the 1962 World Festival of Youth and Students in Helsinki.

The book’s cover photo is densely packed with symbolic layers that should provoke much reflection on the role of folk art and government policy, tradition, and propaganda. With Siqintarilha as the student, the elder folk artist Nashunhutu as the teacher, and two young women whose facial features can be attributed to different regions of the People’s Republic, this scene in Hohhot engenders a sense of hope and harmony for a new socialist country. Now, a half-century later, Wilcox writes, anyone studying traditional Mongolian dance is required to learn Siqintarilha’s techniques and movements as part of standard curriculum.

Wilcox dances lightly on terms such as “invented traditions” and “representative work” (the quotation marks are her own). Where Chinese audiences see tradition as a national style with equal proportions of new and old, Western viewers prone to a firm division between received tradition and individual authorship would probably side with the Western-trained Taiwanese dance scholar Chen Ya-ping, who wrote that Dai Ailian’s dances are “endowed . . . with a presumed ‘authenticity’ [despite being] entirely fictional” (p. 80). In one deft stroke, Wilcox cuts to scholarship’s core conundrum when scholars and their subjects use the same words to mean markedly different things.


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Because it mostly covers so much familiar territory, this book’s title, A New History of American and Canadian Folk Music, is misleading primarily because there is not much “New” here. Weissman largely recounts well-known information about the usual suspects: the importance of Alan Lomax, the impact of the 1950s/1960s “folk revival,” the rise of folk festivals, and so on. The “Canadian” suggests a new geographic perspective on this expansive topic—most books encompassing folk music in North America stop at the Canadian border. However, the Canadian perspective is disappointingly meager. Only one 14-page chapter, “Meanwhile, Back in Canada,” focuses on this vast country to the north of the United States. I can only imagine that someone at Bloomsbury said, “Hey, Dick, if you want to include Canada in the title, you have to have at least one chapter set there.” Unfortunately, the Canadian content in the book is scant and represents a lost opportunity. For example, the long-standing, vibrant, and well-documented Cape Breton fiddle tradition in eastern Nova Scotia has undergone its own renaissance since the 1970s with Natalie MacMaster as its best-known and very public current proponent. This tradition, at least, calls for at least a few paragraphs somewhere in the Canadian chapter that largely focuses on artists involved with the folk scene in the 1960s.

However one defines folk music, no single volume could hope to do more than skim the surface of the topics encompassed by the title of this book, and Weissman does plenty of skimming. The “Contents” page gives the reader a glimpse of what’s to come: 18 generally too-short chapters on topics meandering from “The Civil Rights Movement” to “The Folk Music Business,” presented in roughly chronological order. Many of the sections within these chapters are exceptionally brief. For example, “Taj Mahal” in the chapter titled “What’s Going On: Expansion, Contraction, and Evolution” consists of five sentences split into two short paragraphs. In the same chapter, Hawaiian guitar wizard “Bob Brozman” clocks in at three sentences. Such brief sections contain no new information or insights. I would have been much more interested if Weissman had more fully developed this chapter into a longer, richer, and more seamless essay with fewer terse sections, most of which seem to be tossed in.

A New History of American and Canadian Folk Music often draws on the author’s personal experience, participation, or observations, which constitutes its greatest strength. The book is filled with dozens of short sections, meditations on topics with which Weissman often
has had personal experience, most notably the “revival” era of folk-rock, singer-songwriters, and festivals. And when he spends more time musing about these and related topics, the book becomes more meaningful. Take, for instance, “The Riddle of Authenticity.” In this chapter, the author is largely playing his strong suit because he goes into greater depth, which results in an interesting and provocative examination of the topic. These longer and more personal chapters are the book’s most noteworthy contributions.

The publisher’s blurb indicates that *A New History of American and Canadian Folk Music* “examines the history of folk music into the 21st century and how it evolved from an agrarian style as it became increasingly urbanized.” Well, sort of. The book is not really a history because it lacks the depth implied by the title. And rather than the rural to urban theme, I believe that the interaction between folk and popular styles lies at the heart of Weissman’s interests. Readers seeking a comprehensive overview implied by *A New History of American and Canadian Folk Music* will be disappointed. Ultimately, I found it frustratingly scattershot. The title is enticing, but the book falls short of its promise.

Dick Weissman has been a keen observer of and participant in the folk scene for some 60 years. I wish that he had taken the opportunity to lend a far greater personal voice to a book, perhaps titled “Dick Weissman’s Personal Guide to Folk Music in the United States.” Such a book aimed at a general reader, which seems to be the audience for the book under review, is one that I would look forward to reading.


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In *Folk Illusions: Children, Folklore, and Sciences of Perception*, K. Brandon Barker and Claiborne Rice present a detailed structural and morpho-logical analysis of folk illusions. Specifically, they make a compelling case for the inclusion and creation of folk illusions as its own genre of vernacular cultural practices. Combining more than 8 years of multi-site research to observe performances and collect remembrances from children (of different age groups), college students, and even adults, Barker and Rice argue that folk illusions “present an excellent opportunity for the situated, socially, contextualized study of perception” (p. 4). The authors define folk illusions “as traditionalized verbal and/or kinesthetic actions performed in order to effect an intended perceptual illusion for one or more participants” (p. 4). But, as folk illusions depend on how the body engages and perceives the illusions, the authors argue that their research and approaches must be likewise interdisciplinary. In this regard, the book’s aim is threefold: to make a case for considering folk illusions as its own genre, to provide a morphological analysis of folk illusions, and to explore issues of embodiment and the “kind of knowledge that accompanies embodied consciousness” (p. 7). While illusions and perception have been widely studied in psychology—mainly to explore how our brains and bodies process and transform information—as well as in other fields, the authors wish to “unveil the folk’s dynamic awareness of perceptual illusions” (p. 11).

The book contains seven chapters—each with small vignettes sharing the authors’ personal encounters with folk illusions, either as unwitting participants or agents (initiators of the illusion). Moreover, the authors throughout provide detailed descriptions and morphological structures of all folk illusions discussed. Chapter 1 provides the foundation, defining folk illusions and offering a brief introduction to the literature on perception, and how their work relates to the broader literature on children’s folklore. They also list the characteristics of most folk illusions. Chapter 2 focuses on four forms of folk illusions—specifically, Floating Arms, Twisted Hands, the Chills, and Light as a Feather. By analyzing these four forms in depth, the authors provide a detailed morphological structure of folk illusions as a folk genre. Chapter 3 utilizes John McDowell’s theories of