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Adirondack Folk Music

BY DAN BERGGREN

It's not hard to find information online about the folk music of New York State's North Country. A quick search provides a link to the wonderfully rich website, "W is for the Woods," created by TAUNY (Traditional Arts in Upstate New York) and to a video link for *Songs to Keep— Treasures from an Adirondack Folk Collector*, which is the story of the late Essex County historian Marjorie Lansing Porter (1891–1973). Both are highly recommended, and if you'd like to explore this rich vein of

material further, visit SUNY Plattsburgh's Feinberg Library and listen to Ms. Porter's collection of front porch and kitchen recordings that have been digitized. Folk music of the region's past is well represented by these two sources, but what about its present and future?

Who and What

Over 30 years ago, I was one of about ten musicians in upstate New York who were performing and recording

Adirondack folk music. Of that group, three have since died, two have retired, but seven or so other musicians have joined the ranks of those telling the region's stories through their performances and recordings. That's a positive sign.

There are plenty of North Country musicians on either side of the Blue Line who play bluegrass, blues, and country, but not so many who play folk music. What's the difference? I distinctly remember a night in 1976, when the restaurant owner where



The Roots & Branches crew, June 2018, Great Camp Sagamore. *Photo courtesy of the author.*

I was singing said that he'd be glad to have me back, but only if I'd sing country-western instead of the folk songs I was performing. The country songs on the radio at the time didn't seem to connect with my mountains and my experiences. I stuck with folk and sang traditional songs of the region and wrote new ones about people, places, and experiences that resonated with my audiences.

Then and Now

Songs we now consider traditional often grew out of group work situations. For example, there's a body of North Country songs about the logging industry and getting trees to market. If family members sang, then it was up to the next generation to learn and pass along their repertoire. Consider Yankee John Galusha (1859–1950) of Minerva. He is, perhaps, the greatest single source of Adirondack folk songs, owing to the work of folk musicologists Frank and Anne Warner and Essex County historian Marjorie Lansing Porter. Some of the British Isles ballads that Galusha sang were from his parents and grandparents; the lumberjack songs came from older, fellow workmen; and a handful of Civil War songs came from one of his brothers, returning home after service in the Union Army. Folk music was once shared in smaller, more informal settings: with the family after dinner in their homes (before record players) or with friends in a local pub (before jukeboxes). Today, the great variety and diverse nature of Adirondack folk is a result of technology exposing us, both singers and listeners, to increasingly more and different kinds of music. With all that's now available on the Internet, you can just as easily sit at home and listen rather than experience it live. There are currently more places in the region, than in past years, where you can hear and participate in live folk music, but with so many demands on our time and so many more ways to spend it, one wonders if people are less likely to attend concerts. Sometimes, venues have a tough time getting the word out and filling the seats.

Many folk themes have remained the same: love and falling in and out of it; hard times, good times, and reminiscing about them; and the environment, both in a generally appreciative, isn't-nature-beautiful way and in specific ways of protecting the aspects we value. There are threads of reminiscence; roots of the British Isles, Québécois, and Native American cultures; deeds of real people and situations; and stories of struggle and hope in a place surrounded by beauty.

How and Where to Hear It

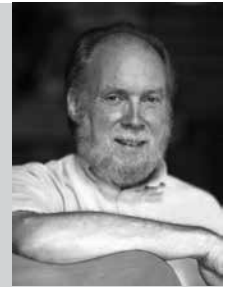
Before listing places where Adirondack folk music can be heard in person, I'd like to mention the positive influence that public radio has had, and continues to have, on this music. There are three radio stations whose signals cover the region in varying degrees with their multiple transmitters: North Country Public Radio's *The Folk Show* on Mondays at 8 p.m.; Northeast Public Radio's *Hudson River Sampler* on Saturdays at 8 p.m.; and Vermont Public Radio's *All the Traditions* on Sundays at 7 p.m. Not only do listeners hear Adirondack folk music in the mix, but these programs have concert calendars that tell of upcoming folk concerts and festivals in the Adirondacks and beyond.

Opportunities to hear live folk music are increasingly popular. One can hear various groups and styles throughout the region at farmers' markets, house concerts, arts centers and local arts groups, town-sponsored summer series from Norwood to Inlet, libraries from Old Forge to Glens Falls, churches from Big Moose to Plattsburgh, the Grange Hall in Whallonsburg, nonprofit organizations—like Adirondack Experience, BluSeed Studios, and Adirondack Folk School—and at festivals like the one in Schroon Lake, which just had its 30th annual Adirondack Folk Music Festival. Schroon Lake has another folk tradition that's been going strong since the 1930s—summer square dances in the town park with live music. While a few of the dance tunes might be relatively new,

many have been played at North Country dances for generations.

Will the tradition continue? Looking to the future of folk music in the region, Great Camp Sagamore in Raquette Lake created a program several years ago called Roots & Branches. It's a hands-on weekend that is designed to cultivate the next generation of musicians interested in learning and presenting traditional songs of the region's past, as well as continuing the tradition of telling new stories in song about the Adirondacks. How about your neck of the woods? Are there musicians keeping the folk tradition alive where you live? Are you nourishing it with your support? ▼

Dan Berggren's roots are firmly in the Adirondacks, but his music has taken him throughout the United States and abroad. Dan has worked in the woods with a forest ranger and surveyor, was a radio producer in Europe, professor of audio and radio studies at SUNY Fredonia, and owner of Sleeping Giant Records. An award-winning musician and educator, Dan is also a tradition-based songsmith who writes with honesty, humor, and a strong sense of place. Visit www.berggrenfolk.com to learn more about Dan and his music. Photo by Jessica Riehl.



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