Tom Paley | John Cohen | Mike Seeger
Sing songs of The New Lost City Ramblers
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 indiscernible crusaders for "old-timey" music has been prevalent for at least the past three years and has become one of the most influential of contemporary folk groups. Insidious crusaders, yes— for it is next to impossible to gainsay the infectious joy, drive and exuberance of their stimulating revelations of the box, the banjo, and the twelve-string guitar. In the past year and ahalf they have appeared in almost every university and college on the East Coast, and some university halls have been unable to accommodate them. Their exuberance of their music is one of the principal market for their recordings—in this rollicking native folk form.

The music that the New Lost City Ramblers so convincingly re-create is from the most part based on field recordings of mountain outlaws 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 outlaws as Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers, Gid Tanner and his Skillet Lickers, and Ernest V. Tom Perry is a Blue Ridge corn Shuckers—to mention but three of the scores of string bands recorded—is properly a music of transition.

During the early 1920s the traditional mountain styles (rooted in the Appalachian ballad remnant and tunes that had survived in the 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, hill country Appalachian dance and fiddle tunes, 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 styings from this period is to be found, by the way, in the excellent three volume set, ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC, folkways FA 2951,2,3.)

"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 churches, 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 more divergent socially and musically. Mike is a New York City-born son of 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 several years—a group 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 descendents 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 dissociating himself from the rough emotive blues of his forebears.) Tom Perry of the New Lost City 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 the social and cultural milieu from which 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 instrumentalists whose parents were transcribing for such books as the Lomaxes'. Our Singing Country and

FOLKWAYS RECORDS
FA 2494

Reprinted from Sing Out Vol. II #5 DecJan 61/62

By Pete Welding

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 for nearly twenty years now and John Cohen's love of traditional song is equally strong, if not as longlived. Though representing relatively divergent backgrounds, the three found in mountain music a common meeting ground. Explains Cohen, "It seems inevitable that we be present in each of the approaches and songs of the new instruments—guitar, mandolin, 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 styings from this period is to be found, by the way, in the excellent three volume set, ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC, folkways FA 2951,2,3.)

"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 churches, 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 more divergent socially and musically. Mike is a New York City-born son of 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 several years—a group 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 descendents 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 dissociating himself from the rough emotive blues of his forebears.) Tom Perry of the New Lost City 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 the social and cultural milieu from which 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 instrumentalists whose parents were transcribing for such books as the Lomaxes'. Our Singing Country and