

Music DVD Review: America's Music Legacy: Folk

If you like your folk music raw and authentic, you will more than likely find the *America's Music Legacy: Folk* DVD something of a disappointment. Hosted by Theodore Bikel, the DVD essentially consists of two TV shows from the eighties, one headlined by Glen Yarbrough without The Limelighters, the other headlined by The Limelighters without Glen Yarbrough. Now while The Limelighters were a mighty popular folk group back in the day, they were never particularly thought of as genuinely authentic. They were popular because they were popularizers. This is not to say they weren't brilliant at what they did; unquestionably they were. It is simply to say that they were not after the same kinds of basic sound of say a Woody Guthrie or a Leadbelly. That they are the show's headliners is some indication of its aesthetic direction. If folk music is music sung by plain folk, these guys were not 'just' plain folk.

They are joined by a collection of singers and musicians who were important voices in the folk revival of the sixties and seventies as well as some newer voices. There are some that stick to the basics. Jean Richie has that distinctive Appalachian roots sound as she accompanies herself on the dulcimer to "March Down to Old Tennessee" and the story ballad, "They Call Me Jackeroo." The blind guitar master, Doc Watson keeps it real with unadorned versions of "Fix Me a Pallet" and "I Got the Blues." Singer/song writer Hoyt Axton does a nice "Greenback Dollar," and a newer group, the Blue Flame String Band revives the authentic folk sound with "Aunt Caroline Dyer Blues."

On the other hand, some of the performances go for the ornate and the mannered rather than the simplicity that characterizes the best of the folk genre. Odetta's medley of "The House of the Rising Sun," "Old House" and "Good Night Irene" for example approaches the Baroque in its ornamentation. Nitty Gritty Dirt Band alumnus John McEuen's "Old Man from Missouri" is little more than an opportunity for him to show off his chops on the banjo. Buffy Saint Marie's "Starwalker" focuses more on artifice than it does authenticity. You only have to compare it to some of the Indian chants preserved on Folkways to see the difference. It is not that art is bad and authenticity is automatically good, it is simply that if you want authenticity, you're not going to get much of it on this DVD.

Yarbrough and The Limelighters are the best example. There is no one better at doing what they do. They can take a song and deliver it with wit and passion. At their peak the trio had a vocal blend that could send chills up your spine. Yarbrough still has that kind of magic tenor. The trio without him still has that infectious sound. These are artists that are not interested in rough edges. These are artists that are interested in taking the crude raw material and transforming it into something more palatable to the broader audience. Yarbrough does some new material; The Limelighters do some of their old repertoire. It is all done very well, but it is folk art with the emphasis on art. Still it is nice to hear "There's a Meeting Here Tonight" and "Lonesome Traveler" again.

This is not quite true of the updated version of *The New Christy Minstrels*. The grins and eye rolls that accompany their "Little Liza Jane" and the Gershwin medley are nothing short of parody. They could have well been a model for Christopher Guest's satiric mockumentary, *A Mighty Wind*. In some sense, much of what is happening on the stage in these shows could have served as grist for Guest and his cast. The cutesy patter written for Bikel's introductions, the obvious pleasure that Dave Van Ronk takes in the dramatic play on New Jersey geography in his "Garden State Stamp," Josh White, Jr.'s off hand references to his father, all could easily be pushed into parody.

The DVD includes some short clips of classic folk singers and snippets of interviews with a few of the performers. The clips are little more than a tease and the interviews offer nothing very substantial. Yarbrough tells how he began singing folk songs at parties in Greenwich Village to pick up girls. Axton talks about his eclectic taste in music, from Chuck Berry to Bach. Saint Marie explains what the Native American powwow was like. This kind of additional material probably was intended to give the shows something of a documentary feel, but in the end the *Folk* DVD like the others in the *Legacy* series is essentially about performance. If you like your folk music smoothed over, you'll like this DVD; if you like it red in tooth and claw, this one's not for you.

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