

THE FOLK MUSIC REVIVAL IN ANN ARBOR (LATE 1950s-EARLY 1960s)
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In 1957 freshman student Al Young and Bill McAdoo founded the University of Michigan Folklore Society. Today Young is the Poet Laureate of California. The Folklore Society was a natural interface between the University folk and the townies – music. As a high-school dropout I had no trouble integrating and being accepted in the folk circles. No questions were asked. We were all just ‘folk’ and it was a culturally rich scene.

And Michigan was not the only campus with a folklore society. Folk music was popping up on campuses all over the nation and we were interconnected by what came to be called the folk circuit, a constant stream of folk enthusiasts that traveled from campus to campus playing and sharing folk music. The circuit went from Cambridge to New York City to Ann Arbor to Chicago to Madison to Berkeley and back again. We were hitchhiking or piling into old cars and driving the route. Musicians like Bob Dylan would hitchhike into town, hang out, play a gig or two, and be on down the road. And well-known folk singers came.

Folksingers like Ramblin’ Jack Elliot and groups like the New Lost City Ramblers and the Country Gentlemen were regular visitors to Ann Arbor and this was before anyone was famous. They didn’t stay in fancy motels, but with us. They stayed in our houses, slept on a couch or in the spare bedroom. We all hung out together and played music or sat in the Michigan Union and drank coffee all day. Whatever music and culture they brought with them really had a chance to sink in. They shared themselves and their time with us. They were just like us.

Ann Arbor had its own players. The president of the Folklore Society was Howie Abrams and we sported folk musicians like Marc Silber, Al Young, Dave Portman, Peter Griffith, and Perry Lederman. There was also an important lady named "Bugs," but I can't remember her last name. Anyone know? And we put on festivals and events. For example, the folklore society raised money to bring Odetta to Ann Arbor where she gave her first college performance. And a young Bob Dylan gave an early performance as part of a small folk-music festival in Ann Arbor put on by the U-M Folklore Society. I can remember sitting in the Michigan Union with a very nervous Dylan, drinking coffee and smoking, while we waited for the review of Dylan’s performance the night before to come out in the Michigan Daily newspaper. It was something like 10:30 AM when the review surfaced and it was positive. With that good news Dylan proceeded to hitchhike out of town. And when Odetta sang at the Newport Folk Festival in 1960, Al Young, Perry Lederman, and Marc Silber hitchhiked there to see her. And there was also a subtle change taking place.

Folk music in the late 1950s and early 1960s was part of what is called the “Folk Revival,” and those of us who were part of it were very much aware of the need to protect and revive our musical heritage. Dylan and Baez were not writing their own tunes back then but rather reviving

and interpreting songs that harkened from other generations. What made you a good folksinger then was the ability to authentically reproduce or reenact a particular song. The keywords were “authentic” and “revive.” Folksingers went to great lengths to locate and reproduce the most authentic versions of a song. Writing our own songs came years later. We were busy rescuing this part of our cultural heritage from oblivion.

Folk music at that time was mostly White folk music with maybe a peppering of Black country blues artists or a virtuoso Black singer like Odetta. They were the exception but they were treated like the rule: revive them and be authentic. When we heard the country blues, we wanted to revive and sing them as authentically as we could, Ebonics and all.

So it was somewhat confusing when we eventually found out that the blues not only didn't need our reviving but were alive and well, playing at a bar just downtown where they were perhaps separated by a racial curtain. We didn't go there because... well, just because. Another insidious form of racism.

But in fact blues, especially city blues, was very much alive, very seminal, and very, very available. In the early and mid-1960s young White Americans began the trek to the other side of the tracks, took the trip downtown, and eventually the journey to Chicago and other places where electric blues were being played. Ann Arbor played a very significant role in introducing White America to city blues. The original two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals were landmark events and the three succeeding Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festivals just opened it all up to a wider audience.

There is more on this general topic in my book “Blues in Black & White: The Landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals,” which was picked as one of the top 20 books published in Michigan last year. You will find it here:

http://www.amazon.com/Blues-Black-White-Landmark-Festivals/dp/0472116959/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1321295671&sr=1-1