March 21, 2016

Between the Sound and the Sea

From 1973 to 1976 native North Carolinian Karen G. Helms (1947-2003), while earning a Master of Arts degree in Ethnomusicology from East Carolina University in Greenville, NC, conducted fieldwork and research on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Helms knew that much emphasis had already been placed on the folk music of the Appalachian Mountains area, but little attention had been paid to the coastal plains, particularly the Outer Banks.

In 1977 a collection of her field recordings titled *Between the Sound and the Sea, Music of the North Carolina Outer Banks,* was released by Folkways Records and Service Corporation of New York City.

BETWEEN
THE SOUND
&
THE SEA
ORAL TRADITION: MUSIC OF THE NORTH CAROLINA OUTER BANKS
FOLKWAYS RECORDS FS 3848
COLLECTED BY KAREN G. HELMS
RECORDED BY OTTO HENRY & KAREN G. HELMS

According to the album's accompanying notes, "In the old oral tradition ballads of the area, one can still discover some of the uniqueness and beauty of the culture, its world view, and its values. Many of the original songs of the Outer Banks contain a more colorful and often more accurate account of past events which influenced the lives of the people than any history book or written record….

"All performers on this album are native folk musicians of the North Carolina Outer Banks. Their ages range from early fifties to early nineties. The music performed was either learned by ear, handed down by word of mouth through the years, or composed on the Outer Banks. Songs from the familiar popular repertoire of these musicians represent their interpretation of music from the mainland. The original music has never been written down in notation until this publication."

Although the vinyl record is no longer available, CDs, Cassettes, and Digital Downloads can be purchased on-line from Smithsonian Folkways (http://www.folkways.si.edu/between-the-sound-and-the-sea-music-of-the-north-carolina-outer-banks/american-folk/music/album/smithsonian).

The web site above also includes a Track Listing with clickable buttons that allow you to listen to short excerpts of each of the songs. Ocracoke Island musicians on the album include Elizabeth Howard (1910-1996), Edgar Howard (1904-1990), Lawton Howard (1911-2002), Maurice Balance (1927-2014), and Jule Garrish (born 1922).

Edgar Howard (with Banjo) & Maurice Ballance (with Guitar):

Liner notes include the following observations about various songs and the musicians:

- "A most unusual and unique vocal style…calling one's attention to the accent of the Bankers, often associated with an early form of English speech." ("Johnny O'Lou" sung by Dile Gallop)
- "It exemplifies the simplicity and beauty of the folk voice as well as the romantic lyrics so often found in this area." ("Amber Tresses" sung by Isabel Etheridge and Mary Basnight)
- "One variant [of this song] can be traced back to an old oral tradition melody from England " ("Nellie Cropsey" sung by Isabel Etheridge)
- "Old familiar tunes are played…here in a folk style on the mouth harp and learned by ear." ("Harmonica Medley" played by Jule Garrish)
- "Two old standards…[played] in a true folk style, with irregular interludes and individual interpretation of the melodies." ("Mandolin Medley" by Lawton Howard)

Lawton Howard (with Banjo), Jule Garrish (with Guitar) & Edgar Howard (with Banjo):

On September 12, 2014, Craig Daniel, from Raleigh, posted the following article on his blog, *Folklore in History*, about Karen Helms' collection of Outer Banks music (http://folkhistory.blogspot.com/2014/09/inventiveness-in-oral-music-on-north.html). He graciously granted me permission to reprint his article in its entirety. Daniel explained to me that he is “not an academic folklorist,” but that he is “deeply interested in the preservation of old pieces of culture.”

Inventiveness in Oral Music on the North Carolina Coast

By Craig Daniel

Not long ago I acquired an album – I use the term slightly generously – from Smithsonian Folkways entitled *Between the Sound and the Sea: Music of the North Carolina Outer Banks*. It’s a glimpse into the last generation of a lost oral tradition in coastal North Carolina, as captured by a modern folklorist without the prejudices that bedeviled the antiquarian tradition of prior decades of folklore studies, and so serves as a perfect case study for the role of authorship in at least some oral cultures.

The Outer Banks are a ribbon of narrow islands which hug the coast of North Carolina, sheltering the mainland from the open ocean. (“Banks” is an old term for what modern geologists call a barrier island, though it is occasionally applied to barrier peninsulas as well.) The island chain comes to an end at a peninsula known as “Bodie Island” (at one time detached from the shore, though the inlet has since closed) at the southern edge of Virginia, and at the southern border of the state it comes back into shore and merges once again with the mainland just north of the border with South Carolina. The sound side of the islands now form part of the Intracoastal Waterway, protected from the hazards of blue water, while on the sea side they are home to notoriously dangerous shoals and capes that, at one time, required the use of an extensive lighthouse system and made them a popular hunting ground for pirates (the most notorious among them being Edward Teach, better known as “Blackbeard”), who, knowing that part of the sea better than merchants who happened to pass through, had a distinct advantage. The first Europeans to settle the islands permanently came from northern England, and subsequently remained fairly isolated culturally from the other settlers who came to the mainland. The islands have been rather poor, with an economy dominated by shipping and seafood, until the twentieth century, when tourism has come to be the driving force of the economy.

Between the Sound and the Sea is a selection of some of the raw recordings taken by Karen G. Helms during her study of traditional music on these islands in the early 1970s. The singers from whom the songs come were already elderly at the time of the collection, and represent the last generation for whom oral music was only minimally influenced by modern recording technology and its fruits (though one of them sings in a vocal style I for one associate with vaudeville); the fact that the younger generations seemed not to continue this tradition was cause for remark even when Helms was making her initial studies. Even today's adults don't pass along this tradition much at all, and a folkie friend of mine in his twenties who grew up on Harker's Island (one of the places from which Helms collected music) tells me the modern folk repertoire inherits much of the pan-Southern tradition that has its roots primarily in Appalachia – though, he notes, old sea shanties are also still being passed along. (When I asked John to teach me a few songs he regarded as currently traditional where he grew up, some of the first things that came to mind were "New York Gals" and "Angeline the Baker", a sea shanty and a classic old-time mountain play party respectively. But then, he's also who recommended I look into *Between the Sound and the Sea*.) To hear another Carteret County native of my acquaintance describe it, the folk music of the islands today "was brought here; it isn't from here."

As is natural for a tradition belonging to an era when all life was at the mercy of the sea, the songs often speak of the lives of subsistence fishermen, of those who die at sea, and of boats that the islanders are able to salvage. The inheritance of English settlement is also seen in the propensity for ballads of lost lovers and of murder for which no particular cause is given, themes which pop up with greater frequency in that tradition than in most.

Something that's remarkable about this collection, because it is at odds with the stereotypes of what makes something "folk music" that many people inherit from Sharp, is that many of the songs being sung are credited to specific, named people (though these attributions may not all be correct – the romantic suggestion that the murder ballad "Nellie Cropsey" was written in prison by Nell Cropsey's killer is precisely the kind of story that would arise as readily in the absence of knowledge as if it were true), and some of them are even by the people who sing them. At the same time, these can be contrasted to a lot of modern singer-songwriters who, detached from the inheritance of any particular folk tradition, don't write in the style of any particular body of orally-transmitted music; also, like many of the most authentic folk musicians who write their own music today, they freely blend their own compositions with things they learned orally in their own repertoires without seeing the distinction as an especially important one, and at least in some cases their songs are picked up by others and float about in the tradition. (In this compare Si Kahn, who was immersed in the Appalachian tradition while working as a mine workers' union organizer and whose "Aragon Mill," indisputably written in that style, crossed the pond and morphed into the now-traditional Irish song "Belfast Mill.")

Even having been composed in the twentieth century in many cases (even some of the traditional songs whose authorship is lost to the mists of time often refer to events that happened within the lifetimes of the performers), most capture something of a distinctly English musical style. "Amber Tresses," for instance, would fit right at home among the folk songs I've learned from my grandparents, most of which come from England (though often by way of American recording artists such as Burl Ives). Although written to commemorate a murder in Elizabeth City, NC in 1901, “Nellie Cropsey” derives from an identifiably English murder ballad family. Others, on the other hand, show clear influence from a decidedly American tradition; “Carolina Cannonball”, for instance, is written to the melody of “The Wabash Cannonball” and its first verse clearly derives from the original (though thereafter the words are a wry commentary on the influence of the telephone on the seafood industry), while “Ole Tucky Buzzard” is thought to have originated as a square dance tune before morphing into a lullaby on the islands. And these are, of course, not two disjoint categories of song; rather, the oral tradition on the Outer Banks inherits a lot from eighteenth-century settlers from England and the music they brought with them, on top of which influences have flowed in from the rest of America since then.

These singers are undeniably part of a living, evolving tradition of music sung on the Outer Banks, at a time when that tradition was still primarily an oral one. Change came slowly to the islands, as to many rural areas; “Carolina Cannonball” references people having to go to the Coast Guard station to be able to make phone calls, which for the singer had been true in living memory. To anyone who rebels against the non-traditional singer-songwriters who are labeled as “folk” by music marketers today, it’s common to swing too far and insist that a real folk musician doesn’t play anything that was written by anybody, instead tweaking old songs and passing them on in that form. To some, the only good songwriter is a dead songwriter. But to the island musicians whose voices are preserved in the field recordings made by Karen Helms, this is hardly the most salient feature. Rather, a song is either part of the tradition or from outside of it, and when a singer who is an heir to that tradition writes in the traditional style, it’s not outsider music. Some of these songs date at least to the late nineteenth century, some are recent compositions (the last track was written in 1973), but *all* of them belong to the islands.

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More information about Karen Helms’ research is available from the Southern Folklife Collection at the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library of the University of North Carolina (http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/p/Pressley,Karen_Helms.html):

Collection Number: 20324
Collection Title: Karen Helms Pressley Collection, 1973-1990 (bulk 1975-1978)