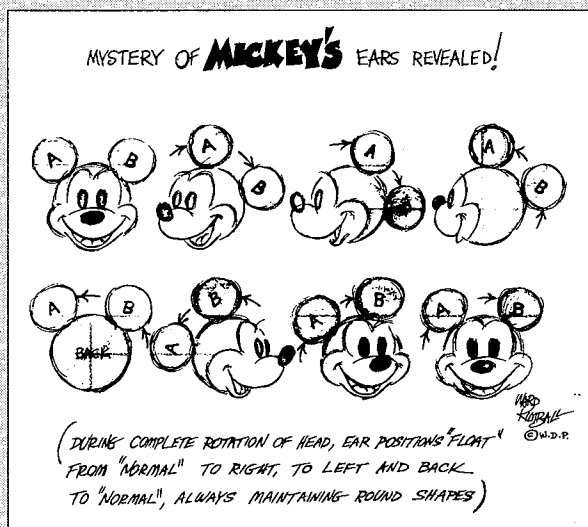


The Mouse That Roared

Novelist John Updike in *Art & Antiques* (Nov. 1991) ponders the enduring and widespread appeal of a plucky little rodent.

His first, iconic manifestation had something of Chaplin to it; he was the little guy, just over the border of the respectable. His circular ears, like two minimal cents, bespeak the smallest economic unit, the overlookable democratic man. His name has passed into the language as a byword for the small, the weak—a "Mickey Mouse operation" means an undercapitalized company or minor surgery. Children of my generation—wearing our Mickey Mouse watches, prying pennies from our Mickey Mouse piggy banks (I won one in a third-grade spelling bee, my first intellectual triumph), following his running combat with Pegleg Pete in the daily fummies, going to the local movie-house movies every Saturday afternoon and cheering when his smiling visage burst onto the screen to introduce a cartoon—felt Mickey was one of us, a bridge to the adult world of which Donald Duck was, for all of his childish sailor suit, an irascible, tyrannical member. Mickey didn't seek trouble, and he didn't complain; he rolled with the punches, and surprised himself as much as us when . . . he showed warrior resourcefulness and won, once again, a blushing kiss from dear, all but identical Minnie. His minimal,

*decent nature meant that he would yield, in the Disney animated cartoons, the starring role to combative, sputtering Donald Duck and even to Goofy, with his "gawshes" and Gary Cooper-like gawkiness. But for an occasional comeback like the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" episode of *Fantasia*, and [1990]'s rather souped-up *The Prince and the Pauper*, Mickey was through as a star by 1940. But, as with Marilyn Monroe when her career was over, his life as an icon gathered strength. The America that is not symbolized by that imperial Yankee Uncle Sam is symbolized by Mickey Mouse. He is America as it feels to itself—plucky, put-on, inventive, resilient, good-natured, game.*



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political factions, but that aristocratic era was gone. "Washington was no politician at all, as we understand the word," Ratcliffe comments at one point in the novel. "He stood outside of politics. The

thing couldn't be done today . . . If Washington were President now, he would have to learn our ways or lose the next election." Reluctantly, Henry Adams had come to the same conclusion.

Inventing Leadbelly

"Our Singing Country: John and Alan Lomax, Leadbelly, and the Construction of an American Past" by Benjamin Filene, in *American Quarterly* (Dec. 1991), Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 701 W. 40th St., Baltimore, Md. 21211.

Leadbelly, the black singer and guitarist (1889–1949) who is now considered

among the most important of America's folk musicians, was first thrust into the

musical limelight by John Lomax and his son, Alan. During the 1930s and early '40s, the Lomaxes traveled tens of thousands of miles and made thousands of recordings for the Library of Congress of obscure songs and singers. In time they won acclaim for preserving America's endangered folk-music heritage. What has not been understood, says Filene, a Yale graduate student, is how much their personal vision, shaped by the left-wing politics of the period, helped to define the very "tradition" they were purportedly just documenting.

The elder Lomax, a widower who had lost his bank job in the Depression, and his son Alan, who was 17 when they made their first expedition in 1933, were looking for "a particular brand of old-fashioned, rural folk music that they felt exemplified the country's creativity and vitality" and which they feared was being overwhelmed by commercial music and urban culture. They looked for "uncontaminated" songs in remote cotton plantations, cowboy ranches, lumber camps, and segregated southern prisons. When they found songs that didn't fit their conception, they simply ignored them.

To enhance folk music's popular appeal, they excluded powerful songs such as "Sistren an' Brethren," in which southern blacks threatened revenge against their white oppressors, from their best-selling

book *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934). When the Lomaxes did find the sort of folk music they liked, Filene says, they sought to gain an audience for it, "even if doing so involved rounding off the music's rough edges and creating a false public persona for the singer."

That was what happened in the case of Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter), whom they discovered in 1933 in Louisiana's Angola Prison, where he was serving time for murder. In promoting Leadbelly, the Lomaxes "focused on his convict past and depicted him as a savage, untamed animal," while at the same time portraying him as "the voice of people."

The Lomaxes, realizing that Leadbelly's commercial appeal depended upon the perception that his songs were "pure folk," tried to eliminate obvious pop influences from his performances. They also toned down his original songs. Under their influence, Leadbelly removed suggestive lyrics from a song about his youthful desire to enjoy the pleasures of a red-light district and added a new ending to the song in which he "begs his mother to forgive him for his past behavior."

"The Lomaxes claimed to be impartial folklorists who documented an existing tradition," Filene concludes, "but they had a personal vision that has powerfully influenced how Americans remember their musical heritage."

Aliens Capture Sci-Fi Literature

"Big Ideas and Dead-End Thrills" by Thomas M. Disch, in *The Atlantic* (Feb. 1992), 745 Boylston St., Boston, Mass. 02116.

Science fiction in the past 15 years has entered a whole new dimension of popularity. Starting with *Star Wars* in 1977, Hollywood has turned out one hugely profitable sci-fi extravaganza after another. Meanwhile, in the literary zone, sci-fi books, along with their horror and fantasy kin, have regularly moved onto the bestseller lists. All this might seem cause for great rejoicing among sci-fi enthusiasts, but Disch, theater critic for the *Nation* and author of *334* (1972) and other science-fiction novels, looks upon it as an odious in-

vasion of the book-snatchers. Publishers, he contends, have turned the genre as a whole into "one of the major symptoms of, if not a causal agent in, the dumbing-down of the younger generation."

In the early 1970s, Disch had complained that, as things stood even then, the genre could best be understood as "a branch of children's literature." He deplored the limitations that resulted from the juvenile nature of the readership and favored "an aesthetically and intellectually mature science fiction, written by grown-