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Comments

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Sound Reviews

Folksongs of Another America: Field Recordings from the Upper Midwest, 1937–1946. 2015. Produced, compiled, and annotated by James P. Leary. Dust-to-Digital, CDs (5), DVD, DTD-43.

TED OLSON

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When I was a child, my father occasionally sang fragments of a few Swedish and Danish songs he had heard while growing up during the Depression Era in a small Wisconsin town settled mostly by Scandinavian emigrants. Just a generation removed from his parents' arrival to the Upper Midwest from Sweden and Denmark, my father all his life sought to assimilate into the elite culture associated with the Eastern US megalopolis. Yet, while never conversant in his parents' native languages, he sang fragments of songs from those Old World cultures because they were a vital part of who his parents were and, by extension, who he was.

People connected to the Upper Midwest (specifically, the states of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota) through birth, family, and/or residency—indeed, anyone seeking to more clearly understand the confluence of ethnicities that shaped the unique cultural landscape of that region—will welcome the new book/CD/DVD set *Folksongs of Another America: Field Recordings from the Upper Midwest, 1937–1946*. Featuring more than 400 pages of liner notes that interpret the wide-ranging folk music included on the accompanying five CDs and one DVD, *Folksongs of Another America* is the first-ever project to comprehensively explore the diversity of Upper Midwest music traditions, and the set goes a long way toward depicting that region's distinctive sense of place. This documentary project grew out of a collaboration between Dust-to-Digital—the innovative Atlanta-based media company responsible for many noteworthy releases of historical record-

ings and illustrations—and the University of Wisconsin Press. Both drew on their strengths, Dust-to-Digital contributing straightforward yet memorable design work and innovative marketing, and the University of Wisconsin Press insisting upon sophisticated scholarly context in the interpretation of such complex material. By any standard, *Folksongs of Another America* was one of the standout documentary projects released in the United States during 2015.

Entitled to not-so-subtly suggest that the region has heretofore been woefully underrepresented in the canon of folkloristic research projects (indeed, many projects that have purported to examine *American* folk music have marginalized music traditions associated with the Upper Midwest), *Folksongs of Another America* offers groundbreaking scholarship. Producer/author James P. Leary—a highly regarded folklorist who founded the Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (and a former *Journal of American Folklore* editor)—applied a lifetime of regional research and service toward this project.

At the core of *Folksongs of Another America* are five CDs offering rarely heard or never-before-released field recordings collected in the Upper Midwest by three Library of Congress-affiliated documentarians during the golden age of field recording activity across the United States (1937–1946). Recordings on the first CD, made during 1937 in Minnesota and Wisconsin by folklorist Sidney Robertson, document musicians from English-language as well as non-English-language cultures (Finnish, Scots Gaelic, and Serbian, for instance). Incorporating recordings from the 1937 and 1938 National Folk Festivals (independently captured by Robertson and Alan Lomax) of the musical group known as the Wisconsin Lumberjacks, an outfit based in the Chippewa Valley area of Wisconsin, the second CD showcases performances

for mainstream audiences of the diverse music repertoire associated with northern Wisconsin's lumber camps. The third CD documents Lomax's 1938 collecting forays in Michigan and thus represents the music of amateur performers from several ethnicities (Finnish, French Canadian, German, Irish, Lithuanian, Ojibwe, Polish, and Swedish) then living or temporarily residing in that state. The set's final two CDs compile material recorded in Wisconsin by Helene Stratman-Thomas during successive collecting trips in the early and mid-1940s. All the recordings were skillfully restored and mastered by Grammy Award-winning sound engineer Michael Graves.

Folksongs of Another America includes 187 performances by more than 200 singers and musicians. That these field recordings are not already known among aficionados of historical American roots music is likely the result of this nation's privileging of Eastern and Southern cultural perspectives for more than two centuries. Certainly, these performances from the Upper Midwest are of artistic and folkloric interest. Newly initiated fans can savor, for example, two representative pieces from Wisconsin: "Dance Tune," a spritely fiddle number performed by Belgian Walloon musician Emile Boulanger, and "War Dance," a ceremonial incantation sung (to the accompaniment of drumming) by Ho-Chunk music leader Winslow White Eagle. Additionally, listeners can hear such fascinating recordings from Michigan as "Russian Gigue," a lively accordion dance instrumental by Lithuanian musician Charles Ketvirtis, and also such recordings from Minnesota as "Alaj Gigi," a band number played at breakneck speed by the Serbian quintet The Balkan Troubadours.

While these CDs and a DVD—the latter presenting digitally restored film footage from Alan Lomax's 1938 Upper Midwest collecting trip alongside audiovisual interpretation of what Lomax encountered there—are the set's essential documents, *Folksongs of Another America* is distinguished by a hardcover book in which Leary provides notations about the recordings as well as insightful commentary illuminating the people, places, and cultural milieus that produced the music traditions associated with the Upper Midwest. For his ex-

haustively researched notes, Leary received a Grammy Award nomination in the Best Album Notes category, and it is easy to see why: Leary renders accessible and familiar the varied music traditions of the region's multiple ethnic groups, presented in prose both luminous and graceful.

Beyond that, the book provides lyric transcriptions for all the featured songs regardless of their original languages; wherever relevant, song lyrics are presented within the book in their original languages with adjacent English translations. Complementing the book's wealth of information are some striking design elements, including high-quality historical photographs and Isabella Leary's charming linoleum prints (meant to resemble classic nineteenth-century broadside illustrations).

This well-conceived and well-crafted set should be incorporated into the collections of libraries within and beyond the Upper Midwest. Clearly a labor of love from a scholar who has devoted a lifetime to studying the overlooked music culture of this American region, *Folksongs of Another America* should not only force broader recognition of the Upper Midwest's music legacy, but also inspire future documentation projects of other neglected music cultures in other American regions.

Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection. 2015. Produced by Jeff Place and Robert Santelli. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, CDs (5), SFW CD 40201.

MARK ALLAN JACKSON
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It is hard to imagine a folk singer more significant to the canon of Americana than Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter. He either wrote or re-fashioned such classics as "Goodnight Irene," "The Bourgeois Blues," "Midnight Special," "Pick a Bale of Cotton," and "Rock Island Line," then offered them and dozens of other songs to the nation beginning in the 1930s through his own recordings and others' publication of this material. This music has reverberated through the decades, being picked up again and again