

The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress
presents
the Benjamin Botkin Folklife Lecture Series
AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT

MIKE SEEGER AND MUSIC FROM THE TRUE VINE



Photo by Robert Corwin

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JUNE 12, 2013
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MIKE SEEGER AND MUSIC FROM THE TRUE VINE

Mike Seeger devoted over fifty years of his life to the performance, documentation, and preservation of the rural music of the South. He learned his craft so well that Bob Dylan could say of him: "What I had to work at, Mike already had in his genes, in his genetic makeup. Before he was even born, this music had to be in his blood." This reputation, to which many other people could attest, albeit without the hyperbole found in Dylan's statement, was all the more remarkable when it is recalled that he was born into the family of two distinguished classical musicians, Charles and Ruth Crawford Seeger. Even more significant is the fact that Mike Seeger did have to work hard to attain his musical mastery, while trying to carve out an identity that was distinct from that of his parents and his iconic half-brother, Pete Seeger. Mike's introduction to southern musical styles had come in his parents' home at the end of the 1930s, as he listened to their storehouse of Library of Congress recordings and commercial hillbilly recordings.

This music, however, was a faceless entity to the young Mike Seeger, and he did not begin to associate it with a specific region or culture until the mid-fifties when he more fully encountered bluegrass music and older rural styles. Before he made his all-embracing commitment to the music of the South, Mike, like many young people, searched rather aimlessly for something meaningful, and did not seriously take up an instrument until he was eighteen. He found his life's mission when he moved to Baltimore in 1954 to begin his public service as a conscientious objector in a tuberculosis hospital. In Baltimore he began to meet and play music with the people who actually made the kind of music that he had first heard in his parents' home. Hazel Dickens and her brothers, who had come to the city from the West Virginia coal country, put human flesh on the music that he had come to love, and with them he became immersed in bluegrass music in the local honky-tonks, at parties, and at the country music parks in the Upper South. He became an indefatigable collector of grassroots music, as well as an impeccable musician. These early endeavors resulted in his production of two historic Folkways LPs, *American Banjo Scruggs Style* and *Mountain Music, Bluegrass Style*, which played a major role in introducing this vital style to northern audiences and to the urban folk music revival.

At the same time Mike also began working with two friends, John Cohen and Tom Paley, in a band called The New Lost City Ramblers, recreating the songs and styles heard on commercial 78 rpm records in the two decades before World War II. The New Lost City Ramblers were unlike any other band heard in the revival: they strived for stylistic authenticity, acknowledged their sources, and demonstrated the folkloristic value of the old recordings. In stressing the need to recreate faithfully the older styles, they lent legitimacy to both the people and culture that had originally created the music.

While working with the New Lost City Ramblers, Mike also pursued a solo career that led him into the deepest recesses of what he called "old-time music." Not only did he develop the capacity for recreating the instrumental styles of old-time musicians (particularly those played by banjo players), he also instructed his listeners about the origins of these styles. Most important, he moved well beyond the recreation of older styles, and began bringing out of retirement such old timers as Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten and Dock Boggs to make music again. This, he felt, was his most memorable achievement. By the time Mike died, he had witnessed not only the resurrection of careers like these, but also the burgeoning of old-time string band music among America's young people. And he now recognized a fact of which he had only been dimly aware in his early career. The music he loved was the product of the long and multifaceted interrelationship of black and white musical cultures: Music from the True Vine.

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The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.

