

MODERN Folk Music

by John Muri

Folk music is a term rarely used in connection with modern popular music, although pop tunes make up about all we have of what may now be called "music of the people." The disappearance of people singing at their work (the piped music systems won't let them) and of latter-day troubadours (we'd call them strolling musicians or vaudevillians) makes modern pop music the property of relatively few singers, whose professional careers in saloons are bewilderingly short. Their material is often weak, but it is widely disseminated on records, radio, movies, television, and Muzak-style speaker systems. It deserves preservation. Since the fourteenth century, scholars have endeavored to collect and preserve popular tunes. They are still doing it. Numerous good books about modern popular music keep appearing, and libraries are saving copies of faded and recent tunes.

In the days of practicing full-time theatre organists, the course of American folk music was determined by movie theatres, provincial dance orchestras, and phonograph records. The theatre organist was a very important person in the eyes of music publishers. His choices of new tunes to feature every week and his happy situation of being able to pick from the cornucopia of popular music that flooded a profitable market made him king for about ten years. This is not to suggest that the music of the twenties was unremittingly excellent; junk tunes abounded. After 1923, radio became the major disseminating power. In 1927, sound movies joined radio in the competition for listeners. During the early movie years (1908 through 1916) a morality code that forbade the showing of live

snakes, women smoking or drinking, fervid love-making, or violence was strictly in effect. By the late twenties, many of the restrictions were relaxed, and the trend was observable in even the song-lyrics. Television took over in 1948, almost destroying its predecessors as it tried to get away with everything it could morally and commercially. It carried violence in entertainment to new limits while giving scant attention to music of all types because of the cost. Its nearest approaches to folk-musical influence have been *Hee Haw* and the *Lawrence Welk Show*.

Critics with no catholicity of taste have labeled popular music inferior and not worth scholarly attention. People differ so materially and emotionally on matters of art and taste that it is not worth the effort to argue, particularly with someone who swears that he doesn't know music but knows what he likes. It may be fighting windmills like Don Quixote, but certain things need to be said about current music.

The most serious defects in modern pop-rock (in common with much old folk material) are casualness of emotion and shallowness of musical form. Trivial sequences of sound (scarcely to be called tunes) made up of a single repeated four-bar figure that fails to develop and trails off into silence after three or four minutes are stupefying. When the lyrics make sense, they portray a few stock emotional situations, namely (1) reactions to a faithless lover or mate,

Mr. Muri's opinions expressed herein are his own and do not necessarily reflect the policies of ATOS or THEATRE ORGAN Magazine.

usually done with sneers or self-pity, (2) uncontrollable sexual drive, expressed with beggings and assorted grunts, indicative of a Passion that is supposed to be love, and (3) commentary on social or political thought that is occasionally soundly based but too often expressed with sentiment that makes one rush to the intellectual vomitorium. The amateur lyric-writers have little regard for rhyme; they join *mind* with *wine*, *pain* with *gained*, and *speak* with *feet*, to quote examples from three touted "great songs of the seventies." Take the words away and the musician finds little or no melody, only two or maybe three chords. All that's left is a beat. A beat makes noises for dancing, but it does not represent "man thinking"; it represents "man feeling," which, for a human being, puts him on a low animal level. Much radio and television music (even background material) is now expressed in simplistic terms, intended to excite or to pacify.

If music can "soothe the savage breast," it can also excite. Assuming (1) that music can stimulate us to action, and (2) that music can be evil as well as good on its influence, we may try jumping to the conclusion that the message of an awful lot of modern pop music is dangerous, if not harmful. If childishness in adults is unbecoming, if imbecile mumbling or screaming is abhorrent, if vacuity of the soul is shocking, if sexual excitation for profit is evil, then the great body of pop rock (rock-a-billy, acid rock, punk rock, etc.) is sending a bad message. I have been informed that much of this music is intended for listening in a hypnotic or drug-saturated environment. If that is what it really is, at best we hope it will have limited influence; at worst we may be justified in being pessimistic. If Gresham's Law (that bad quality will drive away good) is operative, then modern commercial music is sending out more than warning signals.

Folk music has always been pretty rough stuff. After 1720 the bawdy popular music of the English music halls and drinking clubs was almost without exception suppressed, censored, and expurgated by collectors who set out "to purify the English language." They concentrated upon style as the important medium to carry subject-matter. Musicians

came to the same view in the nineteenth century. By 1920, theatre organists tried to become stylists, emulating the flashier pianists and violinists of the previous half-century. Flourishes and poses at the console with distorted dynamics and liberties with melodies became common.

Popular folk music of our time emphasizes style at least as much as it does in content. Witness the work of Kate Smith, Peggy Lee, Bing Crosby (whose stock in trade was delaying entrances into phrases and clipping subsequent notes to catch up), and Elvis Presley, who made his style physical. Early stylistic organists were C. Sharpe Minor, Milt Herth, and Crawford. Later moderns are using personal charm and exotic clothing, but few of them are pure stylists; too many are copying other organists' devices.

Perhaps the day of style is over. Blame television for it. A funny event occurred at the end of the Bolshoi Ballet's *Nutcracker* on NBC last December 18. As the dancers, with Mrs. Gerald Ford as narrator, were taking their bows, NBC broke in with a commercial for peanut butter. I don't know whether there was any political significance or not, but I howled. A few days earlier, CBS had presented a much finer *Nutcracker*, done by the American Ballet Company. The ballet came to a beautiful close, but then what did CBS do? They threw on the crawl (the list of credits) at a speed that tore through the list of performers, slowing down for the names of the faceless producers, assistants, cameramen, scene-shifters, hairdressers and ratcatchers. This sort of hamminess can be passed without comment when it is exhibited at the close of the usual run of TV time-killers, but it calls for scorn when thrust upon what is supposed to be an offering for mature audiences. A recent episode of *Kojak* gave no credits whatever to actors. A new trick is to insert credits after the story gets going, forcing you to read the stuff if you don't tune out the station. What's all this got to do with theatre organs? Well, those TV people, excepting Lawrence Welk, don't use organs on their shows. And so far as the days when organists were powerful in directing public taste is concerned — well, they were great while they lasted. □

Cover Photo . . .

THE ANDERSON PARAMOUNT

by John W. Landon

Originally planned as the Palace Theatre, Anderson, Indiana, the 1700-seat John Ebersson atmospheric house was leased before construction was finished and opened as the "Paramount — A Publix Theatre." Built at a cost of \$800,000 in 1929, it was the grandest thing most of the citizens of this modest-sized Indiana community had ever seen. The auditorium was done in a Spanish decor with copies of famous statuary in the various coves and niches including Venus de Milo. It also boasted the usual twinkling stars and drifting clouds, stuffed parrots and artificial hanging vines. The ceiling of the main lobby was hand-painted in five colors and thousands of tiles in the original design of the lobby floor were set by hand. The terra-cotta facade on the building facing was so detailed that it merited its own blueprints.

John Ebersson had designed a number of theatres in the midwest, particularly in Ohio and Indiana equipped with Page pipe organs which were built in Lima, Ohio. Perhaps the best known of these today is the 4/15 Page in the Embassy Theatre, Fort Wayne, Indiana, beautifully recorded by organist Buddy Nolan. Radio Station WHT in the Wrigley Building, Chicago, installed a 4/15 Page in their studios, broadcast over NBC in the late 1920's by Al Carney. The Casino on Catalina Island, off the California coast, also featured a Page organ. A Page pipe organ was also chosen for the Anderson Paramount. It consisted of three manuals and seven ranks, but in typical Page fashion it was highly unified. Almost no builder of theatre organs unified its instruments as heavily as did Page. There were 148 stop tablets allowing almost unlimited flexibility. Located in two chambers at either side of the proscenium are Flute, String, Vox Humana and Sousaphone in the main, and Kinura (actually Krumet), Tuba

and Tibia in the solo. The console was loaded with bric-a-brac and finished originally in green and gold.

The Anderson Paramount opened August 14, 1929 with a sound film. It never showed silents. The opening program included an address by Sam Katz, president of Paramount-Publix, a newsreel, a novelty song cartoon and the feature picture, *Coconuts* with the four Marx Brothers. For many years the organist was Hilda Lindstrom who came from Elwood, Indiana, every day by interurban to do the honors at the console. She also broadcast the Paramount organ over a local radio station.

The organ was idle for several years in the 1940's and 1950's except for accompanying an occasional stage show. The writer discovered it in 1955 while a college freshman at nearby Taylor University and has been playing it ever since. In 1964-65 the instrument was completely restored by Lewis Hodson and Rex Hoppes of Anderson. For several years thereafter, the writer played organ intermissions before the feature picture on Friday and Saturday evenings. After another brief period of disuse, organ intermissions resumed in 1974 and they continue weekly at present. The writer plays Saturday evenings, with Carlton Smith playing Fridays and Sundays. Lewis Hodson, Carlton Smith and Bob Dunn keep the instrument in first class condition. The writer recorded the organ in 1965 — the first time a Page organ had been heard on a long-playing disc. A new album by the writer at this organ is soon to be released. Although there is dust on the pre-plastic ivy and vandalism has decreed a perpetually cloudless sky, the stars still shine and twinkle on the vibration of the sixteen foot Sousaphones, as the console rises slowly to bring to a new generation a glimpse of the not too distant past. □