

The New Criterion

Notebook

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Bartók, Parry & Lord: a flawed legacy

by [Stephen Schwartz](#)

Debunking the myth of "Homeric" Balkan folk songs.

The opening pages of the classic and now rare 1951 volume by Béla Bartók (1881–1945) and Albert B. Lord (1912–91), *Serbo-Croatian Folk Songs*, contain a hagiographic description of Milman Parry (1902–35), whose work on oral poetry became a pillar of literary analysis in the West. Citing and slightly amplifying that official account, Parry was a

Homeric scholar at Harvard University, [who] had the inspired thought that if we wanted to form a picture of the great Homeric chants and how they were performed, we should observe the life of folksong where it has best survived to the present day, in the Balkan peninsula. The heroic epic songs of Yugoslavia, the so-called ‘men’s songs,’ come nearest in that region to the type of tradition which was probably the foundation of the Homeric epics.

The “ ...

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