



## **HONOR THE TRADITION**

**What singer-songwriters (and other contemporary folk musicians) need to know**

**By Stewart Hendrickson**

Music builds on tradition. Sometimes the tradition evolves gradually, other times big jumps are taken. We have all been exposed to different types of music in our past. How we treat this musical history, build upon it or change it, delve deeper into it or ignore it, has an important effect on our growth as musicians.

Tradition can be thought of as something fixed in time and structure, or it can be something that changes or evolves over time. Should we regard traditional music as set museum pieces, or should we use it as a stepping-off point for our own music? If the latter is our choice, how do we proceed? How do we honor those who have gone before?

First, we need to be aware of the tradition. Many first and second generation Americans rediscover the ethnic music of their parents and grandparents, sometimes after initially rejecting it as too old-fashioned. Often this happens when they have children and realize that they have an ethnic background that needs to be passed down. Or someone may ask them about their own ethnic music, and they realize they have no answers.

[Cookie Segelstein](#) is a klezmer violinist I met at the American Festival of Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend many years ago. She is first-generation American, her parents were holocaust survivors from Eastern Europe. But Cookie was born in Kansas City, and grew up in an environment as far from her ethnic heritage as possible. “I had no Jewish friends, dated no Jewish boys, and stopped going to synagogue after my bas mitzvah. I wanted nothing to do with this world of pain. I studied music, received a Master’s in Music from Yale, and became a working classical musician. I eventually married a non-Jewish man.”

Then she had her first child. “All that I had turned away from, the richness of tradition, my father’s history, and especially the music of the Jewish people all of a sudden became the most important thing in my life besides my child. I called my folks daily with questions. What were the names of all who perished? What was the klezmer band like in their towns? How do you make [cholent](#)?” She realized that she was a critical link in this tradition and wanted to pass it on to her own children. She became more active as a klezmer violinist to the point of it taking over her classical career, and is now most comfortable expressing herself in her own ethnic culture.

One of the exciting things about [klezmer music](#) is that it is continuously evolving. Eastern European Jews carried the klezmer tradition to America, mixing with and picking up elements of American popular and jazz music in the early 20th century. It almost died out, but was rediscovered by a new generation of Jewish youth in the 1970’s, and underwent a tremendous revival. It fused with other musical traditions, and our current music is much richer because of it.

The folk revival of the ‘50s is another example of building upon the tradition. The immediate carriers of this tradition were people like [Woody Guthrie](#), [Lead Belly \(Huddie Ledbetter\)](#), and [Pete Seeger](#). But it goes back before that to people like [John and Alan Lomax](#), [Frank and Ann Warner](#), and others who were collecting music from Appalachia, the South and other places, and recording the traditional musicians before their music became lost in the urbanization of America.

During the folk craze of the ‘60s, the rural roots of folk music changed. The authenticity of rural people singing of their hardships, simple pleasures and protests was lost in a new generation of urban singers. A new type of folk music evolved around the urban environment – phony trios singing pseudo-traditional songs more akin to Tin Pan Alley, Vietnam war protest songs, and the new singer-songwriter genre. Many of these songs are good, but they are far removed from the tradition. Others were more commercial pop and have mercifully disappeared.

Irish music was introduced into popular American culture by such groups as [The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem](#), [The Dubliners](#), and [The Chieftains](#). This music later fell under the heading of “Celtic Music.” The term “Celtic” encompasses the people of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Isle of Man, Brittany, Northumbria, and Galicia. This term has lost most of its meaning (who knows what kind of music the pre-historic Celts made?), and is now just a marketing label.

Like American folk music, Irish music has lost much of its traditional roots. Its revival in [Riverdance](#) took it to a commercial level that would be unrecognized by the traditional musicians of old Ireland, and it lost much of its tradition and charm.

Some musicians, however, have honored the tradition while still allowing their music to evolve to higher levels in different ways. [Kevin Burke](#) of Portland and [Martin Hayes](#) formerly of Seattle grew from their Irish roots to become two of the most respected Irish fiddlers in the world. Their music has stayed within the tradition, but has also brought the tradition to a new level of playing and interpretation.

It might seem strange to mention [Bob Dylan](#) in this regard, but however you regard him in other ways, he was quite aware of tradition and used it to evolve his music to a level some would not regard as folk music. Dylan went to England early in his career to hear traditional songs from which he got material for his future songwriting. He also mined traditional Scottish tunes and songs from his association with [Jean Redpath](#) during their early Greenwich Village days in New York. From this he got the following tunes: *Bob Dylan's Dream (Lord Franklin)*, *Girl of the North Country (Scarborough Fair)*, *Farewell (Leaving of Liverpool)*, and *A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall (Lord Randall)*.

Bob Dylan's borrowing from traditional lyrics is evident in his song *Tomorrow is a Long Time*. It comes from a 16th century poem, [Westron Winde](#) – *Westron Winde, when will thou blow / The smalle raine downe can raine / Christ, if my love were in my armes / And I in my bed again* – which he changed to: *Yes, and only if my own true love was waitin' / Yes, and if I could hear her heart a softly poundin' / Only if she was lyin' by me / Then I'd lie in my bed once again*.

There are “next generation” folk musicians who have strong family backgrounds in traditional music and have used these to enhance their music. I recall hearing [The Mammals](#) play at the [Northwest Folklife Festival](#) in 2006. They represented 2nd or 3rd generations of some of our well-known folk singers: [Tao Rodriguez-Seeger](#), grandson of Pete Seeger; [Ruth Unger](#), daughter of Jay Unger; and others. They shared the stage with [Jay Unger and Molly Mason](#) for the Benefit Concert. They were well received, but afterwards I heard some old folkies grouching that they “just weren't traditional.” Well no, they weren't traditional, but they did have respect for the tradition. They just put it in their own folk-rock style and sound. They took the old songs and tunes and made them their own, with respect and knowledge of what went before. I enjoyed it – they were different. The Mammals have since disbanded and the members have gone their own separate ways.

Another example is [Eliza Carthy](#), the daughter of [Martin Carthy and Norma Waterson](#), who grew up immersed in her parents' world of English traditional music. “Describing herself simply as a ‘modern English musician’ Eliza Carthy [at age 39] is only now beginning to reach the height of her musical powers. During a 20-year journey/career she has become one of the most dazzling and recognised folk musicians of a generation. She has revitalised and made folk music relevant to new audiences and has captured the most hardened of dissenters with canny, charismatic and boundary-crossing performance. Many of the current crop of young professional folk musicians owe their successes in part to her determination, standard-bearing and campaigning spirit.” Some of her music is

'far out,' but when she sings a traditional song it is exciting to hear her new take on it and at the same time her respect for the tradition. Recently Eliza and her father produced their first ever duo album together, [The Moral of the Elephant](#), with a new and different take on traditional songs. [Here](#) Martin and Eliza talk about producing this album. And [here is an Eliza Carthy playlist](#).

Another "next generation" folk musician, [Jeff Warner](#) grew up listening to the songs that his parents [Frank and Ann Warner](#) collected during their field trips through rural America. He is the editor of his mother's book, *Traditional American Folk Songs: From the Anne and Frank Warner Collection*, and producer of the two-CD set, [Her Bright Smile Haunts Me Still](#), the Warners' recordings of rural singers, many of them born in Victorian times. He continues these traditions as a master folklorist, traditional singer, instrumentalist and storyteller. He plays concertina, banjo, guitar and several "pocket" instruments, including bones and spoons, and "he inhabits a song in a way which few singers can do" (Royal Oak Folk Club, Lewes, UK). [Here](#) are some of his performances posted on the web.

Jeff will perform for the [Seattle Folklore Society](#) on Saturday, Oct. 25 – don't miss him! "This concert will include a live multi-media presentation about his parent's song-catching through rural America, followed by Jeff performing songs, banjo tunes, 18th-century New England hymns, and sailor songs."

[Tim O'Brien](#) is not a "next generation" folksinger, but growing up in Wheeling, West Virginia, he was surrounded by classic country and bluegrass music. He also learned the traditional American mountain ballads and fiddle tunes. He is described by Mark Knopfler, in whose band he has performed, as "a master of American folk music, Irish music, Scottish music – it doesn't matter; a fine songwriter and one of my favorite singers." "Over the years," Tim explains, "my music has become a certain thing. Each time I go into the studio to make a new album, I could make an Irish record, or a bluegrass record, or a country record...but it seems artificial to sift anything out. I feel like I'd be leaving out something important. In the end, I just try to make it round... I'm a folk musician," he says humbly. "I gravitate towards the old sounds and I still sing a good bit of traditional material. My songs come out of that well of folk music. If you do it long enough, you can't always tell the old from the new – it blends together. It becomes what happens between the chicken and the egg: I don't know which came first, but it contains the whole of life." Tim is a master instrumentalist and plays guitar, fiddle, mandolin, banjo and other instruments – his musical hero is the late [Doc Watson](#). To appreciate his wide range of musical talents watch a [two-hour video](#) of his concert at the historic Whately Congregational Church in West Whately, MA, on July 17, 2013.

These artists represent just a few of the many folk musicians who continue to honor the tradition in their music, even though it may evolve far from those roots. Their songs seldom mention the words "I" and "me," but they tell stories of interesting people, places, historical times and recent events. They continue the

traditions of the old ballads, songs, and tunes into contemporary times.

We need to honor the tradition as we develop our own music. Tradition is not static, but continues to evolve. William Blake (1757-1827) wrote “The difference between a bad artist and a good one is the bad artist seems to copy a great deal; the good one really does copy a great deal.”

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