

ABSTRACT

JOHN FAHEY AND AMERICAN PRIMITIVISM: THE PROCESS OF
AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by

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JOHN FAHEY AND AMERICAN PRIMITIVISM: THE PROCESS OF AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY is a master's thesis that examines the music of the United States during the twentieth century through the example of John Fahey (1939-2001).

When defining any cultivated music, the first step is to establish clear connections to folk, or vernacular, traditions. In the United States, early definitions can be traced to academic scholars who maintained rigid and subjective criteria that had fundamental ties to European folk traditions. During the early twentieth century, the recording industry's first record producers began recording rural musicians and marketing them as "folk" artists. The opinion of most scholars of folk music was that these musicians were not authentic, due to the influence of an industrial world. But it was the recordings made during the 1920s and early 1930s that were later rediscovered by record collectors after World War II.

John Fahey was one such collector, and like so many others, he was

profoundly influenced by the music that he heard on old 78 rpm recordings. An unschooled musician, Fahey learned how to play the guitar by listening to these records, eventually establishing a basic technique that he applied to his own music. He combined this technique with his love of European concert music, redefining what the steel string guitar was capable of. His music was so innovative, that he started his own record label in order to promote it, establishing one of the first artist owned record labels, Takoma Records.

Fahey formed his vernacular through recordings. He took his basic technique and created an idiosyncratic cultivated style. The music is not what defines American culture, but the individual and the process. Through extensive transcriptions of both Fahey's vernacular as well as his cultivated style, this process becomes clear. Since this model relies on the influence of commercial recordings, it is a definition that has come about during the twentieth century, and is tied to popular culture and popular music issues.

JOHN FAHEY AND AMERICAN PRIMITIVISM: THE PROCESS OF AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY encourages individual examination through process, and is a model that will aid in future studies of American music and culture.