

## Folk Alliance Newsletter

### Performers Column

by Joel Mabus

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#### Sandburg's Songbag

Joel Mabus

The year 2002 brings with it a milestone anniversary in folk music. Seventy-five years ago, in 1927, Carl Sandburg published his massive collection of folk songs, *The American Songbag*. I've been poring over my copy recently, and have come to a renewed admiration for this ambitious, audacious, rambling, flawed but seminal collection.

In 1927, Burl Ives was a senior in high school in Jasper County, Illinois. Woody Guthrie was 15 years old and still in Oklahoma, and Pete Seeger was yet a boy in short pants. It was the year Ralph Peer would head to Bristol and discover The Carter Family and Jimmy Rodgers, but these artists and their repertoires were as yet unknown to the public. Leadbelly wouldn't be discovered for another seven years. Radio was still a novelty -- the Grand Ole Opry and the WLS Barn Dance were not yet hitting their stride.

Today, in 2002, we are as removed from Sandburg's publication date as he was then from Stephen Foster and the heyday of black-face minstrels. In 1927, blues and ragtime had been on the scene some scant thirty years, and the new sounds of hot jazz were filling the speakeasies of Sandburg's beloved Chicago. John Lomax and Cecil Sharp had been published, and Sandburg drew upon them both as source material. But there were many other sources too - some well documented and others not so well. Many of Sandburg's songs were of his own collecting from source singers in his travels on the lecture circuit pre WWI - or from the neighborhoods of Chicago and Milwaukee.

My 1990 Harvest Books edition (still available in print) has an excellent forward by Garrison Keillor, who points out the strengths and a not a few weaknesses of the *Songbag* as a folk music resource. He also speaks to many biographical details, some quite pertinent, such as Sandburg's use of guitar & folksongs to punch up his early lecture career circa 1914. (Other details not so pertinent to the collection, such as Sandburg "gentrifying" his name for a while to "Charles" are perhaps more interesting to "Gary" Keillor than to the rest of us.) Keillor takes Sandburg to task for not including any Scandinavian songs -- an understandable criticism considering Sandburg's ethnicity and Keillor's career theme.

But the *Songbag* was not intended as a scholarly text -- at least not primarily so. Today we remember Sandburg as the populist poet and Lincoln biographer, but he was also a folk song performer. One of the first to do so professionally outside of

barrooms and barrel houses. Early on in his career of giving public readings of his poetry, he discovered that nothing drew -- or pleased -- the crowds more than singing a few old songs with his guitar. The *Songbag* was in many ways, just that - Sandburg's bag of songs, many of which he was known to hold forth in recital. Some years after the publication of the book, he did, in fact, record many of his favorites in an accompanying album of 78 rpm discs. There was also a sequel - *The New American Songbag* (1950) now out of print.

My first acquaintance with *The American Songbag* was as a schoolboy in the early '60's. I used to check this book, along with the *Burl Ives Song Book* and Lomax's *Cowboy Songs*, out of our hometown Carnegie library and look up lyrics to the songs I had some knowledge of. It was simply a reference text for me then. Now, I am more drawn to the quirks, the fragments of songs and the alternate versions of old chestnuts that are included.

Of course, some of the chestnuts weren't quite as old in 1927. Sandburg gives us an entire chapter of songs relating to the story of Frankie and Albert (or Johnnie). While these were not "new" in 1927, they were not more than a generation away from their origins - when Frankie actually shot Albert. Similarly, Sandburg's two versions of "Brady" predate Leadbelly's recording of "Duncan & Brady" by twenty years, and were two years in print before Wilmer Watts' version was recorded as "Been on the Job Too Long." Again, about 30 years from the day that Duncan shot Brady in a St. Louis barroom.

There are a number of familiar folk standards given in an earlier, non-standard version. For example, "Ain't Gonna Study War No More" is printed, but with a melody very different - and less "arranged" -- than the one handed down to us by Pete Seeger and others in the post WWII era. For the student of history or a lover of folk song, *The American Songbag* is full of these glimpses into a pre-broadcast era of folk music.

To be fair, as a collector, Sandburg undoubtedly edited these songs somewhat to fit his esthetics as poet and performer. And yes, Sandburg handed his vocal & guitar versions of these songs over to an array of arrangers to make them piano-friendly, who in doing so surely altered them even more than he himself must have. And his penchant for prairie-town hyperbole is as present in his prose as in his early poetry. Given all that, the aggressively populist *Songbag* still stands as an impressive collection of the songs of the American people of the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a great resource for the modern folk performer.

"A small friend weighing less than a newborn infant,  
ever responsive to all sincere efforts  
aimed at mutual respect, depth of affection  
or love gone off the deep end."

--The Guitar, from Some Definitions by Carl Sandburg



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