

Rethinking 'Revival' of American Ethnic Music.

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RETHINKING “REVIVAL” OF AMERICAN ETHNIC MUSIC* **by Mark Slobin**

I've been asked to talk about the term “revival” as it relates to ethnic music in present-day America. I'm not normally interested in definitions and academic discussions of terminology, but the word “revival” does offer a nice jumping-off point for looking at a wide array of performers, contexts, and styles to which the term is applied. I think the term is largely inapplicable to most of these musical situations. To revive means to bring back to life, and clearly this is not what we're talking about. In the first place, I don't think expressive culture really dies; you'd have to think of culture as a straight-line evolution to believe that, and I don't. I think of it more as a spiral, changing, but dipping back along the way. Second, it's clear to many trained observers that even when people seem to be reviving things, that is, exhuming them and breathing life into them, what they get is something new. Even Lazarus was not the same man before and after his death and rebirth. In culture, context counts for more than half of meaning, form for less.

So why is revival used so widely? We could have regeneration, a more elegant term that also implies a born-again approach, or recycling, which may evoke bottles and newspapers, but is a useful word of our times, or insert recent buzz words like retribalization. Revival is there, I think, because people do indeed conceive of what's going on as literal revival. It is widely felt that ethnic America went through an age of fierce McDonaldization in the 1940s and 1950s, struggled through the black consciousness and consequent new ethnicity phases, and arrived at musical revival. Such a view makes as much sense as thinking the sun never shone in Europe during the entire "Dark Ages," before the grandest Western switch-on, the Renaissance (notice here too it took the catalyst of an entire "reformation").

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*This paper was read in essentially its present form at the meeting of the New York City Chapter of the New York Folklore Society at New York University, May 13, 1983.

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