

# THE NEW LOST CITY RAMBLERS MODERN TIMES



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MUSIC LP

**MODERN TIMES**

This album might well be subtitled "Rural Songs from an Industrial Society."

As Charles Seeger, noted musicologist and professor at U.C.L.A., points out:

"Industrialization . . . in a modern country . . . has uprooted not only individuals, but whole communities from well-known, well-tried ways of living, often moving them bodily into novel improvisations of crowded slums and noisy mills and mines, whose products have eaten at the roots of the way of life of those who were left behind. Under such conditions, the survival of songs of a way of life increasingly different from that actually lived by the singers is hardly to be expected."

This record documents precisely such a change — the movement of Southern mountaineers and farmers during the first half of the 20th century, as they went into the coal mines and weaving mills. The same period saw the horse and wagon replaced by the automobile, and the steam locomotive by the diesel.

In the changed environment, many of the older country songs all but disappeared, and newer, more popular styles of music tended to replace the ancient modes. Yet certain aspects of the older tradition do continue — if seen only in the nature of man's reaction to his environment.

That is the theme traced in this album: the reactions of people from an older, oral tradition and a rural life — their initial conflicts (and eventual reconciliation) with an industrial society.

The songs that reflect this theme so effectively were gathered from a large body of country music recordings made during the 1920's and 1930's, which constitute the "research base" for the New Lost City Ramblers. The commercial recordings from the 1930's include a greater number of socially concerned and topically oriented songs, and they more closely approach the style of present-day performances. Too, they provide a wider range of subject matter, less limited to home-style music than those of the 1920's. Such a development might well be expected — it reflects the directions taken by the early mountaineers and migrating farmers . . . westward through the dust bowl to California and north to Detroit with its automobile assembly lines. Thus Nashville-style country music, Western Swing, and Bluegrass are all stylistic manifestations of the same evolutionary forces which industrialization brought to the rural South.

Folk songs have always been composed to commemorate real life situations. But the conversion of such a practice to a business most likely came with the financial success of an early Hillbilly record, "The Death of Floyd Collins." In this instance, the writer was commissioned to compose the song. It was recorded on the spot, and both the singer and the distributor of the record prided themselves on the speed with which they had the final disc issued — fast enough for copies to be sold right outside the sand cave where the digging for Floyd Collins was still in progress.

From that time on, such men as Carson Robinson, Vernon Dalhart, and Frank Walker made a profitable business from recording songs about human events in the news.

Today's popular country music charts reveal a continuing trend in recording "topical" songs. (This is largely apart from the city-based topical songs of the current folk and rock revival.) Country songs like "Detroit City," "The Streets of Baltimore," "Still Alive in '65," and "Waiting on Your Welfare Line" are more immediate and more far-reaching today than "Barbara Allen." Beyond matters of style, contemporary country "news" songs may well be the real continuation of the former folk song tradition.

With the exception of one song in this album ("The Little Lump of Coal," taken from Library of Congress archives via the United Mine Workers Journal), all the songs come from commercially conceived recordings. They were intended as popular songs (not traditional folk songs), and were sold in the popular marketplace.

One cannot emphasize this point too strongly. For if one is fully to understand the older folk song tradition, it is with the hope that aspects of modern life might be seen in the same light. The study of folklore is not simply to preserve the past, but to make the present more comprehensible.

John Cohen

<sup>1</sup>Folk Music in the Schools of a Highly Industrialized Society.

**SIDE I**

Band 1 — **SHUT UP IN THE MINES OF COAL CREEK** 2:50  
A. Miner — Coal Creek Music

On May 19, 1902, an explosion in the Fraterville Mine in Tennessee killed between 180 and 200 men and boys. After the disaster a number of communications from the trapped miners were found; the verses in this ballad can be traced back to one or the other of them. This beautiful version was collected by Ed Kahn, who also supplied the information. According to Mr. Kahn, the version was learned by Mrs. Elsie Lee Ward Brown from a commercial 78 rpm record. (This is probably the recording by Dick Bell.) It is sung here unaccompanied, as Mrs. Brown sang it, and reflects something of her style. —TS

Tracy Schwarz, vocal

Band 2 — **'31 DEPRESSION BLUES** 3:10  
Ed Sturgill — Ed Sturgill and his banjo,  
Big Pine Records 677M-7157

This song was composed by the late Ed Sturgill of Appalachia, Virginia, and was recorded by him on his own label several years ago. Sturgill's music — especially in this song — was influenced by Dock Boggs, who knew him and still lives in nearby Norton. —MS

Mike Seeger, vocal, banjo — Tracy Schwarz, guitar

Band 3 — **THAT LITTLE LUMP OF COAL** 3:15  
J. N. York

This song appeared in the United Mine Workers Journal, January 1, 1936, with the heading, "Made by J. N. York, Marion, W. Va." Our source is a recording of William March and Richard Lawson, made by George Korson in Kenvir, Kentucky, on March 22, 1940. The March and Lawson recording is currently available from the Library of Congress. A recording of the song is also available on Folkways (FT 1016) by the Kentucky songwriter-singer George Davis.

This song has been one of my favorites since the first time I heard the paper recording of it in the early forties — when my mother was transcribing it for George Korson's book *Coal Dust on the Fiddle*. —MS

Mike Seeger, lead vocal, mandolin — Tracy Schwarz, tenor vocal, guitar

Band 4 — **UNION MAN** 2:40  
Hobo Jack Adkins — Starday 45-448 (2969)

"One thing for sure — when the Lord made me, He made a union man." A genuine topical ballad that was recorded by Hobo Jack Adkins, a Kentuckian whose feelings ran high on the subject of unions. The melody is similar to the first part of the fiddle tune "Lost Indian." —TS

Tracy Schwarz, vocal, fiddle — John Cohen, banjo — Mike Seeger, guitar

Band 5 — **GOT THE FARM LAND BLUES** 3:08  
Carolina Tar Heels — VI23611

The original Carolina Tar Heels were Tom Ashley, Dock Walsh, and Gwynn Foster. The wild mouth harp and guitar runs in the song appear to have come from Foster. The song is notable not only for its insights into farm life, but also for some of its more formally structured aspects — or, perhaps, its lack of them! It seems to be a study in poetic rhyming ("two/roost," "car/tire," "corn/corn") and metric scanning ("bean beetle in the bean patch, just eating up the beans; boll weevil in the cotton, just tearing up the bolls," alongside of "gonna sell my farm, gonna move to town, got the farm land blues, right now"). —JC

John Cohen, vocal, guitar — Tracy Schwarz, banjo, Banty — Mike Seeger, mouth harps

Band 6 — **WE ARE UP AGAINST IT NOW** 2:41  
Uncle Dave Macon — Vocalion 5003

This song was probably written by Uncle Dave, one of the best of the old-time song writers. The last verse, probably added by Uncle Dave to conform to the 78 rpm recording industry's 3-minute recording policy has been omitted on this recording.

It ran:  
I kissed a pretty girl of 18 —  
She smelled so sweet around the throat.  
I kissed an old maid of 40,  
And she smelled like a darn billy goat!

(The verse also conformed to Uncle Dave's far-out sense of humor!) —MS

Mike Seeger, vocal, 5-string banjo

Band 7 — **FROM EARTH TO HEAVEN** 2:45  
Uncle Dave Macon — Brunswick 329

This ballad must be autobiographical, for Uncle Dave introduced it like this: "Now, good people, I've waggoned and farmed for over 20 years, and the style of my waggoning firm was the Macon Midway Mule and Mitchell Wagon Transportation Company, situated on the dividing line, operated by gentlemen on and up to time. Main office eight and one quarter miles east Main Street, Murphysborough, and ten and three quarter west Main Street, Woodbury, Tennessee. Now, here's my song . . ." —JC

John Cohen, vocal, 5-string banjo, — Mike Seeger, 6-string banjo

Band 8 — **HENRY FORD'S MODEL A** 2:00  
Oscar Ford — Col. 15437 (148240)

The praises of the "new" Model A are sung to the tune of "Casey Jones" — a performance in the classic style of Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers.

Tracy Schwarz, vocal, fiddle — John Cohen, guitar —TS

Band 9 — **TRUCK DRIVING MAN** 2:42  
Terry Fell — Terry Fell and the Fellers,  
"X" 4X-0100 (E4LW3040)

Another song — sung here in Bluegrass style — that was originally recorded in the 1950's by Terry Fell. Later recorded by many artists, including Buck Owens, the song has become the classic ballad of the truck driver. —TS

Tracy Schwarz, lead vocal, fiddle — Mike Seeger, lead vocal (chorus), banjo, mouth harp — John Cohen, guitar

**SIDE II**

Band 1 — **DOLLAR DOWN AND A DOLLAR A WEEK** 1:55  
Arkansas Woodchopper — Cong. 7887

This quaint lesson in "home economics" seems to fall somewhere between the homelike "Take warning, girls" attitude that prevailed before the turn of the century,

**FOLKWAYS STEREO FTS 31027**

and the looser, more free-flowing prose common to blues of the 1920's. It's the kind of poem you might still find tacked on the wall of an all-night cafe. During the Hootenanny phase of the early 1960's this song was made available by the Limelighters in a version attributed to Cisco Houston. —JC

John Cohen, vocal, guitar — Mike Seeger, mouth harp — Tracy Schwarz, fiddle

Band 2 — **DEAR OKIE** 2:12  
Rudy Sooter, Doye O'Dell —  
Doye O'Dell, Exclusive 33X (1182-2)

Through the music of the late Woody Guthrie, many city people know of the dust bowl and the migrations to California. This is a more recent country music song from the West Coast. Popular on local radio stations there, it addresses itself to the great country audience populating that state. Rather than being a straight documentary it presents, with a fine sense of irony, the dreams and illusions which originally lured so many migrating families to that "promised land." The Western Swing style of the song is a basic country music style which combines elements of pop, swing, Jazz, and country music. —JC

John Cohen, vocal guitar — Tracy Schwarz, fiddle — Mike Seeger, banjo

Band 3 — **FROM 40 TO 65** 2:53  
Purdum, Cox — the Masters Family,  
Col. 20888 (CO45893)

This recording dates from around 1950. —MS

Mike Seeger, lead vocal, mandolin — Tracy Schwarz, tenor vocal, "finger" steel guitar — John Cohen, guitar

Band 4 — **PRIVATE JOHN Q.** 2:02  
Roger Miller — Smash MGS27049

From the prolific mind of song creator Roger Miller, circa 1965. —MS

Mike Seeger, lead vocal, lead guitar, mouth harp — Tracy Schwarz, tenor vocal, banjo — John Cohen, guitar

Band 5 — **WEAVER'S LIFE** 3:05  
Dixon Brothers — Bb B7802

The Dixon Brothers converted the old sacred song "Life Is Like a Mountain Railway" into this revealing description of life in the cotton mills. The song is full of technical weave-room terms — second nature to employees, but somewhat exotic to the casual listener. Many of the Carolina mill workers were displaced mountaineers who had come to town looking for a living. When union troubles began, they were doubly persecuted — by the local mill owners for being "Hillbillies," and by the cops for being "reds." —JC

John Cohen, lead vocal, guitar — Tracy Schwarz, tenor vocal, guitar — Mike Seeger, dobro guitar

Band 6 — **THE DEATH OF ELLENTON** 2:09  
"Pa" Johnson, D. Smith — the Johnson Family  
Singers, Col. 20895 (CO 45883)

It is interesting that the master number on this recording is only ten digits away from that on "40 to 65," indicating that the two songs were probably recorded within a day of each other. Tunes and performance styles of the originals were also very similar. —MS

Mike Seeger, lead vocal, autoharp — Tracy Schwarz, tenor vocal, guitar — John Cohen, bass vocal, lead guitar

Band 7 — **TAKE THEM FOR A RIDE** 2:50  
David McCarn — Vi 23506A

After the success of McCarn's first disc ("Everyday Dirt/Cotton Mill Colic") Ralph Peer, Victor's A&R man, telegraphed him to record again with new songs. McCarn wrote several (probably including this one) in his hotel room just before the session. He was not only one of the strongest "topical" song writers of the late twenties, but also one of the most far-out of the primitive-hot guitar men. —MS

Mike Seeger, vocal, guitar

Band 8 — **TIMETABLE BLUES** 2:43  
Captain Appleblossom — Okeh 45373 (402749)

A version of this song can be found on sheet music dating from 1911, as featured by Al Bernard, an early radio entertainer. The earlier form has more references to Northern railroads, such as the New Haven and New York Central. This evolved version reveals that the song had some life outside its original form. It is a testimonial to the local and regional nature of America — for who hasn't been impressed by long lines of freight cars, each bearing signs and symbols from a distant part of the country? These boxcars wander all over the nation, like the aimless hoboes described in still another old song, "They Call Me a Roving Sign." —JC

John Cohen, vocal, guitar — Tracy Schwarz, Hawaiian guitar — Mike Seeger, paper bags

Band 9 — **BYE, BYE BLACK SMOKE CHOO CHOO** 2:44  
Smith, Aiken, Holcombe

This tribute to the old steam locomotives was found on the flip side of a popular Country-Western record dating from the 1950's — "Feuding Banjos," with Don Reno on the 5-string banjo —TS

Tracy Schwarz, vocal, guitar — John Cohen, bar guitar — Mike Seeger, banjo, mouth harp

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