4. Folk, Folk Rock, Singer-Songwriters
Lecture Outline

• Traditional folk definition and folk song features
• Three different ideas of “folk”
• Professionalization of folk in the 1950s and 1960s
• Singer-songwriters
• Some newer folk artists and sounds
Traditional Folk

• Oral/Aural transmission
• Anonymous composition (and communal composition)
• Heavy ideological side to the term
  – Authenticity claims, ideas that change with time

• Some Folk Song Types:
  – Ballads
    • Narratives (love, war, heroes, disasters, etc.)
  – Work Songs
    • Sailors, fishing, mining, lumber, sewing, etc.
  – Other
    • Lullabies, children’s songs, drinking songs etc.
Traditional Folk Song Features

• Often unaccompanied (a cappella)
• Simple melodies (and harmonies, if present)
• Usually solo singer or solo instrument
  – Simple accompaniment
  – Fiddle, guitar, accordion, whistle, spoons, etc.
• Strophic form (AAAAA, etc.) or verse/chorus
• Modal (not major or minor, but Dorian, Lydian modes, etc.)
• Dancing often accompanies folk music
Three different ideas of “folk” music

1. 19th Century
   - Romantic nationalism
   - European classical composers use folk melodies for new compositions
   - Start of song collecting
     - Turns it into a pop music
     - *Shapes folk culture* in terms of what is and isn’t collected
     - Turns it into a written music (as opposed to purely oral/aural)

2. 1930s and 1940s

3. Folk Revival Period (1958-1965)
Folk in the 1930 and 1940s: Three Trends

• Folk music starts to be used as a political tool
  – Beginning of connections with folk and protest music
  – Folk singers often advocated for social change
  – Usually left wing positions, socialism, helping the poor or marginalized

• Creation of new “folk” songs
  – These were often written to sound old-timey, but were also often about current events

• Some of these new songwriters became celebrities
  – One of the best examples of these three trends (left wing politics, new songs, and celebrity), was Woody Guthrie...
Woodie Guthrie

Ex: Woody Guthrie “Do Re Mi” (1940)

• Similar to 19th C. folk, tells a story
  – Dustbowl migration of the 1930s

• There were many changes to “folk authenticity” in the 1930s:
  – Folk became more urban and intellectual in its associations
  – More political and protest-oriented
  – No longer as anonymous
  – No longer as firmly centered on old songs
Folk Revival Period (1958-1965)

• Popular with college-aged young adults
• Seen as a more “real” and “authentic” alternative to mainstream pop
  – Meaningful lyrics often touching on social issues
  – Musical simplicity and non-theatrical performances
  – Good looks not important (different emphasis on image)
• Huge increase in number of acoustic guitars sold in US in the early 60s
  – Passable voice, a few easy chords: anyone can do this
    • Reinforces idea that folk music was for and by the people
      – As opposed to mainstream pop
Professional Folk Music

• In the late 1950s, folk becomes a major commercial genre, and folk/pop hybrids became very popular (i.e. pop folk)

• Similarities with Brill Building pop:
  o Carefully crafted to appeal to a particular part of youth market
  o Pop seen as superficial, folk as serious; same business marketing for both
  o Both polite and tame in comparison with first wave rock and roll
The Kingston Trio

• One of the biggest hits of this era:

• **Ex: The Kingston Trio**
  – “Tom Dooley” (1958)

• Start of folk revival in mainstream pop market

• Q: How does this song adapt folk for a commercial market?

• What are the pop and folk elements?
Peter, Paul and Mary

- Most successful pop folk group of the 60s
- Manager Albert Grossman
- Despite a capitalist start, they were well received by folk fans
- Played both sides: pop sensibility and “authentic” performance style

Ex: Peter, Paul and Mary – “Blowin’ in the Wind” (1963)
Compare with the original version:
Ex: Bob Dylan – “Blowin’ in the Wind” (1963)
Split in Folk Market

• The folk scene - and the idea of “folk” music - becomes more complicated

• The newer ideas of folk do not erase the older ones
  – Instead they co-exist and influence one another

• Older-style: Joan Baez; Bob Dylan; Gordon Lightfoot

• Newer pop-style: Kingston Trio; Rooftop Singers; Peter, Paul and Mary
Bob Dylan

• From Minnesota to Greenwich Village, NYC, 1961
• Quickly became a leader in the scene
  – Although his recording career was slow to take off
• Manager Albert Grossman
  – Innovative management style
• Many of Dylan’s songs were hits for other artists
  – It was Grossman who had Peter, Paul and Mary record “Blowin’ in the Wind”
    • An example of his leverage style of management
Bob Dylan (cont.)

• “Protest singer”
• “Voice of a Generation”

Ex: Bob Dylan
  – “Masters of War” (1963)

• By 1964/65, less political lyrics, more rock image and musical style
Dylan Goes Electric

• Seen by some as a rejection of the traditional folk scene
• Not a sudden event, but spread out over a few stages
• March 1965 he released an album which had an entire side of electric material (*Bringing It All Back Home*)
• July 1965: The most famous incident, when he performed with an electric band at the Newport Folk Festival
• Hostile reactions during the 1966 UK tour
  – Which included the famous “Judas” moment
Ex: Bob Dylan – “Like a Rolling Stone” (1965)

– Early electric Dylan

• 6 minute single - which says it’s not pop - although it was on the radio
• Four long sections (with one verse and chorus in each section)
• Campbell/Brody: “a cinematic portrayal of a privileged princess who’s strung out and trying to survive on the streets”
• In what ways does this still resemble his acoustic folk material?
• Rock songs can now be about anything
• Dylan was a major influence on the mid-1960s transformation from Rock and Roll to a style that would be called simply *Rock*
  – Compare 1950s Rock and Roll with mid-to-late 1960s rock
• New potential for pop music: broad and important lyrics
• New musical sounds as well

• In July 1966 Dylan had a motorcycle accident
  – Out of the spotlight for awhile, still influential
Folk Rock

- “Meaningful” lyrics with beat and electric instrumentation of rock
- Most songs were newly composed
- But not all:

Ex: The Animals

- “House of the Rising Sun” (1964)
- British band
- First folk rock song?
The Byrds

• Formed in Los Angeles, 1964
• Several early rock versions of folk songs
  Ex: Bob Dylan “Mr. Tambourine Man” (1964)
  Ex: The Byrds “Mr. Tambourine Man” (1965)
• US and UK #1
• Brings together folk revival (Dylan)
• Girl Groups (Phil Spector/Wrecking Crew)
• Surf (Beach Boys)
• and with the 12-string, the Beatles/British Invasion
Simon & Garfunkel

Ex: Simon & Garfunkel – “Sounds of Silence” (1964) – original acoustic version

• Not a hit when first recorded
  – S&G broke up, but reformed when this became a hit
• After the success of Dylan and the Byrds, the record company added other instruments (without S&G’s knowledge) and released it; became a hit

Ex: “Sound of Silence” (1965) – overdubbed version

• Featuring members of Dylan’s band
• Increased instrumental and vocal intensity as song builds
Singer-songwriter

Many similarities with folk:

• The emphasis is on lyrics and melody
• Minimal instrumentation, often solo, usually acoustic instruments
• Often features socially-minded lyrics and/or personal expression
• Connection between music, text, listener
• Historical context: folk, country, blues songwriters were “singer-songwriters” by definition
  – Hank Williams’ “3 chords and the truth”
Leonard Cohen

- From Montreal
- As much a literary figure as a musical one
- Mid-1950s: Poetry, novels
- By 1966, musical performer

Ex: Leonard Cohen – “Suzanne” (1967)
- First published as a poem, 1966
Joni Mitchell

• First woman folk singer with a large body of work
• Many different styles: jazz fusion
• Revered as a songwriter
• Painter, photographer

Ex: Joni Mitchel – “All I Want” (1971)

• Love song, but unusual in that it seems like we’re listening to her subconscious thoughts
• Strophic form, 3 stanzas of lyrics
Newer singer-songwriters

Ex: Tracy Chapman – Fast Car (1988)
• About escaping poverty
• Strong emotion connection in lyrics and music

• Influence as a guitarist as well as performer and songwriter
• Socially active as a performer and through her record label

• Why do you think there are so many female singer-songwriters?
• How does this genre fit in with gender stereotypes?
Newer Folk and Folk Rock

Ex: Great Big Sea "Run Runaway" (1996)
• Late 80s/early 90s this kind of updated folk-rock sound became quite popular
  – One of the other leading bands of the type
  – Play some (traditional) Canadian and Newfoundland folk songs and new songs written in this style

Ex: The Lumineers – “Ho Hey” (2012)
• “Indie-folk”
• Similarities and differences between these two examples and 1960s folk rock?