

A Salesman Amidst Scholars—Ozarks Song Collector Max Hunter

by Sarah Jane Nelson

One evening back in August of 2014, I was combing the Internet for *new* traditional song material when I stumbled upon *The Max Hunter Folk Song Collection*. The very first song I listened to was a 1975 recording of Kris Ann Parker of Springfield, MO singing “Careless Love.” But this was no ordinary rendition; there was an emotional urgency in the singer’s voice that—combined with the seamless but metrically *crooked* guitar accompaniment—reached out over four decades of time and grabbed me by the throat.

I probably listened to that recording about a dozen times that night, and stayed up well past midnight, listening to other singers and songs in the collection. Not all of them were so easy on the ear: Aunt Ollie Gilbert (who contributed literally hundreds of songs to Hunter), had a voice like gravel. But the depth and breadth of Hunter’s material was so astonishing that I immediately endeavored to find out as much as possible about both the collector and his “informants.” Before I knew it, I was at work on his biography. Ironically, the singer about whom I am most curious—Ms. Parker herself—remains elusive. It is my hope that when I finally travel to Max’s hometown of Springfield, MO, I will stumble on some golden nugget of information regarding this vocalist.

When businessman Max Hunter started recording folk songs, he wasn’t thinking about the illustrious line of song catchers who had gone before him. He wasn’t thinking about how copies of his tapes would end up at the Library of Congress, let alone how modern technology would make his field recordings universally accessible to anyone who had access to the Internet. Nor was he thinking about how prominent folk musicians would delight in performing his material. He was only thinking about selling refrigeration parts, bringing home money for his family of six, and doing something that would keep him entertained and less-than-lonely while traveling through Hill Country. In the words of *Springfield News-Leader* contributor Sara J. Bennett (March 7, 1998):



“Max Hunter grew up in a musical Springfield family, but it was the boredom and loneliness of life as a traveling salesman that drove him to start collecting folk tunes. Alone in his motel room every night, Hunter would record himself singing and playing guitar. Then, he met renowned folklorists Vance Randolph and Mary C. Parler, who encouraged him to tape other people. It was the mid-1950s, and most academicians thought there was no folk culture left to collect in the Ozarks. Hunter proved them wrong.”

The Max Hunter Folk Song Collection, begun in 1956 and completed in 1976, includes almost 1600 traditional songs from the Ozarks. As Max liked to tell it, his tapes “if glued together and stretched out would run about 18 miles.” (Lucile Morris Upton, Springfield Mo. Daily News, Oct. 14, 1974.) In 1998 Dr. Michael Murray and other staff members at Missouri State University took those miles of acetate and started to digitize them. Many of the songs in the Hunter collection form the core of folk repertoire for today’s traditional artists, and several have links to “variants” (i.e., alternative versions) which makes this

archive a veritable candy shop for browsers. <https://maxhunter.missouristate.edu/indexsongtitle.aspx>

In addition, approximately 200 of the songs Max collected were variants of Child ballads that had made their home in the Ozarks, after having travelled “across the pond” to Appalachia. Max eventually won several awards for his song work, but one of his proudest moments was hearing from a university student named Fern Denise Gregory who was writing a thesis entitled, “Selected Child Ballad Tunes in the Max Hunter Collection of Ozark Folksongs.”

Folk Legacy’s founder Sandy Paton, who recorded Max back in 1963, got it right when he said in the liner notes “Max Hunter almost defies classification.” The fact that Max never went to college but formed deep and lasting collaborations with a number of folkloric scholars, including Arkansas icons Vance Randolph and Mary Celestia Parler; Dolf and Becky Schroeder

of Columbia, MO; and his once-in-a-lifetime singing partner, Joan O'Bryant of Wichita University, only makes his story more compelling.

Gregarious by nature, Max quickly made friends of strangers, and managed to instill trust in otherwise reluctant songsters. He also developed a sixth sense about where to find old "gems"; again to quote Bennett: "He says he could tell simply by the swing of a gate if the people inside would welcome him or if he would have to visit a couple more times before bringing his tape recorder." As documented by Max himself, Cathy Barton, and linguistics professor Donald Lance, Hunter would do just about anything to get a song. He tells of removing wasps nests from well houses, feeding dozens of baby calves from a milk bottle, listening for hours to people's troubles, making repeat visits to reluctant informers, bringing in hay, delivering "stump" whiskey and many other adventures. Max's sense of humor was a valuable asset: "it helped him get his songs... It's what got his foot in the door... Back in those days, if you weren't careful you'd get shot at!"

Whenever he returned from his 150-mile sales circuit through southwestern Missouri, Arkansas and Kansas, Max's family would help him carry the weighty Web-Core recorder into the house. It would then be deposited in a corner of the laundry room (a.k.a. "the office") where he would spend many late-night hours poring through songs, and writing down lyrics—again with the help of wife and family. It was indeed a "labor of love." As his eldest daughter Linda expressed it: "I think he looked at the Hill People as an extended family."

As mentioned earlier, Max Hunter was hardly the first person to do field work in the Ozarks; in addition to the Randolphins, he was preceded by other collectors, most of whom happened to be English professors. While not a collector himself, Henry Marvin Belden—founder of the Missouri Folklore Society—sent his students into the field to gather material. Belden's extensive collection is housed at Harvard University. According to *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, Rhodes College professor "[John Quincy] Wolf began collecting mountain ballads as a college student.... Wolf recorded more than 1,000 songs in the rural Ozarks." Loman Cansler (a contemporary of Hunter) donated his extensive collection of songs and other folkloric materials to the University of Missouri-Columbia in 1987.

Max caught songs that cover the full emotional range of human existence. It is discomfiting to hear some of the darkest murder ballads sung in the sweet soprano voice of Fran Majors of Fayetteville, AR, or to hear the childlike voice of Betty Lou Copeland unflinchingly make its way through the brutal story of "Notchville Girl." I'm partial to songs in which the setting is made palpable—the 1958 recordings of Allie Parker Long, whose singing is accompanied by the squeak of a rocking chair, or recordings of Almeda Riddle, which are accompanied by a shower of acorns falling on the tin roof of her cabin.

Max did not spare his listeners; he took the songs as they were delivered, even when the lyrics didn't make sense. In a 1978 interview with Donald Lance he said, "I will not change a song. And some of the songs that I have, have obvious mistakes in them... I'm going to sing it just like the person sang it to me." In this respect Max stood at opposite poles from poet Robert Graves whose book, *English and Scottish Ballads* (1957), was coming out just as Max began his own collecting work. It is doubtful that Max ever saw this book, but he would undoubtedly have found its sentiments wrong-headed:

Said Graves, "Most ballad anthologies nowadays are 'scholarly', which means that the editors feel obliged to print each ballad exactly as it occurs in one of the many variant versions still surviving. But, unless such a version happens to be superior to all others in every stanza, this seems unjust to the reader, who is entitled to see the best text."

This attachment both to the Hill People and to the ineffable qualities of old "gems" is what drove Max, and it's what lead me to the writing of this book. As Max once told Donald Lance, "I don't think you can compose a folk song...because to me a folk song has to go through something. I don't know what it is. It's got to go through part of an oral tradition to get to be a folk song."

Writer and musical performer Sarah Jane Nelson is still at work on her biography of Max Hunter. She made a trip to Columbia, MO last July and looks forward to visiting Max's hometown of Springfield as soon as she's managed to raise enough funds! She encourages readers to visit her link at <https://www.gofundme.com/hunterbiography>.

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