Leary) launched the initial thirteen half-hour installments of "Down Home Dairyland" on Wisconsin Public Radio in 1989. Emphasizing the "traditional and ethnic music of Wisconsin and the Upper Midwest," the series drew on our collective musical experience within the region. One of us, Rick March, grew up in Chicago where he absorbed the Croatian tamburitza music of his own ethnic community and was fascinated by the blues and gospel sounds of black neighbors. The other of us, Jim Leary, was raised in northwestern Wisconsin's Rice Lake where Scandinavian dialect songs, Swiss yodels, Bohemian polkas, lumber-camp fiddling, and Ojibwa powwow drums were a part of everyday life. We met in the early 1970s while earning our Ph.D.s in folklore at Indiana University, and by the decade's end we were each doing research on the Upper Midwest's traditional music.

By the mid-1980s March was employed as the traditional and ethnic arts coordinator for the Wisconsin Arts Board, while Leary was laboring as a freelance folklorist with strong ties to the Wisconsin Folk Museum and the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Folklore Program. We were both involved with presenting traditional musicians to the general public through festivals, concerts, publications, and documentary recordings. Radio loomed as a more consistent and effective means of offering the Upper Midwest's traditional music to a broad audience.

In 1986, March began an early disc jockey version of "Down Home Dairyland" on Madison's listener-supported radio station, WORT. Meanwhile we both had been doing occasional guest segments on Wisconsin Public Radio's "Simply Folk." The current "Down Home Dairyland" emerged as our coproduction under the aegis of the Wisconsin Arts Board, the Wisconsin Folk Museum, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Wisconsin Public Radio. The first thirteen installments, produced in 1989, set a pattern. Each drew heavily upon regional field and archival research to combine sound recordings, interviews with the musicians, and our commentary. An additional thirteen programs were produced in 1990, followed by fourteen more in 1992.

Each set of "Down Home Dairyland" programs was conceived of as the last. Yet for every show produced, the germ of others emerged. For example, the general



Richard March (extreme right) observing line schottische dancers at the Red Barn, Evansville, 1988 **Photo: Jim Leary.**



Jim Leary and Bill Koskela at the North Country Folk Festival, Ironwood, Mich., 1982 **Photo: Ellen Porath**

dearth of women performers on early commercial recordings—attributable to sociocultural constraints rather than ability—spurred us to offer “Women Polka Band Leaders.” Likewise an omnibus show, “The Many Forms of Wisconsin Indian Music,” suggested subsequent programs on specific tribal, generic, and pan-Indian musical practices.

As time passed, we were reaching an increasingly diverse audience, Wisconsin Public Radio was interested in additional programs, there was an abundance of fine music to draw upon, and we were having fun. Since 1992, “Down Home Dairyland” has been a regular weekly feature on Wisconsin Public Radio. With our annual “season” radically expanded from thirteen to fifty-two weeks, we modified the program’s format to accommodate increased production demands. We added opening and closing musical themes, adopted a “news compatible” twenty-five-minute duration, exchanged an abundance of interview excerpts for more of our on-air commentary, broadened the regional scope from the Upper Midwest to the entire Midwest, and offered more tightly focused programs. From fall 1992 through 1995, we have produced 125 programs in the “new” twenty-five-minute format.

A Listener’s Guide

This *Listener’s Guide* complements the original forty half-hour versions of “Down Home Dairyland” that aired in three-month blocks during 1989, 1990, and 1992. Forty short essays and a smattering of photographs correlate with each of forty radio programs. The programs are not in their original sequence, however. While the radio series sought variety from week to week, the essays strive for continuity from page to page. Collectively, they survey traditional and ethnic music in the Upper Midwest, with a particular focus on Wisconsin. Ideally, each will be read in conjunction with listening to the corresponding radio program. Indeed the essays are not scripts, but parallel commentaries which elaborate upon important points, develop additional themes, and chart references. All place-names in the essays are in Wisconsin, unless otherwise indicated.

For those inclined to follow the trail of research, printed sources are indicated parenthetically within each essay (e.g., Densmore 1932), while interviews merit an additional “I” (e.g., Wolfe 1985 I). The musicians and titles for performances heard on each radio program are listed at the head of each essay; and performances quoted within the body of an essay are indicated with a “P” in parentheses. Full citations are given in the References, subdivided as “Interviews,” “Printed Sources,” and “Recorded Performances.”

An appendix contains sketches of regional institutions that have taken on the important work of documenting and presenting the Upper Midwest’s folk cultural traditions. Besides the Wisconsin Arts Board, the Wisconsin Folk Museum, Wisconsin Public Radio, and various folklore-related arms of the University of Wisconsin–Madison (the Folklore Program, the Department of Liberal Studies, the Wisconsin Music Archives), these institutions include the Michigan Traditional Arts Program, UP North Films, the Minnesota Historical Society, and the Minnesota Traditional Arts Program.