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Review of Sounds of the New Deal: The Federal Music Project in the West

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Sounds of the New Deal The Federal Music Project in the West

PETER GOUGH

(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, Music in American Life series, 2015. xvi, 259 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$50)

In this intensively researched monograph, Peter Gough provides a detailed account of a significant component of the New Deal previously ignored by scholars, the Federal Music Project (FMP). The Federal Music Project was one of several cultural programs initiated as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), itself a component of President Franklin Roosevelt's response to the economic turmoil of the Great Depression. Gough's central thesis seems to be that the FMP functioned in a distinct way in the West because, unlike in other regions, its ultimately localized administration allowed individual communities to shape the music they most wanted to hear. He goes beyond this, though. He provides detailed biographical information of numerous staff of the FMP, while situating this single program within the larger recovery work of the federal government. Gough also highlights the tensions between the designers and consumers of FMP programming: audiences wanted to hear vernacular music while administrators wanted to offer more educational programming. At the same time, Gough shows that local administrators in the West responded to community demands and thus that the racial, ethnic, religious, and class diversity of western communities drove the varied musical selections offered by this program.

Gough is strongest in his description of the organization and actors involved in the FMP, while the other strands of his argument remain less well integrated. A tightening of the book's organization might have strengthened

the work as a whole. Yet he clearly makes the case that the dedication and vision of regional and local leadership in the FMP allowed for more localized control of the programming offered. Thus, if communities wanted to hear *orquestas tipicas* or African American choral groups, they usually did. As a result the FMP "spawned an invigorated national identity, predicated upon a celebration of the country's ethnic, regional, and cultural diversity, its folk history, as well as the identification of 'the people' against 'the elites'" (p. 150).

Possibly the most surprising part of this study is that no scholar had yet taken up this topic. Given that the New Deal has been studied from every angle, and that other components of the cultural projects known as Federal Project Number One (specifically, the Federal Theatre, Art, and Writers' Projects) have garnered much attention, Gough supposes that the Federal Music Project had thus far been ignored because its programming expressed less radical ideas than these other projects and because few nationally known artists participated in it. In fact, he argues that the FMP was more popular than these other programs (at its peak the FMP employed more than 16,000 people and by 1940 160 million people had attended FMP performances) because it was less politicized and emerged more from grassroots initiatives. Through the FMP, regular people throughout the nation played, taught, and listened to the music of their communities, sponsored by the federal government.

The author's passion for the music of the era and belief in the FMP's successful support for the diverse local music styles of the West is evident throughout the book. Gough's admirable research spans oral histories of participants in the FMP, administrative records of the WPA, as well as programming materials held by local archives. He also creatively incorporates

into the narrative personal conversations with Pete Seeger, whose father Charles worked for the program in various capacities. The book's foreword, written by Peggy Seeger, Charles's daughter, nicely sums up how this "top-down program explode[d] into a bottom-up movement" (p. xii).

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