

Review and Commentary of
The Skillet Lickers: A Study of A Hillbilly String Band & Its Repertoire
By Norman Cohen

By Dave Olson

Prior to the time of this article's publication, "Hillbilly Music" was not considered by many serious folklorists to be a credible avenue of research as it appeared as though it was commercialization and bastardization of traditional folk tunes. The tunes, many thought, had not been learned through word of mouth but rather written expressly for or copied, reworked and preformed for the sole intent of royalties. Cohen explains in his article that this was not always the case as many bands were merely out to share their bit and have a good time doing it. He also goes on to show the comparisons and evolutionary transitions and bridges that developed combining aspects of traditional hillbilly folk music with other styles including Tin Pan Alley, blues and jazz.

Cohen explains, "The hillbilly string band grew out of traditional dance music, which was

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played Saturday nights in many communities in the rural south."(229) He continues with, "This study will show how deeply rooted the genre is in traditional folk music, and how, as it became aware of itself as a commercial industry it began borrowing from other styles of American music."(229)

No attitude is completely correct as deliberate feigning of credibility and the use "folk music" as a term has been, and always will be maligned. To demonstrate the validity of some as folk performers, Cohen utilizes a band known primarily as the Skillet Lickers.

The Skillet Lickers was a nucleus from which several other groups grew. At least a half dozen recording and performing bands featured Gid Tanner, Riley Puckett or Clayton McMichen, the three main members.

Cohen, by biographing individual musicians, shows that members were legitimate, not products of media and record companies. Cohen also shows the distinctive styles, directions and contributions of the three members. They were all self-taught musicians or learned from a neighbor, friend or relative. The three of them, however were from different generations and different enough backgrounds that there was quite remarkable diversity which both contributed to their success and set them up for pursuing there own projects. They played tunes learned from here and there, as fiddler Clayton McMichen answered when he was asked where he learned "JOHN HENRY", "That's born in you, you heard it all your life; your mother sung that rocking you in the cradle." (233)

All three of The Skillet Lickers were more interested in working, living and playing their tunes than being musicians. It wasn't until a talent scout from Columbia Phonograph offered Tanner an unsolicited contract in 1924 that their professional careers began. Cohen states,

"The recording career began in March 1924 . . . and lasted through the end of the thirties with unabated popularity. This long and fruitful career provides excellent material for a case study of a Hillbilly band epitomizing the development of hillbilly music as a whole."(230)

However, even with their successes, Tanner continued to work as a chicken farmer and McMichen as a welder. They all stayed active in music through radio, festivals and recording but certainly attempt or plan to exist on it. Puckett, being blind, depended more on music for livelihood. After The Skillet Lickers disbanded for good on account of artistic differences discussed later, he continued recording and touring more in the way of a professional folksinger - balladeer - minstrel. He also tended to branch out and experiment and incorporate other musical styles more than the others.

In surveying their respective discographies either as the Skillet Lickers, solo artists or in one of the myriads of ensuing bands, Cohen attempts to divide the songs into "traditional"¹ or "popular"². He then goes on to determine whether a traditional song was learned from another prior recording or learned orally, or if a popular song had been learned orally. Or if a song written as a commercial song has since entered oral tradition. Or if a popular song was based on a traditional song then perhaps it was rerecorded as the traditional song. There are certainly variables and intricacies that could seem like overkill but important in tracking the folk evolution. Cohen goes into extensive detail determining origins of songs by

¹ Folk songs of unknown or ambiguous origin, learned and passed on through oral transmission.

² With some degree of imprecision, the term, "popular" refers to the music written by professional songwriters, aimed primarily at a Northern urban audience and disseminated by mass media such as sheet music and phonograph records. (231)

comparing lyrics, titles and tunes for several of the recorded songs, however, as extensive as it is, nothing is absolute and you never know what anyone was thinking or doing inadvertently or deliberately.

In several instances, The Skillet Lickers version was the first recorded or some songs they recorded more than once showed derivation in lyrics between one another. Another problem in determining origins and discographies in general is the extensive of pseudonyms used to breach exclusive recording contracts. Regardless of categories, justifications and determinations, a varied, curious and far too extensive repertoire emerges.

As the careers progressed, there is a definite decrease in the percentage of traditional songs recorded. This was probably due to the increasing outside influence experienced by the players who started to borrow bits of this and pieces of that to make a distinctly different form. This could be called pandering; selling out or lack of integrity but it is a natural folk evolution as the most traditional of songs change from region to region, culture to culture. Indeed, new verses emerge, choruses and names change, and styles evolve. Previously, regions had been far more segregated and so with this continued emergence of media, it should be expected that styles would merge and split for no particular reason. The problems tainted the "folk" aspect would arise when commercialism would be in the forefront, before personal integrity, in the songwriting. There is no way to objectively judge this and never will be, so the objective factor remains the traditional basis but "new" shouldn't be immediately dismissed as less than credible. Many songs were reworked or written in the folk fashion for consumption by the commercial audience by people who thought it was neat, clever or trendy while other new songs were simply written by folks who didn't happen to know any

other medium or manner in which to express their feelings or musicality.

Cohen explains, “. . . hillbilly music repaid its debt to folk music by creating new songs and styles that have entered the folk tradition.”(229) Undoubtedly, some classic, pure, traditional folk songs would have been recorded far earlier by someone claiming authorship had the technology, idea, desire, market and opportunity existed prior.

One new form that seemed to bridge forms was the "blues ballad", a pre-blues form with considerable negro influence that began emerging quick enough that no one knew where it was coming but hopped on the bandwagon which was easy on account of there being few guidelines and fewer guidelines and rules. Puckett had always shown considerable negro influence and became a major blues innovator primarily with his guitar and voice style which didn't fit the traditional hillbilly fashion, he was one of the first to using open tunings, slide techniques, different strumming styles, flat picks and modern inflections. His style is often referred to as "pre-Carter family" and his style is of obviously universal impact. He also began playing a mandolin that had become popular by this time. Cohen says, "Puckett's development was more typical of hillbilly music in general, moving closer and closer to the mainstream of northern urban popular music."(240)

McMichen tended to resist the traditional hillbilly mold, thinking a rural audience would prefer to hear popular songs played on strings rather than horns. He met this with minimal success as a niche really didn't exist because at that point, with music becoming so varied and accessible, people wanted to hear either country or pop and there were better bands playing each better than he was. Cohen, "McMichen, like many other country musicians of his day, did not distinguish between "country music" and "pop music" or jazz but rather

between "old fashioned music" and "modern music." (240) Eventually he obtained some success with some non-traditional bands playing a sort of country jazz.

The three original Lickers also recorded a bundle of rural drama records, a sort of minstrel style story telling with bits and pieces of songs.

Cohen ends his article by stating, "The careers of the three Georgia musicians considered began when the hillbilly industry was in its infancy, . . . Their careers exemplify in part the development of hillbilly music from field recordings of folk music to a highly commercialized industry similar in many ways to that of "pop" music. Hillbilly music deserves attention for no other reason than that it is an exciting part of today's music. But it is of particular interest to folklorists because it provides a certain conclusive refutation of the theory that folk cultures live in isolation from the surrounding more industrialized society. More accurately, the rural folk music exists in a symbiotic relationship with urban popular music, and frequently the agency for communication between the two is hillbilly music." (242-243)

Cohen, in writing this article, was on the edge of a new vital branch of folklore research, a field old enough to make research challenging but new enough and in such a medium that one would have to tread delicately so as to not mess up the fuzzy lines between "folk" and "not folk" anymore than they already were and are, thus maintaining scholarly, productive and meaningful results and curiosities from this form of music and the ensuing, obvious evolutions and repercussions of it.