



**Edited and with an Introduction by  
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## **Introduction**

### **Why Now? A Millennial Folk Revival?**

1. The success of the Coen Brothers' 2000 movie, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, and its Appalachian- and Bluegrass-inflected soundtrack seemed to come out of the blue. When considered alongside other artifacts of popular culture from recent years—the re-release of the Harry Smith *Anthology of American Folk Music*, Moby's album *Play*, and the popularity of the Dixie Chicks, to name a few—it is clear that the new interest in music drawing on “folk” or “roots” influences has obvious precedents. At the same time, *O Brother's* popularity has spawned a wide array of “follow up” products and projects: new folk anthologies, books, concert tours, TV series, documentaries, women-in-bluegrass collections, soundtracks, and even church musicals. Taken as a package, it seems we are in the midst of a “folk revival”—a period when popular (and corporate) culture looks to music, art, and other cultural forms that are seen as “folkloric,” treated as if created by communities of music-makers without the interference or mediation of technology.
2. There have been many previous folk revivals in this century, the most (in)famous of which occurred in the late 50s and early 60s, including performers such as Pete Seeger and Joan Baez and collectors such as Alan Lomax. The 60s revival—whose presence is very much felt in the

current moment—itself looked to a revival of the early twentieth century, when collectors such as Cecil Sharp, Olive Dame Campbell, and John Lomax (Alan's father) headed into the rural parts of the United States in search of "authentic" indigenous expressions.

3. Because of the disparate paths that led participants to this music, it struck *ECHO* that this phenomenon required explanation—what is this thing (is it a thing at all?) and why is it happening now? What is its connection to earlier folk revivals, and how is it different? This symposium and the separate articles it contains argue that there is indeed something real and important happening in this realm of popular culture that participates in the negotiation of national identity, historical memory, and technology. Like its predecessors, this folk revival comes at a time of dramatic demographic change, the centralization of large corporations, and the rapid rise of new technology (the internet, in particular) that effects the way we relate to one another, to our communities, and to our nation on the most fundamental levels.

### **How Now? The Symposium**

4. This symposium does not attempt to deal comprehensively with the large issues this revival raises. Instead we offer six perspectives on elements of this phenomenon and an initial discussion of its cultural implications. Our contributors deal with a variety of questions and approach them from different viewpoints as scholars and as individuals. Jeff Todd Titon and Bill Hogeland examine the relationship between the current revival and its antecedents. Looking at Ralph Stanley, who has recently been made into something of a patriarch (the "king of mountain soul," as Patty Loveless dubbed him in a recent concert), Titon places his current reinvention in historical context. In light of the *American Roots Music* television series, Hogeland interrogates the issues of canonicity it raises. Anthony Seeger and Alan Williams consider how revival artifacts are made. Having been the head of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings for many years, Seeger examines the concept of the folk music anthology through the *The Alan Lomax Collection*. Investigating issues of recording production, Williams brings to bear his experience as a producer to explain the role of technology in creating sounds that signify the "rootsiness" so important to the revival aesthetic. Rachel Howard and Walter Nelson provide insight into how mass-mediated cultural artifacts connect to the personal and community experiences of fans and musicians. Howard discusses the unfolding of this phenomena from the

perspective of a community of musicians and enthusiasts that formed around the Library of Congress's American Folklife Center and the D.C.-West Virginia Old-Time scene. Nelson reviews the movie *Songcatcher* and critiques the film, soundtrack(s), and DVD as cultural products.

5. An overarching theme running throughout these articles is folk music and even folk revivalism as commodified practice. Of course, all the American revivals of the twentieth century have (at least) intersected with a market-driven economy and have reified music in recordings. This obsession with collections and objectification continues with the *O Brother* phenomenon: the success of its soundtrack has identified (and created) a new market for authenticity in the form of commercially available records. In some sense, the symposium articles focus on the folk revival as it is manifested in objects (CDs, DVDs, books, instruments, etc.) and how participants, including consumers, invest them with meaning.
6. We are pleased to present authors from a wide variety of backgrounds working with different critical methods. We have included ethnomusicologists, archivists, journalists, educators, and performers with several kinds of writing styles and formats (reviews, scholarly articles, historical narratives, and personal narratives). In addition to providing various perspectives and topics pertaining to the revival, the collection represents the multi-faceted nature of the revival itself as something that attracts many kinds of people.

### **What Now? Reviving Revival Debate**

7. The preliminary discussion contained in this roundtable points to many areas that remain to be investigated. Perhaps the most important is an in-depth investigation of the racial implications of the current folk revival. The audience and musicians at the forefront of this phenomenon are overwhelmingly white, occasionally black, rarely Native American or Latino, and almost never Asian. This whiteness is especially conspicuous on the scholarly and collecting side, marginalizing the work of figures like Bernice Johnson Reagon and Harry Belafonte, both of whom produced collections of African American traditions that fall into a similar rubric as the one presented here.
8. An additional issue is the impact of technology on the ways we relate to one another, our communities, and music. As the internet provides

a new space for community formation and facilitates the dissemination of recorded music, people experience their communities and the musical imagination of their nation in a new way. Where other revivals have placed a strong emphasis on do-it-yourself music-making and on forging personal connections through such activity, this revival seems to have substantially displaced that impulse in favor of popular recordings.

9. In presenting this roundtable, we hope to begin a discussion of the cultural implications raised by the revival at the beginning of the new millenium. We are undoubtedly in a period of tremendous change and reflection about what it means to be American, and what America means to those outside its borders. "Folk music," constructed in various ways, has long been an arena of imagining nationhood, and, we believe, it is vital that we interpret this phenomenon to understand the nation we are imagining.

## **DISCOGRAPHY**

Belafonte, Harry, comp. *The Long Road to Freedom: An Anthology of Black Music*. Buddha, 2001.

Reagon, Bernice Johnson, comp. *Wade in the Water: African American Sacred Music Traditions*. Smithsonian Folkways, 1994.

## **Petrified Roots: *American Roots Music***

### **William Hogeland**

1. “That’s authentic! That’s real!” the late R&B singer Rufus Thomas says during the opening sequence of the PBS series *American Roots Music*. Other talking heads in this series concur: roots music is “not disposable pop fluff,” Marty Stuart says. Ricky Skaggs observes, “[it] may flow over here into commercial music,” but it always “connect[s] us to the old.” It’s “the root system”; it “gives the entire new century a canvas to paint on.” While impressionistic in the extreme, these definitions, applied liberally or just impartially, might have led the producers to embrace swing, hip-hop, Al Jolson, klezmer, and who knows what, with resulting verve. Instead, *American Roots Music* limits itself to a familiar trio, blues, country, and gospel; a narrow selection of those styles’ antecedents and beneficiaries; and (in the final hour) Cajun/zydeco, tejano, and Native American music, whose rescue from near oblivion is presented as having been inspired by the preservation of the big three.
2. The tale, in other words, is really that of folk revival and cultural preservation, as seen exclusively from the official and institutional vantage points that the revival has achieved during the past thirty years. Roots music was permanently defined, for the purposes of this series, in the early 60s at the Newport Folk Festivals; its meanings have been nurtured, developed, and expressed since then by such institutions as the Smithsonian, the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, the Library of Congress, and public broadcasting, whose mandates involve not only encouraging the music’s preservation but also—and decisively for the nature of this series—instructing the public in its history and meaning. An evocation of Newport serves as the series’ emotional and intellectual climax; that climax is followed by a long denouement leading to, among other things, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Because the series itself represents yet another expression of the folk revival’s successful progress from festivity to officialdom, *American Roots Music* ends up squandering a wealth of amazingly fresh archival material on what turns out to be an eerily tuneless paean to its own makers, funders, and mentors.

3. Nothing could be more boring, but there is an infuriating irony involved too, with ramifications for current and future manifestations of folk revival. In a breathless Procrustean lather, *American Roots Music* permits itself repeated bouts of disingenuousness, as it lops off vital elements and stretches others painfully thin. The curators on whom we rely to present this music in popular and accessible form seem so preoccupied with enshrining what they consider authentic, and eradicating what they don't, that they have removed all conflict and personality—all life, really—from this vision of the music they are supposed to be committed to preserving.
4. An especially close relationship to folk tradition, the series both states and persistently implies, is what makes the selected music “roots.” The introductory segment points out that the music—with known authors and mass-mediated transmission—is not folk in the musicological sense. Still, the voiceover narration, as read by Kris Kristofferson, defines roots music as grounded in “folk songs, hundreds of years old and not written down,” and throughout, the series directly equates roots with folk: “folk, or roots music”; “Ralph Peer was looking for folk music”; “a thing called folk music, or roots music.” The introduction to the beautiful accompanying coffee-table book describes roots music as an “updated and expanded evolution of American folk music” and commercial media as an addition to oral transmission. According to this essay, a roots artist is an emissary from a folk community, consciously carrying on American musical traditions, embracing technology in order to share those traditions, chronicling gender and class relationships and racial tensions. Since nothing in the history of blues and country—often even as presented in this series!—comes close to bearing out that fanciful description, *American Roots Music* resorts to tortuous pathways in illustrating its authors' favored notions about the proper role of music in tradition and community.
5. Blues, for example, is “founded on an ancient African call-and-response style of singing.” Having defined blues only in this way, the series is off to the Delta, thence to Chicago and rock and today's intermittent lionizing of electric blues. Describing this strain of guitar-accompanied blues as having come almost exclusively from call-and-response singing and ignoring all non-African sources of call-and-response might be explained as necessary oversimplifications. But the series presents the Delta-Chicago-Stones arc as blues at its most essentially bluesy: the music of Bessie Smith is described as “a particular form” of blues, “sung by the soloist fronting jazz

orchestras.” This vacuous distinction between blues and a jazz-backed variant allows the series not only to ignore the likes of Ma Rainey (associated here exclusively with jazz), Joe Williams, and Helen Humes, say, but also to neaten almost into nonexistence the messy creative relationships that once prevailed among ragtime, jazz, and rural and urban blues. As the blues historians involved in the project surely know, Delta and other country players were often adapting reed-brass-keyboard music to guitar, and attempts to give country blues especially primal links to Africa are notoriously problematic.

6. This blues story culminates, post-Newport, in the triumphant assertion that the great Chicago artists are “still revered in the clubs.” But reverence hardly describes the circumstances in which those artists created their art: today’s blues bars represent a potentially interesting shift (at least partly an effect of folk revival) in social, racial, and class conditions. The series pretends this shift doesn’t exist even while giving us blues-in-the-schools, with kids in a classroom singing “I’m a man” from “Mannish Boy.” The scene is charming and funny; it’s also such a far cry from the spirit of Muddy Waters and Son House that it unwittingly contradicts the triumphant suggestion that blues has been revived and kept alive and now can never die. The celebration seems really to be for the permanent establishment of blues as venerable and educationally valuable, its history an important set of lessons that every boy and girl should learn in class. (The lecturing tone of some of the talking heads enhances this feeling.) Delta and Chicago blues themselves, and all the adult intensity, sensitivity, and sexuality that the archival material so beautifully dramatizes—this sequence might as well be saying—no longer really exists.
7. The filmmakers include Jim Brown and Sam Pollard, experienced students of American vernacular history; their advisors include Bernice Johnson Reagon, Charles Wolfe, Pete Daniel, David Evans—these really are among the great experts on blues. Yet the series places the origins of blues exclusively in ancient African singing and says of jazz only that it is “based on blues.” It deftly elides the way rock and roll did not bear out but temporarily sidelined Muddy Waters’s American career; it ignores John Hurt’s having played at least as much in a ragtime as in a “folk” style. The really devastating thing is that these can’t be mistakes.
8. The filmmakers are surely also aware of the irony in playing “Wildwood Flower” while presenting the Carter Family and their

repertoire as steeped in the oldest traditions, which the series has called “not written down.” The Carters’ music is repeatedly described as “old”—and “Wildwood Flower” certainly qualifies. But as many people know, “Wildwood Flower” doesn’t spring from Anglo-American folk music but was composed by professionals, as “I’ll Twine ‘Mid the Ringlets,” published for an urban Yankee audience in the mid-nineteenth century. In failing to mention the song’s origins while insisting on the Carters’ back-country aura, the “past being brought up into the present” (as the series describes the Carters’ music) is an entirely different past from the one on which their music—and country music as a whole—was actually founded.

9. A compelling aspect of early recorded country is the glimpse it affords of rural Southerners’ adapting the urban parlor vision of rural life, making its floweriness their own, embracing the Victoriana that was growing outmoded in cities, and endowing country with trademark weepiness—a process at least as important to the origins of hillbilly as transmission of folksong. And the Carters combined urban Victoriana with their own versions of ragtime and blues, not then “old” at all. The series further declines to acknowledge that much banjo-fiddle music collected in the Appalachians has antecedents in compositions by Stephen Foster and others for the Northern minstrel stage, which itself came from another kind of collecting, the appropriation and parody of black slaves’ music. (Slave music, in turn, came partly from both parody of and compliance with the formally composed music popular among slave-owners.) This is the crippling yet apparently necessary omission at the heart of *American Roots Music*. The series makes much of the impact of roots music on mainstream pop but persistently denies the decisive impact of theatrical, parlor, and other commercial, composed, and published forms on rural Southern music, both black and white, in the centuries before the advent of recording. The decisive impact, that is, of mainstream pop.
10. Uncle Dave Macon is thus described as a preserver of “rare folk ballads.” Though almost entirely untrue, the designation gets tossed in as if in desperate hope of legitimizing Macon’s importance to country music. The series must acknowledge Macon’s broad vaudeville-minstrel style, but by manufacturing a link to some archaic Anglo-America, the filmmakers resist acknowledging how that style undermines their precepts. There’s no choice but to admit that Jimmie Rodgers, too, played sentimental and music-hall material—though the central place of ragtime in his repertoire is ignored, and Rodgers’s background in blackface is censored. Minstrelsy may be the most



ragged wound in this story: you'd never know that Rufus Thomas began his career in the fabled Rabbit Foot Minstrels (his stories might have been riveting), or that blackface characters were common in early hillbilly bands. And without minstrelsy, it's hard to imagine any honest or even interesting history of either blues or country.

11. It goes on. Hollywood cowboys get in where other pop stars wouldn't, maybe because John Lomax's cowboy songbook starts the revival story. Appalachian and blues elements in Bob Wills's music are emphasized over jazz elements. The term "bluegrass" is said to have been given to the music by Bill Monroe, who at least as late as the early 50s, when the term was first coming into common use, would have angrily denied that any such music existed. Extreme racist Henry Ford's crucial role in the spread of fiddlers conventions is never mentioned. Ragtime goes unacknowledged, yet again, in Merle Travis's music—and Travis's folksier hit songs, lauded in the series, are not acknowledged as uncharacteristic attempts to benefit from the folk craze. Lefty Frizzell's vocal style is called influential for bringing not pop stylizing to country but "the Southern drawl" to music. Elvis Presley, lauded by B.B. King and (in the recollection of Sam Phillips) Bill Monroe, appears never to have caused upset among either black or white musicians, just as bluegrass and honky-tonk seem always to have lived comfortably side by side, happy to be part of the "rich gumbo" that is American roots music. And the filmmakers know better.
12. The final hour addresses tejano, Cajun/zydeco, and Native American music. It thus recapitulates the progress of the folk revival itself, as in the late 60s and the 70s young revivalists delved into ethnomusicology and specialization, beginning careers that led to, among other things, this series. The folk revival has been presented in previous segments as crucial to the survival of country, blues, and gospel (in the approved styles): "Most Americans were still not aware of a thing called folk music, or roots music"—(a radically new conception of the folk!)—"but that was about to change." The Newport sequence concludes by dubbing Doc Watson a "national treasure," deftly connecting the folk revival's triumph at Newport to its future connection with officialdom. Having established Newport styles in bluegrass, country, gospel, and blues as the roots canon, the series now turns to the salvation of other music.
13. Music of other cultures, that is. "All My Children of the Sun," as the last hour is titled, dramatizes the claim that post-Newport efforts to

preserve and popularize Cajun, zydeco, tejano, and Native American music have reinvigorated entire cultures. It's not made overwhelmingly obvious that these forms "gradually became accepted as important cornerstones of American music," or that, if they did, it's to the undying credit of revivalist "history lessons," as Marc Savoy forthrightly calls his accordion jam sessions. The Native American case is painfully weak. Nobody really thinks—least of all, no doubt, Native American musicians—that this music will ever get a fraction of the credit among fans of rootsy pop that zydeco and tejano do. The salient issues in Native American music are of another order than those in the other forms; the subject cries out for far less glib treatment than it can get here.

14. The mood and strategy of the last hour are epitomized by a clip of people sweatily cavorting in a bar to the Cajun-and-zydeco-influenced music of Steve Riley. Narration over the party: "It's hard to imagine that thirty-five years ago this same community felt that its music had little value." Hard indeed: that's quite a statement to make about how any community ever felt; moreover, this rocking video moment doesn't say much about how this community feels now. And if truths are buried in all the gushing, how would we know? "Wildwood Flower" has a particular history, and Joe Williams sang as much blues as Muddy Waters, and Bill Monroe didn't give the name "bluegrass" to his music, and the filmmakers know it. What is really hard to imagine is how seriously to take anything in this last hour, which gives an unsettlingly, contradictory impression. In one way, this conclusion seems a patronizing dumping ground for music that it would be wrong to leave out. Yet in attempting to link the "roots artist"—that culturally authentic, socially sensitive emissary to modernity described in the book's introductory essay—not only to current values of cultural education but also to the original development of country, blues, and gospel, the final segment also supplies pretext and specious justification for all the distortions that came before.
15. In the end, it's not only the likes of Son House and Hank Williams whose energies the series tries to squeeze into the narrowest channels. The Lomaxes and Seegers and Peter Paul and Mary and those revolutionary Newport events, with all their passion, idiosyncrasy, and sheer eagerness for discovery, are subordinated, too, to orthodoxies used reflexively to certify the value of American vernacular music's history. There simply must be a new way—at the very least a livelier and more honest way—to engage the dazzling wealth of art with which we've been blessed by musicians, collectors,

entrepreneurs, musicologists, researchers, and others. The approach represented by *American Roots Music* has long grown, at best, calcified. Revival, anyone?

### **WORKS CITED**

*American Roots Music*. CD Anthology. Palm, 2001.

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Santelli, Robert, Holly George-Warren, and Jim Brown. *American Roots Music*. New York: Abrams, 2001.

## **Everything Old is New Again: *Songcatcher* and the “Old-Time Music” Revival**

**Walter Nelson**

1. For decades I have been going along, figuring that only my wife, some of my friends and I liked the quirky old stuff, sung by odd people with accents and idiosyncratic voices. We have been involved for many years in the performance of “living history,” and have been croaking out old songs for anyone who would listen (actually I have been croaking, my wife Sheila has a very nice voice) as part of public education programs, as well as for our own amusement. I have always been fascinated by music in its “natural” habitat, sung by interesting people in a style that was unique to them.
2. I knew there were a few others out there, though not enough to create much of a selection in Tower records. To feed our craving we had to make an annual pilgrimage to Down Home Music in Richmond, California, where we would drop a huge wad of cash for old-time music, sea shanties, Steeleye Span, Breton music, Scottish Border Ballads, or whatever else struck our fancy, and hope it was enough to hold us until the next year. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* has suddenly made this stuff more or less mainstream, letting it out of the cabin on the lawn and in through the front door of the big house, making it noticeably easier to find “old-time music,” or “roots music,” or whatever it is they are calling it this week. What has not happened however, are any more old-time music movies. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Songcatcher* have their franchises going, and the recording industry seems to be paying a little more attention to the genre, but we are not riding the crest of a music revolution.
3. When *Songcatcher* came out last year, there was never any doubt that my wife and I would see it. We try to go to movies whose genre we approve, even if we aren’t sure we will actually like it. We figure that Hollywood money men are far too thick to tell the difference between a good film in a particular genre and a bad one. All they will see is that an old-time music movie pulled in a few bucks, so maybe they will make another one—and by some happy accident, it might be good. I went to *Songcatcher* with this sense of duty to the genre, not really expecting to love it. I had loved *O Brother* for its music and for its quirky Coen Brothers sensibility, which, while it appeals to me, is

not everyone's cup of tea. Unfortunately, the surprising success of *O Brother* and the minor art house success of *Songcatcher* has not led to a spate of copycat "roots music" movies. Our economic strategy has failed to have the desired effect on the movie industry.

4. This film has much to say about women's empowerment and the preservation of disappearing traditions, making for a tolerable viewing experience. The earnestness of *Songcatcher* was, to me, a bit off-putting. The story was not gripping nor entirely engaging, but was not painful either. Like the dialogue in a kung fu movie, it made a bridge between the real pieces of meat in the film. In a kung fu movie, improbable fight scenes with crude sound effects give the movie its anchor and its charm. In *Songcatcher* it is musical performances.
5. When the camera settles on some weathered face and the music begins, the movie slows to a halt, and that's just fine with me. Iris Dement sitting with her greasy hair and dirty mountain schmata on a rocking chair on the porch of a cabin, singing "Pretty Saro"—an old and melancholy ballad—was a high point of the movie for me. However, the set-up to Iris's one and only scene was a bit contrived. She and her husband had, as the scene opened, been forced to sell their farm at a loss to the film's villain, who is acquiring land for the mining companies. However, despite having just that instant lost everything they had in the world, they take the time to sing a song for the heroine. The scene, though contrived, had tremendous impact on this viewer. It was a bit of shameless emotional manipulation, which at least on me, worked pretty well. More than anything else in the film, this scene advanced the central premise: in the Mountains, music was as natural and integral to life as breathing, eating, drinking, laughing and weeping.
6. I suppose, having jumped ahead to the best bits, I should say something about the rest of the movie: it is a work of fiction "inspired," as the movie folk say, "by real events." It follows the adventures of a female musicologist (played by Janet McTeer) some time around 1910, who leaves her university teaching job and married lover after being passed over by her insensitive male chauvinist bosses for a promotion (to which one might interject—it's 1910, lady—what did you expect?). She flees to the Appalachians of North Carolina to hide from the world with her sister, a crusading school marm and closet lesbian who is trying to educate the mountain people. McTeer's character immediately realizes, after hearing the girl who helps out around the school singing that old British standard

“Barbara Allen,” that the mountain people are a priceless treasury of an unbroken folk tradition. She then launches a campaign to document and record the mountain musical tradition. This leads to various adventures, encounters with colorful characters, love with the character played by Aidan Quinn, and (here’s the important part) a fair amount of very fine traditional music.

7. There is an important difference between this movie and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* in the music. The same earnestness that infuses *Songcatcher’s* story also leads to a very simple, “authentic,” and in some ways more scholarly presentation of the music, as performed by excellent musicians like Iris Dement, Taj Mahal, Don Pedi, Sheila Kay Adams, Josh Goforth, including a tag-team performance of “Conversation with Death” by David Patrick Kelley, Bobby McMillan and Hazel Dickens.
8. Much of this, though alas not all, is available on the soundtrack CD. Being a soundtrack, it had to include the orchestral bits composed by David Mansfield (the director’s husband) and only a few of the pieces I remembered and liked from the movie. Furthermore, to fill it out, they added songs “in the spirit of” by artists like Dolly Parton. The orchestral bits and modern songs are not bad, but also are not what I feel like listening to when I pop an old-time music CD in my machine.
9. Worst of all, the young woman who played the-girl-who-helps-out-around-the-school, Emmy Rossum—who has a wonderful voice for acapella music—was excluded from the soundtrack CD with the exception of a brief lead in Emmy Lou Harris’s modern rendition of “Barbara Allen.” I had looked forward to hearing her tackle an entire song on the CD, since she was invariably interrupted in the movie just as she got rolling. I was disappointed. I can only suppose that the limited budget of the *Songcatcher* producers or other logistical problems made it unfeasible to pile all the traditional musicians who appeared on screen into a studio to do full renditions of the pieces they only did parts of in the film. I also suppose that the producers felt like a soundtrack must document the music of the film, and since the film included some orchestral tracks, they too must appear on the CD. One might also conclude that with the composer being married to the director, it would be pretty unlikely that his work would be absent from the soundtrack CD. Then, I guess, after putting together the few complete traditional tracks, the modern rendition of “Barbara Allen,” and the orchestral tracks, they realized that they didn’t have enough

to fill a CD, so they asked Dolly Parton and others to whip up a few more pieces.

10. Which brings me to the recently released *Songcatcher* DVD: the DVD includes, in addition to the film itself, an interesting collection of extras. One of them is a feature that I generally find tedious and self-indulgent, but which was very interesting on this film. It was the “commentary” section with the director Maggie Greenwald and her composer husband David Mansfield talking while the film is running. While I wouldn’t suggest having this feature turned on the first time you view the film, the background on the performers, and the interesting and quite frank historical comments (like) “there were no female musicologists teaching at men’s colleges in 1910” or “Jean Ritchie popularized the dulcimer for American music in the 1950s, and you wouldn’t really have seen one in the mountains” were quite informative and often amusing—if only for the confessions about their deliberate bending of history for theatrical purposes. Other special features include the extended performances by Iris Dement singing “Pretty Saro,” Taj Mahal doing some fancy banjo picking, and an extended and very chilling rendition of “Conversation with Death,” with some seldom performed verses about the torments of Hell and the fact that it’s too late to repent when Death is at hand.
11. To balance out these interesting and informative features, they have included the requisite collection of useless crap DVD features. The foremost of these is the “music track only” feature, which deletes the dialogue and sound effects tracks and has nothing but the orchestral score and instrumental backgrounds. Included in the missing dialogue track are all the on-screen vocal performances, so you hear nothing but silence when Emmy Rossum is singing “Barbara Allen,” and all you hear is fiddle when Iris Dement is singing. It’s a bit surreal, and of probable interest to no one but the film student who wants to see the integration of a musical score without the distraction of dialogue. Unfortunately, while the orchestral score is competent, it is not particularly remarkable, and a discussion of it would not provide much grist for a graduate student’s dissertation mill. After having heard the detailed commentary track, the interview section seems a bit thin, and the interviews with Aidan Quinn and Janet McTeer were particularly fluffy and could just as well have been on *Entertainment Tonight*.
12. The sum of all this, and the sum of the movie, is that it really is about the music. The film is a vehicle to present traditional mountain music

in an approximation of its proper context, and when it focuses on that, the film and its DVD succeed. It would have been a better movie for me if it had crammed in a little more music, and spent a little less time on exposition, but then that might just be my prejudices showing.

13. A logical extension of CDs that focus on modern performances of traditional music is to produce CDs containing original recordings of the songs that inspired the movies. Both the *O Brother* franchise and the *Songcatcher* folks have done this, and both CDs are worth a listen. The most recent *O Brother* CD is titled *O Brother: The Story Continues*. The CD contains twenty-four tracks, most of which date from the 30s to the 50s. It includes two versions of "Man of Constant Sorrow" and two more of that massive mega hit "Oh Death/Conversation with Death" that won Ralph Stanley a Grammy. The exception to the original recording format for *O Brother: The Story Continues* are the recent recordings of Negro spirituals.
14. "Conversation With Death" also makes an appearance on the *Songcatcher* follow-up *Songcatcher II: The Tradition That Inspired the Movie*. This CD contains seventeen tracks, most of which are performed by Doc Watson or Almeda Riddle, with a few by Dock Boggs and others. It also includes one of my favorites: "Babes in the Woods," a wonderful example of saccharine and maudlin Victorian sentimental drivel infecting the folk tradition.
15. One should also mention the original *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack CD, which, unlike the *Songcatcher* soundtrack, is entirely uncontaminated with orchestral music. Even pieces like "Go to Sleep Little Baby," which were written for the movie, fit in nicely with the other songs. My only gripe with the *O Brother* CD is the screen saver feature that is available if you happen to put it in your computer. It murdered my employer's Windows 98 machine entirely, and took me quite some time to repair and uninstall.
16. To round out the movie-related materials, one must of course include the "Down From the Mountain" concert tour, CD and video from our *O Brother* friends. The concert came to Southern California early last year, and was about as good as it gets, with the Fairfield Four, Alison Kraus, Emmylou Harris, Ralph Stanley, others too numerous to mention, and special surprise appearances by Taj Mahal and Tim Blake Nelson (dumb-as-a-bag-of-hammers Delmer from the movie). The live CD is good too, as is the video; but all are a pale reflection of



the experience of the folk music all-star show that was the live performance. This is a show that would never have happened were it not for the surprising success of that goofy Coen Brothers film.

17. With these films, disks, and videos coming out, there seems to be something very interesting going on. The greater availability of music from the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia (a.k.a. "World Music") points to a growing interest in alternative musical forms, most of which are devoid of high-tech recording techniques, audio wizardry and "sampling." This has been accompanied by a partial rejection by the rock mainstream of the electronically overproduced in programs like "MTV Unplugged." I say "partial rejection" since those same artists who appear one night with their acoustic guitar on the same stage with a hurdy-gurdy will be in the studio the next day, being electronically enhanced.
18. The mainstream will always favor the slick and highly produced, and will embrace every new technological gimmick. It will also tend to favor the formulaic and annoying, presented by almost indistinguishable performers (is it just me, or does anyone else need a score card to distinguish between Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears?). However, we old curmudgeons can take some solace in the greater availability of our kind of music, and the fragmented media market of our times makes it very easy to tune out \*NSYNC and listen to something more congenial. Something that has an unbroken connection to the entire history of a people and something that has a human face, soul and voice; and something I can sing along with or take a partner in my arms and dance to.

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## **Revivals, Authenticity, Ralph Stanley, and the *O Brother* Phenomenon**

### **Jeff Todd Titon**

1. When Ralph Stanley won the Grammy award for best vocalist in 2001, no one was more surprised than I, except possibly some of my students. Along with Bill Monroe and Earl Scruggs, the Stanley Brothers are touchstones in the old-time, bluegrass, and country music course I've offered at Brown for the past fifteen years. About ten years ago it occurred to me that in addition to teaching the history of bluegrass it would be fun to try to get the students to sing it. They might as well learn from the best, I thought; and so generations of Brown students have gone around singing Ralph's tenor parts and Carter's melodies. Few had heard of Ralph Stanley before trying to sing like him, but afterward I doubt many forgot him, or his haunting voice—a voice well known for more than fifty years, if only to bluegrass aficionados, before he hit the big time in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, with "O Death."
2. The magnificent tone quality of Ralph Stanley's voice was born, not made; but he learned his curves, glides, and falsetto catches as a child from hearing the music of his family's Primitive Baptist Universalist denomination in church and at home. Popularly called the No-Hellers, because they don't believe there is a hell, this obscure religious group from central Appalachia sings very much like the Old Regular Baptists (see Dorgan, and Cornett, Titon, and Wallhausser); and of course the singing style and tune stock is the same mixture of English and Scots-Irish that came into the southern Appalachian Mountains with ballads and fiddle tunes, though it's likely that some of the style's characteristic melismata, free rhythm, and slow tempo were fashioned in a black/white musical interchange.
3. Why Ralph Stanley, and why today? He has, after all, long been recognized as a major artist in bluegrass. The Stanleys, who began recording in the late 1940s, were among the most popular early bluegrass bands, performing on fifteen-minute segments on local radio stations and playing in small venues throughout the South. Bluegrass never made much impact on the national country music charts, however, and by the late 1950s it was in decline, victimized by rockabilly and easy-listening country music. Just then it entered a

revival phase and found a new audience among (sub)urban, middle-class, college-educated young men. Part of the 1960s folk revival, this bluegrass revival began the series of festivals that brought under one tent many star bluegrass groups and featured the “parking lot picking” that made, and still makes, bluegrass a music for serious amateurs as well as professionals.

4. Carter Stanley died in 1966; after Ralph emerged from mourning, he continued his music as Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys. Over his fifty-year career he has recorded more albums than any other bluegrass musician—185 is a ballpark figure. His popularity spans at least three audiences: the original bluegrass audience in the upland South in the 1940s and 1950s when it was a regional niche music; the added bluegrass revival audience from the late 1950s to the present; and the audience that was introduced to him through *O Brother* and the recent albums where he is paired with other “roots” musicians. It is useful in this context to distinguish him as a “source” musician, an old-timer who has profoundly influenced younger musicians down through the years. What do these three audiences hear in his voice? Each projects its own images of authenticity onto him.
5. In the 1940s and 1950s the bluegrass audience understood Stanley as one of their own. He sang and played their music, but he did so in a virtuosic way. Radio and concert recordings from the period reveal that The Stanley Brothers also participated with gusto in the stereotypical stage humor that had entertained people in the rural South and Midwest for decades—a humor based on stubborn animals, dumb farmers, and ignorant city folks. The Stanley Brothers often entertained at rural fairs, stock car races, and other regionally appropriate venues. As a part of their shows, one of their band members performed sound effects of daredevil auto rides. What their audience saw in them, then, were good old boys as they wanted to be, in control and command of a tradition they identified with. The Stanleys projected not only good-old-boy virtuosity, but also good-old-boy sentiment. Their concert repertory regularly included waltzes, gospel songs, and secular songs whose lyrics reveal that peculiar combination of wanderlust, guilt, and memory of mother and home that construct the textual archetype of bluegrass and country music.
6. The (sub)urban folk revival’s interest in bluegrass, particularly in the 1960s, shared a number of things with prior folk revivals: a distaste for bourgeois values, an antipathy toward the industrial (or post-industrial) state and mass society, and a romantic view of rural life as

more natural and therefore more authentic. Bluegrass, of course, is viewed as a product of that more authentic life. In other significant ways, though, the bluegrass revival was, and is, different from previous folk music revivals. For one thing, the bluegrass revival utterly lacked the nationalism characteristic of European revivals and the racism of the earlier American Appalachian music revival so thoroughly dissected by David Whisnant, though it did not shrink from sexism of the predominantly male bluegrass musical culture. For another, as the revival continued, some of the revivalists who became performers were adopted into the bluegrass culture, a process that continues today. Participation in performance and learning from tradition-bearers like Ralph Stanley is not limited to the bluegrass revival, of course; it is characteristic of Euro-American folk revivals of the later twentieth century.

7. Many of the people who participate in the bluegrass revival come from backgrounds far removed from the Stanleys' rural upbringing in central Appalachia, and sometimes the cultures clash in ways that make it difficult for people to inhabit the same community, other than as a community of music-makers. Yet the romantic impulse in a folk revival is always directed broadly at a way of life represented by music, and not just narrowly at folk performance. A second paradox of this particular revival is that while rejecting the bourgeois values of the corporate world—including the values of getting and spending—many revivalists engage in an excess of bluegrass consumerism, connoisseurship, and a passion for collecting recordings and musical instruments. Finally, as bluegrass is a virtuosic music, difficult to sing and play well, and requiring years of practice even to reach competence, the bluegrass revival embodies both a competitiveness characteristic of music in America and at the same time, at its best, an ideology that denies competitiveness—after all, in a community of musical virtuosos, the good old boy does not try to show anyone up.
8. It is difficult to imagine that the bluegrass revival's romantic pastoral could survive any reasonably intelligent viewing of the *O Brother* movie. It was discussed endlessly on the various American roots music listservs when it appeared, and if the fiddle-l list is a fair representation, the fiddle players (some old-time, some bluegrass, mostly revivalists) who contributed could be divided into those who felt the movie perpetuated the hillbilly stereotype and those who felt it parodied it. Tellingly, no one used the word "authentic" in connection with the film, except perhaps to deny authenticity—the music, for instance, wasn't quite right for the time and place, though on another

level this music appears timeless. Long-time Ralph Stanley appreciators were appalled to hear his voice coming out of the Klan's leader. How could anyone take this movie's story literally? Indeed, this is why the Coen Brothers made so much of the parallels with the *Odyssey*—rather zany, I thought.

9. It's hard to know how many people who made the *O Brother* album a best-seller despite a lack of radio and television airplay actually saw the movie, but I suspect a great many of them did. Some claimed it significant that sales were achieved despite Nashville's indifference. No doubt, but in the *O Brother* film there also are parallels to the reception of another film, *The Blues Brothers*. In both, a public that knew little about roots music was introduced to these things by means of enormously popular cultural icons—John Belushi and Dan Ackroyd in one instance, George Clooney in the other. Many who bought the *O Brother* album do not habitually listen to country music; to them it made no difference that the songs were seldom played on country music radio or TNN. Yet, whereas *The Blues Brothers* showed James Brown, Aretha Franklin, John Lee Hooker, Cab Calloway, and members of the Muscle Shoals Stax/Volt rhythm section performing and acting in the film, Ralph Stanley and most other *O Brother* performers were but disembodied voices on a soundtrack, making it easier for the viewer to disengage the film from these musicians and give the soundtrack album a life of its own.
10. T-Bone Burnett, producer of the music for *O Brother*, is responsible for the eponymous *Ralph Stanley*, a year 2002 release meant to take advantage of the singer's new popularity. Listeners familiar with his earlier work will be badly disappointed. Ralph Stanley nowhere plays banjo, his singing sounds weak, and there isn't a single bluegrass arrangement. Simplistic rather than simple, groove-less despite the presence of all-star musicians, Burnett's production evokes none of bluegrass's drive and tension, and provides only a faint echo of Ralph Stanley's chilling virtuosity, as in "Lift Him Up, That's All." Anyone interested in seeking out the best of Ralph Stanley—and his best is superb—should listen to the Stanley Brothers' Columbia recordings from the years 1949–51, and to the Rebel recordings Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys made in the 1970s.
11. Students at Brown usually have heard me introduce Ralph Stanley as an archaic figure: "Here is someone who at the age of 30 sounded as if he were 70, and now that he is 70 he sounds like he is 170." (He is 75 today.) I have pointed out that in interviews Stanley takes pains to

locate himself within the older traditions, seeing himself not as an innovator but as a perpetuator of old-time music in its more modern representation (bluegrass). It now seems he was ahead of his time, or that the time cycle has for the moment caught up with him. In one view, the Ralph Stanleys and Robert Johnsons of the world labor in their vineyards, waiting to be discovered, to be honored and celebrated, to wear the mantle of authenticity. In a different view, authenticity is an easy target for deconstruction. After all, for fifty years Ralph Stanley was aiming for commercial success, and the opportunity to succeed big time finally came his way. More power to him. It is not as if the "alternative" media industry created cultural icons out of the Primitive Baptist Universalists from whom he learned to sing; and I won't hold my breath until they do. And no one will be more surprised than I when they, or the Old Regular Baptists (whose music the Brown students also learn), are singled out for a Grammy award.

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## **Constant Sorrow: Traditional Music and Fandom**

**Rachel Howard**

1. When Alan Lomax died in July, 2002 at the age of 87, nearly every obituary mentioned the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack, which includes both a recording by Lomax and a song he arranged. I find it fitting that Lomax's epitaphs tie him directly to this platinum-selling package of roots music. Both Lomax's work and the *O Brother* soundtrack have exposed time-tested music to contemporary audiences. Both have inspired a horde of imitators. And both inspire my simultaneous respect and resentment.
2. Lomax's noble impulse to preserve and present vernacular music was long intertwined with his desire to popularize and profit from it. Alan Lomax and his father, John, co-wrote several books aimed at popular rather than academic audiences, combining the lyrics they compiled from their field recordings and the capsule histories of the songs and performers. Those books, and the Library of Congress-published field recording series overseen and edited by Alan Lomax, by then the Assistant in Charge of its Archive of American Folk Song, are important milestones in the study of American folk music. At the same time, the Lomaxes' copyrighted arrangements of traditional songs, their not-always-adequate compensation to performers (yes, I know they recently paid royalties to James Carter, leader of a group of Mississippi prisoners singing "Po' Lazarus," but why did it take over forty years to find him?), and their tendency toward condescension of the very traditions they documented (Leadbelly made to perform in striped prison garb), can be viewed as exploitative.
3. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, for those who have missed the hoopla of the past two years or so, is a musical comedy and adaptation of *The Odyssey*, set in the Depression-era South against a soundscape of old-time music. The Coen Brothers' film pays clever homage to Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels*, borrowing its title from Sturges's unrealized film-within-the-film. The Lomaxes journeyed in search of authentic music; Sullivan traveled as a hobo to experience suffering; Ulysses Everett McGill's odyssey turned toward home and family. The *O Brother* soundtrack, readily available at your local record store, offers one-stop shopping for ballads, blues, gospel, and country music,



although it's often referred to as a "bluegrass" album (perhaps because some of its performances feature bluegrass musicians).

4. In the soundtrack's liner notes, Ethan Coen refers to the music as "harking back to a time when music was a part of everyday life and not something performed by celebrities. That folk aspect of the music both accounts for its vitality and makes it fold naturally into our story without feeling forced or theatrical." He's right about the vitality part—*O Brother's* sales figures and Grammy awards prove that an audience is hungry for this music—but I wonder if he regrets that line about celebrities. The soundtrack's surprising success has made household names of its performers, and the new fans, proud to have discovered this music "without the benefit of radio play" (it has, however, received ample coverage on public radio), nonetheless miss the point by being brand-loyal to the *O Brother* package.
5. My own voyage of discovery into old-time music occurred long after the era of the Lomax type of "songcatcher" and a folk revival or two. In the mid-1990s, I found myself interning in the Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. along with a group of like-minded teen- and twenty-something American Studies and History majors, helping to preserve, file, and produce reference aids for the sound recordings and associated documentation created by the Lomaxes and others throughout a century of field recording. We worked under the direction of Joe Hickerson, a guitarist, singer, and figure of the 1950s-60s "folk boom," who had worked in the Archive since 1963 and had an uncanny memory for all things associated with traditional music and its popularized forms. The director of the American Folklife Center (which includes the Archive of Folk Culture), Alan Jabbour, had recorded a number of Appalachian fiddlers in the 1960s and 1970s and had been prominent in that era's resurgence of old-time string band music as a fiddler in the North Carolina-based Hollow Rock String Band.
6. I was a recent college graduate with broad-ranging musical tastes, a family background in West Virginia instrumental and vocal musical traditions, and a historian's urge to trace things back to their roots. Many other interns were still in school, getting college credit for the internship while scratching similar cultural and historical itches. One, Sara Zoë Patterson of Hudson, New York, was a died-in-the-wool Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie fan who, like Pete, had dropped out of college after one semester and, like Woody, began traveling the country gathering life experiences: she was a canoeing instructor,

organic farmer, and Division III college football manager in the years following her archival internship.

7. The internship was unpaid, so most of us had service industry jobs to sustain us while spending normal office hours working in the Archive. This made it difficult to coordinate schedules for after-hours socializing, but somehow it worked out that we were all free on Tuesday nights. Sara Zoë rented a room in a centrally-located house shared with students and interns of various other Washington non-profits, at 1628 15th Street Northwest, to which she invited the crew from the Archive. She planned a main course and asked that guests bring something else to eat or drink. “And don’t forget your instruments!” Thus was born the Tuesday “1628” tradition.
8. The low-key, participatory nature of the gathering soon attracted a larger following. Joe Hickerson and Alan Jabbour, eager to pass on tunes and tales to the next generation, made appearances, as did other Folklife Center employees, volunteers, and their respective friends. The college students invited others from their American Studies classes. The other residents of 1628, rather than fleeing their home at the first squeak of a fiddle, stuck around on Tuesday nights and even invited their friends—Young Republicans, environmental activists, and skateboarders among them. Reflecting on her housemates’ reactions to the gatherings, Sara Zoë recalls, “It struck me how universal making music live can be—a lot of that music would’ve turned them off in recorded form, but not only did they participate, they invited their friends.” Months later, en route to the Appalachian String Band Festival in Clifftop, West Virginia, a Cuban-American Florida native who lived at 1628 admitted that he’d never been camping, never seen mountains, and “never hung out with so many Anglos”—yet he was drawn there by something about the music, and the coziness of the scene that developed around it.
9. Each participant contributed something to the mix, in addition to the requisite 6-pack or side dish, because even those unable to play an instrument joined in the sing-along, tossed out requests, or banged a spoon against a bottle for what became our rousing finale, “There Ain’t No Grave.” There was no audience, which meant that there could be no star performers. The songs were the stars.
10. Building on the lessons of our internship, we began recording the gatherings. There is as much, if not more, conversation on the tapes as there is music. Conversations tended to kick off with the stories

surrounding the songs: where and from whom they were learned, leading off onto tangents about musical influences and variant lyrics, tunes or titles, and emotional reactions upon first hearings of the piece. The next time that a song was played, we could add our shared experience to its historiography. We copied the tapes and passed them on to friends who had moved out of town, further disseminating the group's evolving understanding of traditional music and strengthening our ties to one another.

11. In the 1930s, the Lomaxes thought they had to capture the old songs and tunes before they were gone, smothered by popular culture. In the years following the 1952 Folkways release of Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, fans sought out the performers featured in its decades-old recordings and brought them into the spotlight, some making a living playing music for the first time just before they died. In the 1990s, American folk music was again at a crossroads, turning up more and more often in unexpected places. We were not averse to the mass-mediated representations. In fact, we wished for more of them. We delighted in the re-release of the *Anthology*, the unpublished Woody Guthrie lyrics put to music by Billy Bragg and Wilco, and the mentions of fiddle tunes in Charles Frazier's best-selling novel *Cold Mountain*. (Although after the release of the book's companion CD, a fiddle-playing friend noted the crowds at Tim O'Brien and Dirk Powell's performance at the Mt. Airy, North Carolina music festival, and sighed, "We're rock stars now.")
12. The shared homemade food and music created a social space that included discussion and dissection of books, films, and other cultural events. We swapped recordings, sharing discoveries old and new. Gillian Welch's first release, presciently named *Revival*, contributed a new set of staples to our Tuesday night repertory, such as "By the Mark." We bought techno composer and musician Moby's *Play* album for the sampled Lomax field recordings. We went to the theater to see *Wag the Dog* for its archival recording sub-plot and *The Apostle* for its gospel soundtrack and cameo by June Carter Cash. We screened the video of John Sayles's *Matewan* to pick out West Virginia musicians now known to us from the festival scene. When we read that a new Coen Brothers film would feature the music of Ralph Stanley and others we revered, we were thrilled.
13. There was a delicate balance between finding our interests increasingly reflected in pop culture, and finding it "down by the old mainstream," to quote alternative country supergroup Golden Smog. *O Brother*

tipped those scales. The film itself posed problems. Other Coen Brothers' films tackle a given cultural milieu (earnest Midwesterners in *Fargo*; L.A. slackers in *The Big Lebowski*) with humor and ingenuity, or so I thought, as a cultural outsider. It was harder for me to laugh at stereotyped Southerners. Having grinned and borne countless mocking references to West Virginia (where I was born) and Kentucky (where I also have roots) over my lifetime, the 1628 experience had refashioned that region as a wellspring of musical heritage, and a source of pride. I didn't like seeing the same old caricatures of yokels and Klansmen played out against banjos and fiddles.

14. For us, the music had been a collective experience, which made it meaningful. *O Brother* and its offshoots are a collective experience in that they've sold millions of copies, but the sense of traditional music as being organic—a living, breathing, force drawing people together—seems to get a bit lost in the *O Brother* packaging. Though the film's soundtrack features expertly produced, exquisite performances by some of my favorite interpreters of the old-time singing styles, its ubiquity had made it too iconic, too set in its ways. I'll admit, I attended one of the Down from the Mountain concerts, but it seemed scripted and rote. The performers mostly play the songs in the same order in which they appear on the soundtrack. When the audience was asked to join in, on "Amazing Grace," lined out by Ralph Stanley, the crowd didn't seem to understand at first what was being asked of it—maybe because that song isn't on the CD. But at the moment when, finally, thousands of voices echoed Ralph's frail tenor, I finally felt that sense of communal musical space that had been lacking throughout the concert. I can only hope that someone in the crowd somewhere felt the power of that moment and decided to hold a dinner party, with instruments.

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**Reflections on Anthologized Recordings:  
The Alan Lomax Collection on Rounder Records and the  
John A. and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip  
on the Library of Congress American Memory Website**

**Anthony Seeger**

“I’m not exactly sure what the Folk Music Revival was, and is, but I’m certain that Alan Lomax invented it. This collection is proof positive. Thanks, Alan.” (“Words” 11)

1. Dave van Ronk only slightly exaggerates in one of the shortest paeans to Alan Lomax in the seventy four-page booklet for the richly documented The Alan Lomax Collection Sampler (of the 150 CD Alan Lomax Collection on Rounder); there were, of course, other influences on revivalism. If Alan Lomax did not invent them, he certainly had a lot to do with most of the revivals and changes in musical taste from the 1940s to the 1990s—and through his recordings he may influence those in the coming decades. He was an extremely original thinker with huge plans, great charm with which to convince others that his plans were good ideas, and a tremendous capacity for hard work. Born in 1915, he died in the summer of 2002 after a long illness. This is not an obituary, however. It is an investigation into the motivation for producing “field” or ethnographic recordings of non-popular musical forms and an evaluation of the strategies for influencing culture through recordings.
2. Alan Lomax’s productions touched almost every aspect of contemporary American music and its expression. He was a field researcher and recorder, a radio personality, a concert organizer, a composer, and in his later years the visionary behind one of the largest comparative projects ever imagined for the study of music—even if it was considered by many colleagues to be totally wrongheaded. You can learn something about him on the Alan Lomax Website, view photos of him, and peruse a fascinating list of his field trips. Brilliant, a whirling contagion of enthusiasm, unafraid to go marching boldly in the opposite direction from hundreds of scholars, Alan Lomax has been deprived of the position he richly deserves as one of the ancestors of applied ethnomusicology, applied folklore, and active involvement in cultural politics. His influence on the folk revival, however, is far more widely recognized.

### **The Alan Lomax Collections**

3. The Rounder Records series of Lomax recordings doesn't really qualify as a stimulus to the 1960s folk music revival in the way that the Harry Smith collection on Folkways did in 1952, or some of the world music anthologies did around the same time, because it is now only a few years old and still growing. The Rounder Records series is also far more comprehensive than any of the series actually produced by Alan Lomax during his lifetime (view a [list](#) of them). Alan Lomax was a prodigious producer, however. He produced early commercial recordings of Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, and Jelly Roll Morton. His five-volume anthology of the folk music of the United States, from recordings in the Library of Congress, was a milestone. He produced a ten-volume set of music of Great Britain on Caedmon Records, an eleven-volume set of the music of Spain on Westminster, an eighteen-record set of music of the world on Columbia Records, and a twelve-volume set, "Southern Journey," on Prestige. Astonishingly, all of these appeared before 1960. They could not have failed to have an impact on those who were fortunate enough to come across them. I never did, for some reason—but most of them are now in the UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive.
4. People may not have seen these series because they went out of print fairly quickly. During the years I directed Smithsonian Folkways recordings, I often found that small companies did a better job distributing special projects like these than the major labels, for whom they were a definite sideline, rarely promoted and often quickly discontinued. Many of Alan Lomax's 1950s releases appeared for a brief time and then were impossible to find. The strategy of Moses Asch, at Folkways Records, was entirely different. Asch knew he could not compete with major labels, but he sold extensively to libraries and kept all of his recordings in print (they still are at Folkways). Thus if you heard a Folkways recording thirty years after it was released, you could still get a copy. People hearing about Alan Lomax's recordings have not been so lucky until now, with the Rounder releases. But Alan Lomax wanted to reach the entire population—not just scholars and aficionados.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Justification for Producing Ethnographic Recordings**

5. Most of the early anthologies were produced by enthusiasts who wanted to expose the rest of the world to their enthusiasms in the hope they would be contagious. These enthusiasts were often

supported by sympathetic record company executives who hoped (but probably didn't expect) to sell enough of them to get their expenses back. Harry Smith was an inveterate record collector who was passionate about the regional recordings produced between 1927 and the mid 1930s. Samuel Charters wanted to expose the world to the rural blues. Henry Cowell wanted to expose the world to the many musical styles of the world's peoples (through the Music of the World's Peoples series on Folkways). Alan Lomax wanted to bring the music that was being marginalized by mass media to the general public using mass media.

6. One might criticize influential anthology recordings for contributing to the establishment of a "canon," or a consecrated group of styles and artists that operates to restrict further musical development. Influential collections would thus limit the music people reproduce. The argument against the canon is that people listen to a single anthology and don't go beyond it. I personally find this a lot of speculative rubbish, only partially supported by events from 1950–2002. Certainly, each producer presents listeners with only part of a larger set of recordings. But to assume that audiences stop at a single recording is rather puerile—how many people bemoaning the creation of a canon have inventoried the recorded sound collections of the people they write about? (I have done this three times in the Suyá village in Brazil.) A lot of people heard the music and searched out the artists and new artists. Others became record collectors themselves, and produced more recordings. Folkways Records, County Sales, Rounder, and many other independent labels went far beyond the artists, periods, and styles on Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*. At Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, we considered not reissuing the *Anthology of American Folk Music* in the 1990s because there was so much more old-time music available in the 1990s than had been accessible in 1952—indeed most of the tracks on the *Anthology* were already available on CD somewhere else. We decided that what wasn't available was Harry Smith's selection and sequence, and his remarkable liner notes—and so proceeded with the reissue.
7. The difference between a fairly small anthology like Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* and the Alan Lomax Collection is one of scale and coherence. Harry Smith wanted to produce four volumes, representing (among other things) the four elements. He only completed the first three for Folkways, with six LP recordings and a total of eighty-three tracks. Most of Alan Lomax's series were far larger than that and were organized by geography and genre rather



than by some other kind of association. I believe the smaller anthologies are better remembered than the larger series, but that particular styles on any recording may suddenly infatuate listeners.

8. When I directed Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, I often likened myself to a fisherman—no doubt influenced by my many months having to fish for our supper on the Xingu River in Brazil. I would produce recordings and hope that someone, somewhere, would hear the sounds and find their lives changed by them. We published discographies and bibliographies with each recording so that people could explore beyond our CDs. My introductions to anthologies often urged people to attend live concerts or learn to play an instrument. I knew recordings could change people's lives. Anthologies like Harry Smith's and Alan Lomax's certainly did so.
9. Writing in the *Hi-Fi/Stereo Review* at the end of that extremely productive decade, Alan Lomax brilliantly characterized the significance of recorded sound for the twentieth century in the language of the 1950s:

To the musicologists of the 21st century our epoch may not be known by the name of a school of composers or of a musical style. It may well be called the period of the phonograph or the age of the golden ear, when, for a time, a passionate oral curiosity overshadowed the ability to create a music. Tape decks and turntables spun out swing and symphony, pop and primitive with equal fidelity; and the hi-fi LP brought the music of the whole world to mankind's pad. It became more important to give all music a hearing than to get on with the somewhat stale tasks of the symphonic tradition. The naked Australian mooing into his djebangari and [Joshua] Heifetz noodling away at his cat-gut were both brilliantly recorded. The human race listened, ruminating, not sure whether there should be a universal, cosmopolitan musical language, or whether we should go back to the old-fashioned ways of our ancestors, with a different music in every village. This, at least, is what happened to me. (43)

10. Alan Lomax always wanted to reach the largest possible audience. He and his father tried to write popular songbooks—but were overshadowed by the *Fireside Book of Folk Songs*. For two years Alan had a national radio show on which he introduced listeners to many musicians who became staples in the later revival, among them Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Lead Belly. He produced some extremely

influential concerts. He issued audio recordings in the 1950s, and the *American Patchwork* television series (and videotapes) in the 1980s.

11. The biggest Alan Lomax anthology of all began in 1996 and continues today. It is a massive endeavor, originally planned to exceed 150 CDs, and intends to present some of the most significant field recordings Lomax made during his long career. The project is spearheaded by Alan Lomax's daughter, Anna Lomax Chairetikas, who is taking great care to make this a monument to her father's work and also a contemporary series edited and annotated by some of the most knowledgeable specialists living today. The beautifully prepared sampler to the collection includes a statement of intention, words of support from luminaries, a brief biography of Alan Lomax, and the description of some of the major collections in nature in his life. In a sense, the piece you are reading is a discussion of an anthology not yet completed. The recordings have not yet become part of the canon of American folk music—although the collector certainly has.

### **Recordings are More than a Collection of Sounds**

12. Alan Lomax was a brilliant collector. While stories of his methods abound, he certainly knew how to get good performances out of fine musicians and could capture them on recording equipment of varying quality. My aunt, Peggy Seeger, wrote: "as a collector he can make you feel as if you're the best musician or storyteller and the world. As a catalyst and innovator, he inspires you to do your best—then to do even better" ("Words" 11). One of the things that impressed me when I listened to any of Alan's productions was that he could identify good performers, get the best out of them, and select brilliant examples from among all he had recorded. I stood in awe of his ability when I produced recordings for Smithsonian.
13. Alan Lomax was extremely sensitive to timbre. This appears in his recordings long before he launched into a comparative study of vocal styles. Listen to his recordings of African American blues performers, or English ballad singers, or Spanish vocalists and you will appreciate how much he was able to get out of his performers and his machines. He must have been a genius at microphone placement. Listen to the Cantometrics Training Tapes for the most remarkable set of vocal timbres you will ever hear. People sang their hearts out for him, and he loved it. I think Alan could hear emotion in performances and picked the tracks he personally found most moving.<sup>2</sup>

14. Ethnographic or documentary recordings are far more than good sound. They are driven by ideology, and are part of larger social, musical, and commercial contexts. Alan Lomax was very aware of this, and wrote eloquently about what he felt his role was in making ethnographic recordings and bringing them to the public through commercial releases:

The recording machine can be a voice for the voiceless, for the millions in the world who have no access to the main channels of communication, and whose cultures are being talked to death by all sorts of well-intentioned people—teachers, missionaries, etc.—and who are being shouted into silence by our commercially bought-and-paid-for loudspeaker. It took me a long time to realize that the main point of my activity was to redress the balance a bit, to bring channels of communication to all sorts of artists and areas. (44)

... tomorrow, when it will be too late—when the whole world is bored with automated mass-distributed video-music, our descendants will despise us for having thrown away the best of our culture. (56)

15. Those quotations, all from the same article which Rounder Records reprinted in the *Alan Lomax Collection Sampler*, are vintage Lomax. He spoke that way in person, too. Deeply aware of the influence of mass communication on our world, with a passion for people with little power or privilege, and a disdain for those who had it unless he wanted something from them, flaunting a Romantic's concern that the disappearance of a tradition marks the end of a civilization, Alan Lomax was passionate, eloquent, and combative.<sup>3</sup> A complex man, his biography has yet to be written (though there are some good articles and chapters about him, as in Benjamin Filene's *Romancing the Folk*).
16. What Alan predicted in 1960 has to a certain degree become true in 2002. There is a great deal more interest in the music of other parts of the world on the part of the United States music-listening audience than there was in 1960. And since not everyone is enchanted by MTV, boy bands, dancing youth, and popular music radio, significant parts of the population—and certain age groups—are looking for more than that.

### **Is the Anthology Dead in the Twenty-first Century?**

17. What will be the influence of these recordings in the twenty-first Century? Is the age of compilations over in a time when individual files

are shared, often without any text, and often without neighboring tracks?

18. Most of the Alan Lomax anthologies, the Harry Smith anthology, and the Henry Cowell *Music of the World's Peoples* all appeared in the 1950s. They were, to a certain extent, a product of a new medium, the Long Playing Record (LP). 78 RPM record albums had fewer songs (usually six songs or “sides”), were heavier and more fragile, and did not have to be played in sequence. In contrast, the LP record could hold six or more songs on a single side, in an order established by the compiler. This made compiling LPs a work of art—where the artistry was in the juxtaposition of the music that was included.
19. The CD increased the length of a compilation album from about fifty minutes to seventy-four minutes. It also eliminated the need to turn the LP over, and further enhanced the role of the producer—sequence became even more complex with that many songs to manage. It was, however, easier to skip around on a CD than on an LP, where clumsily “dropping the needle” on a track could destroy the recording.
20. Creating party mixes, file sharing, and other twenty-first century ways of listening to music have dramatically altered the scene. Albums may disappear altogether; individual tracks may reappear as the most important unit for purchase and appreciation. It may be that the effective life of anthologies is nearly over as technology presents the opportunity for making music available in other ways.
21. The Rounder series represents some of the best anthologizing found today. But do people need them now? Are there alternatives? A number of interesting alternatives have emerged, one of the most interesting of which is the appearance of extensive archival collections on the Internet. A dramatic contrast to the anthologized, re-mastered, newly annotated, and smoothly packaged reissue series on Rounder Records is the fascinating presentation of a field trip by Alan’s father, John Lomax, and his second wife, Ruby, to the American South from March 31st to June 14th, 1939, on the Library of Congress American Memory website.
22. The contrast between the anthologies and the field trip is dramatic. For readers of this online journal, the Library of Congress site is much more fun, and free. Although the 700 recordings are scratchy and have some nasty sonic problems, they are presented in full, including the shouted conversations between John Lomax and the musicians

during the recording. Genres range from a fit of laughter to stories and songs in many genres. Important among them is a large number of Spanish language performances recorded in Texas. The sounds are hardly “cleaned up.” They are accompanied by 380 photographs and field journals. You can even try to read the writing on the sleeves of the discs on which the Lomaxes recorded—many of which have been scanned. You can read the report of the trip. I can’t give you direct links to specific songs because the URLs are treated as searches, but it is fascinating to explore this expedition (blues enthusiasts can listen to Washington White play “Sick ‘em Dogs On”).

### **Commercial Recordings and Archival Collections**

23. Anthologies, of course, play a different role from complete field recordings. Anthologies are the prepared plate of antipasto; field collections are the smorgasbord. The former give you a pre-selected taste of what is available; the latter offer you an opportunity to sample everything or fill your plate with a single dish.
24. As a scholar who has directed archives for most of the past twenty years and run a record company for twelve of them, I can see the advantages of both. There is a richness and depth to the recordings in archives that is unparalleled by even the Alan Lomax collection on Rounder. Even though field collections are of course filtered by the preconceptions of the people making the recordings and taking the photographs, they have not undergone the further mediation of the market system (even non-profits cannot afford to lose money, and thus cannot issue everything in any collection). On the other hand, before the Internet, the capitalist market system was a reasonably efficient way of getting sounds to those who wanted to hear them.
25. If you made 1,000 copies of your field recordings, how would you get them to the people most interested in hearing them? After you have given them to your 250 friends (assuming you have that many friends who like your music), how do you find the others? Record companies like Rounder, Folkways, and many small independent labels are run by people who believe deeply in the significance of music they are producing. The market system is often treated as a means through which to achieve cultural, political, and personal ends, and not an end in itself.<sup>4</sup>
26. The Internet offers the general public a real alternative to commercially distributed sound. On the American Memory site visitors

can explore for themselves the remarkable music as it was actually recorded by the Lomaxes is the 1940s—in the sequence it was recorded, with the shouted questions to the artists and the scrawled notes on the disc jackets. Imagine how exciting it would be to have that kind of material available for all of Alan Lomax's field trips throughout the Americas and Europe. It is to be hoped that someday they, too, will be available for similar exploration.<sup>5</sup>

27. The Library of Congress has taken a different approach to memorializing the work of the Lomax family than Rounder Records. The difference between them is the difference between an anthology made to capture the ears of the broad general public and an extensive presentation of the remarkable sounds and sites of the American South as seen through the work of John and Ruby Lomax on a specific field trip. My enthusiasm for the American Memory site is not to belittle the work of Rounder Records, but it does suggest there are other methods for organizing information and presenting it than the one produced by the commercial recording industry of the late twentieth century.
28. Which approach will have the greatest impact on this century—releases of commercially distributed recordings or Internet access to deeper and quirkier collections? Only time will tell. It may be that the anthology was an artifact of the LP and CD era—short lived, extremely influential, but eventually supplanted by something even richer, more individual, more multimedia, and just as exciting. Or it may be that users will recoil from too much information and learn from commercially distributed recordings. More likely it will be a combination of the two—but which combination? Which will set pulses racing and send people to their rooms to create new, inspired music for the next millenium?
29. Anthologies had a tremendous impact on people during the second half of the twentieth century. Growing up during that period, I confess to having enjoyed many anthologies over the years—not necessarily because I liked everything on any of them, but because I was so often surprised by something wonderful I never imagined might exist. (I like samplers of chocolates, too.) Alan Lomax's anthologies are doubly works of art—he made most of the recordings himself, and then selected and annotated them. If the Rounder series is the last great anthology to be produced, at least it will have been a marvelous end to the genre.

## ENDNOTES

1. The same tension, between major label distribution and independent label reliability, dictated policy at the Smithsonian in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Sometimes we had great success with Sony Music, for example in the benefit album, *Folkways: a Vision Shared*. Sometimes we had less luck, and I tended to prefer to concentrate on autonomy rather than broad distribution in such things as selecting distributors and project partners.

2. Judith Cohen is working on the reissue of the Spanish music series. In a paper she delivered at the 2002 SEM meeting in Estes Park, Colorado, she said that everyone she located in Spain whom Alan Lomax had recorded in the 1950s remembered him, and remembered him fondly.

3. Combative indeed. Alan Lomax stories are nearly infinite. I remember a telephone conversation in the 1980s when he told me "You and three generations of Seegers have ruined American folk music." Also charming, as when he later said "You Seegers don't understand. You come from the north, from a privileged background. My father and I came from redneck Texas, and always felt inferior in Washington DC. You can't imagine how it was."

4. When Moses Asch referred to his label in later years, he sometimes called it a "public archive" of recorded sound. While there are tens of thousands of hours of recordings in audiovisual archives in United States, they are often hard to find, and the recordings difficult to listen to. By making some of the recordings in an archive collection available, even on small independent record labels, the archives can become public and its collections more influential. The Internet, however, can eventually reach a far larger population than record labels have ever reached.

5. Smithsonian Folkways and the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage are experimenting with an international, multi-archive project for making collections available on the Internet, Global Sound.

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## **“Been Drowning Me Out”: Sonic Aesthetics, Neo-New Traditionalists, and the Performance of Process**

**Alan Williams**

1. Since the early 1990s, a family of producers and artists with a background in Nashville recording has somewhat haphazardly developed an aesthetic which signifies “acousticness,” “authenticity,” and “hipness.” These various musical strands and recording practices reached their apex with the release of the film soundtrack, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, a work whose particular approach to recorded musical sound has become codified into what I refer to as the *O Brother* aesthetic.
2. As a secondary market, country music has historically followed trends rather than set them.<sup>1</sup> And so the commercial dominance of the *O Brother* soundtrack has left many music makers from both sides of the great pop/country divide, including a number of artists on the *O Brother* album and related tours, in a sonic quandary. After these musicians have spent entire careers trying to catch the “last big thing” in the recording studios, this one-off soundtrack album—a momentary diversion for most of the participants—has emerged as the “next big thing” in pop music production. How this sonic aesthetic was arrived at, and why so many of the releases by musicians who appear on the soundtrack diverge from this aesthetic, is the subject of this article.
3. The first bluegrass revival of the late 1950s was kick-started by young musicians with little technological savvy. By the time of the second revival in the early 70s, a generation of musicians had educated themselves in the art of sound recording. The sonic aesthetics of this younger generation of performers and audiences were as much informed by the flowering of British art-rock as by any Lomax field recording. Employing multitrack technology, musicians recorded in severe isolation from one another, or even over-dubbed one part at a time. Individual instruments were afforded their own microphone (or in many cases, several microphones) as well as their own tracks on tape. Such isolation offered a far greater degree of sonic clarity, but also required the musicians and engineers to re-create a simulacrum of musical environment and exchange (Toynbee 89–93). Often, musicians were not playing together in the same room, though the finished recordings strove to sound like they had.<sup>2</sup>

4. Throughout the 70s, Nashville recording engineers and producers slowly mastered the practice of multitracked musical isolation. By the early 1980s, many of the third generation revivalists had grown tired of the sound of mainstream country imitation pop, and looked elsewhere for sonic inspiration. They found it in the phenomenal success of New Age, epitomized by the Windham Hill label in albums such as Michael Hedges's *Aerial Boundaries*.<sup>3</sup> Minimal instrumentation recorded with close-miked clarity, then "tastefully" obscured with abundant digital reverb, like a Vaseline smeared close-up of Greta Garbo, New Age music became enormously popular with the emergent Yuppie social class, perhaps the earliest indication of the superaltern<sup>4</sup> alternative market now being targeted by the neo-new traditionalists. Given the intense focus on the sound of individual instruments, it is not surprising that a number of young bluegrass revivalists, such as Mark O'Connor and Jerry Douglas (with Strength in Numbers), as well as other folk instrumentalists like Leo Kottke, have embraced this sonic aesthetic. Consequently, as they have lent their talents in support of singers like Dolly Parton and Alison Krauss, so have their approaches to recording become integrated into the aesthetic of their vocalist employers.
5. Though not an *O Brother* participant, Dolly Parton's recent recordings clearly benefit from an association with an "acoustic" aesthetic, and differ greatly from most of her prior recording career which followed the trends of pop music production, though characteristically a few years out of step. Her "acoustic bluegrass" trilogy (*The Grass is Blue*, 1999; *Little Sparrow*, 2001; *Halos and Horns*, 2002) is as far from acoustic as it is from bluegrass, and stands as a vivid demonstration of the paradox surrounding much of the neo-new traditionalist sonic aesthetic. Though a good deal of the instrumental interplay is performed and recorded in real time, many of Parton's vocal contributions, as well as a number of other elements were clearly overdubbed. The aesthetic at play here involves both a simulacrum of a singular performance made by a group of individuals in real time, as well as the sometimes intentional, though always obvious layers of disembodied performances, considered artistic production "touches." The sounds of guitars, fiddle and banjo are abruptly joined by ethereal choirs, evincing a "Where did *that* come from?" response in the listener, as in "Down From Dover" from *Little Sparrow*.
6. Parton's acoustic trilogy has been touted as a return to her east Tennessee mountain roots, and in comparison to her recordings of the

1980s and 90s, they are remarkably different. But Parton is not simply a Tennessee mountain girl, she is an oversized cultural icon—Dolly. As she claims to wear make-up and wigs even when not in the public eye, such surface decorations are at her very core identity. It would be un-Dolly-like to remove the layered choirs and echoing dobro licks from her music. She may be wearing (designer) denim, but her make-up artists and hair stylists are still working overtime, and as such, her recent recording endeavors stand apart from similar offerings by her contemporaries, with one notable exception.

7. The recordings of Alison Krauss most certainly stood as a template for the Dolly Parton trilogy, both in terms of instrumental and vocal arrangements, as well as sonic presentation. Gary Pacsoza, who also has engineered many of Krauss's recordings, recorded Parton's first two acoustic albums, and his recording approach (clear instrumental separation, an accentuation of the higher frequency spectrum, and a penchant for prominent reverbs) establish a direct link between the two artists. Krauss's rise from the bluegrass festival circuit to TNN video star in the mid-90s was an early indication that acoustic folk music could find a place in the contemporary country music scene.
8. Krauss chose songs from outside the traditional old time and bluegrass repertoire, often looking to songwriters from the contemporary folk scene for material and for sonic models.<sup>5</sup> As Suzanne Vega and Tracy Chapman emerged from the coffeehouses with expensive, pristine productions, a new commercial friendly recording aesthetic was formed. Keeping the chiming acoustic guitars and breathy vocals couched in shimmering reverbs while replacing the electric guitars and synthesizers found in the Vega and Chapman records with fiddles, dobros, and banjos, Krauss constructed a winning formula that propelled her from the lower commercial echelons of the bluegrass circuit to the top of the contemporary country charts with songs such as "So Long, So Wrong." The contrast between Krauss and her rhinestone cowboy neighbors on the airwaves singled her out as an "authentic" musician carrying on in the tradition of Bill Monroe, though the sonic qualities of her recordings had more to do with upscale coffee than downhome "white lightning."
9. As with many of her contemporaries, Emmylou Harris has chased the trends of popular music, as the numerous sonic shifts reflected in her recording career attest. However, rather than cast her eye towards the top of the Billboard charts, she aspires to the five star *Rolling Stone* review. This divergence from the commercial aspirations of

mainstream country music has always set Harris apart from most of her Nashville contemporaries.

10. Harris's most dramatic embrace of the pop/rock aesthetic was her collaboration with producer Daniel Lanois on 1995's *Wrecking Ball*. Lanois's previous work with U2, Peter Gabriel, The Neville Brothers, and Bob Dylan defined one sonic aesthetic—the sound of a band playing together in the same physical space, then drenched in dense, atmospheric textures created by multiple digital reverbs and effects—a kind of psychedelic Americana, as in Harris's cover of Gillian Welch's "Orphan Girl." Not since Phil Spector had a producer so completely stamped an individual sonic imprint on his work with/for other artists (Eisenberg 125–128).
11. The *Wrecking Ball* experiment was Harris's most decisive break from traditional Nashville musical aesthetics, and at first sounds almost like a photographic negative to the *O Brother* soundtrack. But what both projects share is a reconsideration of the recording process. With a greater emphasis placed on capturing the interaction between musicians at one point in time, as opposed to the laborious assemblage of overdubbed performances, *Wrecking Ball* employed the same methods used to record country music in the decades prior to the 1960s. As an approach to process rather than a sonic aesthetic, it can be seen as a template for the back-to-basics approach of *O Brother*.
12. One of the signature tracks from *Wrecking Ball* was Gillian Welch's "Orphan Girl," and Harris's treatment was the first mainstream exposure given to Welch's work. Welch's first two albums, *Revival* and *Hell Among The Yearlings*, demonstrate Welch's fully formed "voice" as a songwriter, but reflect an unfocused sonic aesthetic. Producer T-Bone Burnett, drawing on his past work with Elvis Costello, Los Lobos, and Sam Phillips, casts about for individual sonic vehicles for Welch's material. From Lanois-type distortion and delays on "Orphan Girl," to the Patsy Cline-esque "Paper Wings," or the strikingly effect-free intimacy of "Acony Bell" and "By The Mark," Welch's first two albums represent a search for a new sonic aesthetic, but not its realization.
13. Her third album, *Time (The Revelator)*, is the culmination of the search, and serves as the template for the post *O Brother* sound. *Time* was a self-financed, -produced, and -released album, and Welch and her partner David Rawlings minimized their time spent in the studio by avoiding overdubs and extended, complex mixes. Live performances

captured with top-of-the-line microphones and preamps resulted in a low budget/high fidelity recording.

14. With Rawlings seated directly across from Welch, a simple set-up of one microphone for each instrument and voice, unadorned by reverbs and delays (as in “Dear Someone”) provides a sonic consistency throughout the record<sup>6</sup> But more importantly, such direct, eye-to-eye contact captures the process of music making among musicians, and by minimizing the separation of isolation booths and headphones, the microphone is transformed from distancing mediator to gathering focal point. The microphone establishes “place,” and encourages musical participation and interaction. Performance becomes directed towards fellow musicians, and the listening audience becomes privileged voyeurs. This performance of process became the defining aesthetic of both the *O Brother* soundtrack and its successive tour, captured in the documentary, *Down From The Mountain*.
15. *Down From The Mountain*, filmed at a concert in the Ryman Auditorium a month before the premiere of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, provides a visual manifestation of the *O Brother* sonic aesthetic. Directly emulating scenes from *O Brother* when the main characters gather around a single microphone at a radio station, and later on a grange hall stage, the vocalists from the soundtrack gather around a microphone at center stage, supporting musicians encircle solitary microphones at stage right and left.<sup>7</sup>
16. This arrangement accomplishes two things—the musicians must control their own balances to one another while performing with and to each other, replicating the process aesthetic, and codifying the process as a consciously attained “authenticity” for the benefit of the audience. Most live music performance employs individual microphones or other amplification for each instrument and each voice, rendering the stage a complex obstacle course of cables and stands. The *Down From The Mountain* show draws attention to the cleanliness of the stage sightlines, most especially to the sound monitors concealed in the stage apron, completely out of audience (and camera) view. The theatricality of this set up calls attention to the limited technology being visibly employed, and in many ways the audience is more aware of these very few microphones, and of sound reinforcement in general, than if they were witnessing the latest high-tech rock show.
17. Microphone technology is reconciled with the “acoustic” musical tradition by designating specific microphones as “authentic.” A recent

issue of *Mix*, an industry journal marketed to recording engineers and producers, was devoted to Nashville and “that old-time sound.” In it, an article on the *Down From The Mountain* show notes, “there was also nary a modern condenser mic in sight; rather the stage was dominated by vintage Neumann U47s, mics not usually used in concert applications, but which had the appropriate look for the concert and film” (Jackson 22).

18. That a certain microphone should have an appropriate “look” begs the question, who is the look appropriate to? Is there a presumption that the audience can identify the Neumann U47, and is familiar with its history? Or is the “look” more important to the musicians behind the microphone. Either way, the deification of the U47 as “appropriate” to music meant to evoke 1930s Great Depression America is an “invented tradition” in that great line of invented traditions documented by Eric Hobsbawm, Robert Cantwell, Regina Bendix, and so many others; the Neumann company of Berlin, Germany only began manufacturing the U47 in 1947.<sup>8</sup>
19. The first test of the post-*O Brother* marketplace, T-Bone Burnett’s production of *Ralph Stanley*, fails to achieve the effect of the new sonic aesthetic, and is instead an example of processing used to salvage a faulty process. “O Death,” Stanley’s stand out performance from the soundtrack was an a cappella performance, and it is the a cappella performances on *Ralph Stanley* that are the most rewarding. The songs that feature Burnett’s A-List bluegrass studio band work only intermittently; the success of each recording is in inverse proportion to the number of instruments employed in the arrangements.
20. Part of the problem lies in the difficult task of recording and balancing Stanley’s singing voice with the more delicate sounds produced by guitars and mandolins. The nasal cavity-induced partials and transients that could wreak havoc with recording levels are brought under control with the aid of compression, liberally used. Compression, used in many stages of recording to keep levels from distorting, can also be used to keep several high-amplitude producing signals (such as drums and electric guitars) present in the mix, without overwhelming other signals also vying for space. This is a common technique in rock and pop production, exaggeratedly so in recent years, and has been a hallmark of Burnett’s work with rock bands and pop artists.<sup>9</sup> But why would this be necessary for *Ralph Stanley*?

21. The answer may lie in the performance. It is telling that Stanley's band, The Clinch Mountain Boys, do not appear on the record. Replacing touring bands with studio pros is common practice in Nashville, and it may be that Burnett was looking for musicians who could pull off the more sculpted arrangements he had in mind (as opposed to a band all playing at full throttle). But not all eye-to-eye musical performers see eye-to-eye. Stanley sounds uncomfortable with the musicians, and his performance doesn't match the dynamic fluctuations the studio band is trying to create. The solution: compression, and lots of it. This keeps the dynamics in check, but sounds "unnatural," so delays are used to place his voice in a larger psycho-acoustic setting. Rather than striving to create a mystic, mythical environment as Daniel Lanois often does, Burnett uses these delays to conceal the technological artifice of compression with an artificial "naturalness," a digitally simulated physical acoustic space. However, instead of the exoticized mountaintop that is the apparent goal of the production, the results simply sound like Stanley singing through a cardboard box, heard in "False Hearted Lover's Blues."
22. The difficulties pop/rock record producers like Burnett encounter in their attempts to construct an "acoustic" aesthetic are mirrored by artists like Dolly Parton who have spent their entire careers attempting to re-cast acoustic music in the (often outdated) image of pop/rock. The *O Brother* aesthetic, very consciously constructed, yet accidentally arrived at as a commercially viable template, may prove to be more of a millstone than a breakthrough, as evidenced by Burnett's unsuccessful attempt to replicate the formula with *Ralph Stanley*. As the widely variant sonic character of *O Brother* alumni recordings demonstrate, the more lasting impact of this aesthetic may lie in the approach to process rather than processing. Instead of a wave of "acoustically" oriented, old-time Americana artists dominating the charts, I envision other musical genres adapting the sonic model of the process for commercial success—a precedent has already been set by MTV's extremely plugged "Unplugged" series. Perhaps Madonna, Britney Spears, or Beck will embrace the solitary Neumann U47, unencumbered by other electronic wizardry for their next genre-hop. Who needs the two turntables when you've got the right microphone?

## ENDNOTES

1. For example, Owen Bradley's work with Patsy Cline, along with Chet Atkins' "countrypolitan" productions was modeled on the high-art

orchestrated aspirations of Frank Sinatra's recordings for Capitol; Billy Sherrill's production work with Tammy Wynette was a response to the controlled chaos of Phil Spector and Motown; late 70s Nashville recordings drew inspiration from the Los Angeles based recordings of The Eagles, James Taylor, and Linda Ronstadt; and most recently, the sound of Shania Twain has dominated country radio, her hits produced by her husband, Mutt Lange, the man responsible for much of the pop-metal hits of the eighties by groups like Foreigner and Def Leppard.

2. For examples of this sound see The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's *Will The Circle Be Unbroken* (Capitol 63686, 1972), or any of the early New Grass Revival records.

3. This sound was in turn modeled on the ECM jazz records of the 1970s, right down to the album cover designs.

4. From Gramsci's "subaltern," this term is meant to describe an economically and politically powerful demographic that is nonetheless discounted and marginalized by the recording industry. Occasionally they make their presence in the marketplace known by embracing particular recordings, for example Bonnie Raitt's *Nick of Time* (Capitol 91268, 1989), Eric Clapton's *Unplugged* (Warner Bros., 1992), Santana's *Supernatural* (Arista, 1999), and now the *O Brother* soundtrack.

5. On her album *I've Got That Old Feeling*, Krauss sang a version of a then unreleased Shawn Colvin song "I Don't Know Why," (which Colvin herself would have a hit with the following year) gaining a significant measure of mainstream country radio airplay.

6. This is clearly visible in the liner photos, a fact that subtly attempts to make a case for an "authentic" technologically mediated process. One exception—the large hall acoustics of Ryman Auditorium on "I Want To Sing That Rock And Roll," from the *Down From The Mountain* film.

7. Tellingly, the bass player is given his own unobtrusive mic at the rear of the stage—bass being particularly difficult to isolate from other sounds in a room, and considered a crucial component in audiophile reproduction—something's got to come out of that subwoofer in one's recently acquired surround sound system.

8. <http://www.neumann.com/infopool/history>. Though, it is true that the U47 is still considered one of the ultimate recording microphones, a link to



the traditions of Sinatra, The Beatles, George Jones, or Marvin Gaye, depending on one's particular aesthetic allegiance.

9. An interesting comparison can be made between one pop old-timer resurrection and another. In 1994, Rick Rubin, known for his work with Run-DMC, the Beastie Boys, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers, released a recording of Johnny Cash, *American Recordings*, recorded solo, with no overdubs or reverberant treatments, largely in his living room. Rather than placing Cash, a man with decades of state-of-the-(Nashville)-art recording experience in a contemporary context, Rubin presents him as a Lomax field recording discovery, performing such "traditional classics" as Glenn Danzig's "Thirteen." Cash's "man in black" persona always had an appeal to the rock crowd, and this whittled down recording aesthetic reflects trends in the rock world towards simplified recording techniques with lots of instrumental bleed and murky room tones.

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