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PEOPLE AND IDEAS
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IS SKIFFLE PIFFLE!
C.W. (Colin Ward)

"They re all folk songs, 1 ain't never heard a horse sing
—Louis Armstrong.

WHICH come first, the song-lovers or the song-pluggers? Does the spontaneous reception of a popular tune put it among the "top twenty", or do the activities of the publicity managers, the sheet-music publishers, the record companies and the disc-jockeys chasing the hit-parade, create the public that buys the records that make the money that lines the pockets of tin-pan-alley?

A complicating factor is the extreme fashion-consciousness of the popular music market, on both sides of the counter. No sooner was Rock 'n Roll in, than people said it was out again. Stage one: riots in cinemas (was it that twelve-bar beat that sent the teenagers rocking down the aisles, or was it the publicity-sponsored knowledge that this was the response expected of them?) Stage two: disapproval by J.P.'s and clergymen, followed by approval from psychologists, sociologists,

cutural anthropologists. etc.—and R. and R. j was a Good Thing (socially acceptable means of releasing latent tension and aggression and so on). Stage three: Tommy Steele. But by this time the mysterious arbiter of fashion had decided that R. and R. was done for and Calypso was the thing. (Not what we would have thought were calypsos—improvised topical songs from Trinidad. The best¬selling Banana Boat Song is manifestly not a calypso but a worksong from Jamaica in origin).

But Calypso, the opinion-manipulators tell us, was, except for one song, out before it came in. "What's happened to the calypso rage that was going to sweep the rock out of the window?" asks the Record Review, and Freddie Bell, arriving at the Westbury Hotel last week from America declared "Calypso is finished, but rock 'n roll is as popular as ever". He couldn't say anything else, of course, since R. and R. puts the jam on his bread and butter.

Neither of these tendencies however, is so interesting as that other current phenomenon Skiffle, which merges into Rock 'n Roll at one end via Lonnie Donegan, and into folksong at the other, and is compounded of many ingredients including what the trade calls "Country and Western" music, the boom in guitar¬ playing, coffee-bar entertainment, and Do-it-Yourself. I was unwise enough to ask a group of jazz enthusiasts about its origins. "What exactly is skiffle?" I said.

"Teenage Coca-Cola stuff. It may appeal to mixed-up kids but not to intelligent jazz connoisseurs."

"Britain's answer to Rock 'n Roll."

"In fact the only British contribution to jazz."

"Nothing to do with jazz. Anyway it was done in America years ago but it never caught on."

"It all began with traditional blues numbers like Down by the Riverside and blues singers like Big Bill Broonzy."

"No, it all started when two or three members of a jazz band and a singer stayed behind to keep things going while the oth-

I hope so too. Meanwhile the kids are driving us crazy with Don't you Rock me Daddy-0\ , which is a crib from a traditional song Sail Away, Ladies. But at least that has dropped out of the top twenty. Next week they'll be bawling Freight Train.

quite come off; the listener is too aware of what MacColl is after and the the lyrics are too self-conscious an attempt to manufacture English equivalents to what Americans from the South, who never lost their folksong tradition can do more naturally.

But the effort was well worth making (besides providing an object lesson to skifflers in how to accompany songs in a slower tempo) because if native British popular songs are to get away from the slop school (moonlight, June night, tender, surrender), or from those awful "novelty" numbers, into something more robust, this is a starting point. There comes after all a limit, to the possibilities of imitating American idioms (and American trains), even when it is done with as much verve as Russell Quaye's City Ramblers develop in their record of Nine Hundred Miles (Topic TRC 101), which they back with an American square-dance rhythm uinon song Round and Round the Picket Line. These two records, rather than the current best¬sellers, are examples worth emulating of skiffle playing in its most stylish and in¬ ventive manner.

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TWO collections of skiffle group music have been published; each contains eleven numbers and sells at 2s. 6d. Francis and Day's "Album of Music for Skiffle Groups" is poor stuff cashing in on the vogue, and including things like My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean, simply, I suppose because it is non-copyright material. Feldman's "The Skiffle Album" contains the Lomax, MacColl and Ramblers repertoire including lovely straight folk-songs like The Water is Wide. The optimistic foreword to this collection concludes:

"Folk songs are, after all, part of the make up of every country, and it is a pleasant thing to be able to record this great revival … The British and American people who were great singers a few centuries ago are apparently on their way to becoming performers and ballad makers again. The British skiffle movement is an important part of this whole picture".

ers went out for a drink. After all Lonnie Donegan used to be Humph Lyttleton's second guitarist."

"No he didn't. He played the banjo for Christ Barber."

I had evidently asked the wrong people. Whenever you talk to jazzmen they always start arguing among themselves about who played what with whom and when. But whatever its origins, skiffle is amongst us. Up and down the country little groups are learning the three-chord trick on the guitar, making string-basses from tea-chests or barrels and broomsticks, developing their technique on washboards and other improvised instruments. John Hasted estimates that there are over four hundred skiffle groups in the London area alone. In Lillie Road, Fulham a group of children are skiffling with a toy banjo, milk bottles and so on, and a Hammersmith cinema manager doubles his takings on the nights when he includes a local skiffle group, the Blue Jeans, in his programme. Skiffle contests are being held, local competitions getting about ten entries in each Borough.

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IN Central London, going the rounds of the Two Eyes Coffee Bar in Old Compton Street, the Skiffle Cellar in Greek Street, the Nucleus Coffee House in Monmouth Street, and the Princess Louise in High Holborn, you can hear the aristocrats of the skiffle world, Rus¬sell Quaye's City Ramblers, Charles McDevitt's Group with 'Nancy Whiskey', John Hasted's group and the folksingers Jack Elliott and Derroll Adams, and the Vipers. If instrumentally skiffle represents a reaction against the virtuosity and expertise of the Jazz brass players and pianists, vocally it leans heavily towards the tougher kind of folksong—American rural blues and worksongs, with a strange fixation on the railway, and when they are not real folk numbers they are closely derived from them, with the paradoxical result that Freight Train a rail¬road-chain-gang type song, 'composed' and recorded by Charles McDevitt in London is a nation-wide best seller in America, while Lonnie

Donegan, whose commercial success makes the other skifflers disdain him, sings numbers like Lost John and Screwball, which John Lomax first recorded from a chain-gang in 1933, and Labour-Union-cum-religious songs like I shall not be Moved.

The singer and guitarist John Hasted says, "Granted that some skiffle makes a dreadful noise; that many of the folk¬songs are badly interpreted; that some skiffle is indistinguishable from Rock 'n Roll. The point that has been missed is this. Folk music has been dead in English cities for many years. Young people ail over the kingdom are producing the home-made article. New songs, new tunes, above all a new style, in an age when you are supposed to Sit and Listen to What You Get. With people's singing at a low ebb it will take years to get right and it will probably never become folk song in the sense we have come to understand it. Nevertheless here is the first spark under our noses and we should not recoil from it in horror". And writing in the current issue of Sing, he declares that "we are now on the crest of the skiffle wave … already the tide is turning away from Rock 'n Roll and skiffle and towards folk song. Within a year we shall have as many young singers with guitar -as they have in the U.S.A., the U.S.S.R., and Latin-American countries".

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THERE is something to be said for this evaluation. The skiffle wave will pass, just as a few years ago Square Dancing came and went. It left behind however a much wider interest in country dancing, which is the same thing without its American label, than the English Folk Dance and Song Society had been able to foment in fifty years. Skiffle may play the same role in the popular rediscovery of folk-song by way of America. It was an American, F. J. Child, whose compilation of The English and Scottish Popular Ballads in the eighteen-nineties, was followed by the foundation of the Folk Song Society in 1899, and the pioneer collection of folk¬songs in the field by Cecil Sharp

and Vaughan Williams in the years before the first World War. They had little effect on the world of popular music, and even the schools went on singing inferior phoney folk songs like Heigh-ho, Come to the Fair. Even when Cecil Sharp went to America and collected beautiful variants on English songs in the Kentucky mountains and North Carolina, it aroused little but specialist interest.

But in the nineteen-thirties, as the jazz enthusiasts began to import American Negro folk-music on records, and as John Lomax and his son Alan began collecting American folksongs for the Library of Congress (records which we first heard here in Alistair Cooke's BBC series l Hear America Singing, in 1938), they began to interest a wider circle, while a new generation of collectors in this country like Peter Kennedy of the Folk Song Society, Francis Collinson of the BBC and A. L. Lloyd and Ewan MacColl of the WMA continued the folksong revival. The growing popularity of ballad singers like Burl Ives and traditional singers like Josh White, Huddie Ledbetter and other followers of Blind Lemon Jefferson in America, and in this country people like Elton Hayes, John Gavall and John Runge, has led to a boom in songs with guitar accompaniment, while the Spanish guitar has been growing in favour in its own right as a solo instrument.

The more wide-awake folksong and ballad singers have now moved from the period when, reacting against dressed-up concert versions of folk music, they demanded absolute "authenticity", are now seeking to build up a living tradition rather than a mere revival, and they see in skiffle one of the means of doing this. A record made by Alan Lomax with Ewan MacColl and the Ramblers (Decca DFE 6367) illustrates one attempt in this direction. On one side Lomax sings two American songs based on his own life's work of ballad collecting (one of them inevitably a railroad number), and on the other MacColl sings two of his own efforts, a big town love song Dirty Old Town and a prison song Hard Case. These don't