

BOOK REVIEWS

A Sound History: Lawrence Gellert, Black Musical Protest, and White Denial

By Steven P. Garabedian. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020.

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These songs ... are of inestimable value, if they do nothing more than show that not all Negroes are shouting spirituals, cheering endowed football teams, dancing to the blues, or mouthing inter-racial oratory. Some of them are tired of being poor, and picturesque, and hungry. Terribly and bitterly tired (1).

These lines by Langston Hughes were written to introduce *Negro Songs of Protest*, a book of twenty-four songs collected by radical folklorist Lawrence Gellert and published by the Communist Party-affiliated American Music League in 1936.¹ The songs reputedly showed a side of African American folksong not captured by other, now more famous, white collectors, like John and Alan Lomax, Dorothy Scarborough, or Howard Odum. Where those collections saw self-pity, Gellert's saw class consciousness; where the others sought timelessness, Gellert showed constant reinvention. Most importantly, where others saw a pathological culture of passivity, Gellert saw a readiness for revolution.

Stephen P. Garabedian's new book, *A Sound History: Lawrence Gellert, Black Musical Protest, and White Denial*, concerns the controversy that came next. Although *Negro Songs of Protest* was well-received at time of publication, the following half-century would leave Gellert's reputation in tatters: His personal credibility was reduced to that of a willing dupe, and the songs themselves were deemed at best unrepresentative, and at worst, outright forgeries. Allegations were made that Gellert coached his informants and sometimes invented lyrics or music wholesale to produce a body of propaganda songs that could be used by the Communist Party in their attempt to assist in (or, more cynically, to co-opt) the struggle against Jim Crow. His fall was so dramatic that, by 2013, even Gellert's one-time academic champion, Bruce Conforth, would declare that, "based upon existing material and interviews, it seems clear that 'Negro Songs of Protest' ... never really existed within the folk music tradition."²

Garabedian's book is an attempt to correct this record. Drawing on a systematic study of newly digitized versions of Gellert's 505 field recordings, as well as interviews and new documentary evidence, the author offers a convincing case that Gellert's musical archive is in fact sound, and his personal politics genuine. As the title suggests, however, there is more at stake than the vindication of one man. Garabedian asks: "Why had this material come into doubt? ... Why were some allies in the cause of racial justice so sure that 'Negro Songs of Protest' were a product of white propaganda rather than Black vernacular creativity?" (ix). In answering these questions, the book offers a timely reappraisal of the historiography of the U.S. folk revival(s), a field with lapses Garabedian suggests to be "symbolic of a larger denial of social class and institutionalized racism that rose to orthodoxy in American dominant culture in the postwar and remain[ing] with us today" (xi). Drawing on sociologist

¹Steven P. Garabedian quotes this unused introduction from his findings in the Lawrence Gellert Papers held at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

²Bruce M. Conforth, *African American Folksong and American Cultural Politics: The Lawrence Gellert Story* (Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 159.

Stanley Cohen's exploration of "denial" as a state of "knowing and not-knowing" and the foundational analysis of "romantic racialism" offered by George Fredrickson, Garabedian argues that Cold War anti-communism and the disciplinary conservatism of academic folklore coalesced to produce conditions whereby it was both politically useful and intellectually consistent to deny the radicalism of African American song (4–6).

The book proceeds in a rough chronology: The first four chapters weave together Gellert's biography with the more familiar story of folk revival and left-wing politics, and the final two assess the charges leveled against Gellert by his former folk revival community and by later scholars. Chapters 1 and 2 establish the facts of his early life. Born in 1898 in Budapest, the fifth of six children, Gellert emigrated with his family to New York in 1906. By the early 1920s he was succumbing, in his own words, to a "nervous breakdown," so he began to spend his winters in the resort town of Tyron, North Carolina, which would become the site of his first sustained encounter with African American musical culture (22). Garabedian places emphasis on establishing an accurate chronology of the crucial early days of Gellert's collecting, often coming into conflict both with Gellert's own recollections and with Conforth's biography.

Chapters 3 and 4 compare and contrast Gellert's work with that of a host of familiar supporting characters—John and Alan Lomax, Lead Belly, and the associated coterie of rebels and reactionaries who made up the song-collecting world of the 1930s—but tell this well-worn story from a new perspective by centering Gellert as protagonist. Garabedian presents a significant revision to the commonplace narrative that the organized Left's interest in folk music only began in 1935, when the Popular Front ushered in a move from doctrinaire modernism to songs of "the people" as a cultural counter to the threat of fascism. Rather, he shows that an understanding of the revolutionary potential of specifically African American vernacular music preceded leftist interest in "folk" music more broadly by several years, owing partly to Communist edicts supporting black self-determination, as well as to Gellert's own advocacy (97–8). Ironically, it would be the success of subsequent Popular Front folklore—liberal, multicultural nationalism over Communist Black separatism—that set the stage for Gellert's fall (106).

In 1963, former Communist and folklorist Irwin Silber denounced Gellert's collection in the press, and his charges stuck. Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to the long tail of these allegations and form the book's argumentative core. They investigate the two primary claims that persisted from Silber's first shot to Conforth's 2013 biography: That Gellert was not personally credible and that the songs were not "genuine [African American] vernacular material" (109). Garabedian quickly dispenses with the first: Gellert left a long trail of journalistic writings and interviews that establish his bona fides as a forceful, if idiosyncratic, activist—a true believer, not a dupe. But the latter charge encompasses a whole "inventory of falsehoods" that the author considers in turn (138). Garabedian's analysis of the Gellert collection shows some of Silber's accusations simply to be false. Silber claimed that the entire Gellert archive was protest song and that the songs within it were unique, and thus unverifiable. Rather, only around half of the 505 recordings are explicitly protest-oriented, and many common stanzas can indeed be found, for example, in the collections of Howard Odum and Guy B. Johnson, while others can be heard in commercial blues (144–47). Garabedian shows how other allegations are matters of historical interpretation or ideology. The distinction between a "folk song" and a "protest song"—the former culturally valuable, and the latter mere ephemera, in the eyes of midcentury folklore—emerges as a persistent trope, and one better historicized than argued with on its own terms. Similarly, the extent to which Gellert "coached" his informants—a claim presented by Conforth as a "smoking gun" (137)—is read by the author as a question of changing professional norms, rather than evidence for fraud.

Garabedian refutes the final and most serious allegation—that the twenty-four songs published as *Negro Songs of Protest* cannot be matched with recordings from Gellert's collection—to the point of reasonable doubt: Although no song is an exact match, as is often the case with edited songbooks, several do in fact appear in the archive as discrete stanzas, some multiple times from different collecting trips, while some occur in other collections not subject to the same scrutiny (157–66). It is a strongly argued case: Although he never suggests that Gellert's collecting practice was watertight by modern standards, Garabedian shows that political opposition and racial chauvinism caused this archive to be held to a higher standard of proof than comparable collections that portrayed their subjects as politically docile, or in Hughes's words, "picturesque."

Garabedian closes on a hopeful note: That after being “subject to the multiple tragedies of white denial” for too long, these songs might finally be given the hearing they deserve (181). *A Sound History* offers a foundation for such a hearing, but does not take the work of a systematic study of the songs upon itself; musical and lyrical detail is examined largely to verify the songs, rather than to consider their aesthetic and political claims. A full examination of the material thus remains a task for future scholarship. Since the book is peppered with invitations to examine the Gellert collection at the Archive of Traditional Music at Indiana University, it would seem this is Garabedian’s hope, too.

Such future work might consider further why dismissive attitudes toward Gellert’s collection have persisted long after the postwar conflicts that generated them faded, a question to which Garabedian sketches only one possible answer. Folk and blues scholarship, he suggests in the Epilogue, is a small field, deeply influenced and still well-populated by figures who came of age during the 1960s revival, and it remains an interpretive community whose politics, while progressive, still hold fast to the romantic racialism of their revivalist forebears (177). But as demonstrated by the book’s comparison of the 1930s and 1960s folk revivals, the continuity of personnel does not guarantee a continuity of politics. Further work in this area might, then, ask: What are the continuities between Cold War anti-communism and the neoliberalism of the 2000s, or the rightist populism of the 2010s? Why have some disciplines, such as History and American Studies, been quicker to develop a more sanguine approach to the “dialectic of resistance between ‘red’ and ‘black’” than music studies (12)? Beyond the confines of academic politics, is there space in the contemporary Left, too often mired in bad-faith battles between “class-reductionism” and “racial liberalism,” for this kind of historical example? As the book strongly argues, the lines between academic and national politics are finer than it might be comfortable to believe. As I write, several states have passed, or are in the process of passing laws that would make the songs in Gellert’s volume, and indeed Garabedian’s exegesis, once again “verboten” (29), at least within public education systems.³ As a study in the racial character of U.S. political suppression, then, Garabedian’s book could not be more timely. As a contribution to U.S. music history, it speaks equally to folklore, cultural history, and music studies without sacrificing accessibility or rigor. And as a validation of a radical tradition, a testament to the possibility of a politics beyond the meagre rewards of whiteness’s “psychological wage,” it is essential.

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Fictional Blues: Narrative Self-Invention from Bessie Smith to Jack White

By Kimberly Mack. University of Massachusetts Press, 2020.

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Kimberly Mack’s first full-length monograph, *Fictional Blues: Narrative Self-Invention from Bessie Smith to Jack White*, is a breakthrough in blues scholarship. Mack argues that autobiographical self-invention is an important but rarely examined tradition in blues performance, recording, writing,

³According to Education Week, seventeen states have imposed bans or restrictions that would limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism at K-12 or collegiate level, while a further twenty-five have legislation or other action in progress. Map: Where Critical Race Theory Is Under Attack (June 11, 2021, updated September 28, 2022). Education Week. Accessed October 21, 2022. <http://www.edweek.org/leadership/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06>.