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PROVOCATEURS

MEET THE ANTI T-SWIFT TAKING FOLK MUSIC BACK TO ITS PROTEST ROOTS

Meet the Anti T-Swift Taking Folk Music Back to Its Protest Roots

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because it's toe-tapping — and can inspire us to change.

By Kristina Gaddy

THE DAILY DOSE SEPT 03 2017

Bearded and wearing a flannel shirt, Eli Smith stands on a block of cement with a banjo in his hand, offering it to passersby for a toss into Brooklyn's Gowanus Canal. But Smith isn't your typical folk-musician hipster, and the banjo toss is a gimmick. For this 34-year-old musician, producer and founder of the Brooklyn Folk Festival and the Washington Square Park Folk Festival, American traditional music isn't about a particular instrument or song or style. Rather, it's an idea: It's democracy, activism and personal creativity. "Folk music can open the mind to the fact that there is another way to live, that there is another world that is not a part of the 24-hour news cycle, that doesn't need to buy plastic stuff," he tells OZY. As a member of the Down Hill Strugglers (included on the soundtrack to the Coen brothers' *Inside Llewyn Davis*) and through his festivals, Smith is stirring up a modern-day folk revival — picking up the thread of protest that connects the Beats from the late 1950s to today's performers like Jerron "Blind Boy" Paxton and Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir.

Smith grew up in New York City's West Village in the 1980s and '90s, the red-diaper baby of Jewish political organizers and advocates for abolishing capitalism and establishing genuine political and economic democracy, according to their son. Listening to his parents' Woodie Guthrie and Pete Seeger albums, Smith understood that folk music is the people's music — about the most urgent issues of the day, from fighting against fascism and the war in Vietnam and for fair wages. By contrast, the contemporary music he heard coming from the radio sounded meaningless and irrelevant. So Smith started searching for the music that once filled his Greenwich Village neighborhood — the blues giant Lead Belly had played at his elementary school and Bob Dylan strummed in coffeehouses around the corner from his apartment — and made it his mission to bring those sounds back to the city.

WHO'S TO SAY THAT JUST BECAUSE PEOPLE ARE EXPOSED TO UNDERGROUND FOLK MUSIC THEY WILL CONSUME LESS, CREATE MORE, JOIN A PROTEST OR WRITE THEIR SENATOR?

It's the kind of music, according to Nancy Groce, a musician and folklife specialist at the Library of Congress, that creates social gatherings and a sense of community in an age when people are sitting at home and buying things online. "He [creates community] very effectively and very passionately, using some of the organizing principles and spaces that were traditional to an older left, and he's expanding them and providing them for a new generation," she adds.

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American folk, or traditional, music didn't set out to be overtly political, but as far back as the 1880s, labor unions started changing the lyrics to traditional melodies and church music to create songs in support of their movement. That continued through the New Deal, when mill workers and coal miners in North Carolina and Kentucky wrote and recorded hits about the struggles in their everyday lives. "When the folk revival started in the 1930s, a lot of the people on the left had a political agenda and used the American folk song as an organizing principle," says Groce.

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Eli Smith

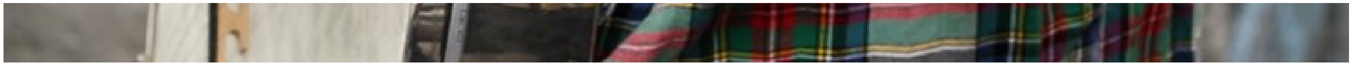
SOURCE LOU MURREY

Smith wanted to carry that tradition forward, using the soundtrack of his youth not so much for political ends but to galvanize his DIY generation. His message? If something is missing in your community, create it. He believes mainstream culture is not innovative; rather, it promotes passivity and dependence that drain people's ability to effect change. Smith, who calls himself a socialist, believes that folk music can inspire people to step back from overconsumption of "stuff" and toward thinking critically about what they enjoy and what matters to them — and then set to creating it.

At the heart of Smith's mission is giving people alternatives to hypercommercial music by making their own music, supporting artists on independent labels and paying to hear music in small venues. From 1920 to 1960, Groce explains, there was a dramatic shift from Americans producing music to becoming consumers of it; post-1960s, she adds, even fewer people were making their own musical entertainment and had resorted to buying it instead. And what most people are buying, according to Smith, is "banal, deeply boring and safe."

Eleven years ago, Smith and ethnomusicologist Henrietta Yurchenco co-created the *Down Home Radio Show*, a weekly music program that blended interviews with musicians and activists. In the lead-up to the 2008 election, they urged listeners to vote as they broadcast songs about war, immigration, women's issues, the division between church and state, universal health care, the environment and upholding the Constitution. The show still airs, but less regularly since Yurchenco passed away and Smith branched out to new projects to extend their vision.

One such project was teaming up with Geoff and Lynette Wiley, founders of the Jalopy Theatre and School of Music in Brooklyn, to establish a home for folk music in New York City. In one location, up-and-coming musicians can play in front of paying customers, an independent filmmaker can screen a movie about the history of the banjo, and students can purchase a guitar and take an eight-week class on Bob Dylan. Since their initial collaboration back in 2006, Smith and the Wileys also launched Jalopy Records. They've only signed 11 artists and produced 15 records so far, but theirs is the only folk music label in New York.



A budding, and very serious, musician at the Brooklyn Folk Festival.

SOURCE KRISTINA GADDY FOR OZY

In 2008, Smith launched the Brooklyn Folk Festival at the Jalopy. With just one stage and a capacity of 100 people, the event quickly outgrew the space and is now held at the historic St. Ann's Church. The headliners aren't big names — nor are they meant to be, says Smith, who explains that most people just show up to hear good music. Even Suze Uttal, a blues critic for *No Depression*, says she didn't recognize many of the acts but she "was introduced to some fine people — musicians, a writer and a filmmaker — who enriched my life." Now in its 10th year, the three-day festival features more than 35 bands, a square dance and jam, plus nonmusical events such as book readings and film screenings.

More recently, Smith started the Washington Square Park Folk Festival, which is significantly smaller than the Brooklyn event, but it returned the music to the neighborhood where it all began for him. Started in 2011 in conjunction with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, the one-day event is free to the public and draws a crowd for an afternoon of music, song and dance.

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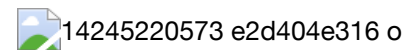
Smith tells OZY he's beginning to book more acts with political messages at his festivals. At this year's Brooklyn Folk Festival in April, for instance, Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir sang about the dangers of climate change, gentrification and consumerism. But Smith is clear that he doesn't want politics to overshadow his events — the focus will always be the music he calls "deeply human."

John Cohen, a photographer who documented 1950s West Village life and went on to found the New Lost City Ramblers in 1958, recalls, "Folk music at that time was such a big, cultural thing." Groups like his were consciously trying to be less commercial and more authentic, in opposition to the Kingston Trio and Peter, Paul and Mary. Cohen, Smith's mentor and friend, says folk musicians face the same challenge today — a challenge he and Smith share when they play together in the Down Hill Strugglers.



Eli Smith (center) with the Down Hill Strugglers, an old-time string band *The New Yorker* called the "very best interpreters of traditional material presently going."

SOURCE M. SMITH

Striving for authenticity and resisting the commercial juggernaut are admirable goals, but who's to say that just because people are exposed to underground folk music they will consume less, create more, join a protest or write their senator? Cohen has seen mixed results from more than 60 years of folk music, and the legacy of protest singers and activists who fought for clearly defined causes. "Who are the [musical] descendants of Phil Ochs? They're militant. And who are the descendants of Bob Dylan? They're all over the place," he says. Cohen also points out that the Newport Folk Festival, the oldest and most prestigious of the folkfests, has given in to booking big-name performers like Wilco, The Decemberists and Norah Jones in order to survive — and, perhaps, to make it commercially feasible to open slots on the lineup for much lesser-known musicians.

Whether or not you agree that music can bring about change, consider this: Punk and hip-hop occupy similar spaces to folk — both started as radical underground scenes before getting co-opted, and today the underground and commercial exist in two parallel planes. What Smith is trying to accomplish in the folk realm is instructive: Assuming mass culture is here to stay, and some artists will be motivated by purely commercial rewards, musicians and fans can still choose to create an intentional community with shared ideals that drive us to think for ourselves. Sound trite? Sure. But a collective push for less plastic and more purpose? That could be a countercultural movement worth signing onto. Especially if it's set to good tunes.

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