THE NEW LOST CITY RAMBLERS
The Early Years, 1958-1962

1. Colored Aristocracy  2:05
2. Hopalong Peter   2:04
3. Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down  2:26
4. When First Unto This Country  2:48
5. Sales Tax on the Women  3:14
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19. My Long Journey Home  2:37
20. Talking Hard Luck  2:40
21. The Teetotals  1:00
22. Sal Got a Meatskin  3:24
23. Railroad Blues  2:41
24. On Some Foggy Mountain Top  2:25
25. My Sweet Farm Girl  2:22
26. Crow Black Chicken  2:35

This compilation of 26 classic performances by the original New Lost City Ramblers—John Cohen, Tom Paley, and Mike Seeger—highlights the skill and variety of the 12 albums they recorded for Folkways between 1958 and 1962. The lively and extremely musical Ramblers introduced generations to the wonders of “old time” music.

Extensive notes by Jon Pankake are enclosed.

Recorded by Moses Asch, Peter Bartok and Mike Seeger
Compiled and annotated by Jon Pankake
Anthology supervised by Anthony Seeger and Matt Walters
Remastered by Malcolm Addey, Mike Seeger and Matt Walters
Cover photo by Robert Frank
Cover design by Carol Hardy
Special thanks to Mike Seeger

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Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40036
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The Early Years 1958 - 1962
Jon Pankake, July 1990

When some future galactic scholar compiles the history of folklore, our century will be noted as the point at which the locus of collecting, preserving, and disseminating folklore changed from the printed page to the electronic media. In the first half of the twentieth century, folklorists began to use disc, tape, wire, and film rather than writing to collect and preserve sung and played folk music, and a parallel documentation was carried out by the fledgling entertainment industry, which inadvertently preserved some dying folkways among its immense production of ephemera such as films and phonograph recordings.

In the second half of the century, the recorded legacy of our dwindling oral culture, a legacy that had accumulated largely unnoticed in archives, vaults, and private collections, began to come to light and to generate a cultural phenomenon of its own — young musicians, largely college-educated and urban, learning folk music not by hearing and emulating elder musicians within their families or communities in the age-old way, but by hearing and emulating the recorded sounds of musicians often decades and cultures distant from them. The media powering this new transmission of music were the reissue LP (such as the key 1952 Anthology of American Folk Music on Folkways (2951, 2952, 2953)) and the home tape recorder via which dubs of unissued and out-of-print material could circulate. The face-to-face "oral tradition" had become the ear-to-speaker "aural tradition" of a new century and a new technologically defined community.

The New Lost City Ramblers will leave barely a blip in the history of the entertainment business, as they predicted in their jokes about their "long-playing, short-selling" albums on the Folkways label. But they have nevertheless earned the touch of immortality for their central role in our discovery of the folkloristic riches preserved electronically in the early years of our century. As individual performers, Mike Seeger, Tom Paley, and John Cohen had during the 1950's become interested in performance style in American folk music, exactly that dimension of the music which recordings uniquely capture. In 1958 they formed The New Lost City Ramblers with the explicit intention of performing American folk music as it had sounded before the inroads of radio, movies, and television had begun to homogenize our diverse regional folkways.

They studied and learned from commercial 78 rpm discs of hillbilly musicians recorded in what has come to be called "The Golden Age" of 1923-1940, from blues and race records of the same era, from the bluegrass recordings of the post-war period, from the field recordings on deposit in the Library of Congress. In turn, they began their own field trips to seek out and record and learn the music of older rural musicians who still played and sang in the old time way. Over the next twenty years, the Ramblers poured forth a steady stream of their own performances live and recorded, albums of their field recordings, and festival performances and workshops in which they introduced musicians they had met in the South to urban audiences of the "Folk Song Revival" of the 1960's and 70's. Their lasting influence was greatest upon a relatively small but important part of that urban audience — those few who wanted not only to study the music seriously, but who also wanted to learn to play the music themselves, actually to be the heirs of a musically rich American culture which by the 1960's largely existed only in the scratchy echoes found on primitive recording discs and in the memories of an ever-fewer number of elders.

Within a couple of years of touring college campuses and coffeehouses, the Ramblers — to their great surprise — began to meet dozens, and eventually hundreds, of young urban musicians who had become inspired by the Ramblers' example to begin to play old time country music learned in the "aural tradition" either from the Ramblers' own performances, from the archival recordings to which the Ramblers had directed them, or even directly from musicians the Ramblers had introduced to urban folk festivals.

The history of this movement is as yet unwritten, but some of its raw material can be found in a remarkable document titled "The Young Fogies Gazette," a newsprint pamphlet included in the 1985 LP The Young Fogies (Heritage 056). The "Gazette" contains autobiographical sketches of over a hundred influential amateur and professional musicians, mostly urban...
In 1962 Tom Paley left the Lammers to pursue a teaching and eventually a musical career in England, and the phase of the group's history documented on this disc ended. Within the year, however, the Lammers regrouped with Tracy Schwarz joining the band and bringing with him skills in ballad singing, fiddling, and bluegrass and Cajun music that would enlarge and enrich the band's repertoire through their twentieth anniversary in 1978 and beyond.

Hearing the Lammers' earliest recordings in 1990, listeners are less likely to make a mistake common in 1959 when their first album appeared: that of mistaking them for scholarly imitators in the manner of the academic amateur Dixieland bands of two generations ago, who would gather together to memorize and play by rote classic early jazz tunes they laboriously transcribed from beautiful old 78rpm recordings. Those who in the last thirty years have sought out the original recordings from which the Lammers gathered their repertoire can best appreciate the astonishing creativity which Seeger, Cohen, and Paley brought to their music. Far from imitating, they managed the feat of learning the musical syntax of old time song — the instrumental attacks and licks, the vocal shadings, the interplay of ensemble lead and support — and then used their mastery of this syntax to recreate in their own voices new performances which boasted all the spirit and sweetness and bite of the old masters such as Sara Carter and Charlie Poole bequeathed to history in their recordings.

The first 1958 recordings of The New Lost City Ramblers are now themselves historical documents, older, in fact, than were most of the 78rpm discs the Lammers resurrected at that time. Logically, as time goes on, the distance between the Lammers and their sources will diminish in significance, until discographers of the galactic future will simply regard them as just another old time country string band who learned their tunes from the recordings of other musicians (as did, in actuality, several 1930s' old time bands such as The Blue Sky Boys and Mainer's Mountaineers). Since we are told that history repeats itself, perhaps it is time for The New Lost City Ramblers themselves to be discovered by a new audience exploring their cultural past through the new laser-powered electronic medium of the compact disc. The irony will be most appreciated, of course, by those earlier cultural explorers, The New Lost City Ramblers themselves.

4. When First Unto This Country 2:48
From: The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Two, Folkways FA 2397
Source: Maggie and Fay Gant with guitar, Austin, TX, 1935, Library of Congress 65 A2. Mike Seeger, vocal and autoharp; Tom Paley, banjo.

Mike has sung this lovely, sad American ballad for about fifty years, first hearing it at a children's party when his mother, Ruth Crawford Seeger, transcribed the Library of Congress field recording for publication in John and Alan Lomax's Our Singing Country (1941). The voices on the battered aluminum disc of the Gants' performance are difficult to make out. I think I hear the last line of the fourth stanza as "Till I stole a fine gray horse from Captain William White," which reading would explain the pursuit in the fifth stanza. Mike and Tom have created a beautiful and original accompaniment for this ballad, with the banjo gently peppering the sweet lullaby of the autoharp.

5. Sales Tax on the Women 3:14
From: Songs From the Depression, Folkways FH 5264
Source: The Dixon Brothers, Bluebird 6327. Tom Paley, lead voice and Hawaiian guitar; Mike Seeger, tenor voice and guitar.

The discography of millworker-musicians Dorsey and Howard Dixon contains an unusually high proportion of original songs, among them "Wreck on the Highway." "Sales Tax on the Women" was very likely composed by Dorsey, though the conceit of taxing women was used in at least one earlier country song of humorous protest, Ernest Thompson's peculiar "Don't Put A Tax on the Beautiful Girls," Columbia 168.

6. Rabbit Chase 2:30
From: Old Timey Songs for Children, Folkways FC 7064

The unique charm of Charlie Poole's banjo fable lies in its scaling down the traditional hunting epic and the imitation of the fox chase to the intimate level of a child's excitement over the prospect of catching a rabbit. In an amazing example of the urban folk revival feeding material back into tradition, John reported, "I have performed it for mountain people in Kentucky and they were so amused that they took out a tape recorder and recorded me doing it."
7. Leaving Home 3:05
From: The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Two, Folkways FA 2397
Source: Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers, Columbia 15116.
Tom Paley, voice and guitar; Mike Seeger, fiddle; John Cohen, banjo.

In many ways, “Leaving Home” is the definitive “old timey” song, combining elements of many of the popular and folk traditions that found a place in “old timey” music. Charlie Poole has taken the Leighton-Shields Tin Pan Alley version of the nineteenth-century “Frankie and Johnny” ballad familiar to both white and black musicians, set it to a twentieth-century string band ragtime accompaniment, emphasized the witty vaudeville-styled patter chorus, and retold the story with knowing editorial comment (“These love affairs/Are hard to bear”). Poole worked similar magic on older material in many of his recordings, notably “The Highwayman” and “He Rambled.” The NLRC early on mastered Poole’s style of counterpointing banjo and guitar in a pianistic manner against a syncopated fiddle lead, and popularized this infectious string band style among a generation of city players.

8. How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live? 3:34
From: Songs From the Depression, Folkways FH 5264
Source: Blind Alfred Reed, Victor 40236. Mike Seeger, voice and fiddle; John Cohen, guitar; Tom Paley, banjo.

The composer-fiddler Blind Alfred Reed was one of the eccentric geniuses captured on early commercial country music recordings, a folk poet whose every song bears the signature of his indignant moral conservatism. Hard-times songs and complaints about merchants and doctors are endemic in the music of poor rural people, but Reed’s compositions stand out within this tradition for the mournful looseness of their tunes and the terseness of their dictum: “We can hardly get our breath, taxed and schooled and preached to death . . .”

9. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Back Again 2:19
From: Songs From the Depression, Folkways FH 5264
Source: Bill Cox and Cliff Hobbs, OK 05896. John Cohen, lead voice and guitar; Tom Paley, voice and lead guitar.

The original Cox and Hobbs disc was recorded in 1936, about a week after Roosevelt’s re-election, and demonstrates how early country recordings could function somewhat as broadsides, commenting on and conveying popular attitudes about newsworthy events. The Ramblers have substituted Tom’s hot picking for Bill Cox’s harmonica accompaniment.

10. I Truly Understand You Love Another Man 2:29
From: The New Lost City Ramblers, Folkways FA 2396
Source: Shorthuckle Roark and Family, Victor 40023. Tom Paley, lead voice and banjo; Mike Seeger, voice; John Cohen, bass voice.

Although the stanzas of this song are “floaters” which appear and reappear among many lyric country songs, they are here consolidated by the touching chorus into a coherent love lament unique in the Ramblers repertoire. The vocal harmony is perhaps the most complex ensemble singing the Ramblers recorded, and doesn’t attempt to reproduce the Roark Family blend of children’s and adult voices.

11. The Old Fish Song 4:52
From: The New Lost City Ramblers, Folkways FA 2396
Source: Blind James Howard with fiddle, Harlan, KY, 1933. Library of Congress 74 A. Mike Seeger, voice and fiddle.

This performance is one of the most remarkable in the history of the “folk revival.” In it Mike introduced to urban audiences the archaic art of ballad singing to one’s own fiddle accompaniment and a song as utterly charming as it is rare. The conceit of retelling Bible stories in latter-day vernacular appears commonly in African American tradition, but surprises us in the repertoire of the Anglo-American Kentucky fiddler James Howard. “The Old Fish Song” displays unexpected structural sophistication by setting its ancient story within a frame from which the narrator reiterates Johnson’s lesson for both his interior (the “buddy” in his lap) and exterior (the figurative language the song) audiences, a technique of storytelling Melville employs in Father Mapple’s Johnson sermon in Moby-Dick.

12. The Battleship of Maine 3:05
From: The New Lost City Ramblers, Folkways FA 2396
Source: Red Patterson’s Piedmont Log Rollers, Victor 20936. Tom Paley, lead voice and banjo; John Cohen, voice and guitar; Mike Seeger, fiddle.

Songs about the Spanish-American War lingered on among rural musicians for a generation, gradually losing their topical relevance until they became, like this one, generally applicable to any war. This comic depiction of a confused country boy dragged into fighting an absurd foreign war came to have startlingly new relevance for Ramblers audiences of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s.

13. No Depression in Heaven 2:56
From: Songs From the Depression, Folkways FH 5264
Source: The Carter Family, Decca 5242. Mike Seeger, lead voice and autoharp; Tom Paley, tenor voice and guitar.

The Carter Family, with their instantly recognizable guitar and autoharp accompaniment, were from the beginning a mainstay of Ramblers performances and were in turn adopted widely among city musicians following the Ramblers’ inspiration. This A. P. Carter composition is among the Carter Family’s most poignant songs in its portrayal of the journalistic reality of the Depression against the visionary prophecy of a looming apocalypse.

14. Dallas Rag 2:02
From: The New Lost City Ramblers, Folkways FA 2396
Source: The Dallas String Band, Columbia 14290. Mike Seeger, mandolin; Tom Paley, banjo; John Cohen, guitar.

The Dallas String Band recorded this masterpiece of early country jazz for Columbia’s “race” series in 1927. The Ramblers discovered the strong African American element in old time stringband music well before scholars such as Tony Russell began formal study of the influence of black musicians on white, and one of the great strengths of the NLRC as teachers of a generation of urban musicians was to make clear and accessible the previously overlooked multi-racial heritage of string band music. Ramblers concerts invariably included songs and musical styles they learned from African Americans, whether from recorded material or from the Dallas String Band or directly from musicians such as Elizabeth Cotten or Mississippi John Hurt.

15. Bill Morgan and His Gal 2:56
From: The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Five, Folkways FA 2395.
Source: Buster Carter and Preston Young, Columbia 15758. John Cohen, lead voice and guitar; Tom Paley, banjo and tenor voice; Mike Seeger, fiddle.

This jolly send-up of early credit card materialism is in the parlour style of string band music associated with the Virginia-North Carolina border, with very precisely syncopated fiddling backed by fingerpicked banjo and guitar counterpointed somewhat as the right and left hands of a simple piano accompaniment.

16. Fly Around My Pretty Little Miss 2:31
From: The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Three, Folkways FA 2398
Source: Samantha Bungarner, Columbia 146. Tom Paley, lead voice and banjo; Mike Seeger, tenor voice and fiddle.

The guitar became common in southern string bands only in the twentieth century, while the combination of banjo and fiddle may have originated among African American musicians as long ago as the late eighteenth century. Tom and Mike revived this old American sound for their audiences, and Ramblers concerts usually contained a banjo-fiddle duet or as this one. Though they list the Samantha Bungarner recording as a source, Tom’s and Mike’s performance reflects the influence of many versions of this popular breakdown.

17. The Lady of Carlisle 3:32
From: The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Three, Folkways FA 2398

The Seeger family introduced this magnificent ballad to urban audiences. Charles and Ruth Seeger obtained the Library of Congress recording of Basil May in the early 1940’s, and sang the song with their children. Mike and Peggy Seeger then introduced it to folk revival audiences in America and England in the late 1950’s.

18. Brown’s Ferry Blues 2:46
From: Tom Paley, Mike Seeger, John Cohen Sing Songs of the New Lost City Ramblers, Folkways FA 2494.
Source: The Delmore Brothers, Bluebird 5403. John Cohen, voice and guitar; Tom Paley, voice and lead guitar.

Although the Delmore Brothers’ recording career spanned the Golden Age to Rock ‘n Roll, from 1931 until 1956, their unique combination of boogie, blues, hot guitar licks, and close harmony was generally unknown to city audiences until the Ramblers introduced this “white blues” on their debut album in 1959. Tom has considerably elaborated on Alton Delmore’s original lead picking.

19. My Long Journey Home 2:37
From: The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Three, Folkways FA 2398
Source: The Monroe Brothers, Bluebird 6422. Tom Paley, lead voice and guitar; Mike Seeger, tenor voice and mandolin.

Another of the Ramblers’ interests lay in discovering and demonstrating the
22. Sal Got a Meatskin 3:24

From: The New Lost City Ramblers
Volume Three, Folkways FA 2398
Source: Cliff and Bill Carlisle, Panacord 25639. Tom Paley, lead voice and
guitar; Mike Seeger, tenor voice and (caped) guitar on first and third
breaks.

The sung tenderness of this love song
(for lack of a better descriptor)
contrasts oddly with its bawdy subtext.
When the Ramblers interviewed Cliff
Carlisle, he confirmed that in Kentucky
vernacular “meatskin” is a euphemism
for a maidenhead.

23. Railroad Blues 2:41

From: The New Lost City Ramblers
Volume Three, Folkways FA 2398
Source: Sam McGee, Decca 5348. Tom
Paley, voice and guitar.

Sam McGee “from sunny Tennessee”
was the most interesting white guitarist
to record on old time records. His
music combines concepts and picking
styles and the blues and
ragtime of street singers to “parlor
styles” popular in the nineteenth century
among genteel young middle class
women. While Tom seldom imitated
the licks of the musicians he studied on
old recordings, he here recreates very
closely the string-popping syncopation
of McGee’s playing. His revival of
McGee’s guitar performances
popularized masterpieces such as
“Buck Dancer’s Choice” and “Railroad
Blues” among revival guitarists.

24. On Some Foggy Mountain Top
2:25

From: The New Lost City Ramblers,
Folkways EPC 602. Source: The
Monroe Brothers, Bluebird 6607. Mike
Seeger, lead voice and mandolin; Tom
Paley, lead guitar and tenor voice; John
Cohen, guitar and bass voice.

The Ramblers had studied both the
1936 Monroe Brothers and the 1929
Carter Family recordings of this song,
and their performance contains
elements of both sources, leaning
heavily toward the jazzier Monroe
version. Again, Tom’s guitar break is
original with him, and a beautiful
example of the way the Ramblers
learned to augment creatively the
music they heard on old recordings.

25. My Sweet Farm Girl 2:25

From: Earth Is Earth, Folkways FF 869
Source: Clarence Ashley and Gwynn
Foster, Vocalion 02780. John Cohen,
lead voice and guitar; Mike Seeger,
tenor voice and banjo; Tom Paley,
autoharp.

While many old time musicians knew
folk material of hair-curling obscenity,
such material didn’t find its way into
their public performances live or
recorded, for obvious reasons. An
exception is the occasional double-
entendre bawdy song such as Clarence
Ashley’s “My Sweet Farm Girl,” which
displaces its sexual references onto an
elaborately innocent but equally
transparent parallel narrative. The
Ramblers recorded four bawdy country
songs on an EP titled Earth is Earth,
the unsigned, hilarious liner notes for
which betray the unmistakable wit of
Tom Paley.

26. Crow Black Chicken 2:35

From: The New Lost City Ramblers
Volume Four, Folkways FA 2397
Source: The Leake County Revelers,
Columbia 15318. Tom Paley, lead voice
and guitar; John Cohen, vocal refrain
and banjo; Mike Seeger, falsetto voice
and fiddle.

The Ramblers customarily ended their
shows by busting the space up with a
full string band number that allowed
them to display all the energy,
exuberance, wit, and roaring
tunefulness of old time music at its
roistering best. The Leake County
Revelers were actually one of the more
sedate string bands to record in the
Golden Age, so the gusto poured into
“Crow Black Chicken” here derives not
from the old recording but from Paley,
Seeger, and Cohen at the top of their
form.

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