Folklife Today Podcast

July 2021 Summer Songs Part 1

0:01 Announcer: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC

0:28 Stephen Winick: Welcome to the Folklife Today podcast. I’m Stephen Winick, Folklorist at 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: Hey, folks! It’s summertime, and we thought we’d do an episode on Summer songs to go along with our winter songs episodes from a few months back. Just like winter songs, the American Folklife Center has a lot of great songs on summer themes throughout our collections.

Stephen Winick: That’s right. We have some favorites, and we’ve asked a couple of our staff members to come along and talk about their favorite archival recordings of summer songs.

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

1:05 Stephen Winick: I would love to. I brought along a song called “Wild Mountain Thyme,” by an Irish group called “In The Willows.” The first words of this song are “The summer time has come.” And it’s got a very interesting history. It’s related to an old song called “The Braes of Balquiddher,” which was published back in the early 19th century by Robert Tannahill. But it was significantly adapted in the 1940s by an Irish singer and bagpiper from Belfast named Francis McPeake. The McPeake family says that Francie, as he was called, rewrote the lyrics to reflect his own life, and especially the loss of his first wife and his ultimately remarrying, which is in there in the song as “If my true love she were gone, I would surely find another.”

In the early 1960s, Pete and Toshi Seeger did a tour in which they filmed traditional folk music all over the world. And at the end of that tour they visited Belfast and filmed the McPeakes, including Francis the first but also his son Francis II and his grandson Francis III, and Toshi captured this song on film. And that film is our collections in the Pete and Toshi Seeger film collection. Then in 2007, Francis III, who had been in that session with the Seegers about 45 years previously, joined us at the Library of
Congress with HIS son, Francis IV, and their band. And they also played
the song for us. So be sure to visit the blog at Blogs.loc.gov/folklife and
look for summer songs to hear those versions!

2:47 John Fenn: Wow, that's quite a multi generational tale bringing us into
this tune. But how about the recording by “In The Willows?” How did that
come about?

Stephen Winick: Well, as you know, we’ve been running “Archive
Challenge” showcases at Folk Alliance International for many years. The
idea is that individual artists or groups select an item with a connection to
the archive, arrange it, and perform their own version in a special showcase
at the conference. So “In the Willows” chose the McPeakes’ two recordings
of this song, and this performance was recorded in February 2018 in
Kansas City, with Jennifer Cutting and me as the emcees.

3:23 John Fenn: OK, let’s hear it!

[Music: “Wild Mountain Thyme by In the Willows]

John Fenn: Once again, that was In the Willows with “Wild Mountain
Thyme,” one of our summer songs here on Folklife Today. And if you listen
to that song, it’s about young people going outdoors for the possibility of
amorous encounters—certainly a big part of our summertime songs! Our
second song has a hint of that also, and we thought we’d bring on a special
guest to talk about it. Nicole sailor is the director of the American Folklife
Center, archive and oversees the stewardship of cultural documentation
that we hold. Hey, Nicki.

Nicole Saylor: Hi, good to be with you!

8:27 Stephen Winick: Welcome, Nicki! One of the reasons we wanted to
have you talk about this next item is that it comes from the Wisconsin
recordings made by Helene Stratman Thomas, and we know you worked
with those recordings before you even came to AFC. So what was your role
working with this collection in Wisconsin?

Nicole Saylor: When I was a library student at University of Wisconsin
Madison, I had a job to put this collection online to put the recordings
online, create the descriptive information about them, go over to Wisconsin
Historical Society and scan in the photographs that went along with these
recordings. And so you can find the the final product online at the UW website.

9:00 Stephen Winick: And that Wisconsin collection is a great online resource. And it's actually how we found the song that we want to ask you about.

John Fenn: And what is that song?

Nicole Saylor: This is a Finnish song, sung by Jalmar Nukala and accompanied on the piano by his wife Mamie. It’s called Kesä-Ilta, which means “Summer Evening.” Our friend Cathy Kerst tells me that is a very well known song in Finland because it was collected by Elias Lönnrot, who collected folk songs in rural areas in order to validate the existence of a distinctive Finnish cultural identity. He stitched some of these songs together into the mythological epic the Kalevala, but he also published other collections. This one was included in his collection called The Kanteletar, or The Old Songs and Hymns of the Finnish People, collected in the 1830s and published in 1840. This is a book that has been a favorite source for traditional Finnish singers for almost two centuries. In the song, the narrator walks out on a fine summer’s morning and stumbles across a beautiful young woman who is singing and playing the Kantele, a traditional Finnish zither.

[Music: Kesa Ilta by Jalmar and Mamie Nukala]

12:01 Stephen Winick: Again, Jalmar and Mamie Nukala with Kesä-Ilta. So Nicki, this song is sung in Finnish but was collected in Wisconsin?

Nicole Saylor: Yes, that’s right. The singer, Jalmar Nukala, was actually born in a Finnish enclave in Michigan, and at the time of this recording lived in a Finnish community in Superior, Wisconsin. Funny enough, according to my colleague Jim Leary, he retired to a Finnish enclave in Florida. In those days it was pretty common still to be born in the US but speak a non-English European language as your first language.

Stephen Winick: One of the things I love about the song is that even though Mamie plays the piano, the Kantele, the iconic Finnish musical instrument, is mentioned. I should point out that in our 2021 Homegrown at Home Concert Series, we featured Kardemimmit, a group of three women who
sing and play Kantele, so if you want to hear what it sounds like, visit loc.gov/concerts/folklife and look for that concert from April 7, 2021.

13: 07 John Fenn: Hey, nice plug, Steve! And we should mention too that we had an ulterior motive for inviting Nicki to be our guest.

Stephen Winick: That’s right! We wanted to let Nicki make a little announcement.

Nicole Saylor: Thanks! My big news is that, as of the end of July, I’m no longer the director of the American Folklife Center archive. I have taken a new position as Chief of the Digital Innovation Lab here at the Library of Congress. So I’ll be primarily supporting the Library’s digital transformation over the coming years, but I’ll still be working with my colleagues in Folklife from time to time.

Stephen Winick: We’ll certainly miss you, Nicki!

John Fenn: Absolutely. But we also hope you’ll come to be a guest on folklife today now and then in the future!

Nicole Saylor: Oh, I will!

Stephen Winick: Thanks so much for joining us!

John Fenn: Yes, thanks—and all our best wishes in the new job!

Nicole Saylor: Thanks!

John Fenn: So both of the first songs we heard fell into that pattern of a young man roving out and finding a beautiful young woman out there. And I think the next song you’ve brought takes that and sends it in a wild direction.

14:05 Stephen Winick: Right! In this song the young man goes out on a bright summer morning and finds the ground covered in snow. He takes a ride on the moon, shoots a deer whose meat and hide fill a whole barn, and does other fantastical things. So it’s a great nonsense song, and it comes from the terrific North Carolina singer and banjo player Bascom Lamar Lunsford. In 1959, Lunsford came here to the Library of Congress and recorded his entire repertoire of over 300 songs, and this is from those sessions.
John Fenn: The song is called “On a Bright and Summer’s Morning.” So let’s hear it!


17:18 Stephen Winick: That was the banjo and singing of Bascom Lamar Lunsford, on that somewhat twisted summer song.

John Fenn: And we’re hearing songs of summer here on Folklife Today. We have invited another guest to join us and tell us about a song from the Archive. So let’s welcome Jennifer Cutting! Hi Jennifer!

Jennifer Cutting: Hi John, Hi Steve!

Stephen Winick: So Jennifer, I understand you’ve got another one of those songs that starts out as a typical summer song with the young man roving out, but then takes a twist.

Jennifer Cutting: Yes, that’s right! In this case, though, instead of finding a beautiful woman he finds another man whose wife is unfaithful, and who is left lamenting and rocking the cradle.

18:02 Stephen Winick: Great, we’ll hear it first, and then you can tell us more about it.

[Music: Mose Bellaire “As I Went a Walking One Fine Summer’s Evening] 

John Fenn: So Jennifer, what’s your connection to this song?

20:41 Jennifer Cutting: Well, as you know, I went to England for graduate school, and I studied with a man named Albert Lancaster Lloyd or Bert Lloyd, as I called him. And in my time, he was the foremost authority on English folk song. But back in the 1920s, he’d been very poor, so poor, that when he was only 16 years old, he went on a government assisted program to look for work in Australia. And when he got to Australia, he worked on sheep stations. And when he came back to England over 10 years later, he established himself as an authority on Australian songs. And he sang an Australian version of this same song about rocking the baby that’s none of my own. His version began. I am a young man from the town of Kiandra. But he admitted to having changed that first line, because he loved the name Kiandra so much. It was originally I am a young man cut down in my blossom, which is to say, cut down in my prime. And like many of Burt's
songs if it became the standard version of this song that you heard in folk clubs from the 1950s, right up to today.

Stephen Winick: Yes, Bert’s version is the first that I learned too! One thing it DOESN’T feature is a third person narrator who wanders out on a fine summer’s evening. But that’s what happens in Mose Bellaire’s version that we just heard, which kind of fakes you out into thinking it’s going to be a typical summer love song, and instead it’s anything but! One of the things that’s cool is that Bert Lloyd’s version featured this line “By the Lord Harry,” and I always assumed that that was some kind of Australian expression because it was in that Australian version of the song. But it turns out that Mose Bellaire sings “By the Lord Harry” too, so who knew? It’s interesting that the singer Mose and his wife Exilia were French Canadians living in Baraga, Michigan in 1938. They were both terrific singers in French but also sang in English. Alan Lomax recorded them singing a French-language religious ballad as a duet. And he also filmed them on silent color film, singing the same song. Our colleague, Guha Shankar, synced up the recording with the film, and you can find that as a bonus in the summer songs blog post at blogs.loc.gov/folklife

John Fenn: So Jennifer, there’s another reason we invited you on the podcast today.

Jennifer Cutting: why is that?

John Fenn: this next song features one of your favorite instruments, the button accordion! It’s the Russian version of the instrument, known as a Bayan. The song is from the Tuvan republic, but it’s not in the “throat singing” or overtone singing style that has become so popular. It was recorded by Alan Lomax in August 1964.

Steve. It’s the genre of song called a Kozhamyk. These songs often have traditional melodies but recently composed words. Since Lomax doesn’t identify who wrote the tune but identifies the poet as Leonid Borandaevich Chadamba, a Tuvan language scholar who was the first director of the Tuvan Institute for Research in the Humanities as well as a minister of culture of the Republic of Tuva, I’d assume this was the case here as well. The singer is Kara-kys Namzatovna Munzuk, and the Bayan player is Aleksandr Laptan.
John Fenn: The song is “Let The Sun Shine On My Verdant Summer.” Let’s hear it!

[Music: “Let the Sun Shine on My Verdant Summer”]

Jennifer Cutting: Oh, great song, great instrument. Let me help you all to picture this Russian accordion. Okay, instead of having a sideways piano shaped keyboard with black and white keys on one side, like the most common kind of accordion, the piano accordion, it just has rows of black and white buttons instead. And it can have an even bigger range than a piano accordion can, because the rows of buttons are so compact. And this makes the by on a great instrument for playing very dense music like Western art, music and jazz. But the song we just heard is just the opposite. It has only five notes of what we call a pentatonic scale. And it uses scale degrees, 1235, and six. If you play the black keys on the piano, just the black keys, one after the other, you’ll get the idea of this pentatonic scale. And our culture thinks of that scale as being kind of jolly and cheerful and sunshiny. So to me, it really sounds like “Let the Sun Shine on My Verdant Summer!”

Stephen Winick: Thanks, Jennifer! So that brings us almost to the end of our rundown of Summer Songs.

Jennifer Cutting: But before we go, John...did You bring a song?

John Fenn: Of course I did. I thought about all the happier lighter songs we were going to share in this episode and occurred to me that there was a harder side to summer to work songs often talk about how hot it is and how hard it is to do work in that heat. So I found a great work song recorded from a prison work gang in Brazoria Texas by John and Ruby Lomax in 1939. This is called “Long Hot Summer Days.” I love the way they make the last word of each line into a long moan—listen for “June July and August” about halfway through the song!

Stephen Winick: Yes, it’s a great work song and a classic holler. So let’s let it sing us out. But first let’s thank our guests, Nicki Saylor and Jennifer Cutting, who is still here...

John Fenn: Thanks, Jennifer!

Jennifer Cutting: Thanks for having me on!
Stephen Winick: And let’s also thank our Engineer Jon Gold, the singers and musicians, and all the colleagues throughout the Library who help us deploy each episode of Folklife Today. And of course, thanks to you John!

John Fenn: Thanks to you Steve, and here’s “Long Hot Summer Days!”

[Music: “Long Hot Summer Days.”]

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress, visit us at loc.gov