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# Book Review of Hank Reineke: Arlo Guthrie: The Warner Reprise Years

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## Book Review of Hank Reineke: Arlo Guthrie: The Warner Reprise Years

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they could no longer take for granted that the general populace would have a nuanced knowledge of traditional music. In these types of accounts, we see how the modern fiddle subculture was starting to coalesce.

Today, we largely think of American fiddling as something that a few thousand post-ethnic whites pursue as an invigorating exercise in wholesome nostalgia. There may be a patina of friskiness that endures, but the idea of a fiddler as a quirky outsider is mostly confined to memory. The dominant image of fiddling is that it's a revived American tradition with European antecedents. In considering the musical tradition within Missouri, readers will gain insight into a main lesson within Marshall's book. Even though there are legions of fiddlers with clear ethnic affiliations who have contributed to this tradition, the inherited centers of both style and repertoire have withstood, or easily assimilated, a variety of possible influences. With a few regional partial exceptions, American fiddling is derived from Scottish and Scots-Irish music with some broadly British, or "old stock" influences. The practice and repertoire have absorbed several infusions of African American elements through repeated interplay with popular culture. Evidence of other ethnic input is modest or debatable. For instance, Marshall notes that a common dance and tune in the "Rhineland" folk region in the St. Louis area, "The Butterfly Dance," is done to the melody of an old song entitled "Life Let Us Cherish," a translation of the late eighteenth-century "Freut Euch des Lebens" (p. 140). However, "Life Let Us Cherish" had become ubiquitous in both American published tune collections and in manuscript commonplace books long before many Germans arrived here. Yes, this was a tune German in origin, but it didn't travel to the United States as such. Instead, it had been filtered through British taste and pop music mechanisms. On the other hand, it remains worthwhile to consider influences from other ethnic groups. Might the tune's popularity in Missouri's "Rhineland" counties have been bolstered during the mid-to-late nineteenth century by its continued German associations?

The American fiddle repertoire constitutes a model much like the violin itself. It is potent

and enduring due to its flexible expressivity. Melodies traditionally played in schematic realizations for dancing readily absorb artistry in modest to exuberant amounts. Then, newly fancy pieces can turn around and easily shed their fancy accoutrements. They can then again be eligible as stock tunes for beginners who are learning, or the same tunes may become daily fare among those preferring straightforward renditions. This process is evident in Marshall's discussion of Missouri fiddle family scions Junior Marriott, Matt Wyatt, and Alita Stoneking Weisgerber. All three play "Leather Britches" and "Billy in the Low Ground" (respectively, "Lord MacDonald's Reel" and "The Braes of Auchtertyre" in eighteenth-century Scotland) in ornate modern versions, as is characteristic of many younger Missouri fiddlers who play in the contest style. But these two tunes ring just as true in the old-time performances of traditional Missouri fiddling presented on the CD tucked into the back of this book. (This excellent collection of 39 rare cuts is also available separately from Voyager Records.) Indeed, these younger fiddlers deeply respect their local artistic progenitors, and their contemporary fiddling subtly echoes Missouri traditions. As modern fiddling continues to accrue regional nuance, we will have a better chance to understand how this works, thanks to the thorough and insightful research done by Marshall and other students of old-time fiddling.

**Arlo Guthrie: The Warner/Reprise Years.** By Hank Reineke. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012. Pp. xix + 327, series editor's foreword, preface, acknowledgments, discography, bibliography, index, 11 photographs, three illustrations.)

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Readers of Hank Reineke's biography of Arlo Guthrie might contest Reineke's claim that by 2002, Guthrie held "uncontested status as the preeminent torchbearer of the Woody Guthrie, Cisco Houston, and Pete Seeger legacies" (p. 246). Even Arlo Guthrie's most ardent fans

would likely concede that other musicians—perhaps Bob Dylan, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, Tom Paxton, Jean Ritchie, Dave Van Ronk, Dick Gaughan, Jean Redpath, Mike Seeger, Ry Cooder, Eric Andersen, Odetta, Billy Bragg, or even Bruce Springsteen—have been, in their own ways, as important in carrying the repertoire and the spirit of the urban folk revival into the twenty-first century. That said, since his emergence in the public sphere with his delightfully quirky 1967 debut album *Alice’s Restaurant*, Arlo Guthrie has been a significant figure in the post-revival singer-songwriter scene. His honest if occasionally cantankerous persona, charming and playful sense of humor, diverse repertoire of songs, and undeniable musical talent, as displayed in countless concerts and on many recordings, have attracted and maintained for Guthrie a rather broad-based and loyal audience.

Arlo Guthrie has often been viewed as a folkie. For the most part, his music isn’t traditional, and he has been influenced more by the music of the folk revival rather than by regional or ethnic folk traditions. Furthermore, as Reineke points out, Guthrie generally performs many contemporary and self-penned songs and few traditional numbers. While not especially groundbreaking, Guthrie’s music has been *popular* in the best sense of the term, as it spoke to a generation of Americans. Nonetheless, the appeal of his recorded output as popular culture has faded somewhat over time. In this respect, Guthrie has been less a tradition-oriented folk musician and more of a contemporary-minded performer who grasped and embodied the counter-cultural values—values so prevalent at the time as to be mainstream—during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Serious fans of American popular music will enjoy reading this book whether or not they are interested in Guthrie’s music. Reineke is a skilled biographer who animates his chosen subjects, effectively balancing a wealth of details with a range of broader insights. His two published books have received recognition: *Ramblin’ Jack Elliott: The Never-Ending Highway* (Scarecrow Press, 2010) was awarded a Certificate of Merit for Best Research in Folk, Ethnic, or World Music in 2010 from the

Association for Recorded Sound Collections. *Arlo Guthrie: The Warner/Reprise Years* received a Certificate of Merit for Best Research in Recorded Popular Music in 2013 from that same organization. While exploring Guthrie’s music, the latter biography illuminates post-urban folk revival music-business dynamics and societal attitudes.

The “Warner/Reprise Years” in Reineke’s subtitle refers to the period (1967–1982) when Guthrie recorded a dozen albums for these two affiliated labels. He was with Reprise for a decade, beginning in 1967, and with Warner Bros. from 1977 through 1982. During the mid-1980s, the Warner Bros. label conducted a “housecleaning,” eliminating from its roster several now-legendary musicians—including Van Morrison, Gordon Lightfoot, Bonnie Raitt, and, of course, Arlo Guthrie. After being dropped by Warner Bros., Guthrie recorded numerous albums for his own independent label, Rising Son Records, with 10 albums released to date. By focusing on Guthrie’s major-label career, Reineke’s book inadvertently marginalizes Guthrie’s later life and work, as a single chapter entitled “Epilogue” covers the past three decades. Even though his Rising Son albums have not sold in quantities comparable to the albums from his heyday, Guthrie has remained active and visible to the present day by touring regularly. He has appeared often in concert with other musicians, both older (most notably, Pete Seeger) and younger (including his daughter, Sarah Lee Guthrie). Arlo also has served in the effort to remind a new generation about the legacy of his father Woody Guthrie.

*Arlo Guthrie: The Warner/Reprise Years* offers some fascinating observations. For instance, Reineke examines Arlo’s status with fans and with music critics during the peak of his fame. Reineke suggests that by the early 1970s, Arlo Guthrie had wider name-recognition in the United States than his father Woody Guthrie, who had died in 1967. Despite his fame, Arlo suffered from that “anxiety of influence,” having to confront the difficulty of living up to a legend. Indeed, Reineke’s book documents that Arlo’s critical reception fluctuated considerably after his impressive debut album. For example, after first hearing him perform during a 1972

festival appearance, a British music critic wrote that Arlo was not “the phenomenal talent he was touted to be” (p. 142). Reineke’s account of the musician’s reaction to this critique is revealing in that Arlo’s responses to these types of reviews have been anything but defensive. In 1974, for instance, when interviewed by a critic from the British music magazine *Melody Maker*, Arlo publicly agreed with an earlier, negative *Rolling Stone* review of one of his albums. Although he had reason to be angry or agitated at this juncture—a time in his life when he did not know whether he had acquired Huntington’s disease, the genetic disorder that took his father—Arlo Guthrie was in fact humble, honest, and approachable. This demeanor has remained part of his charm as a performer.

*Arlo Guthrie: The Warner/Reprise Years* enhances our collective appreciation of both Arlo and Woody Guthrie by effectively separating the scion from the legend. As the book illustrates, Arlo has occasionally—and quite memorably—performed songs composed by his father, most notably his magnificent rendition of Woody’s classic topical song “1913 Massacre” on Arlo’s 1972 album *Hobo’s Lullaby*. Nonetheless, as portrayed in Reineke’s book, Arlo stands on his own as a musician and as a man—invariably, to be sure, of a very different nature than his father.

**Folklore Rules: A Fun, Quick, and Useful Introduction to the Field of Academic Folklore Studies.** By Lynne S. McNeill. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2013. Pp. xvi + 90, illustrations, notes, index.)

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What is the first and most frequently asked question in a folklorist’s existence? Undoubtedly, it’s “So, what *is* folklore?” Beyond supplying a simple definition in a conversational setting, folklorists in higher education have the added responsibility of illuminating the term, in all its tangled origins and debated variations, for a variety of students over the course of their careers. Lynne McNeill’s *Folklore Rules* is a

guide for folklorists who need to introduce the multi-layered field to newcomers, as well as a compass for anyone at the beginning of a journey into the field.

McNeill explains the impetus for writing this slim volume in the opening section titled “For the Instructor: Why You Want to Use This Book.” Because the majority of folklorists in higher education teach in departments ranging from English to history to communications, they often interact with students who have no knowledge of the basics of folklore study. Whether in freshman composition, Introduction to Folklore, or an upper division course of “Folklore and Fill-in-the-Blank,” the instructor is faced with packing a semester’s worth of introductory information into a few class periods, for the sake of the specialized material that the course must cover (p. xiii). While several tried-and-true introductory textbooks exist, they are best suited to courses with much more room in the syllabus for discussing the basics of the field than that of the average class that a folklorist teaches. McNeill set out to write a concise guide that manages to orient newcomers quickly to academic folklore studies by providing numerous examples, heading off common misconceptions, briefly describing seminal works, and generally welcoming students to the process of stepping back and looking with a folklorist’s lens at themselves, their families, friends, and the world at large.

The four chapters of *Folklore Rules* represent basic building blocks of the field: definitions of folklore, what a folklorist does, types of folklore, and types of folk groups. McNeill begins by explaining the informal nature of folklore, how it expresses group consensus, and the ways in which it is transmitted. Her descriptions of folklore fieldwork and analysis are paired with examples of student work from her own career interacting with new folklore students. The genres chapter follows William A. Wilson’s categories of analysis—things that the folk say, do, make, and believe. The folk groups chapter features a short discussion on the evolving study of folklore in the digital realm.

Some of the outstanding features of this book are the “Want to Know More?” sections that are interspersed through the chapters, and the