

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA 2494

*Tom Paley* | *John Cohen* | *Mike Seeger*  
**Sing songs of The New Lost City Ramblers**





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By Pete Welding

To anyone who has followed at all closely the world of folk music for the past several years an introduction to the considerable talents of the New Lost City Ramblers is hardly necessary, for this trio of insidious crusaders for "old-timey" music have in the short space of three years become one of the most influential of contemporary folksong groups. Insidious crusaders, yes— for it is next to impossible to gainsay the infectious joy, drive and exuberance of their stunningly fervent recreations of the bouyant, propulsive and immediately appealing traditional southern mountain string and band stylings. As the foremost proponents of hill country music the New Lost City Ramblers have single-handedly sparked a great revival of interest— primarily among college students, who represent the principal market for their recordings— in this rollicking native musical form.

The music that the New Lost City Ramblers so convincingly re-create is for the most part based on field recordings of mountain outfits made by both commercial recording companies and the Library of Congress in the ten years period 1925 to 1935. The music of such pioneering hill country outfits as Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers, Gid Tanner and his Skillet Lickers, and Ernest V. Stoneman and his Blue Ridge Corn Shuckers— to mention but three of the scores of string bands recorded— is very properly a music of transition.

During the early 1920s the traditional mountain styles (rooted in the Anglo-Saxon ballad remnants and dance tunes that had survived in various isolated pockets of the country, most notably in the southern highlands) were undergoing significant changes as they came into contact with various other musical influences: Negro sacred and secular song styles, the emerging Jazz stylings, and the characteristic instrumental approaches and songs of the new instruments— guitar, mandolin, bass, autoharp, etc. — that were being assimilated into mountain music. Increasing contact between urban and rural areas due to the influence of the mass communications media played a vital role in the evolution of the new country music styles. (A large cross-section of representative mountain stylings from this period is to be found, by the way, in the excellent three volume set, ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC, folkways FA 2951/3.)

"This was a period of great experimentation" writes Mike Seeger of the evolution of the new mountain styles, "when country people were learning new instrumental techniques, affected sometimes by urban or Negro music, and where there was small similarity between any two performers or groups. They were gradually hearing by way of radio and records more of what other musicians in the country were playing, which inevitably affected their style, and their fame spread so that they could earn a living by performing for an eager public in schools, theaters, and amusement parts." Seeger concludes, "From this unique time came some of the most diverse recordings of traditional American folk music." And on the basis of both the original recordings and the New Lost City Ramblers' evocative interpretations of them few would argue with his conclusion.

Curiously enough, the three intense (and highly articulate) young men who comprise this compelling group could not be further removed from the social and cultural milieu that gave rise to the musical expression to which they have devoted their efforts. All three are representatives of the rapidly swelling number of urban folk artists who have come to the fore in the past half dozen years and who have largely been responsible for the perpetuation of the archaic rural traditions that are, sadly, in danger of a quick death. (This, due to the fact that today's country musicians are for the most part attracted to the contemporary descendent of the old hill country music— the fleet, supercharged Bluegrass style— or to the noxious Nashville treacle. The situation is akin to the younger generation Negro's disowning or disassociating himself from the rough emotive blues of his forebears.) Of the three Ramblers, Tom Paley is a mathematician, an instructor at Rutgers University; John Cohen is a painter and free-lance photographer; Mike Seeger has been, at various times, a hospital worker, civil servant, radio technician and professional Bluegrass musician and is the only one of the trio having a background even faintly approximating those from which springs the mountain music the three re-create so lustily and believably. As the youngest son of Charles and Ruth Crawford Seeger, two of America's pioneering folk musicologists, Mike grew up in an atmosphere of folk music, hearing from his earliest years field recordings of traditional singers and instrumentists which his parents were transcribing for such books as the Lomaxes'. *Our Singing Country and*



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SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Tom Paley

John Cohen

Mike Seeger

**Folksong: U.S.A.** As a result, he has been playing and singing this music for the greater portion of his life. Tom Paley has been no less seriously occupied with this vital music, having performed it for nearly twenty years now and John Cohen's love of traditional song is equally strong, if not as long-lived.

Though representing widely divergent backgrounds, the three found in mountain music a common meeting ground. Explains Cohen; "It seems inevitable that we should have met at the (old-timey) songs...for we can recognize something of our own images here." He continues, "In the old time music we sing...we have found a place where we can bring together our separate experiences in picking and singing. We have found that many of our individual styles, arrived at independently, fit together. This is probably because we have been hearing and singing similar songs and listening to similar records—and the same image has been in the back of our heads all the time." And Paley adds simply, "Our principal reasons for playing together are a liking for the sound of old-timey string bands...and a feeling that this sound has just about disappeared from the current folk music scene."

The three pooled their individual talents in the formation of the New Lost City Ramblers in the summer of 1958. That the unit was a success from the start—musically and, happily, commercially too— is due to the truly astonishing musicianship and sensitivity of the three. Among them they command a dizzying array of instruments: on their five Folkways recordings, for example, they have employed, in various combinations, guitar, twelve-string guitar, dobro five-string banjo, mandolin, fiddle, autoharp and harmonica—just about the whole battery of American folk instruments.

Yet even more impressive (and important) than their staggering collective instrumental facility is the intelligence and sensitivity which has characterized its employment in their song re-creations. What they offer are not mere slavish imitations of what they've heard on old 78s, for this would inevitably lead them up a blind alley. No, they have succeeded— by dint of thoroughly steeping themselves in the music of the period— in capturing the spirit of old-timey music, not its letter.

From the very outset they had recognized the danger implicit in striving for literal and rigid transcriptions of old songs. Consequently, they have continued to experiment within the mountain music tradition, for change and meaningful development are at the core of all folk music traditions. That is, if they are to survive. With stasis comes only enervation and eventual death.

Only by immersing themselves in the music have they been able to arrive at a throughgoing knowledge of the old traditions and the life force— change— that nourishes it. "We have found," remarks John Cohen significantly, "that having once recognized these traditions one can make many variations upon them. Having recognized the symmetry of the music and the regularity of its phrasing there comes an excitement in finding never-ending possibilities of asymmetrical and irregular structure— but *only in relation to the tradition.*" (Italics mine.)

As a result of this awareness of the necessity for continual evolution, the Ramblers have been able to keep their music fresh and alive— perhaps *the* cardinal problem facing the conscious folk music performer (as distinct from that elusive creature— the genuine folksinger). It is this accomplishment, perhaps more than any other, that has enabled the group to not only spark a great wave of renewed interest in one of America's folk music treasures— the rough, passionate and exultant polyphonic music of the southern mountain string bands— but to maintain *the* standard of excellence in its re-creation. Many groups have followed their leadership in the last three years, but none has yet to challenge their undisputed mastery of the idiom. This alone is proof enough of their artistry.

## Side 1

1. Colored Aristocracy: Sanford and Harry Rich on Fiddles, Hensel Rich on guitar, Elmer Rich on mandolin. Recorded at Arthurdale Fiddler's Convention, Arthurdale, W. Va., 1936 by Charles Seeger for the Library of Congress. AAFS #3306 b2.  
Mike— fiddle Tom— banjo John— guitar
2. Don't Let Your Deal Go Sown— Charlie Poole— Col 15038  
John— banjo and voice Mike— fiddle Tom— guitar
3. Brown's Ferry Blues: Sam and Kirk McGee— Decca 5348; Delmore Brothers— Bb5403  
John— Lead voice and guitar Tom— Tenor voice and lead guitar
4. Talking Hard Luck: from Arkansas Hard Luck— Lonnie Glosson— Conq 8732  
John— voice and guitar
5. Railroad Blues: Sam McGee— Decca 5348  
Tom— Voice and guitar
6. Likes Likker Better Than Me: Woodie Brothers— Vi 23579  
Mike— lead voice and autoharp Tom— guitar and tenor voice  
John— guitar and bass voice
7. Hop High Ladies the Cake's All Dough: Uncle Dave Macon— Voc 5154; Wade and Fields Ward, Galax, Va., 1937, John A. Lomax. AAFS #1363.  
Tom— Voice and banjo Mike— fiddle
8. It's A Shame to Whip Your Wife on Sunday: Fiddling John Carson— Okeh 45122  
Mike— lead voice and fiddle John— guitar and bass voice  
Tom— guitar and tenor voice
9. Crow Black Chicken: Leake County Revelers— Col 15318  
Tom— lead voice and guitar Mike— fiddle  
John— banjo and second voice

## Side 2

1. Battleship of Maine: Red Patterson's Piedmont Log Rollers— Vi 20936  
Tom— voice and banjo John— guitar Mike— fiddle
2. Beware: Blind Alfred and Orville Reed— Vi 23550  
John— guitar and lead voice Mike— fiddle  
Tom— banjo and tenor voice
3. The Lady of Carlisle: Basil May— Salyersville, Kentucky. Collected by Alan and Elizabeth Lomax, 1937. AAFS #1587  
Mike— voice and guitar
4. Tom Dooley: G. B. Grayson and Henry Whitter— Vi 40235  
John— guitar and voice Mike— fiddle
5. Chewing Gum: The Carter Family— Vi 21517-A  
Mike— voice and autoharp Tom— banjo
6. Who's That Knocking on My Window?: The Carter Family— Decca 5612 B (64102)  
Tom— lead voice and guitar Mike— tenor voice and autoharp
7. Serves 'em Fine (McCarn): Dave and Howard— Vi 23577  
Tom— voice and guitar Mike— mandolin John— banjo
8. Old Age Pension Check: Roy Acuff— Voc 05244  
John— guitar and voice Tom— dobro guitar Mike— mandolin
9. Whitehouse Blues: Bob Baker— from a tape made by Mike Seeger in 1955 when he was a member of Bob Baker's band, the Pike County Boys.  
Mike— voice and banjo Tom— mandolin John— guitar

## A Short Note by the New Lost City Ramblers

We have listed our primary sources which are from the best years of recorded old time country music both on commercial recordings (1922 to about 1941) and in the Library of Congress Archive of American Folk Song (1933 to about 1941).

This album was recorded in December 1960 and January 1961 at Pequot Library Auditorium in Connecticut, by the well known recording engineer Peter Bartok. Recording was in stereo with a split center channel on a much modified Ampex 351-2 recorder and three vintage microphones, one Altec condenser and two RCA Model 44. Monaural mixing was also by Peter Bartok in conjunction with Seeger and Cohen.

The title of this album was a humorous suggestion by Bob Dylan.

The New Lost City Ramblers are exclusive recording artists on Folkways Records