

MUSICAL TRADITIONS

MUSIC FOR A DISMAL ECONOMY

By Stewart Hendrickson

It's approaching New Year's Eve as I write this column and I am thinking about the year to come. It seems we are on the turning point to something, but I don't know what. Could it be a new beginning with a new administration and a new president in the White House? Will we take a turn towards "peace on earth" and away from "endless war"? Will prosperity return? Will we continue in cycles of bubble and burst, or enter a new economic era of less conspicuous consumption and more pleasure in the simple things? We live in "interesting times."

As I think of our dismal economy, I am reminded of that other downturn called "The Great Depression." For all the hard times and pain endured, it did bring a wealth of songs - some in protest, some speaking of the hard times, and some to cheer us up in hard times. Here are some examples:

Brother, Can You Spare A Dime - lyrics by Yip Harburg, music by Jay Gorney (1931)

*They used to tell me I was building a dream,
and so I followed the mob,
When there was earth to plow,
or guns to bear,
I was always there right on the job.
They used to tell me I was building a dream,
with peace and glory ahead,
Why should I be standing in line,
just waiting for bread?
Once I built a railroad, I made it run,
made it race against time.
Once I built a railroad; now it's done.
Brother, can you spare a dime?
Once I built a tower, up to the sun,
brick, and rivet, and lime;
Once I built a tower, now it's done.
Brother, can you spare a dime?*

No Depression in Heaven - A. P. Carter (1936)

*For fear the hearts of men are failing,
For these are latter days we know.
The Great Depression now is spreading,
God's word declared it would be so.
I'm going where there's no depression,
To the lovely land that's free from care.
I'll leave this world of toil and trouble,
My home's in Heaven, I'm going there.*

I Don't Want Your Millions Mister - Jim Garland (1930s)

*I don't want your millions, Mister,
I don't want your diamond ring.
All I want is the right to live, Mister,
Give me back my job again.*

Do Re Mi - Woody Guthrie (1937)

Lots of folks back East, they say,

*is leavin' home every day,
Beatin' the hot old dusty way
to the California line.
'Cross the desert sands they roll,
gettin' out of that old dust bowl,
They think they're goin' to a sugar bowl,
but here's what they find
Now, the police at the port of entry say,
"You're number fourteen thousand for today."
Oh, if you ain't got the do re mi, folks,
you ain't got the do re mi,
Why, you better go back to beautiful Texas,
Oklahoma, Kansas, Georgia, Tennessee.
California is a garden of Eden,
a paradise to live in or see;
But believe it or not,
you won't find it so hot
If you ain't got the do re mi.*

Here are some new songs for the new economy:

A Pretty Penny - Steve Tilston (2008) (myspace.com/stevetilston)

*There's some men in this city
who are paid a pretty penny
Just for guessing where the money flows.
Certain handshakes, knowing smiles,
in this city mile.
That's the way you know the bonus grows.
We should be so lucky,
they're such plucky fellows,
Only right they pluck the sweetest plums.
If we don't knock such wisdom,
Rock the boat or rock the system,
If we're good, we'll get to pick the crumbs.
And behind their hedge
They don't plant wheat,
They don't cut corn,
They don't pick tea,
They don't dig coal,
They don't forge steel,
They just push numbers all about,
They push too far we bail them out,
Keep their fingers firm on fortune's wheel.*

Wall Street Blues - Reggie Miles (2008) (youtube.com/watch?v=QCdWEHqZJuw)

*Everybody's talkin' about
The economic downturn
Who's getting' bailed out
And who is going to get burned
Wall Street millionaires
Vultures coming home to roost
One more corporate welfare*

*To pad their golden parachutes
Fannie May and Freddie Mac
They're starvin' like AIG
A blank check is all they lack
For their next spending spree
Everybody's talking 'bout
The stock market crashing down
Who's going to get a handout
Who they're going to let drown*

The Way We Lived Then - Harvey Andrews (1992)

*Caviar on the table, Champagne in the glass
We laughed and we jeered
at the poor working class
We drank to their ruin,
we drank to their shame
We pissed on their problems,
said they were to blame
Oh the way we lived then,
the way we lived then,
The way we lived then.*

*Jason wore braces and slicked his hair down
Ben had the number of each deb in town
I was a member of every new club
And I used my gold card to pay every sub
For the way we lived then,
the way we lived then,
The way we lived then.
Oh, the way we lived then,
Selling Deutschmark or Yen,
Never thinking of where did it come from
How long would it last us, or when
Would we all have to pay
for this mad holiday
For the Porsche and the Rolls
That were our only goals
Me and Jason and Ben,
Oh, the way we lived then.*

Finally, as we begin a new year, and maybe a new era, I'd like to end with an excerpt from Alan Lomax (1915-2002) "An Appeal for Cultural Equity" (From the Program of the Festival of American Folklife, edited by Thomas Vennum, Jr., Smithsonian Institution, 1985. First published in *World of Music*, XIV [2] 1972). Here he speaks to the value of tradition and the danger of its extinction.

"Man, the economist, has developed tools and techniques to exploit every environment. Man, the most sociable of animals, has proliferated endless schemes which nurture individuals from birth to old age. Man, the communicator, has improvised and elaborated system upon system of symboling to record, reinforce, and reify his inventions. Indeed, man's greatest achievement is in the sum of the lifestyles he has created to make this planet an agreeable and stimulating human habitat."

“Today, this cultural variety lies under threat of extinction. A grey-out is in progress which, if it continues unchecked, will fill our human skies with smog of the phony and cut the families of men off from a vision of their own cultural constellations. A mismanaged, over-centralized electronic communication system is imposing a few standardized, mass-produced, and cheapened cultures everywhere.”

“The danger inherent in the process is clear. Its folly, its unwanted waste is nowhere more evident than in the field of music. What is happening to the varied musics of mankind is symptomatic of the swift destruction of culture patterns all over the planet.”

“One can already sense the oppressive dullness and psychic distress of those areas where centralized music industries, exploiting the star system and controlling the communication system, put the local musician out of work and silence folk song, tribal ritual, local popular festivities and regional culture.”

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