During the 1950s, American studies scholar and musician Gene Bluestein collected, performed, recorded, and taught folk songs to Minnesotans of many ages, promoting through music a message of cultural diversity at a time when the Twin Cities were on the cusp of significant demographic and social change.

Bluestein (1928–2002) made his presence felt during the single decade he lived in Minnesota while pursuing graduate degrees at the University of Minnesota. In addition to teaching at the university and in the community, the self-taught musician (banjo, 12-string guitar, and steel drums, among other instruments) was a Minnesota media pioneer, producing educational radio and television folk music programs used in schools and local libraries across the state. He also produced two record albums on the Smithsonian Folkways label in 1958—one the Minnesota statehood centennial project *Songs of the North Star State*—and a third recording by Appalachian musician Buell Kazee.1

Though the two musicians never met—one came to town in 1959 just as the other left—Bob Dylan moved into a Twin Cities music scene nurtured and shaped by the pioneering work of Bluestein and others. Dylan’s first serious biographer, New York Times music critic Robert Shelton, interviewed erstwhile Dylan roommate Harry Weber in 1966 in order to understand Dylan’s Minneapolis milieu. Weber, then a PhD candidate in Latin literature and a ballad scholar, recalled: “When I arrived in Minneapolis in 1955 with a guitar . . . folk music was very much underground. The older people came from the Old Left. Their idea of folk music was a union song—[Pete] Seeger and The People’s Song Book. Gene Bluestein was the big folk wheel on campus.” Weber’s insistence that he and Bluestein were in separate generations recognizes that something new was felt to be happening at the very end of the 1950s. Weber’s Minnesota-born roommate, of course, famously went on to transform the national folk and rock scene.2

Gene Bluestein was the son of Jewish immigrants from what is now Moldova. His parents met in New York City where both were members of the left-wing Furriers Union. After earning a BA degree from Brooklyn College, Bluestein relocated from Brooklyn, New York, to Minneapolis in 1950, with his wife, Ellie, so that Gene, then 22 years old, could begin graduate work in English and American studies at the University of Minnesota. He and Ellie had met at Camp Kinderland (Yiddish for “children’s land”), then in Hopewell Junction, New York, a transformative experience for both. The youth camp was founded by members of the Workmen’s Circle, a leftist Jewish fraternal organization. (Both the camp and the organization still exist.)

Already a fan of folk music, then abundant in New York City, Bluestein was influenced by a frequent visitor to the camp, Pete Seeger, who led campers in hootenannies on the tennis courts. Bluestein reminisced in later years: “Actually the first time I saw the banjo and saw Pete play it, I said ‘This has got to be my instrument. I must have one.’ It just hit everything. It was American, it was African, it was just a special voice. And especially Pete’s approach to it was so interesting to me and important in my own attitude.” Bluestein’s and Seeger’s paths would cross again, in Minnesota.3

Then as now, American studies was an innovative and boundary-crossing enterprise, and the university’s program, founded in 1945, was among the best in the country. The department provided a home for those who wished...
to study aspects of American culture, such as folk and popular music, science fiction, and television across conventional academic disciplines. Bluestein’s unique blend of performance, American studies, ethnomusicology, and folklore studies displayed the interdisciplinarity at the heart of American studies. A 1952 issue of *Minnesotan Magazine* (published for University of Minnesota staff members) shows American studies committee members from multiple departments gathered for a meal and describes the burgeoning program, started only a few years earlier, as one of the top three in the country. It begins, “An oil painting by Thomas Hart Benton, a recording by Leadbelly, a Sherwood Anderson novel, a treatise by Thorstein Veblen, Lewis Mumford’s *Technics and Civilization*, and Lloyd Warner’s *Yankee City*—all these are proper subject matter of the University’s program in American Studies.”

Gene and Ellie encountered both anti-Semitic and anti-black racism while living in Minnesota: one landlord asked their religion and refused them housing and another asked if they would stop having black friends over. The Bluesteins also befriended a St. Croix calypso band playing an extended gig in St. Paul; its members had been made to enter through the venue’s back door. But Ellie also remembers living in Minnesota as a wonderful time, when they greatly enjoyed the affordable cultural life of the Twin Cities: the symphony, theater, jazz, dance, and sports. The Bluesteins moved around the metro area as their family grew—the couple’s four children, Joel, Evo, Jemmy, and Frayda, were all born during the family’s time in Minnesota—from a basement apartment in central Minneapolis to a place in Northeast, followed by a first-floor unit in Seven Corners on the West Bank. Seeking more space for their active children, the Bluesteins then lived in houses, first in St. Paul and then Minneapolis, where Ellie remembers flooding the front lawn in the winter so the kids could skate.

Gene had no teaching assistantship at first, so Ellie supported them by working in the mail-order department of Sears, handling correspondence; later she would type theses and dissertations. Bluestein eventually supplemented the family income by working as director of music at St. Paul’s Temple of Aaron religious school. He finished his MA in English literature in 1953 and moved on to the PhD program in American studies, perhaps a strategy for dual academic legitimacy given the newness of American studies in the academy.

Bluestein was distinctive in approaching folk music not just through academic study but through performance. A 1953 article in the *Minnesota Daily* described a Minnesota Daily profile from July 3, 1953, characterized Bluestein as “probably the leading student and performer of folk songs in this area.”
Bluestein was distinctive in approaching folk music not just through academic study but through performance.

Bluestein as “probably the leading student and performer of folk songs in the area” and, at 25, already engaged in public scholarship, making appearances on WDGY-AM radio. “His eclectic repertoire includes labor songs, sea shanties, and ‘Elizabethan’ folk songs.” This article mentions Bluestein’s roots in Brooklyn and his finding inspiration in Pete Seeger, whom he’d met “8 years ago.”

Folk performer William Hood, who met Bluestein in 1957, reported that Bluestein had learned banjo from Seeger’s self-published 1948 book *How to Play the 5-String Banjo*. Bluestein made his own long-neck banjo (a Seeger invention that added three additional frets to the neck for low tuning) as they were not yet commercially available: “Gene was the first banjo player I knew to have created a copy of Seeger’s ‘long neck banjo.’ That was a couple years before Vega began manufacturing them.”

The arrival of musicologist Johannes Riedel (1913–96) to the faculty of the university’s music department in 1953 was a boon to Bluestein’s graduate school education. Riedel was a scholar with catholic tastes; his interests ranged from baroque music to Ecuadorian folk music to American soul and came to include local music-making in Minnesota. He sent his young students into the field to collect songs: some of these are in the Library of Congress collection; Riedel’s students sang material from their own families and collected from local elders. Riedel was on the committee that advised and evaluated Bluestein’s dissertation, “The Background and Sources of an American Folksong Tradition,” and their academic interests were closely connected. In addition to scholarly inquiry into American folk music, each worked to assert a place for popular music within his discipline(s), something of an oil-and-water venture at the time.

A group of children, ages 6 to 12, ply Bluestein with questions as he sang in the galleries of Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1958.
One university student Bluestein made an impression on was future Minnesota governor Wendell Anderson. “Gene Bluestein was a Humanities instructor and played guitar and sang folksongs and had a little bit of a beard, so he was suspect [emphasis original],” Anderson said in a recollection of memorable courses and instructors from his undergraduate days at the university (1950–54). Academic institutions were central in sponsoring folk musicians, but—as Anderson’s comments allude—the university’s imprimatur did not remove folk music’s countercultural associations. These began in the 1930s and 1940s when the music was reinvented and adapted in support of left-leaning political reform and labor movements, including in Minnesota (see sidebar). In the charged Cold War environment of the early 1950s, these associations were considered suspicious and could lead to blacklisting or job loss.9

Such was the situation for Seeger, among many others. Repaying the debt to his mentor, Bluestein helped arrange local engagements for Seeger, including concerts at Carleton College in 1956 and 1958, and at the Unitarian Society in Minneapolis in 1957. This was the difficult period after August 18, 1955, when Seeger, following his appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee, was cited for contempt of Congress. As had been the case earlier with his popular folk singing group, the Weavers, Seeger was blacklisted from commercial gigs. As Ellie Bluestein described Seeger’s situation in the mid- to late 1950s: “He just couldn’t get work. A lot of the people who were his devotees were by then teachers, assistants, graduates—he says this in one of his biographies—and they brought him around the country doing concerts. And not at universities [where he was not welcome before the late 1950s], but at houses and coffeehouses . . . and so he stayed with us when he came to Minnesota.”10

Gene Bluestein was no doubt sympathetic to Seeger’s plight, after he and another university teaching associate, Jules Chametzky, were named during a 1954 Washington, DC, “subversive activities control board” hearing as being members of the Communist Party from 1949 to 1951, a charge Bluestein described in a press account as “fantastic and extremely erroneous.” A university board of inquiry cleared them of these charges, but according to historian Iric Nathanson, “a cloud of suspicion continued to hover over them.” Ellie describes the experience as “very frightening”: she was home with their first child, Joel, when a reporter called her for a comment on the page-one story in the Minneapolis Morning Tribune.11

Meanwhile, Bluestein kept busy while working toward his PhD degree. He wrote for Sing Out!, the influential magazine of the folk music and folk song movement, and performed and taught in multiple settings around the Twin Cities, including the YWCA and Walker Art Center, before audiences of small children, college students, and adults. He traveled to the South in 1955 and 1957, recording folk musicians Buell Kazee, Reverend C. H. Owens, Fiddlin’ Bill Jones, Billy Edd Wheeler, and others. During the summer of 1955, he was music director at Camp Hawthorn (now Camp Sabra), run by the St. Louis (Missouri) Jewish Community Center.12

In the later 1950s, Bluestein turned his focus to a number of Minnesota-based projects. In January 1958, he began a television show on American folksong on educational station KTCA Channel 2, airing on Wednesday nights at 9:00; he followed that up in the spring with the World of Folksong. A third show, in 1959, focused on the history and development of folksong. Bluestein’s work with Minnesota musicians and on Minnesota’s folksong heritage formed the basis of his Minnesota School of the Air educational radio programs, which were distributed for use in classrooms in 15-minute lessons throughout the state in 1958–59.13
Precursors to the 1950s Minnesota Folk Scene

Increasingly fine-grained research by folk music scholars suggests that, rather than a single folk music revival occurring between 1958 and 1964 (presaged by mini-revivals), the United States had something of a “long folk revival” taking place over much of the twentieth century. Just as it would be erroneous to imagine that Dylan’s arrival in 1959 marked the beginning of interest in folk music in Dinkytown, collecting, presenting, performing, and publishing folk music had been going on in Minnesota well before Bluestein arrived in 1950. At midcentury, the Twin Cities had an established history of receiving folk figures, especially (but not solely) connected to local colleges and the University of Minnesota, and of nurturing groups of scholars, players, listeners, and tastemakers.1

Early activity in Minnesota focused on collecting little-studied regional music. Historian Theodore Blegen published Norwegian Emigrant Songs and Ballads in 1936. The following year, Sidney Robertson and Minnesotan Marjorie Edgar recorded Minnesota musicians performing Scots Gaelic, Serbian, and Finnish music. (See page 328.) Edgar, like Bluestein, performed the material she collected, sometimes wearing Finnish traditional dress, at women’s and social clubs such as the Businesswomen’s Club, College Club, and Women’s Association of the Church of the Redeemer. She often gave a talk called “Songs of the North Woods,” in which she would describe the settings of the songs she sang. In 1938, folklorist and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, by then established as folk’s preeminent public scholar, gave lecture-demonstrations on various aspects of the American folk tradition five times between 1940 and 1963, once at Carleton College and four times at the University of Minnesota. Folklorist/performer Frank Warner visited in 1947, the same year the Folk Dance Federation of Minnesota was founded to “promote the growth of folk dancing.” Composer, educator, and author Elie Siegmeister taught a course on American music during the 1948 summer term at the University of Minnesota and gave a public talk and radio presentations on “A Composer’s Evaluation of American Folk Music.”

By the 1940s and 1950s, emphasis shifted from folk song collecting to performances and public education. As in many university towns and big cities, folk luminaries made Twin Cities appearances throughout these decades at the University of Minnesota and nearby colleges. Quirky balladeer John Jacob Niles, with his keening tenor and homemade dulcimers, visited four times in the 1940s, in 1956 and 1957, and again in 1965.2 Alan Lomax, by then established as folk’s preeminent public scholar, gave lecture-demonstrations on various aspects of the American folk tradition five times between 1940 and 1963, once at Carleton College and four times at the University of Minnesota. Folklorist/performer Frank Warner visited in 1947, the same year the Folk Dance Federation of Minnesota was founded to “promote the growth of folk dancing.” Composer, educator, and author Elie Siegmeister taught a course on American music during the 1948 summer term at the University of Minnesota and gave a public talk and radio presentations on “A Composer’s Evaluation of American Folk Music.”

From the mid-1940s until the mid-1950s, the Folk Arts Foundation of America (FAFA) focused locally (despite its name) to “preserve, promote, and popularize . . . folk culture.” FAFA included a Songs Committee headed alternately by Marjorie Edgar and Burton Paulu, director of KUOM, the University of Minnesota radio station. Records show Paulu in charge of a project in which Finnish, Polish, and Welsh folk songs were recorded and held in a KUOM archive, now lost. U of M history professor and FAFA member Philip D. Jordan hosted a KUOM radio program focused on the “history and development of American folk song.”

Two nationally known figures, Pete Seeger (1919–2014) and Lead Belly (1888–1949), also played important roles in developing a local folk music culture. Pete Seeger’s avuncular mentorship of neophyte folkies was felt from afar via his records and in person during his occasional visits. (Seeger, as the main story shows, had a direct and personal influence on Bluestein.) In 1941, the same year Seeger joined the topical, pro-union Almanac Singers and one year before he was drafted, he visited Minnesota
with groupmate Woody Guthrie. They stayed in Duluth with Henry and Irene Paul, principal activists in the 1937 timber workers strike. Seeger returned to Minnesota in 1950–51, performing in-house concerts locally. He also made multiple appearances in the region in the mid- to late 1950s (some arranged by Bluestein), including in Iowa City and Ames, Iowa, and Madison, Wisconsin. Eschewing applause and emphasizing do-it-yourself music-making, Seeger aimed to create new musicians rather than entertain passive audience members. His call to discover one’s musicality was a siren song for innumerable young adults of the period, including local old-time musician Lyle Lofgren (1936–2014), who attended Seeger’s 1957 Unitarian Society performance and immediately thereafter began a lifetime of music-making. Jon Pankake and Paul Nelson, who would go on to find the pioneering Little Sandy Review, drove to Ames, Iowa, to see Seeger that same year. Both purchased guitars; Nelson’s guitar teacher, at Schmitt Music, was Gene Bluestein.8

Another important factor in the development of a local folk music subculture was the Upper Midwest tour of Lead Belly (Huddie William Ledbetter) in early winter of 1948. Lead Belly’s stay in Minnesota, a year before his death, and about the time symptoms of his ALS disease must have been manifesting, was an extended one and had a powerful afterlife in a tape recording (The Minneapolis Private Party) made on November 21, 1948. The tape circulated for at least the next decade among local musicians, who took it up and reworked Lead Belly’s ideas, including Dave “Snaker” Ray, himself an influence on Bob Dylan.7

From Marjorie Edgar well before the folk boom to A Prairie Home Companion well after it, and including the Dinkytown and West Bank musical scenes of the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s, the story of Minnesota’s folk revival spans the twentieth century.9

Notes


2. Theodore Blegen, Norwegian Emigrant Songs and Ballads (Minneapo-

3. Lead Belly, Lead Belly Private Party Minneapolis Minnesota ’48

4. Press release, University of Minnesota, June 20, 1949; “Ballad

5. Anne R. Kaplan, “The Folk Arts Foundation of America: A History,”

6. Curt Brown, “Timber Strike 80 Years Ago Had an Unlikely Voice

7. Lead Belly, Lead Belly Private Party Minneapolis Minnesota ‘48, Docu-

8. For an overview of the West Bank music scene of the era, see Cyn

9. For an overview of the West Bank music scene of the era, see Cyn

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In 1958, the state budgeted generously to mark Minnesota’s statehood centennial, and multiple committees planned celebrations of Minnesota’s history, industries, arts, food, and other traditions. Bluestein received a $3,000 grant from the Louis W. and Maud Hill Family Foundation to “preserve Minnesota’s heritage,” enabling him to spend spring and summer traveling around the state, collecting songs in preparation for a book, October concert, and 1958–59 radio program. The book instead became a record album, the Bluestein-produced Minnesota Statehood Centennial Album, Songs of the North Star State, issued by Folkways Records, samples of which are still available on the Folkways website.

The album is a distinct picture of the state in the context of the centennial. At a time when most folk music interest was confined to Anglo-Celtic traditions, Bluestein included Ojibwe (Chippewa), French voyageur, Norwegian, Finnish, Danish, and Swedish songs. Bluestein performed all 10 songs; only three are entirely in English. In a voice reminiscent of Seeger’s, but softer and higher, Bluestein accompanies himself on banjo throughout, save for the a cappella Finnish “Toiler’s Serenade” and “Chippewa Lullaby” collected by Red Wing native Frances Densmore, played on flute.

The LP begins with the French Canadian folksong “Ah, Si Mon Moine . . . ,” attributed to voyageurs. “Nu Ha Vee Yuligen,” translated from Danish as “We Have Christmas Every Year,” is lilting and easily followed; “Skada at America” expresses hope for America through reuse of a Swedish hymn tune; and “Oleanna”—with verses by Seeger—tells the story of Ole Bull’s failed utopia. Midwestern politics is represented by “The Farmer is the Man,” a populist ballad found in the 1890s Farmers Alliance Songbook:

The Farmer is the Man, the farmer is the man Lives on credit til the fall Then they take him by the hand and they lead him from the land And the middleman’s the man that gets it all

When the preacher and the crook go a strollin’ by the brook The farmer is the man who feeds them all And the lawyer hangs around while the butcher cuts a pound The farmer is the man who feeds them all
Songs of the North Star State was reviewed favorably by Robert Shelton in the New York Times and by John K. Sherman in the Minneapolis Sunday Tribune. Bluestein also created a series of related radio programs for KUOM, sponsored jointly by the university radio station and the Minnesota State Centennial Commission, broadcast weekly from October 7, 1958, to March 17, 1959.16

A concert held at Highland Park Junior High in St. Paul on October 22, 1958, gave the public the chance to hear many of the musicians Bluestein had found in his Minnesota fieldwork and whose music he alone sang on the LP. Serving as emcee, Bluestein bookended the concert with his own songs. Performances of Lakota and Ojibwe music and of Swedish, Finnish, and gospel music paint a picture of a multicultural Minnesota. Following a rousing version of “Oleanna,” a Pete Seeger favorite, in which the audience participated enthusiastically, Bluestein and local gospel musician Thelma Buckner closed the concert with “Down by the Riverside (Study War No More).” Bluestein gave an extended introduction that emphasized Minnesota’s diversity:

I want to do one last song that I think will, in a way, characterize much of what we’ve tried to present tonight. The variety and the wonderful kind of individuality which you saw tonight is something that is in a very, very unique way, American. We’re really very lucky, for all of us, to have as our cultural heritage all the wide diversity of things that you’ve heard tonight. I think probably nothing would sum it up quite so well as this last song, which Mrs. Buckner and I are going to do together, which is a spiritual, that comes from the words of Isaiah in the Old Testament, comes through a whole tradition of beautiful imagery. It’s the thing that everybody talks about, that people have dreamed about for centuries and centuries, which was expressed so beautifully in Isaiah, the time we all talk about, when nations shall not raise sword against nation. And it comes out this way . . .”17

Bluestein starts off in a moderate tempo, with a very simple accompaniment. He and Buckner trade harmonies; the product is simple and lovely. Vamping (repeating a short, simple passage of music) after the first verse and chorus, he gently says, “I think we can get . . . there must be a lot of you who know that, we can all sing this together,” and the audience responds, “I ain’t gonna study war no more,” its voice rising. Bluestein and Buckner continue, more boisterously, with additional verses, and the audience joins in readily and loudly on each chorus. The applause afterward is sustained, and Bluestein can be heard saying “Thelma,” presumably urging Buckner to bow. Notably, this celebration of interracial harmony occurs on a school stage some years before Minnesota school systems would begin to seriously address integration. These performances were not released as a commercial LP, but
Bluestein's recording of the concert (complete except for some of his own parts) is included in his papers at the University of North Carolina's Southern Folklore Collection and can be heard on its website.18

Bluestein's second 1958 Folkways album, Songs of the Holidays and Other Songs, performed with children of the Mount Zion Hebrew Congregation in St. Paul, also reflects his commitment to the concept of brotherhood and clearly springs from his experience teaching. Confronting an instructional problem for Jewish youth—that neither Yiddish nor Hebrew were sufficiently widespread to “[transmit] material to children in Jewish schools”—the album offered a series of accessible songs mostly in English. The songs teach children about Adam and Eve and Jewish holidays such as Hanukkah, Rosh Hashanah, and Sukkot. Audiences would be acquainted with aspects of Jewish tradition in conjunction with American folk songs by Woody Guthrie (“This Land Is Your Land”) and Malvina Reynolds (“I Live in the City”), whose lyrics include:

Black hands, white hands, yellow and brown,
All together built this town,
Black hands, white hands, yellow and brown,
All together makes the world go ‘round.

Bluestein writes about this song in the liner notes: “Perhaps the most significant aspect of American culture is the great diversity of peoples who have settled here and contributed their skills and labor to make possible the things we have. As a way of describing brotherhood in immediate and concrete terms I prefer this to any other brotherhood song I’ve heard.”19

“Trog Es Gezunt-Erhait” (“Wear It in the Best of Health”), the album’s first track, is a fine example of Bluestein’s approach. In it, he guides children through taking turns singing about a new thing each has—a sweater, a dress—and the entire group joins in (sometimes a bit prematurely, in their excitement) to sing/shout “trog es gezunterhait!” Bluestein is relaxed and encouraging, providing a clear and steady backup banjo part as children
take their turns singing. Putting himself in the background to let the children’s voices shine, Bluestein vamps as needed on the banjo to accommodate their entrances, and the well-rehearsed children sing with exuberance and skill. It is easy to see why Joci Tilsen, who, as a child, knew the Bluesteins in this period, says of him, “I associate him with warmth and comfort.” It is also easy to imagine that, in addition to engaging Jewish children in their own heritage, such songs helped to connect Jewish traditions to American ones, a wish Bluestein expresses in the liner notes. In this album and in similar work in the community, Bluestein’s focus is on cultural translation and pluralism. Bluestein gently made the point that Jewish (and Native, African American, and northern European) traditions are American traditions.  

Bluestein performed around the state in 1958, presenting music of the Christmas season and from his centennial collection, including concerts at the Unitarian Society auditorium and University of Minnesota convocation in Northrop Auditorium. Bluestein traveled back to New York City in December with Minneapolis Tribune columnist Will Jones, who had chosen him for a performance on the Peter Lind Hayes television show. Hayes, a former vaudevillian who hosted the daytime variety show, had sent out a call to journalists for local talent, and Jones, an affable chronicler of Twin Cities nightlife, nominated Bluestein, realizing only after Bluestein won that he’d “never met the guy. I picked him solely from watching him on various Channel 2 programs.” Accompanied by Jones, Bluestein dragged his long-neck banjo in its custom-made, extended case, his steel pan, and his mandolin, all for a segment that ended up being under three minutes. Jones wrote a column about their adventure, which included briefly leaving behind the steel pan in a cab (“Is that a bingo game?” asked the driver).  

By 1959, Bluestein’s last year and Dylan’s first in Minneapolis, interest in several kinds of folk music was becoming institutionalized. The Scholar coffeehouse in Dinkytown—“a little Village, untypical from the rest of the conventional Minneapolis,” as Dylan later described it—was in its heyday as a venue for folk music. The seminal Minneapolis-based folk music fanzine The Little Sandy Review, founded by Paul Nelson and Jon Pankake (both of whom went on to nationally significant writing careers), was gestating. Aficionados and players of blues, old-time music, and even flamenco such as Lyle Lofgren, Dave Williams, Liz Williams (later Lofgren), and Bud Claeson hosted parties in their Dinkytown apartments, where they would play guitar and banjo and listen to Harry Smith’s
By 1959, Bluestein’s last year and Dylan’s first in Minneapolis, interest in several kinds of folk music was becoming institutionalized.

Anthology of American Folk Music—ownership of and familiarity with which was a badge of honor in these circles. These Dinkytown aficionados brought folk musicians to town and went on to found the Minnesota Folk Song Society in 1961. 22

When in 1959 “at last [he] was in Minneapolis, where [he] felt liberated and gone,” Bob Dylan found the downtown public library stocked with Folkways records, learned from new friends about Odetta and a host of other folk-singers he’d not previously heard of, and substantially grew his folk repertoire. Dylan soon realized the electric guitar he’d brought from home “would have been useless to me,” as he recounted in his 2004 memoir, Chronicles: Volume One. He made an even trade of his electric guitar for a Martin folk acoustic model and prepared to reinvent himself in a “Bohemia (with) . . . beatniks, thinkers, rebels, artists, dropouts, and dreamers.”23

Bluestein earned his PhD from the university in 1959, ending his time in Minnesota. He and his family left for Michigan State University, where he taught for a few years. In 1963, he began what became his lifelong faculty position at Fresno State University, later California State University at Fresno. Bluestein continued his novel combinations of music-making and academic study, such as teaching musical topics in the English department. This enterprise was not without its detractors, as his son Evo Bluestein remembers: “When he did, people in the music department protested, saying, ‘Why is Bluestein using music? That’s our job.’ Gene said, ‘Sue me,’ and kept doing it.” He also designed a multiyear program in which a stellar roster of traditional folk musicians (Bessie Jones, Lydia Mendoza, Dewey Balfa, and Jean Ritchie, among others) came to campus for extended residencies.24

In California, Bluestein produced his mature scholarship, including a host of wide-ranging and provocative articles and three books. The first book applied literary theory to folk traditions; the second introduced his idea of “pople,” a concept of enduring importance in which...
Bluestein argues that purist notions of “folklore” fail to acknowledge the manifold popular and commercial influences of American culture on traditional music. *Anglish/Yinglish: Yiddish in American Life and Literature*, his final book, offered a lexicon of words that combined Yiddish and English, such as “schmoozing.” The Bluesteins formed a family band for a time, and lived in Finland while Gene had a Fulbright scholarship. He also expanded his work in social justice.25

Bluestein died on August 21, 2002, in Fresno. He was 74 years old. His old friend and colleague Jules Chametzky wrote to Ellie in condolence: “What I remember best about Gene, as classmates at Brooklyn, and later at Minnesota, is his irrepressible vitality, the eagerness for life, and his humor.” In 1960s and ’70s California, as in 1950s Minnesota, Bluestein worked within and beyond academic settings to educate Americans about the musical and cultural diversity of their past and present.26

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**Notes**

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7. William Hood, email message to author, Sept. 17, 2014. Hood was the host of *The Blueberry Bill Hour*, KDWB, 1974–79.


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