# Dueling Stereotypes: Perceptions of Southerners and Their Music in Early Twentieth-Century America

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## Introduction

"I've often wondered what it must be like to have grown up in North Georgia and to see your life, your town, your way of living flattened out for someone else's purposes and eventually turned into a national punch line."

Bronwen Dickey, "The Last Wild River"[1]

The landscape of Southern music in the early decades of the twentieth-century was a vibrant patchwork of styles and sounds, reflecting the multitude of traditions and environments found in the region. Creole fishermen danced to zydeco tunes like "Blues de Basile," Kentucky coal miners thrilled to haunting murder ballads like "The Knoxville Girl," and jazz fans in Atlanta flocked to the city's black theaters to hear Bessie Smith sing "Downhearted Blues."[2] Sharecroppers in the Delta heard and sympathized with Charley Patton's "Mississippi Boweavil Blues," while Southern emigrants in Los Angeles got a taste of home and politics through Woody Guthrie's broadcasts on KFVD.[3] From the largest metropolis to the smallest rural hamlet, people of all races, occupations, and classes contributed to the creation and evolution of musical forms that would reflect their own communities and lives in the New South.

Despite this diversity of people and landscapes, musicians and groups responsible for marketing Southern musical products in the early twentieth-century overwhelmingly played into the reductive and stereotypical views about the region that had been propagated since the nineteenth century. The efforts and influence of writers, folklorists, radio program directors, promoters, the film industry, musicians, and countless other groups effectively reduced the rich

[1] Bronwen Dickey, "The Last Wild River" Oxford American issue 61, summer 2008: 62-74. Bronwen is describing the legacy of her father James Dickey's 1970 novel Deliverance, whose now infamous film version had important consequences for the South and stereotypes.
[2] "Blues de Basile," recorded in 1930 by Amédé Ardoin. "The Knoxville Girl" is a traditional ballad of unknown date, available in several variations. "Downhearted Blues," recorded in 1923.
[3] "Mississippi Boweavil Blues," recorded in 1929. Guthrie first appeared on KVFD in 1937. Dave Marsh and Harold Leventhal (eds.), Pastures of Plenty: a self-portrait (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990): 15.

variety of Southern musical genres to a narrow and simplistic definition that was marketed as the only authentic music. According to this idea, the South was composed of rural whites of Anglo-Saxon descent whose lives were out of step with American modernity and mainstream culture. The musical products of this group were naturally of a primitive and unsophisticated variety due to cultural stagnation and isolation, an assumption that was cast in both a negative and a positive light depending on who was crafting the image and to what ends. While it is true that the majority of people living in the South in the early twentieth century identified as white and lived in rural areas until at least World War II, the point remains that these ideas about the region formed a definite caricature of what it meant to be Southern that was then applied to the narrow definition of music that was thought to fit this model. This was an inaccurate and exaggerated characterization of white rural people (an entity that was glossed as if it were a unified and homogeneous group), and the music they were producing, and denied the music and even existence of a multitude of other groups.[4]

This introduction began with a description of a diverse array of songs and genres for two purposes: first, to give concrete illustrations of just a few of the multitude of styles and unique audiences that made up the world of Southern music in the early twentieth century, and second, to show that these styles and artists had enough local popularity and importance to be commercially recorded and preserved. This was the case, even if they were ultimately brushed aside and left out of the canon of mainstream Southern music by those who subscribed to the more exclusive view and exercised power over the kind of music produced and promoted for

[4] While "the 1920 census announced that for the first time more Americans lived in urban communities of at least twenty-five hundred people than in rural areas," two-thirds of white Southerners still lived in rural areas by 1940, more than half without indoor plumbing or electricity. Statistical information from Anthony J. Stanonis, Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006): 23; and Jeffrey J. Lange, Smile When You Call Me a Hillbilly: Country Music's Struggle for Respectability, 1939-1954 (Athens: University of Georgia Press: 2004): 10.

public consumption. The groups responsible for publicizing and marketing Southern music in this period peddled a narrow view that played into middle America's idealization of pastoral life and the past. This nostalgia for the halcyon days of America's agrarian youth was fed by the urban boom of the late nineteenth century, the World Wars, the "unsettling changes in the twenties", and other disruptive events of the early twentieth century that made the idea of a simpler time so attractive.[5]

This thesis demonstrates the extent to which the groups responsible for bringing Southern music to the masses, such as song-collectors, event promoters, radio executives, and even musicians themselves, both drew from and contributed to the characterization of the South as backwards, wholly white, and exclusively rural. The South and its people occupied a unique position in the American imagination, one in which their perceived distinctiveness made them almost un-American; after all, had not they themselves assumed this label in a visible and dramatic way in the 1860s? One legacy of secession and the Civil War was that "the South had undergone an experience that it could share with no other part of America... the experience of military defeat, occupation, and reconstruction." This "un-American lesson of submission" marked the South as different even without the added distinctions of culture or economy.[6] The South's otherness aided the success of marketing a caricature of Southern white rural music and people despite the region's internal diversity in terms of culture, ethnic groups, economy, industry, and urbanization. This thesis also explains how the use of this caricature and even the connotations of the stereotype itself evolved over time, tapping into the evolving needs of the American nation: though historians have not commented on this shift specifically, I examine how

[5] Bill C. Malone, Southern Music, American Music (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979): 34.
[6] C. Vann Woodward, The Burden of Southern History (3rd ed.) (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008): 190.

concerns over ethnic purity gave way to a focus on morality and veneration of the past through music. This work also addresses how Southerners themselves either used stereotypes in their music to establish their place on the national stage, or refused to do so. These considerations illuminate important dissonances of early twentieth-century life in the New South, a problematic time and place between the dissolution of the Confederacy and Reconstruction and the full reintegration of the region into national affairs, where the growing pains of a modernizing region were complicated by a past that could not be forgotten.

Historical examinations of Southern music have been limited in two ways. First, the subject of music history in general has traditionally been neglected or avoided by academic historians and relegated largely to the popular press or musicologists.[7] Southern music history, then, is an even more obscure and problematic topic. Richard A. Peterson, who authored one of the foundational texts on the history and iconography of country music, describes in his book's acknowledgements the difficulty of legitimizing his interest in Southern music to "university colleagues [who] didn't consider anything having to do with country as relevant to those of 'our kind.'" The "elitist snobbery of [his] university colleagues" with regard to this field was an issue in the 1970s when Peterson's research began, and to a large extent it persists today, resulting in an underrepresented area of research that is only recently receiving legitimate study and reception by the academic community.[8] This fact is evident in the bibliography of this thesis, which demonstrates that most secondary sources on this topic date from the 1990s and 2000s.

Historians who have explored this realm have usually produced institutional histories that trace the development of specific entities (such as organizations, radio stations, etc.) without

[7] Dr. Dale Cockrell. Professor of musicology, Vanderbilt University. Personal communication. 27 January 2010.
[8] Richard A. Peterson, Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997): x.

offering much analysis. These are often presented as "biographies" for music enthusiasts and armchair historians rather than serious historical works. Escott's *The Grand Ole Opry*, Wolfe's *A Good-Natured Riot*, and Havighurst's *Air Castle of the South* are prime examples of this.[9] Articles rather than full-length monographs are slightly more common in this field, and usually appear in music-affiliated journals or essay collections focused on music. Wolfe's *Country Music Goes to War* is the most important collection utilized for this thesis.[10]

In addition, the lack of an exact, universally accepted definition of what the South actually consists of has hindered investigation into its cultural products. It is difficult to categorize genres or musicians as being Southern and to identify wider trends in Southern music as a whole when we are unable to definitively delineate the boundaries of this region. Are the South's borders merely geographical, or also cultural and psychological? What states or areas comprise the South, and what qualifications are used for membership? Everything from average temperature to former Confederacy membership to the prevalence of mules over horses or oxen as draft animals has been suggested to divide the South from the non-South. Even the blatantly subjective ruling of the South existing wherever the majority of inhabitants perceive themselves to be Southern has been suggested.[11] These attempts to classify the South are reflective of the

[9] Colin Escott, The Grand Ole Opry: the Making of an American Icon (Nashville: Center Street, 2006).
Charles K. Wolfe, A Good-Natured Riot: the Birth of the Grand Ole Opry (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press, 1999).
Craig Havighurst, Air Castle of the South: WSM and the Making of Music City (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).
[10] Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson (eds.), Country Music Goes to War (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005).
[11] David L. Smiley, "The Quest for a Central Theme in Southern History," The South Atlantic Quarterly Vol. 71, 1972: 307-325.

nebulous entity referred to as "Southern identity" and the difficulty of drawing the borders of an imagined community that exists, to a large degree, separately from its tangible reality.[12]

Historian Bill C. Malone is a key figure in Southern musical studies and the most notable exception to the longstanding rule about historians and music. His landmark work *Country Music, U.S.A.*, originally published in 1968, is considered by many to be the first truly academic (and for a long time, the only) study of country music. This work remains an important one for Southern music scholarship today, as it is constantly being revised and expanded.[13] Throughout his career, Malone has posited that the musical genre we now think of as "country" is a more or less unified entity with a linear descent from white folk musicians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Although not going so far as to make the reductionist judgments about Southern music detailed in this thesis, Malone definitely focuses on a specific type of Southern music (and the one most distinctly white and rural) as being the most important. Malone made a brief foray into more inclusive musical studies with 1979's *Southern Music, American Music*, but subsequent publications have seen him returning to his primary interest in the country genre and its antecedents.[14]

Malone was the first to chart out the field of Southern musical history, but not until recently did other historians produce works to help legitimize Southern music as a field worthy

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[12] An imagined community is a concept that designates a group united by ideology or culture that is perceived to exist by both members and non-members, even though it does not ascribe to the co-residence component of community. This community exists primarily in the mind because members are not all personally known to one another and indeed may never meet the majority of others. See Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (New York: Verso, 1983) and Anthony P. Cohen, The Symbolic Construction of Community (New York: Metheun, Inc., 1985).

[13] Bill C. Malone, Country Music, U.S.A. 3rd revised edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

[14] Southern Music, American Music (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1979), Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers: Southern Culture and the Roots of Country Music (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), and Don't Get Above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002). All works by Bill C. Malone.

of academic inquiry. However, Malone remained the prevalent academic voice in this area for so long that more recent historians often must establish their places on the scene by challenging his ideas. Historians such as Jeffrey J. Lange and Patrick Huber represent the recent generation ushering in a new era in music scholarship that reconsiders many of Malone's conclusions. In their own work, these historians and a handful of others argue against a strictly rural or working-class origin of country music and for more diversity within white rural music of the period, both in terms of sub-genres and the people contributing to this category. Whereas Malone considers the country and pre-country traditions to be overwhelmingly the products of white rural musicians who drew on the legacy of hardship and deprivation that characterized the Southern experience of this time, others argue for a closer examination of this perceived cultural purity and projected authenticity. These reinterpretations of early twentieth-century Southern music seek to provide a more nuanced understanding of the subject, in which more complex patterns of influence coalesced to form the genre (and associated archetypes) that eventually became dominant.

Jeffrey J. Lange's 2004 work is one such example that seeks to reveal hidden diversity by examining country music's mid-century transformation from a stigmatized local art form to a national (if not necessarily less caricatured) force of popular culture.[15] One of his most important contributions is to divide Malone's all-encompassing "country" label into six subgenres that take into account diverse origins and motivations of musicians, as well as a wider range of musical influences beyond those of white rural people. Huber's 2008 book is another recent work to deal with this issue of diverse influences.[16] Whereas Malone consistently cites the development of

[15] Lange, Smile When You Call Me a Hillbilly.
[16] Patrick Huber, Linthead Stomp: the Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2008).

country music as a rural phenomenon, Huber posits that musicians residing in cities had just as great, if not a greater role in this process. This is clearly evident in his choice of topic for his first major work, which examines the contributions of factory and mill workers in the Carolinas to twentieth-century Southern music. On this point, Huber has been blatantly critical of Malone, questioning both his definition and application of the label "rural", especially in Malone's recent book *Don't Get Above Your Raisin'* (2002).[17]

Huber also criticizes Malone for taking for granted that commercially produced music was representative of the values of the artists performing it, or of their listeners. He places much more emphasis on the power of record companies and radio producers to mold artists' images and censor their products and artists' own agency to exploit profitable tropes. He thus sees Malone as romanticizing the country artist as a pure, unbiased mouthpiece for the attitudes and dreams of a unified Southern lower class, with no middleman moderating these expressions to fit the tastes of the intended consumers. He has similar opinions of Malone's designation of country as America's truest and least diluted musical tradition. In general, Huber's viewpoint is much more focused on the way the lens of commerce mediates and distorts culture.[18]

Sociologist Richard A. Peterson is another academic taking a new perspective by focusing on the influence of commerce and social forces in shaping country music. Peterson characterizes the development of the genre as we know it today as a process of conscious and deliberate manufacturing, rather than a natural development that was unaffected by outside forces .[19] Peterson gives a unique analysis that draws on his background in social science by presenting comparisons of iconography and imagery in hillbilly and country music interspersed

[17] See Huber's review of Don't Get Above Your Raisin' in Southern Cultures Volume 9.2, 2003: 102-105.
[18] For Huber's direct challenges to Malone, see Linthead Stomp, xiii, xvi, and 27.
[19] Peterson, Creating Country Music.

with discussions of the greater cultural climate and consequences of these representations. Like Huber, Peterson emphasizes the power that record companies and radio producers wielded over artists' images, but also acknowledges the ability of artists to mold themselves to archetypes that they knew would be profitable and accepted. As the title of his book explains, this scholar examines the history of country and its antecedents to illuminate the idea of "authenticity" and how it was constructed by artists and others. With the crystallization of various tropes about country musicians and ideas about the music itself, artists increasingly had to assert their right to perform it through conformity to these roles. Peterson identifies three main roles that performers could assume to cement their status as authentic practitioners of Southern music: the "old-timer," the hillbilly, and the cowboy. His views on diversity within the genre are also apparent as he traces its trajectory from 1920s Atlanta to the '90s and contrasts the folk, pop, and Western varieties of country music and artists.

These scholars have had the greatest impact on the field to which this thesis makes a contribution. The originality of this work lies in its focus on the process of stereotyping rather than just the outcomes. Whereas the current scholarship analyzes the presence of stereotypical elements in country music, they have paid less attention to where these stereotypes came from, how they developed from the earliest days of the genre, and how they changed along with the evolving concerns of the nation.

This thesis begins with a discussion of how the earliest stereotypes about America's "contemporary ancestors" and the "Southern mountaineers" initially shaped the methods employed by song-collectors and their portrayal of music in the region in published song collections. These amateur folklorists followed the trend of contemporary anthropology by engaging in what is now termed "salvage ethnology", an idea that "stressed the urgency of

collecting the languages, cultures, and material objects of "primitive" peoples, who were believed to be either rapidly dying out or losing their culture through assimilation."[20] This idea effectively determined where song-collectors would go to investigate music (Appalachia, thought to be the most anachronistic area in the nation) and the kind of music they sought (old British ballads, which would support the idea of the "mountaineers" as relics of a previous age).

Although ostensibly done to preserve cultures deemed worthwhile and valuable, salvage ethnology was also prone to paternalistic and idealistic judgments of the people being studied and afforded them almost no agency of their own. The song-collectors' ethnologies painted portraits of backwards uneducated hill folk who still ascribed to savage customs like feuding and child marriage, yet claimed that the songs of these cultures were worth preserving as remnants of early American culture. A major theme of chapter one is the persistence of those representations from the1910s into the early 1930s and their simultaneous constriction and legitimization of the music that was being described: constriction because song-collectors focused on Appalachia as the only Southern area worth noting and judged musical expressions according to this assumption, and legitimization because the idea of the region as a relic of America's pure Anglo past made its music more acceptable and worthy of preservation in the eyes of many people.

The beginnings of radio and an appreciable music industry in the later part of this period lead us into the next chapter, which offers a discussion of important organizations and events that helped further ingrain and deepen the stereotypes discussed in chapter one from the 1920s through the 1950s, namely, the role of fiddlers' conventions and the development of radio programs devoted to Southern "hillbilly" music. Although public events and the transition to

[20] Douglas Cole and Alex Long, "The Boasian Anthropological Survey Tradition: The Role of Franz Boas in North American Anthropological Surveys," in Surveying the Record: North American Scientific Exploration to 1930, ed. Edward C. Carter II (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1999): 236.

radio mark the first time that Southern musicians were able to "speak" for themselves, I demonstrate that their ability to portray Southern music and people was limited by those responsible for marketing this music and circumscribed by a legacy of stereotypes that even then was deeply entrenched. While these entities did reinforce and even deepen Southern stereotypes from within the music community itself, a significant shift also occurred in this period that designated Southern music and entertainment as a moral and charmingly "old-fashioned" genre, in contrast to the much-lampooned backwardness and even barbarism that had been described in earlier years. This recasting of the Southern archetype attempted to retain the positive connotations of antiquity and authenticity while downplaying the association of Southerners with violence and vice (or at least making these things seem less serious).

The final chapter discusses the urban backlash of the 1940s and '50s against poor southern whites and hillbilly music's continuing attempts to counter negative characterizations while still playing into profitable stereotypes. Although radio promoters of the '30s and '40s had somewhat succeeded in selling hillbilly music as the genre of clean living and upstanding moral people, the events of this era proved that it had not been enough to erase the negative connotations of white rural people that had been propagated by the song-collectors and that were currently being fueled by accelerated Southern migration to Northern and Midwestern cities. The introduction of Western cowboy imagery into hillbilly music and radio programs in the 1930s was the most visible effect of the industry's efforts to neutralize anti-hillbilly sentiment. This process not only sought to capitalize on the success of Hollywood's singing cowboys but also to replace the increasingly problematic hillbilly trope with that of the cowboy, a figure whose values and actions were above reproach. Their success was limited, however, as the Southern cowboy's music took on unfavorable connotations of its own.

## A note on terminology

This thesis uses terms describing genres and types of music as they were used and understood in their own time. "Southern music" is the broadest classification, although is necessarily exclusionary since, in the opinion of early twentieth century mainstream America, the "real" music of the South was almost exclusively white and rural. This term encompasses all the music discussed in this essay. "Hillbilly music" refers to Southern music that was commercialized beginning around the 1920s, while "country music" refers to commercial Southern music of the 1940s and later. These two categories have a great deal of overlap and preference for using one over the other is usually based on chronology. "Western music" as used in this thesis refers to the trend of adopting cowboy iconography and themes in hillbilly and early country music.

# I.

Stereotypes about Southern people and culture played an integral part in structuring early twentieth-century research into and presentations of their music. The earliest in-depth investigations of music were carried out by folklorists and "ballad hunters," who sought to preserve the aspects of folk culture they deemed important. These individuals also had a presence at mountain settlement schools (reform institutions created to improve isolated communities and educate children) and performed a similar function by encouraging certain musical traditions to the neglect of others. The goals and findings of the song-collectors often reflected upper-class and non-Southern viewpoints about the nature and worth of Southern folk culture. The power of these outsiders to dictate the boundaries and meaning of Southern culture through music to the rest of the nation was almost absolute in this period when the major studies and texts were produced by those with an outsider's perspective. [1]

This chapter focuses on the way in which song-collectors characterized the South, or perhaps just the parts they deemed worth focusing on, as inherently rural, backwards, and anachronistic. It also examines the way this perception was interpreted to by those studying Southern music or engaged with its preservation to judge the region as either distinctly American or not American at all. While some judged the region and its cultural productions as reflections of an ethnically pure and homogeneous American past, the others pronounced it as so dissimilar in culture and economy that it practically constituted a foreign country. These characterizations, sometimes applied simultaneously to different aspects of Southern life, and the many shades of gray in between reveal important assumptions and dissonances present in the rhetoric of nationalism during this period: what did it mean for people or places to be "American"? Which

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[1] David Whisnant, All that is Native and Fine: the Politics of Culture in an American Region (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

was more American, the past or the present?[2] This chapter examines the reasoning and evidence presented by song-collectors in favor of both ideas, while also providing analysis and criticism of both judgments when they persisted in spite of obvious evidence to the contrary.

## Contemporary ancestors and Southern highlanders

Characterizations of the South and Southerners as representing a vestigial form of America drew on many assumptions: first, that the nation could (or should) claim a kind of shared starting point that encapsulated American values and history, and second, that this foundation was exclusively white, agrarian, and British-derived. Although other regions were technically labeled as American first (i.e., by colonization or statehood), the South was designated the repository of original American life as a result of its perceived isolation from the forces of modernization that had altered culture and introduced technology and diverse immigrants to the North. That the South was a region out of step with current ways of life was rarely disputed, but the conflicting interpretations of this judgment reflected America's struggle to venerate the past and its perceived values while actively pursuing aspects of modernity that seemed to oppose or violate these ideas.[3]

Books and articles emphasizing the peculiarity and antiquity of this region had been prevalent in American popular consciousness since the late nineteenth century, with the basis of their stereotypes extending as far back as the early 1800s.[4] These studies focused particularly on areas in the mountains, as these were seen as the most isolated and conservative places in the South. William Frost, president of Berea College, coined the term "contemporary ancestors"

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[2] For more on American nationalist rhetoric and how the "old Americans" became legitimized as the "real Americans," see Thomas Gossett, Race: the History of an Idea in America (New York: Oxford University Press): 22.
[3] This theme of nostalgia and veneration of an idealized past is explored more fully in chapter two.
[4] W.K. McNeil, ed., Appalachian Images in Folk and Popular Culture (Knoxville: University of TN Press, 1995): 2.

with his influential 1899 article in *Atlantic Monthly*.[5] He describes the racially pure, anachronistic inhabitants of the mountains and their arrested culture that mirrored that of the original Americans. Similar articles followed in scholarly and popular publications, e.g., Charles Morrow Wilson's "Elizabethan America" from 1929.[6] Books by non-Southerners who visited or moved to Appalachia made similar observations: Horace Kephart's *Our Southern Highlanders* in 1913, John C. Campbell's *The Southern Highlander and his Homeland* in 1921, James Watt Raines' *In the Land of Saddle-bags* in 1924, and innumerable others.[7] The designation of these people as "highlanders", beyond designating them as a distinct group within a defined geographical territory, also served to make a connection to their supposed roots in the highlands of Great Britain. These books played to the notions already widely held by Americans and deepened them with their own evidence and ideas. Similar works would appear well into the 1930s that accepted these ideas, with dissenting voices generally not receiving much attention. Works that advocated a stereotyped view of the region contributed to the creation of a "legitimizing identity" of the Appalachia: an identity imposed by dominant groups to justify their domination.[8]

This attitude carried over into the realm of musical studies in the early twentieth century, when a number of folklorists and preservation enthusiasts performed fieldwork in the South to

[5] William Frost, "Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains," Atlantic Monthly March 1899. Reprinted in ibid., 91-106.
[6] Charles Morrow Wilson, "Elizabethan America," Atlantic Monthly August 1929. Reprinted in ibid., 205-216.
[7] Horace Kephart, Our Southern Highlanders: a Narrative of Adventure in the Southern Appalachians and a Study of the Life Among the Mountaineers (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1913).
John C. Campbell, The Southern Highlander and His Homeland (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1921).
James Watt Raines, The Land of Saddle-Bags: a Study of the Mountain People of Appalachia (New York: Council of Women for Home Missions and Missionary Education Movement of the U.S. and Canada, 1924).
[8] Emily Satterwhite, "Objecting to Insider/Outsider Politics and the Uncritical Celebration of Appalachia," Appalachian Journal 38.1 (2010): 71. According to Satterwhite and others, domination in Appalachia most often took the form of resource exploitation by outsiders to the region.

find and record music and lyrics. The methodologies and findings of these researchers were necessarily bound up with their ideas about the region, and this also played into the way their collections were received by public and academic circles. The most well-known and influential song collections in this period peddled a narrow and static view of the South and its culture that strove to connect these people to the nation's humble beginnings, but also presented the inhabitants' "old-fashioned" ways as something that set them apart as an almost alien people within America. This dissonance was clearly present in the fieldwork and production of song collections.

## The Song-Collector's South

The earliest song collections were almost exclusively focused on British-derived songs found in the Appalachian Mountains, with the exception of some volumes on African-American song.[9] Cecil Sharp, a noted folk song enthusiast and lecturer in his native England, spent forty-six weeks during the years 1916 through 1918 traveling through Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia with assistant Maud Karpeles. They collected more than five hundred songs for his *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (initially published in 1917, republished in 1918 with additional songs, and reprinted in 1932).[10] In this volume, Sharp does more than simply transcribe the songs of British origin he encountered on his travels; he also puts forth his opinions and hypotheses on the region's inhabitants, their history and current situation, and even the worth of their native, recent culture. Sharp's statements are reflections of his own understanding of Southern mountain culture as a whole,

[9] However, these were collected for different reasons than the assumedly British songs, as it was believed that "since the emotions of the Negro race are foreign to the white man, an essentially Anglo-Saxon nation derives its nationalism in music only from its own people". In Lamar Strickland, "America and Her Music" University of North Carolina Extension Bulletin 10 (March 1931): 43. Unsurprisingly, the music of Native American groups was also differentiated from that of America's "own people."

[10] Cecil Sharp, English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians (London: Oxford University Press, 1932).

which described this region as inhabited by backwards, isolated "survivals" from Elizabethan England who lived in the manner of a hundred years previous.

In his original introduction, Sharp discusses at length various facets of mountain society that he believes set it apart from the rest of the nation as both a primitive and inherently British group. He often makes a point about the isolated condition of mountain communities, which shelters them from the developments of modern society and protects their heritage from the tainting influence of other cultures. This isolation has also resulted in a society that practices the antiquated customs of their pioneer forebears, and that remains firmly rooted in a "primitive" state. Sharp paints a picture of a land far removed from railroads, with no commercial markets or economic development, where illiteracy is the general rule and "marriage at thirteen, or even younger, is not unknown" for girls.[11] While this seems rather grim to a reader today, Sharp insists that he is focusing on the best aspects of the society in part to counter other contemporary writings that presented a negative image of the region. Indeed, he goes on to characterize the inhabitants as a people whose charm and culture would be spoiled by education or modernity, and laments the rise of commercial industry that will destroy these conditions.

Sharp's most important points concern the origin of the mountaineers and its impact on their innovative capabilities. He posits that the Southern Appalachian population (which he characterizes as totally homogeneous) is directly descended from seventeenth century British emigrants, who settled in the mountains and never left or mixed with other groups. He makes a number of bold statements intended to support this theory regarding mountaineers' social habits and even speech patterns: "their speech is English, not American… it is clear they are speaking

[11] Ibid., xxiv.

the language of a past day."[12] He even goes so far as to describe his work in America as a continuation of the folk studies he had done in the United Kingdom. To Sharp, a necessary corollary of the mountaineers' British heritage is their British music, and exclusively British music, at that: "... the only secular music, that he hears and has, therefore, the opportunity to learn is that which his British forefathers brought with them."[13] He later notes that "all that [a mountain singer] can do and, as a matter of fact, does, is to make use of the material bequeathed to him by his predecessors."[14] In these passages, Sharp summarizes his points about isolation and British ancestry and denies the agency of the mountain inhabitants to create their own musical culture. He speaks disparagingly of "modern street-song[s]" that have managed to work their way into the mountain balladeer's repertoire (calling into question his points about isolation), but assures readers that such intrusions are quickly assimilated into the British tradition and set to an existing tune. Thus, even when new material does appear in the canon of mountain folk song, it is not the result of native innovation and must be fitted into the British model.

Maud Karpeles, Sharp's assistant and scribe during his travels, echoes many of his sentiments in her preface to the 1932 reprint of *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians.*[15] A native of England herself, Karpeles also espouses the view that primitive conditions and song preservation go hand in hand in the mountains, although she does not make explicit statements about the mountaineers being British "survivals". The bulk of this section is devoted to reminiscing about the trips and lamenting the change that has come to the mountains in the form of industry and commerce. The Tennessee/North Carolina border was allegedly the best ballad-hunting ground in 1916-1918, due to its isolation and primitive state. Karpeles

[12] Ibid., xxii.
[13] Ibid., xxvi.
[14] Ibid., xxxv.
[15] Ibid., xxiv – xx.

contrasts this to the Appalachia of 1932, where the "instinctive culture of the people" is endangered by being "brought into touch with modern civilization."[16] While not making as bold claims as Sharp did fifteen years earlier, Karpeles nonetheless affirms their common belief in this region as an idealized anachronism that would be destroyed by development or education.

## Sharp's Influence on Song-Collecting

Although Sharp traced the ballad lineage and culture of the Southern mountains to a point predating the founding of the United States and espoused the view of Southerners as more akin to British subjects than the original Americans, these ideas were easily adopted into the prevailing attitude that emphasized the value of antiquity and saw the British founders as the only founders worth noting in America's past. They may have even helped further legitimize the idea by connecting it to an even older and more venerated tradition. The influence of Sharp's work and by extension the success of the characterizations he supported with regard to music can be observed by comparing contemporary reviews and articles, such as those penned by the *New York Times* music critic Richard Aldrich, and his influence on later song-collectors.

In an article entitled "Old English Ballads Surviving in the South" from February 13, 1916, Aldrich discusses the purpose and importance of song collecting.[17] This article precedes the publication of Sharp's book, but mentions Sharp's popular lecture tour across the United States that year. The bulk of Aldrich's commentary centers on a recent journal article by C. Alphonso Smith, a North Carolina literature professor with an interest in folk songs.[18] The critic lays out Smith's and his own views regarding the business of preserving British ballads in the South. While both admit the presence of a number of songs of British origin and the particularity

[16] Ibid., xvi.
[17] Richard Aldrich, "Old English Ballads Surviving in the South" New York Times 13 Feb. 1916: X6.
[18] C. Alphonso Smith, "Ballads Surviving in the United States" The Musical Quarterly Jan. 1916: 109-129.

of this tradition to the South, neither characterizes the inhabitants as homogeneous British anachronisms in the way that Sharp will a year later. The songs themselves are called "survivals," but Aldrich and Smith see no conflict in viewing a society as American that both possesses old foreign songs and demonstrates its own innovative abilities. Smith in particular describes the changes undergone by British ballads in America, where titles and lyrics are altered to suit American sensibilities and references. He also discusses ballads in the African-American community, giving them equal consideration in the article. Smith's most important point is that ballads are not static museum pieces or remnants of a lost culture, but living expressions of dynamic societies. He argues against valuing British ballads over American, or the ancient over the modern: "the standard version… is the best version, whether made in Great Britain or America, whether a child of the fifteenth or twentieth century." At one point, he blatantly questions the theory that the melodies of American ballads must be younger or even descended at all from British melodies. Instead, they may be "variants which not only antedate the surviving British variants but which in some cases left no lineal British issue."[19] These and other similar articles seem to indicate a more realistic view in both academic and popular circles of the nature and modernity of Southern society.

Articles published after Sharp's project became well-known, but even before his book was published, tell a different story. In an article of December 10, 1916, "Ballads and Folk Songs in America," Aldrich writes of the "remarkable finds of Mr. Sharp" in the Southern Appalachians of an extant folk song tradition where modernity and education has all but

[19] Both quotes from Aldrich, "Old English Ballads Surviving in the South," X6.

destroyed it in England and other parts of America.[20] He also restates as fact Sharp's ideas about the origin and isolation of the inhabitants, noting they "have lived in mountain fastnesses for 125 or 150 years, isolated and cut off in great measure from the rest of the country." He mentions several government agencies encouraging the formation of "ballad societies" for folk song preservation around this time, and, like Sharp, laments the effect modernity will have on mountain society. The "vulgarizing effects of modern life will cause the singers to be ashamed of their songs and wish to be 'like other people'," Aldrich writes.[21]

One year later, after the publication of "English Folk Songs", Aldrich published another article in which he not only gives a summary of Sharp's travels and the book, but also seems to have been fully persuaded by his theories of British origin and primitiveness. He especially emphasizes one example given by Sharp in the book, where he uses the existence of a particular musical scale in the southern Appalachians to further pinpoint the origin of the inhabitants. Sharp argues that the use of "gapped" scales in songs, where one or two notes is omitted in the progression, indicates that the singers are not only clearly of British descent, but more accurately British by way of northern England and lowland Scotland since this is where this scale was most common in old songs.[22] The mountaineers kept the gapped scale in current use, while their "collateral descendents in England moved on to the more advanced scale form" (Aldrich's words).[23] The acceptance of these particular conclusions by a *New York Times* music critic is telling of the influence of Sharp and his work, as well as the mindset of those who viewed Southern primitiveness and homogeneity as fact.

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[20] Richard Aldrich, "Ballads and Folk Songs in America: the remarkable finds of Mr. Sharp, Mr. Brockway, and Miss Wyman" New York Times 10 Dec. 1916: X10. Aldrich may have received an advance copy of Sharp's 1917 book, or perhaps heard about it from the press or other folk song enthusiasts.
[21] All quotes from Aldrich, "Ballads and Folk Songs in America," X10. Fastnesses are strongholds.
[22] Sharp, English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians, xxxiv.
[23] Richard Aldrich, "English and Scottish Folk Songs in America" New York Times 2 Dec. 1917: XX3.

Ten years later, the influence of Sharp's British survival theory had waned somewhat, but still made itself known in public discourse. Robert Winslow Gordon, founder of the Archive of American Folk Song, wrote a column for the *New York Times* in 1927 that focused on folk song scholarship. His inaugural article, "The Folk Songs of America: a Hunt on Hidden Trails" is an interesting mixture of old and new ideas about Southern music.[24] He mentions the old English ballads, but also says they occur in almost every state, not just the South. He also affords particular consideration to "mountain ballads, a pure American product": songs that are locally composed about contemporary events. Gordon also describes the wide variety of folk songs to be found across America, and characterizes this genre as being made up of songs of the people without regard to history or content. In this article, Gordon affords to American folk musicians what Sharp never could: agency and variety.

However, in his next article "Among the Hills our Folk Songs Thrive," he takes a much more conservative approach to the subject, agreeing with many of Sharp's pronouncements about mountain society and its inhabitants.[25] He characterizes the bearers of the folk song tradition as "simple, rugged people [who] still sing ballads that hark back to Elizabethan days", whose "blood has never been mixed with that of the foreign immigrant". Like Sharp, he speaks at length of the ways and quaint customs of the mountaineers, and even makes a statement on their speech that seems to foreshadow future stereotypes of Southern music when he instructs that a song from that region should be sung in a "high-pitched voice with a decided trace of nasal accent." Gordon is years removed from Sharp's heyday but his opinions reflect the fact that he is still ensconced in a society that propagates many of Sharp's characterizations of the South and Southerners.

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[24] R.W. Gordon, "The Folk Songs of America: a Hunt on Hidden Trails" New York Times 2 Jan. 1927: SM3-4.
[25] R.W. Gordon, "Among the Hills Our Folk Songs Thrive" New York Times 9 Jan. 1927: SM7-8.

Although Sharp was one of the most influential song-collectors, he was by no means the only one operating in this period. In the early decades of the twentieth century, dozens of scholars and folk enthusiasts were employed in seeking out and recording the songs seen as worthy of preservation. People like Josephine McGill, Loraine Wyman, Howard Brockway, and John Harrington Cox were doing work similar to Sharp's and drawing similar conclusions about the importance of specific traditions and the people who practiced them.[26] Of all the song collections published in this period, the overwhelming majority had a Southern focus, and of those, a focus on the Southern mountains was the most common theme. Regardless of their stated focus, the importance of British ballads in Appalachia is a recurring theme in these collections. This prevalence is reflective of thinking among the folklorists and the public of the time: that the songs worth preserving were those with a pedigree, found only in the anachronistic South, and that America had no extant national folk song tradition, or, as Harvard professor George L. Kittredge once said (though later retracted), "ballad-making, so far as the English-speaking nations are concerned, is a lost art."[27] The only real ballads to be found were old and in the hands of a society undeveloped enough to have retained them through the centuries.

Musical traditions that emphasized contemporary songwriting or presented the past as being anything but British were dismissed and devalued by those that subscribed to this view. Sharp's denial of the creative agency of mountain balladeers is echoed in his critiques of the song traditions of other groups, particularly those in the class of "cowboy songs" as recorded by John Lomax in his 1910 *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads.* While Sharp affords agency

[26] Josephine McGill, Folk-Songs of the Kentucky Mountains: Twenty Traditional Ballads and Other English Folk-Songs (New York: Boosey & Co., 1917).
Loraine Wyman and Howard Brockway, Lonesome Tunes: Folk Songs from the Kentucky Mountains (New York: The H.W. Gray Co., 1916).
John Harrington Cox, Folk-Songs of the South (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925).
[27] Quoted in Aldrich, "Ballads and Folk Songs in America," X10.

and innovative ability to the cowboys, he sees this as a poor substitute for the illustrious British heritage of the mountains. While the cowboy may lead a more exciting and literate life than the Southern mountaineer, his songs are inferior because he has been "despoiled of his inheritance of traditional song."[28] With no legitimizing historical body behind him and only his own modern mind to compose songs, the cowboy can only sing about himself and his way of life in the current age, a tradition Sharp deems unworthy of calling folk song. In Sharp's eyes, the only true folk song traditions are those stemming from pure ancient sources, untainted by foreign influence and prosaic modernity.

## Cowboys and chain gangs

Although Lomax held some similar ideas to the early song-collectors, his approach to documenting the music of the people was altogether revolutionary and in many ways more open-minded. As a result, his collections evidence quite a different appraisal of the South's relationship to the nation. In the South, he did usually choose to focus on obtaining songs from the isolated and uneducated members of society, but not because he believed these groups to be the unique possessors of a venerable and historically-grounded musical tradition. Reflecting in 1947 on his goals and experiences as a song-collector, he described wanting to preserve songs of the everyday people, songs that were "more often than not, epic summaries of the attitudes, mores, institutions, and situations of the great proletarian population who have helped to make the South culturally and economically."[29] The idea of popular music's detrimental influence and cultural contamination occurring between groups is also present in Lomax's work, but in a much different context than in Sharp's. Tunes from the "music hall" were avoided, not because they

[28] Sharp, English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians, xxvi.
[29] John A. Lomax, Adventures of a Ballad Hunter (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1947): 129.

were contemporary or inherently worthless, but because they were not true productions of the people (being composed by professional songwriters specifically to make a profit). Similarly, he did not conduct the search for uncontaminated song traditions with the intent of preserving pure Anglo-American productions, as Sharp had for his book. Lomax sought instead to record various groups' unique contributions without the oppressive and dominating influence of "white bourgeoisie culture."[30]

A working-class Texan who later attended Harvard, Lomax advocated a much more inclusive, relativistic perspective with regard to the meaning and worth of folk songs. His career as a song collector spanned nearly fifty years and had immeasurable impact on the way folk music was seen and valued in America. His first publication as a music scholar was his 1910 *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*.[31] This volume incorporates both Lomax's amateur interest during his early life in Texas, and his later collecting done on a Sheldon Fellowship Grant from Harvard in 1908. In a later collection, Lomax describes the difficulties he met with in this time period as a result of his unconventional views on folk song and culture: it was extremely difficult to find a publisher for *Cowboy Songs*, because no one thought it was a worthwhile or profitable topic. He recounts bringing his collection of cowboy songs to college at the University of Texas at Austin in 1895, and, when he showed them to his English professor, being told they "had no value."[32] At this point, Lomax says he put the songs away until his interest was reawakened at Harvard a decade later. However, in his 1947 memoir *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter,* he tells a different story. This time, his professor criticizes the cowboy songs as

[30] Ibid., 129.
[31] John A. Lomax, Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads (New York: Sturgis & Watson Co., 1910).
[32] John A. Lomax, American Ballads and Folk Songs (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1934): xi.

"cheap and unworthy", and Lomax burns the entire collection in embarrassment.[33] The differences between these accounts can probably be attributed to the thirteen years that passed between *American Ballads* and *Adventures*: perhaps Lomax felt more secure in making this confession as a nationally known figure, or perhaps the professor in question had passed away by 1947. Whatever the reason, he was able to recoup most of his losses through fieldwork and *Cowboy Songs* was brought out, making an important first step towards promoting a more inclusive view of American folk song.

His second major publication, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, which appeared in 1934, continues this work. This collection spans numerous genres and regions, from railroad and mining songs to spirituals and work songs. Songs are often categorized by subject rather than strictly by region, and out of the twenty-five categories, only one is composed of "songs from the mountains".[34] In his introduction, he discusses the presence of old English ballads in the South, but maintains their worth only so far as they are fully integrated into the native folk song tradition by being altered from their original state. By choosing to include songs of many types and groups, Lomax is attempting to refute the narrow definition of folk song and value judgments of various groups' contributions that were propagated by Sharp and others of his camp, though he does not mention Sharp specifically. He stretches the definition to its broadest limits, collecting together and giving equal weight to "songs of childhood" and "songs from Southern chain gangs". In the introduction, Lomax not only admits the creative agency of folk

[33] Lomax, Adventures of a Ballad Hunter, 32.
[34] Lomax, American Ballads and Folk Songs, xviii.

singers but expresses his fears that collecting a ballad "kills it", because it stops the natural growth and innovation of a ballad by codifying it in writing.[35]

Lomax was also a pioneer in song collecting fieldwork methods, seeking to remove the collector's influence and bias as much as possible to get the purest and most accurate rendering of a song. To accomplish this, Lomax advertised nationally for people to send in folk songs they knew, effectively allowing the collection to cover more territory and contain contributions from a wider base. In the 1930s and '40s, Lomax and his son famously traveled thousands of miles across America with a portable disc recorder, braving the elements and malaria to make acetate recordings of folk singers in addition to regular fieldwork notations.[36] This revolution in song collecting, which allowed folk singers to speak for themselves rather than solely through the medium of an outside collector, was the beginning of a new era in Lomax's career and folk scholarship as a whole.

Throughout his career, Lomax remained committed to representing the musical productions of all Americans, a group which included the South on equal footing with other regions. And this approach was not without success: *Cowboy Songs* may have met with resistance from publishers, but it warranted an introduction by former President Theodore Roosevelt. Following its publication, Lomax was elected president of the American Folklore Society. He gained employment with the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress (created in 1928), collected thousands of songs for them, and was made an honorary consultant and curator. Even his progressive (sometimes shockingly so) collection methods and ideology led to some surprising successes: Lomax collected many songs from African-American

[35] Lomax, American Ballads and Folk Songs, xxxv.
[36] Lomax, Adventures of a Ballad Hunter, 111.

prisoners in the South, including those convicted of violent crimes, although many must have been skeptical of including this group's contributions in an anthology of American folk song.[37] This segment of the project led to the discovery and popularization of guitarist and singer Huddie Ledbetter from the Louisiana State Penitentiary, a convicted murderer who went on to become the internationally famous musician "Lead Belly". Although it was difficult to compete with theories that posited the South as the archive of original American culture and people, in the long run Lomax's bold tactics were instrumental in influencing acceptance of all groups' cultural productions as American, regardless of geographical or racial origin.

## The un-American South

Even as the idea of the South as the essence of Anglo-American heritage prevailed, the seemingly contradictory notion of the South as a foreign land also persisted. The travel and local color literature mentioned previously utilized the rhetoric of early anthropological writing in both their focus on the unusual or sensational and their portrayal of Southerners as residents of some strange and exotic land that was far-removed from modern America. Sharp and other song-collectors also occasionally described Southerners in ways that put them in opposition to other contemporary Americans and portrayed them as foreign study subjects rather than capable informants or hosts. That both groups did so while maintaining that the region was the bastion of American identity in the modern world evidences an impressive management of cognitive dissonance on their parts and on the part of the wider American public. However, another important institution must be considered, one that gave primacy to the notion of Southern "otherness" over shared national identity while maintaining both ideas, and the one that is perhaps most illustrative of the conflict over labeling the South.

[37] See footnote 24 of this chapter.

Beginning in the early 1900s, a new type of institution made its way into the region: the rural settlement school. These schools, often established by religious or charitable organizations and led by middle and upper-class women, took on the moral and social crusade of improving the lot of poor Southerners and integrating them into wider American society. In his book *All that is Native and Fine: the Politics of Culture in an American Region*, historian David Whisnant describes the settlement school process as one in which "mostly educated, urban, middle and upper class, liberal "culture workers" perceived, manipulated, and projected the culture of mostly rural lower class working people in the Southern mountains".[38] A typical settlement school was located in the mountains and had classes for children in the usual school subjects, but also offered instruction for adults in such areas as reading, cooking, sewing, and sanitation. Heavily influenced by the urban settlement house movement, rural schools sought to emulate the methods and the success of Jane Addams and Lillian Wald with immigrants in Chicago and New York respectively.

In contrast to the song-collectors, these teachers entered the South with the express goal of affecting change in society and custom. These schools were very much a product of Progressive era ideals and Victorian ideology, in that they relied on privileged women to take up the banner of the social gospel and exert their efforts, not politically, but in the domestic sphere. The similarity in goals and methodology between Southern settlement schools and the assimilation efforts in the west towards Native Americans in this period is striking and not at all coincidental. Schools and their teachers in both contexts were characterized as bringing much-

[38] Whisnant, All That is Native and Fine xiii.

needed civilization and American values to the unfortunate denizens of an outsider population, who were living woefully out of step with dominant American culture and modern sensibilities.[39]

But what did the settlement school teachers find in the South? Influenced by decades of dueling stereotypes about the backwards mountaineers who nonetheless represented America's venerable pioneer past, what they finally encountered was not what they had expected. [40] Many expressed surprise on two counts: that the Southerners they encountered were neither as ignorant nor as noble as they had been represented to be in national discourse. Even sociologist George Vincent, who made his contribution to the development of Southern stereotypes back in 1898, had to admit that "we had heard so many stories of the ignorance of the mountaineers that we were somewhat disappointed by their familiarity with a good many things we had expected them not to know."[41] Others who ascribed more to the mountaineer as a descendent of America's heroic and resourceful pioneers were similarly let down, recording their bafflement at the widespread poverty and alleged deviance of some members of communities.[42] Although it would seem that the mythical Southern mountaineer of popular fiction and anthropological texts would have been more or less debunked by actual contact, settlement schools continued to operate under these assumptions well into the 1930s.

The dissonance of outsiders' beliefs about the region also played a part in how settlement school teachers evaluated and emphasized Southern music. As one might expect, the type of music that they deemed suitable and worthwhile for Southern people to know and sing was quite limited. Songs became an important part of the education and enculturation process as

[39] Ibid., 41.
[40] Shades of the "noble savage" trope.
[41] George Vincent, "A Retarded Frontier" American Journal of Sociology July 1898:15.
[42] Whisnant, All That is Native and Fine, 41-42.

contemporary patriotic songs were taught as a way of inculcating modern American values, but the specter of the "ancient Anglo-Saxon ballad" appeared once again to haunt the landscape of indigenous music studies. These schools became prime grounds for ballad hunting, prompting visits from Cecil Sharp and others and deepening the stereotype of Southerners as contemporary relics of old British culture. Teachers themselves encouraged the singing and preservation of British ballads to the exclusion of all other music, with the aim of fostering pride in alleged shared British heritage and preserving the assumed links between contemporary Southern culture and that of the distinguished past. Much as Sharp had done in his book, settlement school teachers denied the legitimacy of contemporary, natively-composed music and criticized it as undignified and of little value.[43]

Olive Dame Campbell, wife of the author of *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, John C. Campbell, was a song collector who contributed to Sharp's book and founded a settlement school in North Carolina in 1925. Regarding the place and goal of schools in preserving ballads, she wrote: "we would like to have the people recognize the worth and beauty of their songs… we would like to have them displace the inferior music that is now being sung there." [44] The fact that Campbell refused to acknowledge the music currently prevailing and being composed in the South as belonging to the Southern people is telling of her and other teachers' assumptions: that they knew best what constituted real Southern music and had a duty to uphold its integrity against the encroachment of modern and mongrelized culture. The legacy of the settlement schools with regard to Southern music was largely one of outsiders dictating to Southerners not only the meaning but also the content of their own culture.

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[43] Ibid., 55.
[44] Letter, Olive Dame Campbell to Cecil Sharp, 20 Dec 1916. Quoted in Whisnant, All That is Native and Fine, 103.

Occasionally the mission of the schools was revealed in ways that exposed its hypocrisy and fallacy. Whisnant relays how, in an effort to bring Appalachian Christmas traditions into line with those of majority culture, defined as middle-class white Protestant culture, settlement teachers actually rejected older British carols in favor of contemporary Victorian ones that were seen as more appropriate.[45] In seeking to replace "The Cherry-Tree Carol" (documented by Francis J. Child in the late 1800s and believed to have a history spanning several centuries) and "Brightest and Best" (composed by an English bishop in the early 1800s) with modern songs such as "We Three Kings", teachers effectively threw the baby out with the bathwater by discarding the very things they claimed to venerate.[46] This is an even more extreme example of the fairly arbitrary power of those who engaged in "systematic cultural intervention" and who were able to dictate what Southern culture was not, even in the face of evidence or their own views to the contrary.[47]

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, conflicting perceptions of the South's place in American history and stereotypes about its role in modern culture structured the evaluation of the region's cultural products. The examples related in this chapter illustrate the judgments by song-collectors working alone or in institutional settings on this topic. The ambivalence and mutability of these views reveal the extent to which they were artificially constructed and altered to fill the needs of an evolving modern society, in which the South played an important role in the consciousness of nationalism and American identity. Song-collectors appropriated Southern stereotypes already firmly rooted in American discourse and applied them to their search for America's true and undiluted musical heritage, but as one

[45] Ibid., 50.
[46] Child, Francis James, English and Scottish Popular Ballads (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1904): 98.
[47] Whisnant, All That is Native and Fine, 11.

historian notes, "this idea of there being a pure folk music was an illusion, more the product of ideological needs of the times than of the reality of peoples' musical lives. American vernacular music always has been, like the American people themselves, a complex mix."[48]

[48] Peterson, Creating Country Music, 65.

# II.

The 1910s and '20s saw a continuation of the thinking about Southern white rural music that had dominated past decades, and also the beginnings of a shift that would have lasting and influential consequences for its acceptance into the mainstream of American music as the genre that became known as country. While accepting and utilizing the prevailing judgments of the South as rural and out of touch with modernity that had been put forth by writers and song-collectors for decades, key groups also asserted that Southern entertainment and thus the region in which it originated was inherently wholesome and family-friendly, perhaps even as a result of its perceived anachronistic qualities and cultural stagnation. This chapter focuses on two of the most important entities responsible for directly marketing Southern music to the masses that took this position. Fiddler's conventions and performers and old-time or hillbilly radio programs exploited previously held notions of Southerners and the region, further developed these stereotypes through visual iconography and constructed personas, and influenced the subtle recasting of the Southern archetype to focus on morality and values. Although there were many such radio programs on the air enjoying varying degrees of success well into the post-WWII era, I examine only WLS Chicago's National Barn Dance and WSM Nashville's Grand Ole Opry, two of the earliest and most influential shows of the time.[1]

Some scholars have rationalized this kind of transformation as a result of the groups formerly oppressed by a legitimizing identity forging their own resistance identity, which "reverse[s] the value judgment while reinforcing the generalizations."[2] The idea has some merit in this context, as many Southerners did eventually form a resistance identity in response to a

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[1] Wolfe, A Good-Natured Riot and Kristine M. McCusker, Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels: the Women of Barn Dance Radio (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

[2] Satterwhite, "Objecting to Insider/Outsider Politics and the Uncritical Celebration of Appalachia," 71.

legacy of negative stereotyping, but I do not believe that this was the driving force behind this early shift or that the marginalized common people of the South were wholly responsible for it.[3] Instead, I contend that this shift in characterization was primarily a result of different groups becoming responsible for presenting Southern music to the nation and the drive of these groups to market their "product" in the best light possible, as well as the increasingly public and commoditized nature of this music. The success of this transformation signifies that this new perception fulfilled an important need in the national imagination of the time.

As I show, antiquity rather than ethnic pedigree with regard to music became more of a focus in this period, which supports the idea that Americans were moving away from a veneration of the strictly Anglo past toward a more general appreciation of days gone by, however idealized. The South, with its perceived pastoral nature and antiquated ways, was thus designated as the repository of superior old-fashioned moral values and set up as a foil to the evils and corruption of the city and modern life. The song-collectors discussed in chapter one had more or less venerated traditions that were relatively untouched by contemporary culture (or so they hoped), but this period saw a definite rise in moralizing about the past. The circumstances of twentieth-century life had formerly been viewed as merely destructive to "primitive" communities, but not necessarily evil in themselves. The nation as a whole now sought people and places "untainted by the forces of modernity", forces which were now more often characterized as degenerate and tied to social ills.[4] This use of nostalgia and morality as marketing tools was enormously effective, especially in the 1920s through the '50s as the genre that became known as country was becoming increasingly visible and recognized on the national stage.

[3] Ibid., 71 and Manuel Castells, The Power of Identity (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004): 8.
[4] Stanonis, Creating the Big Easy, 17.

Fiddlers' contests

The spread of fiddlers' contests across the South from the 1910s through the 1930s was another manifestation of Southern myth-making and its reinforcement through music, this time in a more public arena that was instrumental in shaping the visual iconography and symbolism of what was becoming known as hillbilly music. As with many of the song-collectors previously discussed, promoters and the press characterized the musicians who traveled to and participated in these competitions in a certain way, regardless of reality: fiddlers and their music were consistently portrayed as isolated holdovers from the antebellum period who were supposed to represent the wild frontier days of yore. Promoters and fiddlers alike utilized the familiar idea of lawlessness and coupled it with the seemingly dissonant notion of morality in this context, marking a subtle but significant reimagining of the Southern world and its people.

Many in the press and in charge of conventions emphasized the idea of antiquity with relation to fiddlers and their music, like Sharp and his camp had done, but with less focus on the alleged ethnic or national origins of songs. They characterized some songs as remnants of English or Scottish tunes brought by immigrants to the Southern colonies, but it was more important that they simply had the authenticity that came with perceived age: American songs were acceptable if they were of the type that the nation's "granddaddies used to dance to in the country cabins before they moved to Atlanta."[5] The names of these competitions and later characterizations of fiddle tunes by record companies and sheet music publishers were also indicative of this type of evaluation of Southern fiddlers. The most famous competition, held annually in Atlanta from 1913 to 1935, was known as the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers'

[5] Advertisement from The Atlanta Constitution 1 Apr 1913. Quoted in Huber, Linthead Stomp, 62.

Convention, and fiddle songs were marketed under such labels as "olde time fiddlin' tunes", "old favorites", and "old familiar tunes".[6]

Richard A. Peterson recounts the illustrative example of the 1924 Atlanta competition to emphasize the importance of antiquity in structuring perceptions of fiddlers' authenticity. While Atlanta newspapers covered the proceedings of the contest with their usual flair for embellishment (see discussion below), the press carried no stories whatsoever when one fiddler eventually triumphed. Why? Because the winner was a young man rather than a grizzled old mountaineer, and his winning tune was clearly neither of the ancient Anglo stock nor of American pioneer heritage. This failure to fit into the accepted old-time fiddlers' mold led Atlanta papers to ignore or even "suppress" the winner's story, despite having covered and encouraged the competition.[7] However, another paper did carry the contest's results – the *New York Times.* But even this paper fabricated many details regarding the winner's origins, musical education, and song traditions to preserve the image of the archaic old-time fiddler.[8] The *New York Times* version of the 1924 contest also inspired Pennsylvania-born author and poet Stephen Vincent Benét to pen a long narrative poem in an exaggerated Southern dialect that explains the unexpected victory of the young newcomer by reason of his greater primitiveness and mythical parentage of a mountain-laurel fiddle and a whippoorwill bird.[9]

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[6] Huber, Linthead Stomp, 129.

[7] Peterson, Creating Country Music, 57.

[8] Ibid., 58. Peterson describes how twenty-two-year-old Marcus Lowe Stokes triumphed with a modern tune called "Hell's Broke Loose in Georgia." He also recounts the story of Stokes using this tune to defeat the reigning champion: "It was John Carson's favorite contest song, so Stokes, in effect, beat the old champ with his own stick." This was doubly ironic since Carson (discussed later in this work) was considered the quintessential authentic mountaineer fiddler.

[9] Stephan Vincent Benét, "The Mountain Whippoorwill (or How Hill-Billy Jim Won the Great Fiddlers' Prize)," written in 1925. In Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét Vol.1 Poetry (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1942): 376-380.

Along with possessing antiquated music and means of entertainment, fiddlers were also supposed to be living the wild and lawless lives of the nation's pioneer forebears, unencumbered by modern notions of progress and unreached by the latest conveniences and inventions. Contest promoters and newspapers worked to attract city-dwellers and curiosity seekers to these events, emphasizing the rustic and sensational angles of fiddlers' origins and lives, describing the "mountaineers and swamp dwellers," moonshiners, and fighters who turned up to try for the cash prize with their fiddle and bow.[10] Colorful stories about competitors' backwoods habits and speech and isolated mountain homes flooded the papers, painting compelling but often grossly exaggerated pictures of these Southern musicians: although such contests drew competitors from far and wide, eighty miles from Atlanta (given by historian Guthrie T. Meade as the longest distance travelled by competitors in that city's contest) was hardly the isolated heart of Appalachia.[11] The homogeneity of origins and occupations was also demonstrably false: many competitors were residents of towns and employed in some sort of industrial or non-agricultural work, such as in a textile mill in the Piedmont.[12] Regardless of occupation or origin, fiddlers were almost universally described as mountain dwelling frontiersmen who lived rugged lives outside the law and outside a society that required manners and education.

Perhaps the most evocative newspaper ad of this period was headed "Fiddlers Will Check Weapons before Big Contest Begins." Such a statement is clearly indicative of both public perception of the fiddlers and the image marketed by those responsible for promoting contests.[13] A necessary corollary to the mountaineer's existence in the remote and uncivilized mountains was his uncouth and wild behavior. "We raise corn, hell, and fiddlers," one competitor quipped

[10] Wayne W. Daniel, "The Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Convention: 1920 Edition," JEMF Quarterly 16 (1980):67.
[11] Guthrie T. Meade, "From the Archives: the 1914 Atlanta Fiddle Convention," JEMF Quarterly 5 (1969): 27.
[12] Huber, Linthead Stomp, 64.
[13] Advertisement from The Atlanta Constitution 18 Feb 1914. Quoted in Huber, Linthead Stomp, 77.

to the audience regarding his origins.[14] Benét's poem also supported this view along with the idea of fiddlers' backwardness and isolation, describing the rowdy atmosphere of the contest where Hill-Billy Jim triumphed:

> Oh, Georgia booze is mighty fine booze,
> The best yuh ever poured yuh,
> But it eats the soles right offen yore shoes,
> For Hell's broke loose in Georgia. [15]

Publicity emphasized these sensational tales of drinking, fighting, and moonshining, but simultaneously upheld these contests as family-friendly events where all could gather and enjoy the music of times gone by. The fiddlers' apparent deviant behavior (almost certainly a fabrication created to pique public curiosity) was conceptualized as harmlessly rowdy rather than threatening. Historian Chris Goertzen describes how this "supposed hell-raising was portrayed by the press through the rosy lens of nostalgia," as reflecting a time when even crime and vice was supposedly less worrisome.[16]

## John Carson, champion fiddler

The most famous participant and frequent winner of such fiddle competitions, and a prime example of the effects of stereotype on a musician's image, was a man known as Fiddlin' John Carson, who is widely recognized today as the first "country" artist to be commercially recorded and marketed.[17] Carson (discussed previously in reference to his loss to the fiddler of disputed authenticity) had a large and active part in playing into his characterization as an uncivilized mountain man. As such, he provides a vivid illustration of the complex interplay

[14] Quoted in Daniel, "The Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Convention,"71.
[15] Benét, "The Mountain Whippoorwill," (lines 96-99).
[16] Chris Goertzen, Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Conventions (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008): 11.
[17] Malone, Country Music, U.S.A., 93.

between those making stereotypes and those representing them. Like most Southerners born just after the Civil War, he grew up in a rural area with little economic development; however, this was hardly the defining feature of his life that it was later made out to be.[18] His image was carefully crafted, by both promoters and himself, to appeal to audiences at fiddle competitions and later potential record buyers. His birthplace was falsely advertised as the remote mountain settlement of Blue Ridge, Georgia, and he often proclaimed to have long been occupied as a moonshiner. During performances, he often told folksy tales about life in the mountains, his two days of formal education, and his persistent trouble with outside "revenuers".[19] This persona followed him into his recording and touring days, where he was joined by his daughter, Moonshine Kate.

Although Carson's characterization as a stereotypical Southern mountaineer won him success and fame as an old-time fiddler and stage personality, most of it was blatant fabrication. He was born in the country, but by the time he had gained acclaim as a fiddler, he had lived in Atlanta for decades and worked in mills and other industrial jobs. Even Carson's daughter's name was altered to conform to the desired image. To say nothing of the obvious connotations of the "Moonshine" sobriquet, her name wasn't even Kate: a record company talent scout had given her the pseudonym in place of her real name, Rosa Lee.[20] The fact that this was considered an acceptable stage name for a fourteen-year-old girl is further evidence of the tendency to characterize the perceived vice of the fiddlers as going against the mainstream of contemporary values yet ultimately being non-threatening.

[18] Biographical information on Carson from the section entitled "King of the Mountaineer Musicians" in Huber, Linthead Stomp, 43-103.
[19] Ibid., 67.
[20] Ibid., 80.

The dissonance between reality and image became even more striking in Carson's later years as a professional and regionally famous musician. He continued to be portrayed as the naïve yokel just down from the mountains in printed media and on records, even as his fame spread across the nation and he demonstrated his modern day savvy on political and social topics. By the mid-1920s, Carson had enjoyed enormous success broadcasting on one of the first Southern commercial radio stations, had recorded dozens of songs, and had even traveled to New York City to record. Listed in the "Today's Radio Program" section of the *New York Times* as early as 1923, "Fiddlin' John Carson and his mountain fiddlers" were appearing regularly in primetime slots on Atlanta's WSB station and even performed a special program commemorating Carson's fifty-seventh birthday the night of March 23, 1925.[21] Newspapers greatly exaggerated Carson's bewilderment at the strange ways of the big city, conveniently forgetting to mention his long time residence in one of the largest Southern cities.[22] His life had not been as isolated, backwards, or wild as he and those profiting from his image would lead the public to believe, but playing into these caricatures was an effective way to capitalize on the image the public had of Southerners.

Carson also became involved in social and political spheres, although profit and publicity rather than simply beliefs may have been strong motivating forces. His self-penned 1915 ballad "Little Mary Phagan", written about a controversial Georgia murder case in which a Jewish factory superintendent was accused of strangling thirteen-year-old Phagan, was influential in inciting mob violence after the trial and ultimately to the lynching of the accused, Leo Frank, who was probably innocent.[23] While the opinion of the local population (and thus perhaps of

[21] "Today's Radio Program" New York Times 23 Mar 1925: 15.
[22] Huber, Linthead Stomp, 77.
[23] Ibid., 58.

Carson as well) was overwhelmingly against Frank, historian Jeffrey Paul Melnick reminds us that Carson was also motivated by the desire to produce a song that an enraged public would buy, and that referenced their frustration with the world even beyond the court room:

> "With the trial of Leo Frank, Carson found a perfect symbol of the crisis of urbanization… poor white Georgians found in Frank a living representation of all that was making their lives miserable: he was a Yankee, a Jew, and perhaps worst of all, a boss… [Carson] understood immediately that Mary Phagan was a perfect hero for a murder ballad… Carson was using the occasion of Mary Phagan's death to contemplate the meanings of industrialization in the New South." [24]

Melnick also notes that Carson had his young daughter sing the ballad on record "with the thought that her youthful female voice would strike an even deeper chord with listeners."[25] Carson later joined the Ku Klux Klan and became a popular performer at Klan sponsored and affiliated events, a category which had included fiddlers' competitions for years. Although it is difficult to gauge the extent to which Carson's songs and associations were motivated by his own racism or opinions, the fact remains that such manipulation of public sentiment and navigation of these spheres for personal gain was hardly the work of an ignorant country rube.

Putting a nostalgic and moralistic spin on the perceived backwardness of fiddlers may have served the interests of a nation beset with unsettling changes in this period. Peterson describes the period between World Wars I and II as a time of "fear of the loss of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant hegemony," when numerous groups and campaigns were attempting to maintain the status quo in the face of increasing religious and ethnic diversity and to reassert the standards they perceived as flagging.[26] Groups with clear feelings about the venerable past,

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[24] Jeffrey Paul Melnick, Black-Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000):17-19.
[25] Ibid., 18.
[26] Peterson ibid. 58.

including the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Klan, were often sponsors of fiddlers' competitions, and the tactics used for encouraging membership in circles that revered the past would have also served them well in promoting musical events that claimed to uphold the morals and honor of olden days.

The automobile tycoon Henry Ford was one of the biggest supporters of fiddlers' competitions, even sponsoring his own competitions at Ford dealerships in the mid 1920s.[27] Ford was concerned with the erosion of traditional moral values in America and in the city particularly, although he blamed these problems wholly on societal vices such as alcohol and the influence of subversive foreigners rather than the conditions of modern life he had helped make possible through the automobile industry.[28] Ford denounced the twin evils of jazz and modern dancing, and sought to revive old-time music and dancing to remedy the sinful nation and return it to its former state of innocence and purity. In his quest for the authentic and upstanding practitioners of the music he believed would get the nation back on the path to salvation, Ford got more than he bargained for: he withdrew support and publicity from fiddlers who refused to conform to the expected stereotype and act as "paragons of Elizabethan virtue" by revealing themselves as too modern or taken with the vices he so often denounced.[29] Peterson describes several of the fiddlers as "rather unsavory old characters" with drinking problems and serious preoccupations with money.[30] To find a fiddler he could support without reservation, Ford had to look beyond the idealized Southern fiddling circuit. In Maine he found an elderly craftsman

[27] Goertzen, Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Conventions, 11.
[28] Peterson, Creating Country Music, 60.
[29] Ibid., 61.
[30] Ibid., 61.

named Mellie Dunham who seemed to fit the bill, but eventually Dunham too expressed interests in fame and money that Ford thought unbefitting an authentic rustic fiddler.[31]

## Barn Dance Radio: Marketing Nostalgia

The advent of commercial radio in the 1920s and its development as a viable and affordable musical medium enabled the proliferation of old-time and hillbilly music oriented radio programs. As Douglas B. Green notes, "suddenly a whole new world was opened to people all across America who had never heard a dance band, a newscast, a symphony, a drama, or their president."[32] Hillbilly programs were being founded and enjoyed popularity well into the 1950s, most notably in the form of the barn dance show. This type of program, "a genre based on a rural ritual, the Saturday night dance party," was usually a weekly show broadcast live for several hours that featured a variety of hillbilly performers, musicians, and comedy acts.[33] While the exact originating station for the genre is somewhat disputed, the fact remains that by the late 1940s there were dozens of barn dance shows being broadcast to millions of listeners and drawing thousands to their live performances. Programs such as WLS Chicago's National Barn Dance, WSM Nashville's Grand Ole Opry, WLW Cincinnati's Renfro Valley Barn Dance, and KWKH Shreveport's Louisiana Hayride capitalized on America's fascination with the hillbilly image through their broadcasts. [34] They were enormously influential in presenting early country music to the American public and determining the course it would take over the next few decades.

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[31] David L. Lewis, The Public Image of Henry Ford: an American Folk Hero and His Company (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976): 228.
[32] Douglas B. Green Singing in the Saddle: the history of the singing cowboy (Nashville: The Country Music Foundation Press, 2002): 21.
[33] McCusker, Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels, 1.
[34] Beyond the more obvious rural imagery of the hayride, KWKH's barn dance show was actually named after a series of well-known Louisiana political scandals that had happened just a few years prior, perhaps providing further evidence of the way even serious high-profile vice could be twisted in a way that made it seem harmless.

The Saturday night National Barn Dance program was by far the most well-known and influential Chicago hillbilly program in this time period. From 1924 until the 1960s, the program's ever-growing cast of performers (known as the Hayloft Gang) entertained thousands though their broadcasts and live shows. The popularity of the show was such that in 1933, the national NBC network began airing a segment of National Barn Dance, and by the end of the decade the show was broadcast on sixty-seven separate NBC stations. [35] The performances of "Southern" and "Western" music on this show were instrumental in guiding the course of hillbilly radio and eventually influencing country music recording and even television shows.

WLS Chicago may have been based in a large Midwestern city, but by the mid 1930s the station dedicated a significant amount of air time to hillbilly music as well as addressing relevant agricultural news to the considerable rural audience it reached by virtue of its fifty-thousand watt signal. [36] By the early 1940s, listeners could hear as many as ten programs a day of live hillbilly music, including shows such as "Bunkhouse Jamboree", "Mountain Theater", "Barnyard Jamboree", and "Prairie Farmer Dinnerbell Time", and end the week with the five hour National Barn Dance program on Saturday night. While WLS and the National Barn Dance were the most important and powerful proponents of hillbilly radio in the Midwest, Chicago radio in general was well-known for supporting this type of music. The city was called "the haven of the hillbilly entertainer" by a 1943 *Billboard* article whose headline proclaimed: "CHI KING KORN HEAVEN: two stations deliver 10 to 14 hours mountain music for sponsors", and referred to as "Hillbilly Heaven" by an unnamed artist.[37]

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[35] Wayne W. Daniel, "Hayloft Patriotism," in Country Music Goes to War, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson, 84.
[36] Ibid., 83.
[37] "Chi King Korn Heaven," Billboard 21 Aug. 1943: 6.

The National Barn Dance program, because of its choice of genre and actual geographical location, was thus placed at an interesting crossroads of regional styles and stereotypes: it was a Midwestern city station broadcasting music labeled as Southern and Western to an intended audience that was largely composed of Midwestern farmers. Although the conflation of "Southern" and "Western" in the national imagination with regard to music is discussed in chapter three, this is worth mentioning here as a further example of the tendency to homogenize groups that was discussed in chapter one. Even before the advent of radio and an appreciable hillbilly music industry, the South was viewed as a homogeneous entity composed of people with the same culture, music, occupations, and tastes.[38]

With the proliferation of hillbilly radio programs, it became apparent that rural people in many regions were undergoing a similar process of being characterized as one unified group who fulfilled archetypes that previously had been labeled exclusively Southern by those responsible for marketing popular culture. While "hillbilly" had been coined to describe "North Carolina or Tennessee and adjacent mountaineer type of illiterate white[s]," now it could be applied regardless of region to anyone who was thought to fit the part of the rural, unsophisticated bumpkin.[39] Throughout the twentieth century, poor rural whites emigrated out of the South in huge numbers into northern cities like Chicago and Detroit, a migration that increased exponentially in the Depression and World War II years as Southerners sought economic opportunities in the cities and wartime manufacturing centers.[40] This diaspora may have contributed to the overall success of National Barn Dance and other city-centered rural music programs, but it cannot be argued that these programs were crafted solely as hillbilly music for

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[38] Malone, Southern Music, American Music, 36.
[39] "Hill-Billy Music," Variety 29 Dec. 1929: 1.
[40] Anthony Harkins, Hillbilly: a Cultural History of an American Icon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 175.

ex-Southerners. The founding of these programs in the 1920s (before the majority of Southern migration occurred) and WLS's explicitly stated focus on rural areas (where Southern migrants were unlikely to settle) suggests that Midwestern rural populations were the intended audience.

The Grand Ole Opry was founded just a year after the National Barn Dance in 1925 by a man who began his radio career as an announcer on WLS Chicago. George D. Hay, an Indiana-born journalist turned radio director, created the Opry show on WSM and was chiefly responsible for the development of the program's hillbilly image and characterization as a provider of clean family entertainment.[41] By 1928, WSM was a powerful clear-channel station whose broadcast range covered half of the nation. [42] Hay's barn dance style Opry show, broadcast from various locations around metropolitan Nashville before settling at the Ryman Auditorium, was an instant success and in many ways set the tone for the dozens of country shows that sprang up in its wake.

Performers on both shows played the hillbilly role to perfection within guidelines set by promoters, and the Opry and National Barn Dance were enormously successful in marketing themselves as shows of rural charm and old-fashioned values.[43] Every aspect of the programs, from performers' costumes to the stage design to the names of the groups, contributed to the aura of nostalgia that surrounded their performance. This feeling allowed these entities to flourish by portraying backwardness and the rural lifestyle in a positive light, as representing something pure and valuable that had been lost along the way to 20th century American industrialization and progress. Tillman Franks, a musician on the Louisiana Hayride program, later recalled live barn dance performances as being events that mothers would let their young unaccompanied

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[41] Wolfe, A Good-Natured Riot, 11.
[42] Ibid., 22.
[43] Ibid. and McCusker, Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels.

daughters attend without fear or hesitation, because of the genre's reputation for a moral atmosphere.[44]

The names of groups and even individuals were often crafted to reflect the hillbilly image and the aura of old-fashioned values that show promoters wanted to convey. Two types of stage names are important for the purposes of this thesis: those referencing older Southern stereotypes like ruralism and antiquity, and those that emphasized the new turn that these characterizations were taking toward the ideas of family and morality. Artists with such evocative names as the Skillet Lickers (whose line-up later included the aforementioned fiddling champion Marcus Lowe Stokes, who continued to play after losing his right hand in a gun accident), the Cumberland Ridge Runners, Arkie the Arkansas Woodchopper, the Dixieliners, Lulu Belle and Scotty, the Gully Jumpers, Stringbean, the Coon Creek Girls, and Bradley Kincaid as "the Kentucky Mountain Boy with his Houn' Dog Guitar" were popular entertainers on record and barn dance radio who were able to capitalize on the air of authenticity lent by a name or nickname that "sounded" hillbilly.[45] Bands whose names were changed illustrate this trend and can also provide concrete references of what were seen as appropriate country band names before the era of "rustication": the Binkley Brothers Barn Dance Orchestra was renamed the Dixie Clod Hoppers, and Dr. Bate and his Augmented Orchestra became the Possum Hunters.[46] One performer recalled in an interview with Charles K. Wolfe that George D. Hay would rename new Opry bands from a list of colorful hillbilly monikers he kept in his desk drawer. [47]

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[44] Tillman Franks to Morgan Neville (interview). 2003. The Morgan Neville Collection (MNC) of tapes and transcripts from "Honky Tonk Blues." FV.2010.0842. Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum (CMHOFM) Moving Image archives. Nashville, TN.

[45] Information about these groups drawn from Peterson, Creating Country Music and Wolfe, A Good-Natured Riot.

[46] Peterson, Creating Country Music, 75.

[47] Kirk McGee to Charles K. Wolfe. In Wolfe, A Good-Natured Riot, 15.

Names that referenced the idea of family also proliferated on these shows, in keeping with their projected image of squeaky clean family entertainment. Groups composed of actual families, married couples, or siblings, like the Pickard Family and the Louvin Brothers, were marketed as such, but family titles were used even without an actual relation: performers like Uncle Jimmy Thompson, Uncle Dave Macon, Cousin Tilford, Grandpa Jones, and members of Roy Acuff's band Pop Wilson, "Bashful Brother" Oswald, and Sister Rachel all used their names to reference the homey qualities that barn dance programs wanted to convey. In the last case, the choice of nomenclature was also tied to morality, as banjo player Rachel Veach's role was changed from a "Queen of the Hills" with "two country comedian boy friends" to that of Oswald's kid sister as listeners were alarmed at the idea of a young single woman traveling with a band of unrelated men.[48]

Visual iconography and carefully crafted presentations of performers and programs were extremely important for cementing their authenticity and moral acceptability in the minds of fans, even those who couldn't attend live performances. The stages where National Barn Dance and the Opry programs were performed were idealized reproductions of the rural landscape in the middle of large cities, incorporating images of quaint red barns and log cabins to provide the appropriate setting for a hillbilly music program. Costuming also became a very important and referential aspect of performance as artists became more visible and expected to conform to the desired image of the show and expectations of what a hillbilly performer should look like. As Peterson explains, "only when the show began to cater to a studio audience – about 1928 – did [George D.] Hay begin to insist that group members look the part of hillbillies."[49] Long gingham dresses, overalls, straw hats, and later, Western wear such as cowboy hats, boots, and fringed

[48] Peterson, Creating Country Music, 147.
[49] Peterson, Creating Country Music, 76.

shirts were all par for the course on an established hillbilly program. According to historian Craig Havighurst, the only Opry artist who never performed in hillbilly costume was DeFord Bailey, a harmonica player credited with being the Opry's first and most successful African-American member.[50] I believe that this reflects the long-standing practices of seeing all "real" Southerners as fitting the hillbilly mold and perceiving the white Southern population as the only authentic one, unfortunately one of the generalizations strengthened by reclamation through a resistance identity.[51] Since Bailey was not white, he was seen as essentially foreign to the authentic South and could not claim the dress of authentic Southerners.

In the early days of radio and even before the adoption of this medium for popular music, costuming was much less of an issue. This is strikingly demonstrated by publicity photos of pre-radio artists as well as comparing photos of the same artist or group over time. Photographs of artists like Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family collected in secondary literature document the choice available to country artists before the standardization of the hillbilly "look". Instead of affecting the garb that became a distinguishing feature of later performers, these artists posed for publicity photos or appeared for performances dressed in contemporary street clothes that would not have looked out of place in any American town. Artists could also, as in the case of Rodgers, use costumes that fit their songs and thus referenced the diverse traditions from which they were drawing their music: the first real "star" of country music (meaning that he was the first to garner significant wealth from his musical ventures and thus be able to pursue music as a livelihood) appeared in photos and in concert wearing a wide array of outfits, including fashionable 1920s

[50] Craig Havighurst, Air Castle of the South: WSM and the making of Music City (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007): 74.
[51] Satterwhite "Objecting to Insider/Outsider Politics and the Uncritical Celebration of Appalachia," 71.

street clothes, an engineer's costume, and even a tuxedo and bowler hat when playing vaudeville songs.[52]

These options became much more limited with the standardization of hillbilly symbols and the idea of authenticity that was dependent on appropriate utilization of these symbols. While many early radio performers had no special costuming beyond their "Sunday best" suits, the increasing visibility and solidification of the hillbilly trope led to a distinctive "rustication" of these artists' images that built on the legacy of Southern stereotypes from decades past. This transition is readily apparent in contemporary photographs that document many performers' assumption of the hillbilly role, and is especially striking when comparing pictures of the same artist or group over time. The Fruit Jar Drinkers performed on the Opry in somber three-piece suits early in their career, before adopting overalls, hats, and other props to fit in with the show's increasingly hillbilly image. The same can also be seen in comparing photos of the Possum Hunters from 1926 and 1928. Other photos document a transformation in progress: pictures of the entire National Barn Dance and Opry casts from the mid 1930s show a definite mixture of hillbilly, Western, and ordinary outfits, while others show gradual adoption of costumes or even differing degrees of conformity within a single group. Peterson's and Wolfe's collections of such photographs, where sights can be found such as overalls worn over a formal shirt and tie and three quarters of a band in full hillbilly garb while the frontman wears a suit and bow tie, are instrumental for understanding the artificial and often strange development of the hillbilly "look" and some performers' reluctance to adopt it.[53]

[52] Rodgers photographs collected in Peterson, Creating Country Music, Gallery One: "The Folk vs. Pop Look."
[53] Ibid. and Wolfe, A Good-Natured Riot. Escott's The Grand Ole Opry also contains a wealth of photos documenting this process.

As was the case with the fiddlers' conventions, appearance and presentation often substituted for an actual rural or primitive lineage that performers could not legitimately claim. Even before the Opry was founded, most of those who went on to become its performers were living in Nashville and working in industrialized and specialized trades, including skilled jobs.[54] Humphrey Bate, besides being the leader of the Possum Hunters, was a Vanderbilt-educated medical doctor, whose daughter Alcyone relayed in an interview with Peterson how much she hated having to dress in rustic outfits when she performed with her father on the Opry.[55] Members of the Gully Jumpers, a string band that appeared frequently on the program in the '20s, included auto mechanics, a woodworker, and an Irish farmer. Even Sister Rachel, one of the undoubtedly small group of performers who could claim "authentic" hillbilly status, had to be worked into the mold of the hillbilly show trope. Although raised in a rural area with few modern conveniences and evidencing many of the qualities that had become the stuff of hillbilly comedy routines, she escaped being strictly cast in the bumpkin role, as it was considered unbefitting the show's conservative values to make these kind of jokes about a woman.[56] Wayne W. Daniel notes that most WLS Barn Dance performers came from farm families, but this does not mean that they were out of touch with modern culture or had particularly legitimate claims to the hillbilly roles they played on the stage.[57]

Publications from barn dance radio stations as well as statements made by promoters and performers were often quite explicit in their construction of the radio program as the embodiment of old-fashioned and familial values. The WLS station published an annual "Family Album" that featured stories and articles about the station's staff and performers, as well as encouraged

[54] Peterson, Creating Country Music, 75.
[55] Alcyone Bate Beasley to Richard A. Peterson. Ibid., xii.
[56] Wolfe, A Good-Natured Riot, 147.
[57] Daniel, "Hayloft Patriotism," 91.

listeners to consider themselves a part of the "Prairie Farmer station" family where "the latchstring is always out."[58] The covers of these publications often used rural imagery or pictures emphasizing the home and family life and featured home-based patriotic imagery during the war, such as flags hanging in front windows and a mother reading her soldier son's letter beside the radio and his photograph.[59] WSM's George D. Hay made a number of statements regarding his show's family atmosphere to performers and the public both on-air and in his unpublished 1945 book, *A History of the Grand Ole Opry*, which are available through interviews conducted by historians and quotes from Opry sources. He famously characterized the Opry as "simple as sunshine," and his statement that the show is "built upon goodwill [and] expresses the heartbeat of a large percentage of Americans who labor for a living" has been quoted by many who continue to emphasize the show's down home roots and conservative values.[60]

Rules set for performers about songs and content onstage and behavior offstage also expressed, albeit more implicitly, the ideas of family and morality being cornerstones of barn dance radio entertainment. Rex Allen, a popular Barn Dance performer and later film cowboy, recounted WLS's "strict code of ethics," which marked even some country songs as too risqué for their program:

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[58] A latch and string system was often used to secure doors before the use of locks or where manufactured locks could not be obtained. This statement is equivalent to saying that the front door of the farmer's home is unlocked and visitors may walk right in as if they were family. From WLS Family Album (WLS Chicago, 1932), reproduced in Dr. Rich Samuels, "The 1932 WLS Family Album," *Broadcasting in Chicago, 1921-1989.* Available at: http://www.richsamuels.com/nbcmm/wls/1932/contents.html. [viewed 3 Feb. 2011]

[59] The 1943 and 1944 editions, respectively. All Family Album cover art from Daniel, "Hayloft Patriotism," 90-91 and Scott Childers, "The WLS Family Albums," *The History of WLS Radio*. Available at: http://www.wlshistory.com/WLS30/familyalbums.htm. [viewed 3 Feb. 2011]
All Family Album content from Samuels, "Welcome to WLS," *Broadcasting in Chicago, 1921-1989.* 1932, 1934, 1941, and 1954 editions available at: http://www.richsamuels.com/nbcmm/wls/contents.html. [viewed 3 Feb. 2011]

[60] Ronald Reagan. Remarks at a birthday celebration for Roy Acuff. Nashville, TN. 13 Sept. 1984. President Reagan gave an extremely pro-Republican Party speech that praised the Opry's conservative values. CMHOFM Moving Image archive. Nashville, TN.

> [The manager] wouldn't allow any of us to sing "Divorce Me C.O.D." or some of those big hits that Merle Travis had. The word divorce wasn't – you couldn't say that on the radio, you couldn't do that. I had a song called "I Dreamed of an Old Love Affair" and I sang it on the air, turned it in and sang it, and this guy came in madder than hell right after I got off the air. Says, "You can't sing that song!" [...] "Can't sing that on this station!" Sung it once and got away with it, that's all. "Smoke, Smoke That Cigarette" that was so big, I couldn't sing that on WLS.[61]

Danny Dill, an Opry performer, recalled that even Hank Williams at the height of his fame was subject to censorship on Opry radio or at live performances:

> [He had a song called] "Bucket's Got a Hole in It", and in those days you couldn't say whiskey or beer on the Opry. And, uh, they wouldn't allow you to do that. [...] And they told Hank he couldn't sing that song, "can't buy no beer." And he said, all right, that's okay. I don't need to sing it. But it was number one in the country or something. And the crowd was of course wanting to hear it. And he went out there and sang it. But when he got to, "my bucket's got a hole in it. I can't buy no... milk." [instead of "beer"] And, and that crowd just went crazy. Just went crazy, completely crazy. But he was, he was defiant. You have to say that for him.[62]

Hillbilly songs such as these with more racy or mature themes and lyrics relied on jukebox play (an industry that operated primarily in bars and honky tonks) rather than radio play for their popularity and sales. That the crowd seemed to recognize the substitution hints at a significant overlap between bar patrons and Opry listeners, an idea that the Opry would not have wanted to acknowledge or publicize.

Many artists also experienced constraints on their personal lives for the sake of a show's image, even when their behavior did not affect their performances. This was especially true for

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[61] "Divorce Me C.O.D." was a 1946 hit for Merle Travis. "Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette)" was a 1947 hit for Tex Williams. The audio recording of this undated interview is taken from Childers, "The WLS National Barn Dance," *The History of WLS Radio*. Available at: http://www.wlshistory.com/NBD/. [viewed 3 Feb. 2011]

[62] Danny Dill to Morgan Neville (interview). 25 Sep. 2003. MNC, CMHOFM Moving Image archive, Nashville, TN. FV.2010.0853.

women, who were usually cast in roles such as sentimental mother figures or virginal little sister types that left no ambiguity as to their moral standing. Off stage, perceived inappropriate behavior could cost a female performer her job. Getting caught smoking, drinking alcohol, or being too casual with men were often cited as grounds for firing female performers and even blacklisting them in the music industry altogether as risky characters who could tarnish a show's reputation with their immorality. Music historian Kristine M. McCusker quotes numerous letters between talent agents and station managers regarding the firing of women performers who violated these rules and the constant search for the ideal kind of female hillbilly artist, who "never takes a drink nor smokes and attends strictly to her own business."[63] McCusker also quotes Rose Lee Maphis, a popular hillbilly performer alongside her husband Joe, about having to hide her smoking habit after becoming a WLS star. This historian characterizes the morality of barn dance radio as having "intricate ties to feminine virtue" in that the perceived values of the women involved could affect perceptions of the music and program as well.[64]

## Family values: the broader context

Widely publicized caricatures of white mountain inhabitants as personified by the fiddlers and hillbilly radio performers may have been successful in creating sensational stories in the press and creating characters that could interest and amuse listeners, but what did they accomplish in the broader societal sense? How did the idea of morality and family values influence and support these characterizations? The heyday of fiddlers' contests and old-time radio programs spanned a tumultuous period in American history, one that included the World

[63] W.M. Ellsworth to John Lair (letter), 15 June 1942, the John Lair Papers at Berea College, Berea, KY. Lair managed the Renfro Valley Barn Dance show. Quoted in McCusker, Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels, 139.
[64] Rose Lee Maphis to Kristine M. McCusker (interview), 19 May 1998, Center for Popular Music, Murfreesboro, TN. Quoted in McCusker ibid., 139.

Wars, the Great Depression, mass immigration, women's suffrage, and other social revolutions. The dueling stereotypes about Southerners that found expression in these particular forms of musical expression reflect this. On the one hand, stereotypes regarding Southerners' isolation, backwards habits, and uncivilized natures were nothing new, as we have already seen with regard to song collections and their appropriations of long-held ideas. On the other hand, the emphasis on the value of antiquity (rather than ethnic homogeneity) and its perceived moral superiority in this context may reflect different concerns or at least interpretations of the meaning of what was allegedly Southern and American culture. One possible reason contributing to the declining focus on "Anglo-Saxon" or "British" heritage was the growing inclusivity of the "white" or "Nordic" racial category in this period, which minimized the differences between Northern European cultures while exaggerating those of foreign immigrants deemed to be dangerous. The importance of "Anglo-Saxon" (a category that for some time had noticeably excluded the Irish) heritage began to wane as American rhetoric began to focus on uniting the white "old Americans" against the increasingly "non-white" immigration of the early twentieth century. [65]

In conceiving of Southern fiddlers and hillbilly performers as representing an unpolished yet wholesome and authentic facet of early American culture, those responsible for the propagation of these views may have been responding to the fears and concerns of their own times. As McCusker notes, "regional radio not only became a new stage to display cultural anxieties… but it used folk music to provide solutions, too."[66] The public in general, in their acceptance and enthusiasm for the morality-focused Southern stereotype, could have been influenced by the uncertainties and tragedies of early 20th century American life, where

[65] Gossett, Race, 361.
[66] Ibid., 30.

everything from the nature of war to the nature of womanhood was undergoing an unprecedented transformation. Wanting to believe that the past still existed in some form, even if only in pockets of the Southern mountains, and that this past represented something pure and valuable, seems like a reasonable desire in hindsight. But, as Goertzen concludes, "even though history forms the raw material for nostalgia, it is nostalgia that is being enacted… not history."[67]

[67] Goertzen, Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Conventions, 61.

# III.

In the past two chapters, we have seen how various groups utilized the idea of the South in order to promote or market the region's musical traditions and create models of an imagined Southern community that musicians had to follow to be considered authentic. While song-collectors overwhelmingly played into the existing body of Southern stereotypes, entities such as fiddlers' conventions and barn dance radio programs did this and more, introducing the idea of morality to promote and legitimize the music and performances they profited from. In this chapter, I examine the urban backlash against hillbilly music and the most visible group who tried to "save hillbilly": artists who used the imagery of the West instead of the codified body of Southern stereotypes. To some extent, the efforts of cowboy-influenced hillbilly musicians reshaped this region and its people in the minds of Americans, but ultimately they were unable to rescue the image of Southern music from the consequences of its negative stereotypes.

The singing cowboy, who entered the arena of commercial music through Hollywood in the 1930s, quickly became a staple of the hillbilly music industry and barn dance radio programs in the form of the hillbilly cowboy artists. These performers built off of the definition of hillbilly music and its audience that the radio and record industries had broadened to include poor rural whites outside the traditional South to legitimize their portrayal of an alternative white rural existence. The cowboy trope and mythology of "the West" allowed some musicians and promoters to carve out a new space for themselves in commercial music, beyond simply profiting from the success of a popular film genre. For many, this space enabled them to essentially play Southern or Southern-derived music without being saddled with the baggage and expectations of the increasingly solidified hillbilly character, although elements of this trope

could be utilized when it was necessary or profitable to do so.[136] In reality, to take on the cowboy role was to effectively assume and capitalize on the more noble aspects of the Southern stereotype dating from the 1800s (things like self-reliance, freedom, and the pioneer heritage) while avoiding the negative or undignified connotations of this archetype. The cowboy musicians of this time period were instrumental in solidifying the iconography of what we recognize as country music today and influencing the nomenclature shift that increasingly identified the style of music played on barn dance radio as "country and western" rather than simply "hillbilly."

## Hillbilly in the City

The 1940s and '50s saw the era of urban backlash against commercial hillbilly music, especially in places like the self-proclaimed "Athens of the South." Urban elites in the South blamed hillbilly entertainers for propagating a negative and anachronistic stereotype of a region that was becoming increasingly sophisticated. While much of the hillbilly music world cultivated a moral and conservative image to market their genre and buffer a legacy of negative characterizations, the propensity to utilize demeaning stereotypes, even for comedic reasons, drew criticism from urban elites. This attitude became very apparent with Roy Acuff's interaction with Tennessee governor Prentice Cooper in 1943. Acuff had invited Cooper to be the guest of honor at an Opry gala celebrating the premier of a new program, but the governor refused and insulted him by condemning hillbilly music and blaming Acuff for making Tennessee the "hillbilly capital of the United States."[137] Many others who wanted the South to be

[136] Malone, Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers, 95.
[137] Escott, The Grand Ole Opry, 98.

known for its cultural and economic achievements instead of a laughable or demeaning stereotype shared Cooper's opinion.

In addition, this legacy of negative stereotypes followed many Southerners even out of the South and affected their acceptance in new areas. With World War II and accelerating immigration of Southerners to urban centers in the Midwest and Northern states, perceptions of these people and hillbilly music became even worse across the nation. Historian Anthony Harkins describes the results of a 1951 Wayne State University survey that polled Detroit residents about the groups of people they thought were undesirable in their city. "Criminals" and "gangsters" occupied the highest two spots, but "poor Southern whites" and "hillbillies" were not far from the top, having received far more votes than "drifters", "negroes", and "foreigners."[138] Articles referencing this problem also flooded the popular press and sociological journals, describing the backwardness, violence, and generally un-American values of Southern migrants in language that harkened back to the local color literature of the late nineteenth century and many of the song collections like Cecil Sharp's. While some reclamation of derogatory terms and marginalized identity has occurred in recent years, the legacy of the poor Southern white "hillbilly" stigma lives on even in our own decade. A recent analysis of the 2000 census suggests that people living in Appalachia generally reject being labeled as "Appalachian" at least partially due to the connotations of the word, while a survey of inhabitants of Cincinnati (an important destination for Southern migration) of Appalachian birth or ancestry shows the same trend.[139]

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[138] Harkins, Hillbilly, 176.

[139] J. Trent Alexander and Chad Berry, "Who is Appalachia? Self-Reported Appalachian Ancestry in the 2000 Census," Appalachian Journal 38:1 (2010).
Robert L. Ludke et. al., "Identifying Appalachian Adults: an Empirical Study," Appalachian Journal 38:1 (2010).

Hillbilly music's carefully cultivated image of conservative and upstanding moral values had helped make it commercially acceptable but it was not enough to prevent or buffer this wave of resentment. As discussed in chapter two, even some early barn dance performers were reluctant to adopt the hillbilly style, before it became clear that this was a successful marketing tactic.[140] The negative connotations of poor Southern whites had never entirely disappeared under the mask of moral entertainment, and urban audiences inside and outside the South made their disapproval of this group well-known. This kind of criticism and the ever-increasing cultural baggage that came with being associated with hillbilly music helped persuade many of the era's most important artists to adopt a style that, although it was not genuinely Western, at least was not quite so hillbilly.

## The singing cowboys and cowboys who sing

This thesis distinguishes between the original "singing cowboys" who were film actors first and musicians second (if at all) and the next wave of musical artists inspired by these actors to trade their lyrical home in the mountains for a home on the range or to adopt cowboy costuming and iconography. This boundary is somewhat blurred by scholars, but treating them as two distinct groups emphasizes the idea that hillbilly artists were primarily tapping into a film legacy rather than a musical one.[141] While certainly native Western and cowboy music existed (and even made its presence felt in the country world through sub-genres like Western swing) and should be considered on its own terms, this chapter focuses on how musicians who did not necessarily have a legitimate claim to the cowboy image appropriated it as a tool to gain success and a new kind of authenticity in hillbilly music, an arena that formerly had focused on a narrow

[140] See Peterson's photo galleries in Creating Country Music.
[141] Peterson, Creating Country Music; Malone, Country Music, U.S.A.

definition of Southern music. The cowboy's most important legacy was visual rather than musical, or as Malone bluntly states: "except for the fabric of usable symbols which surrounded him, the cowboy contributed nothing to American music."[142] Only the iconography of the cowboy ideal made its way into the hillbilly genre, rather than authentic Western or cowboy music of the type documented by Lomax (see chapter one).

While Lomax and even some Tin Pan Alley composers acknowledged cowboy music in the early twentieth-century, the popularity of the film genre and the events of the Depression era were what really brought it to national attention and eventual success. Douglas B. Green dates the rise of the singing cowboy to the mid 1930s and an era when America was frantically searching for wholesome heroes and escapism in entertainment.[143] Much as the fiddlers' competitions and barn dance radio programs presented their products in a conservative light that stressed old-fashioned values, films underwent a similar process in this period albeit in a more institutionalized way. The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association enacted a strict production code of 1934 to remedy the perceived decline in moral standards of films as the Depression wore on, enforced by the formidable "Hays Office."[144] Will Hays, president, led the crusade for morality in cinema, setting new and stricter rules about what films could show or even hint at, particularly with regard to sexuality and violence. The singing cowboy who upheld law and order with a song in his heart and was the very "epitome of wholesomeness" was thus well-placed to become an American icon and foil to the perceived immorality of modern and

[142] Malone, Country Music, U.S.A., 152.
[143] Green, Singing in the Saddle, 23. He also notes the existence of a few early Western novelty songs and a handful of traditional cowboy songs appearing in record catalogs in the 1920s, and describes the relatively early appearance of cowboy singers on radio stations located near to or even across the Mexican border. Whether or not these musicians could authentically claim the cowboy label, their residence in the indisputable West, their small number, and the fact that they appeared too early to be tapping into the film legacy and solidified trope examined in this chapter unfortunately preclude more than a brief mention of them in this thesis.
[144] Ibid., 98.

urban life that troubled so many.[145] Peterson takes a slightly more pragmatic perspective, attributing this genre's viability in hard times to the low production costs of outdoor films that lacked large casts and orchestras and that utilized songs whose rights could be purchased cheaply or that were free in the public domain.[146] Another factor leading to the musical Western genre's popularity was the idea of freedom it referenced to an audience desperate for a momentary escape from everyday worries and particularly the anxiety that accompanied the Depression years. An ordinary laborer could "enjoy an old-fashioned barn dance [radio program]" to take his mind off his troubles in this time, but the image of the cowboy who could pack his saddlebags and ride off into the sunset was also extremely appealing when economic prospects and personal hopes were at an all-time low.[147] Like fiddlers' competitions and hillbilly radio programs, the cinema singing cowboys were products of an insecure and troubling era in American history that affected many citizens' tastes in entertainment.

Although initially the musical cowboy was "almost universally a B-picture phenomenon," this character became a worldwide success with the careers of Roy Rogers and Gene Autry.[148] They were not the first Western actors to sing in their films and indeed both pursued musical careers before their rise to screen stardom, but their incredible success at the box office and on radio made them the poster children of the singing cowboy genre and the individuals who would most influence hillbilly music's adoption of Western themes. Rogers, born Leonard Slye in Cincinnati, became known as "King of the Cowboys" after he traded in a supporting role in the Western singing group Sons of the Pioneers for the film lead as a singing cowboy, an image he utilized throughout his long film and television career with his cowgirl

[145] Ibid., 98.
[146] Peterson, Creating Country Music, 85.
[147] Green, Singing in the Saddle, 22.
[148] Ibid., 98.

wife Dale and loyal palomino Trigger. Autry, born in Texas as Orvon Autry, rose to prominence on WLS's National Barn Dance before making it to the big screen in 1934.[149] While on the Barn Dance, Gene Autry performed a diverse range of songs, including many Jimmie Rodgers tunes. He also used the nickname he had acquired while working for a Tulsa radio station: "Oklahoma's Singing Cowboy." His radio success attracted the attention of Republic Studios' executive Nat Levine who molded him into the archetype of the screen musical cowboy. By the early 1940s Autry was starring in several films per year and the town of Berwyn, Oklahoma had been renamed Gene Autry in honor of the star who had become an important symbol of the state, a name it retains to this day.[150]

The enormous popularity of the singing cowboys on film as well as their easily adopted "usable symbols" contributed to a change in the kinds of characters that appeared on hillbilly radio shows and recordings. As Peterson states it, the "hillbilly [was] saved by donning his cowboy sibling's clothes," although as we will see, a costume change was not nearly enough to save the hillbilly from negative stereotypes and may have even caused more problems.[151] A powerful symbol of justice, freedom, and American values, the cowboy image was well-suited to the demands of hillbilly programs and the cowboys who sing were quick to seize this opportunity to emulate the popular film stars and in the process reinvent the notion of hillbilly music for many people. Hillbilly artists who recast themselves as cowboys were thus able to exploit the success of previous performers who had been crafted by film producers in the idealized Western image, and avoid the negative stereotypes and urban backlash against hillbilly music by

[149] Biographical information in Green, Singing in the Saddle 120- 148 and 187-197, and Peterson, Creating Country Music, 85-89.
[150] Cusic, "Gene Autry in World War II," in Country Music Goes to War, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson, 47.
[151] Peterson, Creating Country Music, 89.

dissociating themselves from this image while still profiting from appearances on their popular programs.

Much like the barn dance performers who underwent a transformation of "rustication" to become models of authentic hillbillies, artists wanting to assume the cowboy image (or being molded into it by record executives and show directors) often underwent dramatic changes in nomenclature and costuming in order to fit the part. Woodward Ritter, an east Texan who had attended law school at Northwestern, took the name Tex, while Frank Kuczynski from Wisconsin forged a new identity as Pee Wee King, leader of the Golden West Cowboys.[152] St. Louis sisters Dolly and Millie Good reinvented themselves as the Girls of the Golden West, complete with fictional biographies and a new hometown in Muleshoe, Texas. Rubye Blevins of Arkansas became Patsy Montana and went on to become the first female country artist to have a million-selling record with her 1935 hit "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart."[153] These newly minted cowboy singers and musicians achieved success on radio programs and on record, and also adopted the Hollywood-approved version of Western wear as part of their personas, in the form of ten gallon hats, cowboy boots, and fringed and spangled costumes.

The cowboy style was more popular in the 1930s on the National Barn Dance than on the Opry, where George D. Hay and others showed some skepticism and even hostility towards this new development in "rural" music. Photographs of both shows' cast in 1935 and 1936 clearly illustrate this trend: while a significant portion of Barn Dance performers donned Western garb for their publicity picture (and thus, we may assume, for their regular performances), no one on

[152] While he was the leader of the band, it is notable that Pee Wee King was never the lead singer. That role was filled by various Southerners over the years, such as Eddy Arnold. It is likely that King's clearly non-Southern accent would have damaged his credibility as a cowboy hillbilly star. Peterson, Creating Country Music, 144.

[153] Biographical information and photographs taken from Peterson, Creating Country Music 90-91 and Gallery Two: "Geezers, Hillbillies and Cowboys."

the Opry did.[154] By the 1940s, the cowboy style had become prominent on both shows but had mostly abandoned the pretense of authentic Western music or identity; instead, performers played everything from honky tonk country to the more pop-influenced "countrypolitan" style while using cowboy iconography. Protests came from "hillbilly traditionalists" and influential artists like Roy Acuff, "King of the Hillbillies", who refused to have his Smoky Mountain Boys wear Western outfits on stage or in films and declared his horror of being mistaken for a cowboy in his 1978 biography.[155] While the 1930s wave of artists went to great lengths to present themselves as authentic cowboys (or cowgirls) through fictional biographies and Western-inspired lyrics, the 1940s saw a shift toward artists who used cowboy costuming and occasionally nomenclature in the hillbilly market without bothering to explicitly identify themselves as Western.

In no case was this more apparent than in the career of Hank Williams, an enormously popular and influential artist who singlehandedly caused the honky tonk sub-genre to assume the designation of "traditional" country music.[156] Williams utilized cowboy iconography and nomenclature while starring on hillbilly radio programs and writing and recording songs that had no Western content whatsoever. Williams' cousin recalled how Hank himself changed his name from Hiram because it sounded more like a good cowboy name.[157] Hank and his band, the "Drifting Cowboys," wore cowboy hats and boots on hillbilly programs, and but never claimed to be real Westerners as the previous generation of artists had often done.

[154] Ibid., 102 and 104.
[155] Ibid. 91.
[156] Cusic, "Gene Autry in World War II," 55.
[157] Walter McNeil to Morgan Neville (interview). 15 July 2003. MNC, CMHOFM archive. FV.2010.0820.

While Williams' meteoric rise to fame as an Opry legend took much of the focus off of the stereotyped country rube image that Southern urban elites reacted so strongly against, it did not necessarily replace it with something better. It may have even been more harmful. Williams, by virtue of his image and fame as a singer of the honky-tonk genre, made the Southern genre most associated with vice into the most recognized Southern genre period. Honky-tonk music was traditionally associated with Texas bars and roadhouses, where performers were often obligated to close their shows with a gospel song so patrons would not get into fights in the parking lot as they left. [158] This was hardly the idea of idyllic mountain communities that had been promoted by barn dance radio for years. Williams' success encouraged more up and coming artists to emulate the honky-tonk style, adding fuel to the fire of those who criticized hillbilly music in general and saw the new incarnation of the cowboy hillbilly artist as the same stereotype in a different costume.

The Western image may have initially made hillbilly music more palatable to critics and those wary of the baggage associated with this genre and the people it referenced, but ultimately it could not compensate for the longstanding legacy of negative stereotypes about poor Southern whites. Perhaps this prejudice could have been buffered if hillbilly artists utilizing the cowboy image had continued their fictional association with the West, or if authentic Westerners had become the hillbilly stars. The crafted façade of morality that hillbilly radio and fiddlers' competition promoters did not reject the body of stereotypes associated with the people who participated in and listened to these events; it only tried to cast them in a different, more positive light. The advent of the honky-tonk artists who used cowboy iconography but did not strive for

[158] Lange, Smile When You Call Me a Hillbilly, 253.

cowboy authenticity, even in fabricated form, revealed just how precarious the position of the entities marketing the morality of the South really was.

## Conclusion

The story of the perception of Southern music in America is more than just a story about performers, songs, and shows that expressed the experiences of artists and audiences. Mostly it is a story about how the visible face of a musical industry had to conform to what people expected to see. In the 1920s and '30s some artists and shows were able to fulfill the expectations of a public primed with reductive ideas about the South while also waging a subtle campaign to gain some measure of approval for the roles they were cast in. But ultimately most Americans saw in Southern music what they had believed for decades about Southern people, regardless of reality or the enormous changes taking place nationwide throughout the twentieth century. The advent of Western imagery into hillbilly music was not enough to save the image of the poor Southern white as it had been constructed by song-collectors and folklorists in the early twentieth century, and may have even exacerbated things. Regardless of Southern music's success or failure in this period at obtaining respect and legitimacy, it can provide lessons about stereotyping and the nature of authentic identity. These ideas are important for deepening our understanding of how specific groups can serve as symbols for the needs or concerns of the nation, and the hazards this can pose to when we allow our expectations to interfere with reality and the respect we give to those we perceive as outsiders.

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