

THAT'S ALL FOLK

The strumming you hear is the sound of folk music taking over the world

By Juli Thanki

If it was never new and it never gets old, then it's a folk song," declares the titular character in the Coen Brothers' new film *Inside Llewyn Davis*, which explores New York's Greenwich Village folk scene in the early 1960s.

With the rise of bands like the Avett Brothers, Mumford and Sons, the Lumineers, Bon Iver, Old Crow Medicine Show, and the Civil Wars, the folk sound is taking the music world by storm. It's become so popular, in fact, that other genres have taken notice. After singer-songwriter Phillip Phillips won the 2012 season of *American Idol*, his rootsy "Home" settled into the top of the pop charts and sold more than 4 million copies, the most popular coronation song in *Idol* history. Incorporating folk elements into his recent album *True*, EDM artist Avicii scored pop hits with the acoustic guitar-driven "Wake Me Up" as well as "Hey Brother," which features vocals from Union Station's Dan Tyminski. Even pop group One Direction got in on the act with their latest album *Midnight Memories*, landing in the Top 10 with the power-folk hit "Story of My Life."

But what is folk? In the past, the term might have conjured up images of grizzled men on Appalachian porches, lone troubadours in smoky coffeehouses, or folk-light ensembles like the Kingston Trio chirping their way through a whitewashed version of murder ballad



Bon Iver

"Tom Dooley." These days, it's equally likely to describe a shaggy string band playing to a packed arena, or a group of mandolin-toting Brits racking up radio hits. As different as they may be, all these figures—and those of folk's cousins Americana and bluegrass—can be traced directly back to many of the same early influences.

"Folk music is anything that is based off of a traditional style," says Louis Meyers, director of folk music advocacy organization Folk Alliance International. "I expect tradition to change every day, because the world changes. You can't expect someone who grew up pre-television to have the same influences as somebody who grew up post-MTV. We need to have a broad definition of folk at FAI because of the ages we're serving—not every person has the same definition of folk, nor should they."

Meyers also cites advances in technology as a factor in the ever-changing definition of folk. In the digital age, when someone in Mumbai can stream Texas fiddle tunes over the internet, development of pure regional folk isolated from outside influences is a thing of the past—forcing the genre to constantly reinvent itself as artists are exposed to new styles and sounds. This "big umbrella" approach to folk music may rile purists, but it's also served to usher in an extensive body of new fans, many of whom are using the current neofolk revival as a jumping-off point to explore the rich history of American folk music.



The Avett Brothers

TURN! TURN! TURN!

Historically the nation has turned to folk during times of national strife or social turbulence, as many folk singers offered a voice for the plight of the common man and galvanized progressive political thinking. In the 1930s and '40s, folk pioneer Woody Guthrie—whose guitar's tag "This Machine Kills Fascists" reflected popular views of the time—told tales of the Great Depression, Dust Bowl, exploited laborers, and the poor and disenfranchised. By the early '50s, political winds changed again as artists and writers espousing left-leaning views came under fire. The Weavers' Pete Seeger and Lee Hays were summoned to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee during the height of McCarthyism.

The genre's popularity waned when Elvis Presley and rock 'n' roll burst onto the scene, but by the late '50s and early '60s a revival was in full swing in cities and on college campuses led by Seeger, Doc Watson, Odetta, Ian and Sylvia Tyson, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Tom Paxton and others. Folk flourished in places like Greenwich Village, where singer-songwriter Dave Van Ronk—who inspired *Inside Llewyn Davis*—served as the scene's epicenter, playing the coffeehouse circuit and influencing young artists including Bob Dylan.



The Civil Wars

In the '60s, the U.S. became entangled in Vietnam and the battle for civil rights raged, further galvanizing counterculture activism and folk music. At the Great March on Washington in 1963 when Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez sang "When the Ship Comes In" and "We Shall Overcome," and Peter, Paul and Mary sang "If I Had a Hammer" and "Blowin' in the Wind." Protest singer Phil Ochs captured the sentiment in 1965's "I Ain't Marching Anymore," "Call it peace or call it treason / Call it love or call it reason / But I ain't marchin' anymore." These folkies and others of the era laid the groundwork for a host of popular antiwar hits that emerged years later, including Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son," Edwin Starr's "War (What Is It Good For)," and Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On."

Contemporary social issues are also at the forefront of much of today's folk music, with current acts like Sam Baker, Mandolin Orange and Steve Earle singing about the economic recession, marriage equality, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Said Earle, "All singer-songwriters do this job on groundwork laid by Bob Dylan, who built his own fame based on Woody Guthrie. We've all done it with one foot in the 1930s, even though none of us—including Bob—witnessed that time firsthand. Times are really hard these

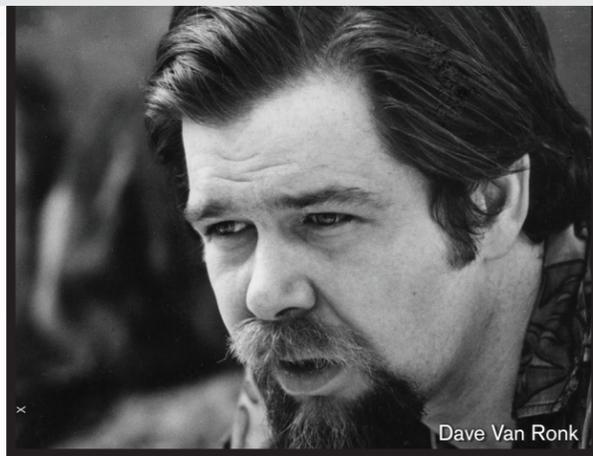


Bob Dylan

days. What I'm seeing out the bus window is a lot closer to what Woody saw than it's been in a long time, though I'm seeing it from a half-million dollar tour bus rather than a boxcar."

Folk doesn't speak only to political and social consciousness, it engages listeners who are searching for music that's timeless and grounded in weightier topics. "Right now people are looking for substance, things they can really hang their hat on," says Bob Crawford, bassist for the Avett Brothers. "This music is honest in the way it's written and recorded, and people are gravitating toward that, which is why this resurgence has been bubbling under the surface for at least a decade, if not longer."

Bandmate Scott Avett suggests part of folk's draw is its simplicity. "There's a reason Degas went from painting very complex compositions with multiple figures to painting washes of color with just one bathing woman," he explains. "Often, the most beautiful art—and I include music in this category—can be defined as simple in some way. In 1999, when my brother Seth and I started playing banjo and guitar, I saw people open up their eyes and ears and engage with our music in a completely different way than when we were in a rock band. There's something to be said for breaking it all back down to basics."



Dave Van Ronk

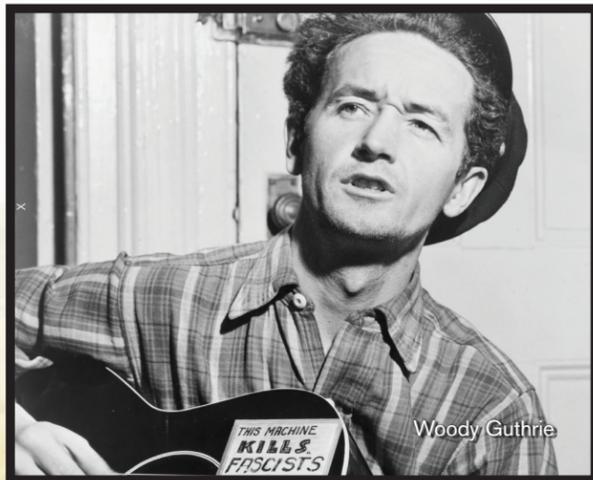
UNBROKEN CIRCLE

While folk is defined by every listener, one constant remains in all definitions—the communal aspect. This sense of community helps explain folk's underlying power to bring people together. "Singing together is something that makes people's hearts feel full," says singer-songwriter Caitlin Cary, of the progressive collective NC Music Love Army.

FAI's Meyers elaborates, "People are responding to the communal, sharing element of this music. These Mumford and Avett records are songs that you can walk out the door and sing, or pick up a guitar, banjo or mandolin and play along with. One of the things that makes folk music communities unique is that musicians know enough of the same songs to play together without formalities."

Nowhere is this aspect more evident than at folk festivals, where thousands of like-minded fans congregate year after year. "A lot of value to our event is that coming to the farm, an hour out of the city, almost feels like going into a time warp," says Levi Landis, executive director of the Philadelphia Folksong Society, which stages the Philadelphia Folk Festival, one of the oldest folk festivals in the nation. "People are camping, they're jamming—we try to make the festival experience feel similar to one you would have had in 1962."

Landis is careful to note that while the atmosphere may feel like a trip back to the '60s, the diverse Philadelphia Folk Fest lineup isn't what you'd find at what he calls "your grandfather's folk music festival." Contemporary acts like the Carolina Chocolate Drops, Iron and Wine, the Decemberists, Pokey LaFarge and ukulele virtuoso Jake Shimabukuro have all played the festival in recent years alongside veteran acts like Emmylou Harris, John Prine, Janis Ian, Arlo Guthrie and David Bromberg. Plus, there's the addition of multiple stages, children's programs and "green" initiatives that make it a thoroughly modern festival.



Woody Guthrie

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings; Dave Van Ronk

NEW FACES

LAURA MARLING

Laura Marling emerged on the U.K. folk scene as a teen, and now at 23 has four albums under her belt. Her unflinching lyrics and haunting voice draw comparisons to Joni Mitchell and Regina Spektor, but with the breadth of music on her latest record, *Once I Was an Eagle*, Marling cuts a singular path of her own.

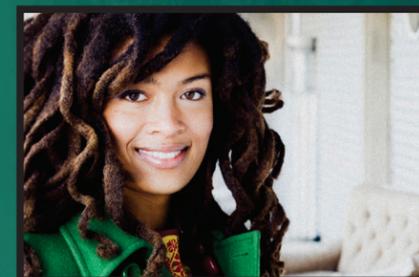


MANDOLIN ORANGE

North Carolina duo Andrew Marlin and Emily Frantz are reminiscent of mixed-gender pairings like Gillian Welch and David Rawlings or the Civil Wars. On their third album, *This Side of Jordan*, they serve up sweet harmonies, spiritual imagery, and earthy folk pop anchored by fiddle and acoustic guitar, occasionally flirting with classic country.

GREGORY ALAN ISAKOV

Born in South Africa and raised in Philadelphia, Isakov has been touring since he was 16. His newest album, *The Weatherman*, offers up sparse yet emotionally rich songs, and a warmth that recalls Springsteen's *Nebraska*. His star's on the rise but Isakov remains down to earth: He donated the proceeds when McDonald's chose one of his songs for an ad.

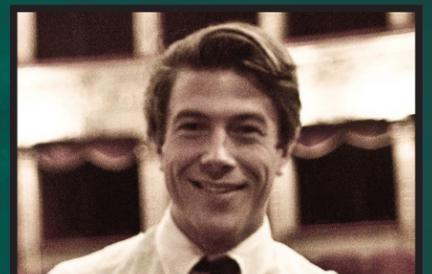


VALERIE JUNE

The Tennessee native burst onto the scene with last year's *Pushin' Against a Stone*, co-produced by the Black Keys' Dan Auerbach. June calls her sound—a blend of folk, country and soul—"organic moonshine roots music." When she sings "Workin' Woman Blues" or "Rain Dance," she channels greats like Elizabeth Cotten, Dolly Parton, and Hazel and Alice.

LUKE WINSLOW-KING

Winslow-King draws on a wide spectrum of influences, from composers Antonin Dvořák to bluesman Mance Lipscomb. Winslow-King—who studied classical music in Prague and honed his slide guitar skills busking on the streets of New Orleans—is a modern throwback, incorporating prewar blues, country, folk and jazz into his infectious sound.



Whatever the reasons, live folk music is growing dramatically. Over the last half-dozen years, Landis has seen more than a 10 percent raise in attendance among the 18-35 demographic, and a sharp increase in membership. It's been enough of a boost for PFS to launch another annual event, the 2nd Street Music Festival, in Philadelphia's trendy Northern Liberties neighborhood.

Attendance is booming at other landmark events as well. The Newport Folk Festival—where Bob Dylan famously went electric in 1965—has seen its attendance and the demand for tickets steadily increase. In fact, tickets have sold out in advance since 2011—and attendance is now capped at approximately 10,000 a day.

What's more, the audiences are getting younger. "I look into the crowd and see kids," says the Avett Brothers' Crawford. "We played *Jimmy Fallon* last night and were outside Rockefeller Plaza when a bunch of schoolgirls, maybe 11 or 12, crowded around and started asking, 'Are you the Avett Brothers?' We had success early on with generations that are older than us, but there are a lot more kids at our shows now. It's a blessing to make music that touches those in their 80s and teens, too."

THE CHANGIN' TIMES

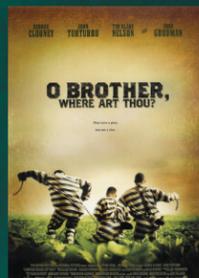
Although record sales as a whole have been languishing in the last decade, folk and roots music is selling. For example, the Civil Wars' self-titled sophomore album sold 116,000 copies in its first week and debuted at No. 1 atop the Billboard album charts this summer. "There's tremendous interest in the music, and with the demise of so many independent and chain record stores, there's a need to find different ways of reaching that audience," says Ken Irwin, who co-founded roots label Rounder Records in 1970. "Our direct-to-consumer sales are more substantial now than they've ever been. And our artists' involvement in reaching the audience, which has always been an important part of our marketing, has even increased. We are also working hard to reach people through different media, including digital and social media, increasing our publicity and marketing through a much broader range of accounts than ever before."

FOLK ON FILM



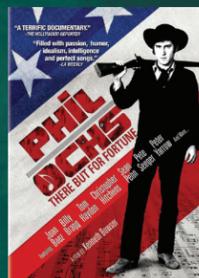
A MIGHTY WIND, 2003

This Christopher Guest (*Spinal Tap*) mockumentary follows three archetypal 1960s folk bands—sweethearts Mitch and Mickey, troubadours the Folksmen, and squeaky-clean New Main Street Singers—as they reunite to play a televised memorial concert. Although the characters verge on absurd, the hilarious send-up's music is solid—the title song even won a Grammy.



O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?, 2000

In this instant classic, the Coen Brothers retell Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, set in Depression-era Mississippi. Though the film boasts an A-list cast that includes George Clooney and John Goodman, the real star is the multiplatinum soundtrack—produced by T Bone Burnett—which renews interest in early country and folk music.



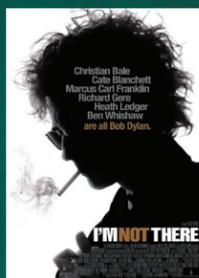
PHIL OCHS: THERE BUT FOR FORTUNE, 2010

This documentary offers a nuanced look at protest singer Phil Ochs before bipolar disorder and alcoholism led to his 1976 suicide. Turbulent events of the '60s—Vietnam, the 1968 Democratic National Convention, Martin Luther King Jr.'s death—provide the backdrop, and interviews with those closest to Ochs illuminate the man behind the music.



GREENWICH VILLAGE: MUSIC THAT DEFINED A GENERATION, 2012

Director Laura Archibald's documentary about the Greenwich Village folk scene in the 1960s and early '70s intercuts interviews with such legends as Pete Seeger and Judy Collins with archival footage of Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan and more to explore the politically progressive, socially conscious and occasionally controversial music that made a lasting impact.



I'M NOT THERE, 2007

In director Todd Haynes' unconventional biopic, six actors—Christian Bale, Cate Blanchett, Marcus Carl Franklin, Heath Ledger, Richard Gere, Ben Whishaw and Cate Blanchett—portray Bob Dylan in reimagined roles at various stages in his career. Blanchett earned an Academy Award for her performance in this fascinating look at an enigmatic cultural icon.

While mega-selling folk acts like Mumford and Sons and the Avett Brothers are signed to major record labels, many artists are now choosing to largely eschew them entirely—or, like singer-songwriter Amy Speace, are partnering with new-model companies like Nashville's Thirty Tigers for distribution. Speace funded her latest album, *How to Sleep in a Stormy Boat*, through popular fundraising site Kickstarter, where backers contribute money and receive previously agreed upon rewards for their donations. "I knew how much it was going to cost to work with the team I wanted to work with," she says. "I had no way to get that money on my own, but I also didn't want to give up the rights to own my masters, so I tried Kickstarter. I have a really supportive fan base, and this was a fun way to interact with them and get them involved with the making of the record."

Other artists are embarking on house concert tours, playing small shows in living rooms and backyards, which not only allows them to strengthen their relationships with fans, but often allows them to take home more pay than they'd receive playing an average small club show. "House concerts remove the artist-listener barrier and allow you to connect more personally," says singer-songwriter Drew Kennedy. "A lot of people consider it a premium to bring musicians into their home. I've found people are more generous with the door figures, and that records and merch sell better at house concerts than club shows. It's nontraditional, but it's increasing in popularity."



Mumford and Sons

BOUND FOR GLORY

The future looks bright for folk music in a way that it hasn't in nearly 50 years. Audiences are beginning to take notice of rising young stars like the Milk Carton Kids, Sarah Jarosz and John Fullbright, all of whom have been nominated for folk Grammys in the past two years. And with more artists and listeners turning to sounds of folk, the trend is still picking up speed.

"I think folk is only going to get bigger," declares Landis. "Authentic music is always going to be attractive to people. In the popular world, trends go through cycles, but we see folk music serving as the zeitgeist of every generation." Meyers agrees: "The next generation now has their own material to wrap their arms around. All they need is a foot in the door and they'll be interested in exploring." **M**

WILLIE NELSON | EARL KLUGH | ROSANNE CASH | SWITCHFOOT



MUSIC & MUSICIANS

JOHN LEGEND

Leading a soul revival

THE CRYSTAL METHOD
White hot

LINDA RONSTADT
Looks back

T BONE BURNETT
Studio magic

TOP GEAR
FOLK ON FIRE
ROAD HAZARDS