

COUNTRY MUSIC AND THE SOULS OF WHITE FOLK

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	II
ABSTRACT .....	IV
INTRODUCTION .....	1
THE CONTESTED CULTURE OF THE SOUTH .....	5
RACE AND LEGITIMACY .....	12
THE BIG BANG OF COUNTRY MUSIC .....	20
PLANTATION NOSTALGIA VS. HEBREW BROADWAY JAZZ .....	23
CONCLUSION .....	32
REFERENCES .....	33
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .....	36

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This paper examines the emergence of country music as a commercial form in the 1920s. Called hillbilly music for the first two decades of its existence, country music has to a large extent been understood as a product of the Southern white working class. In addition to the white working-class Southerners who constituted the music's main constituency, country music derived many of its forms and songs from other less obvious sources. Specifically, the music of Southern blacks is an indispensable component of many folk-derived popular forms, and country music is no exception. In order to understand the context in which this cultural interaction and exchange took place, I examine several historical conceptions of folk culture, focusing specifically on notions of folk culture that conceive of it as an expression of a racial heritage. Examples include the Anglo-Saxonism of early ballad hunters, as well as the later identification of the South's culture as Celtic by such writers as H.L. Mencken and W.J. Cash.

In this paper, I maintain that early country music offers a very different picture of Southern folk culture than these racialized conceptions. Specifically, the Southern culture that produced country music is one based on a complex and significant interaction between black and whites.

Importantly, the forms and repertoire of early country music provide strong evidence that Southern folk culture was in fact heavily implicated with both the emerging mass media culture then centered in the urban North and the popular culture of the previous century.

## INTRODUCTION

This essay's title is an allusion to W.E.B. Du Bois's famous work, in which he states that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (5). I expect the application of Du Bois's insight to the subject of country music to be somewhat jarring. Country music's origins lie in the interaction of a rapidly modernizing, reconstructed but largely unregenerate<sup>1</sup> American South with a culture industry intimately linked with the more material industries of the urban North. As such, it is deeply implicated in the matters of race, class, and region that dominate contemporary understanding of this interaction. Nevertheless, country music seldom receives the critical attention it deserves. Several fine historical surveys of the music and aspects of the commercial and folk cultures that produced it have appeared since Bill C. Malone's seminal *Country Music U.S.A.* was first published in 1968. Without fail, these surveys—including Malone's most recent book, *Don't Get Above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class*—work from a notion of the Southern working class that is ultimately circumscribed by race. Country music—whether defined as music of the Southern working class, the plain folk, peckerwoods,<sup>2</sup> hillbillies, or whatever—is ultimately reduced to the formulation that Blind Willie McTell used when describing a guitar style he had just demonstrated to John Lomax in a 1940 Library of Congress interview: "That's the idea of the white people."

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1. See John Crowe Ransom's essay in *I'll Take My Stand* for the context in which I use these terms.
  2. In the liner notes to a recent reissue of Woody Guthrie's Folkways recordings, Jeff Place cites Pete Seeger's identification of "Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy" as a song "that African Americans derisively called a 'peckerwood song' ('peckerwood' being a term used by Blacks to describe bigoted Whites)."

Tony Russell uses McTell's phrase as a chapter title in his exceptional *Blacks, Whites, and Blues*, published in 1970. Russell's book is one of a handful of studies that have paid close scrutiny to the interactions of black and white folk cultures and musical styles in the early twentieth century. Russell states his claim bluntly: "white country music in America would not have its present form if it were not for black workmanship" (10). In this essay I will bring this acknowledgement of formal affinities between "black" and "white" musical forms to bear on a larger discussion concerning the transition from the folk and commercial cultures of the nineteenth century to the mass culture of the twentieth. Among the most dramatic features of this transition are the radical reorientation of the relationships between North and South, and the complex matters of race that underlay these relationships. By the early decades of the twentieth century the great regional antagonism that led to the Civil War was supplanted by others, subtler but perhaps no less significant. As Du Bois predicted, questions of race would predominate in the period's considerations of regional identity. Eventually, problems that had been deemed the exclusive province of a benighted South—its complex and troubled race relations, the conflicts between traditional values on the one hand and industrialization and mass culture on the other, for example—would assume an increasingly national character. At the same time, of course, aspects of Southern culture—most notably its music—would take on a similarly national scope.<sup>3</sup> A highly commercial form with deep folk roots, a product of the rural South heavily influenced by products of the urban North, a musical genre generally associated with whites but profoundly indebted to blacks, country music serves as a unique and valuable lens through which to view the interactions of North and South, black and white, and folk and popular cultures that shaped it.

To deal effectively with the range of issues raised so far would require a work of much greater scope than this essay allows. I aim neither for the encyclopedic scope of Malone's work nor the

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3. See James C. Cobb's essay on "The Southernization of America" in his *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind & Identity in the Modern South* (78-91).

exhaustive detail of Russell's. Instead, I offer a handful of examples, drawn primarily from the music's early years, that illustrate country music's negotiations of race and regional identity, together with an analysis of the intersections of rural and folk cultural components with the lingering commercial culture of the nineteenth-century culture industry and the related but significantly different mass popular culture that began to flourish in the early years of country music's history. The notion that country music has been in large part a product of the Southern working class has never been entirely accurate or absolute, of course; many important early country music recordings were made in New York or New Jersey, of all places, and the music's commercial appeal quickly extended beyond the South and even beyond North America.<sup>4</sup> New York and New Jersey, while seemingly incongruous with country music's image as a product of the rural South, were of course centers of commercial culture in the 1920s. As such, they are fitting locales for the introduction of country music into the larger field of mass-distributed commercial entertainment.

Still, the vast majority of early country artists were Southerners, as were many of the people who attended their performances, listened to their radio shows, and bought their records and songbooks. The identification of country music with quintessentially Southern, rural, working class values and imagery would persist as country music became more fully incorporated into the national entertainment industry, and as its audience became increasingly urban and eventually suburban. This rural emphasis would persist as the generic traits of country music became more formalized and refined. As increasing modernization widened the gap between the actually existing South and the South represented by country music, the music's purported ruralism was maintained through a shift of the imaginary location (if not the actual geographical one) of "country" to the Southwest. In the decades since the music's commercial inception, the romantic ruralism of the cowboy has largely supplanted the more prosaic ruralism of the farmers, miners, and railroad

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4. Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff note that imitations of Jimmie Rodgers's blue yodels were recorded by a black South African singer by 1932 (3).

workers from whose ranks the first generation of country music performers were for the most part drawn.

Despite the involvement of northern commercial interests, the observation that country music was a product of the Southern working class, in its early stages at least, remains fundamentally sound. What this observation misses, though, is the inadequacy of a terminology that equates “Southerner” with “white” and, conversely, “black” with “black” (Cobb 127). Not only does such an equation artificially deny the Southern component of the identities of African-Americans whose ties to the South span generations,<sup>5</sup> it also serves to obscure and invalidate the crucial importance of African-American cultural, economic, and social contributions to Southern (and, by extension, American) culture as a whole. Du Bois’s assertion regarding the centrality of “the problem of the color-line” holds as true for country music as it does for any other twentieth-century cultural form. Country music’s history is intimately tied up with the culture of segregation that characterized the South and the country as a whole in the first half of the twentieth century. Additionally, early commercial country music’s self-conscious anachronism and nostalgia foreground its ties to the nineteenth century, whose own popular culture was dominated by the racial spectacle of the minstrel show.

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5. In 1910, 90 percent of American blacks lived in the South (Hale 21). This demographic distribution would change significantly during the following decades, as rural Southerners—black and white—migrated to the industrial upper Midwest, bringing their music and culture with them.

## THE CONTESTED CULTURE OF THE SOUTH

James Cobb notes that the increased attention given beginning in the 1920s to the attitudes and problems that purportedly distinguished the South from the rest of the country—political conservatism (“a spirited defense of traditionalism”) and troubled race relations among them—coincided with the advent of country music as a commercial entity (79). Likewise, Susan Hegeman asserts that in the 1930s “regional identity [begins] to have strong political and aesthetic connotations” (129). Of course the South’s regional identity had held strong political and aesthetic connotations since well before the 1930s. Particular to this time frame, though, are new and significant elements in the image of the South: regional characteristics ascribed to the South by observers both hostile and sympathetic. In 1920, for example, H.L. Mencken leveled accusations of stupidity and degeneracy at the South. These notions, refined of their overt hostility and incorporated into a much grander scheme, would surface twenty-one years later in W.J. Cash’s *The Mind of the South*. Though their perspectives and motivations differ significantly, both Mencken and Cash traffic in such notions as the South as a repository for violence and ignorance, and as an impediment to national (that is, industrial and commercial) progress. In contrast, *I’ll Take My Stand*, the 1930 collective manifesto of the Vanderbilt-based Agrarians, offers the South’s perceived opposition to the Northern values of industrialism and progress as evidence not of the South’s backwardness, but rather of the virtues preserved in the former Confederacy that had once been the common legacy of all Americans. Of course, a romantic view of the antebellum South and its Lost Cause formed part of the motivation for the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s as well. D.W. Griffith’s 1915 *Birth of a Nation*, widely associated with the resurgence and legitimization of the Klan in the 1920s, is an obvious but striking example of this romanticization. Despite their significant ideological

differences, the views of the South promulgated by Mencken, Cash, and the Agrarians all demonstrate the tendency to conceive of the South—as a cultural entity—as white. This tendency is a symptom and an illustration of the fact that the early decades of the twentieth century found Southern whites enmeshed in what Elizabeth Hale describes as “a regional dynamic of ex-Confederates versus ex-slaves” and “of the South, understood as white, versus the nation” (9). Commercial country music in its early forms reflects this dynamic, but at the same time it suggests a more complex relationship than the one represented in Hale’s formulation between the white Southerners with whom it is identified and the other communities of the South and the nation as a whole.

Northern publishers, record companies, and musicians were substantially involved in country music from the outset of its commercial development. More basic and pervasive, though, were the influence and contributions of Southern blacks. The engagement of Southern whites with black influences takes place in several arenas. It involves the substantial impact of black songs, styles, and techniques on the pre-commercial folk music of Southern whites and its commercial derivatives. It also entails the involvement of black musicians as country music performers (e.g., the Mississippi Sheiks, DeFord Bailey) and, more commonly, as unacknowledged or belatedly recognized sources of stylistic innovations. Finally there is the complex question of early country music’s ties with blackface minstrelsy, itself a thoroughly artificial and commercial form that staked its claims to authenticity on its purported roots in folk sources.

By the time of the emergence of country music as a commercial form, the popular image of the South as degenerate and benighted was well-established. Country music (and other emerging Southern forms as blues and jazz) stood in tentative opposition to the claims of such antagonists as Mencken, who famously excoriated the South as a region devoid of culture. Mencken appears to have been either unaware of or indifferent to the endeavors of folklorists who in the previous decade had hit upon the notion that the mountains of Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky held an Elizabethan folk culture that had withstood the pressures of modernization that had inalterably

affected the rest of the country.<sup>1</sup> While the culture represented by hillbilly music was quite different from that purportedly represented by Appalachian folk ballads, performers of commercial country music seem to have made peace early on with the proponents of a presumed Anglo-American folk tradition in the South. Such hillbilly<sup>2</sup> artists as Bradley Kincaid, the Carter Family, and Buell Kazee made ready use of such materials of British origin as “Barbara Allen,” “Black Jack David,” and “The Butcher’s Boy,” to cite just three of many examples. On the other hand, the hillbilly artists’ comfort with such traditional materials was not reciprocated by the champions of the presumed Elizabethan folk culture of Appalachia, as folk collectors were consistently mortified to find their informants singing songs of hillbilly or, worse, vaudeville, origin. Such material, “gone feral,” and collected in the hills would sometimes, as Nick Tosches notes, be “misperceived as primitive folk expression” (*Voices* 33). Equally common was the reaction exemplified by the January 1930 Hindeman Settlement School newsletter, which reports the school’s aim to supplant the “raucous singing of so-called ‘hill-billy’ songs” with “true [English] mountain ballads” (qtd. in Whisnant 57-58). Kincaid, cited above as an example of a “hillbilly” singer whose repertoire included folk material, would likely agree with this aim. Despite his commercial success as a singer of “Hilly Billy” songs, Kincaid steadfastly maintained a distinction between them and the “fine old folk songs of the mountains” (qtd. in Wilgus 90). Kincaid, like his folklorist contemporaries, couched this distinction in racial terms: in a preface to a 1934 edition of his *Mountain Ballads and Old Time Songs* collection, he wrote that the ballads were the products “of a people in whose veins runs the purest strain of Anglo-Saxon blood to be found anywhere in America.”

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1. Probably the best analysis of the political and cultural significance the work of ballad collectors such as Cecil Sharp and festival organizers such as John Powell and Annabel Morris Buchanan is David E. Whisnant’s *All That is Native and Fine*.
  2. The term was originally written as “Hill Billy” and then “Hill-Billy” before reaching its current form (Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* 40). “Hillbilly” is a commercial designation encompassing many quite different musical styles. Many of the artists identified with this label, such as Kincaid, resisted it, maintaining that the word was demeaning. I use the word throughout this essay in its commercial sense.

Among the “outbursts of hearts overflowing with emotion” included in this collection are songs with such lyrics as:

Had a girl named Ida red,  
She fell in love with a boy named Ned;  
Took my gun from the peggie-o,  
And shot him through the tummy-o.

Presumably this is not the sort of mountain ballad taught to the Hindeman Settlement School children.

In retrospect, the anxiety that academic collectors seeking Child ballads expressed when finding their subjects instead singing contemporary hillbilly songs appears to be motivated by a profound misunderstanding of the very folk cultures that they aimed to document and preserve. Ironically, these apprehensions provide a key to an understanding of the musical culture of the South that eluded the ballad hunters. This irony was not lost on all contemporary observers, as David E. Whisnant’s study of the White Top Folk Festival illustrates. Whisnant cites musicologist Charles Seeger’s 1936 analysis of the White Top festival: “Under a smoke screen of pseudo-scholarship [the festival] is really sinister” (207). Included in Seeger’s pointed critique of the festival organizers’ prejudices is a keen observation of their feeling that “[y]ou have to keep a tight rein on things or else you hear nothing but jazz” (206). “Jazz” here functions as a code word whose associated meanings are multifarious. Without presuming any special insight into the psyches of the festival organizers, we can assume that among the attributes that they found undesirable in the performances of the mountain folk were those that violated the cherished illusion of Appalachian culture as a racially pure Elizabethan lost world. Among these are those attributes that appear to be of urban, contemporary, or African-American origin. The objects of Seeger’s derision (the White Top organizers), while misguided in their fear of jazz, were in a certain sense accurate in their sense of this music that they considered culturally foreign to permeate and ineluctably influence the music of the Southern folk whose music so interested them. Try as they might, such racially minded purists proved utterly incapable of fortifying the always permeable, tenuous, and largely

artificial barriers that separated folk and popular, urban and rural, and black and white styles, songs, and traditions.

Although most of the prominent figures in early commercial country music were based in the Southeast,<sup>3</sup> by the early 1930s the imaginary location of the music had begun to shift to the Southwest.<sup>4</sup> This shift accompanied country music's increasing ties with other forms of popular entertainment, most notably the movie western, exemplified by singing cowboys like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. Like the hillbilly music of the Southeast, the synthetic Hollywood cowboys and their highly commercial songs too had folk antecedents. Perhaps the most important collection of this material, John and Alan Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, originally published in 1910 and reissued in 1916 and again in 1938, is subtly but deeply informed by notions that link folk traditions with race. The language in John Lomax's introductory material serves ultimately to de-emphasize the multiracial nature of frontier communities and their songs. On the one hand, Lomax makes allowances for the presence of non-whites in the groups of cowboys who were their informants: "It was not unusual to find a Negro who . . . had been promoted from the chuckwagon to a place in the ranks of the cowboys" (xxvii). Tosches notes that in fact 30 percent of cowboys were either black or Mexican; other sources cite similar figures (*Country* 117). Perhaps the most famous song from this collection, "Home on the Range," was collected from a black cook (xix). Lomax paints an unflattering portrait of the song's source: "'I'se too drunk today. Come back tomorrow,' he muttered" (xix). At the same time, Lomax identifies as the source of cowboy culture the transplanted Southern white boys who "brought the gallantry, the grace, and the song heritage of their English ancestors. Their own rough songs often took the form and manner of English

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3. Eck Robertson, possibly the first artist to make a commercial hillbilly recording, is a notable exception. Then living in Amarillo, Texas, Robertson was dressed as a cowboy when he traveled to New York to demand an audition with the Victor company in 1922 (Malone, *Singing Cowboys* 74-5; *Country Music U.S.A.* 35).

4. This movement took on a literal cast, as well, with Jimmie Rodgers's move to Kerrville, Texas in 1929 (Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers* 231).

ballads” (xviii). In one particularly ebullient passage, Lomax calls them “young, bold, youthful vikings of the seas of sage grass through which they pushed their way” (xv). The comparison of the cowboy songs to English ballads, though a bit far-fetched, benefits from the kernel of truth it contains. Ballads and songs of English, Irish, and Scottish origin do in fact turn up in *Cowboy Songs* and similar collections, but these songs are as likely to be of commercial provenance as they are to be aspects of an uninterrupted folk tradition. Less credible, equally romanticized, and more in line with Cash’s later vision of the South’s frontier mentality is Lomax’s assertion that “[f]rom such a group, given a taste for killing in the Civil War, in which Southern feeling and sentiments predominated, came the Texas cowboy and the cowboy songs” (xviii). Both of these conceptions—cowboys as Anglo-Saxon balladeers and as bloodlust-driven neo-Confederates—segregate white cowboy culture from the African-American and Mexican cultural traditions that interacted with and contributed to it. This same segregation would characterize the ersatz cowboy culture that dominated country music (and much of Hollywood) in the 1930s.

While the significant presence and cultural impact of blacks was de-emphasized or effaced in the romanticized mountains and Western plains depicted in the collections of folklorists, a counterfeited vision of the black South had long occupied a central place in American popular entertainment. Eric Lott succinctly notes that “[b]lackface minstrelsy was an established nineteenth-century theatrical practice, principally of the urban north, in which white men caricatured blacks for sport and profit” (3). The roots of many American forms of popular entertainment (music, dance, theater, film, television, etc.) reside squarely in the nineteenth-century minstrel show. During its heyday, blackface minstrelsy, while drawing its subjects and settings from the South, was not *of* the South. It is true that minstrelsy, like other nineteenth-century entertainments, lingered on in the rural South long after its initial urban popularity had waned, but its forms and conventions had by then been long established. Early hillbilly music without a doubt drew much of its repertoire and form from vaudeville, minstrelsy, and other commercial, urban sources. These influences

intermingled with others in the folk music of the South: Old World fiddle tunes, polkas, and waltzes; hymns and other religious songs; jazz and ragtime, to name a few. In contrast to Mencken's claim that the South constituted "a vast plain of mediocrity, lethargy, almost of dead silence" (qtd. in Cobb 79), the music of its people, black and white, amateur and (later) professional, demonstrated the South to be a region of exceptional creativity and energy. Far from dead silence, the music of the early twentieth-century South was a tumult of voices, instruments, and songs from far-flung and disparate sources. We may find in the imperfect synthesis of these component elements—despite the mediation of northern, urban commercial interests—a rural South speaking for and about itself.

## RACE AND LEGITIMACY

The decidedly impure, racially ambiguous nature of actual Southern folk culture is evident in a 1933 recording by the Prairie Ramblers, a white string band from Kentucky, of a tune they called “Go Easy Blues.” The origins of the tune and lyrics are practically unknowable; the half-spoken, half-sung lyrics spring from somewhere deep in the stock of songs and tunes shared by rural dance bands, black and white. Some of the lines, in fact, appear to make little sense coming from a white singer:

Ain't no use in me workin' so hard  
I got a woman in the white folks' yard

This couplet in all likelihood far predates the advent of commercial recording. Variations of it occur throughout the songs of both white and black performers, such as Blind Willie McTell's “Hillbilly Willie's Blues” from 1935, and Leadbelly's “We Shall Be Free” (recorded with Woody Guthrie) and Guthrie's “Talking Blues” (essentially the same song) from a decade later. Nick Tosches cites a 1902 recording by the Dinwiddie Colored Quartet as its first appearance on record (*Voices* 109). It also turns up, in modified form, in “My Bucket's Got a Hole in It,” credited to Hank Williams (but likely of traditional origin). Williams's black mentor, Rufus “Tee-Tot” Payne, is generally credited as the song's immediate source (Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* 240). In both Leadbelly's and Guthrie's versions, “the white folks' yard” becomes “the rich folk's yard” (“the boss man's yard” in Williams's rendition).

Tee-Tot's influence on Hank Williams is not at all anomalous; relatively anonymous black musicians appear just out of focus in the stories of nearly every major innovation in country music from its inception. Jimmie Rodgers's debt to the anonymous black musicians of his youth is clear. Bill Monroe identified the influence of a specific black musician, Arnold Shultz, as key to the

development of his own enormously influential style. In his book on Monroe, Robert Cantwell also identifies Shultz as the progenitor of Merle Travis's equally influential jazz-inflected guitar style (*Bluegrass Breakdown* 30). Another intriguing example of this phenomenon is the case of Lesley Riddles (or Riddle), who would accompany A.P. Carter on his famous song-collecting trips. Riddles's job was to act as "a portable tape recorder," learning the tunes of the songs they collected as Carter wrote down the words (Russell 41). Riddles would later teach Maybelle Carter the guitar parts. It is likely, then, that the famous "Carter lick"—one of the most influential techniques in country music—is directly attributable to Leslie Riddles (Atkins 99).

In some respects, the *Prairie Ramblers's* performance is hardly identifiable as a hillbilly recording. Essentially the same piece, with the same lyrics and similar instrumentation could be (and was) performed by black musicians before and after this particular recording. This fact is not especially remarkable. Especially with dance tunes, musicians throughout the South, black or white, would perform songs that appealed to them and that their audiences wanted to hear, regardless of a particular tune's origins. Street performers like Willie McTell and Leadbelly demonstrated an encyclopedic knowledge of the folk and popular music of their time.<sup>1</sup> In an important sense, "Go Easy Blues," like other early hillbilly recordings, captures a folk performance. Most such recordings were of old-time fiddlers or string bands, whose repertoire and performance styles were, at least initially, geared towards dances and other social functions, rather than to popular consumption via phonograph record or radio broadcast. Tony Russell has argued convincingly that "the traditional music . . . was a repertoire shared by black and white; a common stock," and identifies its components: ballads, banjo and fiddle tunes, popular tunes and (though, oddly, Russell doesn't identify them as such) minstrel tunes from the 1800s (26-8). Clearly, this conception of folk culture and traditions differs significantly from the one that motivated the eminent folklorists

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1. For an example, see John Lomax's interviews with McTell on the 1940 Library of Congress recordings, a partial transcript of which appears in Tony Russell's *Blacks, Whites, and Blues* (70).

at work in Appalachia in the twenties and thirties, or later advocates of a presumably Celtic Southern culture (discussed later in this essay). The folk culture of which the old time fiddlers and early string bands were a part was not the static relic that Cecil Sharp and his contemporaries sought in the mountains of the upper South, and its music was not, as Bill C. Malone puts it, a “rarefied expression of a dying peasantry, an art form that could not survive the industrializing process” (*Country Music U.S.A.* 27).

“Go Easy Blues” demonstrates at the very least that white bands were performing songs of black origin, but the significance of this borrowing goes deeper. In preserving the presumably original racially-specific language in their recording, the Prairie Ramblers participate in a complex racial masquerade—one that points backwards to the nineteenth-century minstrel show and forward to rock and roll. No longer engaged in the outright imitation and mockery of blackface so popular in the preceding decades, the performers adopt the personae of their (real or ersatz) black sources without fully adapting and deracializing them in the manner of Hank Williams and later performers. In other words, something of the blackface minstrel’s charade is apparent in such recordings, but without the element of self-conscious racial spectacle that pervaded the minstrel performance. The significance of black (and ersatz Negro) styles and sources was neither incidental nor unique to this very early stage of country music. Nor was the distinction between authentic and imitation black influences at all clear. By the early 1920s, songs and dances of minstrel origin had been spreading for decades among the rural communities—black, white, and mixed—of the South. Material of popular or commercial origin often entered folk traditions, and continued to mutate and spread, shedding some of its original trappings while taking on new ones.

It does not necessarily follow that, because much of the repertoire of black and white musicians in the early twentieth century South derives from the common stock that Russell describes, black and white musical cultures were shared in any significant sense. Proponents of the relative autonomy of black folk culture have often described the pre-commercial music of black

Southerners as either essentially African in form (that is, based on a non-diatonic harmony and an antiphonal structure) in character, or as the product of a set of historical and emotional circumstances unique to African-Americans. These notions are largely complementary: the first argument is a formal one; the second—less concrete but more complex—incorporates it into a larger social context.

Among the most subtle and compelling articulations of the latter argument are those Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) makes in *Blues People*, in which he argues for an understanding of the blues as inextricably tied to “the peculiar social, cultural, economic, and emotional experience of . . . black [people] in America. The idea of a white blues singer seems an even more violent contradiction of terms than the idea of a middle-class blues singer” (148). Jones goes on to discuss W.C. Handy’s published “blues compositions,” and those of his white imitators; these publications, Jones notes, “had little, if anything, to do with legitimate blues.” What Jones means by “legitimate blues” is perfectly clear, as is the fact that his assertion concerning the relation of published “blues compositions” to their supposed folk antecedents is basically correct. That Handy, Paul Whiteman, George Gershwin, and legions of successors participated in a commercial exploitation of folk sources that was at least partially insidious is both obvious and unremarkable. And yet, Jones’s citation of Handy as his primary example aside, the seemingly intuitive notion of the blues as the exclusive product of the souls of black folk risks being pressed into the service of a racist tautology: that, as Bill Ivey puts it, “authenticity in music is an attribute of race and that Southern musical reality matched the ‘hillbilly’ and ‘race’ distinctions invented by the record industry in its early years” (11).<sup>2</sup> Such distinctions, largely inaccurate and invidious, segregate the reception of black performers like the Mississippi Sheiks or Willie McTell from that of white musicians such as Jimmie Rodgers or the Allen Brothers, despite the fact that the recorded legacy of these musicians

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2. Charles K. Wolfe discusses the impact of this “commercialized racism” on the subsequent development of black musical styles in a recent short essay (“Hillbilly Fever”).

bears witness to a reciprocal influence profound and pervasive enough to render such distinctions nonsensical. The notion of a type of musical expression as endemic to a particular race appears transparently racist and—more importantly—false when applied to, say, chamber music, or opera, or country music, or even jazz. Yet an observer as insightful and sophisticated as Jones can offer, in all sincerity, the image of a white blues singer as absurd. No one would argue that Charlie Pride is somehow not a “legitimate” country singer (to choose the most obvious example), yet Jones’s framework would force him to deny the legitimacy of the blues of, say, Dock Boggs, were he aware of Boggs’s existence.

Boggs’s music has next to nothing in common with the blackface minstrelsy of his contemporaries like Emmett Miller, nor with the earnest, domesticated latter-day minstrelsy of the 60s folk revival (in which Boggs played a minor and irascible part). Neither did Boggs engage in anything like the affected blackness of “white Negroes” like Mezz Mezzrow, whose wholesale adoption of a subset of black culture appears in retrospect as an earnest blackface performance expanded to encompass an entire lifestyle. Mezzrow, a Jewish marijuana dealer and occasional clarinet player, apparently became convinced after moving to Harlem that he had actually become “a Negro” (Melnick 139). Mezzrow’s literalization of his adoption of a “black” identity is only a step beyond the blackface minstrels before him and Jimmie Rodgers or Elvis after him. His is a white Negroism steeped in the urban context of jazz culture. In the same discussion in which Jones dismisses the idea of a white blues singer, he offers jazz as an avenue for whites to successfully imitate “the legitimate feeling of Afro-American music” (37). Jones attributes this possibility to “a broadness of emotional meaning that allowed of many separate ways into it, not all of them dependent on the ‘blood ritual’ of the blues” (38). The “profound reflection of America” that jazz offered, Jones continues, attracted (and in the process, created) “a new *class* of white American” (original emphasis). If Mezzrow and other “white Negroes” participated in a jazz-based culture that was distinctly urban and thoroughly modern, Boggs represents a kind of rural culture that was both

ancient and modern: ancient in its still prevalent, if inextricably muddled, ties to African and British antecedents; modern in the new and peculiar ways in which the combination of industrialization, consumer culture, and economic privation had brought about novel social relations. Boggs's music, and that of a host of others, black and white, who operated in cultural spheres outside of Jones's purview, and who constituted a class of their own, offers a reflection of America equally profound as that Jones sees in jazz. This "old, weird America," as Greil Marcus calls it (89), is a largely unmarked border between the unruly, multiracial, wildly heterodox pre-commercial musical culture of the rural South and the increasingly segregated and formalized commercial genres that derived from it. The profound affinities between the music of someone like Dock Boggs and that of the black blues singers who were his contemporaries are not merely formal. Considerations of mediation and commercial involvement aside, the diverse body of music from which the various blues and hillbilly styles were derived was in an important sense an autochthonous product of the rural South, and as such it displays the same heterogeneity and complexity as any of the other cultural products of the region. In this sense, it is not necessary to reject outright Jones's assertion that the music that would come to be known as the blues was born of "the peculiar social, cultural, economic, and emotional experience of . . . black [people] in America," but the statement bears refining.

I certainly do not wish to contest that the blues is an African-American form, nor do I claim that white involvement contributed to its development in a substantial way, other than in its commercial dissemination and exploitation. I do maintain, though, that an understanding of what would become first "hillbilly," then "country" music is impossible without considering the blues and other black musical traditions. Once this allowance is made, only the most tenuous—and ultimately untenable—racialist arguments stand in the way of considering Southern rural music, from blues to country, as a totality. Certainly there exist discrete strains within this totality, and the distinctions between various genres or subgenera are not completely spurious. On the other hand,

contemporary views of the relative autonomy of black and white musical traditions in the early twentieth-century South are conditioned to a very significant extent by the segregationist policies of record companies in the 1920s and 1930s (and by the segregationist culture of America as a whole). The profound permeability (and near collapse, in many cases) of the boundaries between black and white styles is attested not only by historical evidence,<sup>3</sup> but also by recorded performances themselves. Harry Smith, whose 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music* helped launch the folk revival and temporarily resurrect the long-dormant careers of many artists who had made hillbilly or race records in the 1920s, delighted in the confusion and effacement of the racial distinctions that had governed the commercial marketing and consumption of the recordings his anthology documents. Simply by placing Dock Boggs's "Sugar Baby" in proximity with Richard "Rabbit" Brown's "James Alley Blues," Bascom Lamar Lunsford's "I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground," and Gus Cannon's "Minglewood Blues," Smith made a compelling case that the affinities of these performances (all of which had been commercially released as hillbilly or race records) far outweighed any generic or racially-determined distinctions between them. Viewed from this perspective, the "violent contradiction" of the white blues singer that seemed to vex Jones so seems decidedly less significant. While Boggs's music is clearly not an immediate product of the particular and unique experience of American blacks, considering Boggs in relation to his contemporaries suggests that "the social, cultural, economic, and emotional experience" that conditioned his expression was intimately and inextricably linked with the rural Southern experience that produced what Jones considers "legitimate blues."

A more difficult case is that of Jimmie Rodgers, the most famous white blues singer, who has consistently been acknowledged by listeners white and black as "legitimate" in the sense of the

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3. Examples include the fact that it was not at all uncommon for record companies to "mistakenly" release records by white artists as "race" records and those by black artists on "hillbilly" records and that repertoire has continually been shared between white and black performers from the advent of commercial recording through the present day (Otto and Burns 414; Tosches *Country* 204).

word that Jones uses. Perhaps the simplest way to account for Rodgers's unique style is to approach the question formally; one could easily catalog the guitar licks, vocal techniques, and lyrical elements that Rodgers derived (or stole, if you prefer) from earlier blues instrumentalists and singers.<sup>4</sup> While Boggs serves as an example of a white artist whose music is deeply immersed in the shared folk culture of Southern whites and blacks, Rodgers's case is somewhat more complex, in that it involves an extended engagement of Southern rural folk culture with the multiracial but black-derived commercial culture of urban jazz. While Boggs's recordings were commercial in nature (as opposed to the field recordings made by folklorists), they and the other recordings on Smith's *Anthology* bear a different relationship to the jazz-dominated popular music of their time than do Rodgers's. Rodgers's music, in certain important respects, has little in common with Boggs's. If, as I have argued, Boggs's music can be understood as a product of a largely shared multiracial folk tradition, Rodgers's—while certainly not divorced from this tradition—exhibits strong ties both to the Jazz Age popular culture of the urban North and to the larger body of black-derived white popular music. The commercial ascent of Jimmie Rodgers indicates an important shift in hillbilly music's relationship to the larger world of commercial entertainment. In an important sense, Rodgers's brief career marks the modernization of hillbilly music, its transition from a folk music with commercial ties to a commercial genre with folk roots.

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4. Mike Paris and Chris Comber provide a fairly exhaustive analysis of such derivations in their biography of Rodgers.

## THE BIG BANG OF COUNTRY MUSIC

In June 1923, Ralph Peer traveled to Atlanta to record local black musicians for the race market. While there, he also recorded two tunes by Fiddlin' John Carson, a local (white) musician, at the request of Polk Brockman, a local furniture store owner, who agreed to purchase five hundred copies of the resulting record. A skeptical Peer agreed, and to his surprise the initial pressing sold out immediately. More records were pressed, as Peer and his label (Okeh) recognized that the rural whites who bought Carson's record represented a potentially untapped market—one that was an analog of the race market to which Okeh and other labels sold recordings by black artists. Some sources cite this recording as the first commercial country music recording; others assign that label to old-time fiddler Eck Robertson's New York session in June of 1922. Regardless of which recording is considered to have initiated the trend, other rural musicians were soon recruited and recorded; a conversation between Peer and singer Al Hopkins is reputed to have provided the new genre with a name: "hillbilly."<sup>1</sup>

Recordings by hillbillies—authentic or manufactured—became increasingly popular, and in the summer of 1927, Peer traveled to Bristol, on the Tennessee/Virginia border, to audition and record another batch of rural performers. This trip, of course, resulted in the discovery of both Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, who would quickly become hillbilly music's first big stars. Rodgers would come to be known as "The Father of Country Music," and the Carter Family's influence on music of the next several decades was equally significant. The numerous contemporary accounts of the Bristol sessions, with its cast of characters trekking in from the surrounding hills to audition for the record company scout, serves as a convenient and appealing point of origin

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1. See footnote 2 on page 7.

for commercial country music—what Nolan Porterfield calls “the Big Bang of country music evolution” (“Hey Hey” 17).

In these accounts Peer occupies a position quite similar to that of the ballad collectors who had been operating in the area for three decades before his arrival. Like them, Peer’s encounters with and understanding of his subjects are colored with his deliberate or unconscious notions of an appropriate (which in his case meant marketable) hillbilly aesthetic. In Peer’s account of his initial encounter with the Carters, A.P. “is dressed in overalls and the women are country women from way back there . . . they look like hillbillies” (qtd. in Wolfe *Classic Country* 2). This account, in all likelihood, is a fabrication. It was customary for country dwellers of the time to wear their best clothes when going to town, and all existing photos of the Carter Family show A.P. in a suit and tie (Peterson 244). Peer’s description of the Carters as rubes, while perhaps disingenuous and counterfactual, is perfectly consonant with representations of hillbillies throughout the early commercial period. Such characterizations would color the Grand Ole Opry’s presentation for years to come, and persisted in concrete form at least until the demise of TV’s *Hee Haw* in 1991. Indeed, *Hee Haw*’s grotesque parodies of hillbilly conventions harken back to well before the origins of commercial country music. Substitute darkies for rubes in any given *Hee Haw* segment, and you end up with a late-nineteenth century minstrel show.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Cecil Sharp and other collectors and promoters of Appalachian folk music, Peer’s interest in the music was purely commercial. Peer famously described Carson’s singing as “pluperfect awful,” but had no qualms about recording him once the commercial viability of Carson’s recordings had been established. Like the ballad collectors, though, Peer had a particular notion about the type of music he was seeking. As Peer himself recounted it in a 1953 *Billboard* article, at the time of his first audition, Rodgers “was singing mostly songs originated by New York publishers—the current hits.” At least at the outset of Rodgers’s commercial career, this would not do, and

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2. Robert Cantwell makes a similar observation (*When We Were Good* 24), as does Eric Lott (5).

Peer immediately encouraged Rodgers to develop a repertoire of new (but old-fashioned) material. Peer was nothing if not commercially astute; discouraging Rodgers from recording current popular hits both enabled Peer to capitalize on the publishing revenues of newly-written (or out-of-copy-right) material and to market Rodgers as a folksinger.

While Peer's discovery of Rodgers and the Carter Family marks a new stage in the commercialization of Southern rural music, one characterized by the music's increasing ties to the institutions of mass culture (commercial recordings, radio, Hollywood), the influence of commercial culture on country music was by no means a novel development of the 1920s. Rodgers's own proclivities for vaudeville material, and the tangled histories of many of the Carter Family's songs point towards the nineteenth-century stage and parlor.

## PLANTATION NOSTALGIA VS. HEBREW BROADWAY JAZZ

The minstrel show, which dominated popular entertainment in nineteenth-century America, had an enormous impact on the popular entertainment of the twentieth century as well. By the time of Fiddlin' John Carson's first recording, the perverse spectacle of whites imitating blacks on stage and in performance had been naturalized, familiarized, and ingrained in the popular consciousness by nearly a century of repetitions and variations. Without calling attention to the imitation through the representational cues of blacking up or the use of dialect, for example—or even necessarily being aware of it—Carson, Robertson, and their contemporaries based their modes of performance on well-worn imitations of blacks. Looking again at Carson's recordings mentioned previously, we see that they are both minstrel tunes that had undergone a sort of folk transformation, and entered into the common stock. Carson's first recording was "Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane." Written by William Shakespeare Hayes and published as "The Little Old Cabin in the Lane" in the 1870s,<sup>1</sup> this song—depicting an ex-slave's nostalgic recollection of antebellum plantation life—was typical of a genre of sentimental "plantation airs" that were widespread in the decades immediately following the Civil War. Bill C. Malone argues that by the time of Carson's recording, the song, "once intended as a lament of an ex-slave, became metamorphosed through time into a piece of nostalgia for the rural past" (*Raisin*' 221). While there may be some truth to this assertion, it seems unlikely that such a piece, written by a white Kentuckian in the midst of Reconstruction and popularized by a minstrel troupe (Manning's Minstrels), could be so thoroughly dehistoricized a mere

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1. There seems to be some confusion regarding the original publication date of this piece. Malone says it was written in 1871 (*Raisin*' 55); this date is corroborated by other sources. A fascimile edition printed in *Minstrel Songs with Guitar Accompaniment* in 1950 by Oliver Ditson Company (the original publishers) gives its copyright date as 1875. The cover of the original (an image of which is available online at <http://memory.loc.gov/music/sm/sm1877/07300/07397/001.jpg>) gives its publication date as 1877.

fifty years after its introduction. Carson's version does strip the song of its original cartoonish dialect ("I'se de only one dat's left wid dis ole dog ob mine"), replacing it with what one assumes is his natural diction. On the other hand, the 1920s saw the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan—another fixture of Reconstruction—and Carson "regularly played for Klan functions" (Russell 23). This connection suggests that the overtly nostalgic aspects of the postbellum minstrel songs that Carson performed were enmeshed with other, more ambivalently historical perspectives.

Other evidence against the cultural amnesia that Malone's reading implies is easily found by perusing record company catalogs or sheet music collections from the period. Tosches notes that Victor was still advertising coon songs (under the revised heading of "Negro Songs and Plantation Airs") in its 1917 catalog, and Columbia included "Coon Songs and Specialties" in its 1920 offerings (*Country* 165). *Songs of the Sunny South*, published in New York in 1929, includes piano sheet music for more than two hundred songs, as its preface proclaims, "redolent of life on the broad plantations, stately mansions, bustling levees and magnolia-shaded cabins which dotted Dixie-land during the period from 1800 to 1880." "Little Old Cabin in the Lane" is included, along with "Dixie Land," "Jordan is a Hard Road to Trabel" (sic), "Turkey in the Straw," "When You and I Were Young, Maggie," and other songs that bridge the minstrel and hillbilly traditions. That these tunes appear alongside "Carve dat Possum," "Jim Crow," and "Oh! dat Watermelon" suggests that the audiences of songs adopted by hillbilly performers remained quite cognizant of their provenance and historical context. To modern eyes, the grotesque exaggerations, garish imagery, and twisted sentimentality of blackface appear to indicate a profound failure of identification with its putative subjects. At the same time, the fascination for impersonations and representations of blacks that whites—both in the South and, significantly, in the North, where social interaction between blacks and whites was much less common—serves as a testimony to the profound ways in which whites had come to define their own existence in relation to that of blacks.

The maudlin sentimentality of the minstrel songs found a new home in country music fifty years or more after their origin; so too did the ugly racism of the coon songs, if in a subdued form. The racial burlesques that inform such minstrel show relics as “Nigger Baby” or “Nigger Loves a Watermelon” became increasingly scarce as the 1920s drew to a close, although occasional irruptions like that of Reb Rebel records in the 1960s<sup>2</sup> or the “X-rated” recordings of David Allan Coe—in which the sublimated sexual envy that Eric Lott sees as central to minstrel shows’ representations of blacks finds overt and gleefully crude expression—suggest that the impulses behind them never completely disappeared.

If after the 1920s the coon song racism of hillbilly music’s early years became less and less prevalent, the music’s sentimental underbelly showed no such decline. Jimmie Rodgers, drawing on both Tin Pan Alley and the tradition of “Plantation Airs,” was from the outset one of sentimental nostalgia’s foremost practitioners. Of Rodgers’s Bristol recordings, one was a traditional lullaby that had been recorded by a number of artists in various styles throughout the decade, and the other was an original song, squarely in a traditional folk form. Neither hinted at the great diversity of songs and styles that Rodgers would record over the next six years. Rodgers’s recording career, which lasted from 1927 to 1933, serves in an important sense as a microcosm of the initial stages of country music’s development as a commercial and artistic genre. Country music as constituted in Rodgers’s recordings is a synthetic form, distinctly modern, crafted from a heterogeneous mish-mash of 19th- and early 20th-century folk and popular forms. As such, it contains within it a wealth of intermingling and sometimes contradictory cultural elements: rural and urban, black and white, Southern and non-Southern, folk and popular, traditional and modern.

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2. Reb Rebel records, which operated out of a Crowley, Louisiana, storefront, featured such artists as Johnny Rebel (“Nigger Hatin’ Me”) and James Crow (“Cowboys and Niggers”). Reb Rebel’s output combined “modern” George Wallace-era race-baiting with atavistic, coon-song style lyrics.

In her 1935 biography of her late husband, Carrie Rodgers presents Jimmie Rodgers as a crucible in which the “darkey songs” he learned as a boy are forged within his “Irish soul” into something distinctive and new. Of the early influence of the African-American railroad laborers with whom Jimmie had extensive contact as a waterboy, she writes:

The grinning, hard-working blacks who took Aaron Rodgers’s orders made his small son laugh—often. Though small he was white. So, even when they bade him “bring that water ‘round” they were deferential. During the noon dinner-rests, they taught him to plunk melody from banjo and guitar. They taught him darkey songs: moaning chants and crooning lullabies. (7)

Carrie Rodgers’s understanding of Jimmie’s relationship to the blacks from whom he learned exhibits quite vividly what W.J. Cash six years later called the “vastly ego-warming and ego-expanding distinction between the white man and the black” (40). Cash identifies this distinction as key to the notion of a Southern white identity that transcends class, as the justification for poor whites’ and yeoman farmers’ identification with the planter class. Of course Cash also asserts, famously, that through the mechanisms of plantation life, “Negro entered into white man as profoundly as white man entered into Negro—subtly influencing every gesture, every word, every emotion and idea, every attitude” (51). The tension between very real social distinctions between blacks and whites and the multifarious ways in which these distinctions were troubled on a cultural level plays a large part in the social history of the postbellum South, including its music.

While it’s likely that by “darkey songs,” Mrs. Rodgers means simply songs sung by black people, her choice of phrase, unconsciously or not, again points back to the nineteenth-century tradition of blackface minstrelsy, whose grotesque representations of antebellum plantation life were the most popular and important entertainment form in of the previous century throughout the country. The minstrel show was also a series of stylized public engagements with Cash’s “vast and capacious distinction” (40). The representational forms, characters, and caricatures of blackface minstrelsy persisted in concrete form well into Rodgers’s time. Before his commercial breakthrough, he would tour briefly as a blackface banjo player and comedian in a rural medicine

show—a straggling remnant of the lavish, urban minstrel shows of fifty years earlier. In July of 1930, well into his career as a popular singer, Rodgers recorded a blackface dialog called “The Pullman Porters.” In this atavistic sketch, Rodgers’s character, “Hezekiah,” serves as interlocutor to his foil, “Hiram.” Hiram asks Hezekiah to read a telegram for him. “What’s the matter, nigger? Can’t you read?,” Rodgers’s character asks. Understandably, the recording was not released.<sup>3</sup> This element of Rodgers’s professional experience was by no means unusual; other early important figures in what would become country music—Bob Wills and Roy Acuff among them—had similar backgrounds as blackface performers.

A somewhat different, but particularly illuminating case of the intersection of blackface impersonation and the emergence of commercial hillbilly music is that of Vernon Dalhart, whose career as the first nationally successful hillbilly singer was launched with the release of the “Wreck of the Old 97” b/w “The Prisoner’s Song” in 1924. Dalhart (a one-time cowboy born Marion Try Slaughter in east Texas) found success as a hillbilly singer after seven years spent as a singer of “coon” songs. The first of these releases (reportedly the song with which Dalhart auditioned for Thomas Edison) was “Can’t Yo’ Heah Me Callin’, Caroline,” released in 1917. In his essay on Dalhart, Walter Darrell Haden attributes the record’s success to Dalhart’s “convincing black dialect coupled with the singer’s obvious flair for histrionics” (69). Of course, Dalhart’s “convincing black dialect” was highly affected, and recalled the similar affectations of minstrels and others singers of coon songs. Dalhart, like others purporting special skill in what not so long previously had been called “Ethiopian delineation,” denied this affectation. Significantly, Dalhart claimed not that he had spent time studying Negro dialect, but that he “never had to learn it. When you are born and brought up in the South your only trouble is to talk any other way” (qtd. in Haden 69). In fact, he explains, “the sure ‘nough Southerner talks almost like a Negro, even when he’s white.”

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3. “The Pullman Porters” and other unreleased recordings are available on *Jimmie Rodgers: The Singing Brakeman*, a six-CD set from Bear Family records.

Fortunately for Dalhart's earlier career as a singer of light opera, he had by this time "broken [himself] of the habit, more or less, in ordinary conversation." All this silliness is, of course, marketing hype, but the classically-trained Dalhart's transition from coon songs to hillbilly songs suggests that experience in blackface—literally in the case of performing minstrels or figuratively in that of singers of coon songs like Dalhart—paved the way for the stylized "whiteface" acts that would come to characterize hillbilly music. Dalhart's involvement in the nascent field of hillbilly music was in an important sense an outgrowth of his early career as a singer of coon songs. The basis of his claim concerning the authenticity of these later performances was essentially the same as the one undergirding the "convincing" nature of his Negro dialect songs, as Dalhart claimed to sing country songs in his "own dialect" (qtd. in Haden 78). Regardless of the truth value of this claim, or the related claim that "the sure 'nough Southerner talks almost like a Negro," Dalhart serves as an example of both the essentially performative nature of the hillbilly persona and the affinities between this persona and Southern whites' imitations of Southern blacks.

It is important to recognize—as Rodgers apparently did—that the romanticism and sometimes maudlin sentimentality of the "darkey songs" that Dalhart sang and that keenly influenced Rodgers's repertoire was quite dated and reactionary by the late 1920s. Mrs. Rodgers quotes Jimmie as giving the following rationale for trying to get his music on the radio:

[H]ere's what I figure. Folks everywhere are gettin' kind of tired of all this Black Bottom—Charleston—jazz music junk . . . They tell me the radio stations keep gettin' (*sic*) more and more calls for old-fashioned songs: 'Yearning', 'Forgotten'—things like that, and even the old plantation melodies. Well, I'm ready with 'em. (69-70)

Rodgers would indeed record such material throughout his six-year recording career. At his last session, in New York in May of 1933, he recorded "Mississippi Delta Blues," whose evocations of an idyllic Southern home replete with whippoorwills, steamboats, and moonlit levees are accompanied by such seemingly anachronistic lines as:

I long to hear them darkies sing those old melodies  
 "Swanee River" and "Old Black Joe"

As the titles of the “old melodies” Rodgers’s imaginary darkies sing attest, the South of this song and many of Rodgers’s others had more to do with Stephen Foster’s deeply romanticized minstrel songs than with any actually existing place or people. That such imagery occupied such a prominent place in Rodgers’s repertoire in the 1930s suggests that the aesthetic and political content of country music was profoundly out of sync with the contemporary zeitgeist. In his introduction to *The New Negro* eight years before, Alain Locke described “The Old Negro” as “a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism” (3). “The days of ‘aunties,’ ‘uncles,’ and ‘mammies’ is . . . gone,” Locke proclaimed hopefully. “The popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions” (5). As it turns out, the popular melodrama had *not* nearly played itself out, at least not in cultural realms that were in some ways far removed from Locke’s Harlem. As Rodgers’s “Mississippi River Blues” attests, in country music well into the following decade:

You can hear old mammy shout  
“Come on in here you all”

In Carrie Rodgers’s account, Jimmie’s parlor song- and minstrel show tune-influenced repertoire was a calculated commercial response to the popular jazz of the time. While this would seem to suggest an antipathy to the African-American popular music of the day, the real object of Rodgers’s comment is likely the “Hebrew Broadway jazz” excoriated by contemporary folk purists as a Modernist, urban, Jewish threat to traditional Anglo-American rural traditions (Cantwell, *When We Were Good* 31). Such sentiments are of course tainted with racism and anti-Semitism; significantly, also they represent the anti-Modernism that helped fuel the folk revival of the twenties and thirties. In his discussion of Jewish involvement in blackface, Jeffrey Melnick cites Simon Raphaelson’s preface to the stage version of *The Jazz Singer* (which predates the film): “Jews are determining the nature and scope of jazz more than any other race—more than the negroes, from whom they have stolen jazz and given it a new color and meaning” (103). Further, Melnick claims, “Jewish blackface represented a victory for the (northern) city, for the urban entertainment

complex which consistently proposed that the South had no current identity but only a history” (109). Melnick is correct in this assertion. Peer’s commercial coup in discovering Rodgers and the Carters represents a continuation of this victory, as the northern entertainment complex enlisted Southern performers to record nostalgic reminiscences of a vanished South. Ironically and significantly, these nostalgic early styles would soon engage vigorously with the urban, black-originated styles that the Rodgers quote above posits—somewhat disingenuously, it would seem, given his own predilection for such styles—as standing in antipathy to them. In a second and related irony, this very engagement would allow for the creation of vibrant, hybrid styles (like that of Rodgers himself) that would allow for the articulation of Southern voices that were very much alive. As Rodgers’s career progressed, the distinction in his music between antediluvian folk- and minstrel-derived tunes and thoroughly modern commercial jazz would be continually undermined, as the Father of Country Music would record with old-time string bands, black jug bands, small concert orchestras, blues guitarists, Hawaiian groups, a musical saw player, white jazz bands, the Carter family, and Louis Armstrong. Rodgers’s transition from itinerant local entertainer to national recording star and progenitor of a hugely popular commercial genre would involve the infusion of the wide-ranging musical elements that each collaborator brought to the already thoroughly heterogeneous music that Rodgers brought to his first recording session.

If in the amusing, deferential darkies Carrie Rodgers identifies the formal sources of her famous husband’s music, she insists that Rodgers was not merely an imitator, but that he simply expressed “the natural music in his Irish soul” (58). *Jimmie Rodgers’s Life Story* is replete with references to Jimmie’s “Irish heart” and “Irish soul.” Like the songs of Lomax’s cowboys whose English song heritage flowed in their blood, in his wife’s account Rodgers’s music is an expression of a racial heritage. Carrie Rodgers’s invocations of Jimmie’s “Irish soul” serve to dissociate the music of white folk from that of their non-white neighbors. Instead these invocations assign it a place in an unbroken white musical tradition extending back to the British Isles, much like

Lomax's repeated claims concerning the Anglo-Saxon provenance of his cowboy subjects' songs, or Cecil Sharp's or Bradley Kincaid's similar claims concerning mountain songs. In each case, it matters little whether the presumed tradition is Anglo-Saxon, Elizabethan, or Irish. In fact, Malone notes that the first two terms were often used interchangeably by advocates of a British folk culture in the South who evidently did not realize "that the two terms were not synonymous" (*Raisin*' 21).

Interestingly, Carrie Rodgers's description of Jimmie's music as a product of his Irish soul, rather than Anglo-Saxon blood, is more in line with the claims of later proponents of a Celtic South than with the Anglo-Saxon-oriented view common when she was writing in the mid-1930s. This view of a Celtic South, whose origins lie in W.J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* and of which Grady McWhiney is probably the most notable recent advocate, holds that the culture of the North was predominantly English, and that the South was instead settled predominantly by "Celts" (or Irish or Scotch-Irish), and that long-standing differences in the cultures of the differing populations of settlers largely determined the differences in the cultures of the American North and South.<sup>4</sup> Whether malignant or benign, the notion of Southern culture as a product of a Celtic racial heritage—like similar notions that identify it as Elizabethan or Anglo-Saxon—ultimately serve to obscure actual social relations "under a murky veil of romanticism" (Malone *Raisin*' 20). A similar veil of romanticism combined with more mundane prejudices (both within the South and outside of it) clouds consideration of the South's cultural inventions in relation to each other and to American culture as a whole.

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4. For an application of this theory to the music of the South, see McWhiney (118-122). For a concise but thorough refutation, see Malone (*Raisin*' 20-22).

## CONCLUSION

Each of the racialized notions of Southern cultural identity discussed in this essay contributes to a framework that historically has segregated cultural forms presumed to be “white” from those presumed to be “black,” while ignoring or suppressing the interactions between them. This analytical framework is of course closely tied with social and economic structures that have done the same with individuals and communities. It may be argued that the claims of Sharp, Lomax, Cash, the Agrarians, and McWhiney are largely academic, and therefore marginal in the broader context of the culture as a whole. The notions of race evident in Carrie Rodgers’s book, on the other hand, are certainly not academic, but rather are indicative of large-scale cultural attitudes. Since Jimmie Rodgers kickstarted the commercial country music industry, it has steadily and almost without exception distanced itself from its African-American influences, while the impact of these influences continues unabated. Country music is not simply the product of a provincial white South, nor is it an historical remnant of an Anglo/Elizabethan/Celtic heritage. To the contrary, country music from the outset has been a product of dynamic cultural exchanges among blacks and whites, North and South, and the country and the city. Renewed attention to its history, divested of the romanticism that has accompanied it, is likely to prove a fertile source of insight not only into the music itself, but into the complex cultural context from which it sprang.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Erich Nunn was born in Fort Leonardwood, Missouri, in 1974. He grew up in West Point, New York, Hepzibah, Georgia, and Leesville, Louisiana. He attended Leesville High School, where a fellow student accused him of being a race traitor for reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. After graduation he moved to Chicago to learn to be a blues and jazz drummer. Afterwards he attended Centenary College of Louisiana on a music scholarship. He spent the Spring of 1994 studying literature at Aarhus Universitet in Denmark, and returned to Centenary determined to pursue graduate studies in English. He graduated from Centenary in 1996 with an interdisciplinary degree in English, music, and French.

After spending the summer studying French at the Université de Liège in Belgium, Erich began graduate school in English at the University of Florida. He moved to Boston, Massachusetts, in 1998 to pursue a career in the technology sector. While in Boston, he learned to play guitar and began playing and recording with a country/punk band in Memphis, Tennessee. In October of 2001, he decided to forsake Mammon in order to once again pursue the life of the mind. Erich will be returning to Louisiana to teach at Centenary College in August of 2002, and hopes also to play in a honky tonk band.