

The American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress

The Benjamin Botkin Folklife Lecture Series

# Yodel-Ay-Ee-Oooo: THE SECRET HISTORY OF YODELING AROUND THE WORLD

A lecture by  
**BART PLANTENGA**  
based on his recent book  
**BOOK SIGNING TO FOLLOW**

Featuring yodelers  
**RANDY IRWIN and  
CATHY FINK**

☆☆☆☆☆☆

Tuesday,  
April 27, 2004

6:00 P.M.

**Mumford Room,**  
sixth floor of the Madison Building,  
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

**BART PLANTENGA**

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# THE SECRET HISTORY OF YODELING AROUND THE WORLD

Bart Plantenga's *Yodel-Ay-Ee-Oooo: the Secret History of Yodeling Around the World* (2004) looks at yodeling as a global phenomenon. It attempts to answer the question: How did a centuries-old Alpine tradition make its way into American country music? Along the way, we discover that yodeling is not just for the Swiss: everyone from Pygmies, rhinestone cow-people, avant-garde tonsil-twisters, and Hitlerjugend SS to pop stars like Jewel, Sly & the Family Stone, and Bollywood star Kishore Kumar have been known to yodel.

Perhaps the book's most controversial theme is in describing their way yodeling came to North America. The conventional explanation traces yodeling to Europe's Alpine region at no earlier than 1815, 200 years after the first Europeans arrived. But could the yodel have arrived much earlier? *Yodel-Ay-Ee-Oooo* argues that yodeling reached North America perhaps 150 to 200 years earlier. Evidence is scant, but the historical circumstances surrounding North America's early history raise questions:

For example, did Native Americans already yodel before the first Europeans stepped off the first boat? Certain Shawnee vocals sound suspiciously like yodeling. Listen to contemporary yodeler Peter Rowan's dovetailing of Bluegrass and Native American yodeling in *Old & In the Way's* "Land of the Navajo." That Native Americans may have yodeled is supported by descriptions of their vocal styles as including "vocal pulsations, falsettos, nasality." Native Americans were also influenced by contact with their new neighbors, African slaves.

In 1619, the first African slaves set shackled foot on British North America. The slave population exploded, and by the eighteenth century approximately 15,000 slaves were being delivered annually to the colonies. The principle source for African slaves was Central West Africa's "Slave Coast," which included numerous regions inhabited by yodeling Pygmies and their Bantu trading neighbors. The notion that yodeling entered the New World via these Africans is hinted at by various sources.

For instance, landscape visionary, Frederick Law Olmstead, described the strange vocals he heard in South Carolina, some years before the Civil War as "Negro jodling" (sic) that sounded like a "bugle call" or the "Carolina yell." These calls, also called "hollers" were used as signals to call in the herds. There is very little difference between a holler and a naturjodel.

The interesting syncretic confluence of the many musical influences that commingled in North America has led to a beautiful muddy lake called contemporary music. Blues and jazz emerged out of the experiences and vocals of freed slaves. Meanwhile, Jimmie Rodgers, who was immensely influenced by his exposure to Black musicians as a railroad employee, would in turn become a source of inspiration for blues artists like Howlin' Wolf, who would try to imitate Rodgers's successful "Blue Yodels."

And when Africans in Nairobi first heard Jimmie Rodgers they declared him a demigod for whom they wrote numerous

"chimirocha" songs. Meanwhile, S. E. Rogie (Sooliman Ernest Rogers), singer-guitarist from Sierra Leone, who grew up under the influence of satiny-voiced singers like Bing Crosby (also a yodeler), began his career as "The Jimmie Rodgers of Sierra Leone."

Immigrant Ship Transmission Mennonite archivist Leonard Gross notes, "my hunch is that the [yodel] came to North America with the first emigration of Swiss proper." That yodeling may have slipped into the New World via the once idealistic portal known as Pennsylvania offers some compelling and entertaining possibilities that have yet to be fully researched.

German-speaking peoples mostly from the fervent fringe of the Christian faith escaped European persecution by emigrating in substantial numbers to Pennsylvania. They came from the Pfalz (Palatinate in English) region in southwestern Germany and collectively became known as the Pennsylvania Deutsch (later Dutch). Germans were neighbors to Irish and Scottish immigrants, and may have shared their songs from the old country. And that some of these may have involved frivolous and playful ornamentation such as falsetto and yodeling is not that far-fetched.

So what can we say with any certainty about yodeling's transmission to North America? It seems highly unlikely that yodelers could have been kept silent for some two hundred years (1620s-1830s). Helvetia, West Virginia, resident cheese-maker-yodeler Bruce Betler agrees "that yodeling was here by the 1600s." Western African slaves also brought polyphonic singing, falsetto, and probably yodeling to North America.

-Bart Plantenga

Bart Plantenga is the author of cultural, musical, and historical journalism, fiction, and non-fiction. His writings have appeared in *Reggae*, *Rasta Revolution: Jamaican Music from Ska to Dub*, and many other journals. He lives in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, where he also works as a DJ.

Randy Erwin is a Czech-Tex yodeler, who serves as the yodeling voice of Alameda Slim in the new Disney animation feature *Home on the Range*. He is respected for his four-octave range and mellifluously soulful yodeling, has four critically acclaimed albums, and was featured in David Byrne's *True Stories*. He is one of America's premier new-voiced yodelers with deep roots in traditional cowboy yodeling.

Cathy Fink, Rounder recording artist and Grammy-Award winner (with Marcy Marxer), has had a tremendous influence on children's appreciation of music. She has also introduced old and young alike to the joys of yodeling. She is also renowned for her two-CD set *Learn To Yodel with Tod Whittimore*, which Bette Midler used while learning to yodel for the film *Big Business*. Fink & Marxer are at the forefront of traditional-contemporary folk music.

