

Country Music in the Adirondack Region: Tradition and Innovation

by Ellen McHale

The country music of today's Adirondack communities reflects a rich blend of Anglo-American musical styles and traditions, beginning with the song and instrumental traditions of European settlers and continuing through the Twentieth Century into the present. Always there has existed the sharing of musical forms and styles and tuneful accommodations to the changing nature of society. In the forefront of this change and adaptation is the country musician as innovator, commentator, and artist.

As French Canadian and Anglo-American settlers moved into the Adirondack region in the Nineteenth Century as loggers, quarriers, or small-scale farmers, they brought the traditional music of their home countries or regions. The home or logging camp became the setting for social occasions with song and dance, often to the accompaniment of the fiddle. The house party (alternately known as the kitchen dance, kitchen junket, or house dance) provided an opportunity for socializing with one's neighbors in the sparsely settled areas. The traditional fiddling of yesterday and today retains this orientation to the dance.

Today, organizations such as the *Adirondack Fiddlers* aid in the promotion and perpetuation of this old-time fiddling.

Along with the instrumental tradition is an Adirondack song tradition which shows its roots in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century balladry from the British Isles but which also embraces topical songs, broadside ballads (narrative songs printed on sheets of paper which often served to chronicle a recent event or disaster), and sentimental lyric songs. Singers, as with other musical innovators, embraced and continue to embrace the music and songs which they appreciate and enjoy, whether religious songs, early ballads, vaudeville pieces, etc.

New influences were felt on the music of the Adirondack region with the rise of the commercial recording industry and the proliferation of radio. From its inception in 1888, the recording industry had generally ignored rural folk music. However, with the success of Mammie Smith's recording of "Crazy Blues" in 1920 came an awareness by

the recording industry of a heretofore untapped "specialty" audience and market. Recording companies began to exploit regional,



"The Arizona Pals" playing a dance at the Spitz, a dancehall on the third floor of a Cohoes bank.

ethnic, and racial musical currents by producing "Race," "Ethnic," and "hillbilly" recordings.

The first so-called "hillbilly" music of the early 1920s drew upon the existing folk music of the Southeast, slightly altering the style to please both the recording executives and the general public. This trend was to continue. Country music from the 1920s to the 1990s is a contemporary phenomenon; however, it shows linkages to earlier musical styles. The use of traditional instruments (guitar, fiddle, string bass, accordion, banjo), the genre of "story" or "saga" songs, and the concerns expressed in the song lyrics all attest to the traditional or "folk" origins of country music. Bill Malone in *Country Music U.S.A.* states, "Despite their innovations and urbanized sophistication, the country singers of today are the cultural and musical descendants of the rural folk of earlier centuries who had perpetuated the ancient ballads and eventually created commercial country music" (Malone 1968: 300).

In 1924, the first major radio barn dance show, the WLS barn dance aired from Chicago under the patronage of Sears and Roebuck, the "World's Largest Store." Other radio stations in the mid-1920s began to offer "barn dances," programs of instrumental and vocal music, coming primarily out of the folk tradition. The barn dance tried to project an image of wholesome, down-to-earth family-style entertainment (Malone 1979: 61-63), and it soon became a fixture of nationwide radio broadcasting. Increasing in number in the 1930s, barn dances offered a forum for local folk talent and

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aided the development of what was soon to become known as "country" music. By 1941, through the introduction of fifty thousand watt receivers, radio began to be broadcast nationwide. Stations which as WWVA in Wheeling, West Virginia, could be heard nationally, as could the "Grand Ole Opry," which was broadcast every week of NBC. These national radio shows' broadcasts, as well as local stations such as WGY, WGNA, and WRGB reached the Adirondack region and had a profound influence on Adirondack musicians.

World War II served as a dividing point in country music history, for it became a catalyst for social homogenization. Before the war, country music had been primarily a regional music with a Southern identification. The war accelerated new migrations between North and South (Malone 1979: 86), and to reach their migrant public, Southern performers began to venture out of their home territories and tour in the northern and western United States. With increased national media exposure, a prospering clientele, and the booming post-war economy, country music gained its first national expansion in 1946 (Malone 1975: 397-399).

While recording stars became popularized through 78 rpm recordings and radio shows such as the Grand Ole Opry, the residents of the Adirondack region of New York State were producers of music as well as consumers. Throughout the entire growth and development of country music, regional and local artists played to hometown audiences.

Responding to the increasing commercialization of country music, musicians in the 1950s began to develop a form of music which harkened back to the string bands of the 1920s and 1930s. By 1953 the style of music known as *Bluegrass* was well established, relying upon intricate harmonies, the use of traditional acoustic instruments, a repertoire including traditional songs, and a complex, standard-

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Dance at "Camp of the Pines," Lake Champlain, 1950s.
Photo courtesy of Sadie Young.

ized, ensemble style of playing (Malone 1968: 305-319). This recent innovation continues to shape the music of the Adirondack region, as musicians incorporate music from the bluegrass idiom into their performing. Country music has also recently seen influences from the infusion of rock musicians who have experimented with country music (Malone 1985:386). In the Lake George region, the *Stony Creek Band* is an example of the eclectic nature of contemporary country music, and they name a plethora of musical influences upon their performing.

Country music is a music which defines categories. It is a living, organic process in which various musical styles and traditions are borrowed from and traded. Repertoires and styles are various, as attested to by the artists themselves. Adirondack artists such as Smokey Greene name both the traditional roots of their family's music making and the influence of recorded music and radio on their development as country musicians. Smokey Greene, in a biographical sketch of "Smokey Green and the Boys" describes the group as "not Country," not Bluegrass," not Old Time." Rather, it is "Good down home music" (Smokey Greene, n.d.). In grange halls, fire halls, and dance halls, advertised "round and square dances" offer a blend of traditional

square dance music along with vocal renditions of bluegrass, honky tonk and gospel favorites. Regardless of the form which the music takes, country music in the Adirondacks remains a music which is social in its orientation. Its performances occur in the small tavern, dance hall, fire hall, dude ranch, or grange hall of rural Upstate New York and its lyrics portray everyday concerns and lifestyles. The proliferation of fanclubs, the continuation of country dances, and the distribution of the recordings of regional artists

attests to the continued vibrancy of country music in the Adirondack region.

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