



## **Joe's Jottings #8: Upon my Word!**

By Joe "The Songfinder" Hickerson

Here's a few thoughts on some oft-used terms in our beloved realm of folkdom: Record; Album; Act; Set; and (argh!) Close/Good Enough for Folk Music.

In the field of folk music, sound recordings have played a crucial role, first as a documentary tool (beginning in 1890), and soon after as a media for publication. This gave rise to new usages for the word "record:" to make a sound recording (verb), and the resultant recording (noun). Merriam-Webster (online) currently summarizes the usages of "record" as follows: "to write (something) down so that it can be used or seen again in the future;" "to produce a record of (something);" "to show a measurement of (something);" "to indicate (something);" "to store (something, such as sounds, music, images, etc.) on tape or on a disk so that it can be heard or seen later;" and "to produce a recording of (something)." Let us proceed cautiously.

In 1966-67, I supervised a feasibility study, funded by the Council on Library Resources, to create an automated cataloging system for the field recordings in the Library of Congress Archive of Folk Song (LC/FOLK). We were fortunate to have on detail the part-time services of Guthrie T. (Gus) Meade, the Library's first computer programmer, and a veteran of the Indiana University Folklore Program. Through Gus, I began to appreciate the multiplicity of usages for the word "record" in the modern world. We worked with the Library's first computerized cataloging format, MARC I, to create four different catalog "records" (i.e., files) for (1) collections, (2) items (individual songs, etc., in the collections), (3) personnel (performers and collectors), and (4) the recordings themselves (cylinders, discs [my preferred spelling], wires, tapes, etc.). We called these the "collection record," "item record," "personnel record," and "record record."

This reminded me of a riddling word game my family played when I was young called "stinky pinky" (also known as "hink pink," "hank pank," "wordy gurdy," "brain," etc.). This involves making up an adjective and a rhyming noun, resulting in a rhyming compound that functions as a playful definition (such as "glad dad" for a happy father, or "wild child" for an uncontrollable youngster). So, it occurred to me to ask: what would you call the world's largest file of computer printouts concerning sound recordings? A record record record record?

This prompted me to admonish my interns (and others) to avoid the word "record" without specific referents. As an example, I had to point out this distinction in my review of a manuscript of a biography of a singer/composer of folksongs who did some field work. The author persistently used the verb "record," which I found misleading in the folk music collecting context, since the person in question never used sound recording equipment, but rather pen(cil) and paper. (We wish he had!)

Somewhere along the way, I saw a reference to a recording company in Pennsylvania that planned to call their label "Police." But no one seemed to want to have a Police Record, so it didn't last long.

When I began purchasing recordings in 1949 ("Ghost Riders in the Sky" by Vaughn Monroe was the first), the choice was primarily between 10" shellac discs (often called "singles"), or a group of singles bound together (called "albums"). These latter came on the market in the 1930s and were issued on single themes (e.g., Songs of the Lincoln Brigade), performers (e.g., Burl Ives), or lengthier works (e.g., Broadway musicals or symphonies). You could also purchase albums with empty sleeves for storage of singles. After long-playing recordings (LPs) were introduced in June 1948, a collection of pieces on a single LP came to be called an "album." The word was later extended to other recording media such as compact disc, MiniDisc, compact audio cassette, and digital albums, as they were introduced. So, if you are like me and have a certain affinity to a historical usage of the word "album," you can smile at the use in more current contexts for the word, smug in your knowledge of where it came from, when an album was a group of discs assembled in sleeves that were bound together (like a photograph album).

Two terms in wide use in the musical world these days are "act" and "set." According to Merriam-Webster online, an "act" is "one of successive parts or performances (as in a variety show or circus);" "the performer or performers in such an act;" "a performance or presentation identified with a particular individual or group;" or "the sum of a person's actions or effects that serve to create an impression or set an example (as in 'a hard act to follow')." However, on the many occasions when a performer or group is referred to as the "next act" or the "opening act," I can't help but remember what Lee Hays once said at a concert by The Weavers: "We're not an act; we're real!"

When I was a youth in New Haven, Connecticut, I became familiar with the term "set" primarily as "the basic formation in a square-dance," and "a division of a tennis match won by the side that wins at least six games beating the opponent by two games or by winning a tiebreaker." I did some square-dancing at the time, but quite a lot more tennis-playing and watching. More recently, as a performer, I became familiar with the "set" as "a session of music usually followed by an intermission; also the music played at one session." It has occurred to me that during my early tennis career, no one ever said "Good set, Joe!" (And probably with good reason.) Now is your opportunity to make up for those early years when I was deprived of hearing this laudatory exclamation. On October 25, 2015, I will be doing an 80th birthday concert at Artichoke Music. I'll be doing the best of two-out-of-three sets. Don't miss it if you can!

I will conclude with one of my pet peeves among folk music expressions: "Close/good enough for folk music." (I have also heard the same expression about jazz.) This implies there is something imperfect about folk music (or jazz) performance, often in reference to tuning instruments. I find this expression inaccurate and pejorative. It suggests that performers of folk music are somehow lacking in some sort of standard or aesthetic. I am reminded of the experience of Norman Kennedy, a fine purveyor of Scottish ballad singing and weaving, when he worked as a demonstrator at Colonial Williamsburg (CW). His supervisor complained that his spinning and weaving were too excellent for representing colonial practice. Norman had learned his craft from traditional weavers in Scotland and he strove to replicate their excellence in his

work. Needless to say, he soon left CW for a more felicitous environment. Close enough for folk indeed!

I occasionally use an alternative expression. I acquired this while working summers in 1955-56 for a Connecticut State Highway Department surveying crew. The man with the "gun" (transit) would give a reading and ask if he should take a second one. The foreman's reply often was "No. Good enough for road work." I guess what we have here is a folk expression of the trade -- musical practice on the one hand and surveying on the other. By the way, the only other item I came away with from those two summers was a plumb bob, which I suspended from the ceiling of my dorm room at Oberlin College. When asked why, I observed that when I awoke in the morning, the plumb bob indicated to me which way was DOWN. From that I could extrapolate UP, and then I could get up!

So, the next time you feel good enough to set down (or up) your acts in an album, be sure to make a record of it! Whatever that means.