“Foundations of Folk: The Federal Music Project, The Joint Committee on Folk Arts, and the Archive of American Folk-Song”

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School of the Ohio State University

By

Jarod M. Ogier, B.M.

Graduate Program in Music

The Ohio State University

2012

Master’s Examination Committee:

Danielle Fosler-Lussier, Advisor

Graeme Boone

Ryan Skinner
Abstract

Beginning in 1935, Federal Project Number One of the Works Progress Administration supported the creation of government-funded arts projects that were directed from Washington. The Federal Music Project, one of Project One’s constituent efforts, organized performing ensembles, concerts, and educational projects: its efficacy has been debated. Missing from the FMP record is a clear narrative regarding its relationship to folk music in America. This may be because the developments taking place in folk music during the 1930s were largely overlooked by the FMP and its administrators with the exception of one, Charles Seeger. The relatively small connection to folk music in the FMP was, however, taken up by the Federal Writers’ Project and its director, Benjamin Botkin. In 1938 Botkin organized a committee, known as the Joint Committee on Folk Arts, which helped to unite folk music and folklore studies across all WPA agencies. It also worked with the Library of Congress toward the creation of the Archive of American Folk-Song, a repository of folk materials that continues to exist to the present day. The significance of the Joint Committee on Folk Arts was twofold. First, it encouraged the proliferation of American folk music in ways that the FMP did not. Second, it became the nexus of ideas in regard to folk materials within the WPA and supported the creation of a centrally located repository for folksong.
Acknowledgements

I am indebted to several individuals who have helped to make this document possible. Thanks to Dr. Danielle Fosler-Lussier for her patience and instruction throughout this process. It is only through her comments, suggestions, and kind words of encouragement that this project has made its way to completion. I must thank the librarians in the Music Division of the Library of Congress, all of whom were helpful and willing to engage in conversation about the FMP and all of Federal One. I am grateful to Todd Harvey in the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress for assistance with the materials of Herbert Halpert and Benjamin Botkin, and for setting me on the trail of the Joint Committee on Folk Arts. Finally, I offer my most sincere thank you to the Department of Musicology at the Ohio State University for giving me the opportunity to learn and grow as a thinker, writer, and lover of music.
Vita

2008......................................................B.M. Otterbein College, Westerville Ohio

2011......................................................Graduate Teaching Associate, School of Music,

The Ohio State University

Field of Study

Major Field: Musicology
Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements ................................................................................ iii
Vita .......................................................................................................... iv
Introduction ........................................................................................... 1
Chapter 1: The WPA, Federal Project Number One, and American Folk Music ...... 6
Chapter 2: On Folk and “Folkness” ............................................................ 29
Chapter 3: Beyond the FMP: Sokoloff, Seeger, and the WPA Music Program ....... 40
Chapter 4: The Archive of American Folk-Song, the JCFA, and Folk Music ......... 52
Conclusion .............................................................................................. 64
Bibliography ............................................................................................ 67
List of Tables

Table 1: Projects Created under the FMP ......................................................... 16
Introduction

In the first 100 days of his presidency, Franklin Delano Roosevelt introduced a vast array of policies known as the New Deal. In the New Deal’s first two years, most of its programs offered basic employment, placing able-bodied workers from the relief rolls into jobs funded and supervised by the Federal government. The relative success of such practices resulted in further exploration of government-funded development. The creation of Federal Project Number One (henceforth known as Federal One) in 1935 broadened the aims of the New Deal and identified cultural development as one of its primary functions. It is under Federal One that the Federal Music Project (FMP) was formed, along with the Federal Art Project (FAP), Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), and Federal Theatre Project (FTP).

The FMP furthered learned musical culture in America. Its approach was almost entirely geared toward professional musicians, most of whom were well acquainted with the Western European symphonic tradition. The emphasis on the professional musician meant that the FMP did little to support folk music. This omission was cited as a problem by Charles Seeger after his appointment to the FMP in 1938. Seeger’s concern was later shared by Herbert Halpert, a folklorist who had worked with the FTP during the 1930s. Halpert expressed his disappointment at the lack of folk music support in the FMP and
later suggested that Seeger’s presence there as Deputy Director was the only connection to folk arts he could remember.¹

More recently, Kenneth Bindas has asserted that the prevalence of art music in the FMP was directly reflective of its Washington leadership. He suggests that even though “the plight of the American musician during the depression era was severe…those who were able to read and perform cultivated music found themselves an ally in Washington in [Director Nikolai] Sokoloff.”² Moreover, Bindas explores what he perceives as a contradiction between the inclusive, nationalistic rhetoric of Sokoloff and the reality of exclusivity within the project, particularly in relation to African Americans and musicians who lacked specific classical music training. For him, the difference between rhetoric and action on the part of the government meant that the FMP “effectively muted the diversity of the American mosaic and attempted to meld the country into one vision.”³

Nevertheless, folk music and folk culture were present in the projects of the WPA, albeit beyond the FMP. One aim of the present study is the exploration of the ways in which administrators and folk-song collectors made room for folk culture within the WPA programs more broadly. While a number of studies exist on the WPA and its constituent parts, little work has been completed on its connection to the development and preservation of American folk arts during the 1930s. One reason for this may be that each part of WPA’s Federal Project One was administered separately, whereas the resources for folk culture, such as help in collecting folk songs, were typically provided

¹ Herbert Halpert Interview (AFC 1979/024), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
² Kenneth J. Bindas, All of this Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA’s Federal Music Project and American Society (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 1.
³ Ibid., 116. See also chapter seven, “Exposure, Not Equality,” for more on the contradictory problems that form the core of Bindas’s narrative.
by several projects, even using resources external to Federal Project One. That the WPA’s reach was vast, and its archival sources now scattered, means that tracking down individual aspects of its smaller projects can be difficult.

Further, this study aims to describe the use of Federal resources to support the collection and preservation of folk culture, including field recordings, ballad and narrative collection, and curation in the Archive of American Folk-Song in Washington D.C. Before 1930, the Federal government had little involvement in the collection or dissemination of folk culture. In the WPA era, Charles Seeger, Benjamin Botkin, Alan Lomax, and others played key roles in garnering Federal resources for these purposes, arguing that folk music was crucial to the construction of American identity in the 20th century. The result of their theoretical and practical work was the vast expansion of fieldwork and publication in the years between the two world wars. This study describes how these figures ensured the WPA’s involvement in the construction of American folk identity during the 1930s. Their Joint Committee on Folk Arts (JCFA) served as a nexus of individuals and ideas from a variety of projects throughout the WPA. The Committee’s activities as a specifically folk-oriented entity contrast with those of many of the larger individual projects under Federal Project One, such as the FMP and the FTP.

The JCFA and its activities have been treated minimally throughout the scholarly work on the WPA. This may be for a few reasons. Several factors contribute to its small

---

place in the literature. First, the JCFA was not a directly funded government project in the way that those under Federal One were. As such, its support came from a variety of government sources, many of them within the WPA, yet its existence was not solely supported by the government as was the case with Federal One. Next, the collaborative nature of the Committee meant that no single leader stood out as its political figurehead. In many cases, the Federal One literature is often built around such figures and their perceived influence, such as Nikolai Sokoloff of the FMP or Hallie Flanagan of the FTP. Unlike Federal One, however, the JCFA is better understood through the accomplishments of its collective members rather than any single leader’s influences. It is for this reason that several will be discussed below. One of the primary challenges of this study has been the reconstruction of the JCFA’s agenda through the work of its varied individual members and contributions.

Ultimately the JCFA was important because it helped to increase the awareness of folk idioms at a time in American history when the nation’s identity was malleable. The work of Botkin, Seeger, Halpert, and others helped to lay the foundation for folk arts that continued through mid-century. This encouragement of American social and cultural development along the lines of folk identity would help to solidify the folk revival movement of the 1960s, support labor and civil rights struggles, and describe social unrest connected to a changing consciousness of American class structure.

The conceptualization of what it meant to be “folk” was an important aspect of the JCFA’s work. The creation of the Archive of American Folk-Song represents an

---

5 Bindas, All of this Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA’s Federal Music Project and American Society; Barry B. Witham, The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Both of these studies rely heavily on portrayals of national directors Sokoloff and Flanagan.
attempt at cultural mediation in a time when the national identity was contested among different ethnic groups and social classes. The ideas of Botkin and Seeger, in particular, represent a trend toward cultural intervention, in which learned academics sought to develop the national awareness of American culture through the presentation and curation of the folk, the everyday American citizen: Aaron Copland’s mythologized “Common Man” for whom the famous fanfare was written.\(^6\)

The study that follows explores the organizations and individuals described above for the purpose of understanding their part in the larger process of developing and supporting American folk identity during the WPA years. I discuss the FMP, its leadership, and its lack of folk music support. I then describe the goals and accomplishments of the members of the JCFA, which contrast with those of the FMP. A brief foray into the formation of the Archive of American Folk-Song serves as a final, and perhaps most concrete, example of the accomplishments of the JCFA and demonstrates its collaborative purpose. The JCFA’s contribution to the WPA was a thoughtful intervention that carefully cultivated optimism, idealism, and national pride through the recognition of the cultural achievements of ordinary Americans.

---

\(^6\) David Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 13-14. Whisnant specifically uses the term “systematic cultural intervention” to describe changes taking place within Appalachia in the late nineteenth century as the result of external cultural influence, often brought through learned members of urban society.
The WPA, Federal Project Number One, and American Folk Music

Federal Project Number One represented a shift in New Deal policy from government-based employment relief and economic revitalization toward cultural development. The financial allotment alone for Federal One was staggering and unprecedented, and each of its constituent projects demonstrated a new focus on nation-building. Indeed, many of the products of Federal One, both ideological and practical, can be seen throughout the decades following its end, and discussion of its programs and their effects persists today.

New Deal policies reflected two underlying purposes. First, Roosevelt hoped to stem the tide of economic destruction that had overwhelmed the United States following the stock market crash of 1929. By the time of Roosevelt’s inauguration in 1933, “the GNP [had fallen] from $103.1 billion to 55.6 billion...more than one hundred thousand American businesses [had] failed, and the value of American imports and exports [had] declined by more than two thirds.” Moreover, unemployment had increased from 3.2 percent in 1929 to 25.2 percent in 1933. Nearly all Americans were affected by the economic collapse and its aftermath.

---

7 William F. McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 209-10. The initial allocation was for six months at $27 Million (ibid., 315, 217).
8 Buhite and Levy, eds., FDR’s Fireside Chats, 5. GNP stands for Gross National Product, the measurement used by economists prior to Gross Domestic Product.
Roosevelt saw the second purpose of the New Deal as a restoration of American confidence. The economic struggles were accompanied by pessimism among the American public. In order for recovery to strengthen, the morale of the average citizen would need to lift along with the minimum wage. A shift from the relief rolls to employment would help to restore some of the dignity lost by those without work; indeed, that part of the plan was already well underway by the summer of 1933.

On May 6, 1935, Executive Order No. 7034 allowed for the creation of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Presidential approval on September 12 of the same year allowed for the creation of Federal One under the WPA, establishing the federally administered programs in the fields of writing, art, music, and theatre. On the surface, the WPA was like all previous programs under the New Deal. Nonetheless, it now included a series of projects the likes of which had never been seen in the United States, namely those aimed at work relief for American artists. By supporting the arts, the WPA offered a comprehensive plan that looked beyond employment to the larger task of rebuilding Americans’ confidence, aiming to shape a post-depression American identity.

Federal One was rooted in the primary purpose of the New Deal policies and the WPA: “to assure a maximum employment in all localities.” Through the creation of jobs for artists, the WPA expanded the possibilities for employment beyond labor to those with specialized skills. Federal One broadened emergency relief to include upper middle class job creation. Yet the newly created Federal One also sought to provide not just employment, but also opportunities for artistic expression. Each project was

---

10 Ibid., 131.
11 Ibid., 104.
structured to bring American culture to the forefront and each sought to incorporate the
democratic aspects of American society into the artistic creation of its people. A notable
example of this was the *American Guide Series*, created by the FWP between 1935-41.
Covering all 48 states as well as numerous cities, the series offered a “national self-
portraiture” written by some of the best-known writers of the time.\(^{12}\) Though this massive
undertaking was never completely finished, it “presented an extraordinarily balanced
portrait of a diverse people and a diverse land.”\(^{13}\)

A similar diversity could be seen in the work of the Federal Art Project (FAP).
Artists of the FAP created works in many media: paintings, sculpture, graphic art, murals,
and posters. Much of the art created by the FAP was intended to symbolize American
ideals, like the (often romanticized) development of the nation through depictions of
victory in battle, the building of infrastructure through labor, and diversity.\(^{14}\) Moreover,
these ideals were bolstered by depictions of populism and unity. A “we’re all in this
together” approach can be seen in murals demonstrating the many accomplishments of
Americans working together, as in “Community Helpers,” painted for the Cincinnati
Public Schools in 1936. Its depiction included a series of blue-collar workers in the

\(^{12}\) Bernard A. Weisberger, ed. *The WPA Guide to America: The Best of 1930s America as seen by the
Federal Writers’ Project* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), xi. Contributors to the series included Saul
Bellow, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Conrad Aiken, Nelson Algren, Studs Terkel, Loren Eisely, and
John Cheever.

\(^{13}\) Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers’ Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts*

\(^{14}\) For example *Acquisition of Long Island*, Woodside Public Library, Queens, New York; *Blueprint for
Living*, Red Hook Housing Project, Brooklyn, New York; *Over There*, 165th Regiment Armory, New York
City. Black and white reproductions in Philip Evergood, “Concerning Mural Painting,” and “The
Development of American Mural Painting” in *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and
Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, ed. Francis V. O’Connor (Greenwich, Conn: New York
Graphic Society, LTD., 1973), 47-49 & 50-55. See also Carl Watson, *Federal Project One in Ohio: A
Report of Progress* (Works Progress Administration in Ohio, 1936), 9-11. The report contains, among
many mural reproductions, a black and white reproduction of an American naval victory on Lake Erie
during the War of 1812.
course of duty, among them a crossing guard, a postal worker, an electric lineman, a grocery store clerk, and two firefighters.  

Through its programs, the FAP sought to recognize past American accomplishments while reiterating the importance of work by average citizens toward new accomplishments in their own time. As with the writers’ project, the FAP sought a democratic approach to art, emphasizing it as a “normal social growth deeply rooted in the life of mankind.” The FAP’s national director, Holger Cahill, described a deficiency in American visual art in much the same way that the other national directors did of their own art forms:

> From the middle of the nineteenth century up to very recent times art has tended to become an activity sharply segregated from the everyday vocations of society. The art object has become more and more of a minor luxury product. Our art patrons have sought their art objects, their ideas about art and art patronage in other countries and other times.

The solution was to create an American audience for art, not through the import of foreign works, but through the creation of American works by Americans and representative of their own ideals and identity. The belief that art was to be found among all Americans would remain the cornerstone of Federal One.

The Federal Theatre Project (FTP) was the most controversial of the Federal One projects: the scripts of several productions reflected left-leaning ideology. For example, in the “Living Newspaper” productions, pressing social issues and the government’s

---

direct involvement with them were among the most successful and most criticized. FTP director Hallie Flanagan had experimented with such productions while at Vassar College in the early 1930s. Her first “Living Newspaper,” Can You Hear Their Voices?, premiered in 1931. Written by Flanagan and Margaret Ellen Clifford, and based on a short story by Whittaker Chambers, Can You Hear Their Voices? was a dramatization of an Arkansas drought and its effect on farmers. Flanagan’s adaptation of the short story included the use of “congressional transcripts, newspaper stories, and magazine articles” that contributed to its contemporary appeal. The presentation of social plight combined with the politicized presentation of facts formed the core of FTP productions such as Power and The Cradle Will Rock.

Power, written by Arthur Arent and produced by the FTP in New York City, explored the debate over public versus private ownership of utilities. More specifically, it focused on the control of pricing and access to power in the southern region of the United States. Thanks to the Wilson Dam, built by the government and controlled by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), hydroelectricity being generated could be offered to those living in the region at prices comparable to those of private power companies. The play represented one of the earliest and most influential debates regarding public

19 Ibid., 78.
21 Witham, The Federal Theatre Project, 79-80. One example of this would be the Tennessee Valley Authority versus the private Tennessee Electric Power Company which formed the core of Power.
versus private corporate interests, eventually leading to a Supreme Court decision that upheld the constitutionality of the TVA.\textsuperscript{22}

*Power’s* depiction of the conflict was controversial because of the degree to which it supported the New Deal position and “hounded and vilified the private sector.”\textsuperscript{23}

The taking of sides in political debate through theatre, as in the case of *Power*, is characterized by Michael Patterson as political theatre, which “not only depicts social interaction and political events but implies the possibility of radical change on socialist lines: the removal of injustice and autocracy and their replacement by the fairer distribution of wealth and more democratic systems.”\textsuperscript{24}

The use of such political theatre was widespread in the FTP relating to agriculture, poverty, and labor struggles. Of the latter, Robert Dietz has suggested that *The Cradle Will Rock*, written by Marc Blitzstein for the FTP and produced by John Houseman in 1937, is another clear example of “agitprop in the form of an extended work for the lyric stage.”\textsuperscript{25} The production, described by Blitzstein as being about “unionism as a subject...a symbol of something in the way of a solution for the plight of [the] middleclass” uses at least two “agitprop devices,” including a lack of plot.

\textsuperscript{24} Michael Patterson, *Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.
development and episodes containing caricatures of stereotyped personalities from the struggle between labor and management.\(^{26}\)

The FTP caused controversy for two reasons. First, critics perceived that the subject matter of the productions leaned too far to the left. Attacks on communism became the norm; the House Committee for the Investigation of Un-American Activities (HUAC) was active beginning in 1937, led by Texas Congressman Martin Dies. The attacks increased during HUAC hearings in 1938, with witnesses in the committee’s hearings claiming that far-left-leaning productions had been the project’s modus operandi all along.\(^{27}\) The second reason the FTP suffered was due to the perception in Congress that the executive branch, namely Roosevelt, had been extending its own power since 1933. Dies may have had a political axe to grind with Roosevelt and he did so by “fashioning that unique institution, the Congressional investigating Committee, into a powerful, if at times extra-legal weapon.”\(^{28}\)

As Barry Witham has noted, there may be some merit in the critiques of the FTP, especially when its actions are considered in a similar, if updated context:

Imagine a new play on Broadway in 1985 subsidized by the United States Congress urging support for the Contra movement in Nicaragua. Imagine a similar production in 1999, funded by the Democratic Administration, exposing the sins of the Microsoft Corporation and demanding that the company be broken up for the benefit of the American economy, especially for those companies competing with Microsoft. Imagine the furor.\(^{29}\)


\(^{27}\) Michael M. O’Hara, “‘On the Rocks’ and the Federal Theatre Project,” *Shaw* 12 (1992): 84. The Dies Committee’s lead witness, Hazel Huffman, claimed that an FTP production, *It Cannot Happen Here*, supported Communism because it dealt with “politics in England, both Fascism and Communism” and was “designed to set up some new political system.”


Likewise, in the mind of the FTP’s critics such as Dies, government subsidy of the artists’ messages was the core of the problem—all the more so if that message was seen to have political implications in favor of the president. Perhaps such productions without government aid might not have been subjected to similar accusations of Communism, the primary factor that sealed the FTP’s early demise.\(^{30}\) Funding was withdrawn from the program in 1938.

In its few short years of existence, however, the FTP did much to present theatre to the populace. The influence of the project extended far beyond its often-discussed leftist connections. The vast and varied repertoire of the FTP was “performed in tents, on make-shift stages in school cafeterias, in CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) dining rooms, in Broadway theatres and on the radio.”\(^{31}\) Beyond the stage, the FTP also played a role in the collection and recording of American folklore, attempting to eliminate the gap between the average American citizen and the decisions of those in power, be they government officials or private corporations.

Like the previously mentioned projects, the FTP represented a strong intent toward democratization through its material. Its pragmatism can be seen in the attempts to connect theatre to the immediate concerns of the people. It sought “to seize the unique opportunity...to build a nationwide theatrical enterprise, one that would carry the dramatic art to people everywhere in the country.”\(^{32}\) Much like the FWP’s *American Guide Series* and the FAP’s murals, the FTP sought a decentralization of artistic pursuits

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 130-131. In 1939 the rest of Federal One underwent a reorganization. National Director Hallie Flanagan was eventually brought before the Dies House Committee on Un-American Activities in December of 1938 after a series of testimonies leading to widespread concern of Communism in the works and even in the leadership of the FTP.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 2-3.

and understanding, away from the metropolitan centers toward the nation as a whole. As Flanagan wrote in 1938, “only a theatre which springs from or penetrates into city, town, village, and farm can be called an American theatre.”

The Federal Music Project (FMP) differed, sometimes slightly and sometimes more dramatically, from the model described above. In contrast to the other three projects, the FMP’s reputation rests not on its notable accomplishments but on its overall image. That is, there are few extant examples of FMP creation matching the *American Guide Series* of the FWP, the FAP murals, or the FTP “Living Newspaper” scripts. Instead, the FMP leaves behind it recordings of performances, a wealth of statistics regarding the number of musicians employed, and equally impressive audience figures.

The key difference between the FMP and the rest of Federal One may be that of presentation versus development. For Holger Cahill, Benjamin Botkin, and Hallie Flanagan, directors of the FAP, FWP, and FTP respectively, the intent was to develop and implement a populist agenda that explored uniquely American ways of creating and enjoying art. In each of the three projects, a distinctly self-reflective intent can be found: art for Americans, relating to specifically American subjects, created by Americans.

The latter two aspects remain noticeably lacking from the accomplishments of the FMP. That the FMP was creating art music *for* Americans is the point made repeatedly throughout its publications. In his second report of activities in early 1936, director and Russian émigré Nikolai Sokoloff provided an overview of the project’s goals and achievements. (See Table 1) The director’s prose was divided into categories largely representative of the Western European musical tradition, namely orchestra, band,

---

ensemble; opera, operetta, choral; copyists, arrangers, librarians; and composers.

Ironically, American composers, those most capable of developing distinctly American musical works and creating the foundation of a national tradition, were the only category above not to have been directly supported by the FMP.

For unspecified reasons, the FMP never commissioned new works by composers. American composer and music critic Virgil Thomson summed up some of the frustrations relating to this lack of support when he declared in 1939 that the work relief of $93.86 per month was “just sufficient to count as a subsidy” for the artist, qualifying that “it did so count for easel painters.”\(^\text{35}\) Thomson’s allusion to the fact that composers were not supported by the subsidies, as writers, artists, and instrumentalists were, highlights the lack of nationalist musical works created in direct connection to the FMP. In fact, even the well-known populist compositions of Americans such as Roy Harris and Aaron Copland were neither commissioned by the FMP, nor directly connected to it in any way.

Table 1: Projects Created Under the FMP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Projects</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Number of people employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>162</td>
<td>Symphony and Concert Orchestras</td>
<td>5837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97</td>
<td>Bands</td>
<td>2984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Chamber Music Ensembles</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>122</td>
<td>Dance and Theatre Orchestras</td>
<td>1820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Vocal, Chorus, Quartets</td>
<td>1246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Opera Groups</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>202</td>
<td>Teaching Projects</td>
<td>1495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Copyists, Librarians</td>
<td>470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Soloist Projects</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Coordinating, Administrative, Supervisory, etc.</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reason for this omission may be that many of America’s best-known composers during the early 20th century were finding moderate success by dividing their time between Europe and the United States. Composers such as Thomson and Copland were, therefore, not in need of relief. On the contrary, they could serve as examples of what it meant to be a successful American composer in the art music tradition.

The national advisory board of the FMP was composed of important figures in the classical music world such as Walter Damrosch, Olin Downes, Howard Hanson, and Leopold Stokowski, meaning that the project’s core of support was coming from those most vested in the development of an American classical music scene.\textsuperscript{36} Considering the populist agenda of the rest of Federal One, indeed of the WPA as a whole, one would expect the FMP to have planted itself firmly in the burgeoning movement toward democratization of the arts in America, leaving notions of Victorian gentility behind. Instead, the FMP’s early materials focus not upon the plight of American music more broadly, but upon the plight of the American professional musician.

None of the foregoing is intended to suggest that the FMP was less successful in its aims than the rest of Federal One. It is to suggest that the aims of the FMP were different from those of the other Federal One projects. The other projects saw an opportunity for cultural development along nationalist lines, which meant encouraging accessible, populist art while extolling the virtues of new works created by Americans in reflection of themselves and of the nation overall. By contrast, the FMP seems to have focused more upon preservation of a particular type of American musical tradition: one rooted in European classical forms and styles and organized according to similar

\textsuperscript{36} Sokoloff, \textit{The Federal Music Project}, 5. Though these four are perhaps the best-known members of the board, it is also interesting to note that out of 24 members, only one was not based in a major midwestern or northeastern music center, e.g. New York City, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia.
principles. By preservation it is meant that the tradition of European classical music was being preserved by the employment of those who performed and disseminated it.

Thus, the primary success of the FMP was the successful creation of jobs for America’s professional musicians who had “been on the relief rolls when the Federal Government moved to preserve their skills and to maintain their professional abilities until they were again self-sustaining.” Beyond employment of professional musicians, the FMP seems to have produced less new American music than its Federal One counterparts produced in American art, theatre, or written word. A review of 30 concert programs in varying genres between the years 1936-1939 shows that the number of European compositions programmed is more than double that of American compositions.

Combined with the lack of commissions offered for new American compositions and the strict qualification that “only skilled musicians were eligible for...relief,” the sparse programming of American works further suggests that the FMP was less concerned with the performance of American music than it was with performances by American musicians. The qualification regarding professional abilities would also have limited the influence of vernacular styles except in cases where these styles were modified by classical forms or training. One example of this would be the “Creole Quartet,” written by American composer and New England Conservatory of Music Professor Harry Newton Redman. The “Allegretto” movement of the quartet was performed alongside the “Lento” movement from Anton Dvorak’s String Quartet, Op. 96. Redman’s “Allegretto” uses

---

37 Ibid., 7.
very little chromaticism, a primarily modal harmonic structure, and a repeating melody line in the violins that seems to be imitating a “fiddling” style. Both Redman’s and Dvorak’s quartets are representative of influences that may be American but have been composed in such a way as to conform more to a classical presentation than a vernacular one. Such a practice is widespread in classical music, yet the point remains that instead of recordings or broadcasts of American folk musicians, the FMP supported performances and compositions of classical musicians.

By the onset of the Depression, a number of styles coexisted within the American musical landscape. The rise of vernacular and popular music was aided by the availability of songs from Tin Pan Alley. The American art music tradition, much like the one still active in Europe, had continued across the turn of the century. This tradition made its home among the more learned members of American society. Notions of Victorian gentility often led members of middle-class society to believe that people of the lower classes could have their sense of musical style and taste elevated if only they could be exposed to the good music of the masters. At the turn of the century, major venues were being created for the performance of art music while symphonic organizations were founded in many of the major metropolitan centers of the U.S.


40 Grieve, The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture, 1-10. Grieve discusses the ideas of “negotiation” and “appropriation” related to the cultural changes in early 20th century American society. She highlights George Santayana, Van Wyck Brooks, and John Dewey as key players in the early “culture wars” and explores the government’s role in works of both high and “middlebrow” culture.
Folk music in the United States around the turn of the century was also being explored, albeit through a decidedly European approach. In the hands of organizations such as the American Folklore Society (AFS) and the American Folksong Society, folk music in America was viewed as having survived emigration from the British Isles and existing in its last, undiluted forms in the American southern and Appalachian regions. In 1899, the AFS formed a committee “to take into consideration the subject of folk-music,” citing specifically “negro” and “eskimo” folk-music as well as that of the American Indian. The rise of other American genres such as the blues, jazz, and swing made the American musical landscape quite varied by the time the FMP was created in 1935.

Although the latter styles existed in most regions of the project, typically labeled as “rhythm music” or “dance bands,” they remained secondary to art music within the FMP. Moreover, the actions of FMP leaders at the federal and regional levels seems to have supported the goal of developing an American art music public by utilizing government resources to educate the working classes through inexpensive, often free, public concerts and education for American children based on art music principles. FMP teachers were trained in “sight singing and chorus work” while others taught band or orchestra. Advanced teachers were encouraged to attend institutes organized by the project wherein they could be equipped to train students, youth and adult alike, in “harmony, diction, phrasing, tone, dynamics, and ear training” so that they may become

---


“leaders and lecturers for community groups of ‘listeners’.\footnote{Ibid., 21.} Sokoloff’s use of the term “listeners” is ironic in a sense because the people to whom he referred were already quite capable of listening. Contrary to the director’s claims, most had plenty of music within their families and communities. The listening he spoke of may be seen as the development of a particular taste in music.

The development of a taste for European art music performed by trained musicians, then, might encourage all Americans to support their arts organizations financially while also elevating their personal taste. The FMP asserted that the development of great art music was important to the continued development of a great nation. The struggle of the Depression era made such ideology all the more appealing and as with any large-scale government undertaking, the project was reinforced by an impressive public presence. The FMP established units in 42 states, offering approximately 3,000 performances across the nation during each of the summer months of 1936.\footnote{Ibid., supplemental tabulations as of August 31, 1936, 31.} Beyond that, Sokoloff took every chance to visit FMP units across the country, giving regular interviews and releases to the papers declaring the continuing growth and success of the project.\footnote{“Learn to Sing Under Government Wing.” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, July 26, 1936; “Sokoloff, Brico Agree to Lead Concerts Here.” \textit{The Washington Post}, June 14, 1936; “Federal Music Project Aids 3,003 in Virginia.” \textit{The Washington Post}, June 5, 1937; “4,000 More Musicians to Get Federal Aid; Government Will Push Projects for 17,000.” \textit{New York Times}, January 3, 1936; “Sokoloff Directs WPA Orchestra.” \textit{New York Times}, May 24, 1937; “Federal Music Project Director Pays Visit to City,” \textit{Los Angeles}, March 15, 1938.}

Two detailed and descriptive studies on the FMP exist, written by William McDonald and Cornelius Canon. McDonald’s work in particular is exhaustive and will
be cited throughout this study. More abundant, however, is literature on the FMP that uses the program to argue against or for federal support for the arts. The latter can be seen in the study of Peter Gough, who takes a regional approach to the FMP, suggesting that numerous local successes allow for a more accurate outlook on the project than the failings of particular initiatives. Critics like Kenneth Bindas argue against particular aspects of the project, such as the inclusion or exclusion of a particular group from its efforts (e.g. women, African Americans). Like the WPA overall, Federal One has often received the label of “boondoggle,” a term describing waste in government agencies and bureaus. In a more scholarly vein, Catherine Parsons Smith and Leta Miller reveal political squabbles within particular regions of the project which may have taken away from the accomplishment of its goals and reveal the complexity of bureaucratic structures within the FMP. Finally, the assumption that the Roosevelt administration was more intentional in its effort to shape American culture than those before it has offered

49 Kenneth J. Bindas, All of This Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA’s Federal Music Project and American Society (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995). Bindas praises the project’s goals but criticizes what he sees as a lack of results.
50 “boondoggle, n. and v.” OED Online, http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/view/Entry/21492. The term is used consistently throughout FMP literature and seems to have first appeared in press and articles during the mid-1930s relating to the Roosevelt presidency.
definition to the lines drawn, allowing supporters to praise the creation of a pathway to Federal arts funding in the United States since that time.\textsuperscript{52}

Aside from discussion of the success and failure of the project in terms of its ability to create a lasting effect on American culture, most studies of the FMP treat “folk” music minimally. They often pass over it on their way to other points, rarely attempting to explore whether the FMP was responsible for the continued creation, preservation, and growth of folk music as a source of national identity. Primary sources, such as recordings, programs, and official publications show very little folk presence within the FMP. In fact, out of over 300 performances across all FMP regions which have available recordings at the Library of Congress, fewer than 20 have any connection to folk music at all. The ones that do include folk music of some sort perform European or, in one case, Swedish folk music. Moreover, in FMP-supported projects, folk music seems only to have been incorporated into learned compositional styles such as choirs, string quartets, and orchestras.

It is the assertion of this study that the preservation, development, and continued growth of folk music in the United States was a vital part of the WPA, even though it was fostered outside the FMP. The structure and organization of the FMP reduced its ability to support musicians working outside the European classical tradition, resulting in a project whose accomplishments rest in the development of American art music. Director Sokoloff brought expertise and experience in art music to the project, as did his advisory board. The goals he put into place were neither challenged nor changed until Sokoloff’s

resignation in 1938. Even then, changes in the focus of the project were minimal as result of its restructuring one year later.

Beyond the FMP, however, several smaller-scale projects took place relating to American folk culture, and more specifically American folk music. In 1938, the formation of an entity called the Joint Committee on Folk Arts (JCFA) resulted in representation of a greater diversity in regard to American musical identity beyond the European tradition than the FMP alone. The JCFA was sponsored through a variety of outlets including all Federal One projects (within the WPA) and the Library of Congress (outside the WPA), with personnel and funding coming from the former and equipment, materials, and a repository coming from the latter.

Three important figures will be cited as the core of support behind the JCFA, namely Benjamin A. Botkin, Charles L. Seeger, and Herbert Halpert. Botkin was the national director of the FWP and a strong proponent of folklore study in America, particularly in regard to rural communities. By the time of his appointment to the FMP, he had written several articles and one book on aspects of living folklore.\footnote{Several of Botkin’s essays are reprinted in America’s Folklorist, B.A. Botkin and American Culture, Lawrence Rodgers and Jerrold Hirsch, eds. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010). Botkin’s first book was The American Play-Party Song: with A Collection of Oklahoma Texts and Tunes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1937). He also later edited and compiled many volumes of American folklore, including Sidewalks of America (1954) and Treasury of American Anecdotes (1957).} He also helped to author a folklore manual which was to be used as part of the American Guide Series in the FWP. Seeger, a figure sometimes cited as evidence of folk music interest within the FMP, worked for the Resettlement Administration between 1935 and ‘38. He was appointed to the position of Deputy Director of the FMP in 1938, months before the
Halpert was a student in folklore at Columbia University who found his way into the WPA through its New York City Recreation Division and eventually came to work as a folk-song collector under the auspices of the Federal Theatre Project’s National Service Bureau.

Seeger’s eventual involvement with the FMP is difficult to describe, mainly because the details relating to his responsibilities and actions are thinly documented in FMP sources. One reason for the lack of documentation may be that Seeger entered the FMP only one year before its reformation into a series of state-led projects known as the WPA Music Program. Seeger was also never the national director of either project and aside from one reference to his imminent arrival made by Sokoloff in the Summer of 1938, the reason for his joining the FMP remains unclear. Perhaps he was seeking opportunities to further himself within the government. Perhaps the politics surrounding the FMP, and its already imminent dismantling by the time he arrived, overshadowed his presence. To be sure, his pathway was a logical one, from supervisor of the Special Skills Division of the RA, to Deputy Director of the FMP, to Head of the Music Division of the Pan-American Union. The latter was the position he held longest, from 1941 to 1953.

In any case, as a governmental figure in favor of American folk music, Seeger represents a contrast to Sokoloff, and his presence lends further support to the idea that the JCFA was an important vehicle for the cultivation of folk music. As Sokoloff can be approached as an advocate of the European art music tradition, so too can Seeger be seen as an advocate of American folk music. In many ways, Seeger also represents the

---

54 Gough, “The Varied Carols I Hear: The Music of the New Deal in the West, 26-27; 50-51; and chapters 7 and 8. The author cites Seeger’s presence as one aspect of proof that the FMP was interested in folk music, even though Seeger was not appointed to the FMP until one year before its reorganization.
55 Ibid. Citing a conversation with Seeger’s son, Peter, Gough suggests that Seeger’s involvement in the FMP may have been the result of his aspirations to become national director.
changing views of American musical identity in the 1930s, having had a varied musical history himself. The difference between the two figures is explored in chapter 3.

The purpose of this study, then, is twofold. First, it suggests that the FMP, regardless of its successes and failures as a relief organization or cultural force in regard to art music, was minimally concerned with music and musicians outside the realm of the Western European art music tradition as it had been handed down from the nineteenth century. As a result, the FMP had little direct involvement in the development and proliferation of folk music. This assertion is primarily based upon an evaluation of the goals and prejudices of the FMP leadership as well as its accomplishments, both intended and unintended. The treatment of folk music in the FMP is familiar to music scholars as it reflects the divisions between popular, folk, and art musics, that are alive and well in modern discourse. Seeger addressed the distinctions more than once in his writing and it is clear that by the time he joined the FMP in 1938 the currents had already begun to shift in regard to divisions between musical styles in America.

Second, and by contrast to the FMP, the JCFA, with its footing firmly in the writers’ and theatre projects as well as the Library of Congress’s Archive of American Folk-Song, was a driving force behind the continued growth of American cultural awareness of folk identity in music and, inseparably, the social interactions of those Americans from whom the inspiration for such an undertaking had come. The roles of Botkin, Seeger, and Halpert are paramount in this study. Of the three, Botkin and Seeger are the more prominent due in part to their published oeuvre on the subjects of folklore and folk music as well as their direct connection to the administrative processes of their

56 The term “folkness” comes from Botkin’s essay “The Folkness of the Folk,” The English Journal, College Edition 26, no. 6 (June 1933): 461-69.
respective projects. Halpert is primarily associated with folksong collection trips that resulted in hundreds of songs and materials being deposited in the Archive of Folk Song.\footnote{Herbert Halpert, Mississippi Folk Music (Microfilm 97/1112 M), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; Herbert Halpert, New York and Pennsylvania Recordings (AFC 1938/010), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; Herbert Halpert New York City Collection (AFC 1938/002), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; Herbert Halpert 1939 Southern States Recording Expedition (AFC 1939/005), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.}

Furthermore, the JCFA was a collaboration among individuals whose interests were firmly rooted in their connections to the folk. In the case of Botkin and Halpert, there was support within their projects for greater exposure and understanding of American folk culture. For Seeger, the committee and its intentions presented the means to get the FMP involved in American folk culture in ways that it had not previously been engaged. Perhaps the three men, led by Botkin, who had the strongest folklore connections, saw that their best means of supporting the continued creation of folk culture was to work together; a fitting sentiment considering the goals of Federal One, the WPA, and even the president himself regarding collaboration. Unlike the larger projects of Federal One, the JCFA could draw from a variety of support and funding sources both inside and outside the WPA.

Ultimately, the JCFA seems to have been well positioned, given the funding and exposure of the WPA as a whole, to build upon the large collections of writings and recordings of American folk materials that had been put together in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Much of the collecting and organization had been done by John and Alan Lomax, who were supported by funding from the Library of Congress and helped to provide the foundation for its Archive of American Folksong. The JCFA added to the archive, but its most lasting accomplishments can be observed in the cataloguing,
editing, and organization of the materials, which were subsequently made available to the
general American public along with a stream of promotional writings by Botkin, Seeger,
and others. Beyond the WPA years, Botkin and Seeger continued to tout their theories on
the role of “folkness” in American society while Halpert continued collecting and
preserving folksong and folklore, eventually helping to found the Department of Folklore
at the Memorial University of Newfoundland.\textsuperscript{58} The evidence collected and offered to the
public during the JCFA years is still useful to the study of American cultural
development in the depression and post-depression eras.

\begin{footnotesize}
\item[58] Neil V. Rosenberg, “Herbert Halpert: A Biographical Sketch,” in \textit{Folklore Studies in Honour of Herbert Halpert} (St. John’s, Newfoundland, Canada: Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1980), 10-11.
\end{footnotesize}
On Folk and Folkness

Folk music in the western world presents “a tremendous variety of musical styles, values, functions, and instruments,” typically passed down in oral tradition. The geographical areas from which American folk music draws are themselves broad and diverse. The notions of language and the distant past as identifying markers of the folk, evident in the work of Johann Gottfried Herder and his followers, bear less on the 20th century construction of American folk culture than on Herder’s “volksgeist” as it applies to European nationalism. That is to say, American folk music is not rooted in one particular tradition, but takes its form through the use and combination of a variety of styles. This may be, in part, because American folk culture, much like the nation itself, comprises a number of traditions that have been brought together over the centuries by the nation’s immigrants. American folk culture was born of unique events related to religion, industrialization, war, the idea and exploration of the frontier, and the many characters and stories each brings along with it.

The folk culture of America, then, may not easily be seen in terms of its roots, its land or language, but in a romanticism that follows the myths and dreams of its inhabitants. As Bruno Nettl has observed, folk music may be composed by individuals, but “subsequent to the original act of composition, many persons may make changes, thus in effect

re-creating a song. This process, called ‘communal re-creation,’ is one of the things that
distinguish folk music from other kinds.60 “Communal re-creation” is, in fact, a primary element
of American folk music activity. This can especially be seen in the use of songs by the labor
movement in which the tune of a well-known song was given pro-labor words so that it could be
quickly and easily learned by as many workers as possible.

The waves of immigration into the U.S. across the nineteenth century helped to create
distinction for American folk culture. Through the mythology of the Old West to the struggles
over slavery and the divisions caused by the Civil War, Americans described in song and story
the events that shaped their nation.61 The treatment of folk materials by academics, beginning in
the late 19th century, has been characterized by the terms “scientific rationalism” and
“romanticism,” suggesting that proponents of the former looked down upon folk culture as
“primitive, inferior,” and based on “ignorant superstition” while supporters of the latter saw it as
“attractive, colorful, emotional, natural, and authentic.”62 Still others saw the development of
American folk identity as an extension of its European roots, as in the case of the above
mentioned folk song collector, Cecil Sharp.63

Writing in the 1970s about the interconnectedness of folk music within urban and
rural societies, Nettl characterized the derivation of American folk music from a variety
of factors, incorporating ethnic origin, national expression, historical perspective, genesis,
and music in culture. He described folk music as existing alongside other musical
traditions, particularly in the sense of a dichotomy between itself and “a longtime

60 Ibid., 5.
61 Ibid., 16.
62 Patrick B. Mullen, “Belief and the American Folk,” The Journal of American Folklore 113, no. 448
(Spring 2000): 120; Richard Baumann, “Folklore,” in Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular
University Press), 31.
63 For more on Sharp, see John Francmanis, “National Music to National Redeemer: The Consolidation of a
Gold and George Revill, “Gathering the Voices of the People?: Cecil Sharp, Cultural Hybridity, and the
development of urban, professional, cultivated musical tradition, something that is often called ‘art’ or ‘classical’ music.” Furthermore, technological innovations of the 20th century made the divide between those living in rural areas and those in urban areas less consequential, the result being that cultural features once thought to be urban, “such as radio and television, newspapers and nationally circulated magazines, motion pictures, machinery, and mechanical devices,” were becoming more available to those in rural areas. Thus, American folk culture cannot be seen as grounded in rural society and must be viewed across the nation as a whole.

To a great extent, Nettl’s perspective has its roots in the work of collectors, scholars, and archivists of the 1920s and ‘30s. As we will see, the proponents of folk music who were involved in the JCFA worked against the prevailing valuation of art music over popular music; they helped to develop a conception of living, useful music that could be valued by the nation as a whole. By recording this music, they sought to make it available for use and study outside the communities of its origin. This mediation eventually allowed for communal re-creation in new places, by people who learned the music from recordings. Perhaps most importantly, by justifying this music and claiming value for it, they made a vigorous argument both for their own academic interests and for the acceptance of all Americans as part of “American” cultural life.

Within the purposes and activities of the JCFA, the writings of Benjamin Botkin would help to define the meaning of “folkness.” He denounced those who thought of the folk as isolated and naïve and demonstrated that the activities of the folk existed not in

---

64 Nettl, *Folk and Traditional Music*, 1.
isolation but in all manner of society, including urban areas as well as rural.\textsuperscript{66} Botkin organized and chaired the JCFA in 1938. In 1937 he wrote that “for the student of culture and words the mystery and misunderstanding surrounding the terms ‘folk’ and ‘folklore’ constitute a species of folklore in itself.”\textsuperscript{67} He asserted that in spite of the problematic nature of these terms, there may be no replacement for them; he thus set out to eliminate some (possibly) more specific, though limiting and equally problematic, terms such as “popular antiquities” and “folk art.” These could easily be problematized along with terms such as “unwritten literature.” Botkin believed that such nomenclature inappropriately subjected the oral tradition to the strictures of the written tradition. He concluded that “the real trouble with folk and folklore is not that they have no meaning but that they have too many meanings, and that each age tends to give them its own meaning, in accordance with the prevailing intellectual fashion and the theory of the leading scholars of the age.”\textsuperscript{68}

Writing at a time when the American Folklore Society was working to establish its reputation, Botkin recognized that a unified view regarding folk culture was necessary if the society was to be successful. On one hand, he aimed to discredit the theory of survivals, put forth by Edward Burnett Tylor in 1871, which he believed to be misguided and antiquated.\textsuperscript{69} Tylor’s theory asserted that when aspects of everyday society such as social customs, art, or opinions are well rooted, they are less likely to be quickly affected by outside changes. This is to say that “survivals” exist because they are the strongest elements in an otherwise fading aspect of culture. The influence of this theory remained

\textsuperscript{66} Benjamin A. Botkin, “The Folkness of the Folk,” 468.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 461.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 463.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid. and E.B. Tylor, \textit{Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom} (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1871).
broad at the time of Botkin’s writing, especially in the case of folk song collectors. On the other hand, Botkin recognized that for all the efforts of collectors, folklore remained a category too broad to be beneficial to the average American. Botkin sought an inclusiveness of ideas regarding information passed down through oral tradition but no longer observable as well as that which was current and continually being shaped by the everyday people of the nation. His concern was that scholars were seeing the “lore” aspect of folklore more than the living and current “folk.” He sought recognition for an approach that recognized the historical but did not treat folk studies as those of “survivals” or “savagery.”

The key to Botkin’s understanding of “folkness” is his belief that it is as alive in the present day as ever, constantly developing and changing, forming a part of social structure. Having completed a thorough exploration of the many ideas and assertions surrounding the “folk,” he summarized:

The modern concept of the folk embraces urban as well as rural groups. If folkness is the result of partial isolation or segregation, then the folk may be found in the towns and cities as well as in the backwoods or the wide-open spaces. Living in an urban neighborhood or district or group may isolate as effectively as living in the country. In fact, the open country is becoming less and less segregated.

He finished by suggesting that the mythological quality of folklore and folk music could not be overrun by societal advancements such as those in technology. Instead, he posited a balance, maintained by the realization that “for every form of folk fantasy that dies, a new one is being created, as culture in decay is balanced by folklore in the making.”

71 Ibid., 468.
72 Ibid., 469.
If Botkin’s thinking was against the more academic conceptions of folklore at the turn of the century, it was aligned with many figures whose work would influence the formation of the American folk identity by mid-century. Moreover, these were the same figures who would work together under the auspices of the JCFA. In particular, John Lomax had already begun to see the benefit in collecting the songs and stories of current Americans. His first publication, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, is widely believed to have initiated a new way of viewing folklore in America, namely by listening and recording the songs of those whom he met in the field. In the preface to a later volume of folksongs, Lomax declared that the reason he collected and published folk songs was “to let American folk singers have their say with the readers.”73 Unpacking the reason as to why they should have their say, Lomax romantically alluded to all that could be gained from such singers due to their life experience and participation in the everyday life of American society:

Most of these singers are poor people, farmers, laborers, convicts, old-age pensioners, relief workers, housewives, wandering guitar pickers. These are the people who still sing the work songs, the cowboy songs, the sea songs, the lumberjack songs, the bad-man ballads, and other songs that have no occupation or special group to keep them alive. These are the people who are making new songs today. These are the people who go courting with their guitars, who make the music for their own dances, who make their own songs for their own religion.74

Like Botkin, Lomax saw a balance between what had been created and what was continually being created in American folklore. Both were important and both would be addressed by Lomax throughout his work, culminating perhaps in the creation of the


74 Ibid.
Archive of American Folk-Song at the Library of Congress, with its first deposits coming from the fieldwork of John and his son, Alan, in 1928.

In an article written around the time of the so-called “folk revival” in America nearly thirty years after Botkin’s “Folkness of the Folk,” Charles Seeger took up several of the points made by Botkin. Seeger, who cleverly titled his article as an extension of Botkin’s original, wrote that “as in the ‘ballad war,’ an almost unbreachable gap has widened between two parties of folklorists, the structuralists, with their loyalty to ancient value in shrinking repertories, and the functionalists, with their vision of expanding, blending, ever-creative tradition.”75 In Seeger’s estimation the “gap,” described by Botkin originated in the fact that folklore was handled by a variety of disciplines from philology to sociology by way of cultural mythology, social anthropology, and psychology. The description eventually accepted by Botkin is one that Seeger would describe as “functional,” meaning that it was largely grounded in a pragmatic approach. Folklore must be applicable and meaningful not only to those in academic settings, but also to the folk from which the material had been collected in the first place.

Writing after mid-century, Seeger took Botkin’s functional approach further. He asserted that after the dam of purism, or structuralism, broke, “folkness was discovered to be a funded treasury of attitudes, beliefs, and feelings toward life and death, work and play, love, courtship and marriage, heath and hearth, children and animals, prosperity and adversity—a veritable code of individual and collective behavior belonging to the people as a whole.”76 He stressed that even as the operation of both mindsets of structuralism

76 Ibid., 3.
and functionalism continued within the scholarly community and within the world which they sought to explore, “the possibility cannot but occur to one that perhaps the two are not mutually exclusive opposites but overlapping complements or, perhaps, two aspects of one and the same entity.”

Seeger could understand the connection between the two seemingly opposed sides, for he had experienced both in his own lifetime. Harvard-educated and originally interested in composition, Seeger had followed an elite musical path in his early career, writing a treatise on musical composition in which he encouraged continued musical experimentation and the use of dissonant counterpoint in American composition. He then explored the means to create a compositional style that would appeal to the proletariat using intensity, complexity, and dissonance. Finally, a change in employment led Seeger to Washington in the mid-1930s, where he began to experience and appreciate the folk music he heard in resettlement camps and recreation projects under the WPA.

One final detail may serve to highlight the correlation between the views of Seeger on “folkness” and “folklore” and those of Botkin. That is the view of folk music and folklore as sources of social history. Writing in 1940, two years after the creation of the JCFA, Seeger lamented that musicologists had not yet taken notice of the various possibilities to be found in the study of a folk music idiom:

…the musicologist is, along with the professional musician and the layman in general, well accustomed to regarding music as a thing apart from, rather than bound in with the worlds of daily life and scholarship. This centuries-old trend became grossly exaggerated during the last hundred years or so, when large-scale music organization required the support of wealth and fashion and so came to emphasize the rare rather than the common, the difficult rather than the

77 Ibid., 4.
easy, the *recherché* rather than the ordinary. It was during this time that fine-art music became “good” music and other idioms either “bad” music or not music at all.\(^79\)

Building on the ideas already set forth by Lomax and Botkin, Seeger’s approach is clearly a call for unity and a broader approach toward folk study than has previously been attempted. As Botkin sees it, “folkness” has applied only to the primitive or naïve. For Seeger, the same can be said of the creation and acceptance of music in the United States. Writing around mid-century and seeking to draw strength and knowledge from a variety of fields as the JCFA had done, he suggested that “the folk-music idiom would seem to be the field in which the various parties...anthropologists, historians, and musicologists, can get together most easily.”\(^80\) In fact, the JCFA was seeking to do just that.

The terms “folk” and “folkness” are thus understood in this study primarily through the views of Botkin and Seeger, though the contributions of others cited here cannot be overlooked. In each case, the distinction of “folkness” goes beyond the simplicity of the separations between high and low culture. For Botkin and Seeger such separations were artificial to begin with and their use by scholars throughout history constituted a top-down approach that limited and, in some cases, overlooked entirely, the contributions and developments of an entire section of American society and culture. For Nettl, the reinforcement of the notion of stylistic diversity may be the most important aspect, with the realization that American folk music is less about nativism and more about acculturation also playing a key secondary role.

The work of these thinkers demonstrates why they wanted to form the JCFA. Considering that Botkin was the chairman of the committee and the one whose ideas

---


\(^{80}\) Ibid., 321.
formed the core of its purpose, his writings are an important piece of the work undertaken by the JCFA. The specifics of that work will be discussed in chapter 3. For Seeger, the path to the JCFA led him through the FMP, where many of his views on classical music versus folk music as suitable for the project of nation building would be formed. The differences between Sokoloff and Seeger serve to underscore his importance as a member of the JCFA and further, the JCFA’s commitment to folk music in America in the absence of a concerted effort by the FMP.
Beyond the FMP: Sokoloff, Seeger and the WPA Music Program

Charles Seeger joined the FMP as Deputy Director in December of 1938. His primary responsibility was to assist Sokoloff in matters of organization and oversight of the project. In Sokoloff’s words, Seeger would “be responsible for activities throughout the country” and would “cooperate with the state directors.” Though his description was vague, it did allude to an important detail regarding the appointment: Seeger would not be spending much time in Washington. There was no precedent within Federal One for the appointment of a Deputy Director. Organizationally speaking, the other project directors had plenty of assistants, but none who took on the role of second in command.

The organization of leadership for Federal One placed presidential advisor and WPA administrator Harry Hopkins at the top. He would serve as the liaison between Federal One and the President. Under Hopkins were a series of deputy administrators who handled the individual divisions of the project, for example Finance and Statistics, Employment and Information, and Women’s and Professional Projects. Finally, a national director was appointed to each project. National directors appointed regional directors, who in turn sought out opportunities to support at the state and local levels. Because the operations of each project were intended to be carried out all over the country, the Washington presence of each was slim and the offices placed in states were

---

81 “Minutes of Regional FMP Meeting,” June 22-24, 1938, p. 4, Federal Music Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Box 1, Folder 5.
as numerous as funding quotas, and the support of state and regional directors, would allow.  

Because Federal One was directly administered from Washington, its programs did not require local sponsorship as did most within the WPA outside of Federal One. This meant that decisions regarding projects were recommended through the chain of command, from local workers, through state and regional directors, ultimately arriving on Sokoloff’s desk. The decision as to which programs received funding thus rested with Sokoloff.

The appointment of Seeger in 1938 took place following what Sokoloff deemed “a strong criticism” from within the government about the FMP’s lack of “social music.” Sokoloff introduced the term “social music” during the Boston meeting, defending his project against what he described as a criticism aimed at the project from “the government,” but then shifted gears without further explanation of his criticism and began to define “social music” as he saw it. By the time he was finished speaking, he had offered three definitions for the term.

Addressing what must have been the reason for his bringing up “social music” in the first place, that is the criticism of his project, Sokoloff attributed the term to unnamed critics within the government whom he claimed “may mean one thing, thinking another.” Rather than clarify what he thought they did mean at that point, Sokoloff launched into the first of his own three definitions of “social music.” First, he suggested that “social music in the true sense, is when qualified, able musicians perform the works of art in such a way that it is made indispensable to every man, woman, or child.”

---

82 Federal Music Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Box 3, Folder 8.
83 “Minutes of Regional FMP Meeting,” June 22-24, 1938, 2, Federal Music Project Collection.
84 Ibid.
rhetoric was familiar: Sokoloff had provided the same definition of what he believed to be the “social value” of classical music in two previous publications.85

In June of 1936, the WPA Division of Women’s and Professional Projects had released a public report detailing the scope and activities of the Federal Music Project (FMP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in its first nine months. Sokoloff authored the report, which included information on FMP ensembles and concerts as well as estimates on attendance. Amid the facts and figures, the director also offered his own notions regarding the value of his project and its attempt to make music available for the broadest American audiences. In his opening statement, Sokoloff asserted that “music has no social value unless it is heard.” He then continued by confidently suggesting that the activities supported by the FMP had begun to create a more unified American musical taste and had reached more people across the United States than anytime in its history.86

The opening essay of the report, “Musicians and the Emergency,” detailed how such goals were being accomplished. First, “trained musicians” were won over to the project when they were “convinced that artistic standards and honest musical integrity were to govern” and second, “persons found to be unfitted or unequipped to earn a living within the skill or profession of a musician were to be transferred as quickly as possible.”87

By highlighting the accomplishments of the FMP he was suggesting that it was a socially valuable entity.

With this in mind, Sokoloff’s first definition given during the Boston meeting can be viewed as more of a side-step than an attempt at addressing “social music.” His second

87 Ibid., 9.
and third definitions of “social music,” however, are more to the point. Both also offer a glimpse as to why Seeger was to join the project. Later in the same meeting, after discussing the “social value” of the FMP for a bit, Sokoloff returned to his critics’ assertion that the FMP lacked “community participation.” His response can be summed up thus: if the FMP could define different roles for professional and non-professional musicians within the project, it might be beneficial for the project to seek out non-professionals who possessed a high level of musical skill and work with them to develop their ideas for music-making within their communities. He finished with a reinforcement of the purpose of such action: “when people make an effort, no matter how simple or primitive, to express themselves, they are sincere and trying to do something. I think the Federal Music Project should have some facilities to help them participate and cooperate with them...so that we would create not only a finer understanding but with this finer understanding do certain things that no private institution can do.”

The crux of Sokoloff’s point here rests in his view that professionalism must govern the FMP if it were to be successful. By conceding, as he seems to do in the above statement, that the FMP could explore music-making options beyond that of the professional, Sokoloff was shifting a position that he had held since the formation of the project. This entrance into a non-professional realm, though carefully qualified by the director, may have been a nod toward folk music. It was certainly the first recorded instance of any mention of non-professional music making by the director.

Further support of this point could be heard in his third definition of “social music,” in which he shifted toward a recognition of “interesting things of folk nature.”

---

88 “Minutes of Regional FMP Meeting,” June 22-24, 1938, 3.  
89 Ibid, 4.
Citing work being done in the states of Kentucky, New Mexico, and Arizona, Sokoloff suggested that “two or three projects” were underway in those states with an aim toward exploring the “songs and melodies” that could be gathered there. The exploration of “songs and melodies” may have meant two things for Sokoloff. In the case of Kentucky, the extant sources confirm that the work being done there was in fact folk-song collecting, which eventually produced two scores of song transcriptions, one dating from 1938, the other from 1939. This also appears to be the first reference to folk-song collecting or transcription by the FMP prior to 1938. The FMP’s connection to such activities would increase in 1939 with Seeger’s own collecting in the Southern States as well as his involvement in the JCFA.

As for New Mexico and Arizona, Latin American-influenced ensembles often composed of instruments from varying Mexican music traditions, known as Tipica Orchestras, had been funded by the FMP since 1936. The ensembles were some of the most popular in the Southwest Region of the FMP and were well known for their connection to local traditions both classical and popular. In the context of Sokoloff’s point regarding “social music,” these ensembles provided further proof that his critics had misjudged “community participation” in the FMP. Peter Gough points out, however, that the FMP initially hesitated to fund such orchestras. Citing correspondence between Sokoloff and his regional director for the Southwest, Bruno David Ussher, Gough asserts that both the regional and national directors remained skeptical about the professionalism of the orchestras. That skepticism led to an initial re-classification of the orchestras as

---

90 Ibid.
91 “Kentucky Folksongs,” collected through the Federal Music Project (Louisville: Works Progress Administration, 1938); “Folk Songs from East Kentucky”(Louisville: Works Progress Administration, 1939).
“recreational pursuits,” which in turn led to more correspondence between FMP workers in the region who believed that the Tipica orchestras should be funded by the FMP.92 Ultimately, both Ussher and Sokoloff were convinced by 1936 and the Tipicas were funded in both states. Gough points out, however, that the strongest support for the orchestras and an even greater flourishing of them came after the reorganization of the FMP and the transition of funding from Federal to local sponsorship in 1939.93

The skepticism regarding professionalism outside of the European classical tradition described by Gough is further supported by Sokoloff’s own structuring of the FMP Manual in the early stages of the project in 1935, which detailed the scope and purpose of the project as follows:

The Federal Music Project is designed to give employment to professional musicians registered on relief rolls. The Federal Music Project will employ these musicians as instrumentalists, singers, and other concert performers, and as teachers of music...The general purpose of the Music Project will be to establish high standards of musicianship, to rehabilitate musicians by assisting them to become self-supporting; to retrain musicians, and to educate the public in an appreciation of musical opportunities.94

For Sokoloff and the FMP, the primary goal was to get unemployed professional musicians working again. Employment for these musicians would be varied. They would perform concerts for the public, as they had before, but they would also take part in educational projects, thus making them, and the music they made, more accessible to the general public.

92 Recreational Pursuits refers to reassignment away from the FMP to the WPA’s Recreation Division, a separate division aimed at leisure-time rather than professional pursuit.
93 Peter L. Gough, “The Varied Carols I Hear: The Music of the New Deal in the West,” 83-92. Gough cites correspondence between Sokoloff, Ussher, and several local FMP workers. He also cites records from the Central State Files for Arizona.
94 Federal Music Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Box 1, Folder 1.
After making his broader points on “social music” at the 1938 meeting in Boston, Sokoloff finally homed in on the topic of folk music, suggesting that “there are still millions near New York City who gather and sing the old songs. This generation is still singing these songs. They are certain people known as ‘folk musicians’ who make their living that way and have amazing skill.” In a final allusion to Seeger, Sokoloff clarified the purpose of the new Deputy Director: “The gentleman who will join us in Washington has spent a great many years discovering these people. If we could use a small group of men who are genuinely interested in the creative sense for folk music we might then have part of our project go around to the young generation and show them what American music is.”

Seeger was being brought in to handle that which had not been previously explored by the FMP, namely American folk music. It is clear from Sokoloff’s words that Sokoloff was familiar with Seeger’s work under the RA; he must have felt confident that bringing Seeger on would quiet some of the internal criticism he had been receiving.

Changes were on the horizon for the FMP, however, which would soon bring about an end to the FMP’s work as it had been accomplished since 1935, transforming its structure and transferring its power from the Federal level to that of the states.

Seeger’s appointment became one of many in the transitional period between December 1938 and July 1939. During that time WPA administrator Harry Hopkins resigned to accept the position of Secretary of Commerce and was replaced by Colonel Francis Harrington, who had helped to set up some of the earliest New Deal projects, including the Civilian Conservation Corps. Ellen Woodward, Deputy Administrator of the Division of Women’s and Professional Projects, also resigned and was replaced by Florence Kerr, who had been working as a state level administrator in women’s projects.

---

95 “Minutes of Regional FMP Meeting,” June 22-24, 1938, 5.
She had been the link between Hopkins and Sokoloff. Finally, four of the five national directors of Federal One resigned, Sokoloff among them. The criticisms about which Sokoloff spoke may have been a by-product or a cause of the shifting of administrative leadership. Such a shifting of staff, along with changes in policy that began in 1939, were likely the most important factor in Sokoloff’s choice to exit. Indeed, it must have played a role in the near-complete change of personnel that took place at that time.96

The reorganization of Federal One in 1939 meant that the FMP was mostly defunded at the Federal level before it had the opportunity to pursue folk music projects with much vigor. For his part, though, Seeger lived up to the reputation about which Sokoloff had spoken. In the shift from FMP to WPA Music Program (as it became known in 1939), Seeger maintained his position of Deputy Director and used it to pursue folk-song collecting projects through two avenues: the JCFA and individual state sponsorship. He also reissued an earlier publication, “Music as Recreation,” extolling the virtues of a “music-conscious” America in which the awareness of “ballad-singing...banjo, guitar, and harmonica playing” would make the aim of “everyone singing or playing an instrument, and many good at both,” within reach.97

Having been influenced by his interactions with vernacular music and musicians throughout the rural southern and midwestern states during his work with the RA, Seeger’s views on the potential of American folk music were further articulated during his tenure with the WPA Music Program and his involvement with the JCFA. In two

---

96 For each change in personnel by WPA structure and Federal One project, as well as a detailed explanation regarding reorganization of the arts projects, see William F. McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration, 305-11.
published articles between 1939 and 1940, he expressed the importance of Americans’ seeing beyond the European classical tradition that they had been offered, focusing their attention on the wealth of musical opportunity right under their noses.  

Writing in 1939 against what he perceived to be the views of nineteenth century American “enlightened professionals,” Seeger claimed that such figures had sought to prove “(1) that America was unmusical and (2) that it could be made musical.” The result of this intent, he suggested, was that classical music from Europe was at the center of an American “cult” which took the above as its creed. Finally, Seeger claimed that the folk songs of America had existed for quite some time, but had been overlooked due to the fact that they did not fit into the classical style. Citing specific ballad singers, such as “Bascom Lamar Lunsford of North Carolina, who can give you three hundred and fifteen [ballads]” or “blind old Mrs. Dusenberry in Arkansas who can sing one hundred and thirteen,” Seeger made his point that a wealth of American music had been overlooked for several decades, including the time of his writing.

Though he did not cite the FMP specifically in the article, the work that it had done certainly would have fallen under his characterization of the European classical music “cult” as mentioned above. Moreover, Seeger had already made a similar argument in a lecture delivered to teachers of the Florida FMP in March of 1939, not long after his appointment as Deputy Director. In that address, Seeger suggested that the music project had fallen behind the others in Federal One because it had, up to that point,

---

99 Charles L. Seeger, “Grass Roots for American Composers.”
100 Ibid.
101 “Mr. Charles Seeger, addressing the teachers of District One, FMP, March 21, 1939,” Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.
failed to leave behind it a “permanent or evident accomplishment.” His remedy for this shortcoming was to begin incorporating “truly American folk songs” into public school music education rather than music “written by academic gentlemen who imitate Europeans.” He alluded to the collection of American folk songs that was being established in Washington and urged “why not get down and really study American music?”

Seeger’s encouragement of the study of American folk music was directly connected to his knowledge of the work the JCFA had undertaken and his involvement with it. The JCFA began its work in 1938, around the time of Seeger’s appointment to the FMP. Though the Archive of American Folk-Song had technically existed since 1928, its availability had been limited by funding issues until the mid-1930s. Thus, in each of the above examples, Seeger cited the establishment of the Archive as the newly available means to exploring such music because the Archive was becoming more available than ever before. In 1940, Seeger articulated what he saw as the opportunity to explore the relationship of folk music to the construction of a national identity in the United States. He suggested that given the new resources for study provided by the Archive of American Folk-Song, it fell to the domain of musicology to begin to explore the relationship of folk music to American cultural history and its growth and development.

Seeger’s own work at the FMP and WPA Music Program can thus be seen as a program of advocacy and development. He advocated for the study and continued development of American folk music through processes of folk-song collection and preservation as well as through educating children about American folk traditions and

\[\text{\textsuperscript{102}} \text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{103}} \text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{104}} \text{Seeger, “Folk Music as a Source of Social History, 316-23.}\]
instruments in public schools. As a final example, Seeger published an article in 1942 which pressed further many of the points he had made in Florida three years earlier. He praised the Music Educators’ National Conference for having presented a program entitled “American Songs for American Children” in which it put forth the idea that “one essential basis of music education in a country is the folk music of that country.”\(^\text{105}\) That program was still going strong two years later when Benjamin Botkin began publishing a series of articles by the same name in which he reproduced transcriptions of American folk-songs that could be taught to children in public school music education programs. Two examples were “The Farmer Comes to Town” and “Young Man Who Wouldn’t Hoe Corn,” both taken from RA song sheets that had been organized and edited by Seeger in 1936-37.\(^\text{106}\)

The evidence presented above demonstrates that the FMP under Sokoloff was primarily interested in employing American professional musicians who played European classical music. As such, the FMP took little interest in the development of native traditions, particularly folk music. The appointment of Charles Seeger three years after the project’s inception seems to be a part of a larger shift toward the inclusion of folk music within the project. This shift came too late, however, as the FMP, with Seeger on board, had only begun to explore folk music opportunities in public school education and elsewhere before major changes occurred throughout all of Federal One, resulting in a shift in power from the federal to state levels.

The shift from the FMP to the WPA Music Program had little effect on Seeger’s efforts toward the continued advocacy of folk music. In fact, the need for more local sponsorship of projects under the WPA Music Program may have given him the freedom to introduce a more interdisciplinary approach to the project than would have been possible under the goals set forth by Sokoloff. He may thus be seen as a figure who supported the transition from the classical music pursuits of the FMP to the more vernacular pursuits of the WPA Music Program. He was not alone in his aims: the individuals who also worked within the WPA toward folk endeavors will be discussed in the next chapter, along with their accomplishments during their association with the JCFA.
4

The Archive of American Folk-Song, the JCFA, and Folk Music

In 1928 a “song-catcher” named Robert Winslow Gordon was invited to become the head of a newly created section of the Library of Congress called the Archive of American Folk-Song. Having already established a reputation as a capable collector and folklorist, Gordon caught the attention of Library leaders who were looking to develop the library’s national importance and accessibility. Though he proved not to be the strong administrator the library was seeking, Gordon planted the seed there for collection and preservation of American folk materials. His plans would come to fruition in the decade following his departure, when the archive’s collection would develop more quickly than at any other point in its history.

Gordon was the primary contributor of ideas and materials to the Archive during its earliest years, 1928-1933. The acute interest in folk culture within which the archive was conceived, however, had begun in the 19th century. One area where the root of such interest could be found was the published work of the founding members of the American Folklore Society (AFS), namely Franz Boas and James Francis Child, who had helped to

---

107 Peter Bartis, “A History of the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress: The First Fifty Years” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1982). At the time Herbert Putnam, Librarian of Congress, and Carl Engel, Chief of the Music Division, sought to get in contact with Gordon about the possibility of his coming to Washington he was collecting folksongs in Darian, Georgia. Much of this collecting formed the core of the archive’s original holdings.

108 Ibid., 32-33. A misunderstanding between Engel and Gordon regarding his priorities resulted in a short tenure. Gordon saw collecting as the priority with administrative details to follow later. Engel assumed the reverse and was concerned about Gordon’s rare presence in Washington.
establish the Society in the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{109} Beyond the AFS, Cecil Sharp, a British ballad collector, and Olive Dame Campbell, an early settlement school founder, sought broader views of folk music as it related to the heritage and foundations of rural white Americans.\textsuperscript{110} Moreover, the well-known collection entitled \textit{Cowboy Songs}, published by John Lomax in 1911, offered an approach to American folk songs which, following Boas, “situated them in a specific social and cultural context.”\textsuperscript{111} This approach of specificity regarding regional and community song would continue to influence collectors throughout the first half of the 20th century.

Like Gordon, both John and Alan Lomax would serve as heads of the Archive, the former from 1932 to 1942 and the latter as Assistant in Charge during the height of the WPA years, from 1937 to 1942.\textsuperscript{112} A notable difference between their tenures, however, rested with the funding that had been provided to the Archive. The initial collection and organizational efforts of Gordon in the late 1920s were supported by earmarked funds from the Library of Congress’s Music Division and its chief, Carl Engel.\textsuperscript{113} The funding for the establishment of the Archive had come from a contribution from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.\textsuperscript{114} After Gordon’s initial collection and deposit of cylinder recordings, however, that funding ran out, leaving Gordon out of a job and the Archive dormant until 1933 when John Lomax was hired by the Library to continue the work of the Archive.

\textsuperscript{111} Donaldson, “Music for the People,” 25.
\textsuperscript{112} Bartis, “A History of the Archive of Folk-Song,” ix.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
Upon his arrival in Washington, Lomax set out to continue Gordon’s work by seeking funding through Congress for the official establishment of the Archive within the Library. This meant that instead of private funding, which was less dependable, the Archive could be funded along with the rest of the Library’s divisions. After working out an arrangement whereby the Library would loan him equipment for collecting materials to deposit in the Archive, Lomax once again set out to continue the growth of the collection. John and his son Alan would go on to publish collections of folk songs based on the materials they had collected. Their work became the catalyst for Congressional funding of the Archive, which finally came in 1937. The timing was ideal, as it allowed for development of the Archive between the years of 1938-1941, coinciding with the work of the Joint Committee on Folk Arts.

The Archive was bolstered by the work of the Joint Committee on Folk Arts. The JCFA helped to organize trips to collect folk songs, and more than 4,000 recordings were eventually deposited as a result. JCFA Chairman Benjamin Botkin’s role for the Archive was twofold and included the application of his expansive views regarding folk culture. First, he promoted the “living” aspects of American folk culture and sought acknowledgment for its influence on American society as a whole. Botkin’s work built on previous ideas regarding folk culture and, in some ways, challenged the previously held views regarding regional influence only. Like Gordon, Botkin believed that it was important for the folklorist to treat his collecting as the documentation of a living and developing tradition.

Botkin was a capable administrator. As the chairman of the JCFA, he helped to plan, organize, and seek funding for the folk-song collecting trips that took place between
1938-39. He organized equipment loans through the Library of Congress, funding collaborations between the WPA and the American Council of Learned Societies, and brought together field workers from the Federal Writers’, Theatre, and Music projects.\textsuperscript{115} Just as Gordon had done, Botkin brought his own experience and published work to the archive with him, but there was an important difference: whereas Gordon had preferred to remain in the field collecting, Botkin was prepared to take on the role of administrator. Moreover, Botkin’s connections with Charles Seeger and Herbert Halpert allowed him to advocate for folk arts from Washington while maintaining contact with happenings in the field. The recordings made under his leadership would bolster the Archive’s collection and, in time, would improve public awareness about, and access to, American folk music.

By the late 1930s, the Archive of American Folk-Song had become a meeting place for folk song collectors, folklorists, and all who were interested in the study, collection, and preservation of folk materials. When the JCFA was organized in 1938, it offered a means for those like minds to organize, support, and share ideas. Furthermore, by the time Botkin, Seeger, and Halpert had begun their work with the JCFA, Congress had begun to fund the activities of the Archive, recognizing it as a legitimate section of the Library.\textsuperscript{116} Thus, the committee became a platform, under the auspices of the WPA, through which to utilize the resources being provided by the Library of Congress for the purpose of American folk interests. Moreover, its collaborative focus meant that sponsorship through funding and equipment could come from a variety of areas both


\textsuperscript{116} “A National Project with Many Workers: Robert Winslow Gordon and the Archive of American Folk-Song,” 232.
inside and outside the WPA. For example, collectors were often supported by WPA and Library of Congress equipment loans, a continuation of the precedent that had been set in the case of Gordon’s earliest trips.

That the Committee chose Gordon’s article series for the *New York Times Magazine* to be republished under its auspices is fitting: it represents a full circle from the earliest aspects of collection and organization to the awareness and encouragement of American folk culture in a time when many, including the president himself, believed that national awareness of that identity had waned.\(^{117}\) The work Gordon had begun could now be continued with wider support and more diverse collections. He also saw the reprint as a new opportunity for his work to reach larger audiences.\(^{118}\)

Gordon’s approach had been regional, including songs from North Carolina and Georgia, further subdivided by ethnicity or occupation: negro songs, outlaw songs, jailhouse songs, lumberjack songs, songs of the pioneers, cowboy sings. Ultimately, he saw his own collection and that of others before him as having only scratched the surface: “Glance for a moment at the extremely incomplete summary that follows, a summary made on the basis of material already well-known though still incompletely collected.”\(^{119}\) This call for continued exploration of America’s folk music identity was to be answered by a new series of collectors working with the JCFA, sponsored by the Library of

\(^{117}\) Originally published as Robert Winslow Gordon, “Folk-Songs of America,” *The New York Times Magazine*. 1927-28. There were 15 articles published between January 2, 1927 and January 22, 1928. The reprint was in one volume as Folk-Songs of America sponsored by the Joint Committee on Folk Arts, Issued by the Federal Theatre Project, Folksong and Folklore Department, Herbert Halpert, Supervisor, WPA National Service Bureau Publication No. 73-S: 1938.

\(^{118}\) Gordon, “Folk-Songs of America,” WPA National Service Bureau Publication No. 73-S: 1938, preface: “I am delighted that, through the courtesy of the Folk-Song and Folklore Department of the National Service Bureau...[the articles] may find an enlarged American audience.”

\(^{119}\) Gordon, “Folk-Songs of America,” (WPA National Service Bureau Publication No. 73-S: 1938), 1.
Congress’s Music Division, The Council of the American Folklore Society, and eventually the United States Congress.\textsuperscript{120}

\textbf{Botkin and the Joint Committee on Folk Arts}

Describing the FWP’s “Bread and Song” folklore project in 1938, Botkin wrote that “we are participating in the greatest educational as well as social experiment of our time.”\textsuperscript{121} Botkin’s use of the term “social experiment” acknowledged the nation-building purpose of the WPA as well as the methodological changes he was proposing for the academic study of folklore, especially a broadening of its audience. The purpose of the “Bread and Song” project, as he saw it, was to make the study of the folk useful to the folk. This idea was to be a lifelong labor for Botkin, and at this time, more than any time before or after, it was well-supported by the WPA.

The formation of the JCFA meant that Botkin could extend his plan far beyond the Writers’ Project and AFS and get it out to a larger public whom he believed would benefit from it most:

For the task, as we see it, is one not simply of collection but also of assimilation. In its belief in the public support of art and art for the public, in research not for research’s sake but for use and enjoyment by the many, the WPA is attempting to assimilate folklore to the local and national life by understanding, in the first place, the relation between the lore and the life out of which it springs; and by translating the lore back into terms of daily living and leisure-time activity.\textsuperscript{122}

Botkin understood that the study of folklore was taking place throughout the WPA and he sought to organize those whom he knew would be willing to work together toward bringing that study to the forefront. He also knew that there were already some projects

\textsuperscript{121} Botkin, “Bread and Song,” 205-12.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 209.
underway, like the folklore projects of the Federal Theater Project’s National Service Bureau, and his own project’s endeavors into folk tales as part of the *American Guide Series*.

The committee as Botkin organized it came to include nine members. Aside from Botkin, Seeger, and Halpert, it included C. Adolph Glassgold of the FAP, Sargent B. Child of the Historical Records Survey, Ernestine Friedman of the Educational Division, Nicholas Ray of the Recreation Division, Grace Falke of the National Youth Administration, and Greta Franke of the Special Skills Division.\(^{123}\) Finally, Botkin received consultation and support from the Executive Director of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), Donald Daugherty, and the Director of the Music Division of the Library of Congress, Harold Spivacke.\(^{124}\)

Beyond the ACLS and the Library of Congress, projects within the JCFA would also be planned in cooperation with the Social Science Research Council, with whom Botkin organized four primary services to be offered:

(a) the effecting of cooperation among the various workers and their projects;
(b) the preparation of directives for the technical handling of folk arts contacts and materials;
(c) the preparation and issuing of lists and descriptions of informants, materials, intermediaries, technical services and equipment available;
(d) the sponsorship of publications.\(^{125}\)

The first of the above tenets was already being accomplished in the organization and collaborations between individuals from the WPA, the Library of Congress, and the previously mentioned academic societies as of 1938. The latter three were to reach their peak throughout the next year as recording expeditions would take place throughout the

---


\(^{124}\) Ibid.

\(^{125}\) Botkin, *Bread and Song*, 210.
east and west coasts of the U.S. as well as the southern states. Botkin’s call to seek the
“social function [of music] in communication, play, work, ritual, celebration, recreation,
and use” was to be continually explored by the JCFA, especially in 1939.126

Sidney Robertson, Fletcher Collins Jr., and Herbert Halpert

Folk song collectors such as John and Alan Lomax, Robert Winslow Gordon,
Benjamin Botkin, and Charles Seeger were charged with laying the groundwork for
which the continued collection and deposit of folksong could occur. Not surprisingly, the
majority of the collecting was done by these figures as well. It cannot be overlooked,
however, that a number of other collectors were in the field during this time, many of
whom provided substantial contributions of material. Additionally, contacts and
informants were often retained and future trips could then be made and expanded by
other field workers.127 Three important figures, in particular, had direct connections to the
JCFA, namely Herbert Halpert, Sidney Robertson, and Fletcher Collins, Jr.

Robertson’s ethnographic work in California is well known and much of it has
been digitized as part of the American Memory section of the Library of Congress.128

Much of the planning and execution for the project was done by Robertson, who had
worked in the field with Seeger under the RA and completed a great deal of ethnographic
work there. She organized the project through Seeger and the WPA Music Program,
which provided much of the funding, and the Archive of American Folk-Song, which

126 Ibid.
127 Herbert Halpert Interview (AFC 1979/024), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress,
Washington, D.C.
128 “California Gold: Northern California Folk Music from the Thirties,” American Memory (Online
Access), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, the Music Division,
in California,” in California Folklore Quarterly 1, no. 1 (January 1942): 7-23, and “The Sidney Robertson
Cowell Collection,” in Folklife Center News 3, no. 3 (July 1980): 4-5, 8.
helped to provide equipment and other necessary resources. Much of the loaned equipment was provided through the JCFA.

Fletcher Collins, Jr., worked primarily in the states of West Virginia, Virginia, and North Carolina. In the latter, Collins made a series of field recordings for the JCFA around the same time that Seeger was on his trip through the southern states in 1939.\footnote[129]{Fletcher Collins, Jr. Collection (AFC 1939/003), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.} Much of the work done by Collins relates specifically to the Anglo-American tradition of folk-song in America. Some of it remains unpublished, in particular a proposed song book titled \textit{A Southern Songster} which was to be one of the products of his collection. Like Robertson’s, Collins’s work was supported by funding secured by Seeger and Botkin from the WPA and Library of Congress, and through equipment loans from the Library organized by the JCFA.

Halpert was no stranger to the field. Upon graduation from NYU in 1934, he began work with the Recreation Division of the WPA, which focused primarily on the development of children through physical, social, cultural, and therapeutic recreation.\footnote[130]{Charles Seeger, “Leisure-Time Leadership: WPA Recreation Projects” (Washington, D.C.: Works Progress Administration, March 1938), 3-4.} It was there that he began collecting folk songs in New York City and New Jersey. One of his earliest interests was to capture aspects of the daily life of people in New York City, including children’s songs in the street and the tunes and calls of men and women who sang as part of their daily work, especially those in markets. Years later, Halpert recalled the recordings he had made of a butcher in the Bronx who “called” in song as part of his daily routine as well as a series of newsmen’s “calls.”\footnote[131]{Herbert Halpert Interview (AFC 1979/024).}
By 1937, Halpert was a part-time graduate student under Professor George Herzog at Columbia University and he had been promoted to working for the Federal Theatre Project’s National Service Bureau in New York City. The National Service Bureau primarily sought the rights for popular music to be used in FTP productions around the country. A second purpose, however, had been developed by Halpert for his own interests. That was to collect folk-song recordings to match many of the publications that had been created by John and Alan Lomax, Robert Winslow Gordon, and others. The result was a series of recordings made in New York City, the Pines region of New Jersey, and the “foothills of the Ramapo Mountains” on the New York-New Jersey Border.\(^\text{132}\) Halpert’s work with the FTP National Service Bureau introduced him to Alan Lomax and Botkin, both of whom were interested in his work and the experience he could bring to their project in Washington.

Perhaps the best-known of Halpert’s projects is his Southern States Recording Expedition, which took place in 1939.\(^\text{133}\) The body of material collected during the trip makes up one of the largest contributions to the Archive of Folk-Song under the JCFA. The trip was organized primarily by Botkin, with lists of informants provided by Lomax, Seeger, and others in the state offices of the FWP.\(^\text{134}\) As Halpert describes it, the trip was truly a collaborative effort, perhaps the most illustrative example of the JCFA’s work. The truck Halpert drove was provided through the FTP. It was a “hand-me-down” from the army, but sturdy, and large enough to hold the recording machine, discs, and


\(^{133}\) Herbert Halpert, 1939 Southern States Recording Expedition (AFC 1939/005), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

\(^{134}\) Herbert Halpert Interview (AFC 1979/024). Halpert describes Botkin as having done the “majority of the work” primarily because the informants came from many of his FWP field workers from the American Guide Series.
Halpert’s “library” of folk-song publications.\textsuperscript{135} The Library of Congress provided the recording equipment and discs: in fact, Halpert made so many recordings that he had to write back to Washington twice in order to have more discs sent. As with much of the field work conducted under the JCFA, the materials from Halpert’s trip were deposited in the Archive upon his return. Another consequence, however, was that he was supported for more return trips to areas in which he had cultivated informants, particularly in New York and New Jersey. The materials resulting from those trips were also deposited in the Archive under the auspices of the JCFA.\textsuperscript{136} News of Halpert’s trips and collecting spread quickly, with the \textit{New York Times} reporting in 1939 that many beyond the city were in possession of a “large repertoire” that included “English Ballads, lumber songs, and songs of the early West.”\textsuperscript{137}

Ultimately Halpert became one of the most important collectors to work under the JCFA and his work, like that of Robertson and Collins, represents the “living” aspect of American folk that Botkin and Seeger spoke of and sought to develop under the JCFA. The notion that America was filled with “living lore” was reinforced by the work Halpert had done both before and during his time with the JCFA. Each aspect of the collaboration among figures like Botkin, Seeger, Lomax, and Halpert brought with it a sense of historical importance, but also a fervor to explore the music of the folk as it was. The result was often a real-time record of the people in their day to day lives. Perhaps to the extreme of this point, but nevertheless illustrative, Halpert described an encounter he had

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{136} Most are accessible as part of the current Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; many of the recordings have been digitized and provided with online access. See Herbert Halpert New York City Collection (AFC 1938/002), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
with a New York City bookseller and Alan Lomax. The bookseller sang a cowboy song for Lomax, who recorded it. The bookseller then told him “I made that up, Alan, I’m sorry,” to which Lomax replied, “great.” Though Halpert suggested later that he had been surprised at Lomax’s open acceptance of each person’s songs and stories, he acknowledged that collecting material also meant realizing that your informants might have been influenced by other factors. In the case of the above bookseller, the fact that he could make up a cowboy song on the spot may have signaled influences by earlier collections and perhaps even Lomax himself. If such an idea was problematic for earlier collectors, however, it seemed to play no role in the work of the JCFA collectors, many of whom saw their work as capturing the face of America as it existed, influences and all.

---

138 Herbert Halpert Interview (AFC 1979/024).
Conclusion

The work of the Joint Committee on Folk Arts officially came to an end along with the rest of the WPA on June 30, 1943. Much of the work done by the Committee remains available in the Library of Congress’s American Folklife Center (created by the U.S. Congress in 1976 and made permanent in 1999). The folk song and folklore collections of the Lomaxes, Botkin, Halpert, Seeger, and others are now being digitized as the materials on which they were originally recorded decay with time.

Each of the men mentioned above continued to leave his mark on the study of folk-song and folklore throughout the 20th century. Botkin, Halpert, and Seeger all worked in academic settings while Alan Lomax continued the work of his father, striving for widespread exposure of American folk music. He did so as the Assistant-in-Charge of the Archive of Folk-Song, where he used the resources with which he was intimately familiar to promote the education and understanding of folk-song as an aspect of American identity. His interviews and recordings with now well-known folk pioneers such as Burl Ives, Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger remain some of his best-loved work.

Ultimately, the JCFA may be seen to fill a gap, previously unfilled in the broader views of the WPA, that of folk culture. The work done by the committee members during the 1930s was foundational because it allowed for the exploration of, and engagement with, a perceived folk culture in ways that had never before been attempted. The lack of such exploration by the FMP becomes less important in light of the fact that the other
projects of Federal One made it their goal to connect to the folk of the nation on a most intimate level.

The work of the committee may be all the more important if it can be seen as foundational for the “folk revival” that would develop in the late 1950s and continue throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Ron Eyerman and Scott Barretta have suggested that the work done by those associated with the JCFA and its constituent parts within the WPA was part of a movement toward the recognition of folk music as the “roots music” of America. By working together to create the Archive of Folk-Song, the committee members engaged in a process of authentication, creating a “depository of the people...providing an alternative to manufactured, mass-mediated forms of cultural expression.”

The continued exploration of American cultural authenticity led to folk festivals across the country and the rise of several urban groups who sought to pay homage to the roots of American music. Groups such as the Almanac Singers and the New Lost City Ramblers sought to embody the ideal of the American folk and promote their value in the great tapestry of American culture, often attempting to educate urban audiences on the importance of the American folk idiom. It may be useful to consider the construction of the folk in the 1930s through the collection and preservation of folksong and folklore as a model for the counter-cultural folk ideals that arose with the labor and civil rights movements of the mid-20th century.

The extent to which such connections between the work of the JCFA and the greater trends toward folk music exist, however, is a topic that must be left to further research. Furthermore, a more precise consideration of the American folk construct and its influence on the formation of American identity throughout the rest of the twentieth century would shed light on the development of the concept of authenticity in relation to the folk. One last area for further study might be the direct connections between the music performed by mid-century urban folk musicians, the folk revivalists, and the field recordings made by JCFA members in the 1930s. It would be telling to explore how many of the songs performed by such bands were taken directly from field recordings.

The foregoing study has sought to show that the WPA was, in fact, involved in the development of an American folk identity in the 1930s. The work of the JCFA was instrumental in that development and by viewing its accomplishments, one may begin to see the importance of the committee’s work on broader understandings of American folk music.
Bibliography


“WPA and Folklore Research: ‘Bread and Song’.” *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 3 (March 1939): 7-14.


____. “Americans on American Music,” in College Music Symposium 8 (Fall 1968): 131-42.


___.“Grass Roots for American Composers,” Modern Music 16 (March-April 1939): 143-49.


