

Henry Adam Svec

American Folk Music as Tactical Media

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In a *Futurama* episode entitled 'Forty percent Leadbelly' (S07, E14, 2013) Bender the robot, one of the main characters of Matt Groening's animated series, runs into Sylicon Red, a guitar-playing alien and a universal legend of folk music. Seeing the opportunity to become a renowned folk singer himself, he duplicates Sylicon's instrument with a 3d printer and starts performing under the stagename of Ramblin' Rodriguez. However, the audiences reject his songs for their lack of sincerity, and Sylicon Red warns him not to come back 'til you have lived a life worth singing about' — advice that Bender follows literally, producing a duplicate of himself to experience real-life adventures for him that he can easily turn into successful hits.

The episode can be easily interpreted as a science-fictional satire of an 'authenticity' issue that underlies the whole folk discourse: Bender managing to counterfeit 'artistic integrity' suggests that 'being (and sounding) authentic' is not an inner quality for personal self-expression but a set of socially and culturally constructed conventions. As an alternative to this 'culturalist' view, one can take advantage of the lesson given by Henry Adam Svec's *American Folk Music as Tactical Media* to offer a different reading. After all, the reason Bender ends up artificially reproducing (and ultimately 'faking') authenticity is because he is trying to handle an ancient oral heritage in the only way artificial intelligence can: transcoding it in an amount of data and producing an original output that recombines that data. In this sense he does not act all that differently from any (human) ethnographer or folk revivalists: in fact, when the robot character wants to achieve a formula to write the perfect folk song he performs a computational analysis of 'all folk songs in the world' that strikingly resembles Alan Lomax's *Cantometrics* project, an interactive and dynamic database whose aim was precisely to dissect, measure and taxonomically classify singular performative motifs and musical elements from a world-wide ethnographic repertoire recorded on punch cards. The technological experiments undertaken by Lomax in the sixties are extensively studied in the first chapter of the book, strictly associated to cybernetics. Like Norbert Wiener before him, the ethnomusicologist resorted

to computational machines to decode a system of networked relationships (folk music) and map repeated patterns of action (singing and dancing performances); like Bender the robot after him, he firmly believed that 'the truth of the folk was to be found alongside the (now digital) machine' (p. 44).

That 'folk and machine were often one and the same' (p. 108) is the provocative argument grounding the whole analysis of *American Folk as Tactical Media*. As the author admits in the introduction, his aim to search for 'resonances' between folk (revival) and media theory may at first seem counter-intuitive, since the former is usually presented as a pre-modern object 'in constitutive opposition' to technological innovation (p. 14). Svec's understanding of media, however, is not limited to means of mass communication, nor even to the presence of technical objects as such: coherently with the general aims of Amsterdam University Press' *Recursions* book-series (of which his volume is a part), he is interested in the study of cultural techniques, and how 'diagrams and dreams, models and maps' (p. 15) articulate the *real* that folk revivalists physically inhabit, and claim to sing about. The author's concern for the pragmatics of mediation becomes clearer when he gradually moves his attention from John and Alan Lomax's use of analogue and digital machines to other outstanding folk personalities. Indeed, the second chapter stems from Harold Innis' notion of time-biased media to explain how Pete Seeger used to disseminate the seeds of folk culture by using 'any channel necessary', as though a sort of a counter-broadcasting scattered all over the communicational eco system. The third chapter then argues against authorialist views on Bob Dylan's work and revisits his rock songs in a kitterian/derridian fashion. According to the author, by taking the (in)famous 'electric turn', the songwriter did not simply trade his role as a spokesperson for a community with a more individualistically romantic idea of self-expression, but he became an inscription surface for the discourse networks of his time; the 'voice of a generation' that he had supposedly channelled through his earlier works was replaced with the non-human noises coming from material and infrastructural agencies. Throughout an admittedly rhapsodic and unsystematic overview of the folk revival, the reader learns that not only our historical awareness of musical heritage, but the way songs themselves were written and performed was always already 'plugged in', always already mediated.

This media-related perspective proves useful to offer fresh insights on often-debated topics (Dylan's song-writing being one example). However, this does not prevent Svec from addressing the troubled trope of authenticity: the whole second part of the book, and particularly the chapter entitled 'Another Authentic Folk Is Possible', draws on Marx's writings and radical critical theory in search of a non-essentialist formulation. While advocating for a critical and relational understanding of the concept, the author makes two crucial points: first, that authenticity is not a state of being but a process (meaning that 'true folkness' is not to be found in any naturally given *volk* but only in those people actively struggling to become one); second, no such a thing as the 'self' is conceivable outside intersubjective relationships and, consequently, no self-expression can

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possibly be valuable as ‘innerly authentic’ if taken in isolation from its social context. Such an overtly political reframing of authenticity paves the ground for further resonances between media theory and the folk revival. For instance, the notion of tactical media (originally formulated to describe digital activists’ hit-and-run attacks) serves as a key for a ‘folk-archaeological’ approach to the old rituals of the Hootenanny, a series of open-mic musical parties organized by Woody Guthrie and the Almanac Singers in mid-40s America, whereby singers, activists, storytellers and listeners joined forces for a collective, democratically-minded performance. The reason for likening them to the politics of digital resistance is not only since they too create ‘ephemeral communicational assemblages’ for a ‘multipoint-to-multipoint interaction’ (p. 120), but also because ‘there are weapons to be assembled out of the long American folk revival’s tactical media toolbox’ (p. 115) which could still be of some today’s networked mediascape.

An already theoretically dense book, *American Folk as Tactical Media* makes its most compelling argument when it points its finger at the present. In Svec’s line of reasoning, Steve Jobs’ fetishization of Bob Dylan as a source of inspiration goes hand in hand with the cyber-optimistic view of digital produsage as a ‘renewed vernacular culture’: both, he argues, exemplify the strategical rebranding of ‘the folk’ displayed by digital corporations as a rhetorical surface for the exploitation of user data and free labour. Significantly, these discursive strategies tend to shift attention away from the media-channels themselves and emphasize instead the users’ (authentic) individuality and the immediacy of their interactions. A new folk revival in the digital era could help us to dismantle these cognitive capitalistic rhetorics, so long as we grasp its inherently pragmatic and medial nature. To paraphrase Svec’s conclusions, an authentic folk spirit is not to be preserved outside, but it must be *practiced* from *within* the mediascape in order to create communal outlets in already established networks. A task for ‘machine-benders’ indeed.

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