

BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE LIVRES

American Folk Music as Tactical

Media. 2018. Henry Adam Svec.
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Folk revivalism in the United States has always been intricately linked with political movements, both explicitly and implicitly. Landmark studies by Robert Cantwell (1996), Benjamin Filene (2000), and Ronald D. Cohen (2002, 2016), among others, have traced these connections in great detail, offering nuanced discussions of the ways that individual musicians aligned themselves with political ideologies and social movements, often with a particular focus on left-leaning ideologies. Linking politics and music-making has been a discourse of authenticity that applies a sort of purity test to participants in the folk revival, requiring a constant signaling of one's commitment to specific traditions and political ideologies. In *American Folk Music as Tactical Media*, communications scholar Henry Adam Svec pushes readers to reconsider common notions of folk revival authenticity by "consider[ing] certain folk revivalists as media theorists" (2018: 16) and "more precisely as *tactical* media theorists" (17; emphasis in original). Svec presents a theoretically dense "folk archeology" that seeks to "locat[e] and amplif[y] diagrammatic machines wherein both folk and media assemblages converge and collaborate" (24). In so doing, he suggests that, rather than seeing the mediation of folk music as an inherent problem, we

might productively reframe folk music production, circulation, and consumption as acts that engage meaningfully and deliberately with communications media in ways that advance particular social and political agendas. Focusing principally on canonic US folk music figures such as Alan Lomax, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and Woody Guthrie, Svec's study calls for a fundamental reconsideration of notions of folk authenticity and situates communications media — not artistic personae, public rhetoric, or pedagogical lineages — as vital tools for social change.

Drawing on the writings of Marshall McLuhan, Harold Adams Innis, David Garcia, and Geert Lovink, among many others, Svec argues that some of the most important figures in the mid-20th century US folk revival were deeply concerned with the ways that media might allow them to share songs with a wider audience, galvanize support for anti-fascist and pro-democratic ideologies, and build communities that could reshape civil society. Yet, as Svec convincingly argues, the folk revivalists were not always skilled users of these media technologies, nor were the media technologies they used always well-suited for the revivalists' broader agendas. Instead, folk revivalists often worked within the boundaries of their own limited understandings of media technologies and developed new tactics for using inherently flawed tools.

After outlining the core theoretical foundation for the study in the introduction, Svec first turns to noted folk song collector Alan Lomax, arguing that Lomax's career can be effectively understood as

divided into two “epochs”: “Phonographic Lomax,” during which Lomax was primarily concerned with recording and archiving sounds from around the globe, and “Computational Lomax,” during which Lomax developed his Cantometrics system for correlating sonic and societal traits (32). Although much of this history will be familiar to folk revival specialists, and ethnomusicologists more generally, Svec convincingly demonstrates that Lomax deployed the media technologies at his disposal (including microphones, radio transmitters, and IBM computers) in an effort to combat the dominance of mass media (see esp. 45) and to create new channels for cross-cultural understanding.

Three chapters focus on musicians whose lives were deeply entwined but who might be seen as holding distinct — and, at times, contradictory — approaches to communications media: Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Bob Dylan. In Chapter 3, Svec takes up Seeger, whose long life, ardent political activism, and frequent discussion of media technologies makes him a particularly useful case study for this project. Describing Seeger as “a DIY techno-nomad ... [who] was willing to take up any tool ... fit for the task at hand” (57), Svec uses Seeger’s magazine columns and his disgust at Dylan’s infamous 1965 Newport performance as evidence that, “despite his impatient critique of McLuhan, Seeger himself had a working ‘medium theory’ insofar as he was conscious of the distinctive structuring capacities of what McLuhan called ‘hot’ and ‘cool’ media” (54). He notes that Seeger preferred such cool media as folk song collections, television shows (such as Seeger’s *Rainbow Quest* program), and even live concerts as a way to “broadcast” messages to as wide an audi-

ence as possible, an approach that at times put him at odds with the mass media’s co-optation of the folk revival (54).

Dylan, on the other hand, seems to have embraced “noisy channels” of communication that lead not to community solidarity but to a seemingly endless variety of individual interpretations of his music and image (88). In Chapter 3, a brief discussion of Dylan’s music (focusing especially on his output from the 1960s) highlights the dominant place of communications media in his lyrics, suggesting that communication and miscommunication were important concerns for him. But Svec is even more interested in the ways that Dylan’s music and image were taken up by Apple co-founder Steve Jobs, who not only used Dylan’s music in the unveiling of key Apple products and took inspiration from Dylan’s artistic personae, but was also an ardent Dylanophile. In taking up Dylan as a symbol, Svec suggests, Jobs presented a vision of individual creativity that would allow everyone to “become like Dylan ... with the transparent vessels of creativity Apple offers” (86). This vision, Svec notes, relies on a complex network of individuals who create, manufacture, market, sell, and support Apple technologies.

Chapter 5 focuses on Woody Guthrie, whose life and music served as an important formative force on Dylan and who worked closely with Seeger as a member of the Almanac Singers in the 1940s. Like Lomax, Seeger, and Dylan, Guthrie — who diligently presented a down-home and folksy public persona — worked closely and deliberately with a variety of communications media in an effort to engage in meaningful interpersonal dialogue. Svec highlights the Greenwich Village “hoot-enannies” in which Guthrie and Seeger

participated during the late 1930s as a vital communications medium that transformed folk songs into pro-democratic and anti-fascist weapons. He notes that, in the hootenanny, “voices and bodies can meld and conjoin ... forming a throbbing and propulsive ‘war machine,’ a steely rhizome of sonic solidarity” (121). Yet, even as the hootenannies became powerful tools for social and political change, they also silenced viewpoints that did not conform to the pro-democratic, anti-fascist ideologies held by their organizers. Svec puts these folk music performances in dialogue with the “People’s Microphone” technique used by participants in the Occupy Movement, noting that, unlike the hootenannies, the People’s Microphone requires that participants transmit all messages, even those with which one disagrees. As such, Svec suggests that “the People’s Mic is much more grounded than the Hootenanny had been in the liberal conception of free speech” (125).

Chapters 4 and 6 turn away from iconic folk revivalists and shift attention to more contemporary tactical and strategic uses of communications media. Chapter 6, for instance, considers Canadian pop star Justin Bieber’s rise to fame on YouTube as a deliberate and strategic deployment of social media that uses “folk media” such as YouTube and Twitter to craft personal narratives and brand identities and, in the process, build personal wealth (129). Chapter 4, on the other hand, describes Svec’s own efforts to “map the creative utopianism of the long American folk revival more directly onto the problematics of media-archaeological design, in a perhaps tactical way” (97). Focusing on a series of workshops he led with the New Brunswick Laboratory of Imaginary Media Research

+ Design in 2014 and 2015, this chapter suggests that the creation of “imaginary media” might be a valuable tool to help individuals and communities develop ways to address issues in their own communities (97-107). Unfortunately, many of the practical details of these workshops were largely omitted from Svec’s discussion in favor of extended exegeses of the theoretical foundations for that work.

In fact, throughout much of the book, it is difficult to discern whether Svec is more interested in intervening in discourses around folk revivalism or in those around tactical media. Readers interested in detailed case studies drawing on new archival research, close readings of particular performances and recordings, or critique of folk revival scholarship will likely be disappointed by *American Folk Music as Tactical Media*. Svec spends the overwhelming majority of the brief text presenting close readings and critiques of a wide range of media theorists. As such, Svec’s text, although insightful in a variety of ways, may be of more interest to communications scholars and musical activists seeking new ways to deploy media than to music specialists. This is not to diminish Svec’s work; the book maintains a very tight focus on a specific concern and presents an often-convincing argument. But music specialists will undoubtedly wish to read this text only after having immersed themselves in the historical scholarship on folk revivalism.

Taken on the whole, *American Folk Music as Tactical Media* offers some useful insights into the ways that individual folk revivalists used tactical media to advance their agendas. But, as Svec’s own numerous caveats indicate, the book’s exclusive focus on canonic white male figures unfairly

privileges dominant perspectives. One wonders, for instance, how a deliberate focus on Leadbelly's engagement with communications media might have tempered Svec's discussion of Alan Lomax. As well, the book's sometimes impenetrable prose will undoubtedly make it difficult for some of the powerful ideas that Svec presents to filter into the praxis of musician activists and activist musicians. Consequently, it is unlikely that Svec's nuanced theories will return to the folk communities from which they were derived. 🍀

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Pour le champ d'études des *metal studies* formé en 2013¹, l'année 2016 est particulièrement fructueuse. En effet, trois ouvrages portant sur le sujet dans le milieu académique sont publiés, soit *Heavy Metal, Gender and Sexuality : Interdisciplinary Approaches* (Heesch et Scott 2016), *Heavy Metal and the Communal Experience* (Vara-Diaz et Scott 2016), ainsi que le livre qui fait l'objet de cette recension. Comportant 20 chapitres, cet ouvrage est écrit tant par des spécialistes établis que par des chercheurs débutant leur carrière et présente un bel éventail de disciplines.

L'introduction comporte deux chapitres, dont un écrit par la sociologue Deena Weinstein, souvent considérée comme la première universitaire à s'être intéressée au sujet. Plus spécifiquement, dans « Reflections on Metal Studies », Weinstein tente de répondre à la question « How metal studies is possible? ». Puis, elle revient sur les concepts théoriques issus des disciplines périphériques aux *metal studies* qui peuvent aussi s'y appliquer, tel que le « bricolage » de Levi-Strauss (29-30).

La section qui suit, « Metal Musicology », présente trois textes. Ainsi, le choix de débiter l'ouvrage par cette discipline démontre bien la volonté des directeurs de lui accorder davantage d'importance, malgré qu'elle soit toujours sous-représentée dans les *metal studies*. La contribution