

Away to WISCONSIN

From lumberjack songs to Lithuanian hymns

By Gabriel Miller

Folk music is often seen as having a telescoping effect: in concentrating on the travails of the itinerant laborer or ruminating over a particular historical incident, folk music captures the essence of time and place, and gives form to much more abstract ideas like statehood, culture, and generation. Like other arts that became commercially viable during the twentieth century—the cinema comes to mind—folk music is also seen as perpetually “dying,” a quality due more to the association between folk music and icons like Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan than the much more realistic link between folk music and, say, Christmas carols. But this quality also adds to our nostalgic longing for the simpler times described in verses such as this one:

Since times are so hard I must tell you, sweetheart,
I've a good mind to sell both my plow and my cart,
And away to Wisconsin on a journey to go
For to double our fortune as other folks do.

—Song lyrics from *Away to Wisconsin*

It is ironic then that in her travels across the state recording folk music for the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the Library of Congress in the early 1940s, UW–Madison Professor of Music Helene Stratman-Thomas found some potential performers unwilling to record their music. They could not understand why the songs they had sung in

the barn, heard in the kitchen, or hummed at the logging camp should be recorded for posterity. “How come you want these old songs?

There hasn't been anyone asked me to sing them in years. I didn't think they were any good any more,”

one of the older singers skeptically responded to her request to record him.

Under the sponsorship of the Library of Congress and the UW, Stratman-Thomas set off in 1940 with recording technician Robert Draves in a one-seated Ford to record as much folk music as possible with their Soundscriber recorder—a delicate, primitive machine that etched four and a half minutes of music onto eight-inch green shellac disks. The Soundscriber can still be seen in UW–Madison's Mills Music Library; the Ford, on the other hand, has since been relegated to lore: it blew a tire outside of Spring Green and Stratman-Thomas finished the trip back to Madison on the rim.

Over the course of three such extended trips crisscrossing the state from Beloit to Superior and Green Bay to Black River Falls, Stratman-Thomas would record nearly 800 performances in twenty foreign languages and eleven American Indian languages. She would record the performances of twelve-year-old children and eighty-year-old men and women alike, in many cases accompanied by little-known traditional European instruments or basic imitations made from materials found around the home. Since that time, Stratman-Thomas's recordings have become arguably the most important musical collection of Wisconsin folk songs.

Throughout her journey, the self-perceived unimportance of ethnic folk music by many of the performers was countered by a younger generation who felt preserving the songs heard in barrooms, churches, and parlors was a necessary and important task. Stratman-Thomas's ability to cultivate an informal network of local and regional folk music “experts” underscored her abilities as a collector. Although her previous training was primarily in classical music, Stratman-Thomas had a humility and diplomacy that allowed her to interact with people from all walks of



"Life was not cheap in nineteenth-century Wisconsin, but it was frequently brief."

— Harry B. Peters
Introduction

Folk Songs Out of Wisconsin



life. She also instinctively understood the link between work, class, and folk music.

“One type of folk singer for whom we were constantly looking was the true lumberjack ... Since not all lumberjack songs are intended for ladies’ ears, it was sometimes suggested that I ‘just wait in the car!’” Stratman-Thomas wrote in her field notes for August 25–27, 1940. In Black River Falls she found one of her “true lumberjack” singers in Charlie Bowlen, whom she would revisit several times. After one recording session, Bowlen told Stratman-Thomas, “My senator said he went down to that library in Washington and he got out my record and heard me singing.” Realizing the importance and scale of her project, as well as the pride with which some of the singers recorded, Stratman-Thomas returned to Madison and immediately requested more money for her project.

Although Stratman-Thomas may be seen as a visionary collector during a time when women were just beginning to enter the work force en masse as a result of the second World War, she was also working within a greater milieu of folk music preservation spearheaded by Alan Lomax (with whom she corresponded and received direction) and other ethnomusicologists at the Archives of American Folk Song, Library of Congress.

Where Stratman-Thomas differed was in her approach. While other folk recordings tended to concentrate on Anglo- and Afro-American songs, she recorded a variety of ethnicities and forms. She would record spirituals by the daughters of former slaves in the same way she would



Experience it for yourself...

The UW–Madison Mills Music Library has recently launched *Wisconsin Folksong: The Helene Stratman-Thomas Collection*, a Web site featuring audio clips and photographs collected by Stratman-Thomas during her trips, as well as information about the performers and instruments heard in the recordings. The site also hosts the Wisconsin Folksong Database, a searchable collection of nearly 800 performances representing more than thirty ethnic or geographical sources from around the state.

http://music.library.wisc.edu/hst/hst_history.htm

record Lithuanian folk hymns; she recorded recitations, poems and square-dance calls, in some cases, if she found it of value, she would simply let her Soundcriber run and record conversations.

Although it has been said that the content of Stratman-Thomas’s Wisconsin folk song recordings do not differ significantly from the folk songs of other Midwestern states, one result of her request to extend the project was the documentation of working conditions for jobs specific to the state. Songs such as *On the Banks of the Little Eau Pleine*, *The Cranberry Song*, and *Lost on the Lady Elgin* depict the harsh working conditions of logging and cranberry farming, as well as the disaster-prone reality of turn-of-the-century steamship travel.

The recordings that comprise the Helene Stratman-Thomas Collection do not provide any kind of comprehensive look into the experience of living in Wisconsin sixty years ago. Like the folk songs we continue to sing today—wedding songs, funeral marches, and holiday carols among them—the songs are much more indicative of the high and low points of individual experience and simply one piece of the continuing, dynamic history of folk music. More remarkable perhaps is the rough sketch of Wisconsin’s ethnic groups in transition drawn from Stratman-Thomas’s notes, private reflections and interactions in the field. The candor, or hesitancy, with which many amateur performers approached recording reflects the importance of the songs themselves and says something about the singer’s self-identity—for many, their songs were the last vestige of a cultural legacy spanning generations, a legacy that many worried was dying.



Detail of Soundcriber used by Helene Stratman-Thomas to record folk music around the state in the 1940s. Stratman-Thomas created a landmark collection that included spirituals by the daughters of former slaves as well as Lithuanian folk hymns.

Wisconsin folk music musings: *James Leary*

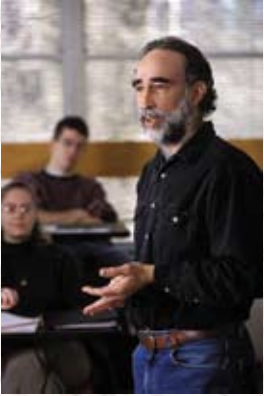


Photo: Jeff Miller

Wisconsin folklorist James Leary, director of the Folklore Program and codirector of the Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures at UW–Madison and author of several books on Wisconsin and Midwestern folklore, discusses the university’s Helene Stratman-Thomas Collection and folk music in Wisconsin. Leary recently received a 2006 Distinguished Teaching Award from the university.

What complications did Helene Stratman-Thomas face as a woman in a profession that at the time was dominated by men?

She was in sort of a difficult position. As I recall, she was either up for tenure or her status as a member of the UW-Madison faculty was somewhat in question. This project was something that the chair of the music department, Leland Coon, was trying to find someone to do, and she had the pluck to take it on. If you look at the roster of UW faculty in the late 1930s and early 1940s, there weren’t too many women—it was unusual at that time. I think she had to work harder and show more than some of her colleagues.

What is the legacy of the work captured in “Wisconsin Folksong: The Helene Stratman-Thomas Collection”?

She was the first one to provide a full portrait of a Midwestern musical region. Before she began to do her work, the little work that had been done focused on American Indians or Anglo-Americans or maybe one or two ethnic groups. Helene Stratman-Thomas recorded people in more than twenty-five different languages. At the time, the openness of the nation to cultural diversity was not very great. There was almost an ideological expectation that “American” folk music would be kind of Anglo-American, maybe tempered a little bit with African American music. It was just really remarkable that she was that open to diversity. Nowadays that would be an expectation, but it wasn’t then.

I also think it’s pretty remarkable that someone from a music faculty, which at the time was very much oriented toward high culture and the so-called classical music canons—Beethoven, Bach, Verdi and what have you—to get down among the common people and look at their music in a serious way.

What distinguishes the folk music history that Stratman-Thomas found in Wisconsin from that of other Midwestern states?

We have the greatest variety of American Indian languages and cultures of anywhere east of the

Mississippi River. And because of the early arrival in rather large numbers of Germans especially, but also Norwegians, Czechs, and Poles, we just have an incredible concentration of non-Anglo Europeans in the state. I think some of the more interesting occurrences in Wisconsin come from the interactions between people who grew up as non-English speakers with other ethnic lines as well as with the Anglo-American traditions. You get some really interesting songs and tunes that are what you might call “creolized,” that are kind of a gumbo or stew—a mixture of a whole lot of cultural traditions. When you listen to them, you can recognize all these different cultural strains, and yet what you’re hearing has a certain integrity of its own as well.

What modern music traditions do you see emerging in Wisconsin that will one day become folk?

There are really interesting new songs being composed by the Hmong people that draw on their older verse structures and themes and singing style but have been modified to address the challenges of their new experiences in Wisconsin. In some cases Hmong musicians have adopted techniques of rock ‘n’ roll and hip-hop and wed that to their own language and traditional songs.

How long of a time period must pass before music becomes a folk tradition?

Tradition is always a combination of the old and new. In a lot of ways, I don’t think it takes any time at all. Folk music is fundamentally grassroots music that people in face-to-face cultural settings carry on and sustain and vary and adapt to their experience. It can be very new in certain aspects and yet the context may be pretty old. People debate it—for example, is the rave scene folk music with its drum bass? I would say as long as something is bubbling up from the grass roots and people are learning by interacting with one another rather than learning it from MTV, I would call it more folk than not.