

CALIFORNIA FOLK MUSIC PROJECT

COLLECTION OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC IN CALIFORNIA

Instructions to workers

The purpose of this undertaking is to collect and preserve the old-time music now in circulation in California, particularly the songs which are fast disappearing and which, for the most part, have never been printed or even written down, but have been passed on from one performer to another by rote. "California" folk music is understood to mean any traditional music, -- song or dance tune, -- now current in California; items from other states which deal with California life or history may be included. The investigation is not of course to be limited to performers whose native language is English. The minority groups in California have much to add that is of great interest.

We want to preserve a song:

- 1) If it was widely current at any time, known to and sung by many people;
- 2) If it has been known to several generations in a family;
- 3) If it is an account of a true happening, with local details and place names, even if it was not known widely; or if it tells about the early days in general (lumber camps, mining camps, the crossing of the plains; crimes, catastrophes; any local trade;)
- 4) If it is a special favorite and particularly good fun to sing.

We want to know what instruments are found in this region, and where any unusual ones may be examined; also names and addresses of performers on any folk instrument, particularly fiddlers who play for dances in the old fashion, and 5-string (not tenor) banjo players. Please note general type of instrument, and mention any odd feature about construction or performance which struck you particularly.

Local pride in the preservation of the cultural things that belong to the old days should be stimulated wherever possible, particularly in the minority groups. Remember that the Anglo-Saxon music which we are inclined to think of as the only "American" kind is a relatively recent importation on this continent, exactly as the Hungarian, Finnish and Armenian folk musics are. The Portuguese and Spanish have been in California three times as long as the "Americans".

It is a good idea to spend much time making friends among the older people who are likely to know songs or to have friends who know them. Don't feel that time spent in conversation about things apparently quite unconnected with songs is wasted, for it will make you seem less a stranger. A few minutes of general conversation (don't scorn the weather as a topic!) should

always precede any explanation of the reason for your visit. A casual friendly, unhurried manner is disarming; a busy, efficient one creates suspicion.

When you find someone who knows a few songs, explain that the University of California is interested in seeing that they aren't lost, and ask him if he'd feel like making out a list of the titles, just to see how many songs he can remember, and which ones. If he will dictate the words to you, tell him you'll make up a typewritten booklet of them and give him a copy. Do not mention recording on disks until specifically told to do this by the Supervisor.

Never judge a folk-singer by the tonal beauty of his singing. If the tune is fairly definite and the words reasonably clear that is all that is necessary for our purposes. Often the singing that sounds most curious to our ears is the oldest and most valuable to preserve. It is important for the collector to realize that in the mind of a true folk-singer the song is of every importance, the singer of none at all. Never admire a performance, only the story of the song or the line of the melody.

Sometimes it is necessary, in order to keep your singer's goodwill, to take down songs that aren't particularly interesting, simply because they are favorites of his. Often, too, it is necessary to take down one that has been published, though the singer does not know this because he, probably, learned it by rote. Don't scorn such songs, their variation from the printed version is very interesting to students, and they should be noted down carefully. In every case we want the singer's own version of words and tune, so never correct him.

In going to call on "foreign" Californians it is almost always necessary to go in company with someone known to your performer, — someone in whom he has confidence and whom you have interested in your project ahead of time. This should be a person able to understand your work in its historical and social aspects, so that if your performer suspects you of attempting to exploit his music commercially, your sponsor for the contact will be able to reassure him effectively. Never ask foreigners directly for the date of their arrival in the United States. Even when they are in this country legally they are often uncertain of their status and this query may ruin your contact. Usually the approximate date is easy to determine indirectly.

Your call should always have the aspect of a social visit, not a business one. Remember that 'foreign' manners are usually more formal and in general more consistent than ours, so be on your best behavior! Don't press people; treat them as collaborators. On the other hand, don't allow a performer to feel that he is doing you a personal favor by allowing you to take down his songs. The undertaking requires hard and concentrated work from both of you, and the best attitude for you is to assume that he will be glad to make the effort to get a more complete record of the history of old-time things, just as you are.

The interview forms which follow should be studied carefully to clarify in your mind the various things we are interested to know. You are not expected to fill these out in full for every performer, but insofar as any of this information is obtainable in general conversation, without more than a few direct questions, it should be included on these forms. A performer's interest should not be exhausted in answering questions since it is infinitely more important to record his music. Never fill out these forms in the presence of the performer.