Folklife Today
January 2020: Winter Songs, Part 1

Stephen Winick: Welcome to the Folklife Today podcast. I’m Stephen Winick, the editor in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, and the creator of the Folklife Today blog. I’m here with John Fenn, the head of Research and Programs at the Center.

John Fenn: Hi, folks! It’s wintertime, and the American Folklife Center has a lot of great songs on winter themes in our collections. In fact, so many that we’ve prepared an epic look at winter songs over two episodes.

Steve Winick: That’s right. These are songs of cold weather, ice and snow! And we’ve asked some of our staff members to come talk about their favorite archival recordings of winter songs.

John Fenn: And I wonder if you’d like to get us started, Steve?

Stephen Winick: I’d love to. I brought along a song called “I Rode Out one Cold Winter Night.” It’s by Hettie Swindel of Freeling, Virginia, and was recorded from her by Herbert Halpert. It’s a great example of an Anglo-American lyric love song. Why don’t we hear it and then I can say how I came to find it.

John Fenn: Sounds good. Let’s hear “I Rode Out One Cold Winter Night.”

Hettie Swindel:

I rode out one cold winter night
A drinking of sweet wine
And there I met the pretty little girl
That stole this heart of mine

Her cheeks are like some pretty pink rose
The blooms in the month of June
Her voice is like some musical instrument
Has been newly put in tune

So fare you well my own true love
So fare you well for a while
I’m going away but I’m coming back again
If it is 10000 mile

10000 mile my own true love
Through England France and Spain
And my poor heart will never be at ease
Till I see your face again.

Oh don’t you see that pretty turtle dove
A sitting in yon tree
She’s mourning for her own true love
And that’s the way of me

The crow that is so black my love
Shall surely turn to white
If ever I prove false to you
Bright day will turn to night

Bright day will turn to night my love
The elements will mourn
The fire will freeze and be no more
And the raging sea will burn

Oh who will shoe them pretty little feet
And who will glove them hands
And who will kiss them red rosy cheeks
When I’m in a foreign land

My papa can shoe my pretty little feet
My mama can glove my hands
And you can kiss my red rosy cheeks
When you come from a foreign land

Supposing that the sea runs dry
And rocks would melt by sun
Oh stay with me, my own true love
Till all these things are done.
John Fenn: Again, that was Hettie Swindel of Virginia. And I hear echoes of a lot of lyric songs like “My Dearest Dear,” “Lonesome Dove,” and “Ten Thousand Miles” in that song.

Stephen Winick: Exactly right. In American lyric songs, it’s common for verses to be borrowed back and forth between one song and another, and scholars and singers often call those kinds of lyrics “floating verses.” So if there are a lot of these floating verses, it’s hard to tell if the thing you’re listening to should be considered a version of “Turtle Dove” or “Dearest Dear,” for example. And that can be frustrating if you’re trying to classify songs, but mostly for me it’s a lot of fun to discover all the new combinations of verses out there, and how they all kind of resonate differently with each other!

John Fenn: How did you come across this recording, Steve?

Stephen Winick: Years ago, the American Folklife Center did a symposium based on Robert Burns, the great 18th Century Scottish poet. Burns of course based a lot of his poetry on Scottish folksongs. In fact, a lot of his poems are really only lightly touched-up versions of folk verse intended to accompany traditional music. His work appeared in song collections with titles like *The Scots Musical Museum*. So I was asked to do a presentation on Burns-related material in the archive. At that time we had just recently digitized our disc-era card catalog, and I realized this presented an opportunity to show people how a knowledgeable curator can be aided by these new digital research tools. So my knowledge came in because I knew that there was a lyric song in the American tradition, which Doc Watson learned in his family as “A Rovin’ on a Winter’s Night.” And I knew from hearing that song that it shared a lot of lines with Robert Burns’s “My Love is Like a Red Red Rose.” But I didn’t know for sure if we had any versions in the archive. And if you look in the physical card catalog under “Rovin’” you don’t find it, because we have no version whose title, as given by the performer, began with the word “Rovin” or “roving” or “a-rovin,” or any of those variations. So if you had to just use the physical card catalog, you’d conclude we probably had no versions of this song. But if you are able to do an electronic keyword search on “Winter,” you find this song among others, and its title “As I Rode Out One Cold Winter Night,” sure sounds like it could be a version of the same song as “A-Rovin’ on a Winter’s Night.”
John Fenn: And is it?

Stephen Winick: It sure is, and the iconic verse that Burns opened his version with is there. Burns wrote:

O my Luve is like a red, red rose  
That’s newly sprung in June;  
O my Luve is like the melody  
That’s sweetly played in tune.

And as you heard, Hettie Swindel sang:

Her cheeks are like some pretty pink rose  
That blooms in the month of June  
Her voice is like some musical instrument  
Been newly put in tune.

John Fenn: Wow, a great variant of the same basic idea. But in the old card catalog, you couldn’t have found this?

Stephen Winick: Right, because all you have is cards sorted alphabetically, so it’s very unlikely you’d find “As I rode” if you’re looking for “Roving.” But once you can search for keywords anywhere in the title, “winter” did the trick.

So that’s kind of a nerdy response to the song of course. But I also just love pretty much everything about that song. The images of lonesome birds and pretty flowers, the forlorn lover theme—it’s just a great old lyric love song. And I love Hettie Swindel’s personality as it comes through in the recording. And I even got to know Dr. Halpert a little, over 50 years after he made this recording. So all in all, it’s one of my favorites, and a little-known gem from the Archive.

John Fenn: Hey, well thanks for bringing it along. As you know, I also brought along a couple of favorites!

Stephen Winick: Excellent! Let’s hear your first one!

John Fenn: This is by Sampson Pittman and Calvin Frazier, and it was recorded by Alan Lomax in Detroit in 1938. It’s a blues song which gives advice to people who might want to sign up to receive welfare. Naturally, it’s called “Welfare Blues.”
Stephen Winick: Great, let’s hear it!

Sampson Pittman:
Welfare’s helping people that cannot help themselves
Welfare’s helping people that cannot help themselves
I said, boys, they ain't gonna help you unless you've lived in Detroit one year

After your case is open they'll give you plenty of fuel and clothes
After your case is open they'll give you plenty of fuel and clothes
I said, boys, they won't help you till you have told everything you know

You go down to the welfare, they'll make you sit there all day
Go down to the welfare, they'll make you sit there all day
Until they know they ain't gonna help you, they'll make you sit there and wait

Oh, boys, I believe I'll go there myself
Yes, boys, I believe I'll go there myself
I say, I tell 'em I ain't got nothing, and I declare that I need their help

Stephen Winick: OK, so that was “Welfare Blues” by Sampson Pittman and Calvin Frazier. John, what made you connect that to the winter?

John Fenn: Well, first I should say that in our collections, there aren’t that many African American songs about winter, because so many of these recordings were made in the deep south, where bitter cold and snow aren’t as big a deal as they are up north. But as more and more African Americans moved northwards, during the Great Migration, for example, they had to deal with temperatures much colder than they were used to. Pittman and Frazier, who performed that song, were both from Arkansas, but found themselves in Detroit in 1938. And there’s a line in the song that is usually transcribed as “once your case is open, they’ll give you plenty of food and clothes.” But it sure sounds to me like he’s singing “fuel and clothes.” And it just makes me think how much of a necessity firewood or another source of heat would be for people in the Detroit winter. Apart from that, it’s also a great example of a topical blues song performed by its composer, and a song which sounds surprisingly contemporary for 1938.

Stephen Winick: Yes, that’s an amazing song from an important collection, so thanks for bringing that one along! Now, each of us has another song to
share later, but we also have some special guests today, including Theadocia Austen, who is our public events coordinator and produces our Homegrown Concert series. She picked a tune from one of our concerts for us. Hi, Thea!

Theadocia Austen: Hello!

John Fenn: Hey, Thea! What did you bring us?

Theadocia Austen: this is a tune played on the Norwegian Hardanger Fiddle by Loretta Kelley. The Hardanger Fiddle is an instrument with one set of strings that are played with a bow, and a second set of strings underneath that vibrate in sympathy with the ones being bowed. So it’s got a richer sound with more harmonics within each tone. This tune is played in several regions of Norway, but Loretta Kelley learned it in Telemark. It’s called “The Bells of the Church of St. Thomas.” And the tune comes with a legend that connects it to wintertime and to cold. It’s a legend about a lake that is not quite frozen all the way through. But we can let Loretta explain. This is from a Homegrown concert we produced in 2015.

Loretta Kelley: this tune is found in Valdres, but it was also played in Telemark, and this is Olav Øyaland's version. “The Bells of the Church of St. Thomas.” And there's a long legend about how when the church was dismantled they took the bells out of the tower and brought them down the hill, the mountainside, and they were crossing a frozen lake on a sledge with the two bells when the ice broke and one of the bells fell in and was lost. So, the bell at the bottom of the lake is still there, and it's said to answer the ringing of the bell that was saved when it rings in the new church that it was put into.

Hardanger Fiddle Music, applause

John Fenn: Wow, what a great performance! We got a tune AND a legend in that clip too—so thanks, Thea!

Theadocia Austen: You’re welcome! That’s a fun concert in which Loretta played with another great fiddler, Andrea Hoag, and the whole thing can be found on the Library of Congress website.

Stephen Winick: Now, as you know, John, in addition to producing our concert series, Thea is also our staff expert on Eastern European languages and singing styles, including Georgian, which is spoken in the Caucasus,
right at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. She has brought several Georgian groups to visit us and sing here at the Library of Congress. So Thea, I understand you’ve brought along a historical Georgian recording for us today.

Theadocia Austen: That’s right. Georgian folk music is widely known for its rich traditions of vocal polyphony. It is widely accepted in contemporary musicology that polyphony in Georgian music predates the introduction of Christianity in Georgia, which happened at the beginning of the 4th century.

Georgian polyphonic singing was among the first traditions to be inscribed onto the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity list by UNESCO in 2001, and it became part of UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008.

The Republic of Georgia is smaller than South Carolina, but as many as 16 different regional styles have been identified, although experts group these styles in different ways. The most general division is whether a song is more from the Western or Eastern Georgia traditions. All regional styles of Georgian music have traditions of vocal a cappella polyphony.

John Fenn: So what can you tell us about the style in this recording?

Theadocia Austen: In this recording you hear men singing in a traditional style of a Kartli-Kakhetian table song. You’ll hear one singer each on a top and middle voice harmonizing, but each singing their own improvised and elaborate ornaments. Beneath them all the other singers sing the bass pedal and support the top two voices. Probably the most well-known example of music in Kakhetian style is the patriotic "Chakrulo," which was chosen to accompany the Voyager spacecraft in 1977.

Stephen Winick: Alan Lomax was involved in making that selection as well, and there’s a blog post about it over at Folklife Today. But what can you tell us about this particular song?

The particular song that we’re going to hear is “Zamtari” which means “Winter.” It was recorded by Alan Lomax in 1964 in the Republic of Georgia, and it’s identified on his tape log as a Table Song from the Kartli-Kakheti region, which is in Eastern Georgia. Table songs are songs traditionally sung at a Georgian feast or supra, where songs and toasts to
God, peace, the motherland, long life, love, friendship and other topics are proposed by the Toastmaster or Tamada. He’s the MC of the feast. "Zamtari" or "Winter" is such a feast song. It’s is about the transient nature of life and is sung to commemorate our ancestors. It compares the tears falling from a young girl’s eyes to the petals falling off a rose when it has been withered by winter’s cold.

John Fenn: Wow, that’s a poignant image! Let’s hear the song.

[Singing in Georgian]

John Fenn: Once again, “Zamtari,” or “The Winter,” from Alan Lomax’s collection made in Soviet Georgia in the 1960s. You can hear more Georgian songs at the Association for Cultural Equity website, and we’ll link to it from the Folklife Today blog.

Theadocia Austen: Please do, because on that site there’s also a brief interview about this song, where Lomax asks the Georgian singer to find the song “Winter” in a book he had been given. The singer tells him the page number, but also tells Alan that Georgians don’t learn songs from books or from scores. They learn all the parts of their songs orally, and that the songs are passed down generation to generation. And from my own work with Georgians, I can tell you that this is still true today. The Georgian method of teaching songs, even to foreigners, is to teach orally, without a score.

Stephen Winick: We knew you’d have the goods on this song, Thea. Thanks for bringing both these pieces to us!

Theadocia Austen: You’re very welcome!

Stephen Winick: So John, are you ready to share your other winter song?

John Fenn: Sure! I’m staying with Lomax’s Michigan trip in 1938. In addition to the great Detroit blues, and a lot of unusual ethnic music, Lomax recorded some classic lumberjack songs. I brought one called “Once More a-Lumbering Go.” It’s sung by Carl Lathrop, who—believe it or not—was 80 when Lomax recorded this from him. And one of the things I love about it for this episode in particular is that there’s an introductory verse and a closing verse and in between there are four verses telling the story of a lumberjack’s typical life. And there are three verses about winter, followed
by one verse combining both spring and summer! So it really was a lifestyle focused on long winters in logging camps!

Stephen Winick: Sounds very cool—literally! Let’s hear it!

Carl Lathrop:

Come all you sons of freedom, and listen to my theme
Come all you roving lumberjacks that run the Saginaw stream
We’ll cross the Tittabawassee where the mighty waters flow,
And we’ll roam the wild woods over and once more a-lumbering go.
And once more a-lumbering go,
We will roam the wild woods over and once more a-lumbering go.

When the white frost hits the valley, and the snow conceals the woods,
The lumberjack has enough to do to find his family food.
No time he has for pleasure or to hunt the buck and doe,
He will roam the wild woods over and once more a-lumbering go.
And once more a-lumbering go,
We will roam the wild woods over and once more a-lumbering go.

With our cross-cut saw and axes we will make the woods resound.
And many a tall and stately tree will come crashing to the ground.
With cant-hooks on our shoulders to our boot tops deep in snow
We will roam the wild woods over and once more a-lumbering go.
And once more a-lumbering go,
We will roam the wild woods over and once more a-lumbering go.

You may talk about your farms, your houses and fine places,
But pity not the shanty boys while dashing on their sleigh,
For around the good campfire at night we’ll sing while wild winds blow,
And we’ll roam the wild woods over and once more a-lumbering go.
And once more a-lumbering go,
We will roam the wild woods over and once more a-lumbering go.

Then when navigation opens and the water runs so free,
We’ll drive our logs to Saginaw once more our girls to see,
They will all be there to welcome us and our hearts in rapture flow.
We will stay with them through summer, then once more a-lumbering go.
And once more a-lumbering go,
We will stay with them through summer, then once more a-lumbering go.
When our youthful days are ended and our stories are growing old,
We’ll take to us each man a wife and settle on the farm.
We’ll have enough to eat and drink, contented we will go,
We will tell our wives of our hard times, and no more a-lumbering go.
And no more a-lumbering go.
We will tell our wives of our hard times, and no more a-lumbering go.

Stephen Winick: Again, that was “Once More a Lumbering Go” here on the
Folklife Today podcast. That was one of John’s picks. He came to us a
couple of years ago from Oregon, so how could he resist a lumberjack song?

John: And that’s going to bring us to an end part 1 of our epic two-part
foray into Winter Songs, but first we should thank some people. All the
singers, musicians, and collectors—we’ve said their names already as we
played their great songs, and we’re grateful to the work they’ve done. We’d
also like to thank our guest on this episode, Thea Austen, and Jon Gold our
engineer!

Steve: And let’s not forget Mike Turpin and Jay Kinloch of the Library of
Congress for help in the studio, and to colleagues throughout the Library
who help us deploy this podcast once it’s produced. So thanks for listening,
and we’ll see you next time with more winter songs!

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit
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