

Don't Criticize Me Buddy: The Kingston Trio and the Folk Music Revival

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Abstract

At the onset of the 1960s, the folk music revival helped to quench middle-class Americans' appetite for authenticity in the postwar world. Americans longed for a more genuine approach to life that embraced the authentic ways of an idealized culture in which life was composed not of artificial sterilities concocted by the mass media but the vital spirit of personal feeling. The folk music revival satisfied the contradictions of postwar life, but created further conflict within the world of folk music. The Kingston Trio embodied the contradictions of postwar living, making the group controversial to folk scholars and musicians. The group's professional and commercial nature divided the folk music community on the definition of authenticity. Scholars and folk musicians attempted to comprehend the correct place of the Kingston Trio in the folk music spectrum. The struggle to categorize the Kingston Trio reflected the conflict between postwar ideals and the yearning of Americans for authenticity. By merging the contradictions of postwar living, the Kingston Trio offered Americans an outlet for their desire for authenticity. The commercial nature of the group displaced the traditional folk style with a transformed folk music that better suited the needs of postwar America, making the Kingston Trio a crucial figure in American cultural history.

Introduction

To many middle-class Americans living in the late 1950s and early 1960s, authenticity contrasted with the sterility of their increasingly artificial, commercialized environment. In the eyes of these Americans, society had become dominated by the influence of mass media, which imposed hollow standards of conformity and materialism upon Americans. Embracing the attitude of the rebel, some Americans searched for authenticity in the suffocating blandness of their inorganic world. The ideal of authenticity represented a more natural, autonomous opportunity for the manifestation of the suppressed spirit of American culture through a return to the simpler, immaterial desires of America's rural past. Americans retreated inward from the material confinement of conformity toward a new "emphasis on feelings," according to cultural historian Grace Elizabeth Hale, which "made authenticity into an internal rather than an external quality," as "emotionalism replaced materialism." Through the rejection of material conformity, Americans embraced the allure of

authenticity's simple spirit of genuine personal fulfillment through meaningful expression of purer internal desires.¹

In folk music, young, middle-class, urban-dwelling Americans discovered an outlet for their yearnings for authenticity. The folk music revival coincided with the emergence of the heightened awareness of Americans to the contradictions of postwar life. Increases in technology, prosperity, and opportunity were counterweighted by the sterility of conformity and the Cold War threat of nuclear destruction. Hale, in her recently published book, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America*, described how Americans sought a resolution "between the desire for self-determination and autonomy and the desire for a grounded, morally and emotionally meaningful life." For Americans, "folk music filled in the gap" between these conflicting desires. Hale asserted that folk music "reconciled yearnings for self-determination and emotional and social connection." The effect of folk music's revival soothed the desire for authenticity among Americans by blending folk music tradition with familiar commercial techniques. The new brand of folk music undermined the folk music tradition, but more importantly the folk music revival transformed the style of the genre to adapt it to the need for authenticity in postwar America.²

The Kingston Trio helped to lead the transformation of folk music, supplying Americans with another new source of authenticity. The group, composed of young, middle-class musicians Dave Guard, Bob Shane, and Nick Reynolds rose to stardom in the late 1950s with a succession of hits including "Tom Dooley." Combining an overtly commercial style with a subtle embrace of folk music tradition, the Kingston Trio offered Americans the secure possibility for authenticity that they desired. The success of the Kingston Trio simultaneously overshadowed traditional folk music and opened up the folk music tradition to numerous new folk enthusiasts. Although controversial in the folk music community, the Kingston Trio transformed popular music by making a derivative folk style an important genre in American culture. The debate between folk scholars and musicians over the musical authenticity of the Kingston Trio paralleled the dialogue of Americans' struggle over personal authenticity in the postwar world. The desire of Americans near the beginning of the 1960s to search for authenticity manifested itself in the success and significance of the Kingston Trio, who not only revived folk music but reflected the transformation of the genre to accommodate a new American culture.

This paper, while culling much information from original sources in archival collections and secondary sources examining the folk music revival and postwar American culture, expands upon the work of scholars Grace Elizabeth Hale and Richard W. Johnston. My argument advances on Hale's thesis from *A Nation of Outsiders* by extolling the Kingston Trio as a reflection of Hale's ideas on the quest for authenticity in postwar America. Johnston, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee in the 1970s, offered a collection of raw materials on the Kingston Trio. Johnston's bevy of interviews, newspaper and magazine clippings, fan letters, and group documents formed the basis of my research. However, it was not until I considered Johnston's research in the light of Hale's broader argument that I was able to formulate clearly the original thesis of this paper. Extensive examination of the folk music periodical *Sing Out!* provided me with contemporary opinion on the Kingston Trio that I was able to place in the broader context of American culture's postwar transformation. My research culminated in an amalgamation of primary personal opinions implemented within the framework of retrospective analysis from cultural historians Grace Elizabeth Hale, Ronald D. Cohen, Robert Cantwell, and Benjamin Filene, in which the Kingston Trio serves as an embodiment of cultural changes in postwar America.

The Folk Music Revival

American folk music is a tradition stretching from colonial times to the present, ranging geographically and culturally from the environments of the Appalachian Mountains to the Western plains. Folk music developed as a way for rural workers to cope with hardships, either through lamentation or jovial entertainment. Similar styles of music, coming to be known as “folk music,” formed in different regions of the country, each maintaining unique characteristics that branded the music to its people. These early traditions truly were the music of the folk, or people; music that the people played for relaxation and recreation. Music became an integral part of the rural cultures, but eventually the style began to be integrated into more commercial venues.³

In the 1930s and 1940s, folk music, an elastic term encompassing styles of music influenced by blues, jazz, ragtime, country, and other forms, was initially introduced into the competitive marketplace. Folk music in this time period was produced by rural musicians who played songs that often advocated the embrace of leftist politics, while hopefully, caustically, or sorrowfully displaying the emotions of the people. Yet by the early 1950s, folk music increasingly trended toward commercialism and mainstream popularity. Bands such as the Weavers, led by Pete Seeger, scored hits with songs such as folk legend Lead Belly’s “Goodnight Irene.” The Weavers, along with folklorist Alan Lomax, broadened the scope of folk music by introducing it to a wider audience.

The new brand of folk music remained closely linked to the politically active ancestors of the early 1950s. The Weavers and other groups united the old tradition of political activism with a new tendency toward popularity on the national charts. The mixture of political radicalism and the increased attention of the public signaled somewhat severe trials for folk music in the anti-communistic America of the 1950s. The communist hunt of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in the mid-1950s had a lasting effect on the political intentions of folk music. Artists such as Burl Ives and Josh White, both veterans of the folk music scene, began to shift their tastes toward commercialism because of the communist reputation that infected folk music. The Weavers and Pete Seeger were blacklisted and turned away from television shows and concerts. By the mid-1950s, the genre had increased in popularity but was experiencing an identity crisis, particularly in regards to its political stance.

As folk music’s popularity became threatened by anti-communist forces, a movement arose that would complete folk music’s ascension into popular consciousness. According to folk scholar Ronald D. Cohen, even as a “growing chasm” opened between “radical politics and market forces,” folk music began to spread. The Weavers and other such groups had opened up a vein in the commercial market for folk music to inject with increased popularity. The Kingston Trio fulfilled that role almost flawlessly in 1957 and 1958, jumping into a scene full of young, popular folk artists with a music that combined folk tradition with the familiarity of commercialism for an America looking for such a mixture of rebellion and conformity.⁴

The Desire for Authenticity

The desire of Americans for such a combination arose from the changes occurring in postwar America. Hale noted that “broad historical changes long underway” such as “migration to cities and suburbs, the rise of white-collar corporate employment, the growth of government and corporate bureaucracies, and the changing nature of family life, continued to erode middle-class whites’ sense of control over their lives and their feelings of rootedness in place and community.” These instabilities along with “the emergence of the cold war and the possibility of nuclear annihilation” threatened the prosperity and tranquility of postwar America. By the late 1950s, America had become a land of juxtapositions: the comfort and security of the booming postwar economy

against the threatening instability of the Cold War. These opposing mentalities met to produce the desire for authenticity amidst the stifling conformity of society and possibility of potential destruction.⁵

Advances in technology and the expansion of mass culture also pushed the drive for authenticity. In the postwar world, Hale observed, the white middle class “had easier and more varied access to people who seemed marginal, exotic, or primitive than they had possessed before this period,” opening the possibility for association with these peoples, such as rural farmers, itinerant workers, and vagrants. A new awareness of, as Hale denoted them, “outsiders” awakened in Americans the desire for authenticity and simplicity amidst the increasingly complex modern world. The allure of the untainted outsider infused Americans with a spirit of rebellion that found an outlet in college students’ embrace of a burgeoning culture built upon the yearning for genuine experience in an artificial society.⁶

At the center of postwar contradiction, college students led the charge toward a more simplistic, authentic life. Robert Cantwell described the swelling desire of college students to make sense of an increasingly irrational world: “Deeply ambivalent about their unstable social situation . . . young collegians found in folk music what Pete Seeger had found in it—an arena for enacting social privilege in a capitalist, democratic, and egalitarian society where privilege is everywhere perceived and nowhere openly acknowledged as a factor in personal destiny.” Books such as J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* spurred young Americans to search for something new, creative, and refreshing, while at the same time stable and rooted in the more comforting past. Amidst an evolving and confusing world, Americans, particularly college students, found the release they needed in folk music.⁷

Unlike the rock and roll of Elvis Presley and African American artists such as Chuck Berry, folk music appealed to Americans searching for authenticity because it demonstrated maturity, awareness, and involvement. College students, compared to their younger siblings, began to turn to folk music’s social sensibility in contrast to the glitzy pop of Tin Pan Alley and the raw, overly brash and rebellious sound and image of rock and roll. Ronald D. Cohen described the attraction of college students to folk music:

While rock and roll appealed mostly to adolescents, their parents and older siblings became increasingly attracted to folk music. Generally not danceable, folk music represented a political and/or aesthetic sensibility, a search for understanding amid the commercial clatter of electric guitars, raucous lyrics and gyrating performers; it linked past to present and commented on current social, cultural and political matters.⁸

Folk music proved to be both rebellious and safe for Americans in a world that demanded both risk and security. According to Hale, folk music provided “white middle-class teenagers a seemingly pure and noncommercial version of the last decade’s teenage rock rebellion.” Not only was folk music more simplistic than rock and roll, but for young Americans, “it gave them a music they could grow up into but that still signaled their opposition to their parents’ culture.” By the late 1950s, folk music began to satisfy the needs and desires of Americans struggling to connect the opposing desires of the postwar world.⁹

The Kingston Trio, although packaged as a commercial commodity meant for consumption by the public, united the conflicting needs of America’s youth by portraying a commercial counterfeit of more genuine folk music. Cohen wrote:

“The Kingston Trio emerged as moral gatekeepers at an optimal time. Rock and roll’s upsurge during the mid-1950s had shaken adult society’s aesthetic and moral foundations, leading to escalating recriminations, censorship, and soul searching.” The Kingston Trio satisfied the need for authenticity of American society with a new musical style that connected the stable past with the opportunistic present. The folk-tinged music of the Kingston Trio presented the American public with a new sound, one that was both entertaining and reproducible, because of its “aural, amateur, and traditional” nature.¹⁰

Not only did the precocious sound of the Kingston Trio’s music lure fans, but their modest image secured their popularity as well. Cohen observed that, “Publicity centered as much on the trio’s physical image and domestic lifestyle as on their folksy, upbeat musical appeal.” Some of the descriptions of the Kingston Trio from the time period included: “Clean-cut, boy-next-door young men, starry-eyed and singing the old-time melodies”; “Safe and reassuring”; and “Normal, decent, intelligent, educated, clean-cut, wholesome, happily married Americans.” The group’s comforting image offered Americans both reassurance and intrigue. One reason for the Kingston Trio’s success was the group’s blatant contrast to rebellious rock and roll musicians, such as Elvis Presley. According to Cantwell, in concert, the “Trio’s music was delivered with an articulation and phrasing perceptibly polite and bookish, in musical settings wholesomely pianistic.” The group’s tempered enthusiasm and conservative style, both in music and fashion, proved to be “a refreshing alternative to the scruffy, rebellious, lewd rock and roll singers.” The Kingston Trio addressed the dualities of the postwar world by creating an image and sound that comforted Americans, offering, according to Cohen, the “perfect combination of charm, wealth, security, and modesty” for an America searching for both individual freedom and the connection of community.¹¹

The popularity of the Kingston Trio manifested itself in the mainstream popular music market. Irwin Silber, editor of *Sing Out!*, a folk music fanzine, addressed the potential popularity of folk, declaring, “There’s a lot of money in it for someone—and there’s a lot of good music in it for all of us.” The Kingston Trio took full advantage of the commercial boom of the folk music revival. Playing an extensive schedule on college campuses and arenas throughout the nation, the Trio earned between \$8,000 and \$12,000 for each concert, as well as an additional \$300,000 per year from their records. Albums such as “The Kingston Trio At Large,” which sold 814,000 copies in 1959, made the Trio one of the nation’s most popular musical acts. Radio stations across the country became enamored with the Kingston Trio, particularly after the release of “Tom Dooley” in the summer of 1958. From June 1958, the date the group’s first LP went on sale, to the end of 1962, the Kingston Trio grossed in excess of \$25 million, with annual earnings exceeding \$1.2 million. The Kingston Trio, spearheading a burgeoning commercial folk revival, became so successful and popular that in July 1960, *Time* magazine declared: “The U.S. is smack in the middle of a folk-music boom.”¹²

The Folk Music Debate

The Kingston Trio became perhaps the most popular and successful band in the United States by the beginning of the 1960s. However, the folk music revival that the group ushered into mainstream consciousness had a more complex connotation for the traditional folk music establishment. The music of the Kingston Trio differed from the more authentic folk tradition of the 1930s and 1940s, represented by Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly. Although the Kingston Trio often reworked standard tunes to their own tastes, the group’s urban, commercial image and sound deeply contrasted with the raw, rural sound and image of early folk musicians. The differences between the Kingston

Trio and the folk music tradition left the group in the middle of an intensive debate led by folk scholars and musicians over authenticity in folk music.

The stark difference between the old and the new styles of folk music became a divisive issue within the folk music establishment. Many folk music purists found the brand of music played by the Kingston Trio detrimental and subversive to folk music's best interests. There were, however, folk musicians and scholars who did support the popularity folk music gained because of the Kingston Trio, despite the group's controversial rendering of folk standards. As the commercial folk music revival brewed, *Sing Out!* editor Irwin Silber urged his readers to be accepting of the new sound of folk music. "We must be tolerant of every kind of music," Silber advised, "We must broaden our musical horizons." Silber's declarations outline the framework of the rest of this paper, which will examine how each side of the folk music revival—the "old," rural, authentic purists and the "new," urban, commercial professionals—attempted to cope with the consequences of the folk music revival, focusing on each side's ability to be "tolerant" enough to "broaden their musical horizons."¹³

In order to comprehend the rhetoric being used to debate the connotation of "folk music," a definition, according to the contemporary terms of the debate, must be analyzed. Two definitions describe the essential nature of folk music. The first is from *Sing Out!* editor Irwin Silber, who, in his periodical's first issue, stated that folk music "has to do with the hopes and fears and lives of common people." The second definition is from musician Roy Butterfield, who said, "I really don't know what folk music is, unless it is any kind of music that catches the fun and sadness and ultimate hopes of a whole lot of people, in a form that is not too contrived or sophisticated or smooth." The music of the Kingston Trio fits both of these definitions. In a postwar America that sought a new form of authenticity, the Kingston Trio expressed the feelings of the people in simple songs. When the "old definitions of authenticity did not work . . . then one solution was to change the meaning of 'authenticity.'" The Kingston Trio did this by evolving folk music to fit the new needs of Americans. The group helped to change folk music externally by making it more commercial and professional. Yet the group and their music remained authentic because it expressed the feelings of the people in postwar America. However, the changes inspired by the Kingston Trio forced the group into the middle of a debate over the authenticity of their folk music.¹⁴

The debate over the definition of folk music and the authenticity of groups such as the Kingston Trio split the folk music establishment into several rhetorical stances. Ronald D. Cohen described the folk revival as proceeding on "two parallel, slightly divided tracks," one of which included: "local performers, promoters, scholars, and fans," who "struggled over authenticity, style, and performance"; and another group, exemplified by the Kingston Trio, who had distorted folk music with "the forces of commerce and publicity." Some commentators, such as Charles Seeger, viewed both sides in an optimistic light, arguing that the purist "looked primarily to the past of the song" while the new artists "looked toward the future of the singer." Reconciliation between the two sides proved difficult, with coexistence becoming the only solution appealing to a majority of purists and professionals. Folk music fan MacClain J. Murdock of Dry Tavern, Pennsylvania, in a letter to the editors of *Sing Out!*, best described the tenuous marriage of folk music old and new in the early 1960s, writing: "As long as people have hearts we will have Woody Guthrie, and as long as people have money to spend we will have Kingston Trios."¹⁵

The two conflicting attitudes emerging with the advent of the commercial folk revival were the traditional purists and the commercial-minded professionals. Richard

Dyer-Bennet, although favoring the purist tradition, gave an adequate distinction of the two sides in his 1962 article “Some Thoughts on the Folk Song Revival”:

The true folk singer was, and is, of rural origin and experience; the new breed comes from the cities. The true folk singer learns his songs from hearing them sung by the older generation; the new urban singer learns his from books and from recordings. The true folksinger has never been a professional musician; he works at some other trade and sings simply as a part of his way of life, while many present day singers of folk songs hope to become professionals. The true folk singer knows only the songs of his home locality; the young urban minstrel knows songs from all over the country, and even from other lands.¹⁶

Although prejudiced against the new style of folk music presented by the Kingston Trio, Dyer-Bennet’s description gives an accurate portrayal of how many within the folk scene viewed the disparities between the new and old folk styles.

The purists were represented by the tradition of rural, itinerant musicians such as Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, and the African American blues singers of the Mississippi Delta. By the early 1960s, the purist folk scene had expanded to include serious enthusiasts and collectors on college campuses and in coffeehouses across the nation, particularly in New York City’s Greenwich Village. Artists such as Dave Van Ronk and, most notably, Bob Dylan, emerged as new leaders of the folk tradition, guided by forefather luminary Pete Seeger. Particularly in Dylan, who broke out in 1961 playing at Gerde’s Folk City in Greenwich Village, Seeger saw a young musician who respectfully honored tradition and sought to preserve and advance the true cause of folk music. In 1961, Seeger, with Dylan in mind, wrote:

I am no defender of tradition per se, because I think that folk traditions will change as the folks who inhabit this earth change. Nevertheless I strongly feel that the more conscientiously young musicians strive to master the finest folk traditions of the past, the better music they will make in the future. It took thousands of years to develop these traditions; let us not lightly think we can improve upon them without considerable artistry. We are but links in a long human chain—and the important thing is not to be a long link but a strong link. May we strive through our music to bring deeper understanding between all human beings, so that there may be many more links to come.¹⁷

To Seeger, Dylan appeared to be the “strong link” who would “bring deeper understanding between all human beings” with his politically conscious, rambling, talking narratives in the fashion of Woody Guthrie, Dylan’s hero.

As Dylan progressed the purist tradition, the Kingston Trio continued to expand folk music’s reach into popular and professional music. The distinction between professional folk entertainers and the amateur itinerants manifested itself in the juxtaposition of city and country, as well as differing stances on commercialism. Whereas the authentic folk musicians were characterized by their vagrancy, playing in backwoods juke joints, the new professionals sought to play in big-market cities to high-paying, sold-out crowds. For new artists such as the Kingston Trio, folk music was not a way of life, but a way to make a living. New folk musicians emphasized their own unique capabilities and commercial potential, while still paying homage, at least in minor ways, to their musical predecessors. Folk music was no longer a way of life, but a representation of life in postwar America. A review of a show by the Trio in 1960 proclaimed that, “Uniquely they satisfy all tastes by being, first of all, entertainers and,

at the same time, folk singers in the traditional style.” Even Kingston Trio member Nick Reynolds acknowledged the new style that the group offered amidst criticism from purists, declaring: “We never took ourselves very seriously, and we were put down a lot because we didn’t put enough feeling into the words, but often the tune was pleasing.” With the Kingston Trio, professionalism and commercialism had triumphed over the authentic lifestyle of the true folk musicians, but the music still carried emotion and entertainment.¹⁸

Making and playing folk music was a business, not a way of life for the Kingston Trio and other similar groups and artists. Dave Guard of the Kingston Trio suggested that he viewed the professional folksinger as a new type of artist, writing: “I visualize the professional folk-singer as sort of a clearinghouse, most effective when bringing fresh ideas to the fore, least effective when parroting the past or singing material he can’t believe in.” The new, professional folksinger had become the developer of a new folk tradition, at the expense of the previously authentic folk tradition. Pete Seeger, the indefatigable champion of the folk purists, tried to make sense of the type of folksinger represented by the Kingston Trio, writing, “I would call him a phony, except that I think he is just another modern paradox.” Hale elaborates on this paradox, stating, “The paradox, of course, was not only that the folk music revival revived earlier commercial music as folk music, but that the revival itself was commercialized.” The professional folksinger had altered the course of the folk music tradition, breaking the chain of authentic folk music with the long link of commercialism.¹⁹

The marriage of folk music with commercial interest had a two-fold effect on traditional folk music. In one aspect, folk music’s increasing popularity, even if represented by the new folk style of the Kingston Trio, led to a resurgence of interest in traditional folk material. Suddenly, forgotten artists were being rediscovered after nearly 30 years away from the music scene. Folk music revivalists discovered the music of Delta blues musicians such as Skip James, Son House, and Mississippi John Hurt, all of whom had recorded in the 1930s, leading to legends about the whereabouts of these mysterious figures. Eventually folk enthusiasts tracked down all three, each becoming extremely popular playing at folk music concerts across the nation after years of working as farmers in the rural South. The music of other artists, who had not received their due during their lifetime, was also rediscovered, as musicians such as Robert Johnson, Big Bill Broonzy, Lead Belly, and the incapacitated Woody Guthrie became popular with folk fans.

The second effect of the increasingly commercial orientation of folk music had a more adverse consequence on the traditional folk establishment. Although folk music had risen in popularity, Ron Radosh, writing in *Sing Out!*, described the folk music revival as “devoid to a large degree of any of the content or understanding of the folk tradition which characterizes the art form.” Folk music may have become “an excellent way for a popular artist to find the kind of material that not only will help build a more durable career, but will also aid in finding himself as a singer and a human being,” but many disagreed with the merging of folk music and commercialism. In 1959, *The Cash Box* magazine predicted that “commercializing this music will only serve to kill it quickly.” Gershon Legman, writing in *Sing Out!*, took an even harsher stance against commercialist folk groups, proclaiming, “They are all out for the money, plus a goodly bit of cheap public attention and acclaim.” However, despite the Kingston Trio’s unashamedly commercial nature, their success did not destroy the folk music tradition, but rather created a new tradition.²⁰

Many took offense to the success of the Kingston Trio however, arguing that the group overshadowed the true style of folk music with its more pop-inflected sound. “It is about time that fans of folk song,” Ron Radosh wrote in *Sing Out!* in the spring

of 1959, “and those who hope to spread it, sing it, or perform it in the folk tradition stop patronizing prostitutes of the art who gain their status as folk artists because they use guitars and banjos.” When the Kingston Trio sang, “Hang down your head, Tom Dooley, Hang down your head and cry, Hang down your head Tom Dooley, Poor boy, you’re bound to die,” many could not connect the sentiment of the song with the relatively glamorous image and sound of the group and its pristine, upbeat songs. Journalist T.E. Rafferty in *Knave* magazine, declared that the type of music popularized by the Kingston Trio was “fake, not folk.” The music the Kingston Trio played was viewed by Andy Gollan of the *Indianapolis Star* not as true folk music, but as “folk schmaltz sugared up for general consumption,” which made “fans blissfully think of folk music as something akin to a fraternity pep rally.” Many scholars, journalists, and folk musicians found the Kingston Trio detrimental to the folk music tradition, but their observations proved to be short-sighted.²¹

Fans of traditional folk music were angered by the false success of the Kingston Trio as well. In a response to Legman’s article “Folksongs, Fakelore, Folkniks, and Cash,” which disparaged the exploits of groups such as the Kingston Trio, fan Barbara Pourin wrote: “I for one, sympathize wholeheartedly with his [Legman’s] contempt for fakery and destructive opportunism, as well as with his sense of outrage at the fact that the fakers should continually profit from their assaults upon genuine and unenlightened interest in folk music.”²² The backlash against the Kingston Trio’s superficial, “inauthentic” folk music aided the bitter decline of the folk music tradition, leaving the band with a strange legacy amongst the folk music establishment. Yet those who criticized the group failed to see the transformative effect of the Kingston Trio, particularly within the frame of postwar America. The folk music of the Kingston Trio had evolved beyond that of the folk tradition into a new form, which had grown along with the changing needs and longings of the people. In this sense, the music of the Kingston Trio remained folk music despite its differences from folk music of the past.

Indeed, there was a good number of folk music fans who recognized and supported the transformative, if not controversial, effect the Kingston Trio had on folk music. Journalist Nat Hentoff, writing in *Playboy* magazine in 1963, analyzed the commercial folk music revival’s effect on the authentic tradition of folk artistry. Rather than disparage the new brand of folk music, Hentoff was optimistic about groups such as the Kingston Trio. He wrote:

Whether the ancient gold will indeed be transmuted into something nobler is seriously open to question, but the weight of current evidence is shifting to the side of those performers and listeners who are convinced that even though the folk—in the traditional sense—are dying, folk music can continue to live boisterously and change more unpredictably than ever before.²³

The Kingston Trio was ushering in a new era for folk music, continuing its relationship to the people and the time period, but also making it more commercial and professional. As Hentoff recognized, the aesthetic of folk music was evolving, while intrinsically it remained the same: endeavoring to provide people with authenticity in their lives.

Some folk music fans noticed the positive attributes of the Kingston Trio’s revitalization of folk music more easily than many scholars and musicians. Folk music supporter Bernard Kamoroff wrote to *Sing Out!* in response to an article by folk musician and scholar Richard Dyer-Bennet, which defamed the prowess of the Kingston Trio and other commercial folk groups. Kamoroff, in an understanding and accepting tone, opined:

Mr. Dyer-Bennet . . . doesn't want the new urban following, but wishes folk music to remain in the hands only of the genuine, years-of-learning type of singer. A young urban teenager should be encouraged, not discouraged. These people may not have learned these songs from their fathers and grandfathers; but they, in learning and singing these songs, are learning about an America they never knew, about people they could never meet—they are learning things schools have been unsuccessfully trying to drum into their heads for years through text-books and teachers. . . . This is something to be encouraged in everyone, teenager and urbanite as well as farmer and world-touring collector. Maybe the true folk singer is dying out, but his songs aren't. These songs, even when conveyed by such taboo singers as the Kingston Trio, are lessons in a great American history that can be beneficial to everyone.²⁴

Kamoroff's defense of the positive consequences of the Kingston Trio's takeover of folk music displays a pragmatic approach to an ambiguous subject. Determining the merits of various types of folk musicians proved difficult in the early 1960s, but an accepting attitude, displayed by fans such as Kamoroff, served to benefit the development of folk music as a whole, no matter the definition.

Other folk enthusiasts realized the importance of the Kingston Trio for folk music in general during the early 1960s. In October 1959, Elektra Records founder Jac Holzman declared to folk luminary Izzy Young that "the Kingston Trio has put us on the map." The Kingston Trio made folk music popular while expanding its scope. Although in the eyes of some folk purists the commercialism of the Kingston Trio proved degrading to the folk tradition, the attention the group brought to folk music revitalized the floundering purist folk tradition. Doc Watson, a rural banjo player from North Carolina, supported the Kingston Trio, claiming that the group "pointed our noses in the right direction, even the traditional performers. They got us interested in trying to put the good stuff out there—the Kingston Trio. They got me interested in it!" The Kingston Trio, although not fulfilling the persona of the traditional folk artist, still "wet the whistle" of purist fans for the traditional folk music. Many fans, inspired by a "heel stomping ditty rendered by the Kingston Trio," sought out more authentic sources of folk music that were increasingly available on major recording labels because of the success of the Kingston Trio's brand of folk music. Stephen Fiott, in a 1962 article defending the exploits of commercial folk singers, declared that by reaching "college students, high school kids and the elderly citizens," the Kingston Trio had perhaps given new meaning to folk music. "And after all," Fiott wrote, "folk means people. People make traditions—maybe the Trio has started a new tradition."²⁵

The Kingston Trio did develop a new folk tradition. The style of folk music that the group played and their urban lifestyle were distant from the rural authenticity of the folk music tradition. Although the Kingston Trio helped to destroy the purist folk tradition, the group also ushered in a new era for folk music, which was capitalized on by groups such as Peter, Paul and Mary, and Bob Dylan. Folk purist Pete Seeger understood the importance of the Kingston Trio. "I look upon us all as links in a chain," Seeger remembered, "I had my particular role and the Kingston Trio had its particular role." Folk singer Gene Cotton suggested that the Kingston Trio "was a bridge away from both the greaser image of rock and roll as well as the ignorant image of a hillbilly, all uncouth and degenerate." The Kingston Trio, as biographers Benjamin Blake, Jack Rubeck, and Alan Shaw declared, became "the happy catalyst that awakened America at a time of musical boredom, and that actually got thousands of young people involved in making music, as well as listening to it." Despite the criticism of other musicians

and scholars, the Kingston Trio transformed folk music by adapting its authenticity to the needs of postwar America.²⁶

Conclusion

In 1963, the Kingston Trio declared, “Nothing can kill folk music; it’s too basic in the American consciousness.” The group’s declaration proved right as their new style of folk music served to revitalize, and not kill, folk music. By the mid-1960s, the Kingston Trio had popularized folk music and made the initial commercial success of Bob Dylan possible. The group responded to the needs and desires of postwar America by offering the chance for both individual rebellion and reconnection with the communal past. Through their success and innovation of folk music, the Kingston Trio reflected the broader changes of American postwar culture, allowing the group to be viewed as a conduit of cultural change. The folk music of the Kingston Trio remained authentic because of its unwavering connection to the needs, desires, and lives of the folk.²⁷

Charles Seeger, writing in *Sing Out!* in 1959, recognized the possibilities of the new folk music being developed by the Kingston Trio. Seeger, addressing the potential death of traditional folk music, prophetically wrote:

Rather, however, than say “the folk is dead” and attempt to keep folksong alive as something quaint, antique, and precious, let us say “the folk is changing—and its songs with it,” and then help what it is changing into . . . not to be ashamed of its ancestors, but to select the makings of a new, more universal idiom for the more stabilized society that we may hope is coming into being from the best materials available, whether old or new. Better than to lament the loss of ancient gold will be to try to understand its permutation into another metal which, though it might be baser, may still surprise us in the end by being nobler.²⁸

The music of the Kingston Trio was “baser” to the traditional folk music establishment, but the group also proved “nobler” by making folk music a popular and enduring art form in American culture and commerce. The possibilities of a new folk music, although controversial, overshadowed the contradictions between folk tradition and the Kingston Trio. The authentic folk tradition was dead, but a new tradition revived folk music in America. Dave Guard, leader of the Kingston Trio, acknowledged these facts while rebuking his critics in a 1961 article in *Sing Out!* evaluating the condition of folk music. Although the Kingston Trio helped to precipitate the death of traditional folk music, Guard’s proclamation affirms the Trio’s statement that folk music remains the enduring art form of the common American, consistently expressing the authentic needs and desires of the people: “Happily, folk songs are made of such hardly individualistic stuff that they can withstand all the assaults of the ultra-commercial and the pseudo-funky as well. They only suffer when they lie dormant and unheard. Don’t criticize me, Buddy. Learn to play better than I do.”²⁹

Notes

1. Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 98.
2. *Ibid.*, 3, 86, 6.
3. See Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good, The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Robert D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival & American Society, 1940–1970* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); and Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

4. Cohen, 66.
5. Hale, 5.
6. Ibid.
7. Cantwell, 306–07.
8. Cohen, 96.
9. Hale, 87.
10. Cohen, 134; Cantwell, 316.
11. Cohen, 132; Victory Van Dyck, Letter to Capitol Records, June 2, 1959, The Kingston Trio Records, Box 1, Folder 3, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Manuscript Collection; Ibid; Lloyd Shearer, “Hottest Act in Show Business: The Kingston Trio,” *Parade Magazine*, December 4, 1960, 24, The Kingston Trio Records, Box 2, Folder 3, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Manuscript Collection; Cantwell, 317; Cohen, 133.
12. Cohen, 103, 200; Discography 1958–1969, The Kingston Trio Records, Box 1, Folder 8, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Manuscript Collection; Untitled Kingston Trio Memo, n.d., The Kingston Trio Records, Box 2, Folder 5, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Manuscript Collection; “Folk Frenzy,” *Time*, July 11, 1960, 81, The Kingston Trio Records, Box 5, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Manuscript Collection.
13. Irwin Silber, *Sing Out!* 7, no. 3 (Fall 1957): 35.
14. Silber, *Sing Out!* 1, no. 1 (May 1950): 2; Cohen, 59; Hale, 97.
15. Cohen, 144; Charles Seeger, “Folk Music in the Schools of a Highly Industrialized Society,” *Sing Out!* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1958): 28; MacClain J. Murdock, Letter to the Editor, *Sing Out!* 13, no. 4 (October–November 1963): 75.
16. Richard Dyer-Bennet, “Some Thoughts on the Folk Song Revival,” *Sing Out!* 12, no. 2 (April–May 1962): 17.
17. Pete Seeger, “Folk Music Today: A Symposium,” *Sing Out!* 11, no. 1 (February–March 1961): 30.
18. “Nitery Review: Coconut Grove Show Review,” *Daily Variety*, June 6, 1960, The Kingston Trio Records, Box 2, Folder 3, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Manuscript Collection; Nick Reynolds, Interview, September 27, 1973, The Kingston Trio Records, Box 1, Folder 18, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Manuscript Collection.
19. Dave Guard, “Folk Music Today: A Symposium,” *Sing Out!* 11, no. 1 (February–March 1961): 30; Filene, 203; Hale, 105.
20. Ron Radosh, “Commercialism and the Folk Song Revival,” *Sing Out!* 8, no. 4 (Spring 1959): 27; Harry Belafonte, “My Repertory Must Have Roots,” *Sing Out!* 8, no. 4 (Spring 1959): 30; Bill Gersh, “Let’s Not Kill Folk Music,” *The Cash Box* 10, no. 20, The Kingston Trio Records, Box 2, Folder 2, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Manuscript Collection; Gershon Legman, “Folksongs, Fakelore, Folkniks, and Cash,” *Sing Out!* 10, no. 4 (October–November 1960): 35.
21. Radosh, “Commercialism and the Folk Song Revival,” *Sing Out!* 8, no. 4 (Spring 1959): 29; Cohen, 145; Peter Wyborn, Letter to the Editor, *Sing Out!* 12, no. 4 (October–November 1962): 2; Andy Gollan, “Trio Fakes Folk but Cash Is Real,” *Indianapolis Star*, n.d. The Kingston Trio Records, Box 2, Folder 7, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Manuscript Collection.
22. Barbara Pourin, Letter to the Editor, *Sing Out!* 10, no. 4 (December 1960–January 1961): 53.
23. Cohen, 203.
24. Bernard Kamoroff, Letter to the Editor, *Sing Out!* 12, no. 4 (October–November 1962): 2.
25. Cohen, 42, 133; Pat Urbanus, Letter to the Editor, *Sing Out!* 13, no. 2 (April–May 1963): 69; “Folk Singing: Sibyl and Guitar,” *Time*, November 13, 1962, The Kingston Trio Records, Box 1, Folder 1, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Manuscript Collection; Arnold Finklin, Letter to the Editor, *Sing Out!* 13, no. 3 (June–July 1963): 71–73; George Avakian, “Folk Music Today: A Symposium,” *Sing Out!* 11, no. 1 (February–March 1961): 20; Stephen Fiott, “In Defense of Commercial Folksingers,” *Sing Out!* 12, no. 5, (December 1962–January 1963): 43–44.
26. Pete Seeger, Interview, February 13, 1976, The Kingston Trio Records, Box 1, Folder 19, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Manuscript Collection; Gene Cotton, Interview, June 29, 1976, The Kingston Trio Records, Box 1, Folder 13, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Manuscript Collection; Benjamin Blake, Jack Rubeck, and Allan Shaw, *The Kingston Trio on Record* (Naperville, IL: Kingston Korner, 1986): 14.

27. Bob Thomas, "Basic to Americans: Folk Music Here to Stay," *San Jose News*, September 24, 1963, The Kingston Trio Records, Box 2, Folder 6, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Manuscript Collection; Blake, Rubeck, and Shaw, 22; John Stewart, Interview, April 4, 1975, The Kingston Trio Records, Box 1, Folder 27, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Manuscript Collection.
28. Charles Seeger, "Folk Music in the Schools of a Highly Industrialized Society," *Sing Out!* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1958): 29.
29. Dave Guard, "Folk Music Today: A Symposium," *Sing Out!* 11, no. 1 (February–March 1961): 30.

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