

## The Continuing Tradition of Folk-Legacy Records

by Scott Alarik



Folk-Legacy Records is thirty years old. That may not seem so old for a record company, but for such a grassroots, bootstrap, ma-and-pa business, it is a very long time; and for an American record company devoted entirely to folk music, it is, quite simply, amazing. (Only Folkways Records is older, although it was all but dormant until the Smithsonian Institution recently – and most happily – resurrected it.)

Folk-Legacy's ma and pa are Sandy and Caroline Paton. They have always run it as a family business, first from their home in Vermont, and since 1967, from an amazing, eccentric folk music castle in Sharon, Connecticut.

Lee Haggerty founded the company with them in 1961, helping to finance it through its very tough early years, when it ran almost exclusively as a haven for purely traditional performers. He still manages much of the business affairs, working quietly in an upstairs office. He is one in a very long list of people who have approached Sandy Paton with a question or two about folk music and found their lives were never quite the same. Whatever else they may be, Sandy and Caroline Paton are folk music missionaries of the first order: still, after all the hardscrabble years, ardent and wide-eyed believers in the powers of tradition.

"The Continuing Tradition." In that brief logo, as in the title of their small company, the Patons sum up perfectly their vision both as performers and record company executives. They are devoted to traditional music, but not in any museum-shelf, archival way. The old songs are alive to them in very palpable, emotional ways.

As Sandy put it, "It isn't that the songs are good because they're traditional; they are traditional because they are good. They were preserved by generations of traditional singers because they reflected real feelings. If the songs were not good, they wouldn't have been saved."

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The “continuing” part of their logo is just as important to them. It is in the places where new sensibilities and old traditions meet that Folk-Legacy seeks its spark. Very early on, they began recording interpreters like themselves, and songwriters such as Gordon Bok, who used traditional roots to create new music.

Partly because the label is a family business, partly because they are so clear about what they want to record, Folk-Legacy Records has always had an uncommonly vivid personality. Listeners know that when they play a Folk-Legacy record, they will hear a soft, acoustic sweetness, a melodiousness, and arrangements that put the song out in front. Whether one person is singing alone, or is backed by many instruments and rich harmonies, the song will lead the singer.

“Sometimes we hear performers who are up there saying, ‘Look at me, I’m singing the hell out of this song,’” Sandy said. “I think what we both like is the singer who says, ‘Listen to this wonderful song.’ That’s what we look for, more than great stand-up performers.”

When the Patons talk about folk music, their points are frequently illustrated by stories about the old traditional musicians they met and recorded in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s. Sandy remembers recording 86-year-old Monroe Prescott for their brilliant Beech Mountain series, where they presented a colorful cross section of the musical traditions existing in that North Carolina township:

“I thought he was a great singer. He kept apologizing for his age. But through his age, one could hear the style. It was wonderful: his grace

notes, his embroidery, his direct honesty, and his love of the song. He’d finish a song, and I’d say, ‘Uncle Monroe, that was beautiful.’ And he’d say, ‘Isn’t it?’ It never occurred to him I was talking about his performance; all he was thinking about was the song.”

Visiting the Patons in their cluttered, eccentric and charming lair, it is instantly clear that no real line exists between their work and their lives. In their case, this is the happy symptom of lives well spent. Their children, David and Robin, live right up the road, frequently perform with them, and help with the business. The people they record are friends, as are the people who hire them to perform. They are completely frank about not wanting to record people they would not enjoy having in their home, recording studio, business office or warehouse for the time it would take to make a record.

Their truly amazing house was originally built as a barn and carriage house, then transformed into a home and classical music school called Fiddlestyx in 1939. All the things that made it a realtor’s nightmare – and affordable for the Patons and Haggerty – made it an absolute Brigadoon for people wanting to run a small recording studio out of their home.

There is a huge, airy room, designed for orchestra rehearsals and recitals, that makes a grand studio, and an adjoining area designed as a green room, replete with drawers for musical scores that perfectly fit master reels of tape: perfect for a control room. The house is divided into many small spaces and rooms, with two kitchens and a big living room. The many guest rooms are equipped with private baths. Shelves are piled high with old tapes, folk song collections, folklore books and records. All is wood-warm, rural and inviting. It is all friendly clutter, extremely homey; busy, but quietly so.

Trying to pin these two down for an interview is no mean feat. Time and again – a chatty, pleasant conversation going on all the while – one would get up to do some chore while the other spoke. One scurried to the copier, the other to the laundry. Sandy would snatch a minute here or there to stick mailing labels on catalogs. Seeing him occupied, Caroline would run off to her own always waiting work.

At last, they both sat down. Caroline

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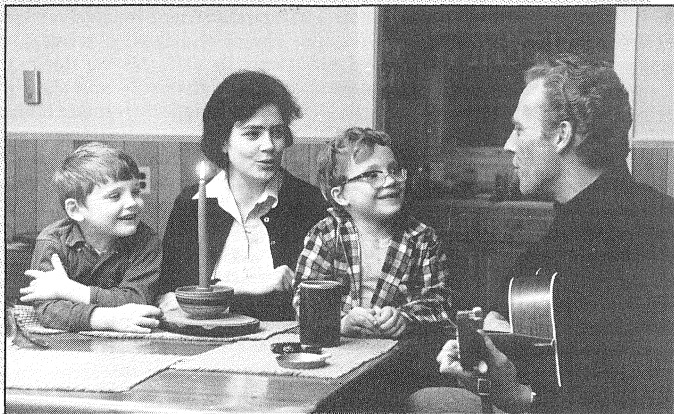
started, then Sandy got up to “just run a few things through the copier.” Finally, becalmed by memories, they leaned back and the stories came.

They met in 1957. Caroline actually was another who, like Haggerty,

approached Sandy to ask a question about folk music. He had sung a New England variant of “The Riddle Song,” and she wondered where he’d found it. As they told the story, they had a cheerful, anecdote-filled dispute about which collection it actually had been in, which led them to sample other variants they’d discovered on their travels: all punctuated, as much of their speech is, with snatches of song. It was easy to see how they hit it off so well. In many ways, they still seem to be in the midst of that conversation they began 34 years ago.

Sandy was singing a concert in Berkeley, filling in for a friend who had a chance to see the Weavers in San Francisco. Caroline went to the same concert at the last moment. Neither particularly wanted to be there; both instantly felt a connection.

Sandy had been on the road for years, since he began to grow impatient with the way high



The Paton family in Vermont, circa 1965.  
photo by Suzanne Szasz

school was interfering with his education – “I’m a guy who’s always figured that if there’s something I need to know, I can get a book and figure it out” – as well as with the family tensions and problems of being a teenaged army brat during World War II. He hit the road with guitar-strumming friends, following the wheat harvest through the Great Plains. Through scores of odd jobs, acting work and a desire to be an artist, folk music began to take over his life.

“I was becoming aware, politically, of the importance of paying attention to the working class and the underprivileged. I thought this music spoke to that; these were songs of working people, not art songs, not songs removed from life. It was music that spoke to the needs and concerns of people who were very real to me.”

By the time he met Caroline, he was an established folk performer. Before founding Folk-Legacy, he recorded an album for Elektra, legendary in folk circles as the first American recording of “Wild Mountain Thyme.” (He taught both that song and “Farewell to Tar-waithe,” which he had learned from Ewan MacColl, to Judy Collins when they shared a club gig in Denver.)

“My background was very different from Sandy’s,” Caroline said. Sandy eyed the copier in the next room, but a sad, worried glance from our intrepid interviewer kept him in his seat. “I really had quite a happy and very sheltered childhood. I was the kind of good kid who always tried to turn assignments in on time. I had listened to old 78s of Carl Sandburg and had always been fascinated by life on the frontier. I just never liked all this Tin Pan Alley stuff on the radio in the ‘40s; all the moon-June-croon stuff, like ‘I’m sad and I’m lonely; My heart would break; My sweetheart loves another, and

I wish I was dead.’ But songs about girls going from the alehouse to the jailhouse, from the poorhouse to the grave, I thought, ‘Boy, that’s real; there’s no “paper doll that I can call my own” there.’”

They were married less than four months after that first meeting (“Yes, Sandy lost his heart completely,” Caroline said sweetly), and off on a performing and collecting tour of the British Isles that had an enormous impact on the way they would design both their lives together and Folk-Legacy.

“For me, touring England and Scotland was a revelation,” Caroline said. “When I heard ballad singers like Isabel Sutherland and Margaret Barry and Jeanne Robertson open their throats and these big powerful voices came out, I decided to try it, and nearly scared myself. As I’ve said before, I’ve been crowding Sandy’s act for over thirty years. I would come up at the end, sing a little harmony. I was always afraid to sing in public until I met those singers. Their power really was a revelation to me. And what they cared about was the song.”

For Sandy’s part, his love for the traditional people and his desire to record them increased. But, in meeting people like Ewan MacColl and Hamish Henderson, with whom they collected in Scotland, another revelation came.

“At the time we went to England and Scotland, people like Ewan MacColl were writing new songs that sounded like traditional songs. They were so deeply immersed in the tradition. I thought, what a wonderful difference. In this country, people were taking traditional songs and trying to make them sound like pop songs.

“I became aware that there were singer-songwriters out there who had grown up listening to traditional music, and whose new songs reflected some of the style and the honesty of traditional music. They attracted me for the

same reasons traditional music had. So I invented the term we use, 'The Continuing Tradition,' because I feel these people do reflect, given all the influences of media in the modern world, a continuing of that impulse to create songs of meaning for people's lives."

After returning, Sandy spent a summer as musical host at a Colorado folk club where Glenn Yarborough was getting the Limeliter together. Soon, with one child born and another on the way, the travel required to be a folk-singer got to be too much for him. They ended up in Chicago, where he went to work building up a folk record collection for Kroch's and Boitano's bookstore. It was there that young Lee Haggerty wandered in, bought a hundred dollars worth of records, became Sandy's best customer, and began thinking he might wish to use his modest inheritance to start some sort of business with Sandy.

Chicago got the better of the Patons before too long, and, when a store in Vermont offered Sandy a job, they moved. There, Lee Haggerty caught up with them. One night, Sandy played him some tapes he had recorded of traditional musicians in North Carolina.

"Lee listened to these tapes and asked what I was going to do with them. I said, 'I thought I'd organize them and take them to Moe Asch down at Folkways,' because I'd already done that a couple of times. Lee said, 'Why don't we put them out ourselves?' I said, 'Well, one, I don't know how to make a record, two, I don't know how to edit; I know a little about distribution, but not enough.' So I got a book."

Haggerty financed the early going, and the three learned as they went. At that time, a number of record companies were doing the same thing: running on a shoestring, putting out records of folk music too traditional for the major labels. They included Vanguard, Elektra, Folkways, Riverside, and Tradition, which had been started by the Patons' friend Pat Clancy, of the Clancy Brothers. Sandy got advice there, and from his old traveling companion and fellow collector Paul Clayton, who was doing similar things for Stinson.

They knew what they wanted right away. "We felt it was important for the people in the tradition, people now called roots musicians – the people from whom we learned our songs – to be heard as they actually sounded."

Caroline said quickly, "But style, as well as substance, was important. You couldn't make a record of just anyone who had songs. You had to have that combination of someone who had traditional material and also who delivered it well. We were always looking for a combination of material and style."

"We knew Folk-Legacy would have to earn its own way," Sandy said, "and we knew it wasn't going to do that with just traditional albums. So, very early on, we branched out into interpreters, people who drew from tradition for their material, but who were like us, people who sang folk songs because they discovered them and learned to love them, but who were not the sources of them. So when The Golden Ring, some friends of ours from Chicago who had been singing together, sent us a tape they'd



Sandy recorded New York State ballad singer, Sara Cleveland in Huntington, VT in 1965.  
photo by Suzanne Szasz

made at WFMT radio station, we released that, too. That record, which was number 16 for us, did quite well and enabled us to record of Sara Cleveland, Norman Kennedy and others."

The Golden Ring records (Sandy took the name from a Jean Ritchie song), full of plain-spun and wonderfully pretty songs with lilting, choruses and gorgeous harmonies, became Folk-Legacy staples. The first was followed up by two "New Golden Ring." A new one, featuring the Patons and Ed Trickett, the only person on all three recordings, is in the works.

The other Folk-Legacy mainstay is Gordon Bok. For many, including the Patons, he personifies the "Continuing Tradition." His rich ballads trade on the rough, craggy romance of the Maine coast. He writes them with great respect, understanding and love for the people he knows there, dipping deeply into tradition's well for inspiration, then sketching with uncommon honesty and musical beauty.

Sandy said, "He's not only a fine musician, singer and songwriter, and a thoughtful person, but I remember what first attracted me was the same thing that attracted me to the songs of Ewan MacColl. Gordon was writing songs about the fisher people off Maine's coast that captured their lives: the hardship, devotion, and values. And, he was putting in those songs the words of the people themselves."

Caroline said, "I can't imagine Gordon changing his music in a self-conscious way, saying, 'Now this is what's trendy; how can I jump on this bandwagon?' And that certainly suits our style."

The next morning, plans are made to finish up the interview over lunch. Getting the two into their famous blue van proved as tricky as corralling them into their living room had been. Caroline gets a call and has to fill an order, which gives Sandy time for "one more quick cup of coffee." Of course, she comes into the kitchen just in time to see him pouring the coffee, so she now has time "just to get some mail together." He hears that and trots off "just to check the mailing list." She hears him pattering upstairs and makes another phone call.

Through it all, son David hobbles in and out, recovering from arthroscopic surgery on his knee done to get him ready for U.S. Olympic Team tryouts for whitewater canoeing. He mutters darkly about the Persian Gulf, then stops in the living room to play his hammered dulcimer. Eldest son Robin worries about needing to fix the roof, as he readies for a trip to the dump. His wife brings in 2-year-old daughter Linnea. The lure of Linnea finally nets both elder Patons in the kitchen, where, after only a couple more quick chores, they are led off to lunch.

When interviewing people who are perfectly content to wait two or three hundred years to find out if a song is any good, it is important to remain relaxed.

The Patons are busy and popular performers as well as record company executives. Financially, the two careers complement each other, making it possible for them to take both on their own terms. In addition to celebrating Folk-Legacy's 30th Anniversary and their 20th year with Bok, 1991 also marks their 5th year as regular Sunday afternoon folksingers at the Interlachen Inn in nearby Lakeville. When they're on tour, David fills in on hammered dulcimer.

As performers, they treat folk music with the same tender honesty they do at Folk-Legacy. Their vast songbag is delivered prettily but never busily, with voices and arrangements noted more for their honesty than cleverness. That pleases them.

"Because we perform," Sandy said, "we not only get to hear people, but we get to meet them; and that's important. I remember being asked once why we didn't record so-and-so, and I said, 'Because I couldn't live with the S.O.B. for a week.'"

Caroline said, "We never wanted to be a big label. We've known some small labels that were only small because they hadn't gotten big yet, but we like it this way. If we were a big label, we'd just have more hassles; it's like a ship collecting barnacles."

Sandy said, "If it became just a business, we wouldn't be in it. When I first was drawn to folk music, I saw it as music you could do rather than just buy. It was not a commodity that you purchased; it was something you really shared with others and enjoyed. I never met a traditional singer who was possessive of a song. They were so delighted to find someone who was interested, eager to save the songs by sharing them with someone else. Sara Cleveland's grandchildren now sing her songs, Frank Proffitt, Jr. sings professionally, using our recordings of his father as a resource. I am so happy to see a continuing family tradition there, just as I am to see it in our own family. It really is a continuing tradition."

Caroline said, "Now that there are a lot of younger, contemporary musicians whose style is less traditional, that seems all the more reason to keep doing what we're doing. We've never gone for the quick fixes, or tried to be trendy."

"And it worked," Sandy said brightly. "We're not." Then more quietly than he had said anything during the two-day visit, he said, "What is lucky is that there are a lot of people out there who agree with us."

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Songs from the Patons follow the next page 