

Bruce Hayden

Bruce Hayden Some years back I mentioned of a panel discussion I moderated at the FAR-West Conference which was that year held in Vancouver Washington It was titled "Getting in Touch With Your Roots".

Rosalie Sorrels and Michael Hawkeye Herman were a part of that panel. This is where I met Hawkeye.

Rosalie of course had spent a year studying with Charlie Seeger, Pete's father, at UCLA. Some credit Charlie for founding the studies of what is now known as "Ethnomusicology". Rosalie spoke about the roots for where some of our folk music came from. The panel had a traditional banjo player who would touch on the roots of many of the tunes we know today in folk music. He spoke of the importance of storytelling that we now would call oral history as over half of the country in the mid 1800's were illiterate. Thus storytelling with music became a way to pass down history and culture. Tom Dula was one mentioned with a few others as an example of the roots of the folk music that was sung until songs written by contemporary songwriters began to dominate folk music.

Sometime prior to this panel I had breakfast with Alex Hassilev (Limelighters) and a couple of other musician while attending the International Folk Alliance. . Alex was telling me of the wealth of traditional folk music that was to be mined by many of those folk musicians in the 50's and early 60's. He mentioned that there was little thought of writing original folk tunes as there was a gold mine of music that had been around for hundreds of years. He included Woody Guthrie's huge collection of songs to tap into as well. He said Dylan changed all that. Soon if you were not writing your own material you were no longer commercially viable.

November 18 at 1:46pm

Michael Hawkeye Herman

Michael Hawkeye Herman I remember well my first meeting with Bruce Hayden, as moderator, for the the panel discussion titled "Getting in Touch With Your Roots" at the FAR-West Conference a few years ago, in Vancouver, WA. It was an honor & a pleasure participating in the discussion with Bruce & the talented & wise Rosalie Sorrels. In line with Bruce's current post herein regarding 'storytelling with music became a way to pass down history and culture', I remember us panelists all agreeing with this concept of 'musical oral history,' and my contributing to the discussion/adding 'evidence' to the topic by explaining that because Blacks/ African Americans were purposefully disenfranchised from the American political/democratic process, oppressed, they were kept illiterate, & powerless in society ... as a result of these factors of enforced illiteracy, oppression, & disenfranchisement, the Blues musical format and African oral tradition became the depository for the history of African Americans. All aspects of the African American experience are documented in the blues: not just stories of 'lost love' or 'lost money', but bad fortune AND good fortune, & also historical & topical material like food, fashion, automobiles, airplanes, politics & political figures, news & newsmakers both good & bad, the entire spectrum of African American life & experience is/are documented in blues lyrics ... blues music has a long tradition of being a vehicle for the sharing of stories of all kinds, news, opinions, politics, and all aspects of culture ... including, & importantly, stories/songs of HOPE for a brighter day. Illiteracy, the historical oppression & disenfranchisement of African Americans gave rise to the blues, and as result, the blues became the cultural depository for/of

their experiences/stories/history. The stories/lyrics of blues music reflect real life experiences (& fictional stories), good/bad/indifferent, and are 'documents' that tell the story of African Americans.

November 18 at 5:59pm · Edited

Michael Hawkeye Herman

Michael Hawkeye Herman The strong African tradition of passing on history orally in music; cultural, tribal, family, and personal history, is the result of most African tribes not having a written language, only orally could info be passed from person to person, tribe to tribe, and generation to generation. The griot in each tribe is the keeper of all stories and histories. He/she does so through memorized lyrical songs. The griot selects younger members of the tribe as his students/future griots to learn all the storie/songs so as to carry on the 'living history' of the tribe. An example of the keeping/passing on of such history: when Alex Haley was doing the research to write his book "Roots," he went to Senegal, where his ancestors had originated, he found the tribal area of his family, and he asked the local griot about the history of his family ... the griot was able to recite, in song, the names of 14 generations of Haley's relatives ... and the griot could do this service for all those in the tribe. I explained all this to a blues master class I was teaching at a music festival in France a few years ago, and one of my students was a musician from Cameroon in W. Africa, Roland Tchakounte. Roland told the class that what I had explained about the oral tradition and the griot is still true today: when he goes back to his homeland in W. Africa to visit his family the tribal griot always comes to visit him at his family's home, and he asks Roland questions about his recent life happenings, travels, and performances. The 'new'/recent personal information that Roland shares with the griot is then creatively/poetically added to Roland's 'family song/history' by the griot, and taught to the griot's students to ensure that it will be remembered and passed on orally/musically to future generations. (photo by Willitte Herman: Roland Tchakounte & Michael Hawkeye Herman at Blues sur Seine Festival, in France, 2007.)



Hawkeye and Roland Tchakounte
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