

New troubadours capture authentic folk spirit

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MUSIC CRITIC

The term "folk music" is a slippery one.

The strictest definition of folk posits it as "the music of the people," but these days folk is about as much the music of the people as Volkswagen's coveted New Beetle is "the car of the people."

It still has its audience, obviously, but it's hardly the dominant mode of musical communication in North America - or anywhere on the planet, really, that's been successfully infiltrated by the products of Western culture.

That's not to say, of course, that pure numbers rule the day. While I suppose someone could, given ample time and the right rhetoric, mount an argument that the Backstreet Boys and Britney Spears constitute "the new folk," that someone won't be me. The suggestion that a particular music is "of the people" assumes that the music satisfies a few other criteria besides market share.

What those criteria are is difficult to pin down. My knee-jerk response to the word "folk" is usually a mental picture of Beavis and Butthead's homeroom teacher - a namby-pamby, sensitive-hippie type with a battered acoustic guitar, a long, blonde ponytail and a heartfelt of achingly earnest pronouncements. Entirely limiting, inaccurate and unfair to thousands of folk musicians, I know, but that's the way it is. Sorry.

Personal prejudices aside, most who seek to define folk can generally agree on a few points.

Folk music is generally thought to have an earthy, unadorned quality, to reflect some kind of grassroots truth or sentiment or to have an agitational bent. Folk has also, as Jon Landau wrote in 1972, typically implied "a strong bond between performer and audience, a natural kinship, a sense that the stars weren't being imposed from above but had sprung up from out of our own ranks. We could identify with them without hesitation."

Landau was talking about rock music as a form of folk music, though, which is indicative of how complicated all this can get. The above characteristics can be applied to just about any kind of music. In those terms, Public Enemy's intelligent agit-hip hop and Propagandhi's searing political hardcore qualify as folkier than most contemporary folk.

What's always kept me from embracing folk music is its tendency towards dogmatic traditionalism, symbolized most famously in the hostile reception that greeted Bob Dylan's first electric performance at the Newport Folk Festival - a move that smashed another preconception about folk, that it must or should be played acoustically, once and for all. The old idea that folk is somehow more weighty or "human" because it's transmitted with a minimum of technical mediation, that it provides a clearer window on the human soul because the vocals aren't drenched in layers of Jesus and Mary Chain-level distortion, nonetheless persists.

That anti-technological stance is weakening, though. And, ironically, helping to strengthen the traditional image of the folk singer as self-contained, self-sufficient solo balladeer.

Lately, I've been drawn repeatedly to a couple of records from last year - Joseph Arthur's brilliant *Come To Where I'm From* (which I haven't stopped playing in more than a year) and the lesser-known Jai Agnish's *Automata* - that drift closer to the definition of folk than they do to other forms of popular music.

Arthur and Agnish are both darkness-prone singer/songwriters - Arthur's is a desolate, intensely Midwestern breed of romantic and existential anguish, while Agnish tempers a keen eye for the hollowness of material life with his Christian faith - who usually perform their heart-on-the-sleeve compositions alone, accompanying themselves on guitar. Both also employ electronics to greatly expand the performance potential of folk's typical guy-with-a-guitar format.

Arthur's live shows are legendary for the way he uses a few pieces of electronic gear to generate virtual-band accompaniment - percussion, phantom atmospherics, a chorus of himself - and hair-raising levels of intensity by sampling and looping his voice and stray noises made by his guitar.

Agnish, meanwhile, strums his glum, Red House Painters-ish tunes along to various beats, blips and squawks programmed beforehand. It's not a particularly new idea, but the young New Jersey singer's curious ear for samples and unconventional, techno-savvy accompaniment adds a captivating new dimension to some already-gripping songs.

(If you're curious, Agnish returns to Ted's Wrecking Yard, where he made several new fans earlier this year, for the weekly Wavelength showcase tomorrow night.)

Not sure how it plays with the purists, but to me, Arthur and Agnish and their ilk (Toronto's sampledelic Tamara Williamson qualifies, for instance, as does Beck when he's in the right mood) represent an intensely interesting millennial update on the old folkie-as-roving-troubadour image, whose do-it-yourself ethic long predated punk.

They're honest, guitar-toting singer/songwriters who travel solo with a minimum of fuss and baggage, but who also use technology to fortify their stand-alone position and to further enrich their singular visions.

They make great music, too, which helps. Sift through all that ponderous over-intellectualization, and that's all I'm saying.