

The Rise and Fall of the Hillbilly Music Genre:
A History, 1922-1939.

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Ryan Carlson Bernard
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Dr. Richard Blaustein, Chair
Dr. Ted Olson
Dr. Kevin O'Donnell

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ABSTRACT

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This research will examine the rise in popularity of the hillbilly music genre as it relates to the early part of the twentieth century as well as its decline with the arrival of the western hero, the cowboy.

Chapter 1 examines the origins of traditional music and how instrumental the fiddle and banjo were in that development. Chapter 2 looks closely into the careers of recording artists who recorded what would later be called hillbilly music. Chapter 3 examines the string band and the naming of the hillbilly genre. Chapters 4 and 5 look at the aspect of radio programming and stereotypes.

Chapter 6 discusses the homogenization of the hillbilly genre and the replacement of the hillbilly with the cowboy. This research will clarify the appeal of the hillbilly and highlight the negative stereotypes that started the genre and ultimately ended it leading into the Second World War.

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CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	4
Chapter	
1. THE BEGINING.....	7
Origins of Traditional Music.....	9
Banjo.....	10
Minstrels.....	10
Vaudeville.....	14
2. THE FIRST HILLBILLIES TO RECORD, 1922-1928.....	21
Eck Robertson.....	22
Henry Whitter.....	25
Fiddlin' John Carson.....	28
3. THE HILL BILLIES AND EARLY STRING BANDS, 1924-1929.....	37
The Skillet Lickers, 1924-1931.....	38
The Term "Hillbilly".....	44
The Hill Billies.....	45
4. UNCLE DAVE MACON AND THE GRAND OLE OPRY, 1918-1930...54	
The Grand Ole Opry.....	55
Hay's Vision of Hillbilly Authenticity.....	59
Uncle Dave Macon.....	61
5. EARLY HILLBILLY STEREOTYPES, 1850-1939.....	72

Mining the Misconception.....	77
Arkansas Traveler & Li'l Abner.....	80
Enter: Hillbilly Musicians.....	84
6. HOMOGENIZATION & THE DECLINE, 1925-1939.....	90
Maces Springs & the Tenneva Ramblers.....	91
Peer & Stoneman.....	94
Bristol: Birth of a Legend.....	96
Music Publishing: The Hillbilly Writer.....	99
"I'm Going Where There's No Depression"	101
Enter: The Media Cowboy.....	104
Conclusion.....	107
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	115
VITA.....	120

CHAPTER 1

THE BEGINNING

As the nineteenth century headed towards modernization and the industrialization of the rapidly approaching century, rural inhabitants began to take part in a mass exodus out of the southern Appalachian region, away from the isolation and poverty of the mountain South. The promise of good jobs and new, modern ways of life attracted impoverished mountaineers and rural folk, while the prospect of leaving the old ways in exchange for these new, urban areas was often intimidating and daunting in the least.

As the southern migration to the cities exploded, many aspects of rural life were carried along and incorporated into the newer, modern modes of every day life. Significant aspects of this modern change were the impact of traditional music, recordings, and radio broadcasts. With newly implemented programming including barn dances, skits, minstrelsy, and vaudeville performances, these musicians along with the far-reaching power of radio impacted, nurtured, and influenced the hillbilly acclimation to these new urban centers.

This study will examine the rise in popularity of the hillbilly genre of music in the early part of the twentieth century and how the rise of this traditional music correlates to the demographic, cultural, and economic changes of the mountain South and the great Southern migration to cities. A closer look into the reasons why the genre rose in popularity at a time of such great social change in the country and the explanations for the genre losing the social connection before World War II will also be examined. How this music with its intrinsic rural values

and easily identifiable “folk” qualities became what is known today as “country music” will also be addressed.

The enormous business opportunity that the hillbilly and race recordings provided in the 1920s should also be examined when discussing the history of traditional, folk music and its rise in popularity and acceptance. The genre provided an easily marketable elixir for southern transplants with its rural values and rustic nostalgia and this notion was presented and put forth at a time when the old ways of life were most assuredly fading away. This sentiment was not lost on savvy businessmen like Ralph Peer, George D. Hay, and Frank Walker, and the commercialization of the hillbilly genre was an exercise in the symbiotic relationships between musicians and businessmen and ultimately would develop and evolve into a business model for popular music.

Mass-produced, commercialized hillbilly music was a vital and pivotal feature of southern acclimation to modern industrialized society and northern urban centers. Examining the rise and fall of the hillbilly genre provides insight into socioeconomic variables that ultimately affected the identities of southern Appalachians and the commercial music industry and its role in shaping rustic, rural values and mores through modern modes of media.

Origins of Traditional Music

From earliest part of the seventeenth century America, the fiddle played an integral part in social interaction and was present as this nation grew, struggled, and evolved. The fiddle embodied tradition and the tunes that were played on this instrument were a direct link with the European continent and cultures, which the settlers had then recently departed. Fred Fussell illuminates this point in his book; *Blueridge Music Trails* (2003): “The fiddle was a compact carry-over from the old world. When the Europeans first brought it to North America during the late seventeenth century, the fiddle was a novel and exciting instrument that was beginning to replace the hornpipe, tabor, and harp at country dances and other rural social gatherings in the Old World.”¹ The fiddle was often the only musical instrument played in many white settlements; numerous British, Irish, Scottish, and other European tunes were brought with this instrument. The importance and relevance of the fiddle quickly integrated into early American psyche. The fiddle is easily identifiable with early American history. Thomas Jefferson, for example, was a noted fiddler who composed and collected songs. George Washington, some scholars say, had a favorite fiddle tune called, “Jaybird sitting on a Hickory Limb.”²

¹ Fred Fussell, *Blue Ridge Music Trails: Finding a place in the Circle* (Chapel Hill: University North Carolina, 2003), 3.

² Lisa Burman-Hall, “Southern Fiddling: Context and Style: Context and Style” (PhD. Diss., Princeton University, 1973), 14.

Banjo

By the 1800s, a significant event transpired in secular music: the integration and assimilation of the banjo into the southern Appalachian culture. Some scholars contend the banjo, with its origins in Africa, made its way to the North American continent via the slave trade and continued on into more isolated areas by means of the new railroads. D. K Wilgus elaborates on the how music and instruments made it into a more isolated Appalachia: “By steam packet, by railroad, by returning loggers who had rafted timber, by returning western migrants, by those who drove jolt wagons to the settlements-selected musical materials reached our ‘contemporary ancestors.’”³ The isolation of Appalachia, some scholars say, was less profound than once believed. The histories of the various banjo incarnations vary from scholar to scholar but all agree that the importation and integration of this instrument was vital in the development of country, hillbilly, or traditional music. President Thomas Jefferson commented on the Banjo and how it was tuned. In his book, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1743), Jefferson said of black residents of the Blue Ridge, “The instrument propoer {sic} to them is the banjar which they brought hither from Africa.”⁴

Minstrels

The use of the banjo in minstrel shows greatly increased the instrument’s popularity before the Civil War. Minstrel shows were an odd amalgam for

³ D. K. Wilgus, “An Introduction to the Study of Hillbilly Music,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 78 (1965): 196.

⁴ Fussell, 5.

America at this time. Don Cusic relates this strange mixture of cultures in *The American Recording Industry* (1996):

The impersonation of blacks by whites is one of the unique—and characteristic—forms of entertainment developed in America. In fact, one of the major reasons America as a nation was so unique was the presence of a black culture, separate from the white culture at the same time it was part of this culture. In entertainment and music it gave us a diverse heritage, a cultural mix not found anywhere else in the world, which influenced our entertainment music industries.⁵

The banjo, the main prop of the minstrel performer, had found its way into the region, and in tandem with the fiddle it formed the core of the mountain string band.⁶ The combination of fiddle and banjo were an integral part of minstrelsy; through minstrel shows the banjo became popular in the North and the South alike. African-Americans playing the African banjo and the European fiddle formed the first uniquely American ensemble—the root or beginnings of a sound that would eventually shape old time, hillbilly, blues, bluegrass, and eventually country-western music, among other genres.

According to Wilgus, opinions vary concerning the origins of both the banjo and fiddle as secular string-band instruments, “One makes statements about folk music of secular culture with extreme caution. The secular musical tradition was almost completely domestic, performed by nonprofessionals. The repertory included both Old World and native American materials, though it is not possible to demonstrate when some of the latter entered the tradition. Few old ballads native to the area have survived. Performance, excepting shaped-note singing, was monophonic; melodies were largely modal, sung with considerable

⁵ Don Cusic, *The American Recording Industry* (Nashville: Belmont University, 1996), 30.

⁶ Fussell, 5.

ornamentation and rhythmic freedom. The only instrument in wide use was the fiddle, and probably only for frolic music. The attitude toward secular music in general and the fiddle in particular varied from complete toleration to total rejection on religious grounds. But there was a strong conservative tradition with ancient roots.”⁷

Traditional or folk music continued to evolve and acclimate to the changing times of the nineteenth century. The South was an agrarian society during the 1800s and social interactions between whites and African-Americans reflected a pastoral sentiment. The traditional songs of the white people of which echoes are preserved in Negro secular songs are generally jig-songs, nursery songs, and children’s nursery rhymes. They may have been acquired in the white man’s nursery, at corn-shuckings, or break-downs of the white man at which there were Negro musicians, on large plantations where in the eighteenth century the slave sometimes worked side by side with the indentured white man, or the small farm in the nineteenth century where the slave and his owner often labored together.⁸ Black slaves and white indentured servants did much of music making at Virginia dances, and the *Virginia Gazette*’s advertisements for runaway sometimes mentioned that the escapee was a fiddler. Virginians seeking to acquire slaves and indentured servants sometimes specified that, in addition to the usual qualification, they wanted a musician.⁹

⁷ D. K. Wilgus, “Country-Western Music and the Urban Hillbilly,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 83 (1970): 159.

⁸ Newman I. White, “The White Man in the Woodpile. Some Influences on Negro Secular Folk-Songs,” *American Speech* 4, (1929):209.

⁹ Fussell, 4.

A series of cultural shocks and alterations began with the Civil War. Of course the music and the cultural tradition of which it was a part had not been completely static, even in the deepest back country, but change now became increasingly rapid. We can date economic changes, we can date song texts, but we cannot date changes in musical styles or even the introduction of musical instruments during this time. For example, the banjo and the Ethiopian minstrel songs were a staple of the urban tradition by 1850; yet we do not know when the southern white folk musician adopted them. What we do know is that by the end of the century they had become a vital part of the tradition. What we can do is recognize influences that were gradual, and influences that were resisted. We can summarize them as urbanization.¹⁰

In the mid-nineteenth century, the country's musical traditions and idioms were influenced primarily by Scottish, English, Irish, and German immigrants coming into the Northern region of the country and African-American slaves transported to the South. At the end of the Civil War, the diverse musical forms from which contemporary country or folk music traces its musicological lineage were the prevalent popular musical forms in North America. European fine art music was performed only in a few large seaport cities. At no time since has this Anglo-Celtic music, a mixture of fiddle dance songs, narrative ballads, and sacred gospel songs, been so nearly *the* music in the country at large. This pre-commercial country music was transmitted by amateur musicians who, working in an oral tradition, readily incorporated new composed songs of the early touring

¹⁰ Wilgus, 159.

professionals and elements from immigrant musical styles. As a result there was a great deal of regional variation in song texts, performance styles, and instrumentation.¹¹

Vaudeville

Vaudeville was the next addition in a long procession of entertainment genres found in the mid-nineteenth century. Vaudeville, a variety extravaganza which began to assume a national identity in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and which flourished until the burgeoning popularity of motion pictures in the 1920s, was a stage show that became popular following the rise in popularity of the minstrel show. Like the earlier minstrel show, to which it was much indebted, vaudeville inspired the emergence of a professional song-writing class, and it developed highly sophisticated means of circulating their songs around the nation. Vaudeville troupes played in most of the southern cities, but songs introduced by them made their way into smaller towns and villages on sheet music, in stereopticon slide shows, on piano rolls and cylinder recordings, and in the performances of tent-repertory actors.¹²

Humor played a major role in secular traditional music and was incorporated promptly into stage shows and earlier minstrel routines. There is scarcely an aspect of American character to which humor is not related, few aspects which in some sense it has not governed. It moved into literature and music, not merely as an occasional touch, but as a force that determined large

¹¹ Richard A. Peterson and Paul Di Maggio, "From Region to Class, the Changing Locus of Country Music: A Test of the Massification Hypothesis," *Social Forces*, 53 (1975): 499.

¹² Bill C. Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 8.

patterns and intentions. It is a lawless element, full of surprises. It sustains its own appeal, yet its vigorous power invites absorption in that character of which it is part.¹³ American sense of humor did not come in to widespread existence until about 1830, more than two hundred years after John Smith wrote the first American book.¹⁴ The nation, itself, had to realize its own character and develop a sense of humor within its place in history and time. With the changing socio-economic variables, American humor was firmly ensconced in early traditional art forms such as music.

The elements of immigrant influences on southern traditional music should be noted when discussing the origins of commercial country music or the hillbilly genre. The Civil War definitely affected regional and national migration patterns. Wars would continue to provide catalysts for outward migration from the South. The Civil War, like the other American wars to follow, brought rural men into urban environments and men of different cultural regions into contact. Northern entrepreneurs and technicians entered to exploit the South. Southern youths were leaving the area—largely for the West—but they were returning as well. Railroads furthered communication; in their very construction they introduced new cultural (including musical) influences. Logging, mining, and manufacturing plants were developed, altering economy and the face of the South, without fundamentally challenging the value system of its folk. It is in this atmosphere that hillbilly music developed and continued to develop.¹⁵

¹³ Constance Rourke, *American Humor* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1931), 10.

¹⁴ Walter Blair, *Native American Humor* (Chicago: Chandler Publishing Company, 1960), 3.

¹⁵ Wilgus, 159.

According to Archie Green, the word, *hillbilly*, has been used both pejoratively and humorously in American print since April 23, 1900. On that day the *New York Journal* reported that “ a Hill-Billie is a free and untrammled white citizen of Alabama, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him.”¹⁶ We do not know how early the term began to circulate in speech. One possible clue on origin might be found in a pair of Scottish colloquialisms, *hill-folk* and *billie*. The former was deprecatory, for it designated a refractory Presbyterian—a Cameronian—a rebel against Charles II. Scots hill-folk and hill men in 1693 were noted for zeal, devotion, and prudence in seeking isolation away from their rejected monarch’s rule. *Billie* was used in Scots dialect as early as 1505 as a synonym for *fellow*, *companion*, *comrade*, or *mate*. The words *hill* and *billie* might well have been combined in the Highlands before the first austere Cameronian took refuge in the piney uplands of the New World. Historical speculation aside, we know the word in print only from 1900 and only as an Americanism.¹⁷

The origins of hillbilly music were by no means land-locked or confined to one geographical area of the country. The folk aspect of the music resonated with the listeners throughout the North and West. Green continues, “Hill-billy music seems to be a super-hybrid form of some genuine folk elements which have intruded into the mechanism of popular culture.” A dual definition states: “Of

¹⁶ Archie Green, “Hillbilly Music: Source and Symbol,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, 78 (1965): 204.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

or pertaining to commercialized folk or folkish songs (or the performers thereof) largely derived from or aimed at white folk culture of the southern United States, beginning in 1923. Of or pertaining to that style—a blend of Anglo-Irish-Negro folksong and American popular song—on which the commercial tradition was based and developed.”¹⁸ D. K Wilgus expresses a somewhat different opinion on the beginnings of the genre—that hillbilly music is phenomenon solely of the South in general and of the Southern Appalachians in particular is a myth in the best sense of the word. The myth has its factual aspects—the music first recorded in the South, and the musical style was originally Southern. But “Southern Tune,” Mountain Song,” and “Dixie Music” had much the same significance in the 1920s as “Old Northern Tune” had on London broadsides of the seventeenth century. Early hillbilly performers came not only from the lowland and upland South, but from the Great Plains, and the Midwest—and eventually New England, Nova Scotia, and Alberta. That the first important hillbilly radio show, WLS, originated in Chicago during the early 1920s cannot be explained solely by the presence of Southern migrants. Barn dances on the air waves were a manifestation of the South; their essence was of rural America. Southern hillbilly music seems but a specialized and dominant form of a widespread music; to say the least, it appealed to the tastes of the rural folk who could be reached by radio stations in Pittsburgh, Kansas City, Boston, and Cleveland.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid, 205.

¹⁹ D. K. Wilgus, “An Introduction to the Study of Hillbilly Music,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 78 (1965): 196.

The music and musicians that would eventually be called *hillbilly* were definitely present and performing before the advent of radio and recordings. The radio and recording industries did not invent hillbilly music. They offered new media for an already existing tradition, which they rapidly learned to exploit. They changed an existing pattern but slowly. The performers were recognized artists, the best musicians of rural hamlets, traveling folk-oriented shows, and the developing industrial centers of the South. The point is that professional minstrelsy antedated the attentions of the folklorist, and the professional string band antedated the machinations of the radio and record industry.²⁰

At the dawn of the 1920s, southern folk music remained largely unknown to the outside world. Generally ignored and unobserved by others, it was left to develop on its own. The songs of the southern region, however, were gradually being presented to Americans at large through the publication of various folksong compilations such as those John Lomax and Cecil Sharp. Sharp's collection of English folksongs found in the southern mountains, *Folksongs from the Southern Appalachians* (1917), constituted the first attempt to include musical notation as well as the lyrics for the South's traditional store of songs. But nothing had been done yet to publicize the singers themselves, and since Sharp ignored some of the basic categories of musical expression (such as religious and instrumental music); little was known of the total musical culture that folk southerners had created. Rural music was an inchoate phenomenon, existing in a thousand different communities and performed by fiddlers, banjoists, balladeers, song

²⁰ Ibid, 197.

sheet hawkers, family gospel groups, and occasional string bands. Performed usually at home or at a community social function, but occasionally in a paying situation, such as on the medicine show stage, the music was as commercial as its socioeconomic context would permit it to be.²¹

By the 1920s, radio and recording technology were competing for the general population's attention. Throughout the early part of the twentieth century these two forms of media would struggle, re-invent, rename, and mystify the public's idea and perceptions of what *hillbilly* music eventually become. This misnomer would in due time act as an all encompassing term to categorize anything rural, country, folk, or western. Green elaborates, "the term *hillbilly music*, however defined has been employed for three decades as a rubric covering a kaleidoscope variety of sub forms: old time, familiar tunes, Dixie, mountain, sacred, gospel, country, cowboy, western, country-western, hill and range, western swing, Nashville, rockabilly, bluegrass. *Hillbilly* can cover all available (recorded and published) white commercial country music or it can be equated simply with the limited type of recent period."²²

The early part of our nation's history provided a great arena for the integration of cultures, musical forms, instrumentation, and social idiosyncrasies. In addition, the American South provided a virtual "birthing-ground" for a characteristically American folk music. The assimilation of the fiddle and banjo into frontier culture was paramount in the development of an American folk tradition. As the country grew and evolved, so did its distinct, culturally different,

²¹ Malone, 27-28.

²² Green, 205

musical tastes and forms. The music that grew alongside the nation was overtly and originally American.

With the onset of industrialization and mechanization, the nation's isolated and often, forgotten areas were suddenly accessible and along with that access, a blending of cultures and exchange of ideas often took place at a higher frequency. As the frequency of exchange occurred more often, we find the development of musical forms such as the minstrel, the medicine show, and vaudeville. All of these new forms, in turn, led to the early modes of hillbilly and country music. Economic, social, and political implications factored heavily in the development of early folk and hillbilly music. Migration, immigration, wars, and economical events such as the Great Depression ultimately factored in on the progress of the musical idiom.

Lastly, the early forms of traditional and folk music associated with the South and Appalachia were uniquely American because of the inherent melting pot from which they developed. The young nation provided the middle ground for a musical exchange of cultures and ideas. Without this diversity, none of these unique qualities and characteristics could have developed.

CHAPTER 2

THE FIRST HILLBILLIES TO RECORD, 1922-1928

The use of the word, hillbilly, would not appear for some time in relation with early recording artists and its association with rural traditional music. The word itself possessed a duality not lost on poor southern whites, and the eventual use of nomenclature signified a particular change in southern attitudes toward expression, tradition, and rustic values and their Appalachian identity. Early traditional musicians acclimated and co-opted the comic element inherent in most hillbilly stereotypes, and further evidence supports a general, if not eventual mass acceptance of the word. Finally, the word and its resonance were more socially acceptable and its representation and ramifications required a broader definition.

Fiddlin' John Carson's early success as a champion fiddler was not lost on Ralph Peer, producer in the field, and his colleagues at Okeh records. Carson was ultimately responsible for bringing life back to a genre of traditional music that had been present but unknown since the beginning of the century. Actually, students of Americana know that comic derivatives and "concert improvements" of folksong, as well as some traditional folk music, were available on cylinder or disc in the 1890s. The potpourri of rural dances, minstrel routines, laughing songs, country fiddling, and concert offerings were neither integrated nor categorized by the industry or public. However, these traditions were well received. In the early 1900s, Alma Gluck's "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" was the first Victor Red Seal disc to sell over a million copies and, needless to say, many of the purchasers felt they were getting a real view of plantation mores.

Then, as now, the media offered restyled vulgarized, folk-like songs as well as authentic pristine selections under a bewildering set of labels. The 1901 Columbia cylinder catalog identified the already traditional “Arkansas Traveler”²³ as the “description of a native sitting in the front of his hut scraping his fiddle, answering the interruptions of the stranger with witty sallies.” But two decades later the same piece performed by Joseph Samuels was cataloged by Okeh as an Irish instrumental. Between 1901—1923 there existed no established category for recorded native folk music.²⁴ Obviously, the music industry had no special designation for folk or rustic music and was satisfied simply to include the music of the Appalachians and southern highlands alongside the artists the industry was trying to promote. Legitimacy and folk purity was an afterthought, if a thought at all, when rural artists were recorded in this early period of the recording industry.

Eck Robertson

First, there has been some debate concerning the first recorded hillbilly artist. If scholars and folklorists followed a chronological timeline, then that would place Texas fiddler Eck Robertson at the beginning. The natural starting point is the day when Eck Robertson and his friend Henry Gilliland appeared at the Victor studio in New York and asked for an audition. It is one of the classic stories of country music history: both men traveling from a Confederate reunion in Virginia, appearing in New York in a cowboy outfit (Eck) and confederate uniform (Henry),

²³ Joseph Samuels, *Arkansas Traveler*, Okeh 45042, 1926, 78rpm.

²⁴ Green, 207.

and playing for astonished executives. Gilliland happened to have a contact at Victor—a lawyer named Martin W. Littleton who did occasional work for the company. He invited the two fiddlers to stay with him after they got to New York (about June 28, 1922), gave them a tour of the city, and introduced them to the people up at the Victor studio. At this point, the assumption has always been that Gilliland and Robertson returned on Friday, June 30, to record two duets (“Arkansas Traveler”²⁵ and “Turkey in the Straw”²⁶), and that Robertson returned the following day to record two more records by himself. The implication has been that the Victor folk were dubious about this strange music and were cautiously testing the waters. They recorded not just two, but four, duets with Gilliland that first day; and the following day, they recorded from Robertson not just the four released sides, but an additional two sides that remained in the vaults. In other words, this first session yielded ten sides, not the six previously thought.²⁷

The events that were to take place next are still debated to this day. Why would Victor take a chance on these southerners and their “wild” fiddle music? We do not know what went on in the minds of the Victor directors—they may very well have been charmed by the music that they heard (or by the romantic symbols of the Old South and Old West being displayed before them)—but they did permit the tests, and several selections were subsequently released.

²⁵ A.C. (Eck) Robertson and Henry Gilliland, *Arkansas Traveler*, Victor 18956, 1922, 78rpm.

²⁶ A.C. (Eck) Robertson and Henry Gilliland, *Turkey in the Straw*, Victor 19149, 1922, 78rpm.

²⁷ Charles Wolfe, *The Devil's Box: Masters of Southern Fiddling* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press, 1997), 16.

Robertson recorded a few tunes with Gilliland, but his solo version of “Sallie Gooden” is one of the most justly famous renditions in country music; after sixty plus years of history, Robertson’s virtuosity still dramatically commanded the attention of the listener.²⁸

The fact that Victor records had no idea what to do with this music is noticeable in their initial handling of these early recordings. Although Victor released a publicity blurb describing the records and although sales were reasonably good, the company did not immediately follow through in its exploitation of the untapped folk reservoir. In fact, Robertson himself was not recorded again until 1930 when Ralph Peer (by then a Victor talent scout) arranged another session for the Texas fiddler and his family. On March 29, 1923, about a year after his unsolicited New York recording session, Robertson performed on WBAP, in New York, the two numbers he had earlier recorded, “Sallie Gooden ²⁹” and “Arkansas Traveler.” These radio performances may have been the first by a folk musician who had earlier recorded for commercial records. In doing these numbers, in fact, Robertson—termed a “Victor artist” by the *Fort Worth Star Telegram*—may have been the first country performer to plug his recordings on a radio broadcast. This important Texas folk musician thus played significant roles in two important commercial media whose dual exploitation of folk talent coincidentally converged in the early twenties to produce the brand of music which we now call country music.³⁰

²⁸ Malone, 34.

²⁹ A.C. (Eck) Robertson, *Sallie Gooden*, Victor 18956, 1922, 78rpm.

³⁰ Malone, 35-36.

Eck Robertson would be pushed aside due to a lack of ideas in promotion and disinterest in early country music or hillbilly recordings. Robertson would not record again for several years. According to Charles Wolfe, all in all it was a promising start, and with a little luck, Robertson should have had a long career that other pioneers like Fiddlin' John Carson and Henry Whitter had. But for some reason he didn't. As the country recording industry blossomed in the mid-1920s, it somehow by-passed Robertson and many other Texas fiddlers.³¹

Henry Whitter

Henry Whitter would be the next hillbilly artist to record for a commercial recording company and like Robertson would not be recognized until after the success of Carson. Almost a year after Robertson's first trip to New York, a similar incident occurred: Whitter, a textile worker, singer, and multi-instrumentalist from Fries, Virginia, traveled uninvited to New York in March 1923 and made some test recordings for the General Phonograph Corporation. These recordings were shelved away and remained unevaluated until Fiddlin' John Carson's successful recording in June of 1923. Whitter was invited back to New York in December of 1923, when he recorded nine numbers including "Lonesome Road Blues"³² and a famous song for which he claimed partial authorship: "The Wreck on the Southern Old 97".³³ Whitter was a good

³¹ Wolfe, 17.

³² Henry Whitter, *Lonesome Road Blues*, Okeh 40015, 1923, 78rpm.

³³ Henry Whitter, *Wreck On the Southern Old 97*, Okeh 40015, 1923, 78rpm.

harmonica player (he was one of the first country musicians to use a harmonica rack around his head), a passable guitarist, but a mediocre singer at best. Probably Whitter's greatest claim to fame, apart from his association with "Wreck of the Old 97", was his recordings with the blind fiddler and singer, George Banman Grayson. Several of Grayson and Whitter's songs, such as "Lee Highway Blues"³⁴, "Handsome Molly"³⁵, "Little Maggie"³⁶, and "Little Omie Wise"³⁷, were destined to become standards in country music. By the time Whitter's solo records were released in January 1924, Ralph Peer's field recording trips into the South were beginning to reap a rich harvest of old-time performers and tunes.³⁸

Whitter's recordings would reach and inspire Ernest "Pops" Stoneman to write Ralph Peer. The summer of 1924 found Ernest Stoneman doing carpenter work in Bluefield, West Virginia. For some now forgotten reason, Ernest passed Warwick Furniture Company and heard a familiar sound. In those days, phonographs were marketed by furniture dealers, and local retailers often played recordings to attract attention. Stoneman got a surprise a few minutes later when he found that the singer was none other than Henry Whitter, a man he had

³⁴ G.B. Grayson & Henry Whitter, *Going Down the Lee Highway*, Victor 23565, 1929, 78rpm.

³⁵ G.B. Grayson & Henry Whitter, *Handsome Molly*, Gennett 6304, 1927, 78rpm.

³⁶ G.B. Grayson & Henry Whitter, *Little Maggie with a Dram Glass in her Hand*, Victor 40135, 1928, 78rpm.

³⁷ G.B. Grayson & Henry Whitter, *Little Omie Wise*, Victor 21625, 1927, 78rpm.

³⁸ Malone, 36.

known from his cotton-mill days at Fries.³⁹ The fact that Whitter was not an amazing musician was not lost on Stoneman. This characteristic led the generally modest Ernest Stoneman to declare to Hattie, his wife, when he went home for the Fourth of July, “I know that I can out-sing Henry Whitter any time—if I couldn’t, I’d quit.” Hattie replied, “Why don’t you go and make one [record]?”⁴⁰

Archie Green explains the complexities of these early recordings—the story begins, then, in Okeh’s New York office, but this is like tagging a link in a continuous chain. More properly it has at least five separate places of beginning: an Atlanta’s fiddlers’ convention; a Fries, Virginia, textile mill; a Gap Creek, North Carolina, mountain farm; a Galax, Virginia, barber shop; and curiously, a Times Square motion picture theater. In the period June, 1923—January, 1925, Ralph Peer was the director who brought a company of actors together from the various locales and who integrated their skills in a drama. He welded isolates into a movement in the sense that the hillbilly record industry achieved an esthetic unity like other movements in art and letters. Alternative captions for Peer’s achievements—genre, idiom, tradition—have been used to separate hillbilly music from other forms. He and his colleagues thought of themselves only as businessmen selling a new product—native white folksong freshly recorded and packaged—to a buying audience from whom the music had originally come. It took eighteen months to season Peer’s creation and another two years, January, 1925—December, 1926, to give it a broadly accepted name. There was no single

³⁹ Ivan M. Tribe, *The Stonemans: An Appalachian Family and the Music That Shaped Their Live* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 37.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

day in this forty-two month continuum when a given person broke a champagne bottle and launched the vessel, Hillbilly Music.⁴¹ The genre that eventually became the hillbilly or old-time genre; remained nameless although popularity and public interest had begun to rise with the introduction of a north Georgia fiddler and master showman.

Fiddlin' John Carson

At the beginning of the 1920s, the recording industry was eager to bolster sales and Ralph Peer had been successful in the spring of 1920 with a young, vaudeville singer, Mamie Smith. The singer recorded for two Okeh recording scouts, Fred Hagar and his assistant, Ralph Peer. Miss Smith was neither a blues singer nor a southerner (she was from Ohio), but her recording of Perry Bradford's "Crazy Blues" set off a boom for blues music and launched the General Phonograph Corporation (owner of the Okeh label) into a ranking position as a record company. A market for black music was found to exist among blacks themselves. As yet, the record companies had not seen fit to concentrate on the rural or "country blues" performers, and when the recording executives learned that rural southern blacks, whether back home or in Chicago, desired to purchase recordings by members of their own race, such enterprising recording men as Ralph Peer resolved to venture into the South to find native singers in their own habitats. Through this kind of scouting activity the white hillbilly recording industry came into being.⁴²

⁴¹ Green, 207.

⁴² Malone, 35.

Radio would provide motivation in the recording industry to explore new means and avenues of recording and this new innovation would play a major role in the promotion and exposure of early hillbilly artists and their careers. In 1920-21 the record industry had scored heavily with the rapid climb of race record star Mamie Smith and her followers. The general post-War economy was already sluggish, when a new competitive menace arose to challenge the medium. Radio was still utilitarian message service during the War, but on November 2, 1920, Pittsburgh station KDKA broadcast the Harding-Cox election returns, and soon Westinghouse researcher Frank Conrad was reading newspapers and playing records over and over again in his primitive studio. New York station WEAF began selling time, and radio was on its way to big business. The record industry was directly challenged. Almost overnight, radio sneaked into the picture and the novelty of tuning in music and static from a distance, combined with the convenience of no cranks to wind and no records to buy or change, began sending sales of platters downward. Edison's invention was in trouble in 1923.⁴³

Fiddlin' John Carson was the first country artist to be recorded and explode with success. He was born in 1868 on a Fannin County, Georgia, Blue Ridge mountain farm and, at the age of ten, began to play his grandfather's instrument—a Stradivarius copy (fiddle) dated 1714, reputedly brought to the North Georgia hills from Ireland in 1780. Carson fiddled during his years as a young race horse jockey in Cobb County, and, when too large to ride, he competed at the annual Atlanta Interstate Fiddlers' Conventions. Here in the city

⁴³ Green, 208.

he was able to scrape out a living with his bow between intermittent jobs as a textile hand and building trades painter. He fiddled constantly at political rallies for friends Tom Watson and Eugene Talmadge, on trolley cars and at street corners presenting topical ballads to casual audiences, at the many Civic Auditorium fiddlers' conventions, and finally, on the then-infant radio.⁴⁴

Polk C. Brockman, an Atlanta wholesale man and Okeh's southern representative, had "discovered" Carson on a news reel during a visit to Times Square and it was Brockman who suggested to Ralph Peer, Okeh's New York man, that he record Carson. Green elaborates, "Brockman's business trips to headquarters were frequent; on one such trip in early in June, 1923, he found himself in the old Palace Theater on Times Square viewing a newsreel of a Virginia fiddlers' convention. Struck by a novel idea, he took out his memorandum pad and jotted down 'Fiddlin' John Carson—local talent—let's record.' His next step was to arrange an Atlanta recording expedition."⁴⁵

According to Gene Wiggins in *Fiddlin' Georgia Crazy* (1987), Brockman reasoned that since Atlanta blacks had begun buying phonograph record players in great numbers as soon as records by blues and jazz artists were released, presumably white farmers and townfolk would likewise be more likely to buy phonograph record players if their preferred kind of music played and sung by one of their own was available on phonograph records.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Gene Wiggins, *Fiddlin' Georgia Crazy: Fiddlin' John Carson, his real world, and the World of his Songs* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1987), 75.

John Carson had already been performing several weekly programs on WSB, the local Atlanta radio station. According to Green, on March 16, 1922, the *Atlanta Journal* had established station WSB with a 100-watt transmitter as the first commercial broadcasting unit in the South, and on June 13 it increased its power to 500 watts. Three months later, on September 9, Fiddlin' John Carson made his radio debut as part of a novelty program.⁴⁷ WSB's manager, Lamdin Kay, put Carson on the air in 1922 for the same reason that Brockman put him on wax in 1923, his appeal to hitherto untapped market; yet there was no direct tie-in between WSB's pioneer country music broadcasts and Okeh's recordings of the same music. Opinions vary on the exact date that Carson debuted on WSB, according to Wiggins, the date was much closer to the beginnings of the station, "In 1939, when John was about to play on his birthday, March 23, Ernest Rogers wrote that he had first played on that day in 1922:

Seventeen years ago tomorrow a slender man with an engaging smile and manner came to WSB's studio on the fifth floor of the Atlanta Journal Building. Under his arm was a fiddle case which showed it had been used...and frequently. With that same friendly smile that characterizes him now, the fiddler removed his hat and inquired if it would be alright for him to play and sing a song or two over WSB.

Well, it just so happened that it would be all right and so Fiddlin' John Carson, "The First of the Hill Billies," went on the air. As near as we can trace it down, the first tune John played and sang was a threnodic backwoods song called "Little Log Cabin in the Lane."⁴⁸ He had a repertoire that apparently was limitless. He played and sang until, shall we say, exhaustion set in. But not before he had scored a signal triumph and the phones were jumping up and down with requests from listeners who liked this return to the old-time

⁴⁷ Green, 208.

⁴⁸ Fiddlin' John Carson, *Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane*, Okeh 4890, 1923, 78rpm.

mountain music that John Carson had been playing and singing for years.⁴⁹

The reason that the September broadcast was memorable was due to press coverage that followed and preceded the airing. In the month of September 1922, John was given considerable *Journal* publicity. The *Journal* showed him with T. M. "Bully" Brewer, guitarist; Earl Johnson, fiddler; and L.E. Akin, banjoist. The headline "Georgia Fiddlers Invade Radio World" let the public know that what we, the public, call country music had come to the radio.⁵⁰

Carson was a seasoned, successful musician and a favorite at fiddler's contests when he cut a record for Okeh on June 14, 1923. Much of lore surrounding this record has suggested that Peer was skeptical, at best, about a fiddler who sang and played at the same time. The oft-repeated account is that Peer labeled him "pluperfect awful." Peer was probably less than impressed by the live performances of "Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" and "The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow"⁵¹, but there is much to suggest that the technical results were what mainly bothered him. The recording engineers never recorded a person who fiddled and sang into the same recording horn. Peer did not predict much success for John's record, but Polk Brockman insisted on a pressing of five hundred copies for his own distribution.⁵² Again, this premise was unmistakably made clear when Carson sold out of the first five

⁴⁹ Wiggins, 75.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 71.

⁵¹ Fiddlin' John Carson, *The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow*, Okeh 4890, 1923, 78rpm.

⁵²Wiggins,75.

hundred copies of his first recording at a fiddler's convention at Cable Hall auditorium, Atlanta in 1923. Carson had the insight to play the record from stage between rounds during the competition and it proved successful. Carson sold the entire first pressing, then sold one thousand more copies eventually sales rose to 500,000 copies much to Peer's surprise and elation.⁵³

The notion that Peer was skeptical of this “raw sounding” music from the onset should be examined in order to understand the time frame and basic attitudes towards rural or folk music at this time. When Peer listened to the two songs that Carson chose to record—“The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” and “The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow”—he responded with disbelief. He thought the singing was awful and insisted that only Carson's fiddle tunes be re-recorded. Brockman, however, understood the Georgia entertainment market and realized that the small farmers and mill workers enjoyed Carson's vocalizing as much as his instrumental virtuosity. Unable to conceive of a regional or national market for such items, Peer issued the record un-catalogued, unadvertised, unlabeled, and for circulation solely in Atlanta. By late July, when the first shipment of five hundred records had been sold and after Brockman had ordered another shipment, Peer acknowledged his early mistake and gave the recording the label number 4890, a move that placed the songs in Okeh's popular catalogue and gave them national publicity. In November, as sales continued to mount, Carson was asked to come to New York, where he recorded twelve more songs and signed an exclusive Okeh contract. Needless to

⁵³ Wayne W. Daniel, *Pickin' on Peachtree: a History of Country Music in Atlanta, Georgia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 69.

say, while Ralph Peer's esthetic appreciation of country music may not have been improved by the incident, Fiddlin' John nonetheless made him a believer in the commercial value of the medium.⁵⁴

Fiddlin' John Carson provided a rural or folk template for Peer and other recording industry moguls to use in monopolizing and profiting from this new-found genre. With the recording of Fiddlin' John, the first southern white folk musician to have his songs recorded and marketed on a commercial basis, the hillbilly music industry began its real existence. Peer now remembered the recorded but unreleased tunes of Henry Whitter and after Brockman gave these a favorable review; Whitter was invited back to New York for further recordings. The popularity shown by Carson's, Robertson's, and Whitter's records encouraged other record companies to enter the virgin hillbilly territory in order to bolster their lagging sales capacities. In the years leading up to the Great Depression such companies as Brunswick, Gennett, Paramount, Victor (hesitantly), and Columbia began emulating the successful tactics used earlier by Ralph Peer and Okeh. Essentially, such men as Frank Walker and Dan Hornsby (both with Columbia), James O'Keefe (Brunswick), Eli Oberstein (Victor), Arthur Satherley (American Record Company), and, of course, Ralph Peer were businessmen who had little knowledge of music. They were, on the other hand, unwitting folklorists who collected (and therefore preserved) an immense and

⁵⁴ Malone, 37-8.

valuable body of musical, social, and cultural materials dealing with the rural South.⁵⁵

Carson went to New York to record additional songs for Okeh records in November of 1922. According to the *Journal* article written shortly after the trip, John recorded fourteen sides. There is record of only twelve. At least three possible reasons for the discrepancy can be suggested. There may have been lost and unnoted masters; there may have been the *Journal's* usual exaggeration about John (smaller degree than usual); or the earlier Atlanta recordings may have been included. His recording career would last another eleven years during which he recorded some 150 sides for Okeh and about two dozen for RCA Victor. By 1930 Carson's career began to wane. His appearances on the radio became less frequent, and his last recording session took place in February 1934.⁵⁶

The idea of early hillbilly recording artists seeking-out record companies exemplifies the original pioneering spirit of their forefathers. Eck Robertson and Henry Whitter had no idea what the "recording men" would do with their recordings but both men knew that they wanted to record and be recorded. What drew these two bold men from the southern part of our nation to New York to record old, traditional songs from the past? Some scholars speculate the lure resulted from these musicians' infatuation with technological advancement that included phonographs, automobiles, motion pictures, and the newly implemented radio broadcasting equipment. Whitter and Robertson were just brave and smart

⁵⁵ Malone, 38.

⁵⁶ Daniel 93-4.

enough to understand what and how these new technologies could possibly spread their music and possibly make them famous. These men were simply willing to embrace the future.

The ground-breaking moment in the birth of hillbilly music was when Ralph Peer decided to go into the South and mine for authentic folk musicians. Fiddlin' John Carson was the successful indicator for potential success found in the South; a South that included peaks and valleys of the Appalachian Mountains. The mountains held, within their hills and hollows, a wealth of traditional songs, ballads, and fiddle tunes that dated back a few hundred years. Peer and Brockman sought these ancient tunes and authentic musicians like Carson. Their inventive approach for seeking new musicians and their music embodied a new, innovative model in finding folk musicians to record. Bringing the recording process to the musicians enabled more musicians to record as well. Going into the field in order to record regional musicians was beneficial for all parties involved. These early field recordings quickly established a prototype for Peer and future producers to follow.

CHAPTER 3

THE HILLBILLIE S AND EARLY STRING BANDS, 1924-1929

The string band was an evolutionary extension of the social gatherings and get-togethers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to Malone, string bands were direct descendants of (and in many cases were the same as) the folk entertainers who played for house parties, barn dances, church socials, tent shows, and political rallies in the decades before 1920. String bands often incorporated the guitar and mandolin alongside the fiddle and banjo. The incorporation of these instruments into a band format was definitely influenced by an “opening-up” of the mountains and rural areas via the railroad. Just like the banjo finding its way into the mountains, the mandolin and guitar were brought in from wars, traveling workers, immigrants, and ultimately mail-order catalogs. The railroad had a major impact on the proliferation and adaptation of the string band.

Although the term string band did not appear on a record label until about 1925, string musicians had grouped themselves into bands since the nineteenth century. As often the case, the term evolved long after the music had been formed. The identity of the first recorded string band should be noted as a bit mysterious, but if such a band can be considered as consisting of as few as two members, then the early fiddle and banjo duos would hold the distinction.⁵⁷ The string band would be seminal vehicle in the stellar rise of hillbilly music and recordings.

⁵⁷ Malone, 50.

The Skillet Lickers, 1924-1931

The hillbilly string band grew out of traditional dance music, which was played Saturday nights in many communities in the rural South. One of the finest and most popular of the hillbilly string bands to record during the twenties and thirties was a group of north Georgians best known as the Gid Tanner and his Skillet Lickers. The recording career of the Skillet Lickers began in March, 1924, less than a year after the historic first recordings of Henry Whitter and Fiddlin' John Carson, and continued through the end of the thirties with unabated popularity. The Skillet Lickers were important not only because of their rich traditional repertoire but also because of their many attempts at recording popular music and jazz.⁵⁸ Although the main members of the Skillet Lickers would consist of Gideon Tanner, Riley Puckett, and Clayton McMichen, the personnel would change throughout the years.

James Gideon Tanner was born in Thomas Bridge near Monroe, Georgia, on June 6, 1884 or 1885. When he grew up he moved to Lawrenceville, where he owned a chicken farm. Later he moved to Atlanta and finally settled in Dacula, Georgia. He learned to play the fiddle at age fourteen when an uncle died and willed him an instrument. His fiddling can be heard on all but a few of his recordings. He won many fiddling contests in Georgia, and in the twenties was a frequent competitor of Fiddlin' John Carson.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Norman Cohen, "The Skillet Lickers: a Study of a Hillbilly String Band and Its Repertoire," *Journal of American Folklore* 78, No. 309 (1965): 229.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Gid was the most outrageous clown of all the fiddlers. Looking and sounding funny was his specialty. A big, roan-haired, ruddy-faced oaf, he had a deep bass and a high falsetto. He could throw his head back so far that he looked decapitated. He could turn it around almost completely, like an owl. Many people have seen the old 78s bearing the credits "Gid Tanner and his Skillet Lickers with Riley Puckett and Clayton McMichen" and have assumed from the priority given to Gid's name that he was head musician or at least carried a large part of the musical load. Neither was the case. His name was put first because he had already made himself well known as a comic musician several years before any country recordings were made.⁶⁰

The competition between Tanner and Carson was often played-up in the local Atlanta press. Tanner was again present when the fiddlers of Georgia convened at the Atlanta City Auditorium in 1915. A reporter at that year's convention called him "Gwinnett County's Laughing Rufus," and when Tanner appeared on stage he used several different voices to advantage in two or three songs he made up himself. It is said that he got frequent requests for encores that displayed his fiddling and was often asked to perform imitations of people. Reporters at the 1915 convention began to play up a supposed rivalry between Carson and Tanner. It is difficult to determine from the newspaper accounts exactly how much of the alleged rivalry was real and how much was created on paper for the purpose of stirring up interest in the convention and attracting large crowds for the evening performances. Master showmen that they were, Carson

⁶⁰ Wiggins, 50.

and Tanner probably did their part to enhance the spirit of conflict, and although they no doubt were competitive by nature, the rivalry probably was not as intense as they, the reporters, and the convention promoters would have had their fans believe.⁶¹

George Riley Puckett was born near Alpharetta, Georgia, twenty-five miles northwest of Atlanta, around 1890. At the age of three months he was blinded when a lead acetate solution was accidentally used to treat a minor eye ailment. In 1901 he entered the Georgia Academy for the Blind in Macon. During his teens he lived in Atlanta, and there, at the age of twelve, began to play the five-string banjo. Later he learned to play the guitar, which he used on all his recordings after 1925. He made his radio debut over station WSB on September 29, 1922.⁶²

Puckett was not recognized usually in accounts of Atlanta fiddlers' conventions but more than likely was in attendance. Perhaps because he was not a fiddler, Puckett is not often mentioned in newspaper accounts of Atlanta fiddlers' conventions. His name in connection with these events first appears in print in 1916 when we read in the *Journal* the brief statement that "the blind banjoist" was "ready for the big doings" at the fourth annual Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Convention. Puckett's last documented appearance at the Atlanta fiddlers' convention was the one held in March 1934 when he won first prize in the banjo contest.⁶³

⁶¹ Daniel, 97.

⁶² Cohen, 230.

⁶³ Daniel, 102.

Clayton McMichen was born on January 26, 1900, in Allatoona, Georgia. His Scots-Irish ancestors came to the United States around 1800 and became farmers. At age eleven McMichen learned to play the fiddle from his uncles and from his father, who was a trained musician. His father played the fiddle at square dances in the neighborhood and also played Viennese waltzes at the uptown hotel “crinoline” dances. From his father McMichen learned his first fiddle pieces, including “Pretty Little Widow,” “Billy in the Low Ground,” “Run Nigger Run,” “Nancy Rollin’,” “Arkansas Traveller,” and “Durang’s Hornpipe.” There is some indication that McMichen’s broadcasting career began even before Station WSB started broadcasting. In the very early twenties the Georgia Railroad had a small radio station that broadcast privately to passengers on the train for their enjoyment, and McMichen has said that his band began its career then. He made his first appearance on WSB on September 18, 1922; just nine days after Fiddlin’ John Carson became the first rural musician to broadcast on the newly opened station.⁶⁴

Frank Walker, a talent scout for Columbia Phonograph Company, would ultimately be the person responsible for recording the first string band. He had asked Tanner in 1924 to come to New York to make some recordings and to bring along one other person with him; he brought Riley Puckett. Tanner and Puckett made their first recordings on March 7, 1924, and were the first Southern rural artists to record for Columbia.⁶⁵ At these sessions, held on March 7th and

⁶⁴ Cohen, 230.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

8th, Puckett recorded six solo numbers with only his guitar as accompaniment. These songs, which became the first released recordings by Puckett, were “Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane,”⁶⁶ “Strawberries,”⁶⁷ and “Rock All Our Babies to Sleep.”⁶⁸ The latter song, which became one of the top-five hillbilly songs that year, featured Puckett’s yodeling and established him as probably the first recorded hillbilly artist to employ that vocal device. This was three years before Jimmie Rodgers became famous as America’s “blue yodeler.”⁶⁹ Puckett’s importance in the Skillet Lickers was never clearly evident until later in the careers of the Skillet Lickers.

Gid Tanner and Riley Puckett would return to New York on a second trip to record for Columbia. In September of 1924, Puckett took along his banjo, and on five of the resulting releases (“Sourwood Mountain,”⁷⁰ “Cripple Creek,”⁷¹ “Georgia Railroad,”⁷² “Oh! Susanna,”⁷³ and “Cumberland Gap”⁷⁴) we hear examples of his rarely recorded banjo work. Puckett’s records met with tremendous success, and he soon became, after Fiddlin’ John Carson, the most frequently recorded southern singer. By the end of 1925 orders for pressings of

⁶⁶ Riley Puckett, *Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane*, Columbia 107-D, 1924, 78rpm.

⁶⁷ Riley Puckett, *Strawberries*, Columbia 220-D, 1924, 78rpm.

⁶⁸ Riley Puckett, *Rock All Our Babies to Sleep*, Columbia 107-D, 1924, 78rpm.

⁶⁹ Daniel, 103.

⁷⁰ Gid Tanner & George Riley Puckett, *Sourwood Mountain*, Columbia 245-D, 1924, 78rpm.

⁷¹ Gid Tanner & George Riley Puckett, *Cripple Creek*, Columbia rejected, 1924, 78rpm.

⁷² Gid Tanner & George Riley Puckett, *Georgia Railroad*, Columbia 15019-D, 1924, 78rpm.

⁷³ Riley Puckett, *O! Susana*, Columbia 15014-D, 1924, 78rpm.

⁷⁴ Gid Tanner & George Riley Puckett, *Cumberland Gap*, Columbia 245-D, 1924, 78rpm.

Puckett's records were exceeded in number among Columbia's artists only by those of pop singer Vernon Dalhart.⁷⁵

The Skillet Lickers most notable recordings for Columbia began in 1926. Tanner and Puckett were joined, in turn, by two other popular WSB performers and Georgians, fiddler Clayton McMichen and five-string banjoist Fate Norris. McMichen and Norris had been members of a group called the Home Town Boys, but McMichen suggested that the new organization be called the Skillet Lickers—after an earlier group that had played at Atlanta conventions, the Lick the Skillet Band. In their Columbia recording period from 1926 to 1931, the Skillet Lickers recorded, in a wild, raucous, but highly infectious style, everything from traditional ballads, breakdowns, and rural “dramas” (humorous skits) to the latest popular hits from Tin Pan Alley.⁷⁶ Humor, once again, a vital aspect of early traditional music was used to increase the genre's popularity and relate to the general public.

The Skillet Lickers success spanned for several more years on into the early thirties. From their first recording session in 1924 until 1931, Tanner and Puckett recorded exclusively for Columbia Phonograph Company. All but the first ten of their releases appeared on the Columbia 15000-D series, Columbia's line of hillbilly music (“familiar tunes, old and new,” as their catalogs called them) which began in 1925 and ceased in the winter of 1932. The Skillet Lickers, best known of the bands organized by Tanner, Puckett, and McMichen, recorded for Columbia from 1926 to 1931, when the effects of the depression sharply curtailed

⁷⁵ Daniel, 103.

⁷⁶ Malone, 52.

the activities of the recording industry. The recording sessions (two each year except in 1931, when there was only one) were all held in Atlanta. Personnel were Gid Tanner and Clayton McMichen on fiddle, Riley Puckett on guitar, and Fate Norris on banjo. Eighty-eight sides were recorded at those sessions, of which eighty-two were issued on the Columbia 15000-D series. The records from the first session, in April 1926, were labeled “Gid Tanner and his Skillet Lickers, with Riley Puckett.” McMichen objected to this—and with some justice, for the original Lick the Skillet Band had been his—and all the succeeding records were by “Gid Tanner and his Skillet Lickers, with Riley Puckett and Clayton McMichen.”⁷⁷

The Term “Hillbilly”

By the time the Gid Tanner and Riley Puckett had recorded their first sides for Columbia, there had been no proper nomenclature designated for the type of music these southern musicians were playing and eventually recording. The talent scouts used a variety of methods to find folk talent (including newspaper advertisements), but they all relied on local agents to supply them with names. The scouts varied in the kind of control which they tried to exercise over the talent which came before them. Ralph Peer, for example, encouraged the use of traditional or old-time material, while others left the choice of songs to the performers. Some recording sessions were conducted with meticulous care;

⁷⁷ Cohen, 232.

others done haphazardly, almost as if the ignorant rubes who presumably bought the records would not know the difference anyway. ⁷⁸

As the number of rural bands and musicians proliferated in the mid-twenties, observers, friendly and otherwise, were hard-pressed to find a name that correctly described the kind of music they performed. Record company release sheets and catalogues camouflaged the songs under a variety of headings, most of them evoking a romanticized conception of southern rural music. ⁷⁹ It would take a band from Galax, Virginia recording in New York to give a name to the genre that would become what is now known as country music.

The Hill Billies

The events surrounding the recording of the band and the naming of the genre were somewhat circumstantial and could be argued that naming was a throw-away jibe or a stereotypical afterthought. Arguably, one of the most the most important dates in the history of country music occurred on January 15, 1925. At their first recording session for Okeh records (their second recording session in New York), executive Ralph Peer asked musicians Al Hopkins, Tony Alderman, John Rector, and Joe Hopkins what the name of their band was. Al Hopkins' immortal words to Ralph Peer were... "Call us anything you want. We're

⁷⁸ Malone, 39.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

nothing but a bunch of hillbillies from North Carolina and Virginia anyway!” Peer instructed the New York Okeh studios secretary to write Hill Billies in the ledger.⁸⁰

According to Archie Green, The Hill Billies humble origins began in a barbershop in Galax—on one Monday morning in the late spring of 1924, Joe found himself in a Galax barbershop where one young journeyman, Alonzo Elvis “Tony” Alderman, kept a fiddle on the wall. The guitarist and fiddler became friends at once, formed a duet on the spot, and began to make music. Tony cut no hair for a week. On Saturday Al came for a shave—and for his brother—and joined in the harmony. Word of the new trio reached John Rector, a Fries general store keeper and five-string banjo player of local renown. In fact John had just recently returned from New York City where he, Henry Whitter, and James Sutphin had made three string-band records for Okeh as The Virginia Breakdowners. Rector felt that the Alderman-Hopkins’ talent and his banjo could outshine the Breakdowners. Since he was looking for an opportunity to make the exciting New York trip to stock up on fall merchandise, he asked Al, Tony, and Joe if they wanted to record.⁸¹

The group’s first recording session in New York was awkward and a bit lackluster. It took three days in Al’s 1921 model T Ford to reach the city where Rector had arranged a session with Clifford Cairns, Victor A& R man. In the studio Joe, John, and Tony used guitar, banjo, and fiddle while Al took vocal leads as well as acting as the group’s leader. Also he turned the piano into a

⁸⁰ Paul Ahrens, “Fiddlin’ Charlie Bowman: A 1920s East Tennessee Champion”. *Bluegrass Unlimited*. December 2001, 33

⁸¹ Green, 212

country music instrument—a precedent infrequently followed by subsequent string-bands. Good techniques for recording mountain string-bands were not yet perfected in 1924. The music was still relatively unknown in the industry; there were problems with balance and placement.⁸² Unbeaten, the group would return to work with Mr. Peer and make history.

In January, 1925, they planned a trip to Okeh studio—this time in Rector’s new Dodge. The weather was cold, hence they improvised a hot brick heater for the journey. To break the long trip from Galax north, they descended on the Hopkins family residence in Washington, D.C. for shelter. Mr. Hopkins asked his sons and their mountain companions, “What do you hillbillies think you’ll do up there?” His paternal jibe was to prove effective. In the city, having learned from their previous failure with Victor, the band members were in good form. Ralph Peer supervised the session and recorded six pieces. At the end of the last number Peer asked for the group’s name and the rest was history. The recording-christening date was January 15, 1925; labels, as well as dealer release sheets were soon printed and by February the first disc with the new band name was on the market.⁸³

The band was not entirely sure of their new name and was somewhat worried about how people in the South would decipher the word. Tony seemed particularly sensitive: “Hillbilly was not only a funny word; it was a fighting word.” Although he had grown up in an isolated log cabin at River Hill, ten miles southwest of Galax, he was in no sense back-woodsy or backwards. His father,

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Green, 213.

Walter, was a self-educated surveyor and civil engineer, a justice of the peace, and a man of literary and musical skill. Tony felt that his family might be critical of the undignified name selected up North and half wished that he could reach Peer to alter the band's name.⁸⁴

The band did receive positive reinforcement from a hometown friend, Pop Stoneman. Stoneman had already journeyed north on September 1, 1924, to record for Okeh "The Ship That Never Returned/The Titanic"⁸⁵. He, too, like Rector, had felt that he could improve on Whitter. Stoneman's first record was not yet released at the time of the Hill Billies' Okeh session. Naturally he was most curious about their luck with Peer. In response to his query, they reported success and the christening. Pop laughed until tears came to his eyes. "Well boys, you have come up with a good one. Nobody can beat it."⁸⁶

Ralph Peer may have been responsible in some regards for naming the Hill Billies but their contact with him was limited to the one session for Okeh in 1925. Later in 1925 he left Okeh for Victor but the band that he helped launch did not go along with him. Instead, it went over to the recently combined Vocalion-Brunswick companies to work with A & R man Jimmie O'Keefe. All their post-Okeh discs were released for dual sales purposes as The Hill Billies on Vocalion and as Al Hopkins and His Buckle Busters on Brunswick. For personal dates they used both names interchangeably. In 1929, the group hired a Washington lawyer to incorporate their group after seeing a marquee in New York with the name

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ernest V. Stoneman, *The Titanic*, Okeh 40288, 1925, 78rpm.

⁸⁶ Green, 213.

Ozark Hillbillies. But the gesture was of no avail. Other bands, singers, and units in show business appropriated their name. In time, they accepted the rivalry philosophically—especially when *hillbilly* became the generic term for southern country music.⁸⁷

A vitally important and pivotal fiddlers' convention was held in Mountain City, Tennessee on May 8, 1925. The circumstances surrounding this event would prove to be a major milestone in the development of country music. All the top fiddlers of the southern region congregated in this rural setting and competed. The fiddling competition, often overlooked as a benchmark in country music, would be considered legendary by today's standards. The crowd grew so large that organizers had to relocate the contest. The organizers decided on a local school as the best locale because of the seating and room inside the auditorium. The crowd proved to be so formidable that the auditorium floor came dangerously close to falling in from the weight of the spectators. This was the contest in which Al Hopkins met Charlie Bowman who later joined the seminal Hill Billies band. The contest also brought John Carson, Uncle Am Stuart, Charlie Bowman, Fiddlin' John Powers, and the members of the Hill Billies together for the first time.⁸⁸

Radio and recordings now made it possible for these entertainers to reach audiences beyond the scope of their local areas. One of the main reasons that the contest was so significant is that the contestants underscored, for the first time, the far-reaching effects of radio programming and the popularity of their

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Joe Wilson *The Hill Billies*. Liner notes written by author. County Records 525, 1973.

recordings. Not only did radio and recordings reach a captivated audience but now an audience was willing to spend hard earned money to see these musicians. According to Joe Wilson, “a third surprise of the day was in store: these musicians learned that people who knew them only from their recordings and broadcasts were willing to lay down good money to see them in person.”⁸⁹ The cross-pollination of fiddling talents was not the only important aspect of this event. The Hill Billies realized the potential for success in these gatherings gained a new, revolutionary member for their band, experienced the far-reaching power of radio, and they returned the following year.

It was in Mountain City that Charlie Bowman, a young fiddler from Gray Station, near Johnson City, Tennessee, decided to join the Hill Billies and become a professional musician. He was the first of many newcomers to augment the original group’s rank. Not only did he contribute his fine talent and humor at the time, but in later years he was to convey much of the band’s story to discographers and folklorists. Following Mountain City, a heavy schedule of personal appearances from South Carolina to New York commenced—at schools, vaudeville shows, fiddler’s competitions, political rallies, and even a White House Press Correspondents’ gathering before President Coolidge. Much of the road work was correlated with trips to New York for recording sessions. On their final trip early in 1929 the band made a film sound short for Vitaphone that was released as a trailer with Al Jolson’s *The Singing Fool*. It was certainly the

⁸⁹ Ibid.

first movie to couple with the sights and sounds of hillbilly music.⁹⁰ The film portrayed the band members doing incredibly silly things and playing frenetically upon their respective instruments. “Hillbilly” was a term that would encompass all kinds of backwoods inhabitants, but the film documented the musicians wearing costumes associated with mountain life. The group clearly responded to a public conception of the hillbilly as a comic or laughable character.⁹¹

String bands were the next step in the natural progression or evolution of hillbilly music and their influence on the radio and sound recordings was instrumental in the rise of popularity for the newly christened genre. There were numerous string bands during the twenties and I have only chosen what I feel are the pivotal musicians who enhanced the genre. Some of the other important string bands included Stoneman’s Dixie Mountaineers, Whitter’s Virginia Breakdowners, Carson’s Virginia Reelers, Charlie Poole and his North Carolina Ramblers, The Tenneva Ramblers that included Jimmie Rodgers, and numerous other string bands throughout the southeast.

The development of styles and public perception of these bands were somewhat exploitative and opportunistic. The radio and recording entrepreneurs definitely contributed to the shape and tone of the hillbilly bands by suggesting band names, style of costumes, and repertory. The businessmen sensed the public fascination with rustic types during the twenties and consequently urged such images upon the musicians. Often the images projected by the promoters

⁹⁰ Green, 214.

⁹¹ Bill C. Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993): 77.

coincided with desires and self-conceptions of the musicians; there were hillbillies who were pleased with the opportunity to perform and who had no pretensions of being anything other than hillbillies. But there were others who resisted the rube stereotype and who chafed at the limitations placed on their art. Above all, the hillbilly musicians were ambivalent about their status and would become increasingly so as the decades passed.⁹²

The Hill Billies and The Skillet Lickers were the first successful examples of string bands. By no means, do these bands embody all the resources and qualities that early string bands exemplified. The personnel of the string band varied from band to band, region to region, and the band's style and sound were often dependent on the players' skills, abilities, backgrounds, and wealth of musical knowledge. String bands of the 1920s and 1930s were a mere reflection of the rapidly changing social landscape.

The string band presented collective thoughts of an era. Much of these bands' repertoires were based squarely in the events of the day. For example, the escalating alteration of the farms due to mechanization as well as prohibition and morality surrounding alcohol were topical themes pursued by musicians of this era. Uniquely humorous, the string band used their music to promote their own opinions about the changes taking place across the nation. These hillbilly groups were intuitive enough to understand the changing times and clever enough sing and play about these topics in manner socially acceptable for the

⁹² Malone, *Country Music USA*, 51.

times. The hillbilly string bands were the forerunners to the folk singer, the protest singer, and the country crooner.

CHAPTER 4

UNCLE DAVE MACON AND THE GRAND OLE OPRY, 1918-1930

The decade of the 1920s was a truly significant time in the development and implementation of hillbilly or country music. Radio and phonograph recordings were major innovations responsible for bringing folk music out of the rural areas of the South and into urban centers and the hands of new listeners. Radio was the foremost medium responsible for exposing and promoting these new, rustic artists. With radio, the barn dance or hillbilly programs devoted time and energy to broadcasting rural values and old time traditions that had been intrinsically linked with southern ways of life.

One of the first barn dances to emerge in the twenties was the WSM Barn Dance that would later be named The Grand Ole Opry by George D. Hay. The Opry and many other radio broadcasts like the WLS “Barn Dance” in Chicago materialized during a time of tremendous demographic, social, and economic change in the South. Across the region millions of rural people—black and whites, men and women—were leaving the countryside to live and work in southern and northern cities. In 1890 a bit more than ten percent of the region’s population lived in urban areas; by 1930 this figure had swelled to nearly one third. Nashville, the home of the Opry, underwent tremendous growth in the 1920s as rural people poured into the city from the towns, hamlets, and farms of the Tennessee countryside. This “southern great migration” came to transform

the region, laying the foundations for today's modern, urban south.⁹³ Not only did this great migration affect these southern cities but also a great deal of northern cities swelled with these hillbilly radio programs and barn dances. Hillbilly and old-time programs could be heard in Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, and Columbus.

The Grand Ole Opry

The origin of the Opry is a well-known tale that has been retold and recounted in a number of different ways throughout the years. On November 28, 1925, young George Hay sits an old white-bearded man before one of the station's newfangled carbon mikes. He lets him play a few fiddle tunes. The switchboard lights up and telegrams pour in. The old man, Uncle Jimmy Thompson, plays an hour, and across the country listeners scramble for earphones to their old crystal radio sets. Hay gets an idea: why not have a regular weekly show of this sort of stuff? Soon he is besieged by pickers and fiddlers of every variety: "We soon had a good-natured riot on our hands," he recalled. The show was off and running.⁹⁴

The far-reaching effects of radio were not lost on the founders of the National Life and Accident Insurance Company, brothers Cornelius and Edward Craig. In 1925 work began on a radio station, to be located on the fifth floor in a building on Seventh Avenue in downtown Nashville, only a few blocks from the

⁹³Louis M. Kyriakoudes, "The Grand Ole Opry and the Urban South," *Southern Cultures* (Spring 2004): 69.

⁹⁴ Charles K. Wolfe, *a Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999), 4.

state capitol and on a hill commanding most of the town. The station was not seen so much as a corporate investment as simply an elaborate advertisement. The company quickly associated itself with the new station's call letters: WSM stands for the slogan "We Shield Millions," capitalizing on the shield used in the company's logo since its inception. The station went on the air on October 5, 1925. It began broadcasting with one thousand watts of power, making it one of the two strongest stations in the South, and stronger than 85 percent of all the other broadcasting stations in the country at the time.⁹⁵

By the time Hay assumed control of the station format, Dr. Humphrey Bate and his band, Uncle Dave Macon, and Sid Harkreader had performed on the WSM broadcast but not with any kind of format or regularity. In October 1925 all the basic elements for the Opry were in place: a powerful radio station located in an area rich in folk tradition; a backing company with impressive assets and a dedication to principles of commercial radio; and an eager and enthusiastic audience just learning and growing accustomed to the benefits of a new entertainment medium.⁹⁶ The station's far-reaching influence was felt throughout the southeast and the lower part of the United States. The radio waves that permeated the hills, valleys, and ridges brought the outside world into the mountain south.

The origins of the Opry show clearly how the program functioned as an urban institution that worked to reshape both the rural and urban South and redefining white southern life. Developing out of the close interaction between the

⁹⁵Ibid, 5.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 6.

culture of the rural South and imperatives of the twentieth-century business enterprise, the radio program was both a product of and an agent in the modernization of the rural South. In creating a rural vaudeville show for the radio, Hay constructed a radio stage upon which white southerners could project their nostalgia for elements of a fading rural culture as well as their anxieties about urban life without actually surrendering their desire for the products and ways of modernity. The Opry's inclusion of blackface and other elements borrowed from minstrelsy aided newly arrived white migrants in clarifying racial as well as social boundaries in the new world of the city.⁹⁷ With an ever-evolving social landscape, the Opry provided a reflective counterpoint to the modern, urbanization of the South and nation as a whole.

Radio was a revolutionary agent because it brought city and countryside together. By bridging these two vastly different worlds, the medium succeeded in altering the isolation and insular aspect of rural life. According to Randall Patnode, the periodical press of the 1920s attempted to promote the value of radio for all Americans in part by focusing on how it was adopted by farmers, the group that could potentially benefit most from the new technology. Isolated from the urban centers and cut off from such urban-based entertainment as theaters and music halls, farmers were depicted by the popular press as ideally positioned to profit from what radio did best, bridge large distances and provide abundance of information and amusement. In focusing on radio's potential to redeem rural America, press accounts exaggerated the shortcomings of farm life, casting the

⁹⁷ Kyriakouides, 69.

farmer as an anti-modern “other” and indirectly lending support to an increasingly urban and modern way of life.⁹⁸ With the onset of radio, rural isolation barriers were quickly dissolved and the great expanse between country and city was dramatically lessened.

Phonographs and radio were the most evident means of promotion for hillbilly artists in the 1920s. Many amateur performers found it possible to earn a living playing country music thanks to new technologies of radio, phonograph, auto, and the all-weather roads that increasingly spread throughout the countryside. Performers played on the air for little or no pay in order to gain a regional reputation and earned a living by playing at dances, fairs, and festivals within the range of the radio station and the auto. While groups could eke out a marginal existence in all parts of the country, those working in the Southeast prospered because the greater density of country music fans in the region made the radio-plus-touring pattern more lucrative. Ambitious performers were increasingly drawn to Southeast by the lure of larger more stable income.⁹⁹ Not only did the South provide income and an audience for these performers, the Opry combined the stage and radio into a combined, centralized entity.

⁹⁸ Randall Patnode, “What These People Need is Radio: New Technology, the Press, and Otherness in 1920s America,” *Technology and Culture* 44 (2004): 285.

⁹⁹ Richard A. Peterson and Paul Di Maggio, 500.

Hay's Vision of Hillbilly Authenticity.

George Hay had a notion of what folk music was and was ever ready to develop and cultivate his notion. At first Hay seemed to make no clear distinction between “old-time tunes” and “folk tunes”: the former he seemed to see as any older, nineteenth century, pre-jazz-age music, with its appeal not so much cultural geography as simple nostalgia. This philosophy was apparent when the early Saturday-night programs contained band music, barbershop quartets, bird imitators, even musical saws, acts that were “old-time” mainly by virtue of their nostalgic content. But gradually Hay began to focus his definition of what he meant when he said, “Keep it down to earth.” He began to use the term *folk* to describe some of his musicians.¹⁰⁰

Hay's vision of himself as a preserver of American folk culture did not fully emerge until after the Opry had become an established institution. Hay asserts that he perceived the value of traditional music as early as 1919 when he made his trip into the Arkansas Ozarks. Perhaps so, but his posture in the earliest days of the Opry was to maintain hillbilly music simply because it was popular; the idealistic underpinning came after the program had established itself. Whatever he personally thought about the music, Hay sensed that it was very popular with Southern audiences and sought ways to exploit this popularity. Others who had exploited the music had done so by creating hillbilly stereotypes. In California the group called the Beverly Hill Billies were discovered “rusticating” up in the mountains; in Washington, D.C., Al Hopkins and His Hill Billies dressed in

¹⁰⁰ Wolfe, 12-13.

overalls; in Atlanta a sophisticated jazz-tinged fiddler named Clayton McMichen was made lead fiddler in a band called the Skillet Lickers and participated in skits about moonshine and “*revenooers*.” Thus by the late 1920s, Hay had plenty of patterns to follow as he began image-building for his Opry musicians.¹⁰¹ The hillbilly stereotype had permeated print and written local color accounts of the south and southern Appalachians as early as the mid-nineteenth century.

To authenticate real “folk-i-ness”, Hay perpetuated hillbilly stereotypes and imagery. The hayseed image of the Opry and its performers was largely Hay’s creation. As the Barn Dance program of the mid-1920s grew into the Grand Ole Opry, Hay consciously developed hillbilly personas from his leading acts. Most of the early performers were country-born, but they all had experienced urban life. Uncle Dave Macon, Fiddlin Sid Harkreader, Deford Bailey, and Dr. Humphrey Bate, in particular, hailed from the countryside around Nashville. Macon had spent his formative adolescent years living in downtown Nashville where his parents operated a hotel catering to traveling vaudevillians. It was here that Joel Davidson, a prominent late-nineteenth-century vaudevillian, taught Macon the banjo. Macon was a seasoned veteran of the southern vaudeville circuit well before he joined the radio program. Sid Harkreader and Deford Bailey both migrated to Nashville from rural middle Tennessee as young men in search of work and were living in the city when the WSM radio began broadcasting string-band music in 1925. Humphrey Bate was called “Doctor” because of his Vanderbilt University M.D. degree. At first performers insisted upon arriving at the

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 14.

studio sporting their Sunday best. Only later did Hay encourage the acts to devise cornpone names such as the Fruit Jar Drinkers, Clodhoppers, and Possum Hunters, and then pose before the publicity photographer in overalls and wide-brimmed straw hats standing alongside hay bales and pig sties.¹⁰²

The old-time aspect was evidently present in these early performances but there were other influences in the development of the Opry. The early Opry acts owed much to the conventions of vaudeville, burlesque, and minstrelsy. The earliest broadcasts often featured popular vaudeville acts that happened to be passing through town, and white participants wanted to advertise their performances over the airways. Rather quickly, though, the program settled on a format that stressed old-time music. Yet, even then, veteran vaudevillians Uncle Dave Macon, Ed McConnell, and the blackface duos of Lasses and Honey and Jamup and Honey remained among the most popular performers on the program.¹⁰³ The presence of vaudevillian performers was definitely a key aspect in the early stages of the Opry and their influence had a major impact on the hillbilly comic elements of the Opry.

Uncle Dave Macon

One of the most famous hillbilly musicians to grace stage, radio, and phonograph was “Uncle” David Harrison Macon. Macon, the son of a former Confederate army officer, was born in 1870 near McMinnville, Tennessee, about sixty miles southeast of Nashville. As a teenager he lived for a few years in

¹⁰² Kyriakoudes, 71.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 75.

Nashville where his parents operated the old Broadway Hotel. The hotel catered to vaudeville and circus performers, and by his middle teens Uncle Dave had grown to love music and the performing traditions of the nineteenth century banjo. In 1885, when he was fifteen, he got his first banjo. In his own words, it was Joel Davidson, “a noted comedian and banjoist...that inspired Uncle Dave to make his wishes known to his dear aged mother and she gave him the money to purchase his first banjo.” But long before Macon had seen Joel Davidson in Sam McFlynn’s circus and had begun absorbing nineteenth century vaudeville traditions, he had been exposed to another powerful influence, rural black folk music. A 1926 account of Uncle Dave reports that “born on a farm in Warren County, Tennessee, he learned the tunes of the darkies.” Uncle Dave did not hesitate to acknowledge his debt to African-Americans for an inspiration and sources for much of his repertoire. Indeed, he seemed to take the interplay between white and black music for granted.¹⁰⁴ The influence of African-American music was definitely a key element in early hillbilly music and was made evident by Uncle Dave and the early artists of the genre.

Uncle Dave has become an iconic symbol of old-time music, the Opry, and the early hillbilly musicians. The early Opry performers acquired mythological status and grandiose personas not unlike other folk iconoclasts such as Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, and John Henry. Uncle Dave was no exception to the rule and was a colorful character in the truest sense. When he was nineteen Uncle Dave married and began farming in the small community of Kittrell, near

¹⁰⁴ Wolfe, 103.

Murfreesboro, Tennessee. He played and sang informally, for both himself and his friends, and casually developed a repertoire of songs from both oral and written sources. Before long, he formed the Macon Midway Mule and Wagon Transportation Company, hauling freight and produce with mule teams. Many old-timers in the area still recalled Macon singing as he drove his team along. The daughter of a grocer on the Murfreesboro public square recalled that when Uncle Dave delivered produce and goods to her father's store that he would make up impromptu songs about what he had—much in the vein of a street caller. In 1920 Uncle Dave became a victim of technological unemployment: a truck line started in competition with Macon Midway, and Uncle Dave simply chose not to compete. At age fifty, he began thinking of starting a new career in music.¹⁰⁵

Most accounts of Uncle Dave's first performances are in agreement but some do vary. According to Stacy Harris, wider recognition came to Uncle Dave after an incident in 1918, when he was forty-eight years old. A farmer asked Macon to perform at a party. Dave did not especially like the farmer and did not want to perform for him. So he said he would play for fifteen dollars, thinking, of course, that he would be turned down. To Macon's surprise, however, the farmer agreed, and Dave felt that he had to live up to his end of the bargain. That was fortunate, because one of the guests at the party was a talent scout.¹⁰⁶

Some accounts vary concerning the relationship between the first performance and this Loew's theater talent scout. Charles Wolfe recounts the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 104.

¹⁰⁶ Stacy Harris, *Comedians of Country Music* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 1978): 13.

events in a somewhat different light, it was at about the time when Uncle Dave gave up the freight hauling business that he visited relatives in Arkansas and was encouraged to begin making formal public appearances. The next year saw Uncle Dave's first public performance, a charity event in Morrison, Tennessee. Macon recalled: "The Methodist church there needed a new door. I gave a show, then passed the hat and collected the money, seventeen dollars." Two years later a talent scout for the Loew's vaudeville circuit heard him at a Shriner's benefit in Nashville and offered him several hundred dollars a week to do a stand in Birmingham. The engagement was wildly successful—a two-week stint was extended to five weeks, and the theater managers were cited by the fire department for overcrowding. Uncle Dave was now a professional musician. He next found himself booked in the Loew's theater chain around the country.¹⁰⁷ Regardless of the uncertainty surrounding his rise in popularity, Dave was successful enough to begin touring and establish himself as a vaudeville star long before recording and the Opry. As with many other early hillbilly artists, the vaudeville circuit provided stable income for these musicians and was regular enough to eke out an existence.

By the early twenties Uncle Dave found himself touring the country as a solo act and soon realized that he would need a backup man to complete the act. In 1923, Uncle Dave was playing in Charlie Melton's barbershop in Nashville when the young Sid Harkreader happened to walk in with his fiddle under his arm. The two began playing and Macon was impressed enough with

¹⁰⁷ Wolfe, 104.

Harkreader's ready wit, musicianship, and versatility. Sid could sing and second on guitar as well as play the fiddle. Macon engaged Sid for some bookings, and soon the pair was burning up the Loew's circuit in the South. They worked together throughout 1924, and by early 1925 Macon had added a third member to his team, a buck-dancer named "Dancing Bob" Bradford.¹⁰⁸ Another barbershop meeting that proved to be a pivotal moment in the development of hillbilly music and eventually country music in general.

Uncle Dave's popularity led to the Sterchi Brothers Furniture Company, regional distributor of Vocalion Records, convincing Uncle Dave to make records. Uncle Dave's recording career began in 1924, when he and fiddler Sid Harkreader recorded fourteen sides for Brunswick-Vocalion in New York. His first session included some of his most popular songs, such as "Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy,"¹⁰⁹ as well as the first song to carry "hillbilly" in its title: "Hillbillie Blues."¹¹⁰ In later sessions beginning in 1926, he was generally supported by those talented brothers from Tennessee, Sam and Kirk McGee, and by old-timer fiddler Mazy Todd. Their 1927 sessions resulted in some of the most exciting string band sounds heard on records.¹¹¹

According to Wolfe, Uncle Dave's records were so successful that he was repeatedly called back into the studio during the 1920s; he recorded in New York several times a year. Many of his songs were genuine folk songs similar to the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Uncle Dave Macon, *Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy*, Vocalion 14848, 1924, 78rpm.

¹¹⁰ Uncle Dave Macon, *Hill Billie Blues*, Vocalion 14904, 1924, 78rpm.

¹¹¹ Malone, *Country Music USA*, 74.

kind that Cecil Sharp collected, but others were old vaudeville songs, blues, old popular songs, and old hymns. On many of the records he introduced the songs with a story or a joke and often mentioned his friends and neighbors in Tennessee by name. Uncle Dave somehow wanted to make each record sound more personal, to get across with each song some of his own high spirits and good humor.¹¹² The aspect of humor intermingled with down-home sentiment were some of the main components of early hillbilly entertainers. Humor, above all, was a major attraction to the radio listeners, record producers, and fans alike.

The alternating sidemen, Sid Harkreader and Sam McGee, offered a fascinating and often engaging contrast in the principles of musicianship and performance. Sid and Sam were awfully distinctive as musical companions for Uncle Dave Macon. On the one hand, Sid Harkreader was a thin, angular, almost ascetic-looking man, thoroughly professional and rather intense about his music. He was an interpreter rather than a creator and at home with a fiddle as a guitar. He also fancied himself somewhat of a crooner. Sam McGee, on the other hand, was lively and impetuous, always ready for a joke, and one of the most creative guitarists in country music history. At times Uncle Dave felt uneasy with both men. Sid was sometimes a little too serious for him, and Sam's guitar and banjo virtuosity sometimes threatened to overshadow his own talents.¹¹³ McGee would prove the consummate showman for Uncle Dave, and one of the major reasons was McGee's sense of humor.

¹¹² Charles Wolfe, *Tennessee Strings: The Story of Country Music in Tennessee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977): 35.

¹¹³ Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 106.

The early days of WSM and the Opry have been remembered in a number of ways but generally the accepted chronology gives Uncle Dave and Sid Harkreader precedence as the first performers on WSM over Uncle Jimmy Thompson and Hay's memorable night. According to Wolfe the events unfolded in this manner: on November 6, 1925; Uncle Dave and Harkreader performed in a special, live show for an annual Policeman's Benefit at the Ryman Auditorium and "set hundreds to stomping their feet." The show was advertised as "An Evening with WSM" and urged listeners "to see these artists that you listen to every night." On November 28, George Hay lets Uncle Jimmy Thompson play, thus launching the Barn Dance. On December 26, Macon joins Uncle Jimmy for an hour or two of familiar tunes. The common story holds, then, that Uncle Dave appeared on WSM's Barn Dance program shortly after Thompson's debut. This is refuted by newspaper files from those months. Hay was not hired until the week of November 6, 1925. The November 6th WSM broadcast on which Harkreader and Macon first appeared was a hallmark because it was broadcast from the Ryman Auditorium the building that was later to become the shrine of the Grand Ole Opry. Thus, Uncle Dave likely had more to do with establishing the Barn Dance (Opry) than he is generally given credit for.¹¹⁴ Ironically, Macon was to perform less than the other performers on the Barn Dance in the months that followed.

Uncle Dave preferred performances to radio and generally thought that there was more money to be made in personal appearances. But if Uncle Dave

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 107.

was in on the Barn Dance during its first months, he was hardly a regular for the next three to four years. One obvious reason was the money: WSM was not paying at all at first, and even when pay began, Uncle Dave could spend his time much more profitably in other media. So Macon would spend much of summer and spring touring and appear on the radio mostly in the winter months when roads were bad. In 1928, for example, he appeared on the Opry only four times.¹¹⁵ This pattern of touring would become commonplace for many Opry performers in years to come. Touring and public appearances, in general, were the most profitable for these early hillbilly musicians.

The Great Depression of the late twenties and early 1930s was not kind to Uncle Dave Macon or the other early hillbilly performers. The depression brought an end to Macon's relationship with Brunswick-Vocalion. Both touring and recording were drying up. Uncle Dave did his last session in Knoxville in March 1930. It was a special occasion for him, for it marked the recording debut for his son Dorris. He was therefore considerably angered when Brunswick failed to release a single one of the sides. Sid Harkreader recalled that he thought some sort of technical flaw in the records prevented their release, but Uncle Dave would not hear of this and severed his long recording relationship with Brunswick. At once he set up a session with rival company Okeh and with Sam McGee did a memorable series for them in December 1930. This date, in Jackson, Mississippi, produced at least two masterpieces, "Tennessee Red Fox Chase"¹¹⁶ and the topical "Wreck of the Tennessee Gravy Train."¹¹⁷ But most of

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 108.

¹¹⁶ Uncle Dave Macon, *Tennessee Red Fox Chase*, Okeh 45507, 1930, 78rpm.

the session, like the last Brunswick one, was not issued. Recovered test pressings from the Okeh date show that the music was fine, as usual. Okeh's failure to issue was because no one had money to buy records at the time. Altogether in 1930, Macon recorded some eighteen sides but, sadly, saw only six released.¹¹⁸ The lack of a record-buying public would force Uncle Dave back to the medium that he had forgone a few years earlier; the radio and the Opry.

In 1930 Uncle Dave began to appear on the Grand Ole Opry regularly, his return to the radio was greatly appreciated by his fans. He appears in the radio logs with regular slots on almost every Saturday program, usually accompanied by his son Dorris. His audience was waiting for him when he took his place among the WSM regulars, and he quickly became the most popular attraction on the show. Before the WSM Artists Bureau had mastered the art of setting up successful tours, popularity in those days was measured by the amount of mail a performer received. Uncle Dave customarily received more mail than anyone else, with the occasional exception of the Delmore Brothers. Uncle Dave would eventually tour and record with the Delmore Brothers based upon the popularity of these performers.¹¹⁹ Macon, with the aid of the Delmore Brothers would return to the recording studio for Bluebird, a label developed by Victor Recording Company and financially aimed at the recovering, record-buying public.

¹¹⁷ Uncle Dave Macon, *Wreck of the Tennessee Gravy Train*, Okeh 45507, 1930, 78rpm.

¹¹⁸ Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 110.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Uncle Dave Macon embodied a nineteenth century entertainer spirit that projected, promoted, and recalled the rural traditions of an ever-changing South and landscape. Old-time music made the Grand Ole Opry immensely popular with its southern audiences during the twenties and thirties. However, the popularity of old-time music on the Opry was not solely rooted in nostalgia for times long past. The program's musicians often addressed the ambivalence rural southerners held towards modernization, alternately praising and damning the changes sweeping the countryside. In doing so, the Opry performers stood at the forefront of a larger trend of creating a new southern music that had roots in the region's rural and cultural past but spoke to the concerns and anxieties of a present undergoing rapid change.¹²⁰ Uncle Dave, like other Opry performers, was actively engaged in a musical love-hate treatment concerning modernization of the rural South. These performers' ambivalence towards change was instrumental in the acclimation for southern migrants flocking to northern cities and urban centers of the South.

The migration of southern rural and southern Appalachians to the larger, urban centers in the North and South provided a backdrop for the initial success of hillbilly music and the Opry. Hillbilly music eventually developed later into the modern country music machine in Nashville, Tennessee. The modest beginnings of hillbilly radio, phonographs, and performances should be remembered as a major catalyst in the expansion of a major music industry; furthermore, their

¹²⁰ Kyriakoudes, 75.

influences on southern whites and on southern Appalachia's evolution into the modern twentieth century cannot be underestimated or overlooked.

Uncle Dave, along with the other Opry stars and radio personalities, cushioned the transformation of rural-to-urban migration of the 1920s and 1930s. With their nostalgic flair and comedic personas, the hillbilly radio musicians presented entertainment for a changing era. These musicians represented something often remembered by the radio listeners, home sweet home. As time ushered in new technologies and new modes of life, hillbilly performers were representative of an era of simplicity and promise.

CHAPTER 5

EARLY HILLBILLY STEREOTYPES, 1820-1939

The idea of mountain people carrying guns, playing fiddles, drinking, feuding, and making moonshine began to be associated with southern Appalachians in early literature as early as the mid-1800s. Information about the area and its inhabitants was limited and came largely through few legitimate channels. A general consensus about Appalachia nonetheless emerged in the popular culture: Appalachia was a place apart, a different and sometimes dangerous place, a place whose people possessed only the mere rudiments of civilization. Largely created by outsiders, these popular notions of the region emerged in the mid-to-late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the writings of short-story authors, novelists, missionaries, social workers, handicraft organizers, and academics whose work forged a remarkably enduring stereotype of the region and its people.¹²¹ The frontier provided an inordinate amount of inspiration for misconceptions and misinformation in early nineteenth century writing. Davy Crockett's *Crockett Almanacs* were some of the first writings to touch on the hillbilly persona. After the real David Crockett died in Texas defending the Alamo, the mythic "Davy" Crockett, a mixture of superhuman frontiersman and comical hick, lived in the popular *Crockett Almanacs* series of

¹²¹ Katie Algeo, "Locals on Local Color: Imagining Identity in Appalachia," *Southern Cultures* 4.4 (2003):27-54.

the 1840s and 1850.¹²² Not the first portrayal of the rural comedian but certainly one of the earliest to be featured in a series.

Some of the earliest generalized misconceptions about rural southerners and mountain people began with local color writers who traveled into the lower South and reported what they saw during their limited excursions. The local color writers of the late 1800s were largely responsible for combining the hillbilly image with that of the frontiersman or mountaineer. By the time the *Arkansas Traveler* was becoming iconicized in the decades immediately following the Civil War, descriptions and images of rustic rubes, impoverished southern whites, and frontier inhabitants had developed for well over 100 years and were established in American culture. These separate depictions not only continued to appear in various cultural formats throughout the twentieth century, but they also began to coalesce into a new self-contained image linked to specific geographic locale—the dualistic icon of the hillbilly-mountaineer.¹²³ A large percentage of documentations and writings from the mid to late nineteenth century sensationalized the hillbilly icon for the sake of selling magazines or books and were usually grossly exaggerated. Many writers from this period became quite popular using local-color writing styles which eventually led to the recognition and popularity of latter writers such as John Fox, Jr. and Mary Noailles Murfree.

Writing about the South, and more specifically Appalachia, became a central theme for these writers around the time of industrial modernization and

¹²² Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 22.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 29.

agrarian mechanization. As society became more urbanized and less agrarian, literature reflected these changes by essentially denying the past and origins of its members. An easy way to separate or distance oneself from the past was to simply satirize or exaggerate the present. The money-making, entertainment incentive of these stories and travelogues ultimately focused on, falsely represented, and established the misconceived image of the mountaineer and later, the hillbilly.

A false notion of the Appalachian people emerged and contributed to the erroneous stereotyping of a region as well as a re-writing of indigenous people's history. In *Beyond Isolation and Homogeneity: Diversity and the history of Appalachia* (1999), Ronald L. Lewis makes his point:

Appalachia is a region without a formal history. Born in the fertile minds of late-nineteenth century local-color writers, "Appalachia" was invented in the caricatures and atmospheric landscapes of the escapist fiction penned to entertain the emergent urban middle class. The accuracy of these stories and travelogues, the dominant idioms of this genre, generated little or no critical evaluation of their characterization of either mountain people or the landscape itself.¹²⁴

The outsider's viewpoint eventually established the country's idea of Appalachia and its inhabitants. Harry Shapiro relates his ideas of an intellectual and cultural gulf as an "otherness" in his book, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920*.

¹²⁴ Ronald L. Lewis, "Beyond Isolation and Homogeneity: Diversity and the History of Appalachia," in *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk From An American Region*, eds. Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), 21.

(1978)¹²⁵ In his discussion of the origins of local color, Shapiro began with a writer, Will Wallace Harney, who journeyed to the Cumberland Mountains in the fall of 1869 and wrote about his experiences in the region for *Lippincott's Magazine*. His article was published in 1873 with the title "A Strange Land and Peculiar People," which contained anecdotes of the hardships of travel and little stories of Civil War days in the mountains but hardly any word to justify a title like the one Harney gave to his story.¹²⁶

Harney's sense of "otherness" for Appalachia became a common misconception of the region and its people. By an act that itself was conditioned by the demands of his literary medium, Harney made the southern mountains and mountaineers available subjects for literary treatment. In a real sense it was Harney and the editors of *Lippincott's* who discovered Appalachia, for they were the first to assert that "otherness" that made of mountainous portions of eight southern states a discrete region, in but not of America, and after 1890, seemed to place Appalachia and America in radical opposition.¹²⁷

The separation between Appalachia and the rest of the country created a double interest in the region. This fascination with an Appalachian "otherness" was a cornerstone in the growing missionary movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This distinctiveness also led local progressives like William Goodell Frost to praise the mountaineer as offspring of the founding

¹²⁵ Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978): 4.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

fathers and the progeny of our great country. Frost's famous article, "Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains," signified a maturation of the concept of "otherness" or as Appalachia as a culturally and spatially remote remnant of a bygone era. Frost described the mountain people as "eighteenth century neighbors" who were pure Anglo-Saxons "beleaguered by nature" and "one of God's grand divisions" living in Appalachian America.¹²⁸ Frost's intent was obviously aimed at brokering support for his missionary work in the area. Again, the people of Appalachia co-opted to further an enterpriser's agenda at the cost of their own cultural legitimacy.

Frost's romanticization of Appalachia was not malicious. He struggled to correct the more vicious portraits of gun-toting feudists, moonshiners, "white trash," and lazy "hillbillies". In an era of post-Reconstruction hand-wringing, he sought to depict a pro-Unionist Southern Appalachia that could serve as a bridge for national reconciliation. In fact, serving in 1890s as president of Berea College, a pioneering school founded as an abolitionist institution in eastern Kentucky, Frost embodied the late-nineteenth-century missionary spirit that desperately championed the Unionist mountain whites, a supposedly singular ethnic group left behind by progress and held back by the physical nature of their surroundings.¹²⁹

Interest in the Appalachian region in the late nineteenth century increased as access to the region became easier. The industrial sector of America became

¹²⁸ Lewis, 21.

¹²⁹ Jeff Biggers, *The United States of Appalachia: How Southern Mountaineers Brought Independence, Culture, and Enlightenment to America*, (Emeryville, Shoemaker & Hoard, 2006): 146.

aware of the great wealth of natural resources in the area and at the same time the northern missionary movements found their calling in the impoverished hill people of the southern mountains. These two major forces were able to infiltrate the mountains and their impact was felt throughout the Appalachian region.

As travel into the mountains increased and became safer and easier, different classes, races, and cultures began to mix more frequently. The railroad was the major innovation that led to the diversification of Appalachia. The railroad played a key role in opening up new industrial possibilities and linking most rural communities to a rapidly expanding market economy. By 1890 nine of every ten southerners lived in a railroad county, and railroad construction touched the lives of people all along the track, providing markets for garden, farm, and forest produce and labor opportunities for tie cutters and rail builders.¹³⁰ Railroads were catalytic in breaking down isolation and information barriers in the southern mountains. Modernity, with all of its negative aspects, did lessen the isolation and otherness that Appalachia had come to be known for in the late nineteenth century.

Mining the Misconception

Stereotyping or generalizing a class or group of people in order to marginalize them has been taking place as long as man has walked the earth. The word, hillbilly, instantly evokes demeaning imagery within an instant of its utterance. Mass media has been most responsible for the ideas associated

¹³⁰ Bill C. Malone, *Don't Get above Your Raisin': Country Music and Southern Working Class*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002): 23.

concerning hillbillies, mountain people, or poor southern whites. Local color writers may have brought some of this imagery to the forefront in America but these misnomers and denigrations had been going on long before writers made their way into the hills and hollers.

The literary use of a fool or rube can be traced back as far as the Bible. The fool defined as, someone who openly challenges God and was defiant, or a person that was not pious or holy. He can be easily dismissed because the fool or rube was outside of modern society. Sandra L. Ballard describes the fool in biblical terms:

A fairly traditional example of this type of fool is one who challenges God. Medieval fools, often cast in the role of disputers with a deity or with a secular source of power, appear in drawings alongside texts of Psalms 14 and 53, where the psalmist wrote, "The fool has said in his heart, there is no God." Images of the fool reveal his rustic, ragged poverty—his clothes barely cover him, or he is naked to the waist.¹³¹

Ballard also discusses Shakespeare's use of the fool in his literary works. Shakespeare's fools, who possessed flat, predictable attributes, enjoyed similar sanctioned exemptions that allowed them to be truth-tellers. The fool's function was to speak truth to power. In general terms, then, one way to look at the "hillbilly fool" is as a "ritual clown" who mocks power by challenging God (morality) or some other authority figure. The hillbilly fool may get his way without trying because his actions are based on common sense and honesty, exposing base ignorance and greed of someone with more power who considers himself

¹³¹ Sandra L. Ballard, "Where Did Hillbillies Come From: Tracing Sources of the Comic Hillbilly Fool in Literature," in *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk From An American Region*, eds. Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), 140.

superior.¹³² Simplicity reveals an unknown moral side to the hillbilly rube or fool. This simplistic ideology was an attractive attribute moving through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The popularization of the hillbilly began at a time during the late nineteenth century when great social and economic changes were occurring in America. Although the hillbilly image remained relatively unchanged, the meanings of these representations and the word itself have continuously evolved over the past century in response to broader socioeconomic and cultural transformations in American society.¹³³ What changed to make a derisive, insult transform into an accepted descriptive name? When did it become acceptable to be a hillbilly and when did native Appalachians accept and promote themselves in such a way?

The evolution of the word, hillbilly, is a complex saga involving many factors some of which were social, economic, diplomatic, and simply progress in general. The key to the hillbilly's surprising ubiquity and endurance from 1900 to the dawn of the new millennium has been the fundamental ambiguity of the meaning of this term and image. Consistently used by middle-class economic interests to belittle working-class southern whites (whether from the mountains or not) and to define the benefits of advanced civilization through negative counterexample, the term and idea have also been used to challenge the generally unquestioned acceptance and legitimacy of modernity and progress.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Harkins, 3.

The media hillbilly thrived during the 1930s in an era of economic and social collapse. Uniquely positioned as a white “other,” a construction both within and beyond the confines of American-Anglo culture, the hillbilly has also been at the heart of struggles over American racial identity and hierarchy. Southern mountain folk have both denounced the term as a vicious slur and embraced it in defense of their value system and cultural heritage.¹³⁴ Beyond nationalizing the term, country music also replaced the term’s dominant pre-World War I association with violence and threat with unpretentious humor, carefree frivolity, and grassroots authenticity.¹³⁵ The term has been used to define a generation and, at the same time, forced a generation struggling with modernity and progress; to examine its place in America and within its society.

Arkansas Traveler & Li'l Abner

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the exclusive focus on poor whites from Appalachia began to expand and extended into other southern states in which use of the word, hillbilly, permeated literature and newspaper accounts. From its origins as a regional label, the word and image slowly spread nationally through the works of joke book writers, professional linguists, popular authors, and motion picture producers and directors.¹³⁶ Political cartoonist Homer Davenport was perhaps the first to illustrate his representations of characters that he called “hill-billies.” Defined by their long-limbed bodies, scraggly beards or

¹³⁴ Ibid, 4.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 71.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 49.

mustaches, oversized felt hats, and full length trench coats, these backwoods folk look up expectantly but noncommittally at the huge figure of railroad magnate Collis Huntington as he prepares to buy their votes.¹³⁷ Images like this one seeped into the American conscious as time marched on.

The word began to increasingly appear coupled with Arkansas and the state was used thematically in volumes of local color depictions of Ozark hillbillies. One of the first appearances of the hillbilly and Arkansas pairing was a 1902 pamphlet *Down in Arkansas* written by humorist Charles S. Hibbler. This pamphlet told the story of a Boston capitalist, a Philadelphia lawyer, and a Kansas City real estate agent who visited the Ouachita Mountains of western Arkansas in hopes of making a killing by buying cheap land and selling it to lumber and mineral interests. Most of the story revolved around the already-hackneyed theme of slowness concerning Arkansas trains, but here the image was explicitly connected to the mental and physical slowness of the mountain inhabitants. Themes of complacent poverty and geographical and social stasis would be perpetuated in almost all subsequent depictions of these Arkansas characters. The Arkansas theme would continue with the widely read *On a Slow Train through Arkansas* (1903) by Thomas Jackson, Andrew Guy Chilton's *Through Arkansas on a Hog* (1908), and George Beason's *I Blew in from Arkansaw* (1908).¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

The *Arkansas Traveler* was one the most commonly used iconographic images in the Arkansas themes. Anthony Harkins elaborates on the origins of the song, tune, and skit:

Perhaps the most direct link between the southwestern popular culture and the comic hillbilly image is the “Arkansas Traveller,” a written tale, humorous oration, instrumental and lyrical song, and pictorial image that had appeared continuously since the mid-nineteenth century. Most likely the creation of Colonel Sanford Faulkner, an elite Arkansas politician during the first years of statehood, the well-known tale is an ostensibly humorous retelling an encounter between a party of Arkansas politicians, who have lost their way in the mountains during the 1840 campaign tour, and a poor squatter continuously sawing away at the same tune on his fiddle in front of a primitive log cabin. The squatter responds to each of the visitor’s requests for assistance with verbal puns, negative replies, and indifference. Finally the traveler (representing Colonel Faulkner himself) achieves his ends by seizing the fiddle and playing the end of the tune the squatter has forgotten. The grateful homesteader, joyful that he finally recalls the closing melody, invites the travelers in for food and drink.¹³⁹

The Hillbilly represented in the media has taken many forms but one of the earliest popular forms was found in comic strips. In the early 1900s, the hillbilly had surfaced in books, newspapers, novels, films, and cartoons. One of the most popular cartoons depicting hillbillies was Al Capp’s *Li’l Abner*. When Al Capp introduced the world of Mammy, Pappy, and Abner Yokum in his comic strip *Li’l Abner* in 1934, the idea came from Capp’s memories of a hitchhiking trip through Kentucky and from the popularity of “hillbilly” music in a vaudeville show and on the radio. Capp, who blended “yokel” and “hokum” to create the name Yokum, was the first cartoonist to use hillbillies as his principal characters.¹⁴⁰

The complexities of Capp’s characters were some of the first positive instances or portrayals of mountain people in the early part of the twentieth

¹³⁹ Ibid, 26.

¹⁴⁰ Ballard, 144.

century. Li'l Abner Yokum represented a simplistic way of life. Capp described his rawboned rustics as a "family of innocents" who learned that the world outside their native Dogpatch, Kentucky, was a treacherous place: "This innocence of theirs is indestructible, so that while they possess all the homely virtues in which we profess to believe, they seem ingenuous because the world around them is irritated by them, cheats them, kicks them around. They are trusting, kind, loyal, generous and patriotic. It's truly a bewildering world in which they find themselves."¹⁴¹ Despite his fame as the best-known comic strip hillbilly fool, Li'l Abner Yokum had a complex identity. He was a hero because somehow he did not become debased...Abner maintained his basic goodness and incorruptibility and at the same time, he was the antihero. Abner's foolishness is laughable, but when we look closely at those who con him, we see either that we are smarter and more capable of dealing with villains of higher social class and power or that we prefer Abner's trust in other people's goodness to the cynical alternative.¹⁴² As people began to accept complex characters like Abner, the social, political, and economic climates of America began to change dramatically. Urbanization and the First World War had already made a major impact on the social climate of this country. During Capp's time, the effects of the Depression were still being felt throughout the country and simpler, more rustic ways of life were remembered, longed and wished for by the common man. The simplistic appeal of these complex characters eventually opened doors for traditional musicians to promote themselves as proud, rural musicians. Hillbilly musicians

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

represented a by-gone era viewed simpler and easier than the new, quick-paced life that now faced the modern-day, middle-class whites. The people who identified the most with characters like Li'l Abner and Uncle Dave Macon were the people who worked factory jobs, worked on the railroads, or picked cotton and these hillbilly characters were something that they could simply relate to. Hillbilly musicians and music was the last remnant of a pastoral, ideal past that was slowly being overtaken by technology and urban sprawl. Isolation of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that had been responsible for the misconception and misnomers of mountain people was now superseded by the industrialization of the South and ruralism, with all of its complex connotations, was now the accepted and attractive facet of southern identity and folklore.

Enter: Hillbilly Musicians

The beginning of the twentieth century brought folk tradition of regional Appalachian music to the forefront of the American consciousness. The fiddle contests of the early part of the century created folk heroes and icons in the small towns and large cities alike. Newspaper coverage of these events treated competitions like prize-fights. Much of the mythology surrounding these early fiddlers was propagated by newspapers and eventually by the advent of radio. Fiddle players were the earliest superstars of country music and were accorded the same place in social status, a far cry from the stereotypical sinful view of fiddlers in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. With the ever-increasing

industrialized society altering and re-defining itself, these musicians were “real folk” that white, working class people could relate to and understand.

The music of the southern Appalachian Mountains, or hillbilly music, as it came to be known was not high-brow entertainment; its appeal lay in its folk honesty and earthy sincerity that, in turn, drew listeners in and kept their attention. The music that the scholars and collectors attended to and valued was for the most part archaic—usually the unaccompanied ballads from the old country stalked by Wyman, Brockway, Sharp, and many others. Such as it was an esoteric activity valued highly by intellectual elite.¹⁴³ Hillbilly music did not fit the idealized version of folk music promoted by collectors and their allies in the mountain settlement schools during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it did conform marvelously to the reality of plain-folk life in the first quarter of the twentieth century. A plain-folk world of music did exist in the South and that musical culture was largely unknown and dismissed by many Americans. The early hillbilly musicians drew upon a rather large and floating body of music that reflected Old World, American, religious, pop, and diversely ethnic origins. Columbia Records fittingly described the old-time music listed in their 15,000-D series as “Old Familiar Tunes,” while the Gennett label described theirs as “Songs from Dixie.” The hillbilly musicians simply did not care where their music came from as long as it conformed to the aesthetic and social values of their community.¹⁴⁴ The traditions that resonated with southerners and rural

¹⁴³ David E. Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine: the Politics of Culture in an American Region*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983): 183.

¹⁴⁴ Malone, *Country Music USA*, 18.

Americans the most were characteristically down-home mores, a ruralistic landscape and an intrinsic romantic quality put forth by the hillbilly musicians and entertainers.

An idea of ruralism began to develop around the traditional musician who could sing about the “old home place”, “back-home”, or “mother’s grave.” Ruralism linked hillbilly music to a broad spectrum of Americans by providing a mythology with which all could identify. In short, ruralism linked hillbilly singers to the nation’s most cherished myth, the deeply held belief that our country began its existence as a republic of rural virtue.¹⁴⁵

What drew the common southerner to the image and sounds of the hillbilly musician? The rapidly changing social and economic aspects of southern culture were evident by the beginning of the twenties. The radio and the phonograph were new technological innovations that allowed the hillbilly musician to “win over” the general public. The remarkable confrontation of rural folkways with urban-industrial technology created the dynamic that gave hillbilly music its special character and permitted it to win an ever-widening audience.¹⁴⁶ These light-hearted purveyors of old-time music were comedic, lonesome, and down-to-earth and these qualities were appealing and comforting to the farmer who had recently moved to the city to work and support his family.

The most common element during the twenties among many southern rural or mountain homes was the radio. In times of great change, locally or worldwide, the radio provided a link to these events. Throughout the twenties and

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 23.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 24.

thirties the radio was a source of news, entertainment, and a symbol of modernity for people acquainting themselves with the new age. One could argue that the disparaging image of the rube was fading, thanks to radio. The rube had been fully assimilated into the new, urban way of life by virtue of his access to the radio; his otherness had been wiped away.¹⁴⁷ The mountaineer was now connected and tuned-in to the outside world. The disparaging stereotypes of the late nineteenth century were replaced with widespread acceptance and general nostalgia for the mountaineer and his humble surroundings.

The phonograph played a smaller but comparable role in the acceptance and widespread popularity of hillbilly music. Before World War I, the music industry—then represented chiefly by vaudeville, the sheet music business, and the phonograph interests—concentrated on urban America because of its population density and easy accessibility. The rural market was not totally neglected, but it received the same entertainment material that was directed to the cities. The music industry's anti-rural attitude might have persisted had it not been for the emergence of one medium of communication and the temporary submergence of another. In general, the public discovery of traditional music was the result of radio.¹⁴⁸ So, in turn, without radio the hillbilly music genre may have never taken off or evolved into what country music is today. Radio provided a means to promote and establish these musicians in the minds and ears within the bandwidth's reach. The radio was responsible for a down turn in record sales,

¹⁴⁷ Patnode, 294.

¹⁴⁸ Malone, *County Music USA*, 32.

but eventually the advantages of radio promotion in regards to record sales came to light.

The music industry's readiness to exaggerate, stereotype, and promote widespread misconceptions about southern rural performers was used to exploit, mine, and redefine the hillbilly genre and hillbilly musician. In many ways this exploitation of misconception by the recording industry mirrored the exaggeration of local color writings during the nineteenth century. We can discern through this parallel that the nineteenth century comic frontiersman was indeed a precursor to the twentieth century comic hillbilly. The comedic element of hillbilly musicians resonated with the general buying public much in the same way that the local color writings did in the late 1800s.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Okeh, Vocalion, Victor, and Brunswick were decking their fiddlers and string bands in ever more outrageous hayseed garb for promotional photos. Eager to expand their markets, they attempted somewhat ambivalently both to purge the music of the very archaisms valued by scholars and to appeal—through carefully shaped images of rusticity—to the nostalgic longings of a public caught in the midst of rapid social transformations of the late 1920s.¹⁴⁹ The appeal of these hillbilly images resonated with American consumers and by 1929 sales of hillbilly records multiplied dramatically. The images these records purveyed came to be accepted by a large segment of the public as an authentic representation of southern mountain music.¹⁵⁰ The imagery surrounding the genre alternated between the “Sunday-best” to the

¹⁴⁹ Whisnant, 183.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 184.

rustic rube with his overalls and corn-cob pipe and eventually aligned with the nostalgic “down-home” imagery set forth by Ralph Peer and his greatest accomplishments, The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. These four musicians forever changed the hillbilly genre and popular music as a whole for generations. Their imprint and influence was felt on all country music and hillbilly musicians who followed.

CHAPTER 6

HOMOGENIZATION & THE DECLINE, 1925-1939

By the end of the 1920s, the hillbilly genre had exploded onto the American consciousness. Radio had bridged the gap between “town” and “country.” Southern and northern cities alike were bustling with new inhabitants seeking better lives than the farm and hidden hollows had provided. As southerners and southern Appalachians began filing into these cities, the recording industry with its new recording format tapped into a collective, uniform sentiment that was being felt throughout the country. In a time when so much was changing, hillbilly music provided a glimpse of the past and a simpler time. This new period was marked by jazz, prohibition, speakeasies, and organized crime. The nation was visibly growing and maturing at a rapid pace with communications technology, mechanization, and industrial progress at the forefront of its growth. Hillbilly music was an irrefutable, substantial constant that people could relate to and cherish.

At the end of the decade, the recording industry was busy mining the South for new, and more importantly, profitable talent. With radio competing for the nation’s attention, recording companies sat up their portable studios all over the South in cities like Atlanta, Savannah, Memphis, Bristol, amongst others in order to broker new talent and means of income. The major, singular recording event that changed everything about hillbilly music, created two major recording entities, and eventually surpassed all hillbilly record sales at that time was the Bristol sessions in 1927.

Maces Springs & the Tenneva Ramblers

The late 1920s were an economically interesting time for people in the South and other rural areas of the United States. The economic boom following World War I enabled folks to purchase luxury items and purchasing these items became much more perfunctory throughout the decade. For the first time in history, recording companies had developed a technology that made it profitable for them to record groups like the Carters, Jimmie Rodgers, and Uncle Dave Macon. At the same time fans of this music had acquired a new cash economy that made it possible for the entrepreneur to profitably market his new medium. In the period before the First World War, most of the people in the rural areas of the United States including the South and southern Appalachia did not have sufficient cash income to purchase phonograph recordings. With the new wealth that came to the South and other rural areas following the First World War, however, a clear commercial market for regional music was established.¹⁵¹

One of the main facets in traditional music that appealed to the record-buying public was the focus on family and the home. In the Carter Family's Bristol sessions recordings, one can easily identify the reasons for the family's success. They took old-fashioned, familiar songs and themes and turned them into new material—and though their harmonies and instrumentation were grounded firmly in Appalachian folk music, they took that tradition in new directions. It was their distinctive Carter sound—based firmly on Sara and Maybelle's lead vocals, A.P.'s bass harmony, and Maybelle's guitar work—that

¹⁵¹ Ed A. Kahn II, "The Carter Family: A Reflection of Changes in Society." (Ph. D. diss. , University of California, 1970), 14.

appealed to audiences and induced them to buy records from the Victor Company.¹⁵² Bristol proved to be the genesis of modern country music marketing and recording, moreover, the sessions eventually heralded the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers to the rest of the world.

Jimmie Rodgers came to Bristol in 1927 with a band, The Tenneva Ramblers. According to John Lily, the group took their name from a combination of Tennessee and Virginia and they played an impressive style of traditional string band music. The group consisted of Claude Grant, guitar; his mandolin-playing brother, Jack Grant; and 19-year old fiddler, Jack Pierce.¹⁵³ Rodgers assembled the Ramblers as his back-up band and played a few radio shows in Asheville, North Carolina. After several trips over the mountain to Bristol and several unsuccessful bookings, Rodgers and Pierce found themselves in front of Ralph Peer discussing the prospect of recording the band. Peer promised to listen and nothing more and the duo returned to North Carolina to retrieve the other members of the band.¹⁵⁴ The events that lead up to Jimmie Rodgers recording as a solo musician are clouded with mystery. According to Carrie Rodgers, Jimmie's wife, the three other musicians conspired behind Rodgers' back to record on their own. Alternately, according to a 1975 interview with Richard Blaustein of East Tennessee State University, Claude Grant claimed that

¹⁵² Katie Doman, "Something Old, Something New: The Carter family's Bristol Session Recordings," in *The Bristol Sessions: Writings About the Big Bang of Country Music*, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and Ted Olson (Jefferson: McFarland, 2005), 66.

¹⁵³ John Lily, "Jimmie Rodgers and the Bristol Sessions," in *The Bristol Sessions: Writings About the Big Bang of Country Music*, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and Ted Olson (Jefferson: McFarland, 2005), 56.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

an argument between Jimmie Rodgers and Claude's brother Jack was the cause of the split. Jack Grant and Rodgers had apparently had their differences for some time concerning the group's finances and Rodgers' unconventional business methods.¹⁵⁵ Regardless of the true nature of the split, parting of ways did occur. Some speculate that Rodgers wanted his name for the band and that was the ultimate cause for the split.¹⁵⁶ Peer offers another version of the story that makes the most sense. Interviewed in 1953 by the newspaper, *Meridian Star*, Peer claimed that it was he who engineered the split. According to Peer, Rodgers and the group did audition together, but the music was not satisfactory to his ear. "The records," Peer said, "would have been no good if Jimmie had sung with this group because he was singing blues and they were doing old-time fiddle music. Oil and water...they don't mix." Peer conveyed that he decided to allow the string band to record some numbers in order to keep the peace and not hurt anyone's feelings and later brought Rodgers back in alone.¹⁵⁷ This illuminates the sheer control that Peer had over the product and musicians he was recording. With Rodgers eventual success, Peer and Victor became synonymous with hillbilly music.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 61.

Peer & Stoneman

The Bristol Sessions of 1927 may have never happened had it not been for the relationship established previously between Ernest “Pop” Stoneman and Ralph Peer. As mentioned before, Stoneman had recorded for Peer in 1924 and Peer trusted Pop’s opinion concerning local music and felt that Stoneman’s music was traditional but somewhat advanced at the same time. The fact that Stoneman knew a great number of local musicians was not lost on Victor’s man in the field. When Peer first got to Victor in 1926, he recorded a new Stoneman record and it sold sixty thousand without an ounce of promotion.¹⁵⁸ Peer decided to make a journey to Galax to visit Stoneman and record some new musicians.

Peer procured sixty-thousand dollars for the idea to pay hillbilly musicians for each of their songs and came armed with a new recording process that Victor had developed the previous year. A year earlier, Victor began a new electric recording process and issued a new phonograph, the Victor Orthophonic, which was flying off of the shelves.¹⁵⁹ In mid-1925, Victor’s Orthophonic Victrola and Columbia’s Viva-Tonal phonographs became available. Both machines were specially designed *acoustic* phonographs created to play back the new electronic recordings. The electronic recording processes rendered possible higher quality recordings of stringed instruments and thus led to an increase in the number of

¹⁵⁸ Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002): 93.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

recordings of string bands, a favored format in the early years of country music.¹⁶⁰ According to Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, Peer made his way down south:

With money in place—and a new and better recording system—Peer wrote Stoneman. He was coming to visit Pop at his new home in Galax, Virginia, and Pop should go up in the mountains and find some acts worth recording. After the auditions, Peer said, he'd have Pop and the other approved acts meet him in Bristol, Virginia, for Victor's first field-recording session. Recording in Bristol had two advantages: There was a strong Victor distributorship there, run by Cecil McLister, and it was a railhead. With two major roads and a half-dozen short lines running into Bristol, acts from all over Appalachia could get there fairly easily. If all else failed, Peer figured, at least he'd get some Stoneman recordings on wax. Ironically, by the time Peer got to Bristol, Pop hadn't turned up much talent besides his own family and one friend.¹⁶¹

Pop Stoneman may not have delivered the musicians for whom Peer was looking but nonetheless it was the trust between him and Peer that brought the Victor field-recording process to Bristol. Peer eventually invited a local newspaper editor to the Stoneman recording session and the coverage that followed was really what brought musicians over the miles to audition for Peer. Newspaper publicity generated extensive excitement about Peer's visit to Bristol. In Peer's words, "(Using the newspaper) worked like dynamite and the very next day I was deluged with long-distance calls from the surrounding mountain regions. Groups of singers who had not visited Bristol during their entire lifetime arrived by bus, horse, buggy, trains, or on foot"¹⁶² Beyond that, the fact that musicians were paid for their music was even more inviting.

¹⁶⁰ Eric Morritt, "The Early Sound Recording Technology and the Bristol Sessions," in *The Bristol Sessions: Writings About the Big Bang of Country Music*, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and Ted Olson (Jefferson: McFarland, 2005), 12.

¹⁶¹ Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, 93-94.

¹⁶² Malone, *Country Music USA*, 80.

During the nine days that Ralph Peer spent recording in Bristol, he recorded some twenty-one acts for commercial purposes, of which five had been previously recorded by Victor or other companies, one was an orchestra recording popular music, and one was a race artist. Of the fourteen previously unrecorded hillbilly acts that were recorded during the expedition, only seven ever returned to the studios. Most of these rural people enjoyed making music, but few considered themselves to be professional musicians. They responded to Ralph Peer's ad, made their recordings, and went home unchanged by the experience.¹⁶³

Bristol: Birth of a Legend

The mythical treatment of these recording sessions has their origins with Ralph Peer, obviously, but also with other parties who were enamored by the recording artists more so than the actual event. Peer had a part in developing the stereotypical imagery surrounding these hillbilly artists. The hillbilly exaggeration only fueled record and songbook sales, an idea that was not only lucrative to Peer but also responsible for persuading the buying public to accept these down-to-earth musicians. According to Charles Wolfe, Peer gave an interview in 1928 in which he recalled that Jimmie Rodgers had been "running around in the mountains before his session in Bristol, and that when he tried out he was laughed at."¹⁶⁴ This comment made about a musician who eventually made

¹⁶³ Kahn, 35-36.

¹⁶⁴ Charles K. Wolfe, "The Legend That Peer Built: Reappraising the Bristol Sessions," in *The Bristol Sessions: Writings About the Big Bang of Country Music*, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and Ted Olson (Jefferson: McFarland, 2005), 18-19.

Ralph Peer a millionaire. He also tried to “earthen-up” the Carter Family’s imagery with a tale of homespun clothes and bare feet. Peer later claimed that when the Carter Family first appeared at the Bristol studio, they looked like they had “come through a lot of mud either by horse and buggy or an old car...He [A.P.] was dressed in overalls and the women are country women from way back there—calico clothes on...they looked like hillbillies.”¹⁶⁵ Peer had learned from John Carson and the Hill Billies that real, old-time music had to hold a certain amount of mountain charm. Simply stated, the hillbilly stereotype was good for business. Any mythology surrounding the recordings of the Bristol sessions was equally scrutinized over and studied the same as the recordings themselves.

With Jimmie Rodgers, Peer had an opportunity for the first hillbilly superstar. According to Malone, by the end of 1927 Rodgers’ popularity had begun to mount, and Victor and Peer realized that they had signed a potential star. Rodgers was soon permitted another recording session in Camden, New Jersey where he recorded the first twelve of his Blue Yodels. “T for Texas” became the hillbilly hit of the year, and at last fame and success were at hand. In its structure the song resembled the typical blues form, but at the conclusion of the third line, Rodgers lifted his voice to a higher octave and uttered the blue yodel that made him the most famous hillbilly star in history.¹⁶⁶ Rodgers continued to rise as a modern, country performer and paved the way for country music’s evolution.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Malone, *Country Music USA*, 81.

Alternately, the Carter Family represented a vastly different side of the rural South. Whereas, Rodgers incorporated his years of working on the railroad into his persona as “the Singing Brakeman” and “the Blue Yodeler”; the Carter Family evoked the family, the old home-place, and strong morality. Malone relates this:

Rodgers brought into clear focus the tradition of the rambling man which had been so attractive in country music’s folk ancestors and which has ever since fascinated much of the country music audience. This ex-railroad man conveyed the impression that he had been everywhere and had experienced life to the fullest. His music suggested a similar openness of spirit, willingness to experiment, and receptivity to alternative styles. The Carter Family, in contrast, represented the impulse toward home and stability, a theme as perennially attractive as that of the rambler. When the Carters sang, they evoked images of the old country church, Mama and Daddy, the family fireside, and “the green fields of Virginia far away.” Theirs was a music that might borrow from other forms, but would move away from its roots only reluctantly.¹⁶⁷

Unlike Rodgers, the Carters never became extremely wealthy from album sales and most of their public performances throughout the years were for the most part local to southwest Virginia and informal. The very characteristic of simplicity and ruralism that the family shared with common people, made the Carters, with their common rural lifestyles, popular with their fans. They were simple country people trying to eke out an existence. The Carters were fairly typical of a pattern of seeking outside work for short periods of time. Sara was explicit in pointing out that the royalties—perhaps one quarter of a per cent of retail sales prices—were certainly not enough to support the members of the group but enough to keep them going and give them encouragement.¹⁶⁸ A. P. and Maybelle’s husband,

¹⁶⁷ Malone, *Country Music USA*, 64-5.

¹⁶⁸ Kahn, 56.

Ezra, sought work out of state from time to time. Needless to say, The Carter Family represented the common folk's struggle to survive and this was not lost on the press and more importantly Peer and his colleagues.

Bristol represents the beginning of true country music as a mass-marketed revenue-making commodity. Up until 1927, the hillbilly genre was an attempt by the record companies to overcome the advent of radio and re-establish the money making ventures. With Jimmie Rodgers and The Carters, the industry realized the inherent potential in the country crooner and the family band and these components could be used to create revenue. Essentially, the country music business aspect of the hillbilly genre was born during those August sessions of 1927.

Music Publishing: The Hillbilly Writer

One of the reasons that Bristol has been celebrated as the birthplace of modern country music was because of the Ralph Peer's innovation of music publishing as a major money-making enterprise. Much of this process is still in use today in modern music business. Peer was a revolutionary component in bringing about the publisher-songwriter practice in country and traditional music. One of the main reasons that Peer was looking for new talent in 1927 was because he had realized the untapped resource of owning copyrights to songs. This was one of the main reasons that he came to Bristol: to mine the local resources for possible revenue-making songs.

As mentioned previously, Peer was so confident of the economic advantages of possessing the rights to songs that in 1925 he offered to work for

Victor Recording Company for no salary if they would allow him to hold the copyrights of the new songs he recorded. This practice of recording singers capable of creating their own material was so financially successful that it encouraged others to attempt the same procedure; as a result, singers who composed their own songs became and still are a premium commodity in the country music industry.¹⁶⁹ Publishing still remains one of the strongest streams of revenue for the country music industry.

The change brought about by this new publishing endeavor was not an immediately noticeable occurrence. The rest of the industry did not acclimate to the new idea for some years. Ironically it was not until twenty years later that Acuff-Rose Publishing Company in Nashville would begin to make Peer's model for publishing music the norm for the entire commercial music industry.¹⁷⁰ Peer was innovative in that he offered his artists "free" management as long as they signed a contract to exclusively record for him. Peer signed all those he worked with to exclusive writer-publisher and personal management contracts that specified that they could record only for him. Although it was standard practice, Peer did not charge the artists a fee for being their personal manager, a fact he continually reiterated to them. This generosity was part of his plan because, being under contract to him, performers could not sell songs to other publishers or record for other record companies.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Jimmie N. Rogers, *The Country Music Message: Revisited*, (Fayetteville, University of Arkansas Press, 1989): 9.

¹⁷⁰ Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1997):39.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

These new innovative publishing plans brought about a change in the hillbilly recording industry and market. Peer was now searching for original material as opposed to the old traditional tunes. Peer's deal with Victor changed the sort of songs he looked for in an important way. Frank Walker and other A&R men, who worked on salary, were looking for copyright-free material so that their company would not have to pay the fees to a copyright holder. For them a song in public domain was perfectly acceptable.¹⁷² For Peer the opposite was true, he was more interested in new songs because his income was based upon the sale of songs that were part of his publishing company. He essentially needed new songs with the old, traditional feel in order to keep afloat in the industry. In Jimmie Rodgers with his clear and winning country sounding voice and spare guitar accompaniment, Peer had found such a solo voice with a minimum of arrangement, and in the Carter Family he had tapped a treasure trove of old-sounding ballads and love songs.¹⁷³ Nevertheless, Peer could have not predicted the economic downturn that country felt during the late 1920s and his publishing breakthrough would have the weather the stock market crash and the dust bowl for several years.

"I'm Going Where There's No Depression"

The Great Depression brought with it massive change and alteration to the landscape and psyche of this nation. Not only did the Depression alter our way of

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

thinking, it also changed the value system and buying habits of Southerners and southern Appalachians. When Jimmie Rodgers died in 1933, one decade had elapsed since Fiddlin John Carson made his first Okeh record and inaugurated country music's commercial history. The music had become a secure part of American entertainment and gave every indication of expanding both in popularity and in personnel.¹⁷⁴ Even before his untimely death, however, the prime vehicle of Rodger's popularity, the phonograph record, was suffering great commercial reverses owing to the Great Depression. Total record sales in the United States, which reached \$75 million in 1929, plummeted to just \$6 million, less than one tenth the 1929 figure, by 1933.¹⁷⁵ This latter sale figures paint a strikingly different picture than the early 1920s when total record sales reached \$100 million.¹⁷⁶ Ironically, country music sold steadily throughout the Depression.

According to Malone:

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of country music's history during the Great Depression is that the music not only survived but expanded. The once-modest hillbilly business began to take shape as an industry with booking agents, promoters, advertising firms, publishers, music-licensing agencies, and motion picture representatives recognizing the gold that might be mined from this new territory. The music also took great strides toward national dissemination and eventual national homogenization during the Depression years: Sear-Roebuck catalogues advertised the same records in all sections of the country; powerful radio stations boomed the music out to city and farm alike; advertising agencies linked the music with such brand names as Alka-Seltzer and won new consumers with each; radio transcriptions permitted musicians to popularize themselves on stations far beyond their own geographical areas; touring units took the music to all sections of the country; and Hollywood films made many of

¹⁷⁴ Malone, *Country Music USA*, 93.

¹⁷⁵ Peterson, 50.

¹⁷⁶ Rogers, 22.

the performers visible , while introducing their music to millions of Americans who would not have heard it in any other format.¹⁷⁷

The hillbilly recording industry changed somewhat after the Depression. The stable market for country and hillbilly records and the low cost of producing them made it the genre that was a vital and important part of the music industry.

Regardless of lean times, the genre still managed to move records thanks in part to live performances and the ever-present radio broadcast. Peterson reiterates this, beginning with Polk Brockman's innovations in Atlanta and continuing right through the Depression; however, country music flourished by combination radio exposure and live concert tours. Then in the mid-1930s, the western films of Gene Autry and his followers proved another major avenue for projecting and promoting country music. The images projected by radio and film accentuated the regional and rustic nature of hillbilly, country music, its performers, and its audience.¹⁷⁸ The hillbilly music and imagery set forth in the early 1920s was quickly being subjugated by the modern sounds of western swing and the cowboy. The new focus on original material altered the hillbilly landscape considerably and allowed the western and cowboy imagery to flourish. Within the decade of the 1930s, the hillbilly with all his rustic characteristics and charm would eventually fade into the memories of the past.

¹⁷⁷ Malone, 94.

¹⁷⁸ Peterson, 51.

Enter: The Media Cowboy

One of the main reasons that the cowboy became synonymous with country music in the 1930s was the motion picture. The romance surrounding the cowboy had been a part of American popular culture since the mid to late nineteenth century. Cowboy singers and bands were part of the early hillbilly recording boom. Simultaneously, cowboy musicians and hillbilly musicians achieved popularity and fame during the 1920s and 1930s. What made the cowboy so appealing and why were the iconographic qualities of the West so attractive to the general public? Among the wide array of western characters, the cowboy was the one who most often held center stage in the western world of imagination.¹⁷⁹ The cowboy did not joke and laugh because his life, imagined or real, was a life of solitude and danger.

The hillbilly and the cowboy both enjoyed success throughout the 1920s, but the fortunes of the imagined cowboy and his hillbilly sibling proved quite different in the 1930s. The hillbilly often seemed close to breaking under the combined weight of depressed agricultural prices and the march of industrialization into the rural hinterland. The dominant image alternated between the sullen, displaced farmer and comedic buffoon. At its best, the music created during the early 1930s was vital and richly varied. In stark contrast, the cowboy, always serious, alone, and unfettered by communal responsibilities, seemed to

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 81.

grow in stature.¹⁸⁰ The imagined cowboy represented a romantic notion and was an extension of pulp fiction. The lone drifter provided an escape during hard times whereas the hillbilly provided stark realism and nostalgia for an ever-changing rural landscape. The cowboy was idealistically appealing and other-worldly to Depression-era dreamers and the hillbilly musician only reinforced their stark reality of the dustbowl age and ragged outdated stereotypes.

As mentioned before, the cowboy imagery and dress was not a new trend. Eck Robertson, the first old-time fiddler to record commercially, hailed from West Texas and dressed in cowboy attire for his audition, and a number of musicians in the 1920s, including Carson J. Robinson, Carl T. Sprague, and above all, Jimmie Rodgers, gained prominence singing cowboy songs and wearing exaggerated cowboy costumes. But not until the 1930s and the tremendous success of “Oklahoma’s Singing Cowboy,” Gene Autry, who moved from the *National Barn Dance* (WLS-Chicago) to an enormously successful career in Hollywood, did the cowboy persona envelop country music.¹⁸¹ Hollywood was a major component in the rise of the singing cowboy and his popularity.

America’s preoccupation with the West developed long before the recording, radio, and motion picture industries. The romantic concept of the West, shared by most Americans, has a history virtually as old as the nation itself. James Fenimore Cooper’s early novels describing the restorative qualities of the frontier were not substantially different, nor less romantic, than the themes emphasized later in Bret Harte’s stories in the western “dime novels” or in such

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Harkins, 95.

books as Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1901).¹⁸² The fictionalized exploits of Indian scout and buffalo hunter Bill Cody were presented in an 1869 dime novel and serialized in the *New York Weekly*. In 1901 Teddy Roosevelt, who styled himself a cowboy, became president. In 1903 *The Great Train Robbery*, a western and the first extended narrative film, was released to great acclaim. A spate of one- and two-reel melodramatic western movies followed, with Tom Mix emerging as the first cowboy hero.¹⁸³ The image of the cowboy was an established icon by the time the singing cowboys emerged in the late 1920s and early- to late 1930s.

Socioeconomic factors of the Depression affected the public's outlook on the hillbilly musicians and alternately aided in the rising popularity of the cowboy and western romanticism. According to Anthony Harkins:

Several related factors underlay the abandonment of the hillbilly look and the widespread adoption of cowboy imagery in the mid-to late 1930s: ten-gallon hats, chaps, and pointed boots offered far greater romantic possibilities than did the traditional mountaineer costume; the string band and plaintive mountain ballad style sounded increasingly old fashioned and even alien to modern audiences and performers; and in the searing psychological and economic environment of the Great Depression, the cowboy persona offered (in the words of country music historian Bill Malone) "a reassuring symbol of independence and mastery" that doubtless provided comfort to many Americans struggling with financial hardship and personal and societal loss of faith. In the early part of the twentieth century, the mythic mountaineer represented these same qualities of individuality, independence, and stalwartness. But by the mid-1930s, these more positive readings were being superseded by a growing derision toward, and increasingly negative image of, the southern mountains and mountaineer. A national audience, exposed on a regular basis to stories of violent coal strikes in Kentucky and West Virginia, social depravity and aberrant religious practices such as snake handling and speaking-in-tongues, and a steady diet of increasingly degenerate hillbilly

¹⁸² Malone, *Country Music USA*, 138.

¹⁸³ Peterson, 82.

portrayals, could no longer sustain a romantic and nostalgic sense of the mountains and mountaineers.¹⁸⁴

With an ever increasingly prevalence of negative images pertaining to hillbillies, mountaineers, and southerners, the public quickly embraced the cowboy and his western imagery.

Conclusion

As the 1930s began the nation started embracing romantic imagery and heroic traits associated with the cowboy and the Old West. Hillbilly music, a solidified constant of the music industry, remained popular with consumers throughout the decade, but negative connotations associated with the music began to damage the appeal that the genre generated during the 1920s. The hillbilly musician began to appear foolish, ignorant, and rube-like to the public. The cowboy, with his romantic qualities, began to supersede the hillbilly although both were equally popular during the early boom of the recording industry.

In spite of their repeated exposure to millions of moviegoers, the western songs performed by the singing cowboys like Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and the legion of other movie singing cowboys who followed, with rare exceptions, did not sell well.¹⁸⁵ Besides motion pictures, the cowboy's success was not directly correlated to album sales. Largely as a result of Hollywood exploitation, the concept of western music became fixed in the public mind. After the heyday of Gene Autry the term "western" came to be applied even to southern rural music

¹⁸⁴ Harkins, 95-6.

¹⁸⁵ Peterson, 91.

by an increasing number of people, especially by those who were ashamed to use the pejorative term “hillbilly.”¹⁸⁶ The general public along with the majority of the music industry had forsaken the outdated modes of dress and rube-like comedy of the hillbilly. Now, the cowboy image was embedded in the nation’s psyche and the hillbilly was relegated to negative stereotypes of the late nineteenth century.

The early recording pioneers of the hillbilly genre paved the way for future country artists and singers. The accidental nature of the genre’s discovery underscores the fickleness of an early twentieth century consumer market. The hillbilly genre provided an ample sociological cushion during a period of transition whereupon rural people evolved from an agrarian, rustic mode of life to the fast-pace of a modern industrial nation. With the advent of radio and recording technology, the hillbilly musician gained momentous ground socially and economically. The recording of hillbilly artists provided an identity for these musicians, alternate sources of income, and above all, sense of place and belonging to a much-overlooked, quickly denigrated region of the country.

Why did the hillbilly genre fall out of favor with record buying public? There was a cyclic duality in the popularity of hillbilly music. This duality varied from overwhelmingly positive public acceptance to an utter disregard and reluctance to embrace the comedic, bucolic qualities of the genre. Archie Green underscores this dualism:

It is unfair to the amorphous record buying public of the mid-1920s that so enthusiastically took the new hillbilly music to its heart to say

¹⁸⁶ Malone, 145.

precisely why it accepted a pejorative term for something it liked. Perhaps the public sensed the larger community's antipathy to the discs that both commented on and documented traditional values. Out of the long process of American urbanization-industrialization there has evolved a joint pattern of rejection as well as sentimentalization of rural mores. We flee the eroded land with its rotting cabin; at the same time we cover it in rose vines of memory. This national dualism created the need for a handle of laughter and ridicule to unite under one rubric the songs and the culture of the yeoman and the varmint, the pioneer and the poor white...so long as we both exploit and revive hillbilly music, so long as we feel tension between rural and urban society, we are likely to continue to need Ralph Peer's and Al Hopkins' jest.¹⁸⁷

From this statement we can assume that a plausible reason for the decline in popularity concerning hillbilly music can be directly related to the dualistic nature of early twentieth century culture. The genre served a need for people moving from an outdated system, longing for stasis and memories of home, to a newly, industrialized areas of the urban sector. Once the transformation was complete, the public matured and yearned for more sophisticated forms of entertainment. The very facet of hillbilly music that attracted consumers in the beginning, gritty, agrarian plain white folk, was the very idea or notion that repelled them in the late 1930s.

Country music changed and evolved throughout the pre-war era of the 1930s and a more homeostatic music and musicians were the end product in this evolution. The recording industry that sought truth, grittiness, and realistic bonified hillbillies in the early twenties was now interested in marginalization of unique, inherent qualities and more than interested in extending a broad,

¹⁸⁷ Green, 223.

encompassing definition of country music. Country music had generated into a definition synonymous with the cowboy of Western culture in the United States.

Country music owes a great deal of reverence to the hillbilly genre and without its early performers of the 1920s; country music may have not developed into the commercial behemoth that it is today. Cowboy songs were in the repertory of eastern hillbillies before the commercialization of the tradition. Ex-cowboys (real ones) began recording in 1925. Yet the cowboy contribution, in addition to a relatively few traditional songs, was more image than actuality. Whatever was viable in the music of the cowboy was largely absorbed in to hillbilly tradition by 1930. After this time, cowboy singers came under the spell of pop or hillbilly music, and whatever authentic cowboy culture remained now borrowed the hillbilly tradition. But the cowboy “myth” was as influential on hillbilly music as on American mass culture. Although cowboy and hillbilly music were often bracketed, there was a connotative difference. The cowboy’s image was almost the reverse of the hillbilly’s. Furthermore, the culture that gave birth to hillbilly music shared the general regard for the image of the cowboy as representing values being lost in the urbanization of America.¹⁸⁸ The same nostalgic attachment to pastoral, rural settings of the past was represented by the cowboy myth. The cowboy was one of the last remnants of an agrarian way of life and this sentiment resonated with the American consumers in the 1930s.

Hillbilly artists during the thirties quickly acclimated to the evolving musical landscape of the era. Some of the musicians changed their looks and styles in

¹⁸⁸ Wilgus, *Country-Western Music and the Urban Hillbilly*, 166.

order to survive and be successful, while others were influenced by outside factors such as jazz and western swing. Fiddle bands continued to flourish and their development was rather straight-line: they became smoother and more integrated; when they became “hotter” it was largely through the influence of pop jazz.¹⁸⁹ The newer, polished sounds emphasized harmonies and clarity and artists quickly abandoned the grittiness and real-life qualities of the early hillbilly artists.

The blues tradition had a great impact on hillbilly music and the development of country-western varieties. Southeastern performers were singing “white” blues and playing hot instrumentals in the 1920s. Jimmie Rodgers popularized both the songs and the style, so that there was no regional limitation to the style in the 1930s. But the tradition flourished most significantly in Louisiana, Texas, and Oklahoma. It was in this area, rather than in the hillbilly communities of the industrial North, that the greatest acculturation took place. Whereas in the Southeast the frolic pieces, the blues, and the sentimental songs coexisted in the repertory, usually with stylistic differences in performance, they tended to coalesce in the southwestern tradition, dominated by the blues-jazz influence.¹⁹⁰ The development of the western sound and cowboy myth emerged out of a complex array of social and economical events in the late thirties that combined to launch the country-western genre into the mainstream.

The urbanization of the southwest sector of the United States was a major contributing factor in popularizing cowboy and country-western music. There are

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 167.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

a number of explanations for country-western acculturation, from the influence of the Louisiana blues and jazz traditions to the oil boom in Texas and Oklahoma. At the country dances and in taverns or honky-tonks, the older Anglo oriented country music met Cajun, blues, jazz, and even Mexican styles. The strength of the Anglo folk tradition had long been undermined by the growing heterogeneity of the population; there was such a restrictive set of urban pop music values obtained in the North; and there was a meeting of many traditions on a folk level. The southeastern white folk culture tended to reaffirm its values in the face of cultural exchange. The hillbilly ghettos in the North were continually reaching back to their heritage, but the folk music of the Southwest became the leading urban hillbillies.¹⁹¹ The Southwest provided a new pattern for hillbilly artists to follow and musicians in the Southeast and North quickly followed suit and adopted newer styles and imagery as the music grew and became popularized.

Finally, the emergence of the cowboy and western themes were as symbolic as the emergence of the hillbilly in the early twenties. Both of these personas provided and represented a simpler, more innocent time in American history. Without the comedic foolishness of the hillbilly, the cowboy could have never captured the hearts of a nation. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, these two exceptionally different but similar folk icons came to symbolize and represent the advance of technology and the progressiveness of the age. In a time of the radio, phonograph, automobile, speakeasy, and motion picture, the hillbilly and cowboy rose to soften the quickly changing paces of modernity.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 168.

The South and the Appalachian south had been through an inordinate social struggle in the late nineteenth century and were involved in a social reinvention during the early part of the twentieth century. The South of the 1930s closely resembled the South of the 1920s; many places in the region, in fact, looked as they did in 1900. The South was still a rural, agrarian region in the midst of an urban, industrial nation. In its isolation, the South was able to preserve and maintain some the traditions and values that were evident at the outset of the nation's beginning. In its isolation from American society, the rural South clung to the values and customs that shaped its identity. For many rural white southerners, country or traditional music manifested their worldview in addition to offering an avenue for entertainment. White southerners listened to country music because its lyrics and themes captured the particulars of their lives while the music provided a reason to congregate with friends and family. White southerners looked on music as an important social and religious part of their lives.¹⁹² Music provided a social momentum within Appalachia and the South. Musical gatherings and events were a reason for people to congregate and socialize with one another.

Hillbilly musicians and the hillbilly genre played significant roles in the acclimation of rural southern life into a modern, urbanized South. With the acceptance of the hillbilly, the South assumed a social responsibility to inherent traditions and its heritage. By embracing the past and welcoming an overly-stereotyped figure, the mountain South was essentially condoning and accepting

¹⁹² Jeffrey Lange, *Smile When You Call Me A Hillbilly: Country Music's Struggle for Respectability, 1939-1954*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004): 19-20.

an often-ridiculed, regional misrepresentation. As the South became more modernized and a new generation migrated to the urban centers of the North and Southwest, the need for a newer, cleaner bucolic images emerged and the hillbilly imagery and associations were acclimated into the western imagery of the cowboy or dropped altogether.

Both the cowboy and hillbilly provided much needed pastoral representations of an outdated agrarian society as well as a social buffering for the impending march into modernity that the South was experiencing and adjusting to. The rise and popularity of the hillbilly genre in a sense represents the complex, changing times of the early twentieth century. His popularity underscores a region's struggle for identity and definition in the face of a modern, industrialized society. The entertainment and comedic qualities that the hillbilly possessed were essential in the acclimatizing of a rural South into the modern age.

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York: Simon & Schuster, 2002.

VITA

RYAN CARLSON BERNARD

Personal Data: Date of Birth: July 15, 1973

 Place of Birth: Kingsport, Tennessee

 Marital Status: Single

Education: Public Schools, Kingsport, Tennessee

 Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro,
Tennessee; Recording Industry Management, B.S.,
2000.

 East Tennessee State University, Johnson City,
Tennessee; Appalachian Studies, (MALS), M.A. 2006.

Professional Experience: Administrative Assistant, Eminent Records. LLC.,
Nashville, Tennessee, 1999-2001.

 Manager, Cat's CDs, Kingsport, Tennessee, 2002-
2005.

 Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University,
School of Liberal Studies (MALS), 2005-2006.

 Head Counselor, Tennessee Governor's School for
Tennessee Heritage, 2005.

Related Experience: "Handbooks to Hymnals", Middle Tennessee State
University, 1999

Appalachia Studies Conference, Radford, Virginia,
2005.Appalachia Studies Conference, Dayton, Ohio,
2006