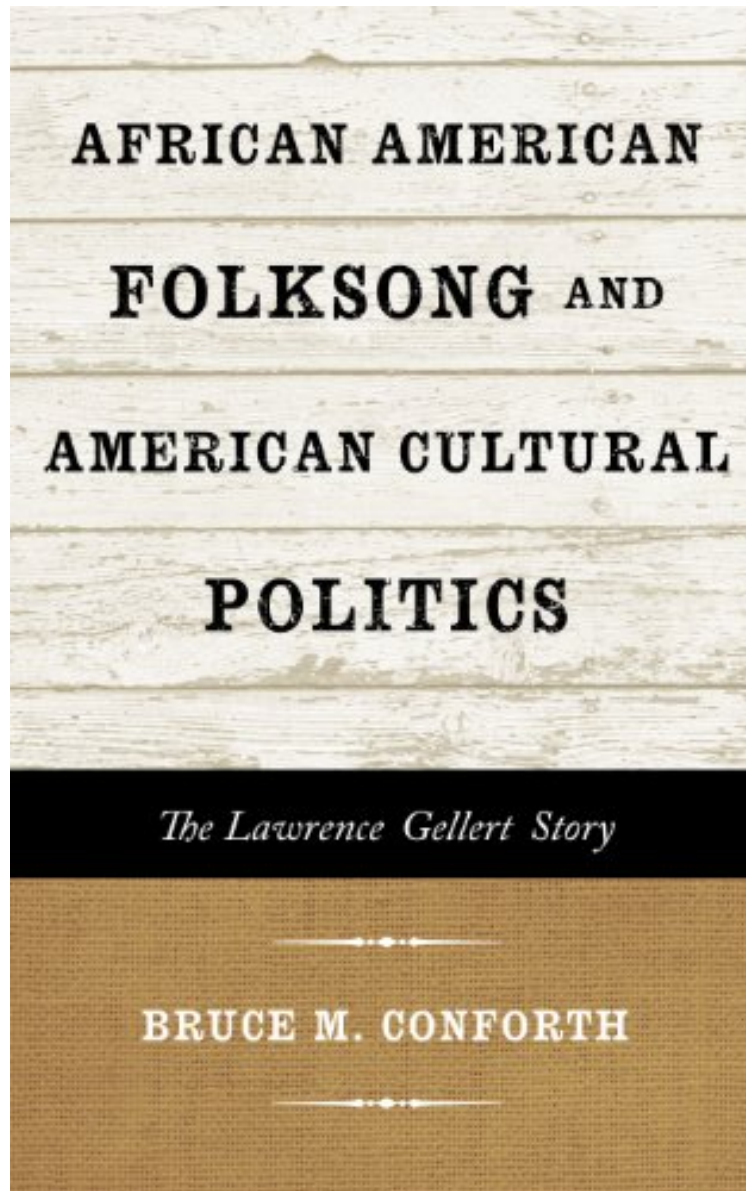


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(American Folk Music and Musicians Series)

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Bruce M. Conforth

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Bruce M. Conforth : African American Folksong and American Cultural Politics: The Lawrence Gellert Story (American Folk Music and Musicians Series) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised African American Folksong and American Cultural Politics: The Lawrence Gellert Story

In *African American Folksong and American Cultural Politics: The Lawrence Gellert Story*, scholar and musician Bruce Conforth tells the story of one of the most unusual collections of African American folk music ever amassed—and the remarkable story of the man who produced it: Lawrence Gellert. Compiled between the World Wars, Gellert's recordings were immediately adopted by the American Left as the voice of the true American proletariat, with the songs—largely variants of traditional work songs or blues—dubbed by the Left as "songs of protest." As both the songs and Gellert's standing itself turned into propaganda weapons of left-wing agitators, Gellert experienced a meteoric rise within the circles of left-wing organizations and the American Communist party. But such success proved ephemeral, with Gellert contributing to his own neglect by steadfastly refusing to release information about where and from whom he had collected his recordings. Later scholars, as a result, would skip over his closely held, largely inaccessible research, with some asserting Gellert's work had been doctored for political purposes. And to a certain extent they were correct. Conforth reveals how Gellert at least "assisted" in the creation of some of his more political material. But hidden behind the few protest songs that Gellert allowed to become public was a vast body of legitimate African American folksongs—enough to rival the work of any of his contemporary collectors. Had Gellert granted access to all his material, scholars would have quickly seen that it comprised an incredibly complete and diverse collection of all African American song genres: work songs, blues, chants, spirituals, as well as the largest body of African American folktales about Irish Americans (what were referred to as "One Time I'shman" tales). It also included vast swaths of African American oral literature collected by Gellert as part of the Federal Writers' Project. In *African American Folksong and American Cultural Politics*, Conforth brings to light for the first time the entire body of work collected by Lawrence Gellert, establishing his place, and the place for the material he collected, within the pages of American folk song scholarship. In addition to shedding new light on the concept of "protest music" within African American folk music, Conforth discusses the unique relationship of the American Left to this music and how personal psychology and the demands of the American Communist party would come to ruin Gellert's life. *African American Folksong and American Cultural Politics* will appeal to students and scholars in the fields of American social and political history, African American studies, the history of American folk music, and ethnomusicology.

Among collectors of African American folksong, Lawrence Gellert is undeservedly obscure. Eccentric and controversial, he led an adventurous life, many details of which are uncertain. His family moved from Hungary to New York City in 1906. Around 1920, he relocated to North Carolina for his health. There he established special rapport with African Americans, whose music he loved. Treated as an insider, he was able, at considerable risk, to collect songs usually unheard outside the black community in that segregated era. His collecting, done in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi in the 1920s and 1930s, predated several better-known efforts. Influenced by leftists, for a while he associated with the Communist Party, which embraced his collections as proletarian songs of protest. The music was much broader in subject matter, however, and he cared little for politics. Conforth has spent decades researching Gellert's accomplishments and here provides the first comprehensive scholarly study of this complex man. Suitable for academic libraries and large public libraries, it should interest scholars in numerous fields, especially African American studies and ethnomusicology. Summing Up: Recommended. Graduate students and above. (CHOICE) From the Back Cover In *African American Folksong and American Cultural Politics: The Lawrence Gellert Story*, scholar and musician Bruce Conforth tells the story of one of the most unusual collections of African American folk music ever amassed—and the remarkable story of the man who produced it: Lawrence Gellert. Compiled between the World Wars, Gellert's recordings were immediately adopted by the American Left as the voice of the true American proletariat, with the songs—largely variants of traditional work songs or blues—dubbed by the Left as "songs of protest." As both the songs and Gellert's standing itself turned into propaganda weapons of left-wing agitators, Gellert experienced a meteoric rise within the circles of left-wing organizations and the American Communist party. But such success proved ephemeral, with Gellert contributing to his own neglect by steadfastly refusing to release information about where and from whom he had collected his recordings. Later scholars, as a result, would skip over his closely held, largely inaccessible research, with some asserting Gellert's work had been doctored for political purposes. And to a certain extent they were correct. Conforth reveals how Gellert at least "assisted" in the creation of some of his more political material. But hidden behind the few protest songs that Gellert allowed to become public was a vast body of legitimate African American folksongs—enough to rival the work of any of his contemporary collectors. Had Gellert granted access to all his material, scholars would have quickly seen that it comprised an incredibly complete and diverse collection of all African American song genres: work songs, blues, chants, spirituals, as well as the largest body of African American folktales about Irish Americans (what were referred to as "One Time I'shman" tales). It also included vast swaths of

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About the Author Bruce M. Conforth grew up during the folk/blues revival of the 1960s as experienced in New York City's Greenwich Village. He received his PhD in ethnomusicology and folklore from Indiana University and served as the first Curator of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. He is now a member of the faculty of the American Culture Department at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.