

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

by Kristina Gaddy // September 3, 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.

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.

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.

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.