



is Swing Folk Music?

By BRUCE MASON.

"Swing music is the music of the people to-day: Folk music is the music of the people yesterday: Therefore, swing music is folk music." So goes the current logic. How far is it true?

TO SWING FANS, hep cats, and jivers it will seem an academic and fruitless question. If one enjoys swing, why bother to talk or write about it? True enough; but many are bothering, particularly the more sober musicians who are beginning to admit grudgingly that if there is a folk element in our music, it must be swing. When pressed, they will even concede that since the great composers of the past have made folk music the ground for their work, then the basis for the great music of the future will undoubtedly be swing. This view is gaining ground. It therefore merits closer scrutiny.

One must work from data, and so I assume two things. First, that music is in our race. It is part of the universal will to self-expression, older than recorded history. No culture, people, tribe, or sect has done without it, nor could have done without it. It is a fundamental human need. Second, that just as language has grown from a few basic noises into the complex structure we use now, so music has developed from a primitive germ, a few elementary themes loosely linked, growing in thousands of years of variation and refinement into the sophisticated structure we call modern music. This primitive germ is known as Folk Song.

But this does not define it. What is a Folk Song? This has been discovered in the only way possible—at the source. Until the eighteenth century it was an unexplored field. But with Bishop Percy's "Reliques of Ancient English Poetry," a new vista opened in England, and, with the work of the Grimm brothers, in Europe. The world suddenly discovered its past. It was the day of the old, the antique, the aboriginal, the return to Nature and the simple life. The structure of society was collapsing slowly and tiredly and the last snap of the French Revolution was only a few years away. The present would not do—the future did not exist; people turned eagerly to the past. A further impetus was provided by Darwin. The *Origin of Species* seemed the origin of all things, and what had been in the eighteenth century a tentative probing into the literature and song of the folk, became in the next century firmly grounded in fact, until, now, the picture is almost complete. From the massive research of two centuries a few broad principles have crystallized:—

(1) Folk Song is the music of the common people. But who are the common people? They are the unlettered, the untravelled—those whose mental life has been due not to any formal schooling, but has grown from the touch and feel of their own immediate world, from the communal life, and from direct experience. They are the "primitives"—either the founders of a civilization, or small isolated groups left behind by a maturing, literate