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Trying To Make It Real:
The Documentary Imagination of American Roots Music

By

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Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts

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Abstract

Trying To Make It Real examines documentary film and photographic representations of American roots music from 1899 until 2003. The study focuses on photographic work by the Hampton Institute Camera Club, Doris Ulmann, Ben Shahn, John Wesley Work III, and Frederic Ramsey, Jr., and film work by *The March of Time* newsreel service, Willard Van Dyke, Alan Lomax, John Cohen, the Appalshop media collective, Bill Ferris, Mike Shea, Worth Long, Wim Wenders, and Mark Romanek.

Over the past century, cultural intermediaries have worked to establish the authenticity of vernacular music and musicians, and, in the same respect, many documentarians have positioned their photographs and films as authentic representations of reality. The aim of *Trying To Make It Real* is not to assess the authenticity of a particular musician or documentary depiction but to contextualize claims of authenticity—who has made them, when, how, and for what reason—and to consider how notions of authenticity have changed over time.

This study reveals ways in which photographers and filmmakers understood and interpreted American roots music. Some, such as Ulmann and Ramsey, presented the music as dead or in decline, while others, such as Lomax and Long, approached the music as dynamic and adaptable, deploying it for social struggles and to challenge racial and regional stereotypes.

Like roots music, documentary has taken on different meanings in different contexts. This study considers the documentary imagination at specific moments in U.S. history. Shahn and Ferris, for example, approached documentary as a record of social reality, to be produced with minimal adornment and manipulation. Others, such as the Hampton Camera Club and Wenders, stressed the subjective, expressive dimension of documentary, accepting staging and re-enactment as legitimate practices.

Text and context contend in documentary and roots music. During the 1960s, folklorists began to document the context that circumscribes folkloric expression, in addition to the accustomed textual transcriptions, and, during this same period, many documentary filmmakers shifted from an expository approach and began to incorporate more observational and participatory methods.

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Acknowledgments

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I would also like to thank Emory University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, its Institute of Liberal Arts, and the Emory library system for all the financial and institutional support they provided over the past six years. I deeply appreciate the generosity and camaraderie of the Emory community.

One of the most significant influences on my early scholarly development was my father Roger, who passed away in 1997. He generously assisted with tuition and other school expenses, but his biggest gift was encouraging me to find and follow my intellectual interests. My dad had a broad and voluminous mind, and my keenness for American history stems from him. This dissertation is dedicated to his memory.

I want to thank my mother Ave and my in-laws the Leavells for all the love and support they provided over the course of this long journey. I'd also like to thank my brothers Mike and Jeff for turning me on to roots music in the first place. When I was in the ninth grade, Mike lent me his copy of *Rev. Gary Davis at Newport*, which blew my mind, and Jeff exposed me to hill country blues and alt country when I lived with him for a couple summers in Oxford, Mississippi in the early nineties.

Writers often refer to long-term book projects as their "baby," but, in my case, it's not just a metaphor. My wife Amy got pregnant as I was beginning the earliest stages of this dissertation, and, now, upon completion, our son Miles is two and a half years old. It's unlikely that Miles will remember the period when this dissertation was written, but I will always cherish the memory of the past couple of years of watching him grow up. Thank you Miles for your cheery disposition, your playfulness, and for helping me keep everything in perspective.

My deepest thanks are reserved for my wife Amy. Soon after we started dating, she encouraged me to apply to Emory for graduate school, and I can now see that it was one of the best moves I ever made. Her support and encouragement through the seemingly never-ending march of coursework, exams, and dissertation writing was always steady, as was her patience for the messiness of my mind and my office. Thank you Amy for helping me through this immense challenge. I couldn't have done it without you.

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Introduction

“Deeper, more three-dimensional, more compelling”: Documentary, American roots music, and the pursuit of authenticity

*Looks like we always end up in a rut (everybody now!)
Trying to make it real —compared to what?*

—Eugene McDaniels¹

In 2003—designated the “Year of the Blues” by the United States Congress because it marked the hundred-year anniversary of the genre—the record collector John Tefeller revealed a previously unknown photograph of Charlie Patton, regarded by many as the “Father of Delta Blues.” Tefeller discovered the photograph, a full-body studio portrait of Patton playing his Stella guitar, in a stash of old Paramount Records publicity material in Grafton, Wisconsin. Until this discovery, the only known photograph of Patton was a grainy headshot, which, according to Tefeller, had been cropped at some point from the original full-body portrait.

As soon as this new image of Patton was unveiled, its authenticity was questioned. A number of fans and musicians on the popular online forum guitarseminars.com challenged the legitimacy of the picture. The renowned guitarist Bob Brozman claimed that he “immediately had the thought the photo is a fake. . .[because] the head is too small for the proportions of the rest of the body.”² Others claimed that the lighting and shadows in the photograph are inconsistent and that someone had to have manipulated them. While some noted the possibility that a Paramount representative

might have innocently retouched the image back in the 1920s or 30s, others accused Tefteller of engineering a hoax in order to profit from merchandise and licensing deals. Many participants on the forum responded angrily to these accusations and defended the authenticity of the photograph and the integrity of Tefteller.³

What I found intriguing about the controversy surrounding the newly-discovered Charlie Patton photograph wasn't the debate about the picture's authenticity⁴ but, rather, how this debate often seamlessly shifted into a discussion about the authenticity of Patton himself. On the guitarseminars.com forum, fans analyzed the unusual way Patton handles the guitar in the picture, particularly his top-down fretting technique. Some accepted the technique as proper and professional, while others described it as calculated pose that bore little resemblance to the way Patton typically played.⁵ On the forum, there were two parallel yet interrelated debates: one about whether the photographic document was genuine and one about whether Patton's behavior in the photograph was genuine.

Many of fans on the forum grew weary analyzing and debating the legitimacy of the picture. Bob Brozman, who had expressed his skepticism about the photograph for weeks, tried to remind fans about what was really important: "It is Charley Patton's MUSIC that makes his photo an item of interest. Don't lose perspective--it is the MUSIC here that is really more important."⁶ In this comment, Brozman reiterates the common belief that visual representations of musicians, while interesting, serve to distract from the "purely musical."⁷ The authenticity that mattered to Brozman didn't involve a picture or a pose but, rather, the music that Patton made, and, for Brozman, Patton represents the ultimate in blues authenticity. In an interview shortly after Tefteller unveiled the new photograph, Brozman asserted that Patton's music was "deeper, more three-dimensional,

more compelling. . . than any of his peers.”⁸ Brozman admires Patton’s music not just because of the bluesman’s remarkable technique and creativity, but also because Patton’s music feels more raw and emotional—more authentic—than any other pre-World War II blues.

Brozman tries to maintain a boundary between visual culture and musical culture, but the online debate about the Patton photograph demonstrates that this boundary can’t be effectively maintained. Music and visual media are intertwined now more than ever. It’s not just that music is increasingly delivered through visual means (via music videos, films, television programs, etc.) but that the *discourses* about visual and musical forms often overlap.

Trying To Make It Real examines the interrelationship between documentary and American roots music from 1899 until 2003. I use one to illuminate the other, examining American roots music through documentary representations and surveying documentary through a sustained focus on roots music. I account for the complex negotiation *between* the two, demonstrating how documentary methodologies have framed the representation of the music and how attitudes about the music have shaped documentary practice.

Many of the people who have shaped the meaning and memory of American roots music haven’t been musicians but cultural intermediaries: scholars, folklorists, revivalists, and music industry personnel. In this study, I focus on a specific group of intermediaries—documentary photographers and filmmakers—and examine how they

have represented and shaped perceptions of American roots music since the late nineteenth century.

At certain points the discourse on music and the discourse on documentary intersect. As was evident in the controversy surrounding the newly-discovered Charlie Patton photograph, one key intersection point is the shifting concept of authenticity.

As Richard Peterson, Benjamin Filene, and other scholars have shown, cultural intermediaries in the twentieth-century went to great lengths to establish the authenticity of vernacular musicians.⁹ These mediating figures detailed the raw and rural background of vernacular musicians in order to convince the public of the legitimacy and sincerity of the downhome music these people made.

In a similar respect, many documentarians over the past century tried to establish the authenticity of their work by claiming that their films and photographs were, in essence, reproductions of reality. These claims were often made at moments when new technologies enabled new methods of documentation; in these instances, documentarians made grandiose claims about how they managed to break through the conventions of visual representation and capture authentic slices of “real life.” For instance, the documentary filmmakers Albert and David Maysles, who in the early 1960s began using the new portable film cameras and audio recorders, claimed that they produced the “purest form of cinema” because they were able to present reality in a totally direct and unadulterated state.¹⁰

Recent scholarship has demonstrated, however, that authenticity isn’t a tangible quality that can be definitively measured, documented, proven, or debunked. As Richard Peterson notes, “Authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designed

authentic but is a socially agreed-upon construct.”¹¹ It’s not a fixed characteristic but, rather, a quality that is constantly being asserted, accepted, and contested. What constitutes authenticity in one location and at one time does not necessarily apply to another location and time. In this study, my aim is not to assess the authenticity of a particular musician or documentary representation but to contextualize the claims of authenticity—who has made them, when, how, and for what reason—and to consider how notions of authenticity have changed over time.

Part of my aim is also to reveal the ongoing dialectic between authenticity and its supposed opposite, artificiality. I examine documentary films and photographs produced in a “straight” style with minimal adornment and manipulation, but I also consider documentary representations that have been self-consciously staged. My intention is not to suggest that capturing events in a “straight” style is preferable to setting up scenes. I’m more interested in tracking the dialectic between spontaneity and staging, between the seemingly authentic and the seemingly inauthentic, than in advocating for either approach.

This leads into questions about the nature of documentary itself. Is a documentary representation a mere record of events, or is it an imaginative impression of events? Can and should documentary be considered art?

While some still expect documentary films and photographs to be objective accounts of reality, the fact is that no film or photograph can be produced in a totally objective manner. All documentary representations exhibit some degree of bias and subjectivity because basic decisions have to be made about what to shoot and from what vantage point. It’s best to accept and try to understand the role of subjectivity in

documentary rather than to try to stamp it out. As Stella Bruzzi explains, “Documentary is a negotiation between reality on one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other.”¹² In this study I consider the biases and motivations of those who have documented American vernacular music. Sometimes a clear and explicit political agenda informed their work, other times the agenda was less clear and operated on a more subconscious level.

I use the term “documentary imagination”—a term borrowed from William Stott’s landmark work *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*—to highlight the subjective dimension of documentary work, but I also use the term to signal that I will be considering how documentary itself has been imagined at specific moments in American history. The term wasn’t regularly applied to a particular style of photography or filmmaking until the mid-1930s, but, of course, the practice of documenting actuality had been central to both mediums since their inceptions in the nineteenth century. In this study, I consider how some of the photographers and filmmakers who documented American vernacular music understood what they were doing, i.e. how they interpreted the meaning and function of documentary work. Like the concept of authenticity, documentary itself is a construction that has taken on different meanings in different contexts.

The term documentary is sometimes applied to audio projects like long-form radio shows or to textual projects that feature oral history transcriptions, but, in this study, I focus exclusively on documentary photography and film. Three chapters of this study deal with photography, four with film. Some of the same themes and attitudes run through both mediums, and, in certain instances, I show how one medium mimics the

style and technique of the other (like when photographers create sequences according to the logic of cinematic montage). And yet, I also consider the inherent differences between documentary film and photographic representations and the substantial variations in how roots music has been documented within each medium.

Within the broad field of documentary studies, music has been a relatively minor topic. A handful of documentary films that focus on American popular music, like *Don't Look Back*, *Woodstock*, and *Gimme Shelter*, have become cultural touchstones and key works in the documentary canon, but, for the most part, music occupies a small niche within documentary scholarship.

Within the study of vernacular American music, a few scholars have emphasized the importance of visual representations. From 1967 through 1985, Archie Green wrote a column in the *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly* about graphic material relating to American vernacular music. Early on, he recognized the importance of considering visual material in music research: “It seems to me that there is no better way to place music in a context of culture than to gather and make available the full array of man’s statements about music—visual as well as aural.”¹³ In 1977 Jeff Todd Titon debuted the influential work *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis*. In the final chapter, he examines the advertising of downhome blues records in the late 1920s and early 1930s and argues that white perceptions and anxieties about modern black life shaped these ads. In 2000 Eileen Southern published *Images: Iconography of Music in African American Culture, 1770s-1920s*, which considers how traditional African American music has been represented in painting, illustration, and photography. The limited scholarship on the visual culture of American roots music has tended to focus

on graphical and fine art images. The examination of documentary film and photographic representations of the music has been scarce.

The primary aim of this study is not to fill in gaps in documentary and roots music scholarship, but, instead, to bring the two fields together in order to appreciate where and how they have overlapped. This dual approach, more than anything else, is what makes this study unique and different. As I've noted, authenticity has been a major concern to scholars of both documentary and roots music, but no one has attempted to link the various authenticity debates and considered how the discourses on authenticity have intersected and diverged. With all the issues covered in this study, including authenticity, I try to maintain both a wide and a close-up perspective, i.e. appreciating how an issue has played out over time across a range of disciplines and cultural forms but also how it has been framed in specific ways at specific moments in time.

In terms of fields of scholarship, this study is perhaps best described as a hybrid of American Studies and documentary studies. This study also draws upon and can be positioned within a wide variety of other disciplines, including film history, photographic history and theory, visual culture, American music history, southern studies, folklore history and theory, anthropology, and ethnomusicology. I cite ethnomusicology and not musicology because this study is more concerned with the social and cultural aspects of music rather than the formal properties of music. For many decades, ethnomusicologists have embraced visual documentary work because it helps them better communicate and understand the social context of music.¹⁴

The issue of context is central to this study, for I am interested in how much of a musician's environment is revealed in documentary photographs and films. In some

cases, the surroundings are ignored or obscured, but, in other cases, there are extensive details about the domestic spaces and routines of vernacular musicians and about the public places where music is performed. Context is especially relevant to the depiction of musical performances. Often filmmakers and photographers simply show the musicians playing and singing, but, in other instances, documentarians reveal all the participants involved in a musical event, including spectators and dancers. Including all the participants implies that music is about much more than just melody, rhythm, and lyrics and, in fact, encompasses the entire social field in which music is presented.

It wasn't until the 1960s when folklorists began to emphasize the importance of documenting the context that circumscribes folk expression. Before then, folklore was an almost exclusively textual discipline. Folklorists working on music collected the lyrics and melodies of folk tunes and then published detailed transcriptions. The personality of folk musicians and the complex social worlds they lived in were not yet vital issues to folklorists. In this study, I sketch the history of academic folklore in the United States and chart some of the field's major changes, including the contextual turn of the 1960s and 1970s.

I've already used four different terms— vernacular, roots, folk, and downhome— to describe the music examined in this study. In his book *Romancing the Folk*, Benjamin Filene provides useful definitions of the terms “vernacular” and “roots”:

Appropriate to its usage in linguistics, I use “vernacular” to suggest songs employing a musical language that is current, familiar, and manipulable by ordinary people. . . . Under this definition, “vernacular” includes not only Appalachian mountain music or blues but also “pop” music. . . . within the domain of the vernacular I am mainly interested in “roots” music. I use “roots” (a designation that comes out of rock criticism) to identify musical genres that, whether themselves commercial or not, have been glorified as

the “pure” sources out of which the twentieth century’s commercial popular music was created.¹⁵

The term roots music has gained currency in mainstream and academic circles and is used extensively throughout this study, but I recognize that it is a far from perfect term. For one thing, it overemphasizes a fixed place out of which a style of music emerges. Recent music scholarship has begun to emphasize that migration and movement—routes instead of roots—must be considered as to avoid literally freezing musical traditions in a timeless place.¹⁶

Another limitation to the term roots music is that it reduces this music to nothing more than source material for commercial popular music. In certain cases, the “source material” definition falls apart because some genres of roots music (like zydeco and Tex-Mex music) simply have not had a notable influence on mainstream popular music. In other cases, the “source material” model is more relevant, like in the case of acoustic and electric blues, genres which were key to development of rock music. And yet, these kind of musical influences tend to get overstated. The meaning and significance of blues music involves more than just the fact that it has inspired rock.

The “source material” definition is problematic because it tends to place roots music in opposition to popular music. Much of the roots music in this study was issued commercially, and some of it even achieved large audiences. Then again, much of the music in this study flew well under the music industry radar and was only performed in small family or community settings. My goal is not to determine the appropriate level of popularity or obscurity for roots music but to simply track the various claims that have been made in regard to this issue. Some documentarians approached roots music as an

oasis separate from the swamp of mass culture, while others avoided making rigid determinations about how popular or commercial this music should be.

In this study I consider how terminology developed and has changed over time. The term folk music has had an especially difficult history, partly because, like the term roots music, it's often defined in opposition to what is deemed commercial and popular. Notions of purity and authenticity have clung to folk music, creating the impression it is or at least should be an "unselfconscious, unmediated, and wholly uncommercial mode of musical expression."¹⁷ While I reject limiting definitions of folk music purity and authenticity, I do consider how these definitions formed and have been contested over time.

One other term that I use in this study is downhome, which I take from Jeff Todd Titon's *Early Downhome Blues*. In this book, Titon encourages blues scholars to shift from the old term "country blues" to the more flexible category "downhome blues" because he feels that downhome encompasses blues' both tangible and *intangible* connections to place, locating the music in "both a place in time and a state of mind."¹⁸ Unlike the terms folk and roots, downhome doesn't imply a set of qualities inherent in musicians and doesn't frame the music in relation to another genre but, rather, emphasizes how blues functions as a kind of worldview. Downhome doesn't imply an oppositional relationship to popular culture in the way that the term folk music traditionally has. With that said, though, downhome typically isn't associated with slick and refined forms of entertainment, and one of the main reasons Titon used the term "downhome blues" was to draw a distinction between it and "classic blues," a more polished, jazz-influenced form of blues.

It's also important to note that I do not consider the entire spectrum of roots music in this study. The current conception of roots music encompasses a wide variety of musical genres and styles, including Cajun, Tex-Mex, zydeco, gospel, and Native American music, but I focus on just two roots genres: blues and old-time music.¹⁹

There is a general consensus about what constitutes blues music, but the term "old-time" is broader and less precise. According to Wikipedia, old-time music "is a form of North American folk music, with roots in the folk musics of many countries, including England, Scotland, Ireland and Africa. This musical form developed along with various North American folk dances, such as square dance, buck dance and clogging. . . It is played on acoustic instruments, generally centering on a combination of fiddle and plucked string instruments."²⁰ In this study I consider some of the commercial off-shoots of old-time music, including hillbilly and bluegrass.

Aside from my own taste and knowledge, the reason I have chosen to focus almost entirely on the blues and old-time genres is that this study is largely concerned with music of the U.S. South (and the diasporic South) up until about 1980. While there have been a multitude of regional styles and genres of roots music, blues and old-time music have been pervasive *throughout* the entire South and have been, aside from church music, the dominant forms of roots music in the South.

There are countless studies that focus just on blues or just on old-time music, but there are relatively few studies that examine both genres. In this study, I examine both because I want to explore both white and black musical traditions in the South.²¹ I consider how distinct cultural groups produced certain forms of music in specific

historical and geographical contexts, like the mountain music of Appalachian whites and the Delta blues of African Americans in Mississippi.

Despite the South's long history of racial segregation and intimidation, there has been a great deal of cultural confluence among southern blacks and whites, particularly in terms of music. And so, while I acknowledge how distinct racial communities produced unique forms of blues and old-time music in specific cultural contexts, I also highlight instances when documentarians revealed and/or emphasized the sharing and appropriation of vernacular music across racial lines.

I recognize that, while more than half of this study focuses on African American music, this study includes virtually no discussion of African American documentarians (although I do discuss African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar in Chapter One, African American musicologist John Wesley Work III in Chapter Three, and African American folklorist Worth Long in Chapter Six). This is partially an acknowledgment of the fact that those who have documented American roots music have been overwhelmingly white.²² This has been the case, at least in part, because doing documentary work often involves institutional support and/or requires certain kinds of training, and, up until the 1960s, this support and training was only minimally available to African Americans. It's also important to note that, during the Civil Rights era, many African Americans associated their vernacular music heritage with the Jim Crow South and, therefore, felt little urgency to document and preserve it.

I also recognize that, while many of the subjects in the films and photographs in this study are female, I only discuss one female documentarian: Doris Ulmann in Chapter Two. This is partially due to the fact that the documentarians of American roots

music have been overwhelmingly male.²³ As with the case of African Americans, this is partly because, before the 1960s, support and training for documentary film and photography were only minimally available to women. Doris Ulmann was able to photograph extensively throughout Appalachia because she was extraordinarily wealthy and could afford to do so. None of the other documentarians in this study were as wealthy and well-connected as Ulmann, but, with that said, almost all of the documentarians in this study were in a privileged class position relative to their subjects, who, more often than not, were working-class. While some documentarians delude themselves into thinking that class distinctions can melt away during the documentary encounter, others are more aware of the boundaries and biases involved in representing “how the other half lives.”

Some might complain that I omit some of the most well-known documentarians who have worked on roots music (like Les Blank, for example), but I need to be clear that this study is not a comprehensive survey of how blues and old-time music have been represented in documentary film and photography. Instead, this study focuses on specific figures, films, and photographs that are emblematic of their particular historical moments and illuminate key ideas and issues related to both documentary and roots music. Some figures, like Alan Lomax, appear in multiple chapters, and, in these instances, I try to reveal the reverberations, influences, and connections across time.

This study is organized chronologically. The middle five chapters focus on the period from 1930 to 1980, and the first and last chapters serve as outlying bookends, the first set in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the last set in the first decade of the twenty-first century. I break the tight chronology with the first and last chapters

because it allows me to both look back on the period before the idea of documentary developed and to anticipate fundamental changes in documentary practice due to the dynamic and non-linear features of digital technology.

In Chapter One I examine the poem “A Banjo Song” from the 1899 book *Poems of Cabin and Field*. The text of the poem was written by the African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, and the photographs accompanying the text were produced by the almost entirely white photographic club at the Hampton Institute, one of the country’s oldest historically black colleges. I argue that The Hampton Institute Camera Club produced “A Banjo Song” as a plausible, respectful simulation of black vernacular culture in order to fight against the obviously false depictions of that culture that circulated in print and on the minstrel stage. Because “A Banjo Song” treads so closely to nineteenth century stereotypes of African American life, it’s debatable whether Dunbar and the Camera Club succeeded in their goal of improving the public image of African Americans.

In Chapter Two I compare the music-related photos Doris Ulmann took in Appalachia with John Jacob Niles in the early 1930s to the music-related photographs Ben Shahn took for the Farm Security Administration in the mid-1930s. I show how the different style and methodology of these two photographers reveals fundamentally different attitudes about both documentary and American vernacular music. Ulmann considered photography a full-fledged art form, and her nostalgic images of Appalachia present the region as an isolated, antimodern space. Ben Shahn, on the other hand, believed he was producing social documents rather than works of art, and his mobile,

spontaneous photographs exhibit more of an awareness of contemporary American social life than Ulmann's romanticized depictions.

In Chapter Three I shift from photography to film and consider films produced by or in association with folklorist Alan Lomax during the 1930s and 1940s, including a newsreel, an educational film, and a series of silent sixteen-millimeter films shot by Lomax during his various field recording expeditions. The newsreel (1935) and the educational film (1947) serve as historical bookends, marking the beginning and the end of the first phase of the American folk music revival. Lomax's sixteen-millimeter "amateur" films diverge from the expository style of the newsreel and the educational film and are closer in spirit to the music photographs taken by Ben Shahn for the FSA at roughly the same time. In these films Lomax documents vernacular musicians in their native context, revealing the intricate social environments in which they live and play music.

In Chapter Four I switch back to photography and consider sections from Frederic Ramsey, Jr.'s 1960 book *Been Here and Gone*, which was based on the photographs and field recordings he made in the South between 1951 and 1957. Much of the content and style of *Been Here and Gone* mimics the work of the FSA photographic unit, but Ramsey's text positions him ideologically closer to Doris Ulmann than to the FSA. He framed his field recording expeditions as an urgent salvage mission, as a race against time to capture traces of folk music before they slipped away due to modernization. *Been Here and Gone* is historically significant because it helped solidify the notion of roots music, the idea that vernacular musical styles have served as the foundation for the major genres of mainstream popular music (in Ramsey's case, for jazz).

In Chapter Five I shift the focus back to filmmaking and examine three films produced during the 1960s and 70s that focus on American vernacular music. These films are all considered classic examples of the “folklore film,” a genre of documentary that emerged in the early 1960s. These films represent the shift in folklore studies during this period towards an appreciation of the social context that circumscribes folkloric expression. They also demonstrate the shift in documentary film towards a more mobile and less didactic approach. Unlike the earlier expository works, these films rely heavily upon observation and allow subjects more opportunities to “speak for themselves.”

In Chapter Six I examine two documentary films that focus on blues music: *And This is Free* (1965) and *Mississippi Delta Blues* (1980). These two films highlight a central tension within documentary work between showing and telling, between subjects “speaking for themselves” and filmmakers asserting their own message and vision. In this chapter I also discuss the contentious issue of who played blues music and to whom during the 1960s and 70s. By 1970 the audience for blues was no longer predominately black, and Worth Long’s *Mississippi Delta Blues* film was a reaction to this shift. Long sought to restore, or at least to honor, blues within the racial and geographic community that originally nurtured it.

In Chapter Seven I examine a documentary film and a music video, both released in 2003, and consider how archival materials related to American roots music are being preserved and interpreted. In *The Soul of a Man*, director Wim Wenders re-enacts moments in the lives of two legendary bluesmen. These re-enactments are designed to look like actual fragments of archival footage. While Wenders should be commended for using archival material to tell the story rather than relying upon heavy-handed

exposition, he tends to fetishize the archival material and to celebrate its durability and immortality. In contrast, the 2003 music video for Johnny Cash's song "Hurt" is a poignant reminder of the ephemeral nature of life and its traces. At the end of his life, Cash put death and decay at the core of his music, but, ironically, that is what gives his music life and longevity.

The tension between life and death is central to the discourse on American roots music. Many of the photographers and filmmakers in this study believed that the musical traditions they documented were dead or in decline, but there were others who preferred to see vernacular music as dynamic and adaptable.²⁴ Some documentarians lamented the passing of old musical traditions, while others emphasized the vitality and resiliency of roots music. Some photographers and filmmakers were more oriented towards the past and treated roots music as vestigial traces that had little or no connection to contemporary life. Others were more oriented towards the present and opted to use the music as a way to challenge stereotyping and injustice. In *Trying To Make It Real*, I consider the many ways in which documentary photographers and filmmakers have understood and interpreted American roots music over the past century, appreciating the historically specific variations but also the connections and consistencies across time.

Notes

¹ From the song “Compared to What,” written by Eugene McDaniels. The song was first recorded by Roberta Flack for her debut album *First Take* (1969), but the definitive recording is the live performance of the song by Les McCann and Eddie Harris from the 1969 Montreaux Jazz Festival (and featured on their 1969 album *Swiss Movement*). For more on Eugene McDaniels and “Compared to What,” see Mack Anthony Neal’s article “‘Real, Compared to What’: Anti-war Soul,” March 28, 2003, from <http://www.popmatters.com/features/030328-iraq-neal.shtml>, accessed on May 28, 2008.

² From <http://www.guitarseminars.com/ubb/Forum1/HTML/002917.html>, accessed on May 24, 2006.

³ From <http://www.guitarseminars.com/ubb/Forum1/HTML/003076.html>, accessed on May 24, 2006. For a close (skeptical) technical reading of the photograph, see the first post by “Lenman”. Skepticism about Tefeller and his intentions are evident in the post by “Pffff”. More than any of the other participants on the forum, “Hambone” makes the case for the authenticity of the image.

⁴ This wasn’t the first controversy involving the authenticity of blues archival material. Just a few years before, film footage surfaced that supposedly showed the bluesman Robert Johnson playing guitar on a Mississippi street corner. Ultimately, a 1941 movie poster, visible in the background, ruled out the possibility that Johnson was the figure in the footage.

⁵ From <http://www.guitarseminars.com/ubb/Forum1/HTML/002596.html>, accessed on May 24, 2006. “Hambone” accepts the technique as proper and professional, whereas “crossdblue” argues that the technique on display in the photograph is an “absolute pose” and not indicative of the way Patton actually played.

⁶ From <http://www.guitarseminars.com/ubb/Forum1/HTML/003076.html>, accessed on May 24, 2006.

⁷ This belief has been particularly evident in the criticism of the music video genre and its negative effects on popular music and the music industry. In 1984 *USA Today* critic Joe Saltzman wrote a scathing indictment of music videos:

Before MTV, the song, no matter how silly or pretentious, could be used as a springboard to a range of emotions most teenagers felt. The lyric, the loud beat of the music, could lead to self-created, very personal images being conjured that might help teens give form to vague troubles. Now here comes the music video to destroy all that. They are self-contained packages of sight and sound. All kids have to do is watch and listen and stare straight ahead. No need to think, to embellish, to create, to imagine. The electric fix is in.

Rather than view the visual interpretation of music as a great usurper destined to replace the purely musical, most critics and musicians have come to accept visual representations of music as healthy and creative supplements to the music. Still, the assumption remains that these visual forms, however creative and interesting, are ultimately secondary to music.

⁸ Tersch, Gary von. "Bob Brozman: The Globetrotting Mr. National," *Sing Out!*, Winter 2003, reprinted at http://www.bobbrozman.com/inter_sing.html, accessed on May 4, 2008.

⁹ Peterson, Richard. *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Filene, Benjamin. *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Quoted in Stella Bruzzi's *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000) p. 70.

¹¹ Peterson, p. 5.

¹² Ibid., pages 4 and 9.

¹³ Green, Archie. "Commercial Music Graphics #13," *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly*, Vol. 6, part 2, Summer 1970, No. 18, p. 73.

¹⁴ For instance, see, Steve Feld's article "Ethnomusicology and Visual Communication," *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 20, No. 2. (May, 1976), pp. 293-325.

¹⁵ Filene, p. 4.

¹⁶ See George Lipsitz's *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (London ; New York : Verso, 1994), John Connell and Chris Gibson's *Sound Tracks : Popular Music, Identity and Place (Critical Geographies)* (London ; New York : Routledge, 2003), Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), and James Clifford's *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Filene, p. 3.

¹⁸ Tilton, Jeff Todd. *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pages xvi and 29.

¹⁹ I didn't title the study "The Documentary Imagination of American Blues and Old-time Music" because I am more interested in uncovering the overarching discourse on American roots music than in recounting the history and dynamics of specific genres and sub-genres.

²⁰ From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_time_music, accessed on April 18, 2008.

²¹ I don't mean to imply that blues is a wholly African American form or that old-time music is an exclusively Caucasian form. I recognize that there's a long history of white blues—both acoustic and electric—but I'll be focusing almost exclusively on African American blues, primarily because the genre was created and initially nurtured within African American communities. In contrast, old-time music was, at least up until the 1940s, a racially mixed form, and my early chapters will consider various examples of African American old-time music. However, in the later chapters, I will focus almost exclusively on white old-time music.

²² While the documentation of American roots music has primarily been done by whites, there have been some significant African Americans who have documented this music, including photographers Ernest Withers and Roland Freeman.

²³ While the documentation of American roots music has primarily been done by men, there have been some significant women who have documented this music, including Appalshop filmmakers Mimi Pickering and Anne Lewis.

²⁴ In 2006 Atlanta couple Matt and Erica Hinton debuted *Awake My Soul*, a documentary film about white sacred harp singing in the American South. When I got around to watching *Awake My Soul* on DVD, I couldn't help but notice the big tagline on the back of the case: "The earliest music in America is neither dead nor dying: it's standing right in front of you, singing." That phrase "neither dead nor dying" struck me. On the one hand, it's simply an acknowledgment of the resurgence of interest in sacred harp singing since the 1960s after decades of neglect and marginalization. On the other hand, "neither dead nor dying" speaks to much more than just sacred harp singing and its history. The phrase seems like a rebuke to those who see American roots music traditions as defunct or disappearing. Sacred harp singing may be centuries old, but, through their film, the Hintons wanted to demonstrate that it is a strong, *living* tradition that will be carried on for generations to come.

Chapter One

More or Less Convincing: The Artificial Realism of “A Banjo Song”

In June 1896, Paul Laurence Dunbar’s literary career got a boost when his second volume of poetry, *Majors and Minors*, was reviewed favorably by William Dean Howells in *Harper’s Weekly*. One of the most influential editors of his era, Howells championed the work of writers he admired, including Emily Dickinson, Stephen Crane, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Charles Chesnutt. His *Harper’s* review of *Majors and Minors* was instrumental in establishing Dunbar as one of the first nationally renowned African American literary figures.¹

Majors and Minors was broken into two parts: the “majors,” written in standard English verse, and the “minors,” written in black vernacular speech. Howells’s praise was almost entirely for the “minors.” He felt that Dunbar had privileged access to the culture and consciousness of his race and could use this “direct and fresh authority” to great effect in his work.²

Literary and cultural scholars have extensively examined Dunbar’s written work, but few have commented upon the ways in which his poetry was combined with illustrations and photographs.³ From 1898 until his death from tuberculosis in 1906, Dunbar oversaw the production of several volumes of prose and poetry that included evocative illustrations and photographs. *Poems of Cabin and Field*, published by Dodd, Mead & Company for the holiday season of 1899, was the first Dunbar book to incorporate photographs. The Hampton Institute Camera Club produced the photographs for this book.

African American vernacular music turns up at several points within *Poems of Cabin and Field*, but there is a sustained focus on music within only one poem, “A Banjo Song.” In this chapter I examine “A Banjo Song” and connect it to the development of both documentary photography and academic folklore and to the contentious representation of African Americans and their vernacular culture in the late nineteenth century.

It might seem unusual to include a work like “A Banjo Song” in a study about documentary representations, for all the photos of “A Banjo Song” were staged and were designed to correspond to the imagined action of Dunbar’s verse. It’s important to remember, though, that the term “documentary photography” did not exist in 1899; the term wouldn’t emerge for almost forty years, and, when it does, documentary photography was, more often than not, narrowly defined as a raw, “objective” account of reality. Late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century photographers who engaged with American social life weren’t restricted by this narrow conception of documentary. They didn’t feel obligated to present authentic subject matter (i.e., not staged) through an authentic mode of representation (i.e., devoid of artistic manipulation). In fact, many of the works that are considered early landmarks of documentary photography, like *How the Other Half Lives* and *The North American Indian*, are blends of artifice and actuality.

The photographs of *Poems of Cabin and Field* and “A Banjo Song” should not be rigidly judged by our contemporary standards of authenticity but should be appreciated as a self-conscious challenge and alternative to the distorted and demeaning images of African Americans that were pervasive in the popular culture of the late nineteenth century. The Hampton Camera Club produced plausible, respectful simulations of black

vernacular culture in order to fight against the obviously false depictions of this culture that circulated in print and on the minstrel stage. However, Dunbar and the Camera Club tread so closely to the repertoire of clichés and stereotypes that they unintentionally absorbed and perpetuated some of them.

Background on the Hampton Institute Camera Club and *Poems of Cabin and Field*

A small group of Hampton Institute faculty members started the Hampton Institute Camera Club in 1893, shortly after the death of the school's founder Samuel Armstrong. While the student population of Hampton was almost entirely black, the Camera Club was almost entirely white, made up of Hampton faculty, administration and their spouses (no students participated in the Club). The Camera Club's photographic activities varied. The club often assisted with Hampton's publicity and promotional efforts. Hampton was an early pioneer in the use of photographs for fundraising purposes, and the Camera Club supplied the school with images of the campus for lantern slide presentations and for use in various publications.⁴ The Club also encouraged its members to pursue photography as an art form. The Club was aware of current trends in and ideas about photography (they subscribed to Stieglitz's *Camera Notes* and to other photographic periodicals), and they organized regular critique sessions of each others' life and landscape studies.

After his breakout success with *Majors and Minors*, Paul Laurence Dunbar began a long-running association with the Hampton Institute. He assisted with the school's fundraising and contributed to the school's major publication, *The Southern Workman*.

It's not surprising, then, that the Camera Club chose in late 1897 to photographically interpret one of Dunbar's poems, "The Deserted Plantation," for one of its projects.⁵ Working on "The Deserted Plantation" inspired the Club to photographically interpret a whole collection of Dunbar's dialect verse. After some negotiations with New York-based publisher Dodd, Mead & Company, the *Poems of Cabin and Field* project began. Dodd, Mead & Company paid the Camera Club one-hundred-and-fifty dollars for their photographic contributions to the book.

The commercial success of *Poems of Cabin and Field*⁶ led to two more collaborations between Dunbar and the Camera Club and, after that, three collaborations between Dunbar and one of the most skilled members of the Camera Club, Leigh Richmond Miner. While there are few details about precisely how Dunbar collaborated with the Camera Club, we do know that he had a hand in what poems were selected for photographic treatment and that he had editorial control over which images were included in the final published volumes.⁷ The Club had no editorial control over Dunbar's verse; they received finished poems from Dunbar and crafted their photographs to correspond accordingly.

Poetry volumes with accompanying photographs were not common in the 1890s, but a few of these type books were published before or concurrently with *Poems of Cabin and Field*, including James Whitcomb Riley's 1899 volume *Love Lyrics*. Reproducing photographs in print had only recently become technologically possible. In 1880 *The New York Daily Graphic* introduced the halftone process, which allowed for the cheap and high quality reproduction of photographs and illustrations. By the early 1890s, the halftone was commonplace, and it revolutionized the news, magazine and advertising

industries, bringing a wider variety of images to consumers in more spectacular and accessible layouts.⁸

“A Banjo Song”

Here is how “A Banjo Song” appeared in *Poems of Cabin and Field* :

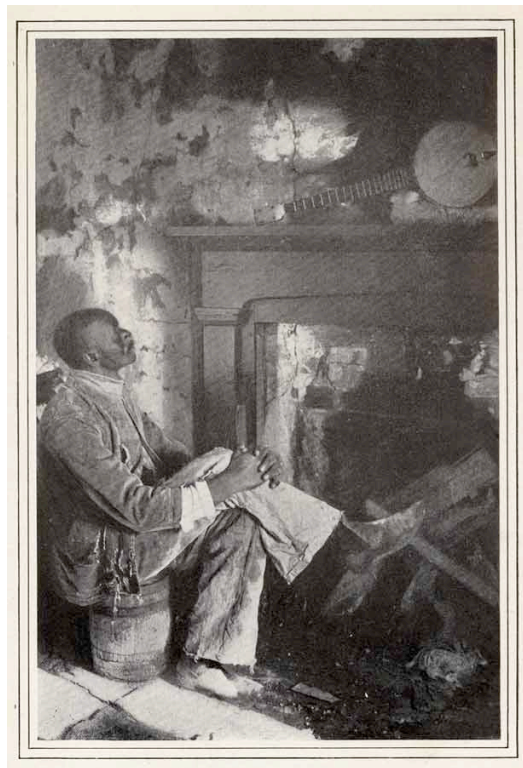


Fig. 1

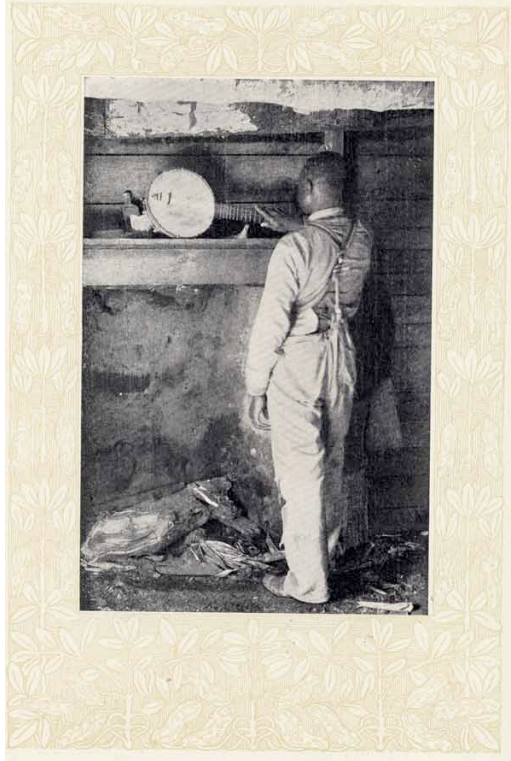


Fig. 2

Oh, dere's lots o' keer an' trouble
 In dis world to swaller down ;
 An' ol' Sorrer's purty lively
 In her way o' gittin' roun'.
 Yet dere's time when I furgit 'em,—
 Aches an' pains an' troubles all,—
 An' it's when I tek at ebenin'
 My ol' banjo f'om de wall.

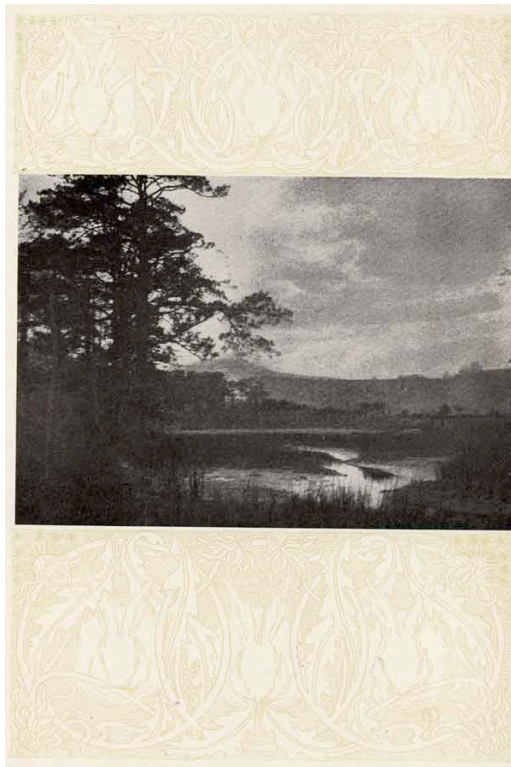


Fig. 3

'Bout de time dat night is fallin'
 An' my daily wu'k is done,
 An' above de shady hilltops
 I kin see de settin' sun ;
 When de quiet, restful shadders
 Is beginnin' jes' to fall,—
 Den I take de little banjo
 F'om its place upon de wall.

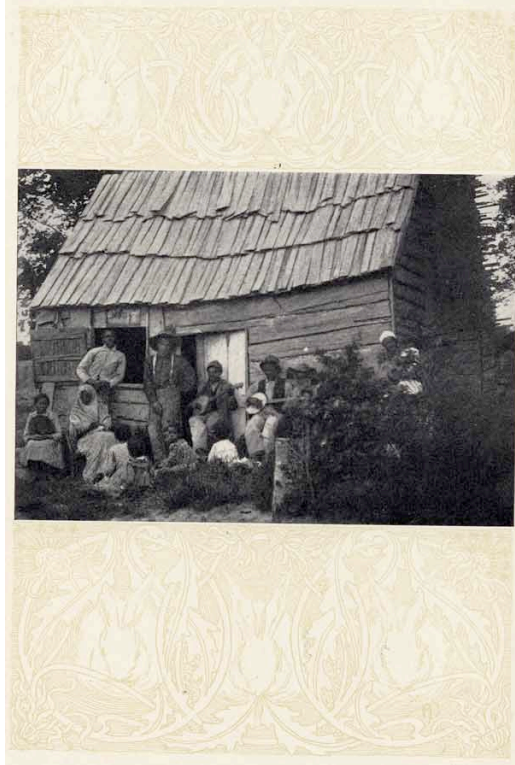


Fig. 4

Den my fam'ly gadders roun' me
 In de fadin' o' de light,
 Ez I strike de strings to try 'em
 Ef dey all is tuned er-right.
 An' it seems we're so nigh heaben
 We kin hyeah de angels sing
 When de music o' dat banjo
 Sets my cabin all er-ring.

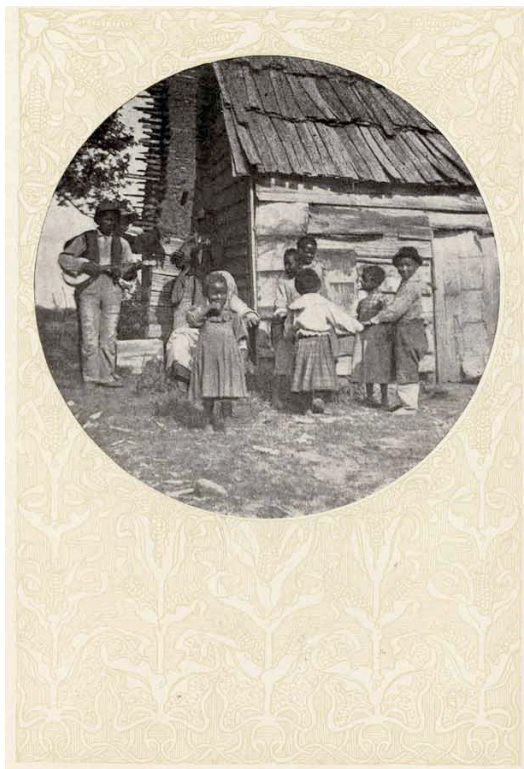


Fig. 5

An' my wife an' all de othahs,—
 Male an' female, small an' big,—
 Even up to gray-haired granny,
 Seem jes' boun' to do a jig ;
 Twell I change de style o' music,
 Change de movement an' de time,
 An' de ringin' little banjo
 Plays an ol' hea't-feelin' hime.

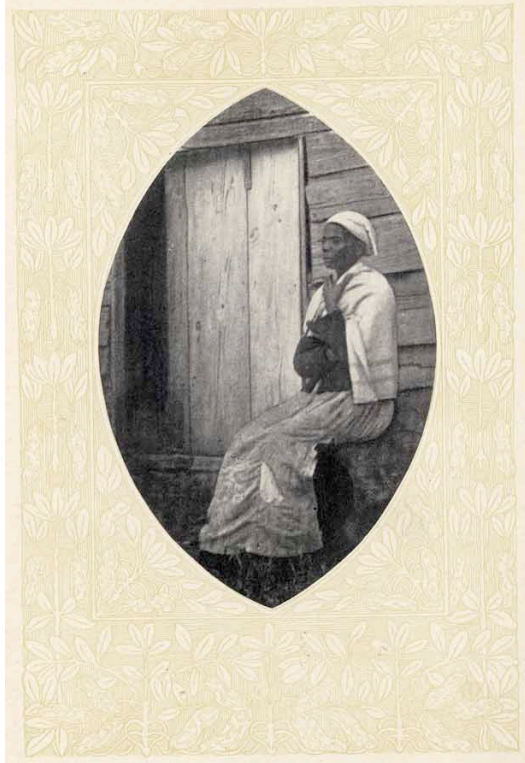


Fig. 6

An' somehow my th' oat gits choky,
 An' a lump keeps tryin' to rise
 Lak it wan'ed to ketch de water
 Dat was flowin' to my eyes ;
 An' I feel dat I could sorter
 Knock de socks clean off o' sin
 Ez I hyeah my po' ol' granny
 Wif huh tremblin' voice jine in.

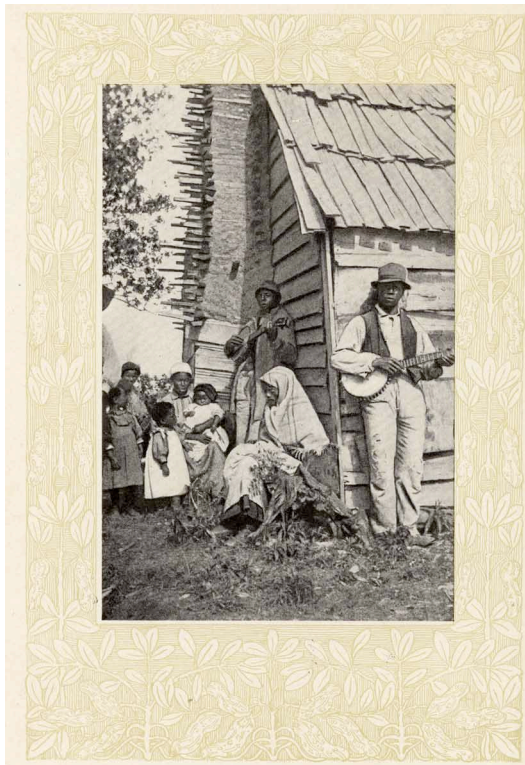


Fig. 7

Den we all th'ow in our voices
 Fu' to he'p de chune out too,
 Lak a big camp-meetin' choiry
 Tryin' to sing a mou'nah th'oo.
 An' our th'oats let out de music,
 Sweet an' solemn, loud an' free,
 Twell de raftahs o' my cabin
 Echo wif de melody.

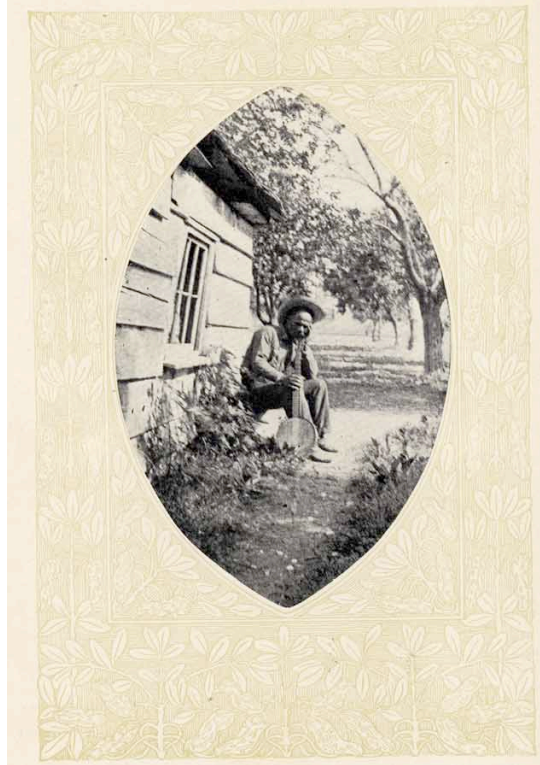


Fig. 8

Oh, de music o' de banjo,
 Quick an' deb'lish, solemn, slow,
 Is de greates' joy an' solace
 Dat a weary slave kin know !
 So jes' let me hyeah it ringin',
 Dough de chune be po' an' rough,
 It's a pleasure ; an' de pleasures
 O' dis life is few enough.



Fig. 9

Now, de blessed little angels
 Up in heaben, we are told,
 Don't do nothin' all dere lifetime
 'Cept play on ha'ps o' gold.
 Now I think heaben'd be mo' homelike
 Ef we'd hyeah some music fall
 F'om a real ol'-fashioned banjo,
 Like dat one upon de wall.

“A Banjo Song” and the narrative sequencing of photographs

The Camera Club created a sense of narrative, temporal and spatial progression in this succession of nine images. The series begins with two similar but distinct images of men looking at a banjo positioned on a mantle, then moves to a pastoral landscape featuring a large tree, a creek and clouds, then to two images of social music-making (with both adults and children) outside a cabin, then to a full-frame image of an old woman, then to another social music making image (this time framed slightly closer), then to a photo of a lone man sitting next to the cabin holding his banjo (not playing it), and concludes with an image of a banjo hanging on a wall. The series moves from quiet to music and back to quiet again, from the banjo over the mantle to the banjo being played to the banjo hanging on the wall, from solitude to community and back to solitude.

The sequencing of images in “A Banjo Song” and in much of the Dunbar/Camera Club books foreshadowed editing techniques that would soon develop in narrative cinema. The use of establishing and cutaway shots in “A Banjo Song,” its variation of shot size and camera position, and its seamless temporal flow are all elements that would trickle into cinema over the next decade, particularly in the films of Edwin Porter and D.W. Griffith.

Poems of Cabin and Field was not the first work to feature a narrative sequencing of photographs. One of the earliest and most significant attempts at narrative photography was Alexander Black’s “picture play” “Miss Jerry,” which debuted in New York in October 1894. Using a pair of stereopticon devices, Black projected four

hundred and eighty images, each for about fifteen seconds, as he read the text of a fictitious story about a young woman from rural Colorado who comes to New York to pursue a career in journalism. In establishing a variety of locations and even setting up simultaneous action across multiple locations, Black anticipated structures and techniques that would become common in cinema in the following two decades.⁹

“the recollection of a first-hand observer”

Black’s picture plays are also noteworthy for their curious blend of artifice and actuality. The majority of the images in “Miss Jerry” feature actors in controlled interior spaces depicting the action of the story. For some scenes, though, Black opted for location shooting in order to bring, in his words, “the living characters of my fictitious action against the actual life of the city.”¹⁰ At one point, the fictitious character Jerry recedes from sight, and what we see is presumably what she witnesses as she travels around New York as a reporter. The photographs in this scene were not taken for “Miss Jerry” but were, instead, images of real New Yorkers that Black had been taking with his portable Kodak camera since the late 1880s (and were presented in an earlier stereopticon lecture entitled “Ourselves as Others See Us”). Black mixes unstaged documentary images alongside staged fictitious images in order to heighten the sense of realism. As he explained in an 1895 *Scribner’s* article, “In ‘Miss Jerry’ my purpose has been to test experimentally, in a quiet story, certain possibilities of illusion, with this aim always before me, that the illusion should not. . .be that of photographs from an acted play, nor of artistic illustration, but the illusion of reality.”¹¹

William Dean Howells attended the premiere of “Miss Jerry” and, being the country’s leading proponent for literary realism at the time, he likely appreciated Black’s attempt at mixing images of actual street life with a fictional story. Two years later Howells wrote the influential review of Dunbar’s *Majors and Minors*, praising the work for its realistic portrayal of black vernacular life. According to Howells, Dunbar was “the first man of his color to study the race objectively, to analyze it himself, and then to represent it in art as he felt it and found it to be.”¹² Howells’s vision of literary realism often hinged on the exacting, quasi-scientific presentation of cultural difference. Critics like Howells tended to describe Dunbar less like a poet and more like a scientist/observer.

In his book *The Culture Concept*, Michael Elliott argues that the literary realism movement of the late nineteenth century was bound up with the methodologies and aims of scientific ethnography and that literary devices like vernacular dialect were ways through which “authentic difference could be textualized in tangible and accurate ways.”¹³ According to Elliott, *Poems of Cabin and Field* functioned as a voyeuristic form of ethnography, a presentation of a “lowly” culture for the interest and pleasure of a more privileged culture. The primary audience for *Poems of Cabin and Field* was a predominately white middle-class readership that could afford this relatively expensive volume and who appreciated depictions of cultural difference.¹⁴ As Elliott explains,

...the pleasure enjoyed by the readers of [“A Banjo Song”], presumably outsiders to this world of the slave, derives not from the music itself, but from this act of cultural reportage marked as the recollection of a first-hand observer. To the late-nineteenth-century readers of dialect, the speaker of this poem embodies the possibility that cultural difference could be reliably documented, and that the results would have aesthetic appeal from their very dissimilarity to the world of white, middle-to-upper-class Americans.¹⁵

Elliott refers only to the text of “A Banjo Song,” but his point can be extended to the photographs as well. Readers of “A Banjo Song” most likely interpreted the pictures not as fanciful evocations of an older era but as glimpses from a “first-hand observer.” In this regard, *Poems of Cabin and Field* appears to follow in the tradition of Jacob Riis’s 1890 pioneering work of documentary reportage *How the Other Half Lives*.¹⁶ Riis’s book revealed intimate details of working-class life in New York City for a middle-to-upper-class readership that was simultaneously repulsed and fascinated by these details.

According to Maren Stange, *How the Other Half Lives*, rather than destabilize the status quo, actually worked to maintain it. It solidified the boundary between the two halves, flattering the middle-class audience into believing that their colonial perspective on the slums was a “natural” one.¹⁷ The Camera Club didn’t exhibit Riis’s revulsion for working-class life, but it’s likely that many contemporary white readers accepted the Dunbar/Camera Club books as authentic traces of black vernacular life and appreciated the difference between themselves and the people in the pictures.

Staging African American vernacular culture

Despite Howells’s claims about Dunbar’s deep knowledge and understanding of his race, the poet in fact had limited exposure to the black vernacular culture he based his dialect work upon. He grew up in Dayton, Ohio, and was the only African American student in his high school. While he did collect folklore from his mother’s friends and from the roustabouts around Dayton,¹⁸ he visited the South only once during his life and had little or no contact with southern folk culture.

In reviewing a posthumous anthology of Dunbar's poetry in 1914, W.S. Scarborough remarked that "every phrase of Negro life has been caught by [Dunbar's] pen as by a camera."¹⁹ Operating under the assumption that cameras are able to precisely reproduce reality, Scarborough was implying that Dunbar was able to reproduce the reality of his race on the page. Dunbar himself never described his work in this fashion. He never considered himself a literary ethnographer.²⁰ He readily acknowledged that he drew upon the traditional songs and stories of African Americans but, in the same way that professional groups like the Fisk Jubilee Singers transformed spiritual songs in moving them from the camp meeting to the concert stage, Dunbar transformed black folk speech in shifting it to the printed page.

The textual portion of "A Banjo Song" draws upon the speech and cultural practices of rural African Americans, but it does not constitute the "recollection of a first-hand observer." It is, ultimately, a work of the imagination. The photographic portion of "A Banjo Song" is also not an objective reproduction of black vernacular culture but, instead, a self-conscious rendering of this culture. It is, in other words, a performance. Unlike the spontaneous style of documentary photography that would emerge decades later, a style which seemed to present subjects in the flux of actual events, the Camera Club images were all staged. This is particularly evident in the first two images of "A Banjo Song" [Figures 1 and 2], in which men look pensively at the banjos on their mantles.

There's reason to believe that the clothing, living spaces, and cultural practices depicted in the Camera Club photos didn't accurately reflect the daily lives of some of the subjects in the photos. The Camera Club left few notes about the identities of its

photographic subjects, but Ray Sapirstein surmises that its subjects were either already subjects of the Hampton Folklore Society “or were known to club members as employees of the school, veterans of [founder Samuel] Armstrong’s Civil War regiment, students and their relatives, or recipients of aid through Hampton’s efforts in community extension.”²¹ This is a broad range of subjects. On one end of the spectrum (the Folklore Society informants), there was likely very little or perhaps even no intervention by the photographers; what’s depicted in the photos corresponded more or less to the everyday reality of these subjects. In other cases, though, the subjects must have been substantially re-arranged to fit the Camera Club’s vision. In the case of the Hampton students featured in the photographs, their daily collegiate lives bore little resemblance to the sparse, agrarian life displayed in the images.

Emily Oswald argues that it is not just the authenticity of some of the subjects that is questionable but the settings as well. She maintains that the Camera Club utilized vacant buildings for many of the images in *Poems of Cabin and Field*, exaggerating the poverty of the subjects: “Pictures of ramshackle cabins and dilapidated interiors give most of the images connected with black living quarters a distinct sense of poverty...[but] some of the interiors shown in the club’s photographs provide no evidence of recent habitation.”²²

Artifice and mimesis

Contemporary scholars like Oswald, who work to debunk the authenticity of the subjects and settings in the Dunbar/Camera Club images, don’t appreciate the dominant

aims and methods of photography in the late nineteenth century. In the 1920s and 1930s, authenticity became a guiding principle in photography, but, in the nineteenth century, photographers and viewers were largely interested in *credible imitations* of reality. In *The Real Thing*, Miles Orvell discusses the earlier photographic tradition: “The realism of Victorian photography is properly understood as an ‘artificial realism,’ in which the image offers the viewer a representation of reality, a typification, a conscious simulacrum. . .once the picture is accepted as a representation, the question is no longer ‘Is the representation more or less truthful?’”, but rather, ‘Is the representation more or less convincing?’”²³ In nineteenth century texts that are now considered pioneering examples of documentary photography, like Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*, there is no purity of representation but, rather, in Orvell’s words, “a synthesis of the extremes of artifice and mimesis.”²⁴

The photographs in “A Banjo Song” exhibit this same blend of artifice and mimesis, and it is futile to try to determine which elements were based in reality and which were fabricated. It’s more productive to try to understand the motivations and assumptions that informed the Camera Club’s images, i.e. to recognize what the “more or less convincing” images were trying to convince viewers of. To do this, it’s necessary to consider the Camera Club within the wider context of the Hampton Institute and its folkloric endeavors during the 1890s.

Folklore at Hampton

The Hampton Institute developed out of efforts during the Civil War to educate fugitive slaves. The school became a formal institution in 1868 and took on the mission to provide moral and manual training to young African Americans and Native Americans. It received most of its financial support from church organizations and from affluent veterans of the Union Army. One of Hampton's most famous graduates was Booker T. Washington, a vocal proponent of industrial education for African Americans.

Intent on improving the public image of African Americans, Hampton "sought to endow African Americans with an image of self-determination and self-help, rather than positing unindividuated objects of pity and condescension."²⁵ In the school's promotional photographs, African Americans are presented as exemplars of middle-class civility, a radical statement in the late nineteenth century, particularly in a state that supported slavery just a few decades before. By demonstrating that African Americans could embody the values and practices of middle-class America, Hampton was upending entrenched cultural assumptions about African Americans' perceived place and worth.

The Folklore Society at Hampton was founded in 1893, and a few individuals were active in both the Camera Club and the Folklore Society. A white woman, Alice Mabel Bacon,²⁶ founded the Society, but its members were, unlike the Camera Club, predominantly African American. The core mission of the Folklore Society was to preserve and promote understanding of African American folk culture, and the group published the ongoing column "Folklore and Ethnology" in the school's major publication *The Southern Workman*. This column was one of the earliest and most sustained efforts to catalogue the rich heritage of African American folkways, and it has

been an invaluable resource to subsequent generations of scholars working on African American folk culture.²⁷

As Donald Waters explains in his study on the Hampton Folklore Society, one of the primary motivations of the Society was to “guard against the misuse of the material,” i.e., to shield African American vernacular culture from ridicule and condescension.²⁸

Robert Mussa Morton, a member of the Folklore Society and one of the only African American members of the Camera Club, identified one of the main sources of ridicule of black vernacular music: “White minstrels with black faces have done more than any single agency to lower the tone of Negro music and cause the Negro to despise his own songs.”²⁹ The derision of black vernacular culture by minstrel performers prompted the Hampton Folklore Society to preserve black folk culture in an accurate and respectful manner.

The Hampton Folklore Society folded in 1899 upon the departure of Alice Mabel Bacon from the school, but the directives of the Society clearly informed all the Dunbar/Camera Club books. The Camera Club visually interpreted folkways described in the “Folklore and Ethnology” column of *The Southern Workman*, and, according to Ray Sapirstein, some of the Society’s informants appear as subjects in the Dunbar/Camera Club books.

The Boas connection

In 1909 Franz Boas, who is now considered the “father of American anthropology,” wrote an article for *The Southern Workman*. He visited Hampton around

this time and was supportive of the school's efforts to collect and preserve African American folklore.³⁰ Even during the 1890s, Alice Mabel Bacon and the Hampton Folklore Society were aware of Boas and his work,³¹ and there are some clear connections between Boas's work and the folklore efforts at Hampton.

Boas rejected theories of social and cultural evolution and the notion that "primitive" cultures were somehow less evolved than modern, industrial cultures. Many anthropologists in the late nineteenth century scientifically measured and documented racial "types" (a practice called anthropometry) in order to establish racial identity and inferiority, but Boas didn't believe that races exhibit fixed sets of immutable characteristics and that one race can be inherently superior to another. He forcefully opposed using science to justify racial inequality. In fact, he worked throughout his career to shift attention away from race and towards an understanding of culture and difference. The Camera Club's photographs for the Dunbar books reflect this shift, in that they portray black life as culture rather than as race. Unlike the practitioners of anthropometric photography, the Camera Club photographers didn't try to document the fixed physical characteristics of a race but, rather, attempted to reveal aspects of a specific culture within its own specific context.

Boas was a pioneering figure in anthropology not just for his opposition to evolutionary hierarchy but also for his acceptance of photography as a legitimate tool for ethnographic inquiry. He studied photography in Berlin in the early 1880s and integrated it into his fieldwork soon after. He used photography extensively for his 1894 fieldwork involving the Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia. This fieldwork served as the basis for his 1897 publication *The Social Organization and Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl*,

which was one of the first ethnographies to be illustrated by original field photographs.³² Like the images *Poems of Cabin and Field*, the photographs in Boas's 1897 book are combined with text, are arranged sequentially in certain instances, and involved at least some staging and re-enactment. It's possible that members of the Camera Club were familiar with *The Social Organization and Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl*.

The legacy of “The Banjo Lesson”

Another possible influence on the Camera Club hung on the wall in the Hampton Institute library during the 1890s. It was “The Banjo Lesson” [Figure 10], painted by the African American artist Henry Ossawa Tanner in 1893 and given to the school in 1894 by philanthropist and Hampton trustee Robert Ogden. Hampton proudly displayed the painting because it demonstrated the potential of African American artists but also the enduring value of black vernacular culture. It's likely that all of the Camera Club members and even Dunbar were familiar with this work.³³



Fig. 10

Tanner grew up in a well-off family in Philadelphia. His father was a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and his sister became the first black physician in Alabama. In 1879 Tanner entered the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, where one of his painting mentors was Thomas Eakins. In 1889 he moved to Atlanta to open a photographic studio, and, when that plan failed to materialize, he taught drawing at Clark University. “The Banjo Lesson” was based partially on sketches and photographs he made of African American subjects in the mountains of Georgia and western North Carolina during the summer of 1889.

Tanner critiqued the visual depictions of blacks in the latter part of the nineteenth century, claiming that “many of the artists who have represented Negro life have only seen the comic, the ludicrous side of it, and have lacked sympathy with and appreciation for the warm big heart that dwells within such a rough exterior.”³⁴ Tanner self-consciously crafted the “The Banjo Lesson” to challenge the stereotypical image of African Americans banjo players. According to banjo historian Karen Linn, in the late nineteenth century, the image of the black banjo player “was more than just an association. It had become a symbol of a reactionary value system.”³⁵ This symbol was circulated by the minstrel tradition and through popular imagery of the Old South but was also perpetuated in the fine arts. Here is an engraving based on an 1885 painting by Thomas Hovenden entitled “T’s So Happy”³⁶ [Figure 11]:



Fig. 11

Tanner knew Hovenden, who was a teacher at and later the director of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (after Thomas Eakins was dismissed). Tanner must have been familiar with “I’s So Happy” because the composition of Hovenden’s painting and “The Banjo Lesson” are remarkably similar.³⁷ The position of the men’s legs and their banjos are nearly identical. Despite the formal similarities, the intent and mood of the two works are notably different. As Jo-Ann Morgan suggests, it’s likely that Tanner was “refuting his white colleague, wrenching dignity from the maw of sentimentality.”³⁸ Rather than present a banjo player performing for an audience or for the viewer, “The Banjo Lesson” depicts a private family moment, presumably between a grandfather and grandson. The scene appears quiet and reserved, unlike the buffoonery in most minstrel iconography and, to a lesser extent, in Hovenden’s painting. The old man in “The Banjo Lesson” teaches the young boy how to play the banjo, and this emphasis on pedagogy challenges the stereotypical notion of African Americans’ natural musical expressivity.

In the painting, banjo playing is not as an ingrained and spontaneous talent that all African Americans share but is, rather, a skill lovingly passed down by elders.³⁹

While the images of “A Banjo Song” do not depict intergenerational education, it seems likely that the Camera Club produced the photographs in the spirit of Tanner’s painting. Working against the grain of demeaning stereotypes and against the voyeuristic impulse to reveal lurid details of “how the other half lives,” the Camera Club’s *intention* was to normalize and legitimate black vernacular culture.⁴⁰

Illustration, photography, stereotype

While some scholars contend that Paul Laurence Dunbar, like Henry Ossawa Tanner, actively worked to overturn racial stereotypes,⁴¹ other scholars argue that Dunbar perpetuated damaging stereotypes.⁴² It has become an either/or debate—Dunbar was either co-opted by sentimental stereotypes or effectively challenged them—but the fact is that Dunbar’s work is a complex mixture of co-optation *and* opposition. As Ray Sapirstein notes, “Dunbar’s identity was torn by a deep simultaneous double-consciousness, both evading and subscribing to a sentimental white vision of African American character.”⁴³ This tension between resisting and reinforcing stereotypes is particularly evident in the visual material that accompanied Dunbar’s poetry and prose.

Paul Laurence Dunbar first incorporated visual material into his work when he hired Edward Windsor Kemble to provide illustrations for his 1898 collection of short stories, *Folks from Dixie*. At this point Kemble was a major figure in American illustration; he inked the images for the first edition of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 1885, illustrated an 1891 edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and served as the

illustrator of choice for Plantation School writers Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, and Ruth McEnery Stuart. Kemble was known for his quaint sketches of rural Americans but was also well-known for the caricatures he drew of African Americans. Kemble was born in Sacramento, California and lived most of his adult life in New York City, but he did make several trips to the South to sketch rural black life.⁴⁴ Between 1896 and 1901 Kemble released seven picture books—targeted as much to children as to adults—featuring stereotypical images of African American life. In the cover image for Kemble’s *Comical Coons*, released the same year as *Folks from Dixie*, Kemble drew a banjo player in the comic minstrel tradition.⁴⁵ [Figure 12]

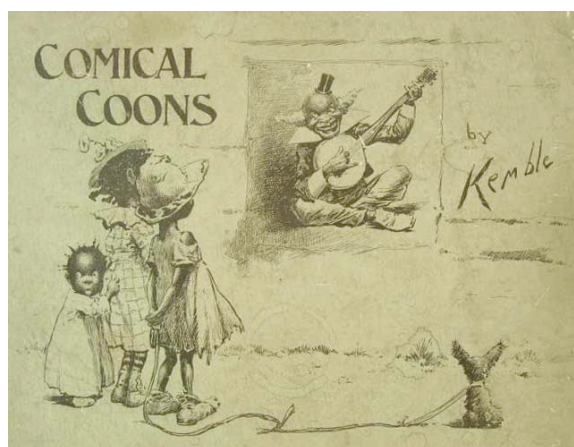


Figure 12

For the most part, *Folks from Dixie* doesn’t feature the gross caricature style of Kemble’s picture books. While exaggerated facial features creep into some of Kemble’s sketches, most of the illustrations in *Folks from Dixie* are relatively straightforward renderings of African American characters.⁴⁶ It seems that Kemble was able to modify his style to fit whatever project was at hand: for the popular picture books, he utilized a caricature style replete with racist clichés, and, for the more literary works, he typically let the content

and tone of the author's narrative dictate the drawing style. While it's surprising that Dunbar hired an illustrator who had a reputation for producing gross caricatures of blacks, the poet admired Kemble's work and had him illustrate two subsequent collections of his short stories.

When the halftone technology became ubiquitous in the 1890s, photographs quickly replaced illustrations in the pictorial press. Hungry for images of current events, readers preferred photographs to illustrations because photographs were considered infinitely more accurate in reproducing scenes from life.⁴⁷ Hampton administrators and Camera Club members believed that the photographic medium was exceptionally suited to combat stereotypes because, unlike hand-drawn illustration, it exhibited a remarkable fidelity to its subject matter and was not inherently reliant upon standard codes and clichés of visual representation. A 1903 review in the *Southern Workman* of one of the subsequent Dunbar/Camera Club books affirms the school's faith in the realist potential of photography over the distorting nature of illustration: "Any effort to substitute scenes from life for the caricatures that are generally used in illustrating Negro dialect stories and poems is to be welcomed."⁴⁸

It is, however, a mistake to think that nineteenth century photography was disconnected from other contemporary media. As Miles Orvell notes, "Photography in the nineteenth century could not be said to operate within what one might call a purely photographic aesthetic. (That would await the twentieth century.) Instead, the medium borrowed from existing approaches in other forms and genres: from the tourist sketch, the painted portrait, the staged tableau, even—as in the composite—from the scientific illustration."⁴⁹ In borrowing from other forms, photography absorbed the clichés, conventions and stereotypes that circulated in these other forms. Simply because "A

Banjo Song” features photographs doesn’t mean that it is immune from stereotyping.

“A Banjo Song,” the Plantation School, and the ideology of “romantic racialism”

But what stereotypes might the poem perpetuate? I would argue that the poem intersects with two threads of nineteenth century sentimentality: the Plantation School of literature and the ideology of “romantic racialism” as epitomized by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. But, again, it’s important to understand the Dunbar/Camera Club books as a complex mixture of co-optation and resistance and, therefore, not a perfect example of either the Plantation School or the ideology of “romantic racialism.”

The Plantation School was rooted in a pastoral fantasy of antebellum America. In the works of Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, the Old South plantation is nostalgically imagined as a natural paradise devoid of conflict. In this vision, African Americans exist in harmony with nature and are generally satisfied with plantation life. Some might contend that the images of poverty in “A Banjo Song” contradict the pastoral fantasy of the Plantation School, but, as Emily Oswald points out, the poverty on display in the Hampton Camera Club photographs is not meant to be an indictment of social conditions but instead an affirmation of a simple, natural way of life:

Images of poverty should not be seen as being in contradiction with idealizing the plantation tradition, but instead be viewed as a kind of visual shorthand for communicating the racist depiction of ‘the happy darkie,’ a trope central to the plantation tradition’s depiction of the Old South. Poverty here becomes not an economic condition, but instead a way of denoting simplicity of mind and lifestyle, as well as ‘a pastoral concept of peasantry rich in folkways, unashamedly natural.’⁵⁰

The landscape image in “A Banjo Song” is the only “cutaway” shot in the whole series, the

only glimpse outside the context of the cabin, and it serves as a reminder that the events are taking place in a natural setting. This image doesn't anchor the setting in a specific place but, like other pastoral works, suggests an anonymous imagined space.⁵¹

“A Banjo Song” exhibits some of the pastoral tendencies and quaint imagery found in the plantation tradition, but the link between the visual poem and the plantation tradition isn't as clear cut as Oswald makes it out to be. She asserts that the images perpetuate “the happy darkie” trope, but, aside from the children in figure five, none of the subjects in “A Banjo Song” exhibit a sense of joyfulness or satisfaction. The subjects' faces are mostly expressionless, and, in figure eight, the subject appears forlorn with his head resting on his hand. The text of “A Banjo Song” also includes a number of references to suffering and misfortune. For instance, in the first stanza, the narrator begins by saying that “dere's lots o' keer an' trouble / In dis world to swaller down,” and, in the next to last stanza says that though “de chune be po' an' rough / It's a pleasure ; an' de pleasures / O' dis life is few enough.” In plantation literature, there were few acknowledgements of the misery and difficulties of life, primarily because those acknowledgements would have been direct indictments of the plantation system itself.

The poem's acknowledgement of suffering and its use of cabin imagery seems to position it closer to the sentimental tradition embodied by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* than to the Plantation School. George Fredrickson calls the Stowe mode of sentimentality “romantic racialism,” an ideology that, while advocating for the fair treatment of blacks, is based on an essentialist view of blacks as gentle, child-like, and forgiving. “Romantic racialism” is not based on a genuine desire to know and understand African Americans, for, as Fredrickson points out, “benevolent reformers tended to see the Negro more as a symbol than as a person, more as a vehicle for

romantic social criticism than as a human being with the normal range of virtues and vices.”⁵² Stowe’s criticism is directed at her own race, at its inability to live up to its Christian values and its over-reliance on the intellect. “Romantic racialism” directly challenges the injustice of the slave system, but it is less a call for equality among the races and more a caution to white Americans to begin to favor their hearts over their heads.⁵³

With its emphasis on black suffering and emotion, “A Banjo Song” appears to follow in the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* tradition, but the two works share only superficial similarities. The suffering in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* involves the harsh treatment of blacks by whites, but there is no explicit mention of how whites treat blacks in “A Banjo Song.” The slave narrator describes himself as “weary” and cites his “aches an’ pains”, which suggests that he is worn down from his “daily w’uk”, but elsewhere the suffering is only vaguely referred to as sorrow and trouble. White oppression is never referenced in “A Banjo Song” nor in any of the Dunbar/Camera Club books. In fact, very few whites appear in the books’ photos or are referenced in the text of the poems. Unlike Stowe’s novel, there is no interaction between the races in “A Banjo Song” and no displays of domination or submission.

As Ray Sapirstein notes, the Dunbar/Camera Club books were more about “commemorating the African American community rather than eulogizing the benevolence of white masters.”⁵⁴ All of the subjects are rural African Americans, and all the spaces are rural African American spaces. For the most part, the Dunbar/Camera Club books present a self-contained African American cultural sphere.

Using the past in the present

The Plantation School and the ideology of “romantic racialism” were both rooted in a nostalgic longing for a simpler past, and it’s fair to say that some of Dunbar’s poetry reflects back on the antebellum era with a degree of fondness. Take, for instance, Dunbar’s “The Ol’ Tunes”, which was featured in his first poetry volume *Oak and Ivy* and includes the lines

How I long ag'in to hear 'em
 Pourin' forth from soul to soul,
 With the treble high an' meller,
 An' the bass's mighty roll;
 But the times is very diff'rent,
 An' the music heerd to-day
 Ain't the singin' o' the ol' tunes
 In the ol'-fashioned way.⁵⁵

The “ol’ tunes” that the speaker of the poem refers to are the spirituals that were sung by slaves. The speaker recognizes that, in the current climate, these old songs are out of fashion—that it isn’t “proper fur to say/That you want to hear the ol' tunes/In the ol'-fashioned way”—but he, nevertheless, still longs to hear them.

Dunbar shared the speaker’s admiration for the old songs,⁵⁶ but it’s a mistake to interpret his admiration as a nostalgic longing for a simpler past. Dunbar sought to revive the memory of these songs, not as nostalgic vestiges of the plantation world, but as inspirational messages of African American solidarity and perseverance. His intent wasn’t just to preserve the songs but to draw upon their messages of unity and strength for their contemporary relevance. This wasn’t nostalgia but, rather, a way of activating

the past within the present. As the speaker of Dunbar's poem "The Voice of the Banjo" puts it, "The future cannot hurt us while we keep the past in mind."

"A Banjo Song" floats between the past and the present. In noting that banjo music is "de greates' joy an' solace / Dat a weary slave kin know," the narrator seems to situate the action of the poem in the antebellum era. Michael Elliott suggests that "A Banjo Song" should be read as an imagined *recollection* of the slave past by someone who lived through it. The other poems in *Poems of Cabin and Field* support this interpretation. For example, "The Deserted Plantation," the first poem in the book, is set amongst the deserted ruins of an old plantation, as a narrator (a fictional figure, not a documentary narrator) reflects back on the old plantation culture, lamenting that the "banjo's voice is silent" now. If one reads "A Banjo Song" as an extension of "The Deserted Plantation," then "A Banjo Song" is a reminiscence of a time in the antebellum era when banjo playing was common.

If one accepts that the action of "A Banjo Song" is set during the antebellum past, it's logical to assume that the photographs correspond to the text, i.e. that the images are re-creations of the slave past, fictional re-enactments of a previous era. There is, however, nothing that explicitly situates the images in the antebellum era. Compare "A Banjo Song" to a contemporary example of photographic staging, F. Holland Day's 1898 photographic re-creation of Christ's crucifixion.⁵⁷ Day's crucifixion photographs feature costumed Roman soldiers and Day as Christ and were obviously intended to be seen as historical re-creations, but there is nothing that instantly codes the images of "A Banjo Song" as images of the past. In fact, there is one element that instantly positions the images of "A Banjo Song" within the 1880s or 1890s rather than in the antebellum era:

the raised frets on the banjo that is pictured. Raised frets didn't appear on banjos until the 1880s.⁵⁸

Rather than conclude that the Camera Club made a simple mistake of historical accuracy with one of its “props,” it seems more plausible that the pictures, while staged, were meant to represent the contemporary reality of 1899. As *Poems of Cabin and Field* was being assembled, a writer in the *Southern Workman* discussed the photographs and poems as representations of a contemporary culture, albeit rooted in traditional folkways: “The study of the old-time life of colored people which is involved in the composition of these illustrations is by far the most interesting if not valuable work [the Camera Club] has undertaken. . . The poems themselves are wonderfully true in their descriptions of a life which is rapidly passing away.”⁵⁹ While this writer echoes Howell's claims about the authenticity of Dunbar's work and fails to recognize the photographs as carefully constructed images that reflect the prerogatives of Dunbar, the Camera Club and Hampton, he or she does understand the pictures as representations of a *living* culture.

“A Banjo Song”—and much of the work of Dunbar and the Camera Club—is not a nostalgic evocation or reminiscence of the plantation era but an acknowledgment of how traces from the slave past continue to reverberate in the present. The Camera Club's images books don't just preserve elements of black vernacular culture but emphasize the continuing vitality of this culture.⁶⁰ In doing so, the Club subtly challenged the aims and methods of the nascent field of folklore.⁶¹

Photography and early folklore scholarship

During the 1880s American scholars became increasingly interested in folk music traditions. In 1882 the Harvard professor and literary scholar Francis James Child published the first part of his exhaustive study *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Child interpreted British balladry as a long-dead, ancient tradition, and, because he believed there were no living subjects to collect material from, he relied exclusively on old manuscripts for his research. In 1888 the American Folklore Society was founded, along with the society's main publication *The Journal of American Folklore*, and scholars began to recognize that America had a rich heritage of folk expression that could be collected not just through manuscripts but also in person. Some folklorists followed Child's lead and looked for vestiges of the English and Scottish ballad tradition in rural areas of America, while others, such as the Hampton Folklore Society, began to collect and publish songs outside the canon of Child ballads.⁶²

Folk music collectors in the late nineteenth century paid little attention to social contexts and personal histories because they felt that these issues were largely irrelevant to the study of folklore. As ballad scholar George Lyman Kittredge famously declared, "The text is the thing,"⁶³ which meant that, in the study of American folk music, people, social structure and space were, at best, secondary concerns. The Dunbar/Camera Club books challenge this textual methodology by revealing not the lyrics and melodies of African American folk music but, instead, the typical context in which the music was presented. The images are staged and some of the action doesn't correspond to the daily life of some of the subjects, but, by foregrounding the photographic image of an African

American folk musician, the Camera Club was suggesting that there was more to folk music than lyrical and melodic transcriptions. The photographs point elsewhere, to what people look like, where they live, and how the audience participates in the music making.

In *Culture on the Margins*, sociologist Jon Cruz argues that, over the latter half of the nineteenth century, the African American spiritual was transformed from a poignant testimony of social oppression into an artifact of folkloric curiosity, which effectively stripped the form of its latent political power. As Cruz notes, “A peculiar kind of culturalism triumphed through a cultural eclipse of politics.”⁶⁴ Around the turn of the century, black intellectuals like W.E.B. Dubois sought to reclaim the spiritual from the scientific domain of classification and analysis and “reopen the pursuit of testimonies, of situated vocabularies embedded in *lived* histories that demanded to be retrieved.”⁶⁵ The Dunbar/Camera Club books represent a shift in focus away from collecting artifacts and transcriptions of African American vernacular culture and towards an appreciation of how and why the culture is actually used.

In the first half of the following chapter, I examine photographs of folk musicians that are at least partially similar to the images of “A Banjo Song.” Like the Dunbar/Camera Club pictures, the Appalachian photographs taken by Doris Ulmann in the early 1930s were often staged and were meant to demonstrate the continuing value of traditional folkways. However, the motivations of the Hampton Institute Camera Club and Doris Ulmann were fundamentally different. Dunbar and the Camera Club engaged with contemporary cultural and political struggles. While it’s debatable how successful their efforts were, their work was as an intervention into the discourse on race at the turn

of the century. It also cut against the grain of the emerging field of folklore by emphasizing not just the preservation of folkways but how folkways remain relevant at the community level. Ulmann's photos, on the other hand, represent an antimodern retreat from the reality of 1930s Appalachia. Like the transcription of an old ballad, the photographs aren't testaments of a living culture but artifacts collected from a dead or dying culture. In the second half of the following chapter, I shift the focus to the "straight," unstaged documentary photography that emerged in the mid-1930s and consider the music photographs of Ben Shahn, one of the members of the Farm Security Administration's photographic unit. Unlike Ulmann, Shahn's work was more in touch with the present and with the changing dynamics of American vernacular music.

Notes

¹ See “Introduction” of *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, edited by Joanne Braxton (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

² Quoted in Michael Elliott’s *The Culture Concept: Writing and Difference in the Age of Realism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) p. 69.

³ The few who have include Nancy McGhee, Ray Sapirstein, and Emily Oswald.

⁴ Sapirstein, Ray. “Chapter Two - Fundraising and Photography at Hampton: Inviting the Reader’s Glance and Making Lasting Impressions,” in “Out from Behind the Mask; The Illustrated Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Photography at Hampton Institute,” unpublished dissertation for The University of Texas at Austin, 2006.

⁵ The same year Dunbar wrote a sentimental dialect poem entitled “The Photograph,” about a man who looks at a photograph of his lover, simultaneously wishing she was with him in the flesh but also startled how present she seems to him via the image (“Fu’ de blessed little miss/Who’s a smilin’ out o’ dis /Pictyah, lak she wanted a kiss!”) Sapirstein suggests that this poem might have been “the genesis of the Camera Club’s impetus to illustrate his work photographically.”

⁶ According to Jay Martin and Gossie Hudson in *The Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975), *Poems of Cabin and Field* went through five editions of 5000 copies each from 1899 to 1913.

⁷ Sapirstein, p. 152.

⁸ Carlebach, Michael L. *American Photojournalism Comes of Age* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997). See also Neil Harris’s essay “Iconography and Intellectual History: The Half-Tone Effect” in *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, edited by John Higham and Paul K. Conkins (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

⁹ Hollyman, Burnes. “Alexander Black’s Picture Plays: 1893-1894,” *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2. (Spring, 1977).

¹⁰ Black, Alexander. “Photography in Fiction,” *Scribner’s*, M18 (Summer 1895), p. 348.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 348. Black emphasized that his photographs did more than illustrate the story and, in fact, argued that the two mediums performed separate but complementary tasks: “The text or monologue, freed, for the most part, from the describing the appearance or actions of the characters, has to concern itself simply with their thoughts and words; and thus, in effect, a novelette which might require three hours to read, by this division of communication between the eye and the ear can be presented in an hour and a half or less time.”

¹² Quoted in Elliott, p. 70.

¹³ Elliott., p. 63.

¹⁴ While Ray Sapirstein reports that *Poems of Cabin and Field* was appreciated by African American readers, he and Michael Elliott both claim that the primary audience for the book was a white middle-to-upper-class readership. And, while no one has uncovered precise sales numbers for the book, the fact that it was re-printed five times up until 1913 suggests that it was a popular title that sold well.

¹⁵ Elliott, p. 73.

¹⁶ The works are also similar in their tendency to stage action for the camera. Riis's subjects were purportedly all tenement dwellers, but he often asked these subjects to "play themselves" in mini-dramas he set up for dramatic effect.

¹⁷ Stange, Maren. "From Sensation to Science: Documentary Photography at the Turn of the Century" in *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹⁸ Dickson Bruce, "On Dunbar's Jingles in a Broken Tongue: Dunbar's Dialect Poetry and the African American Folk Tradition," in Jay Martin, Ed., *A Singer in the Dawn; Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1975).

¹⁹ Quoted in *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, p. xxiv.

²⁰ Dunbar was somewhat ambivalent about his dialect work. He recognized that it was the primary source of his success but was frustrated that it pigeonholed him into one style of writing.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

²² Oswald, Emily. "Imagining Race: Illustrating the Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar," *Book History*, Vol. 9 (2006), p. 219.

²³ Orvell, Miles. *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989) p. 77, 85.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²⁵ Sapirstein, p. 14.

²⁶ Bacon was raised in New Haven, Connecticut. Her father was pastor of the Center Church in New Haven and professor in the Yale Divinity School. Bacon insisted that only African Americans should collect African American folklore. She believed that black informants generally felt uneasy around white collectors and were evasive when pressed for information by these collectors. She believed that African American folklorists interacted with black informants with the appropriate sensitivity, noting in 1893 that this kind of collecting "must be done by observers who enter the homes and lives of the more ignorant colored people and who see in their beliefs and customs no occasion for scorn, or contempt, or laughter."

²⁷ Sapirstein, Ray "Chapter Three - Integrating Tradition and the Future: African American Vernacular Culture at Hampton" from "Out from Behind the Mask." Sapirstein does point out the tension between Hampton's official mission of promoting middle-class civility and its efforts to preserve of black vernacular culture.

²⁸ Waters, Donald J. *Strange Ways and Sweet Dreams; Afro-American Folklore from the Hampton Institute* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1983), p. 46.

²⁹ Quoted in Sapirstein, p. 103.

³⁰ Sapirstein, p. 108.

³¹ Baker, Lee, "Research, Reform and Racial Uplift: The Mission of the Hampton Folk-Lore Society, 1893-1899," in *Excluded Ancestors, Inventible Traditions: Essays toward a more Inclusive History of Anthropology*, edited by Richard Handler (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000). On pages 65-67 of this article, Lee Baker discusses Alice Bacon's attempts in 1898 to secure a gramophone for the Folklore Society through the connections of Mr. Boas.

³² Jacknis, Ira. "Franz Boas and Photography," *Studies in Visual Communication*, Vol. 10, no. 1 (1984) p. 51.

³³ It's possible that Dunbar met Tanner at some point. At the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Tanner presented a paper entitled "The American Negro in Art", Douglass delivered a lecture, and Dunbar presented one of his early poems.

³⁴ Quoted in "From The Banjo Lesson to The Piano Lesson: Reclaiming the Song," in *Picturing the Banjo*, edited by Leo G. Mazow (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005) p. 149.

³⁵ Linn, Karen. *That Half-barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991) p. 46 and 41.

³⁶ The original painting is lost. All that has survives is the print.

³⁷ Inspiration for Tanner's painting might also have come from Thomas Eakins's 1878 painting "Negro Boy Dancing," which features a young African American banjo player.

³⁸ Morgan, pp. 186-7.

³⁹ The majority of scholars accept this positive interpretation of "The Banjo Lesson," but a few scholars suggest that Tanner's painting is based on a reactionary ideology. Leo Mazow argues that the painting encourages a hegemonic restraint of sound, and Jo-Ann Morgan argues that the painting can't escape the iconography and sensibility of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

⁴⁰ Sapirstein, Ray. "Picturing Dunbar's Lyrics," *African American Review*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Summer 2007) p. 334.

⁴¹ In the past three decades critics have worked to revitalize Dunbar's legacy by demonstrating how his dialect work stands apart from the reactionary politics of the Plantation School (Contemporary critics have also noted that Dunbar composed several protest poems in standard verse, most notably his anti-lynching poem "The Haunted Oak", challenging the common perception that he didn't deal with contemporary social problems). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has argued that Dunbar exceeded "his inheritance of racialized language, recharging and refocusing it, turning it to his own purpose," and Joanne Braxton has asserted that the poet created something "completely original, new and unique—an Afrocentric poetic diction that transcended the racist heritage of the plantation tradition." Both Gates and Braxton contend that Dunbar not only transcended the Plantation School but that he subtly worked to undermine its system of stereotypes. They cite Dunbar's famous standard verse poem "We Wear the Mask" as evidence that the poet was consciously attempting to destabilize the racialized language of Harris, Page, and others. The most famous lines of that poem are: "We wear the mask that grins and lies,/It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—/This debt we pay to human guile;/With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,/And mouth with myriad subtleties." While proponents of nineteenth century literary realism praised Dunbar for accurately reproducing the cultural patterns of African Americans, critics in the postmodern era have suggested that Dunbar was reproducing the stereotypes of the Plantation School so that they might be revealed as deceitful masks. It seems implausible to suggest that the Camera Club were intentionally epitomizing stereotypes in order to destabilize them. That's not to say that this strategy was not utilized at this time. Shawn Michelle Smith has made a persuasive case that W.E.B. Dubois, in assembling the photographic albums for the 1900 Paris Exhibition, mimicked the conventions of mugshot photography in order to demonstrate how whites viewed blacks stereotypically according to a discourse of "negro criminality."

⁴² During the Harlem Renaissance and later during the Black Arts Movement era, a number of African American critics assailed Dunbar, claiming that he was merely another example of the nineteenth century Plantation School of literature. While purporting to accurately reflect the cultural patterns of rural blacks, Plantation School writers like Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page grossly distorted the image of African Americans into comic simpletons satisfied with the racial and economic status quo. Skeptical African American critics have argued that, because Dunbar was writing to and trying to please a predominately white audience, the poet avoided accusations of injustice and instead presented a palatable vision of harmonious subordination. In 1967 the scholar Darwin Turner criticized Dunbar for his political complacency: “Dunbar’s noble sentiments and protagonists reveal not only a naïve political philosophy but also a romantic and idealized concept of society...Neither a scholar, political scientist, nor economist, he naively offered an agrarian myth as a shield against the painful reality of discrimination in cities.” Others take a slightly different approach and simply note that there’s no way Dunbar could have articulated a socially conscious black voice through his dialect poems and fiction because the dialect form is hard-wired to enslave African Americans through language. Joanne Braxton cites Audre Lorde’s phrase about dismantling “the master’s house using the master’s tools” and claims that, for Dunbar, this was “an extremely difficult if not impossible task.”

⁴³ Sapirstein, p. 358.

⁴⁴ Martin, Jr. Francis John. “The Image of Black People in American Illustration from 1825 to 1925,” unpublished dissertation completed for UCLA in 1986, p. 473.

⁴⁵ The wild hair, tiny hat, oversized shoes, and exaggerated grin were all stock characteristics of the minstrel figure.

⁴⁶ Here are two of Kemble’s illustrations from *Folks from Dixie*: [Figures 13-14]



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

⁴⁷ See Joshua Brown’s *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

⁴⁸ Quoted in Sapirstein, p. 159. Sapirstein argues that the Hampton Camera Club and Folklore Society were not particularly fond of Kemble's illustrations. In a 1904 *Southern Workman* review of *The Heart of Happy Hollow*, the last Dunbar book Kemble provided illustrations for, an anonymous reviewer noted, "It is possible that the illustrations, most of which are in Mr. Kemble's usual style of caricature, help to give the impression that the writer is out of sympathy with the dwellers of Happy Hollow."

⁴⁹ Orvell, p. 94.

⁵⁰ Oswald, p. 222.

⁵¹ In addition to plantation fiction, local color writing also flourished in the post-Reconstruction era, providing urban readers with portraits of quaint country locales and people. Unlike plantation fiction, local color was rooted more in a realist sensibility, but both genres tended to idealize country life. There is sometimes a strain of condescension in local color, an assurance to urban readers that they are superior to their rural counterparts, but, generally, local color romanticizes rural life by accentuating natural splendor and friendly community relations. It is not a vision of the present but a nostalgic fantasy of the past, a time when life was supposedly simpler and easier. The idealizations of local color ultimately tell us much more about local color writers and readers than about rural areas of America. These stories reveal anxieties city dwellers had about the changing landscape of urban areas, but they should not be regarded as imaginative escapes from the city. Rather, they aided urban readers in negotiating the contours of contemporary life, particularly the increasing presence of immigrants in America in the late nineteenth century. See Stephanie Foote's *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth Century American Literature* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

⁵² Fredrickson, George M. *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971) p. 109.

⁵³ Jo-Ann Morgan points out in *Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2007) that, in the post-Reconstruction era, the Plantation School and the Uncle Tom's Cabin tradition began to merge as the subversive elements of Stowe's novel faded away in the various stage productions and in popular iconography (There was no banjo playing in the original novel, but the banjo was omnipresent in stage productions and in popular imagery). Morgan notes, "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, once anathema to southerners, became in image and theatrical revision a repository of nostalgia for the Old South and thus was used to promote the ideology of the Lost Cause... *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became less a jeremiad about a slave's humanity and more a commemoration of Lost Cause idealism." [p. 175, 190]

⁵⁴ Sapirstein, "Picturing Dunbar's Lyrics," p. 330.

⁵⁵ In 1893 twenty-one year old Dunbar traveled from Dayton, Ohio to Chicago to attend the World's Fair, where he hoped to sell copies of *Oak and Ivy*. At the fair, Dunbar met Frederick Douglass, who hired the fledgling poet as his assistant during the exposition. Douglass enjoyed Dunbar's collection of verse and particularly enjoyed reciting his poem "The Ol' Tunes." Douglass himself heard the old spirituals as a slave and, later, as an anti-slavery advocate and influential African American leader, grew to appreciate the beauty and power of "those rude and apparently incoherent songs." [Quoted in

“Introduction” to *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, edited by Joanne Braxton p. xxvi]

⁵⁶ Dunbar admired the “ol’ tunes” wrought during slavery, but he also appreciated more contemporary forms of African American music. The year before *Poems of Cabin and Field* was published, Dunbar wrote the lyrics and libretto for *Clorindy, or the Origin of the Cakewalk*, which featured a new and innovative style of African American music that would soon be internationally known as ragtime. Dunbar frequently visited New York City and was well acquainted with the major ragtime and theatrical performers there. In 1903 the Hampton Institute Camera Club and Dunbar collaborated on another photo-poetry volume, entitled *When Malindy Sings*, which includes a poem depicting an African American marching band playing ragtime. Dunbar recognized the value of older African American musical forms and demonstrated that old forms could be used to craft new expressions, but he also understood that change was inevitable and necessary.

⁵⁷ Day was familiar with the Camera Club’s work and, in 1905, visited Hampton to photograph with Club members and judge one of their contests.

⁵⁸ Conway, Cecilia. *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study of Folk Traditions* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995) p. 183. Conway claims that most African American banjo players within the folk realm played fretless banjos.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Sapirstein p. 151.

⁶⁰ John Berger discusses the tug between the past and the present in the photographic image: “Photographs are relics of the past, traces of what has happened. If the living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would reacquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments. It is just possible that photography is the prophecy of a human memory yet to be socially and politically achieved. Such a memory would encompass any image of the past, however tragic, however guilty, within its own continuity. The distinction between the private and the public uses of photography would be transcended. The Family of Man would exist.” [quoted in Jefferson Hunter’s *Image and Word* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1987) p. 65].

⁶¹ Allen Tullos takes issue with the notion that the Camera Club fully diverged from the aims and methods of the nascent field of folklore, noting that the Club’s work might be seen as “a complementary effort to the ballad hunters’ efforts to find traces that would reinvigorate contemporary Appalachian and indeed U.S. ‘Anglo-Saxon’ white culture.” [from e-mail correspondence with the author]

⁶² Filene, Benjamin. *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) pp. 12-27.

⁶³ Quoted in D.K. Wilgus’s *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1959), p. 145.

⁶⁴ Cruz, Jon. *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) p. 6.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 197, emphasis mine.

Chapter Two

Raw Materials: Doris Ulmann, Ben Shahn, and the Art of Documenting American Vernacular Music

In the early 1920s the American recording industry sought new markets to exploit. When a 1923 Fiddlin' John Carson recording sold over a half-million copies, record executives quickly recognized that working-class consumers were eager to hear music produced by working-class musicians. A huge boom in the recording and sale of vernacular American music ensued, at least until the industry collapsed in 1932 due to the effects of the Depression.¹ Even at the height of their commercial success in the late 1920s, though, "hillbilly" and "race" records never achieved a "mainstream" middle-class audience. These records were primarily purchased by working-class whites and blacks, and, in the early 1930s, in dramatically lower numbers due to the worsening economy.²

And yet, just as working-class music declined commercially due to the Depression, there was a nationwide surge of interest in the culture of working-class Americans that was engineered, at least in part, by the Roosevelt administration. Previously marginal citizens like sharecroppers and mountaineers were made into symbols of dignity and strength, meant to inspire the country during this difficult period. The surge of interest in working-class life was also part of the widespread effort during the 1930s to uncover and celebrate the distinctively American elements of American culture. During the Depression, cultural workers burrowed into American social life and history in a remarkable process of self-scrutiny.

Photography was central to this process of self-scrutiny. Documentary photographers examined many facets of American vernacular culture, including folk

music traditions. Prior to the documentary turn of the 1930s, the vast majority of photographs of American vernacular music were promotional in nature, usually publicity shots taken in professional studios. These promotional images showed what musicians and their instruments looked like but seldom depicted the local contexts in which musicians lived and performed. Documentary photographers in the 1930s increasingly presented vernacular music in its own native context, outside the confines of the photographic studio.

In his book *The Real Thing*, Miles Orvell argues that the documentary turn in photography during the 1930s reflected a shift from the nineteenth century “culture of imitation” to a new “culture of authenticity.” As I recounted in the previous chapter, the “culture of imitation” was marked by an “artificial realism” that provided viewers with credible simulations of public and private life. In contrast, the new “culture of authenticity” offered “something closer than ‘realism’ to ‘the real thing’ itself.”³ Rather than offer simulations, a new generation of photographers sought to present the “exact feel and reality of things.”⁴ Many of them dispensed with staging and pictorial embellishment in an attempt to depict subjects “as they are. . .not as some doctrine insists they should be.”⁵

The shift from imitation to authenticity was not absolute. Residual elements of the old “culture of imitation” remained, and, in this chapter, I consider the work of one photographer, Doris Ulmann, who incorporated elements of both the old “culture of imitation” and the new “culture of authenticity.” In her Appalachian photography of the early 1930s, Doris Ulmann insisted upon depicting actual mountain people in and around

their homes, but she also frequently resorted to staging scenes and even costuming subjects in order to project an image of a noble folk community.

In this chapter I compare the music-related photos Ulmann took in Appalachia with John Jacob Niles to the music-related photographs Ben Shahn took for the Farm Security Administration in the mid-1930s. While these two photographers didn't explicitly refer to their work as "documentary" during the 1930s, scholars today consider their work to be prime examples of Depression-era documentary photography.⁶ The term documentary had been consistently used in reference to filmmaking since the early 1930s, primarily through John Grierson's efforts to build a state-sponsored infrastructure of documentary filmmaking in Great Britain.⁷ At some point in the mid- to late-1930s, the term documentary was broadened to include socially-minded photographic work, a field of photography that had roots in the nineteenth century but was greatly expanded by early twentieth century practitioners like Lewis Hine. Today 1930s documentary photography is often viewed as a single homogeneous style, but there were, in fact, substantial variations in the methodology and motivations of 1930s documentarians. In this chapter I show how Doris Ulmann and Ben Shahn had fundamentally different understandings of and approaches to documentary.

Stylistically, Ulmann and Shahn's photographs couldn't be more different. Ulmann fixed her camera on a tripod and carefully composed each image, sometimes even coordinating the arrangement and facial expressions of subjects. Ben Shahn used a small, portable camera, which allowed him to circle around subjects and capture spontaneous moments and movements. Because of his freewheeling method, Shahn often made photographic mistakes like cropping off heads or lumping subjects to one side

of the frame, but he wasn't overly concerned about these imperfections because he believed he was producing social documents rather than works of art.

Ulmann, on the other hand, considered photography a full-fledged art form and felt that her images should stand alone as artistic creations. Most of her music-related images are portraits, and, in these portraits, the personal and private dimensions of music are emphasized. Her images don't provide a sense of the domestic and community spaces in which musicians lived and shared their craft. In contrast, Ben Shahn, following the directives of FSA management, produced mostly photographic series, which provide a rich sense of space and context. Most of his series depict the public, social dimensions of vernacular music.

The contrasting form and content of Ulmann and Shahn's music photographs reveal a contrast of attitudes about American vernacular culture in the 1930s. Ulmann depicted Appalachian culture as isolated and self-contained. Her static photographs fossilize musicians, making them seem like relics from an archaic past. The pictures present a pastoral, handmade Appalachia; there is no indication of the economic upheavals that were occurring in the region. Her tendency to avoid the political, economic and cultural contexts that circumscribed musicians reflected a common assumption of the time that a folk musician should "forget himself and everything that reminds him of his everyday life... [and retreat into] an imaginary world of his own."⁸

Unlike Ulmann, Ben Shahn was in touch with the contemporary reality of American vernacular music: its shift to towns and cities, its interracial dynamics, and its ongoing connections to popular culture. Through his photographs Shahn engaged with the present and didn't try to evoke an imagined, agrarian past. His photographs anticipate

changes that would occur within the fields of documentary and folklore decades later, when capturing the full context of events became a primary objective.

Doris Ulmann's background in photography

Doris Ulmann was born in New York City in 1882, the eldest daughter of a wealthy family. In 1907 she matriculated to Columbia University, where she met the Pictorialist photographer Clarence White. After attending Columbia she continued her training with White at his school of photography, and starting in 1918, she dedicated herself full time to photography. The work of Ulmann and her husband Charles Jaeger appeared in photographic journals and was exhibited in salons alongside other Pictorialists.⁹

Pictorialism had been around for over two decades when Ulmann embraced the style in the 1910s. It developed in Europe in the late 1880s and spread to America in the 1890s primarily through the efforts of Alfred Stieglitz, who took charge of the New York Camera Club and began publishing the influential journal *Camera Work* in 1903. American Pictorialism emerged at the same moment snapshot photography was becoming a mass commercial phenomenon through the introduction of affordable and easy-to-use cameras like the Kodak. Pictorialists sought to distinguish their work from snapshot photography and to confirm that, in the right hands, the medium could be elevated to the status of art. Because Pictorialists considered themselves artists, they rejected “straight” photography in favor of highly stylized and personal approach. Rather

than accept a raw camera image, they creatively manipulated the medium through the use of soft focus, filters, and elaborate processing and printing techniques.¹⁰

When Ulmann embraced Pictorialism, the style was losing momentum within art photography circles. In the mid 1910s, the modernist turn was beginning to emerge with the work of Man Ray, Andre Kertész, Edward Weston and others. Ulmann's images during the late 1910s and early 1920s—landscapes, but also studies of working-class people in New York City—embody the Pictorialist aesthetic with their soft-focus, painterly look, and emphasis on composition and tonal rendering. Ulmann also brought her Pictorialist training to portraiture. During this period she produced a large number of photographic portraits of leading intellectuals and artists, including Albert Einstein, John Dewey, William Butler Yeats, Paul Robeson, and Lillian Gish.¹¹

In one of the few book length studies of Ulmann and her work, Philip Walker Jacobs speculates that, at some point in the early to mid-1920s, Ulmann began to grow “tired of photographing the ‘beautiful people’ of New York’s intelligentsia and social elite.”¹² In response to this growing dissatisfaction with the insulated world of New York, coupled with the death of her mentor Clarence White in 1925, she “began to move beyond what . . . pictorialists had always appeared to concentrate upon—the very introspective boundaries of family and the circles of the rich and famous and powerful.”¹³ She shifted her focus away from New York City and towards the rural areas of the United States. Her photographic style was still rooted in Pictorialism, but, with this newfound interest in small and relatively isolated communities outside New York, she veered away from the typical subject matter of Pictorialism and moved in a more documentary direction.

At first, Ulmann remained in the Northeast, producing portraits of Dunkards, Shakers, and Mennonites in rural Virginia, New York, and Pennsylvania, but, by the late twenties, through a friendship that developed with the writer Julia Peterkin, Ulmann began to work almost exclusively in the southern United States. With Peterkin, Ulmann traveled extensively throughout the South, including photographic trips to South Carolina, Alabama, and Louisiana. The result of their collaboration was the 1933 book *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, about African American folklife at and around Peterkin's plantation in South Carolina. This book featured Ulmann's photographs alongside Peterkin's text. In 1932 Ulmann began to conduct her southern fieldwork with the musician and folksong collector John Jacob Niles. Peterkin felt jilted that she had been substituted with Niles on Ulmann's southern expeditions, and the two women never fully reconciled before Ulmann's death in 1934.¹⁴

Ulmann and Niles

John Jacob Niles was born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1892. When he was twelve, his family moved to a farm in rural Jefferson County. While the Niles family was not wealthy like the Ulmanns, they do appear to have been comfortable: Niles's father was a sheriff in Louisville and, later, could afford to employ workers on his farm.¹⁵ John Jacob Niles was steeped in formal music—his great-grandfather had been a composer, and his mother taught him music theory—but he also appreciated the folk songs that he heard his father and people around the farm sing.¹⁶ In 1909 Niles became a traveling salesman and repairman for the Burroughs Adding Machine Company, a job that entailed significant

amounts of travel throughout Eastern Kentucky. When Niles visited mountain towns for work, he used his free time to locate and collect folksongs from local residents. He worked for Burroughs and collected folksongs in Eastern Kentucky until 1917, when he began serving as a ferry pilot in the U.S. Air Corps during World War I.¹⁷ He remained in France after the war to study music and, in the early 1920s, settled in New York City where he began a musical career adapting folk music for the concert stage.¹⁸ Niles was but one of many American musicians and composers during this period who drew upon folk material for art music. In 1931 the African American composer William Grant Still debuted *Symphony No. 1 "Afro-American"*, which fused a traditional symphonic score with blues progressions and rhythms.¹⁹

Ulmann and Niles met in 1925 in New York City. They became close, perhaps even lovers, but they didn't have a sustained work relationship until 1932, when Niles accompanied Ulmann on a series of photographic expeditions through Appalachia. Ulmann used a handful of rural settlement schools, especially the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina, and Berea College in Berea, Kentucky, as jumping off points for her rural photographic fieldwork. Their expeditions were almost entirely funded by Ulmann, who hired Niles as an assistant to lug photographic equipment around and to help with logistical details, but their trips had two parallel aims: Ulmann produced portraits of mountain folk while Niles collected the words and melodies of folk ballads. At several points—the moments when Ulmann fixed her view on Appalachian folk musicians—their two aims converged. I will be focusing on Ulmann's images of Appalachian musicians, which represent only a small portion of the large body of photographic work she produced with Niles between 1932 and her death in 1934.²⁰

Freezing time

These two photographs are typical of the way Ulmann captured Appalachian musical subjects: [Figures 1-2]



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Ulmann generally frames her musical subjects in medium long shot from the shins up. Subjects sometimes stare back at the camera but, most of the time, their gaze is directed away from the lens. Ulmann occasionally captured a smile, but, typically, the expressions of her subjects are serious and pensive. Instruments are prominently displayed in the foreground of the photographs, reminding the viewer of the craftsmanship involved in constructing these instruments. Subjects either pose holding their instrument at their side [figure 1] or they freeze their hands while playing [figure 2]. Musicians are never actively playing or singing at the moment the photograph is taken. Performance is implied but never actually depicted.

Although small photographic cameras with quick exposure times were the norm in the early 1930s, Ulmann clung to old-fashioned technology: huge large-format cameras with glass-plate negatives. This method required several seconds for proper exposure, which meant that Ulmann's sitters had to remain perfectly motionless when their picture was taken. This produces an unusual effect, making it seem that the subjects are literally frozen in time, and, for Ulmann and Niles, freezing time was precisely the point.

Ulmann and Niles believed that it was vitally important to preserve Appalachian folk culture. They recognized that rich traditions of folk music and handicrafts had managed to survive in areas of Appalachia but believed that these traditions were rapidly disappearing due to encroachments from the modern world.²¹ Their project, like much folkloric work of the time, was a form of salvage ethnography, i.e. urgent cultural collecting driven by the belief that the culture being collected is rapidly disappearing. A prime example of the salvage mindset applied to Appalachian folk music was Cecil Sharp and Olive Dame Campbell's landmark 1917 study *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*. About a decade after finishing this book, Olive Dame Campbell founded the John C. Campbell Folk School and became a close friend of Doris Ulmann's in the final years of the photographer's life. The introduction to *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* concludes with a message of impending doom for traditional Appalachian culture:

The pressing need of the moment is to complete our collection while there is yet the opportunity—and who can say how long the present ideal conditions will remain unaltered? Already the forests are attracting the attention of the commercial world; lumber companies are being formed to cut down and carry off the timber, and it is not difficult to foresee the

inevitable effect which this will have upon the simple, Arcadian life of the mountains.²²

Recent scholarship has demonstrated, however, that salvage ethnographic projects aren't always productive efforts and that they often, in fact, contribute to the fossilization and marginalization of traditional cultures. Ethnographic theorist James Clifford criticizes the salvage approach for its assumption that the culture being salvaged "is weak and 'needs' to be represented by an outsider (and that what matters in its life is its past, not present or future)."²³ The belief that a culture is rapidly disappearing re-enforces the perception that the doomed culture is lodged in a perpetual past. Sharp, for instance, in discussing the linguistic patterns of Appalachian folk musicians, notes that these people speak in "the language of a past day." In Sharp's vision, mountain folk seem to be stuck in time or exist outside of time itself. As Clifford explains, "This synchronic suspension effectively textualizes the other, and gives the sense of a reality not in temporal flux, not in the same ambiguous, moving *historical* present that includes and situates the other, the ethnographer, and the reader."²⁴ The visual traces that the salvage ethnographer collects aren't testaments to a living, dynamic culture but, rather, relics of a bygone era (or, as is often the case, the ethnographer's imaginative renderings of that bygone era).

Staging the collection of folk music

Unlike the FSA photographers a few years later, Ulmann rarely depicted music in a community context beyond the individual or small group of family members. Most of her musical images frame subjects against relatively non-descript backgrounds like trees

or the side of a building. There is no sense of the space in which these mountain musicians congregate, play, and listen to one another. Ulmann did, however, depict one special type of musical encounter: John Jacob Niles sitting with one or more mountain musicians, either writing down a folksong lyric from a rural informant or playing his dulcimer to stimulate the memories of musicians. While Ulmann's individual musical portraits were clearly arranged and even "directed" to a certain degree, the musical photographs featuring Niles are quite obviously staged. In a few cases, Ulmann situates Niles in provocative situations with young Appalachian women: [Figures 3-4]



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Some scholars have noted the sexual tension in these images and have suggested that they represent the erotic connection—or fantasy of an erotic connection—between Niles and Ulmann.²⁵ Most of the staged musical scenes with Niles, however, are not sexually charged and appear to be primarily about the collection and/or performance of folk songs: [Figures 5-6]

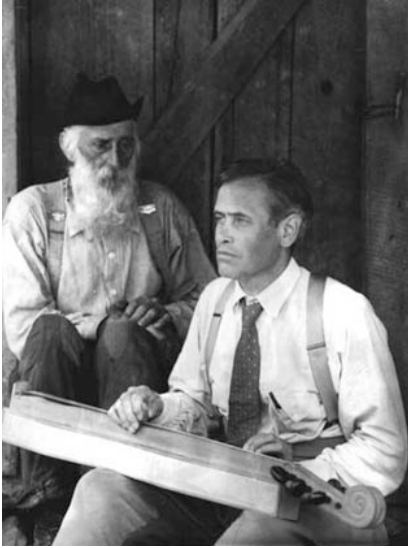


Fig. 5



Fig. 6

In most of the folksong collecting images, Niles looks pensively offscreen as the mountain men and women stare intently at him. Niles's offscreen gaze and position in the foreground of the composition reverses the expected logic of the encounter, making it seem like he is the featured performer and the Appalachian men and women are his spellbound audience.

Doris Ulmann produced many studio photographic portraits in New York, but, for her images of rural subjects, she wanted to avoid the shiny formality of studio photography. Olive Dame Campbell explained this in a note to one of her friends: "I have also had to explain a good many times that [Ulmann] wants people as they live and work, not dressed up for the photographer's studio. That is sometimes hard for people to understand."²⁶ At times capturing Appalachians "as they live and work" proved difficult. Some of the women Ulmann encountered were self-conscious about their appearance and, when the camera was around, they felt compelled to put on their best dress, fix their hair, and apply makeup.

Despite her aversion to the obvious posing and grooming of studio photos, Ulmann often staged her images of everyday Appalachian culture in ways that were as stiff and self-conscious as studio portraits. These staged photos are her most controversial images, for, in certain instances, Ulmann presented not an accurate portrayal of contemporary Appalachia but a fabricated vision of an archaic past. For example, in *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands*, Allen Eaton describes how Ulmann coordinated a shoot at the Pine Mountain Settlement School: “Several of the grandchildren and other members of the Creech family dressed in old *costumes* and were photographed at work *as in pioneer days*.”²⁷ Judith Keller has also noted that the baskets three women are supposedly weaving in another Ulmann photograph appear to be store-bought (one basket seems to still have a pricetag still on it).²⁸ The problem is not that these images are staged but that they are not explicitly presented as performances and are passed off as authentic traces of contemporary Appalachian culture.

The photos of Niles collecting folk songs were staged, but, unlike the staged images of women wearing the outdated linsey-wooley dresses, the Niles images were at least partially based in contemporary reality. He did actively collect the lyrics and melodies of folk ballads throughout the region. The question remains, though, why Ulmann felt compelled to include Niles in these pictures. Why not just show the old-timers singing and playing these old ballads?

Perhaps Ulmann wanted to reveal the *process* of collecting folk music. In the folk music studies of the 1910s and 1920s, including Campbell and Sharp’s *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, there is scant information about collectors’ encounters with folk musicians, but, in Ulmann’s images featuring Niles, the encounter

between collector and folk musician becomes the primary focus. Niles is shown collecting folksong material from Appalachian musicians, revealing that the collecting process is not just a transmission of information but a complex mediation between two sets of people.

Outsiders and Appalachia

It's unlikely, though, that Ulmann was trying to reveal the two-way interchange of folksong collecting. Rather, her inclusion of Niles merely reiterated a common assumption of the time that professionally trained musicians and musicologists were the only people who could properly appreciate and preserve Appalachian folksong. In the Ulmann/Niles vision, it is impossible to imagine folksongs being collected and preserved by the folk themselves.²⁹

The problem wasn't that folk preservation efforts were spearheaded almost exclusively by educated professionals but that these professionals didn't so much collect folk culture as shape a self-serving vision of it, a vision that was often at odds with reality. In *All That is Native and Fine*, David Whisnant argues that Olive Dame Campbell didn't promote an already existing culture in Appalachia but, instead, imposed "an essentially alien ideology and social program" upon the community of Brasstown and its environs.³⁰

Campbell was born in 1882 (the same year as Ulmann) in Massachusetts. She first visited the South in 1908 and began her extensive ballad collecting soon after. In the late 1920s, she started a folk school in Brasstown, North Carolina dedicated to promoting

indigenous Appalachian culture, but, as Whisnant demonstrates, the school's connection to local tradition was marginal at best. Teachers were mostly university-trained and were often brought in from outside the region, and Campbell introduced elements of the curricula and rituals from the Danish schools she visited in the early 1920s. Although Campbell “conceived of the folk school as rooted deeply in local culture, it was in fact—and remained through all the years—an ‘outside force.’”³¹ Instead of supporting the region's indigenous culture, Campbell formulated her own vision of Appalachia that was based on her own well-intentioned outsider perspective.

The same could be said of Doris Ulmann and John Jacob Niles. John Jacob Niles was a Kentucky native, but he had been living in Europe and New York for almost twenty years prior to working with Ulmann. He was more interested in adapting folk music for his own creative purposes than in accepting and preserving it on its own terms. In Ulmann's staged images of Niles with the old Appalachian men, Niles isn't so much collecting music as he is defining it.³²

Collecting photographic “types”

In 1928 Ulmann published the article “Among the Southern Mountaineers: Camera Portraits of Types of Character Reproduced from Photographs Recently Made in the Highlands of the South ” in the magazine *The Mentor*. The term “type” is a critical component of Ulmann's photography, for, after 1925, she and others continually referred to her work as the collection of character “types.” Because of this, Philip Walker Jacobs connects Ulmann's Appalachian photography to a photographic project that occurred

almost concurrently: August Sander's sprawling portrait of the German people during the Weimar period, "Citizens of the Twentieth Century." Despite the different cultural contexts, Jacobs sees notable similarities between Ulmann and Sander, including their tendency towards portraiture, their preference for old-fashioned photographic equipment, their disdain for snapshot photography, and, "most critically...their mutual interest in different 'types' within their respective societies."³³ Influenced by a radical group of young painters in Cologne, Sander sought to produce a comprehensive portrait of the German people in the 1920s:

With the systematic methodology of a social scientist, Sander assembled in front of his lens individuals from all walks of life—peasants, clergymen, painters, bureaucrats, gypsies, secretaries, bricklayers, nuns, clerks, the unemployed, and the mentally ill—representing them in their daily environments or against neutral studio backdrops. He divided the portraits into seven sections comprising a total of forty-five portfolios, ordering them sequentially *to make the existing social order visible*. Each section addressed a specific population group: farmers, workers, women, professionals, artists, and city dwellers. His enormous archive ended with "The Last People," those on the fringes of society: the handicapped, sick, and dying.³⁴

Sander published a preview of "Citizens of the Twentieth Century" in 1929, entitled *Faces of the Time*. When the National Socialist Party took control of the German state in the mid-1930s, the book and the plates from it were confiscated and destroyed, for they deviated from the Nazis' vision of a pure Germanic people.

Jacobs's linking of Ulmann and Sander is misguided. Sander attempted to reveal the entire spectrum of German society, from the most affluent to the most marginal, and his system of "typing" was based mostly upon occupation and class. When Ulmann began her rural fieldwork in the mid-1920s, she used the term "types" to refer to discrete

cultural groups like Shakers and Mennonites, but, as she worked more extensively in the South, “types” increasingly referred to entire racial or ethnic groups: Native American types, African American types, Caucasian types, etc. Her rural fieldwork always focused on homogenous communities, like the mountain communities of Western North Carolina and Eastern Kentucky and the Gullah culture of South Carolina. In the books and articles that featured her work in the late 1920s and 1930s, Ulmann doesn’t present an eclectic cross-section of people but, instead, what is *typical* of a particular racial or ethnic group. Whereas Sander destabilized essentialist notions of race and nationality, Ulmann continually reiterated essentialist visions.

The practice of photographing “types” did not begin with Ulmann, for, in the mid-nineteenth century, many anthropologists used photography to establish the inherent characteristics of racial and ethnic “types.” Unlike Darwinians, who tended to stress the variability of “type,” nineteenth-century anthropologists tended to emphasize the “fixity of type,” perhaps to ease their classification efforts.³⁵ Much of the anthropological photographing of “types” was conducted in a scientific manner³⁶ with no regard for aesthetic value (for instance, subjects were often shot against background grids and in mugshot profile), but, in other cases, like cartes-de-visites that relied upon the conventions of professional portraiture, the images were more intentionally artistic. Regardless of aesthetic intent, though, nineteenth century anthropological photographs of ethnic “types” resemble Doris Ulmann’s twentieth century photographs of “character types” in that subjects are generally not identified and the backgrounds are usually plain and non-descript. As Elizabeth Edwards notes, the photographic “type” “is expressed in a way which isolates, suppressing context and thus individuality.”³⁷

Ulmann and race

Ulmann didn't explicitly espouse an ideology of white supremacy during her lifetime, but there is enough evidence to suggest that she held conservative attitudes about race. In August 1933 Niles and Ulmann made a special trip to see the musician John Powell perform at the Third Interstate Music Festival. Powell had been publicly advocating Anglo-Saxon nativism since the early 1920s, demanding that whites work to maintain the purity of their race. In the 1930s Powell began to shift in a more cultural direction, using events like the White Top Folk Festival to promote his vision of pure Anglo-Saxonism.³⁸ Powell's vision of the racial purity of Appalachian folksong had roots in the work of Cecil Sharp, who believed that mountain whites were endowed with a special "racial heritage."

Ulmann's work with Julia Peterkin on the book *Roll, Jordan, Roll* also points to a regressive perspective on race. *Roll, Jordan, Roll* focuses primarily on the African Americans of Lang Syne Plantation, where Peterkin had been the mistress since 1903. Whereas Peterkin's earlier work had often worked against the grain of the pastoral tradition, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* adheres faithfully to the pastoral model. As Elizabeth Robeson has noted, the book is "a plantation eulogy cleverly presented as documentary."³⁹ Sympathetic depictions of African American folklife were still relatively rare in the early 1930s, but Peterkin's sympathy is rooted in a paternalistic attitude, which obscures the injustice of the plantation system and eliminates traces of African American self-determination. As Sterling Brown noted in a contemporary review of the book, the African Americans at Lang Syne "pay for their quaintness by

their—at best—semi-enslavement. And even for quaintness, this is too much to ask.”⁴⁰

Because Ulmann had such a close personal and working relationship with Peterkin, it’s fair to assume that photographer shared or at the very least tolerated the writer’s views on race.

Ulmann, Appalachia, and anitmodernism

Attitudes about race only partially explain why Ulmann felt so compelled to present a positive, upstanding image of rural Appalachia. She was drawn to mountain culture because, for her, it represented the antithesis of modern, industrial culture. Instead of depending on machine-made, store-bought products, resourceful mountain folk continued to make their own food, household items, and even musical instruments. Ulmann admired the mountaineers’ self-reliant and supposedly simple way of life, and perhaps she saw connections between Appalachian hand-made objects and her own photographic practice. Ulmann did all her own processing and printing, and she prided herself on using basic equipment. On several occasions during her Appalachian expeditions, she produced images with a pinhole camera, which has no lens or viewfinder and is often constructed with rudimentary household items. When she did use her more sophisticated glass plate camera for her Appalachian portraits, she produced an exposure by literally removing and replacing the lens cap because her camera contained no internal shutter. While Ulmann would likely have been sympathetic to the term “amateur photography” because she herself emerged from the world of amateur photo clubs and journals, she thoroughly disliked the phenomenon of snapshot photography. She felt that

modern cameras eliminated the craftsmanship of photography. When Niles began to use a Rolleiflex with a built-in light meter, she called him a “complete faker” (she herself never used a light meter). Ulmann also felt that snapshot photography promoted artificial behavior. As Niles noted, “She concluded that there would always be someone with a snapshot camera to photograph the pretty girls with frills, dresses and curled hair, made-up eyes and lips. She was concerned not with these people, but with genuine, downright individuals.”⁴¹

During Ulmann’s life, some of her Appalachian photographs were exhibited at small colleges and rural settlement schools, but the only book that she collaborated on that featured her Appalachian images was Allen Eaton’s *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands*, which was published three years after her death. Eaton surveys the handicraft revival in Appalachia and examines a wide range of handicrafts, including log cabins, quilts, furniture, pottery, and musical instruments. While Eaton recognizes that most handicrafts had been replaced by cheap, mass-produced products, he pushes for the appreciation and preservation of Appalachian handicrafts for the social uplift it can bring to native residents and the educational benefit it can provide for natives and outsiders. There are more than fifty Ulmann photos in Eaton’s book, and her images are meant to communicate the Highlanders’ “grace”, “character”, and “fascination” in ways that the text cannot. There are only a few music-related images in the book, and four of them are on one page that presents four Ulmann photos of dulcimer makers from around Appalachia: [Figure 7]



Fig. 7

The Arts and Crafts movement developed in the late nineteenth century, and, as T.J. Jackson Lears explains in *No Place of Grace*, the leaders of the movement weren't native country folk raised amidst handicrafts but, instead, were typically WASPs from the business and professional ranks who were feeling increasingly "cut off from 'real life' and most in need of moral and cultural regeneration."⁴² The attraction to crafts was rooted more in a need for therapeutic self-renewal than it was in a commitment to preserving tradition. The forces of modernity were fragmenting the individual psyche, and crafts offered a way to "reintegrate selfhood by resurrecting the authentic experience of manual labor."⁴³ As Lears points out, the craft movement was, by and large, an elitist form of antimodernism, in that it helped city people adjust to, rather than challenge, the modern industrial world.

Like the ideologues of the craft movement, Ulmann was a privileged antimodernist. She lived on Park Avenue and was well connected in artistic and social

circles in New York. She embarked on extensive photographic trips through the South because she could afford to do so. On these trips she brought her German chauffeur down from New York to shuttle her around, and, to Niles, she seemed to have an endless supply of new clothes and photographic plates. She never explicitly critiqued modernity, much less the American capitalist system. Rather than working to scale back the advances of modernity, Ulmann selectively embraced both the urban/modern and the rural/traditional, but she, of course, had the privilege to move back and forth between these two worlds.

“you have the reality”

Ulmann’s attraction to Appalachia was likely rooted in her need for psychic renewal. The rural communities she visited in Western North Carolina and Eastern Kentucky represented bastions of “reality,” and connecting with this sense of authenticity eased her mind as her health continued to deteriorate. In her correspondence during the 1930s, she repeatedly refers to the *realness* of mountain folk. For instance, in a letter to Olive Dame Campbell after attending the 1933 White Top Folk Festival (which became a huge media event largely because of the presence of Eleanor Roosevelt), Ulmann writes, “While the simple mountain singing and playing was going on—the buzz of the reporters’ typewriters was heard. And what a dissonance! I wished I was at Brasstown with you and your people— *you have the reality* and you do not even disturb it with anything that you do.”⁴⁴ The people from Brasstown were no more real or authentic than

people from any other part of the country. Ulmann's pronouncements were merely *claims* of authenticity and not inherent characteristics of the Brasstown people.

Forgetting "everyday life" in Appalachia

Ulmann's tightly framed portraits and neutral backgrounds focus the viewer's attention on the individuals but don't provide a sense of the surrounding context. While it was commendable of Ulmann to show the mountaineers as noble and self-reliant, her depiction completely avoids the rampant exploitation of the region that was occurring at the time. The coal mining industry, funded not by wealthy Appalachians but by Northern business interests, was decimating the region's natural environment (and the health of workers), and company profits weren't being significantly re-invested in community infrastructure. The coal industry made Appalachian communities dependent upon the mines but also managed to beat back most efforts at union organizing. If Ulmann had pulled her camera back to reveal the interiors and exteriors where her subjects assembled or if she had ventured beyond Berea and the settlement schools into heavy mining or logging areas, her images would likely have communicated a much different message than the nobility and ingenuity of rural folk.

Many of the rural areas Ulmann and Niles visited were remote in terms of paved roads and available amenities, but that didn't mean that they were cut off from the flow of the modern, industrial world. Many of these small Appalachian communities had very strong ties to the industrial world, for they served as critical centers for the mining industry. Mass culture flowed into these areas via radio, newspapers, consumer products, and

various other means. Ulmann's Appalachian images don't provide an accurate glimpse of social conditions in the region but instead present an idealized view. David Whisnant criticizes the myopia of Ulmann's romantic vision:

...we are given to understand, mountaineers sit placidly in some magical living sepia-toned photograph, carving an infinite series of ducks and mad mules, oblivious to and untouched by the periodic expansions and contractions of a Rube Goldberg economic system. Culture has become not the deeply textured expression of the totality of one's life situation—hopes, fears, values, beliefs, practices, ways of living and working, degrees of freedom and constraint—but a timeless, soft-focused, unidimensional refuge from the harsher aspects of reality.⁴⁵

As is the case with all documentary work, Ulmann didn't simply present what she found but instead shaped what she found to communicate a particular vision and message. In some cases, this meant consciously distorting what appeared before her camera, like having subjects wear clothes or perform household duties that were long outdated, but, most of the time, it simply meant eliminating material that was contradictory to her vision of a pre-modern Appalachian folk culture.

Ulmann was not the first photographer to willfully omit traces of the modern world in photographic images of rural American subjects. Three decades before Ulmann's Appalachian expeditions, Edward Curtis photographed Native Americans throughout the American West, which culminated in his multi-volume study *The North American Indian*. Like Ulmann, Curtis believed that the "primitive" world could revivify the modern industrial world. As Alan Trachtenberg explains, Curtis presented his Native American images as "a tonic and a possible redemption for an America that had grown soft and un-heroic."⁴⁶ For this vision to be effective, all traces of modernity had to be left out of the frame. Curtis himself even acknowledged this willful omission: "I

resolved at an early period in my work with the Indians that my photographs must show the native without dress or artifact that betokened his contact with white civilization if possible.”⁴⁷ Ulmann’s images of Appalachians and Curtis’s images of Native Americans ultimately tell us much more about Ulmann and Curtis—and the cultural myths that circumscribed their work—than they do about the rural subjects. Of course, ideology and mythology creep into all documentary work, but the dangerous tipping point is when documentarians, in an attempt to perpetuate a distorted social vision, retreat from the real world altogether.

There was a belief among some cultural workers of this period that the main virtue of folk music was not how it connected one to contemporary society but how it offered an imaginative retreat from real people and problems. In the introduction to *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, Cecil Sharp explains why he favors the mountain ballads of Appalachia to the cowboy songs of the West and Midwest:

Why, then, is it that [cowboy] songs compare so unfavorably with those of the mountain singers? It can only be because the cowboy has been despoiled of his inheritance of traditional song; he has nothing behind him. When, therefore, he feels the need of self-expression, having no inherited fund of poetic literature upon which to draw, no imaginative world into which to escape, he has only himself and his daily occupations to sing about, and that in a self-centered, self-conscious way, e.g. “The cowboy’s life is a dreadful life”; “I’m a poor lonesome cowboy”; “I’m a lonely bull-whacker”—and so forth. Now this, of course, is precisely what the folk-singer never does. When he sings his aim is to forget himself and everything that reminds him of his everyday life; and so it is that he has come to create an imaginary world of his own and to people it with characters quite as wonderful, in their way, as the elfish creations of Spenser.⁴⁸

Sharp defines folk music as an escape from “everyday life” into an imaginative zone of pure fantasy. He devalues musicians that draw from their immediate surroundings and

from their own hardships, misery, or personal hopes. Although Sharp didn't live to see any of Ulmann's Appalachian portraits, he undoubtedly would have liked them because they too represent a retreat from "everyday life" into an "imaginary world."

Ben Shahn background

Ben Shahn wasn't oblivious to the cultural and political landscape of the United States during the Depression. In the early 1930s he began his career as a fine artist,⁴⁹ and many of the murals and paintings he made in this period depicted controversial political figures and events. In 1931-1932 he produced twenty-three paintings about Sacco and Vanzetti and their contentious trial.

During this time he also developed a close relationship with the young photographer Walker Evans. Evans and Shahn shared a studio in Greenwich Village and spent several summers together at Truro on Cape Cod. When Shahn acquired a Leica camera from his brother as a result of a wager, Evans provided some rudimentary instruction on how to use it. Shahn used the camera to capture street scenes in New York, often focusing on struggling working-class people (like the homeless and unemployed) or on radical political events like artists' strikes and parades.⁵⁰

In 1935 the Special Skills department of the Resettlement Administration hired Shahn to create posters, pamphlets and murals promoting various New Deal programs.⁵¹ In an unusual arrangement, Shahn began to take photographs for Roy Stryker's photographic department of the RA while still technically in the employ of the Special Skills department. This was a pleasant setup for Shahn, for it meant that he was

bureaucratically detached from Stryker,⁵² who had developed a reputation for being an overbearing manager.⁵³

In his four years working (indirectly) for the RA/FSA, Shahn traveled thousands of miles, taking pictures in rural and urban areas all across the South, Midwest, and Northeast. Before this point Shahn had seen little of the United States outside of New York City and had never been to the South. After nine years, the overall FSA file swelled to more than one-hundred-and-sixty-thousand images, and Ben Shahn was responsible for more than six-thousand of those images. A small portion of Shahn's FSA photos depict musical activity. In this section of the chapter I examine some of his music-related FSA images.

The FSA mission and ideology

According to Roy Stryker, the goal of the FSA photographic project was no less than “to portray America,”⁵⁴ to provide an exhaustive visual account of the country at a particular moment in time. Never had such an immense project been undertaken in the history of photography, but, for many, the innovation wasn't so much the scale of the project but the deliberate emphasis on ordinary subject matter. Stryker urged his photographers to focus on everyday details rather than on the sensationalistic, “not the America of the unique, odd or unusual happening, but the America of how to mine a piece of coal, grow a wheat field or make an apple pie.”⁵⁵ Ben Shahn understood this mission but recognized the novelty of it. In 1944, looking back on his stint with the FSA, he noted, “We tried to present the ordinary in an extraordinary manner. But that's a

paradox, because the only thing extraordinary about it was that it was so ordinary. Nobody had ever done it before, deliberately. Now it's called documentary, which I suppose is all right."⁵⁶ According to Shahn's recollection, it wasn't until well into, or perhaps even after, the FSA project that the term documentary began to be widely used to describe a particular genre of photography.

In 1939 Roy Stryker wrote an article entitled "Documentary Photography." He began the article by critiquing the term documentary: "As a new concept requires a name, a word is called into being, borrowed, adapted, or combined from already existing terms. Frequently the new word becomes too small for the idea it is supposed to name. This is what has happened to the word 'documentary.'"⁵⁷ After establishing the inadequacy of the "new word," Stryker lays out the main difference between documentary and pictorial photography: "The 'documentarians' differ from strictly pictorial photographers chiefly in the degree and quality of their love for life. They insist that life is so exciting that it needs no embellishment."⁵⁸ Stryker defined documentary photographs as images that do not rely upon embellishment and demanded that his staff photographers stick to this no-frills philosophy. As Shahn later explained, this meant "no angle shots, no filters, no mattes, nothing but glossy paper."⁵⁹ Stryker not only set his staff's "straight" images apart from the self-conscious domain of art photography but also from the rapidly evolving sphere of news photography: "The newspicture is dramatic, all subject and action. Ours shows what's in back of the action. It is a broader statement—frequently a mood, an accent, but more frequently a sketch and not infrequently a story."⁶⁰ In Stryker's view, the documentary photograph need not encapsulate a single

gripping action but could simply present a small physical detail or routine social situation.

Considering the FSA file in its entirety, it's undeniable that ordinary details are omnipresent, but it's also clear that ideological imperatives directed the scope and focus of the project. The FSA photographers tended to focus on working-class subjects typically in rural and small-town settings. They also tended to emphasize the "worthy poor," i.e. not vicious or depraved individuals but honest, strong citizens enduring hard times with a sense of dignity. Rather than simply documenting what was supposedly ordinary, the FSA produced certain kinds of pictures for a specific audience and for a specific purpose. Alan Trachtenberg explains the FSA philosophy:

The story we hear is a "pastoral", a story in which the lowly "shepherd" characters—the ignorant, dirty, and hungry but wise and just country folk—instruct us in dignity, humility, sorrow, transcendence, or whatever we clean urban people (perhaps just beginning to feel the crunch ourselves) might wish to hear from such imagined characters. We have become their narrators, the tellers of their story; that we are merely listening to a tale told by a picture is only an illusion fostered by a certain way of thinking about these pictures.⁶¹

The FSA pictures, which were published at the time in a wide variety of government and mass circulation publications, were designed to make an emotional impact, thereby encouraging support for the government's anti-poverty initiatives. The images rarely depict explicit political activities like strikes or rallies, but all the FSA photographers understood that their pictures were being used for political purposes.

Ben Shahn photographed poor and downtrodden individuals, and, by showing them enduring struggles with dignity, believed he was helping to alter the public consciousness about poverty and perhaps sparking efforts towards social change. In a

1964 interview with Richard Doud of the Smithsonian, Shahn acknowledged the propagandistic quality of his government photographs: “I recognized what our function was. Our function was, if our work was used at all, to convince our congressmen and senators that this is a necessary thing, this Resettlement Administration; and without convincing the public you can't convince a congressman either. So I felt it was very necessary to get our stuff out to publications and exhibits.” In the interview Shahn doesn't apologize for the propagandistic nature of the FSA, “The word ‘propaganda’ is a holy word when it's something I believe in.”⁶²

Shahn and the “worthy poor” directive

Doris Ulmann and the FSA photographers both focused their cameras on rural subjects, but their images are different in fundamental ways. While Ulmann avoided showing explicit signs of poverty, the FSA team often highlighted signs of economic distress. Ulmann believed in the value of Appalachian self-reliance and even self-containment, but the FSA project was based on the assumption that the people in the photographs desperately needed the help of outsiders.

Here are four of the eight photographs Shahn took in 1937 of Mary McLean playing the fiddle outside her home in Skyline Farms, Alabama [Figures 8-11]:



Figs. 8-11

Dorothea Lange took six pictures of a migrant mother and her family in Nipomo, California in 1936, but only one became an iconic symbol of the Depression. None of the Mary McLean images have achieved the iconic status of Lange’s famous shot, but, if Stryker or another FSA official had to choose among these four photos for an appropriate promotional image, they would have likely chosen the final one [Figure 11] because it features the emblematic FSA look, the look that William Stott describes as “half frown, half appeal.”⁶³

The sequence of McLean images reveals the FSA photographers didn’t always capture the emblematic FSA look and, in fact, sometimes captured expressions quite antithetical to it. Smiles and signs of joy sometimes pierced through the vision of dignified suffering.⁶⁴ The smiling expression is not the only element of the McLean images that deviates from FSA convention; the angle is unusual as well. Many of FSA

images of poor subjects are shot from a low angle, which enriches subjects with a sense of grandeur and importance, but Ben Shahn frequently shot subjects from a relatively high angle, which tends to diminish the stature of the subjects. In discussing a 1938 Shahn FSA photo of a farmer sampling wheat in Ohio, Maurice Berger notes, “Ben Shahn shoots the ragged farmer from above, short-circuiting metaphors of dignity. Bent over and completely anonymous, the farmer is captured from a perspective that underlines his position on the economic ladder.”⁶⁵ Whether a conscious decision or a matter of convenience, the high angle in the McLean sequence and in other Shahn photographs is a formal device that works against the ideological imperatives of the FSA.

The iconic images of the FSA and the recycled pronouncements of Stryker and others have perpetuated a monolithic narrative of the photographic unit. While the “worthy poor” ideology was a dominant motif in the FSA work, it was by no means the only thread.⁶⁶ By considering a broader range of images and by allowing for elements that are tangential or even contradictory to the “worthy poor” directive, we can appreciate the FSA project as more than just sentimental propaganda and see it as a novel, albeit limited, attempt to “portray America.”

Representing a changing (musical) world

Doris Ulmann’s portraits of Appalachian musicians and Shahn’s images of Mary McLean playing fiddle in Skyline Farms, Alabama, were produced only a few years apart, but, from a stylistic standpoint, they couldn’t be more different. Ulmann used a large, glass-plate camera which required careful setup and relatively long exposure times.

Shahn used a Leica, a 35mm camera cherished by FSA photographers for its portability and ease of use. Because of its size and speed, the Leica allowed Shahn to capture spontaneous moments. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly Brannan note that, as a result of this spontaneous approach, “Shahn’s photographs have something of the quality of sketches. The plane of focus is not always on the subject of greatest interest, shadows or objects occasionally obscure important pictorial elements, and some images have been framed in a loose or imprecise way.”⁶⁷ Shahn did not carefully compose every image like Doris Ulmann did. This inevitably led to some formal “mistakes”, but, in Shahn’s mind, capturing the vitality of a fleeting event far outweighed any compositional irregularities that might appear in the process.

In her Appalachian work, Doris Ulmann did not look for a wide range of idiosyncratic subjects. She wanted to represent a limited range of character types, all of whom affirmed her vision of a dignified, serene, and self-reliant Appalachia. Was Ben Shahn’s intent to capture the unique personality of each subject he documented, or did he tend to recycle character types? If his work does veer towards typing, what types does he utilize: the noble mountaineer type championed by Ulmann, the “worthy poor” type encouraged by Stryker, or other types that filtered in from popular culture?

These questions are difficult to answer definitively. Shahn clearly believed in the social mission of the FSA and shaped many of his images so that they might be effective pieces of propaganda. And yet, the sheer range of material Shahn documented and the spontaneous, sketch-like quality of his methodology meant that he did much more than just repeat a limited range of character types. One thing is clear, though: unlike Ulmann, who depicted a hermetically-sealed folk world, Shahn felt free to include traces of the

modern industrial world and of the realm of popular culture. Here is a Shahn FSA photo that depicts siblings playing music on a hillside in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, in 1935 [Figure 12]:



Fig. 12

The detail that stands out in this image is the oversized cowboy hat that the one brother is wearing. Westmoreland County is located about thirty miles from Pittsburgh and certainly was not cowboy country in 1935. The young man was likely influenced by the cowboy iconography that was pervasive in American popular culture in the 1930s and perhaps by the recent emergence of a new type of performer and hero, the singing cowboy, which was largely established through a slew of Gene Autry films and recordings during this period. John Lomax's research demonstrated that there was a tradition of cowboy occupational music in America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but the singing cowboy of 1930s popular culture bore little resemblance to his vernacular predecessors. As Richard Peterson explains in *Creating Country Music*, "The singing cowboy and the hillbilly character were deliberately constructed images created selectively out of available symbolic resources and

contemporary styles.”⁶⁸ Doris Ulmann and John Jacob Niles would likely have shuddered at the notion of a singing cowboy, viewing it as completely artificial construction that had virtually no substantive connection to American folk music traditions, but Ben Shahn wasn’t preoccupied with the relative authenticity of his musical subjects. He simply pointed his lens at scenes that interested him. In the case of the Westmoreland County hillside photo, Shahn was able to depict an intimate and spontaneous example of vernacular musicmaking, which bore the influence of popular culture.

Doris Ulmann and John Jacob Niles believed that they were documenting cultural practices that were rapidly disappearing. While Ben Shahn perhaps felt that he was documenting aspects of American life that had been ignored, he never framed his work as a salvage effort. Years after his FSA involvement he acknowledged the immense historical value of the FSA file, but he never talked about cultural traditions being in danger of extinction and in dire need of preservation. He seemed to be content with the inevitability of change. Nevertheless, while Shahn wasn’t driven by a salvage instinct, he did, in fact, document a number of cultural forms, including important musical traditions, that have faded away. Here is a photo Shahn took in 1935 of blind street musicians in West Memphis, Arkansas:⁶⁹ [Figure 13]



Fig. 13

Before World War II, the American music industry was instrumental in phasing out important folk music traditions. In the 1920s, recordings of vernacular musicians were separated according to race and genre. African American vernacular musicians cut “race records” and were generally restricted to blues and jug band material. White vernacular musicians cut “hillbilly” records and were limited primarily to string band and “old-time” material.⁷⁰ Of course, there was a good deal of fluidity in the twenties as white mountain musicians like Dock Boggs sang blues and black bands like The Mississippi Sheiks played traditional string band music. Nevertheless, by the early thirties, the racial and genre boundaries were firmly entrenched, and commercial recordings of white blues singers and black string bands virtually disappeared.⁷¹ In photographing an African American fiddle/guitar duo, Shahn documented a musical form that was beginning to disappear from record stores and from street corners, even if salvaging a fading musical practice was not his intention. Unlike Ulmann, who consciously looked for disappearing culture in supposedly isolated rural areas, Shahn revealed fading cultural practices in both rural and urban areas. He captured music-

making wherever he happened to come across it: in the back of pickup trucks, in fields, at festivals and frolics, and on street corners and curbs.

Shahn was one of the first photographers to capture spontaneous musical activity on the streets of American towns and cities. One of the only precedents to Shahn's musical street photography was the work of artist-reporters for the pictorial press of the late nineteenth century. Artist-reporters sketched scenes firsthand and then submitted these drawings, which were touched up, engraved and then printed in newspapers. The firsthand illustrations produced by artist-reporters in the nineteenth century depicted the performance and enjoyment of vernacular music in finely detailed social contexts, including the streets and sidewalks of towns and cities.⁷² Until the documentary photography of the 1930s, these illustrations provided some of the most spontaneous glimpses of vernacular music making in America.

Shahn and the photographic series

Whereas Doris Ulmann tended to represent individuals with a single expressive shot, Shahn took a variety of shots, none of which can be considered the authoritative statement on a subject. Part of this can be attributed to who had control over the image once it was taken. Ulmann developed and printed her own pictures and determined how they would be publicly presented whereas Shahn sent his unexposed film off to be processed and printed and only had a limited say in what pictures were used for public use and in what context. Ulmann viewed her photographic portraits as art and therefore did not feel an urgent need to preserve images that contained mistakes or were simply not

as good as other images of the same subject. Because Shahn worked for a governmental agency (compelled to preserve materials funded by taxpayers) and because his photographs were meant less as art and more as agents of social change, a much broader range of his photographs have been preserved. The FSA archive contains numerous Shahn photographs with formal “mistakes” (cropped framing, over- or underexposure, etc.) and many that are only slight variations on other images. While there are significant differences in how one assesses a finished portfolio versus what are essentially series of raw contact sheets, it is still possible to discern some fundamental differences between the two photographers from the available materials.

Compare the portraits Ulmann took of female Appalachian musicians [Figures 1 and 2] with the series of photos Ben Shahn took of Mary McLean [Figures 8-11]. The multiple images of Mrs. McLean display a range of expressions and body language, which provides the viewer with a fuller sense of her personality. Shahn’s camera captures Mrs. McLean from a variety of distances and vantage points, encouraging the viewer to apprehend the various layers and “sides” of her personality and discouraging a single neat summation of her character. In Ulmann’s Appalachian images, backgrounds are largely irrelevant, but, as Davis Pratt notes, Shahn often “organized his subjects in relation to their surroundings.”⁷³ In the closer portraits of Mrs. McLean, the woodwork on the background building warrants our attention, as does the worn path leading to the building and the rooster perched on the wooden stairs. Mrs. McLean is the primary subject of these images, but the surrounding details help set the context in which she plays her fiddle. In the one long shot, Shahn backs up to reveal the scale of the building

and the terrain leading up to it; here, Mrs. McLean's expression and method of playing the fiddle⁷⁴ are secondary to the space she operates within.

In the same way that Doris Ulmann viewed Appalachian culture as self-contained, her images are equally self-contained, meant to stand on their own as individual creations. While many FSA pictures have been singled out and elevated to iconic status, the majority of FSA photographs were produced in the context of a series, and it is essential that historians appreciate not just the individual FSA shot but the series in which individual shots are embedded. In some series, like the McLean sequence and the migrant mother sequence by Lange, a photographer circles a single subject from a variety of distances and vantage points in order to provide thorough coverage of that subject, but, in other series, photographers organized events in a more sequential, narrative manner. Recent scholars have described these narrative series as mini-movies, and, indeed, many of the FSA photographers approached the photographic series with a cinematic eye. Ben Shahn revealed how he produced a photographic series of a country auction: "I looked at it almost like a movie script except they were stills. I'd first go out and photograph all the signs on telegraph poles and trees announcing this auction; and then get the people gathering, and all kinds of details of them, and then examining the things, and the auctioneer, and so on and so forth."⁷⁵ Here is a photographic series Ben Shahn produced in 1935 that details the interaction of street musicians in Scotts Run, West Virginia [Figures 14-21]:



Figs. 14-21

I have included these images in the order in which they appear in the online FSA collection.⁷⁶ I assume this is the order in which Shahn took the original photos, but, even

if the original order was different than what we see here, the eight images still tell a fascinating story about a musical interaction on a street corner in Scotts Run, West Virginia in 1935.

Only one of the images has a caption in the FSA file. The sixth image [Figure 19] is captioned with the following: “Doped singer, ‘Love oh, love, oh keerless love,’ Scotts Run, West Virginia. Relief investigator reported a number of dope cases at Scotts Run.” The caption refers to the famous song “Careless Love,” a traditional composition reportedly played by Buddy Bolden in his New Orleans jazz band in the early part of the twentieth century and modernized by W.C. Handy in 1925. The song was recorded by many jazz and blues artists in the 1920s and 1930s, including Bessie Smith, Lonnie Johnson, and Louis Armstrong. The original lyrics are quite varied from version to version but generally bemoan how careless love has wrecked the narrator’s family and fortune. The modernized Handy version maintains the same melody but changes the title to “Loveless Love” and shifts the danger facing the narrator to synthetics and adulterated food. The first stanza of “Loveless Love” expresses fear over the increasing synthetic nature of American life: “Oh love oh love oh loveless love / Has set our heart on goal-less goals / From milkless milk and silkless silk / We are growing used to soul-less souls.” While I don’t want to overstate the connection between the singer and the song, the caption does suggest a connection between the song lyric and the singer’s doping problem, that the singer or perhaps even Shahn is acknowledging the singer’s carelessness and self-destructive behavior.⁷⁷

The first two pictures of the series set up two musical scenes in two spaces of what is perhaps downtown Scotts Run. The first shows the doped singer sitting on the

curb playing a guitar, joined by a group of seated and standing bystanders. The second photograph depicts four African American men sitting on the front porch of a business or a residence; one of the men plays a guitar. The third image is a slight variation on the second, revealing a bit more of the foreground space of the subjects. The fourth image visually rhymes with second and third images: it features a similarly sized composition of four men, this time four white men sitting on a bench (none of which play an instrument). At this point in the series, it is difficult to determine the spatial relationships between the first shot, the second shot (and the third shot variation), and the fourth shot, but the fifth image helps to orient the viewer. The fifth photo reveals that the bench in image four is located just a small distance down the same side of the street. In the fifth image, it also appears that the four African American men have moved from their location in shots two and three to watch the doped singer perform on the curb. Photograph six provides a closer view of the doped singer and the various onlookers assembled on the curb. Images seven and eight shift the space back to the porch where the African American men were sitting in images two and three. Now the doped singer is playing his guitar on this porch, along with one of the men featured in the second and third images and some other onlookers.

Unlike Doris Ulmann, who typically had musicians sit still with their instruments while photographing them, Ben Shahn captured vernacular musicians actually making music. In the case of the Scotts Run series, it's likely that the musicians were assembled before Shahn arrived and that they continued to play after the photographer left. Shahn did not look for the single expressive shot that could encapsulate their music making but, instead, relied upon the series to depict the shifting spaces and different configurations of

musicians and spectators. Whereas Ulmann tended to frame music as a personal and private activity, Shahn often revealed the intricate social relations of music in public places.

In the case of the Scotts Run series, this musical street scene challenges the racial segregation that was firmly entrenched in the American music industry prior to World War II. Black and white musicians (and consumers) were divided into separate markets, but, as Shahn demonstrates, the reality “on the street” was that there continued to be mutual influences and interactions between black and white musical traditions. The dictates of the marketplace and the specter of Jim Crow laws were instrumental in pushing the races musically apart, but those forces couldn’t extinguish the ongoing musical interplay across racial lines. From the accounts of musicians and from the music itself, the mutual influences between white and black musical traditions before World War II are clear, but Ben Shahn was one of the few individuals that ever *visually* documented these cross-currents.

Representing the musical event

Below is a photographic series Ben Shahn shot of a big-circle dance in Skyline Farms, Alabama in 1937.⁷⁸ [Figures 22-39] In the FSA file the images of Mary McLean (that were previously discussed) almost immediately follow these images, so it’s likely that Shahn photographed Mrs. McLean and this dance on the same day or perhaps a day or two apart. The FSA file contains forty-four images of the Skyline Farms big-circle dance, but I’ve opted to display only eighteen of these here to avoid redundancy and to

present a more streamlined sequential flow. I recognize that eliminating some of the images in the series represents an editorial intervention, but, nevertheless, I feel that what I have selected is true to the spirit of Shahn's original series.



Figs. 22-27



Figs. 28-35



Figs. 36-39

Doris Ulmann positioned her camera on a tripod and encouraged her subjects to remain completely motionless during exposures, but Shahn's photographic method involved continual movement of the subjects and of the camera itself. Shahn loved the miniature size of the Leica camera, which he could fit in his back pocket and remove at a moment's notice. In this series Shahn is like one of the dancers circling the dance floor, moving in to see the dancers and rotating out to take in the musicians and onlookers. The image size, camera position, and the arrangement of the figures constantly changes.

What is striking about this series is that none of the three types of participants—dancers, musicians, and spectators—are privileged over the other. In fact Shahn demonstrates the fluidity of the various roles as one of the dancers leans in to sing with the musicians and the fiddlers put down their instruments in order to watch the dance with the rest of the crowd. Shahn does not narrowly focus on one aspect of the dance but

instead attempts to take in the whole scene. Similar to how he handled the street musicians in Scotts Run, Shahn documents the spatial context of the dance and the interconnections between the various participants. This series is not about dancing, about playing music, or about being a spectator at a dance but rather about how these elements all intertwine at a specific event. For Shahn, music and dance cannot be reduced to notes and steps; the social context within which notes and steps are performed and enjoyed must be considered as well.

Many of the spectators in this series look away from Shahn's camera. It's possible that they were more interested in the dance than in Shahn or that Shahn discouraged subjects to return the gaze of the camera, but the lack of self-presentation in these images might be partly attributed to Shahn's use of a right-angle viewfinder. During his FSA stint, Shahn often utilized this type of camera viewfinder, which allows for a photographer's body to be positioned at a right angle to a subject, which means that subjects often do not realize that they are being photographed.⁷⁹ While the practice of photographing people without their knowledge is ethically questionable, Shahn's method often produced impressive results. Subjects he photographed with the right-angle viewfinder were not as self-conscious about presenting themselves to the camera, and, as a result, Shahn was able to capture spontaneous, unguarded expressions.

“the image was more important than the quality of the image”

Because Shahn was constantly moving the camera searching for spontaneous and revealing moments, many of his resulting compositions are awkward or sloppy. Heads or

parts of bodies are often cut off [see Figure 13], and subjects frequently get lumped to one side of the frame. These “mistakes” didn’t concern Shahn. He embraced his amateur status and readily acknowledged that he didn’t use a light meter for his exposures. Rather than focus on the aesthetic qualities of a photograph like composition and tonal rendering, he was primarily concerned with the content of the image, with capturing a split second moment that was revealing. In the 1964 interview with Richard Doud, Shahn summed up his photographic philosophy:

Of course I realize that photography is not the technical facility as much as it is the eye, and this decision that one makes for the moment at which you are going to snap, you know...I thought of it purely as a documentary thing and I could argue rather violently with photographers who were interested in print quality and all this bored me. I felt the function of a photograph was to have it seen by as many people as possible...I felt that the image was more important than the quality of the image...⁸⁰

Shahn suggests that the real talent of photography lies in selecting what to focus on and in determining precisely when to take a picture. Elsewhere in the interview Doud presses Shahn about whether he feels photography is an art and Shahn responds, “There is, among photographers, a kind of self-consciousness of wanting it to be an ‘art,’ you know, the ‘art of photography’ and so on, and I get kind of tired of that... it is a mind, an eye, but not an art.”⁸¹ In this interview Shahn sets up a dichotomy between documentary and art, the former a rough expression that provides useful social information and the latter a personal vision marked by refined aesthetic qualities. It is ironic that Shahn conceptually divided documentary and art and lumped photography in with documentary, for his friend and photographic mentor Walker Evans worked to diminish the boundaries between the

two categories, demonstrating that a photograph could simultaneously function as both a social document and an art object.⁸²

From document to art

While Shahn did not consider photography an art in and of itself, he believed in *using* photography to create art. Like Thomas Eakins a half century before,⁸³ Shahn was attracted to the remarkable precision of the photographic medium and believed that this precision could assist his painting. Shahn discovered the utility of photographs for making paintings when he began snapping pictures around Manhattan in the early 1930s. He later explained: “I became interested in photography when I found my own sketching was inadequate. . . I was working around 14th Street and that group of blind musicians were constantly playing there, I would walk in front of them and sketch, and walk backwards and sketch and I found it was inadequate.”⁸⁴ When Shahn got a paying job taking photographs for the FSA, he still considered the photographs secondary to his real art, noting later that “these weren’t just photographs to me: in a real sense they were the raw materials of painting.”⁸⁵ After Shahn left the FSA in 1938, he began his most prolific period of painting. He used many of his FSA photos as the basis for paintings.

When Shahn’s painting career began to take off in the 1940s, art dealers and museum curators were uneasy about the links between Shahn’s photographs and his paintings. When Shahn had his first retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1947, the museum’s curator James Thrall Soby wrote to Shahn, saying, “There is a tendency to link your painting far too closely to photography. . . I tried to qualify whatever

I said about your photography by pointing out how different the paintings are in final conception and spirit.”⁸⁶ Shahn and Soby were reluctant to include any photographs in the MOMA exhibition, anxious that some critics might interpret the reliance on photography for some of the paintings as “a form of cheating,” which “could diminish the paintings’ aesthetic or market value or, worse, both.”⁸⁷ As Laura Katzman notes, beyond the issue of Shahn’s photographs serving as source material for his paintings, Shahn and Soby’s reluctance to make the association to photography was because the medium “was not yet fully accepted as an art form, despite efforts made earlier in the century by Alfred Stieglitz.”⁸⁸ During the Depression, the artistic potential of photography was viewed as secondary to its capacity to expose social conditions. While Shahn always spoke lovingly about his tenure with the FSA, he repeatedly devalued photography as a distinct art form. The first solo exhibition of his photographic work occurred shortly after his death in 1969.

An example of a Shahn painting based on a photograph is his 1949 work “Nocturne” [Figure 40], which was based on two of his photos from the 1935 Scotts Run street series [Figure 20-21]:



Fig. 40

Shahn explained that, in this painting, he wanted to depict the “the fierce intensity of the folk singer,” to show how the singer’s concentration and feeling for his song produces “a facial expression nearing agony.”⁸⁹ The reddish hue of the subjects’ skin, which stands out against the cool blue and green background, suggests not a nostalgic retreat but a moment of tortured engagement. Shahn’s Scott Run photo was also used as the basis for the cover illustration of a 1951 Folkways Records LP [Figure 41]. Shahn’s Scotts Run image proved to be flexible: in one instance used as the basis for a fine art painting, mined for the intensity of the singers’ expressions, and in another instance used as the basis for the cover of commercial LP of folk music, symbolizing the rich heritage of American folksong.⁹⁰



Fig. 41

Several of Shahn’s FSA photographs were used for Folkways LP’s. In fact, Shahn had known Folkways founder Moe Asch since the 1930s and produced graphic art for Asch’s labels beginning in the early 1940s.

Doris Ulmann and Ben Shahn interpreted documentary in fundamentally different ways. Ulmann often staged action for the camera, whereas Shahn and the other FSA photographers sought to capture social life as it spontaneously happened. To Ulmann, each photograph was a self-contained, artistic statement, but Shahn produced photographs in series, not as aesthetic masterworks but as documents of American society in flux. He believed that these documents could be used as the “raw materials” for art but were not art in and of themselves.

In 1939, shortly after Ben Shahn concluded his tenure as a government photographer, Ben Botkin wrote an article in *Southern Folklore Quarterly* in which he laid out a vision for a new, more progressive approach to American folklore. Botkin argued that folklore should be seen as “germinal rather than vestigial,” i.e. in a perpetual state of growth and adaptation rather than in a state of decay and stasis.⁹¹ Botkin’s germinal/vestigial dichotomy is a perfect description of the contrast between Ben Shahn and Doris Ulmann’s 1930s photographs and the assumptions that informed their respective work. Ulmann viewed Appalachian folk culture as archaic, isolated, and fading, whereas Shahn revealed vernacular cultures shaped by the forces of modernity. She presented an almost exclusively white vision of Appalachia, but he documented both white and black cultural traditions in the South and, in some cases, revealed how these traditions were intersecting and fusing together. It’s naïve to think that Shahn’s FSA work wasn’t driven by the ideological imperatives of the FSA. It was, but, nevertheless, he still managed to capture scenes and details that exceeded the government’s political agenda. In the case of Ulmann, though, it’s difficult to see past the nostalgic, antimodernist ideology that informed her pictures.

Aside from Botkin, one of the most progressive folklorists of the 1930s was Alan Lomax, who ran the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk Song during the late thirties and early forties. Lomax helped ignite the first major revival of American folk music. He did this by exploiting the entire range of media: he published books and articles, produced commercial records and radio shows, and helped make documentary films. In the next chapter, I consider three documentary films that Alan Lomax was involved with during the 1930s and 1940s, in an attempt to understand both the folk music revival and the field of documentary at this time.

Notes

¹ Peterson, Richard. "Chapter 2: Atlanta: Birthplace of Commercial Country Music" from *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

² Roy, William G. "'Race records' and 'hillbilly music': institutional origins of racial categories in the American commercial recording industry," *Poetics* 32 (2004) 265–279.

Dowd, Timothy J. "Structural Power and the Construction of Markets: The Case of Rhythm and Blues." *Comparative Social Research* 21 (2003) 147-201. In an email correspondence with author, Dowd clarifies some of the author's comments about the early recording industry: "The recorded markets for race and hillbilly were indeed overlapping to a certain degree -- but they were also distinct (with the race market preceding the hillbilly market) [and] some economic difficulties for the recording industry (particularly the dominant firms) surfaced before the Depression."

³ Orvell, Miles. *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989) p. 199.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁵ Pare Lorentz talking about the FSA photography of Dorothea Lange, quoted in William Stott's *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) p. 62.

⁶ See Stott's *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* and Jacobs's *The Life and Photography of Doris Ulmann*.

⁷ In 1926, in a review of Robert Flaherty's film *Moana*, the young British sociologist Grierson by chance coined the name of the new genre in stating that the film, "being a visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth, has documentary value." The American documentary film of the 1920's, pioneered by Flaherty and other adventurers like Merian Cooper, was a curious blend of popular cinema and amateur anthropology that tended to accentuate the exotic and primitive aspects of far-away cultures. However, as the US sank into The Great Depression in the early 1930's, work by documentarians began to focus more on the culturally different and the supposedly emblematic within American society itself.

⁸ *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, collected by Olive Dame Campbell and Cecil J. Sharp (New York: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1917) p. xxii.

⁹ Ulmann, Doris. *Doris Ulmann: Photographs from the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Malibu, Calif.: The Museum, 1996) pp. 5-6.

¹⁰ There were bitter debates in the nineteenth century about whether photography should be considered art. Naomi Rosenblum argues that there were three main positions within this debate. The first "was that photographs should not be considered 'art' because they were made with a mechanical device and by physical and chemical phenomena instead of by human hand and spirit." [Rosenblum, Naomi. *A World History of Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1997) p. 209] Critics of photography contended that art requires the mastery of skills and that photography eliminates the need to develop these skills. Skeptics of photography also maintained that the medium merely reproduces the material world and that art involves the sublime transcendence of reality. In his famous diatribe against photography in 1859, Charles Baudelaire railed against the new medium, calling

it “art’s most mortal enemy” because of the way it substituted verisimilitude for imagination. Baudelaire complained, “Each day art further diminishes its self-respect by bowing down before external reality; each day the painter becomes more and more given to painting not what he dreams but what he sees.” (Baudelaire, Charles. “The Salon of 1859,” excerpted in *Photography in Print*, edited by Vicki Goldberg [Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1981], pp. 125-126)

The second position in this debate was that photography is or could at least be considered art. Photographers seeking to elevate the medium to the status of fine art often mimicked the subject matter and visual style of famous paintings. In the 1890s the photography-as-art position gained momentum with the Secession Movement and the rise of Pictorialism, which “regarded the optical sharpness and exact replicative aspects of the medium as limitations.” (Rosenblum, p. 297)

The third position in this debate, according to Rosenblum, was “that photographs would be useful to art but should not be considered equal in creativeness to drawing and painting.” (Rosenblum, p. 209)

¹¹ Ulmann, pp. 103-106.

¹² Jacobs, Philip Walker. *The Life and Photography of Doris Ulmann* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001) p. 52.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-109.

¹⁵ Information from the 1978 Appalshop film *John Jacob Niles*.

¹⁶ Niles describes how his song “Go ‘Way From My Window” developed: “In 1908 my father had in his employ a Negro ditch-digger known as Objerrall Jacket. As he dug, he sang, “Go way from my window, go way from my door” -- just those words, over and over again, on two notes. Working beside Jacket all day (I was sixteen at the time), I decided that something had to be done. The results were a four-verse song dedicated to a blue-eyes, blond girl, who didn't think much of my efforts. The song lay fallow from 1908 to 1929, when I arranged it and transposed to a higher key. “Go 'way from My Window” was first sung successfully in Berlin, Germany, in 1930. It has gone a long way since.” [From http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/Biographies/john_jacob_niles.htm]

¹⁷ From the 1978 Appalshop film *John Jacob Niles*.

¹⁸ Niles continued his passion for collecting folk music, and he edited two collections of folk songs in the late twenties.

¹⁹ The most well-known composer to draw on American folk music traditions was Antonín Dvořák, who lived in the United States between 1892 to 1895 and, while here, incorporated elements of Native American and African American folk music into his work.

²⁰ For Ulmann’s Appalachian photos, I am drawing primarily upon the University of Oregon’s online collection of Doris Ulmann photographs (<http://libweb.uoregon.edu/speccoll/photo/ulmann/index.html>) and from the Jacobs and Getty Museum books.

²¹ See “Introduction” by John Jacob Niles in *The Appalachian Photographs of Doris Ulmann* (Penland, N.C. : Jargon Society, 1971).

²² *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, p. xxii.

²³ Clifford, James. "On Ethnographic Allegory," in *Writing Culture*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) p. 113.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁵ Ulmann, p. 84.

²⁶ Jacobs, pp. 116-117.

²⁷ Eaton, Allen Hendershott. *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands; With an Account of the Rural Handicraft Movement in the United States and Suggestions for the Wider Use of Handicrafts in Adult Education and in Recreation* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1937) p. 258.

²⁸ Ulmann, p. 127.

²⁹ Olive Dame Campbell's husband John Campbell published *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* in 1919. The book includes this photo, depicting Cecil Sharp (and most likely Olive Dame Campbell) collecting a folksong from an Appalachian woman: [Figure 42]



Fig. 42

It seems likely that both Ulmann and Niles were both familiar with this image and that they were, in the photos of Niles collecting folksong, fashioning Niles into the image of Cecil Sharp.

³⁰ Whisnant, David. *All That is Native & Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983) p. 177.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

³² After Ulmann's death, Niles spent a year teaching at the Campbell Folk School.

³³ Jacobs, p. 123.

³⁴ Sander, August. *August Sander: Photographs from the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Los Angeles: The Museum, 2000) p. 8, italics mine.

³⁵ Edwards, Elizabeth, "Photographic 'Types': The Pursuit of Method," *Visual Anthropology*, Vol. 3 (1990), p. 240.

³⁶ In the nineteenth and early twentieth century many African Americans and other minorities were forced to be photographed so that "pure" racial types could be scientifically documented. Some of the most infamous examples of this practice are J.T. Zealy's 1850 daguerreotypes of African-born slaves in South Carolina. Zealy's images,

operating under the assumption that race can be unproblematically read off of subjects' bodies, were meant to communicate the basic physical characteristics of the black race. The different physical characteristics were seen by scientists like Louis Agassiz as proof that blacks evolved separately from whites, and this bogus notion was used to justify the social inequality of blacks.

³⁷ Edwards, p. 241.

³⁸ Whisnant, pp. 237-246.

³⁹ Robeson, Elizabeth., "The Ambiguity of Julia Peterkin," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 61, No. 4. (Nov., 1995), p. 764.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Robeson, p. 781.

⁴¹ "Doris Ulmann: Preface and Recollections," from "<http://libweb.uoregon.edu/speccoll/photo/ulmann/nilestext.html>" accessed on March 29, 2007.

⁴² Lears, T.J. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) p. 61.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 60.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Jacobs, p. 118, italics mine.

⁴⁵ Whisnant, p. 172.

⁴⁶ Trachtenberg, Alan. *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans, 1880-1930* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004) p. 179.

⁴⁷ Quoted in *Shades of Hiawatha*, p. 176.

⁴⁸ *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, pp. xxi-xxii.

⁴⁹ Shahn was born in Kovno, Russia (present day Lithuania) in 1898. He and his family emigrated to Brooklyn in 1906. For nearly twenty years, he worked in New York as a commercial lithographer.

⁵⁰ Shahn, Ben, edited by Davis Pratt. *The Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975) p. vii-ix.

⁵¹ One of Shahn's most well known government sponsored murals was in a housing development for garment workers in Roosevelt, New Jersey.

⁵² According to Shahn, there was a brief six-week period when he was under the direct employ of Stryker.

⁵³ Walker Evans's displeasure with Stryker's management has been extensively written about, including in the chapter "A Book Nearly Anonymous" in Alan Trachtenberg's *Reading American Photographs*.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Alan Trachtenberg's "From Image to Story," in *Documenting America, 1935-1943*, Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan, editors. (Berkeley: University of California Press in association with the Library of Congress, 1988) p. 58.

⁵⁵ Stott, p. 50. It's also important to put the FSA project within the context of other examples of 1930s documentary photography. Photojournalism expanded in the 1930s with the launch of the magazines *Life* and *Look* and the publication of photo books like *You Have Seen Their Faces*.

⁵⁶ *The Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn*. p. x.

⁵⁷ Stryker, Roy E. "Documentary Photography," in Vol. 7 of *The Encyclopedia of Photography*, ed. Willard D. Morgan (New York: Greystone Press, 1971), p. 1179.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 1179.

⁵⁹ From ““Interview with Ben Shahn conducted by Richard Doud at the artist’s home in Roosevelt, New Jersey April 14, 1964”
<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/shahn64.htm>, accessed on April 23, 2007.

⁶⁰ Stryker, Roy Emerson. *In this Proud Land: America 1935-1943 as Seen in the FSA Photographs* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973) p. 8.

⁶¹ Trachtenberg’s “From Image to Story,” p. 64.

⁶² From “Interview with Ben Shahn conducted by Richard Doud...”

<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/shahn64.htm>, accessed on April 23, 2007. In the late 1930s the term documentary began to be used widely, and the core FSA conception of the term—raising consciousness about social issues in order to spark social change—tended to dominate other conceptions of what constituted documentary, including the collection and preservation of folk traditions. For instance, Moses Asch, who would go on to found and run the influential Folkways Records, released a record in 1945 on Asch Records entitled *American Documentary Number One*, which featured Woody Guthrie songs about labor strikes and violence. In Asch’s mind, and in the minds of those who bought his label’s records, the word documentary implied an explicit political agenda. It implied an awareness and possible transformation of a social ill rather than the preservation of a social treasure.

⁶³ Stott, p. 59.

⁶⁴ FSA photographer Arthur Rothstein expressed frustration that, whenever he broke out his camera, his subjects tended to give him their “Sunday-snapshot smiles”, so he learned to sneak a photo when the subjects weren’t ready in order to get a more “natural pose” from them. On the one hand, Rothstein was exhibiting a form of documentary purism in his aversion to self-conscious posing. On the other hand, though, by pre-determining the type of expression he wanted to capture, he was privileging his own interpretation over the preferences of his subjects.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Lawrence Levine’s “The Historian and the Icon,” in *Documenting America*, p. 17.

⁶⁶ Another notable thread in the FSA project is nostalgia for small-town America, prompted perhaps by Stryker’s fondness for his childhood in Colorado but also stemming from a belief that small-town culture was being threatened by the rise of major cities and their market values. One of the most well-known examples of FSA nostalgia for small town culture is Russell Lee’s 1941 photographic series of Independence Day celebrations in Vale, Oregon. I would argue that Ben Shahn steered clear, for the most part, from these overt expressions of nostalgia.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 77.

⁶⁸ Peterson, p. 68.

⁶⁹ Bob and Richard Carlin note in *Southern Exposure* that these two musicians might be “Blind Pete” and George Ryan, who were recorded in Little Rock the previous year by John Lomax. The Carlins provide this interesting tidbit about the relationship between the music collectors and the FSA photographers: “Often the field photographers would follow in the footsteps of collectors like Lomax, knowing that they could find musicians

where he had previously worked.” (Carlin, Richard. *Southern Exposure: The Story of Southern Music in Pictures and Words*. New York: Billboard Books, 2000, p. 104).

⁷⁰ Roy, William G. “‘Race records’ and ‘hillbilly music.’”

⁷¹ Of course, sales of all recorded music dropped precipitously during the Depression years, but, even during these lean years, the proportion of white blues and black string band was miniscule.

⁷² Here’s an illustration depicting a Charleston, South Carolina “bottle band” from the Feb. 23, 1889 issue of *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*: [Figure 43]



Fig. 43

This illustration, based on a sketch by Joseph Becker, was included in a short article Becker wrote about a “subtropical” railway journey he made from New York down to Jacksonville, Florida, with stops in Virginia, South Carolina and Georgia. Becker notes that some of the illustrations accompanying his article derived from scenes he witnessed from the train itself: “These fast trains are vestibule trains, and they are provided with spacious ‘observation platforms’ which afford the flying tourist every opportunity for seeing whatever can be ‘taken’ by such instantaneous mental photography.” The professional illustrator Becker compares the act of observing passing scenes from the platform of the train not to sketching but to snapping photos. It’s also important to note that Becker himself was the inventor of the train observation platform. As he recounts in a 1905 *Leslie’s* article, Becker, after returning from a train trip to the American West in 1872 where passengers crowded the rear platform for a better view of the landscape, created a design for an observation car, which was implemented by the Pullman train company and later by other train manufacturers. It’s unusual, then, that his illustration of the Charleston bottle band isn’t drawn from the perspective of the observation car but, rather, from a position behind the train itself. Becker doesn’t present a mental snapshot from the train, as he promises in the text, but, instead, depicts a trio of train passengers observing the band themselves (Of course, it’s possible that Becker could be the one male passenger standing on the platform in the illustration, but that would negate the illustration’s status as an observation and would be the only example I’ve ever come across of a *Frank Leslie’s* sketch artist inserting themselves into their drawing).

⁷³ From the Preface to *The Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn*, p. x.

⁷⁴ The Carlins note the way McLean balances the fiddle against her lower shoulder blade, which represents a “typical southern traditional way of holding the instrument” (*Southern Exposure: The Story of Southern Music in Pictures and Words*, p. 60).

⁷⁵ From “Interview with Ben Shahn conducted by Richard Doud...””

<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/shahn64.htm>, accessed on April 23, 2007.

⁷⁶ <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html>. In the online catalog, there are some photographs of Scotts Run that break up the musical street sequence (between shots one and two and between shots six and seven). While Shahn could have left the street scene, returned, left, and returned again, it seems more likely that the cataloger of the images mixed different scenes together in assigning call numbers, thus disturbing the original order of how the pictures were taken. With the mixed-in scenes removed, it’s possible—although not entirely guaranteed—that the remaining order (the sequence that I have displayed) represents the original order in which Shahn took the pictures.

⁷⁷ Scholars often criticize the pairing of words and photographs, complaining that words narrow the range of meanings in an image and compel the viewer to accept one explanation or interpretation. While there are certainly numerous instances, particularly in journalistic contexts, in which captions effectively reign in the polysemy of a photograph, I would argue that the caption for Shahn’s photograph of the doped singer extends, rather than limits, the mystery and ambiguity of the image. The words open up a range of new questions—about the singer, about the song, about the town—that would never have been posed without the inclusion of Shahn’s brief caption.

⁷⁸ The Carlins note the primary difference between a big-circle dance and the traditional square dance: “Big-circle dances used many of the same figures as the more familiar square dance—the promenade, do-si-do, birdy in the cage—but they were incorporated into the circular formation. Unlike the square dance, the big-circle dance not have to have eight couples to make it work. You could accommodate ‘as many as will,’ in the words of many old English dance manuals.” (*Southern Exposure: The Story of Southern Music in Pictures and Words*, p. 93).

⁷⁹ Here is a 1939 photograph of Shahn using the right-angle viewfinder: [Figure 44]



Fig. 44

⁸⁰From ““ Interview with Ben Shahn...”

<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/shahn64.htm>, accessed on April 23, 2007.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Trachtenberg, Alan. *Reading American Photographs* (New York : Noonday Press, 1990) p. 257.

⁸³ Thomas Eakins was certainly not the first painter to use photographs as painting aids. A number of key painters, including Jean-Francois Millet in France and Thomas Cole in America, were both known to draw upon photography for their work, but Eakins arguably utilized photography as a resource more than any other nineteenth century painter. While training in Paris in the late 1860s, Thomas Eakins “learned to see paintings as accretions, as collections of parts to be worked up in succession from sketches, memory, and life study.” (Paschall, W. Douglass. “The Camera Artist” in *Thomas Eakins*, organized by Darrel Sewell [Philadelphia, Pa.: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, 2001] p. 242) Eakins was familiar with photography from an early age and, in the 1870s photographs became one of the parts he used to construct his paintings. His 1879 *A May Morning in the Park* was inspired by Eadweard Muybridge’s motion studies of horses’ gaits, and the following year, he began a series of paintings about Gloucester, New Jersey fishermen based on photographs that he and others had taken. In 1883 Eakins produced his *Arcadia* and *Swimming* paintings, which were based on photographs of nude men that had been taken in natural surroundings, and in his studio. He rarely used a master photograph as the basis for a painting; instead, he used several different photographs for different components of the canvas. He supplemented the photographs with memory and imagination and perfected the details by observing models who recreated poses from the photographs.

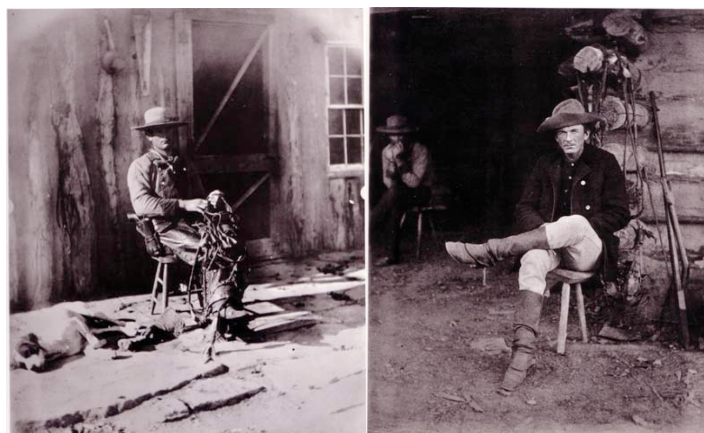
After being dismissed from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1887 for removing a male model’s loincloth during a ladies’ art class, Eakins spent a ten-week sojourn at the B-T ranch, located on the sprawling plains of the Dakota Territory, where he hoped to alleviate his lingering malaise and find artistic inspiration in the western landscape. He took a number of photographs while at the B-T Ranch. Of the surviving photographs from Eakins’s Dakota sojourn—thirty-six glass negatives and four prints—only one depicts musical activity, this shot, listed by Eakins as “Cowboy Playing Harmonica”: [Figure 45]



Fig. 45

Eakins never publicly exhibited this photograph, and, in fact, only allowed three of the over one thousand photographs he took during his lifetime to be exhibited in a gallery space (two by Stieglitz in 1899).

In 1890 Eakins returned to his Dakota Territory photographs and began to mine the images as resources for his paintings. He selected details from the photos and had one of his students, Franklin Schenck, dress up in his cowboy outfit—along with a guitar and a banjo—and enact some of the poses from the photographs. Whereas most Eakins scholars view the two resulting paintings featuring Schenck—“Cowboy Singing” (1890) and “Home Ranch” (1892)—as relatively minor works, vernacular music historian Archie Green notes the significance of the paintings as the first visual traces of the cowboy musician, [Green, Archie. “Commercial Music Graphics: Twenty-three”, *JEMF Quarterly*, Vol. 8, part 4 (Winter 1972), No. 28, pp. 196.202], an image that would become known worldwide in the twentieth century. Here are two of the likely source photographs [Figures 46-47], along with the two paintings [Figures 48-49]:



Figs. 46-47



Figs. 48-49

Through his meticulous attention to detail, Eakins cultivated a reputation as a dedicated realist. In these two paintings, Eakins went to great lengths to ensure the authenticity of the details: he had Schenck wear his authentic cowboy outfit and had his student mimic the poses from the photographs. Eakins goes beyond his photographic sources by adding the guitar, banjo, and singing elements. While it's plausible that Eakins heard banjo and guitar music while in the Dakota Territory, there's no record of it in his sketches, photographs, or letters. It's likely that he added the guitar and banjo to the paintings simply because he wanted to, because it fit the mood he was trying to capture.

And what is the mood of "Home Ranch" and "Cowboy Singing"? Kathleen Foster notes that the paintings are consistent with Eakins's work in the 1890s, when the artist began to work exclusively within his Philadelphia studio: "More comfortable with large figures studied from life in a darkened interior, Eakins could build a mood for nostalgia for cowboy life that drew from the contemplative sensibility of his other late portrait studies." [*Thomas Eakins Rediscovered*, Kathleen Foster, editor (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997) p. 196]. Eakins might have been expressing nostalgia for his own short stint as a cowboy a couple of years before, but his painting is also connected to the growing public fascination with cowboys, a fascination which began with 1860s dime novels but grew into a national sensation in the 1880s with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show and other live-action spectacles.

Eakins prided himself on how he could translate subtle details from photographs into his paintings. He went to great pains to use real props and costumes (actual fishing nets and cowboy hats) in staging scenes to paint. And yet, the more visually realistic Eakins paintings became as a result of working with photographs, the less they reflected actual people and events. "A Cowboy Singing" was based on photographs of real Dakota cowboys but, in Eakins's Philadelphia studio, the real cowboy was transformed into an imagined cowboy, a nostalgic recollection of someone who never existed.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Selden, Rodman. *Portrait of the Artist as an American* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951) p. 91.

⁸⁶ Katzman, Laura. "The Politics of Media: Painting and Media in the Art of Ben Shahn," *American Art*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter, 1993) p. 61.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 62.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 62.

⁸⁹ In 1953 Shahn reflected on this painting and on the visual representation of music: “Song, I observe, does not issue from an untroubled face; quite the contrary, . . . concentration produces a facial expression nearing agony. To test, to implement my point of view, I call up, one after another, specific impressions of singers. . . I wonder how I can capture a little of each and unite them into one face, or two faces that will hold the fierce intensity of the folk singer—and perhaps reflect too something of the rapt absorption of the listener. I will introduce a delicate play of leaves back of the singers which may create a visual contrast as striking as the real life contrast between the tortured face and delicate song.” Counter to the conventional wisdom concerning blues and other folk music forms, Shahn attributes the agony of the singer’s expression to the singer’s concentration and not to the content of the song or to the troubles of the singer. In fact, Shahn describes the song as delicate and tries to accentuate this musical detail by inserting a delicate visual detail.

⁹⁰ Another example of a Shahn FSA image used for one of his paintings is his 1940 work “Pretty Girl Milking a Cow”, based on his 1935 image of boys playing music on a hillside in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania (Figure 12 is a variation of this photo): [Figures 50-51]



Fig. 50



Fig. 51

Shahn makes some significant changes in shifting the photograph into a painting, most notably his elimination of three of the figures from the photograph (including the young man wearing the cowboy hat). An affable moment of social music making has now become a solitary performance.

⁹¹ Botkin, B. A. "WPA and Folklore Research: 'Bread and Song'," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 3 (March 1939) p. 14.

Chapter Three

“A Living, Changing Thing”: Alan Lomax’s Documentary Film Work during the 1930s and 1940s

Alan Lomax was one of the key figures of the American folk music revival of the 1930s and 40s. Scholars, critics and filmmakers¹ have extensively researched and written about Lomax’s audio field-recording efforts during this period, but no one has examined his documentary film work during this same period in any great depth. In this chapter I shift the focus of this study to the moving image and consider three films produced by or in association with Alan Lomax during the 1930s and 1940s. I examine a *March of Time* newsreel about the discovery of the musician Lead Belly, a sixteen-minute educational film written by Lomax, and a series of silent sixteen-millimeter films shot by Lomax during his various field-recording expeditions. The newsreel (1935) and the educational film (1947) serve as historical bookends, marking the beginning and the end of the first phase of the American folk music revival. These two films also represent fundamentally different political perspectives, one imbued with an ideology of racial paternalism and the other based on a progressive vision of racial cooperation and musical adaptability. In the section on the newsreel, I deal more with Alan’s father John than with Alan, but it’s necessary to include this material on John because Alan’s progressive vision of American folklore was, at least in part, a reaction to his father’s conservative politics.

The notion of authenticity is key to both the newsreel and the educational film, albeit in complex and contradictory ways. Through a series of stiffly-acted reenactments, the *March of Time* producers present Lead Belly as an authentic bearer of American folk music tradition. In the educational film, there is no attempt to establish

the authenticity of Pete Seeger, who serves as the spokesperson for the folk music revival, although Lomax and the filmmakers intentionally exaggerate Seeger's folksy, unassuming delivery in order to avoid the didactic tone that was common in newsreels and documentary films during this period.

The silent sixteen-millimeter (abbreviated in this chapter to 16mm) films made by Alan Lomax from 1936 to 1942 diverge from the expository style of the newsreel and the educational film and are closer in spirit to the music photographs taken by Ben Shahn for the FSA at roughly the same time. Part of the task of this chapter is to explore the similarities and differences between documentary photography and documentary film and to consider the possibilities and limitations of each medium. In his "amateur" 16mm films during the 1930s and 40s, Alan Lomax often documented vernacular musicians in their native context, revealing the intricate social environments in which they lived and played music. The Lomax films preserve the sense of encounter between the folklorist and his musical subjects, demonstrating the complex process of cultural negotiation involved in field recording. In 1941 and 1942, Lomax collaborated with scholars from Fisk University to detail the musical practices of African Americans in Coahoma County, Mississippi. The researchers mostly collected audio field recordings and sociological data but also shot film footage and photographs. Because of its collaborative and interdisciplinary nature, the Coahoma project provides a more nuanced look at how Lomax approached and understood American vernacular music.

In the previous chapter, I showed how Doris Ulmann and Ben Shahn had fundamentally different understandings of and approaches to documentary and that the contrasting form and content of their music photographs reveal differing attitudes during

the 1930s about the function and future of American folk music. This chapter is different in that I focus primarily upon just one individual and his consistent vision of American folk music. Nevertheless, even within the documentary work of this one person, there is a wide range of style and method, i.e. a variety of ways in which documentary itself is imagined. The process and function of documentary is conceptualized in different ways in the newsreel, educational film, and the 16mm footage Lomax helped produce during the 1930s and 40s.

Folklore and the phonograph in the 1930s

A major turning point in American folk music history was the founding in 1928 of The Archive of American Folk-Song within the Library of Congress. The founding of the Archive not only signaled the national legitimization of American folk music but also marked a paradigm shift in how folk music was collected and preserved. Robert Winslow Gordon, the head of the new Archive, encouraged the use of disc recorders for collecting folk music in the field, and recording devices quickly supplanted the traditional text-based methods of documenting folk tunes. Recording songs to disc was a radical departure in the field of folklore, for it emphasized the singular performance over the definitive textual transcription.²

In 1933, after receiving funds from the Archive of American Folk-Song for the purchase of one of the first portable recording devices, John Lomax and his seventeen-year-old son Alan set out on a field recording mission through Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee to capture African American folk music on a three-hundred-

and-fifty pound Dictaphone recorder built into the trunk of their automobile. Although John Lomax had been out of the world of academic folklore for almost two decades, he was regarded as a pioneering figure in the field. Rather than hunt for remnants of old British ballads, he sought songs that were created as a direct response to the American experience and landscape. His early collecting and writing in the 1910s focused on cowboy songs from the American West.³

A year after the Lomaxes' initial field recording trip through the South, John Lomax published an article in *The Musical Quarterly* which provided details about his recent field recording expeditions. The article contains only one image, a photograph by Doris Ulmann of an African American chain gang. This image was included in Julia Peterkin's 1933 book *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. *The Musical Quarterly* article contains a key passage in which John Lomax describes the Library of Congress's preference for unmediated documentation:

Before starting on the trip, I was impressed with a cautioning word from Mr. Engel, chief of the Music Division: "Don't take any musician along with you," said he; "what the Library wants is the machine's record of Negro singing and not some musician's interpretation of it; nor do we wish any musician about, to tell the Negroes how they ought to sing." The hundred and fifty new tunes that we brought to the Library at the end of the summer are, therefore, in a very true sense, sound-photographs of Negro songs, rendered in their own native element, unrestrained, uninfluenced, and undirected by anyone who had his own notions of how the songs should be rendered.⁴

Lomax implies that photographs are pure, unmediated representations of reality and that his musical field recordings exhibit the same mimetic purity. He celebrates the direct and unmediated possibilities of the recording apparatus—claiming that “for the first time

there was a way to stick a pipeline right down into the heart of the folks where they were.”⁵

John Lomax glorified the phonograph recorder’s ability to document musicians who had had little or no exposure to phonograph records. Marybeth Hamilton points out this contradiction, noting that Lomax used cutting-edge technology “to step outside modernity, to find archaic Negroes who inhabited a world where time had stopped.”⁶ In this respect, the Lomaxes early collecting efforts were similar to the work of Doris Ulmann and John Jacob Niles in Appalachia at roughly the same time. John Lomax maintained that “folk songs flourish. . . particularly where there is isolation and homogeneity of thought and experience,”⁷ and Ulmann and Niles adhered to this notion searching for “pure” folk culture in the more isolated and homogenous sections of Appalachia. It’s worth noting, though, that the two groups’ conception of isolation differed considerably. Ulmann and Niles traveled to remote mountain regions of Appalachia to document people “cut off” from the modern industrial world simply through geography, whereas the Lomaxes sought folk music in areas that were intentionally segregated from the modern world for socio-economic reasons, i.e. spaces like cotton plantations, lumber camps, and prisons.

The Lomaxes “discover” Lead Belly

The first place the Lomaxes used their bulky disc recording machine was at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola in July 1933, and one of the first people they recorded was Huddie Ledbetter, who was known by the nickname Lead Belly. The

forty-four year old convict impressed the Lomaxes with his large repertoire of traditional songs, and the folklorists returned to the Angola Penitentiary in July 1934 to record Lead Belly and other convicts who knew traditional songs. One of the songs they recorded from Lead Belly in 1934 was “Governor O.K. Allen,” an appeal from the singer to the Louisiana governor for a release from prison. After visiting Angola, John Lomax delivered a copy of the recording to the Governor’s office, and on August 1st Lead Belly was pardoned. Lead Belly and John Lomax (and countless writers) have perpetuated the story that the recording of “Governor O.K. Allen” is what freed Lead Belly from prison, but the available evidence suggests that Lead Belly was in fact released due to good behavior and that his recorded appeal played no part in his pardon.⁸

After his release from Angola, Lead Belly sought employment from John Lomax, and the folklorist hired him as a driver and assistant for his fall 1934 field recording expeditions.⁹ When Lomax visited southern prisons to find and record folk songs, he had Lead Belly perform a few songs to show the inmates the type of material he wanted. John Lomax presented Lead Belly at the Modern Language Association’s annual meeting at the end of the year in Philadelphia, and the academic crowd was impressed by the folk singer’s material (and Lomax’s interpretation of it). John Lomax brought the singer to New York City in early January, and a huge media blitz ensued. Lomax organized a series of concerts and commercial recording sessions for him, and, virtually overnight, Lead Belly became America’s most renowned folk musician.¹⁰

The meteoric rise of Lead Belly from convict to folk hero represents a pivotal moment in the history of American music. Early folk music scholars were primarily interested in songs; musicians were simply carriers of the ancient song traditions.

Because these scholars felt that the identities and personal histories of musicians were irrelevant to their inquiries, most folk musicians before 1920 were shrouded in anonymity. The “race” and “hillbilly” records of the late 1920s and early 1930s demonstrated that there were sizeable audiences for vernacular music, but John Lomax helped form one of the first vernacular music celebrities, partly because he was able to broaden Lead Belly’s appeal beyond the African American market.¹¹ Benjamin Filene describes the Lomaxes’ management of Lead Belly as a “pioneering move” because they were the first folklorists “to promote not just the songs but the singers who sang them.”¹²

The Lead Belly *March of Time* newsreel

The Lomaxes utilized the entire range of mass media to promote Lead Belly. A notable example was the 1935 *March of Time* newsreel which recounted their “discovery” of the musician.

A production of Time, Inc., *The March of Time* began as a radio program in 1931 but shifted to the newsreel format in 1935. According to documentary historians Jack Ellis and Betsy McLane, *The March of Time* “had the most substantial and sustained success of any documentary-like material prior to television. . . at its peak it was seen in the U.S. by twenty million people a month in 9000 theaters and was distributed internationally as well.”¹³

The *March of Time* radio program featured Lead Belly in January 1935, and the second installment of the motion picture newsreel in early March featured the Lead Belly/Lomax segment. The three minute Lead Belly segment exhibits the distinctive

March of Time style: location shooting mixed with stock footage and re-enactments, all held together by the authoritative voice of commentator Westbrook Van Voorhis. John Lomax is credited with writing the screenplay for the Lead Belly segment, although Alan reportedly wrote a first version which was overridden.¹⁴

The Lead Belly segment depicts four locations: the penitentiary in Angola, Louisiana, a hotel lobby in Marshall, Texas, a home in Wilton, Connecticut, and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. All four scenes are re-enactments of previous events. The last two scenes (which account for only about a quarter of the overall running time) do not include dialogue by onscreen individuals, and the images in these scenes simply provide general illustrations of what is said by the narrator.

The first scene is a re-enactment of the Lomaxes's recording of Lead Belly in Angola in July 1934. During the opening moments, John Lomax records Lead Belly performing his classic song "Goodnight Irene." In addition to the long shot of Lead Belly and Lomax [Figure 1], the scene also features close-ups of Lomax fiddling with the recording controls [Figure 2] and of other convicts watching and listening.



Figs. 1-2

After the recording is finished, Lead Belly and Lomax re-enact a discussion that in all likelihood never occurred. Lead Belly asks Lomax to bring the recording of “Governor O.K. Allen” to the Governor so that he might pardon him. Lomax responds that he doesn’t know the Governor and that Lead Belly must not expect too much of him but that he will make an effort on his behalf.

The newsreel re-enactment

Re-enactments were common in newsreels, even during the early days of the newsreel in the 1890s. While some newsreel cameramen manufactured footage that had no basis in historical reality, the bulk of newsreel re-enactments, according to scholar Raymond Fielding, involved either the “staging or manipulation of components of an event at the time of their actual occurrence” or “the re-creation of a newsworthy event after the fact, using the same individuals that were originally involved.”¹⁵ As an example of the first type, Fielding cites a cameraman describing how he, in 1921, assembled a newsreel about the inauguration of airplane mail service between New York and Washington, D.C. The cameraman went to the airfield during an actual day of mail service operation, and, in addition to basic shots of the planes parked and taking off, he staged typical actions, like the workers loading mail bags onto a plane. According to this cameraman, “If no mail bags were yet on hand, dummy bags or anything resembling a mail bag would be used.”¹⁶ The producers of this newsreel staged certain actions for the camera and took some liberties with props, but Fielding feels that this type of re-

enactment was “practiced not to deceive but to reveal the true nature of the subject matter.”¹⁷

As an example of the second type of re-enactment, Fielding cites a 1915 incident involving a young newsreel cameraman named Louis Rochemont, who twenty years later would go on to found the *March of Time* newsreel. In 1915 Rochemont was assigned to cover the arrest of a German saboteur charged with destroying a bridge in Maine. Frustrated that he arrived in Maine after the saboteur’s arrest, he convinced the sheriff, arresting officer, and saboteur to re-enact the arrest for the newsreel camera.¹⁸ As Rochemont later noted, re-enactments are “frequently sharper and more detailed than the ‘real’ thing.”¹⁹

Re-enactments were a part of the first newsreels in the late 1890s and were consistent with the artificial realist style that was characteristic of Victorian culture. As Miles Orvell argues, one of the primary features of the Victorian “culture of imitation” was its obsession with credible simulations of reality. Simulations were preferred because they were thought to be, as Rochemont claims, “sharper and more detailed than the ‘real’ thing.”

However sharp and detailed re-enactments might be, they are, by their very nature, artificial. In the case of the *Lead Belly* newsreel, the producers utilized the original historical participants, but several of the filming locations did not match the places that were depicted. The entire scene at Angola Penitentiary was shot in Wilton, Connecticut, at or near the home of the Lomaxes’s friend Mary Elizabeth Barnicle.²⁰ What is striking about the *Lead Belly* newsreel is how an “inauthentic” mode of

representation—the re-enactment—is used to establish Lead Belly’s authenticity as a folk musician.

The key to the Lomaxes’s promotion of Lead Belly was establishing the folk singer’s authenticity. They constantly recounted Lead Belly’s bona fide folk background and assured listeners that the singer’s music was genuine and not just show-business pretense. In his introductory remarks for Lead Belly’s first New York City concert, John Lomax told the crowd, “Whether or not it sounds foolish to you, he plays with absolute sincerity. . . . To me his music is real music.”²¹ As Benjamin Filene notes, the Lomaxes’s promotion of Lead Belly “created a ‘cult of authenticity,’ a thicket of expectations and valuations that American roots musicians and their audiences have been negotiating ever since.”²²

John Lomax, racial paternalism, and the crafting of Lead Belly’s persona

It is important to remember that the treatment of convicts in the U.S. South had become a nationwide scandal in the early and mid-1930s. In 1931 Robert E. Burns wrote about his experience working on a Georgia chain gang in the pages of the pulp magazine *True Detective Mysteries*. His story became a best-selling book and a popular Hollywood film starring Paul Muni. William Stott claims that the Burns’s story became popular because it offered “the sort of thing people in the early thirties had begun to care about: a social evil.”²³ In 1932 John Spivak published an exposé of southern chain gangs, entitled *Georgia Nigger*, which differed from the Burns account in that it featured graphic documentary photographs of Georgia chain gangs in action.

Unlike Doris Ulmann, who largely avoided the struggles and suffering of Appalachians in her work, John Lomax acknowledged the suffering of his African American subjects in his folklore writings. In fact, he believed that there was a direct relationship between pain and transcendent folk expression, noting in his 1934 book *American Ballads and Folk Songs* that “the truest, the most intimate folk music is that produced by suffering.”²⁴ Lomax is not, however, referring to suffering produced by an unjust and racist social structure but, rather, suffering as an inherent part of the human condition or as a result of individuals’ own destructive actions. Lomax criticized exposés like *Georgia Nigger*, claiming that outsiders like Spivak, in order to sell books and gain attention, “invented. . . horrors and cruelties even worse than those practiced in the Dark Ages.”²⁵

Alan Lomax later noted that his father, “in spite of his intense sympathy for the prisoners and a genuine concern for black welfare, believed in the overall beneficence of the Southern system”²⁶ John Lomax was satisfied with the southern penal system and even with the racial segregation of southern society. He felt that there was no need to overhaul prison culture or overturn segregation.²⁷ In describing African American folk music as a “quiet resignation to the inevitable,”²⁸ John Lomax implied that African Americans themselves accepted the impossibility of changing overarching political and economic social structures.

John Lomax was born in Mississippi in 1867, and he subscribed to the nineteenth century ideology of racial paternalism. He valued the creativity of African Americans but ultimately believed that blacks were dependent upon whites to make their way in the world. This is painfully evident in the second scene of the *Lead Belly* newsreel, which

takes place in John Lomax's hotel room in Marshall, Texas, three months after the Angola scene. Lead Belly, dressed in his prison work clothes, pleads with the folklorist to give him a job [Figure 3]:



Fig. 3

Begging John Lomax for employment after his release from prison, Lead Belly offers himself as a loyal servant, saying, “I come here to be your man. I got to work for you for the rest of my life. You got me out of that Louisiana pen. . . Please boss take me with you. You’ll never have to tie your shoestrings anymore, as long as you take me with you.” Lomax initially refuses Lead Belly’s offer because he is a “mean boy,” but, as the ex-convict continues to insist, Lomax gives in. Lead Belly celebrates, saying, “You be my big boss and I’ll be your man. Thank you sir! Thank you sir!”²⁹

As Marybeth Hamilton notes, this is an “excruciating depiction of Leadbelly as a hapless, hopeless, mindlessly criminal darkie, a part that Lomax seems to have set out for him and with which the singer seems to collude.”³⁰ Despite John Lomax’s contention that he sought folk songs “uninfluenced and undirected by anyone who had his own notions of how the songs should be rendered,” he obviously violated this directive by

crafting a “part” that he expected Lead Belly to follow. Lomax manipulated Lead Belly’s public image by making him wear his convict stripes or his prison work clothes at selected concerts and for publicity photographs. For Lead Belly’s concerts and recording sessions, the Lomaxes demanded the musician stick to the traditional material that they heard him play in the penitentiary. Lead Belly knew a wide variety of popular tunes, including cowboy songs by his hero Gene Autry, and wanted to incorporate them into his repertoire, but John Lomax felt that including obvious traces of popular culture would taint Lead Belly’s supposed purity.³¹

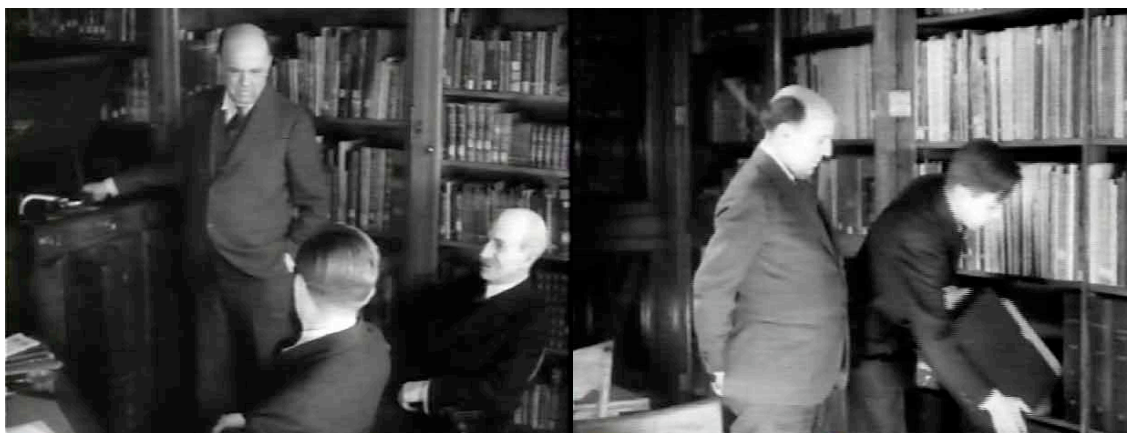
In the same way he valorized the recording machine for its ability to objectively document musical performances, John Lomax continued to present himself and his son as objective intermediaries who simply facilitated the flow of American folk music. John and Alan Lomax were not, however, disinterested intermediaries but, rather, active mediating figures who shaped the personae of performers and the expectations of audiences.

The end of the Lead Belly newsreel, the end of the Lomax/Lead Belly partnership

The third scene of the *March of Time* newsreel is brief, lasting only about fifteen seconds. The narration suggests that it is a re-enactment of the wedding celebration of Lead Belly and his long-time girlfriend Martha Promise. The scene begins with a quick, establishing shot of the Barnicle residence in Connecticut, and the action shifts to what is apparently the interior of the home, where Lead Belly, dressed now in a suit, sings “Goodnight Irene” for his new wife. Perhaps the reason Alan Lomax disliked this

newsreel so much is that the sensationalistic elements of Lead Belly's story are emphasized, while the more tender and dignified moments, like this one, are minimized. Alan reportedly hated the Lead Belly *March of Time* newsreel and felt "it had been a huge mistake for them to entrust themselves to mass media" they could not control.³²

The final scene, also brief, takes place at the Library of Congress. In addition to exterior and interior shots of the Library, we also see John Lomax at the Library listening to Lead Belly's recordings with two associates and then assisting one of these associates in filing the recordings away. [Figures 4-5] Although this scene is quite brief, it is essential because it establishes the institutional credibility and authority of the Lomaxes. They were not operating as independent folklorists pursuing their own interests and goals but believed they were fulfilling a national mission of collecting and preserving the country's rich heritage of folk music.



Figs. 4-5

The narrator concludes the newsreel with this sentence "Hailed by the Library of Congress' Music Division as its greatest folksong find in twenty-five years, Lead Belly's songs go into the archives of the great national institution, along with the original copy of The Declaration of Independence." According to a web page affiliated with Alan

Lomax's archives,³³ the linking of Lead Belly's recordings to the Declaration of Independence was Alan's idea. It was radical to suggest that folk songs deserved a place in the "great national institution," but Alan's motivation for making the connection was perhaps to emphasize that the document's assertion "that all men are created equal" must apply to all citizens, regardless of race.

On March 8, 1935, the day the Lead Belly newsreel hit theaters across the country, the relationship between John Lomax and Lead Belly disintegrated. At the University of Buffalo, one of the stops on his concert tour, Lead Belly brandished a knife at Lomax, demanding money he believed he was owed. John Lomax ended his association with the musician, and Lead Belly pursued legal action against the folklorist to secure his proper compensation and to challenge the recording and management contracts Lomax had devised for him earlier in the year. In the subsequent months and years, a number of leading intellectuals claimed that John Lomax had cheated and mistreated Lead Belly. In 1937, the African American writer Richard Wright called John Lomax's management of Lead Belly "one of the most amazing cultural swindles in American history."³⁴

Alan Lomax and the American folk music revival

Lead Belly became a part of New York City's radical folksong movement of the late 1930s. One of the primary architects of this movement was Alan Lomax. As Marybeth Hamilton notes that, "while Alan never criticized [his father] in public. . . in his actions he had quietly, remorselessly distanced himself."³⁵

In 1937, Alan took over his father's position as director of the Archive of American Folk-Song, an impressive appointment for a twenty-one year old.³⁶ For the next several years, he traveled extensively throughout the U.S. South, Midwest and Northeast collecting folksongs. Because he saw himself as much a folksong popularizer as a collector, Lomax branched out from his government work and produced a number of popular radio shows during the 1930s and 1940s. For CBS, he helped produce *The American School of the Air* (an educational show designed for children) and *Back Where I Come From*. Musicians that would go on to become celebrated American folksingers, including Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Burl Ives, were first introduced to a national audience through these two shows.³⁷

In 1941 he assisted the Almanac Singers, a folk-song group that promoted progressive causes like strong labor unions and non-intervention in World War II. The group, which included a young Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, sought to embody their own political message by collectively living and writing songs. When America entered the war in late 1941, the political momentum for pacifism and the labor movement waned, which hastened the end of the Almanac Singers. Literally overnight, commercial folk musicians shifted from opposing America's involvement in the war to enthusiastically supporting the war cause. Pete Seeger joined the Army, and Woody Guthrie served as a Merchant Marine. Lomax left the Archive of American Folk-Song in 1942 and supported the war cause by promoting folk music in the military and producing a series of patriotic radio shows that incorporated folk music and stories.³⁸

After the war, Lomax and Seeger worked to reinvigorate the connection between folk music and politics. They formed People's Songs, an organization that linked folk

music to the struggles over labor and civil rights. People's Songs supported Progressive candidate Henry Wallace in the 1948 presidential election. Lomax arranged for performers like Seeger and Guthrie to perform at Wallace rallies and penned special folk songs to drum up popular support for Wallace and his policies. Wallace was ultimately trounced in the election, and this prompted an intense debate within the folk music community about how effective or wise it was to explicitly link progressive politics and folk music. As a conservative, anti-Communist attitude began to dominate American life, publicly pushing for a strong labor movement and for international peace was an unpopular and even dangerous move. Alan Lomax was cited in *Red Channels* in 1950 and left America to live in Europe until 1958. As a member of the group The Weavers, Pete Seeger scored a number one hit in 1950 with a cover version of Lead Belly's "Goodnight Irene," but The Weavers came under intense government scrutiny for its members' affiliations with the Communist party. The group was blacklisted in 1952 and then disbanded in 1953. Pete Seeger remained in America throughout the 1950s but struggled amid the anti-Communist sentiment; his refusal to cooperate with HUAC in 1955 ultimately led to a contempt of Congress indictment.³⁹

In the postwar period, Lomax shifted away from government work and moved in a more commercial direction promoting folk music. He wrote articles for mainstream newspapers and magazines and produced new and reissue recordings for the Decca, Brunswick, and Commodore labels. He also returned to the radio with a new show called "Your Ballad Man" on the Mutual network. It was in this context that he collaborated on a sixteen-minute documentary film entitled *To Hear Your Banjo Play*, directed by Irving Lerner and Willard Van Dyke.

If the Lead Belly *March of Time* newsreel represents the beginning of the first phase of the American folk music revival, *To Hear Your Banjo Play* represents the swan song of this first phase. It would take roughly another decade and another shift in politics and public taste for folk music to regain its commercial footing. The acoustic instrumentation of downhome blues and old-time music gave way, at least temporarily, to the electrified sound of rhythm and blues, rock n' roll, western swing, and other new styles.

Alan Lomax's involvement in *The March of Time* segment was limited, but he had a significant hand in the production of *To Hear Your Banjo Play*. He is credited with writing the "story" and dialogue, and he can be heard offscreen directing questions to the onscreen Pete Seeger. *The March of Time* segment is not listed on Lomax's own filmography, but *To Hear Your Banjo Play* is, which suggests that he was proud of the 1947 film.

Irving Lerner, Willard Van Dyke, and the American documentary film movement of the 1930s and 40s

Irving Lerner and Willard Van Dyke, the directors of *To Hear Your Banjo Play*, had been utilizing documentary film to advance progressive causes since the mid-1930s. In 1931 Lerner joined the Worker's Film and Photo League, a New York organization that supported working-class issues by producing politically-conscious newsreels and photographs. Lerner quickly grew frustrated with the limitations of the newsreel form. In 1934 he wrote a short article entitled "The Revolutionary Film—The Next Step" in which he challenged politically-committed documentary filmmakers to develop "a more synoptic form to present a fuller picture of the conditions and struggles of the working

class.”⁴⁰ Lerner felt that newsreels, because they tended to focus on specific incidents, couldn’t provide an overarching context and course of action for the labor movement. Therefore, in addition to recording significant events (like strikes) as they happened—producing a “document” of an event, in Lerner’s words—he stressed the necessity of re-creating events for the camera. By fusing in-the-field documentation with studio-based re-creation, documentaries could provide “more inclusive and implicative comment on our class world than the discursive newsreel.” As Lerner notes,

A mixed form of the synthetic document and the dramatic is the next proper concern of the revolutionary film movement: to widen the scope of the document, to add to the document the recreated events necessary to it but resistant to the documentary camera eye—a synthetic documentary film which allows for material which recreates and fortifies the actuality recorded in the document, and makes it clearer and more powerful.⁴¹

In 1934 Lerner left the Film and Photo League and formed Nykino along with Leo Hurwitz and Ralph Steiner in order to pursue this new form of revolutionary filmmaking.

Willard Van Dyke moved from California to New York in 1935 and almost immediately fell in with the Nykino group. He had been a prominent photographer in California but shifted almost entirely to motion pictures after moving to New York. He received his photographic training from Edward Weston, and, in 1932, along with Weston, Ansel Adams, and other celebrated photographers, co-founded the Group f/64, which specialized in deep focus photographs of landscapes and other relatively motionless scenes. The Group f/64 were proponents of a “straight” style that respected the unique characteristics of the photographic medium. They disliked Pictorialist photography, for they felt it borrowed too heavily from other art forms.

Touched by the devastation of the Depression, Van Dyke grew to believe that still photography was inferior to film in terms of enacting social change. He later reflected on the major creative shift in his life: "I left still photography because it could not provide the things that I knew films could provide. I was excited and interested in film as a pure medium of expression, but I was more interested in using it for a social end."⁴² In 1937 Nykino transformed into a new organization, Frontier Films. Along with Van Dyke, Lerner and other American filmmakers, the radical Dutch documentarian Joris Ivens was also a member of Frontier Films. The first Frontier Film production dealing with an American subject was *People of the Cumberland*. A combination of re-creations and actual contemporary footage, this 1937 documentary details the emergence of a labor movement in rural Tennessee and, in one scene, features square dancing and folk music. After serving as a cameraman for the classic U.S. government documentary *The River*, Willard Van Dyke left Frontier Films in 1938 with Ralph Steiner to complete *The City*, which is now considered a landmark in American documentary cinema. During the war years, Van Dyke worked extensively with the U.S. government, producing propaganda films. Lerner also left Frontier in 1938. He served as cameraman for Robert Flaherty's U.S. Film Service production *The Land* and headed up the Educational Film Institute of New York University. Throughout the 1940s Lerner kept a close affiliation with Van Dyke, serving as an editor for a number of documentaries directed by Van Dyke, including the 1941 film *Valley Town*.

To Hear Your Banjo Play: opening scenes

As the opening credits run for *To Hear Your Banjo Play*, the camera begins with a tight shot of Pete Seeger playing “Sally Ann” on the banjo. The camera pulls back to a wide shot to reveal that Seeger is playing in what appears to be a large urban loft (skyscrapers are seen out the windows). The cinematographer for *To Hear Your Banjo Play* was Richard Leacock. A year after this film was made, Leacock served as cameraman for Robert Flaherty’s last solo directing effort, *Louisiana Story*, which featured intricate camerawork through Louisiana swampland. Both films utilized large thirty-five millimeter film cameras, which required much time and effort in setting up camera positions and moves. It’s ironic that Leacock began his career shooting two documentaries with bulky equipment that required considerable to setup and operate, for he would go on to become a leading figure in the direct cinema movement of the 1960s, which emphasized the liberating quality of handheld 16mm cameras. Before the mid-1950s, documentaries that featured synchronous sound were shot with huge cameras and audio equipment, which meant that the shooting had to be done in a controlled environment and that subjects were rarely followed with a moving camera.

After Seeger’s song is complete, Alan Lomax’s voice can be heard offscreen, saying “Hello there Peter.” Seeger responds “Howdy” and the two begin to talk about the instrument Seeger is playing:

Lomax: What’s that funny looking guitar you’re playing?

Seeger: Oh, this isn’t a guitar, this is a banjo.

Lomax: Well, tell me, is a banjo something new?

Seeger: New, about as new as America is. You see, American Negro slaves made the first real banjos a couple hundred years ago out of old

hollowed gourds and possum skins I guess, but then the banjo spread all over the whole country. Everyone loved it...



Fig. 6

While Seeger is speaking [Figure 6], the camera gradually zooms in on his right hand lightly picking out a banjo melody. When he says “Everybody loved it,” an expanding iris transition reveals a different hand playing a different banjo. Seeger continues talking, but now his words have shifted from being in conversation with Lomax to serving as a voice-over narration for the images of rural Virginia that we now see:

[The banjo] traveled West in the covered wagons. Later on the banjo went out of style, got countrified. Nowadays you’re liable to hear it played by some old farmer. And the hands on the strings will be hardened by work and worn by the weather, like these hands of an old friend of mine down in Virginia. He can’t read music, you know, he plays by ear. Some old tune, a tune that made feet pat in old pioneer days. What’s he thinking about? Maybe about the picnic last Saturday, and the square dance where the boys were swinging the gals, and the gals were skipping and flying. . .

When Seeger mentions the square dance, the film cuts from the farmer playing the banjo to images of a country square dance and then to images of people eating and playing horseshoes at a country picnic. The film shifts again to a musical scene in rural Virginia; this time, an old man buckdances as a string band plays. The film returns to New York

and to the direct conversation with Lomax, as Seeger says to him, “Yes sir, the banjo still makes folks dance out in the country.”

The avoidance of didactic narration in American documentary films of the 1930s and 40s

Seeger provides some basic information about the banjo in the opening moments of the film, but Lomax, Van Dyke, and Lerner ensure that he doesn't come off as dry or didactic. Lomax obviously knows what a banjo is and knows its history, but he deflates his expertise and plays the role of the uninformed viewer in order to get clear and straightforward answers from Seeger. When Seeger begins to deliver voice-over narration over the rural Virginia scenes, the fact that he has already appeared onscreen in a casual conversation with Lomax makes it seem like he's sharing some information in a friendly way rather than making declarations in a bold and authoritative manner.

The tone and function of narration was a central issue in documentary filmmaking in the 1930s and 1940s. After using a *March of Time*-style narration in *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, Pare Lorentz shifted to a more lyrical style of narration for his subsequent film *The River*, which is famous for its poetic repetition of American place names. In making *Plow*, Lorentz realized that a dry and authoritative narration tended to dominate and overwhelm the imagery of a documentary film. He felt that a lyrical, less preachy narration could foster a more healthy interplay between the images and the narration.

For *The City*, directors Willard Van Dyke and Ralph Steiner “consciously avoided the Lorentz style of extensive lyrical narration and agreed to eliminate commentary

whenever possible.”⁴³ While *The City* does incorporate some dry, authoritative narration, it is relatively sparse, and, more importantly, it is challenged by the brief inclusion of a second narrator in part two of the film. This second narrator is heard during the noisy downtown scenes, and his zealous support for urban life is meant to be ironic. As Charles Keil notes, “The employment of narration in this manner undercuts its traditional status as reliable and superior to the image; rather it acts as a counterpoint to the visuals, which constitute the primary source of information.”⁴⁴ The narration of *To Hear Your Banjo Play* isn’t ironic or subversive like the narration in part two of *The City*, but it is delivered in a manner that is folksy and unthreatening, which helps deflate the sense of authority and omniscience.

Today many believe that the only style of narration in the pre-1950 documentary film was voice-of-God narration, typified by *The March of Time*, *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, and virtually all the American propaganda films made during World War II, but many filmmakers during this era were sensitive to the populist notion that information shouldn’t be delivered in a commanding top-down style but should emerge from the grassroots in a more modest and unassuming manner. These filmmakers recognized that it wasn’t just the content that should be folksy; the delivery should be folksy as well. Sometimes, like in the case of Ivens’ *Power and the Land*, the folksy element was exaggerated to the point of near caricature, but the overall strategy in these films to minimize the expression of direct authority was well-intentioned and well thought out.

Reviving folk music in “big town”

When the scenes of rural Virginia end and we return to the New York City loft, Seeger and Lomax continue their conversation:

Lomax: Well, then, Pete, what are you doing here in New York City?
 Seeger: Well, it’s a funny thing, the people in this big town are beginning to like my kind of music too. Out there in big town where the skyscrapers glisten in the sun, where the buildings make canyons in the air, American folk music got lost in the roar of the traffic, but now the people are listening again. I guess my old tunes remind ‘em of home, of their roots in the land, seems my country music kind of fascinates ‘em.
 Lomax: But Peter, why try to revive this American music, isn’t it dead?
 Seeger: Oh, no you’re all wrong, it’s not dead, it’s very much alive for millions of people. . .

When Seeger begins the sentence that starts “Out there in big town,” the film cuts from the medium shot of him to various shots of New York City. Seeger’s voice can be heard over the images of skyscrapers and crowds. [Figures 7-8]



Figs. 7-8

Unlike Van Dyke’s *The City*, which presented the American metropolis as a frightening and destructive place, the series of generic city images in *To Hear Your Banjo Play* are

simply meant to evoke the immensity and bustling activity of New York City and to stand in contrast to the downhome country scenes of rural Virginia that were previously displayed. Whereas *The City* rejected the modern American city in favor of the countryside and the emerging suburbs, *To Hear Your Banjo Play* respects “big town” and maintains that folk music has a place amid the skyscrapers and bustling traffic.

As Pete Seeger explains, the big city is where folk music is *revived*. In the country, like in the sections of rural Virginia shown earlier in the film, folk music doesn't need to be revived because it is alive and vital there, but, in the big city, folk music got lost in the frenzy of the crowd and needs to be regenerated. The folk music revival that Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger helped orchestrate from the late 1930s to the late 1940s was largely an urban phenomenon. Most of the record labels, concert venues, and radio shows connected to the revival were all clustered in or around New York City. Even though revivalists depended on folk song material from rural areas across the country, the revival itself was a New York City movement.

A range of authenticity

Alan Lomax understood that cities were integral to the promotion of folk music, but, nevertheless, he still believed that the most significant and most authentic folk musicians were the ones who were raised in small, close-knit communities. This is evident in a roundup of folk music recordings he wrote for *Vogue* magazine in December 1946. In the article, Lomax breaks down the entire spectrum of folk music performers:

...you can buy recordings of many types of American folk songs, performed in almost any style you may prefer...by unsophisticated country singers (and these I most strongly recommend as art of lasting interest and value), by commercial hill-billies (and these have value as a new sort of small-town folk music), by the city-billy ballad singers of the big towns (and these present the best repertoires, usually in a singing style that you are probably accustomed to hearing), and finally by art singers (and these are, for me, the least interesting, because they lose most of the original earthy essence of the country music).⁴⁵

Lomax acknowledges that a wide variety of people sing folk songs, from rugged farmers to professional, university-trained musicians, but he claims that the best—in other words, the most authentic—are the “unsophisticated country singers.” There is a range of authenticity built into Lomax’s range of folk performers, the art singers being the most artificial and the country singers being the most genuine. At the time, John Jacob Niles would have epitomized the refined, professional folksinger, Pete Seeger the citybilly ballad singer, Wade Mainer the commercial hillbilly, and Texas Gladden (who sings archaic Appalachian ballads in *To Hear Your Banjo Play*) the “unsophisticated country singer.”

American Studies scholar Alexis Luckey argues that the American folk music revival of the 1930s and 1940s “obscured definitions of ‘folk’ and ‘folk music,’ confusing the supposed boundaries delineating the ‘authentic’ folk from the constructed thing.”⁴⁶ She claims that citybilly singers like Pete Seeger, in donning working-class garb and adopting a folksy delivery, attempted to appear authentic, while bona fide country singers like Aunt Molly Jackson, Lead Belly, and Woody Guthrie compromised their downhome credibility in catering to the radical folksong crowd.

I disagree with this idea that “the boundaries delineating the ‘authentic’ folk from the constructed thing” were hopelessly blurred during the 1930s and 1940s. In fact, I

would maintain that the strength of the first wave of the folk music revival was due to the fact that each set of players involved had their own place and role and, for the most part, stuck to them. Downhome country musicians, like the ones we see in the film in rural Virginia, remained in the country and were representative of folk sturdiness and authenticity. Figures like Aunt Molly Jackson, Lead Belly and Woody Guthrie, who had nurtured their craft within small folk communities but then became part of the urban folk music movement in the late 1930s, occupied a special intermediary zone, valued for their supposed authenticity but also engaged with the working-class agenda of the movement. Citybilly singers like Seeger fulfilled a vital role as mediators and interpreters of folk material. Seeger dressed in flannel and denim and issued folksy phrases, but this wasn't so he could pass as an Appalachian balladeer or even as a Guthrie, but, rather, as I noted before, to avoid a didactic, authoritarian position in spreading the folk message.

As Benjamin Filene has recently noted, "Seeger is not and never was authentic."⁴⁷

What set Alan Lomax apart from his father was that he realized that there was a place for inauthenticity within the world of folk music.

To Hear Your Banjo Play: cultural geography

In *To Hear Your Banjo Play*, all the sets of players have their own designated space: the rural musicians in and around their homes in rural Virginia, Seeger in the Manhattan loft, and Guthrie in what appears to be a barn. Just as each set of participants had their own special place within the revival, Lomax also had a more general appreciation of how place shapes musical expression. Topography and social conditions

vary tremendously from region to region and even within regions of the United States, and Alan Lomax understood that this resulted in a rich and diverse landscape of folk music traditions.

This diversity is evident in *To Hear Your Banjo Play*. After the section on the resurgence of folk song in the city, the film returns to images and music of rural Virginia. The Lomax-penned narration emphasizes the connection between the land and the music: “Down in the blue hills of Virginia, down where the rough mountain country sort of closed in on the people. . . you’ll find a clear pure stream of frontier balladry.” During this stretch of narration, Van Dyke and Lerner display images of rolling hills and mountain streams. Immediately after this section the scene shifts to the cotton country of the South and to a newer type of music. Lomax’s narration shifts accordingly: “When you come down into the flat hot country of the South, down into the rich cotton land, you hear a different kind of music, the music of the sharecroppers, the migratory workers, music that’s jangling and mournful.”

As images of cotton harvesting are displayed, the narration continues: “The work is seasonal. It’s hard. They’re bowed down in poverty, bowed down to the earth. You see poverty written all over their faces and poverty in their songs. There’s strength in this music, too, strength that made millions of bales of Southern cotton.” After a brief scene of Woody Guthrie⁴⁸ and Baldwin Hawes⁴⁹ playing the song “East Virginia” in what appears to be a barn, the narration continues: “Two races met here in the South, together they built the South, and together, they made a new kind of music. This is a new worksong with a beat of steam engines in the rhythm.”



Figs. 9-14

After a shot of men loading what appears to be a bale of cotton onto a ship, the film then cuts to successive close-ups of African American men singing [Figures 9-10], although on the soundtrack we still hear Guthrie and Hawes performing “East Virginia” rather than these three men singing. Suddenly a shot of a hard-charging locomotive appears [Figure 11] and the music shifts to an uptempo version of the classic folk song “John Henry.”

This song is played by Guthrie, still in the barn setting. Hawes is now gone, and Guthrie is accompanied by African American bluesmen Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee [Figure 12]. The footage of them playing is interspersed with shots of moving trains and workers laying out railroad tracks [Figures 13-14]. In several of the rail laying shots, blacks and whites work alongside one another.

A progressive vision of American folk music

During the late 1940s, Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger articulated specific positions on political issues such as the labor movement and civil rights, but *To Hear Your Banjo Play* does not discuss or advocate any specific political policies. The only mention of class in the film is when Seeger notes that cotton harvesters are bowed down in poverty and that this poverty can be heard in their songs.⁵⁰ The film's lack of political specificity was likely due to the fact that it was primarily educational and was probably, as Dennis Coelho has suggested,⁵¹ targeted at high-school and college students. Seeger and Lomax were passionate about their political beliefs, but they were adept at adjusting their rhetoric to fit different audiences, from the most radical to the politically indifferent. And, of course, the growing spectre of anti-Communism in postwar American made advocacy of working-class causes more precarious.

To Hear Your Banjo Play doesn't promote specific political policies in the way that the Almanac Singers and People's Songs did, but the film is certainly not apolitical. The film's handling of the issue of race was notably progressive for its time. In the midst of the segregated social world of 1947, Lomax emphasizes that whites and blacks

built the South together and that their music was intertwined in profound ways. Images of white and black workers laying rail line together are interspersed with the integrated ensemble of Guthrie, McGhee, and Terry. Lomax believed that American folk music represented the essence of American democracy and egalitarianism and that America could improve itself by renewing its connection to its folk music legacy.

The most progressive aspect of the film, however, is its depiction of folk music itself. Previous generations of folk music scholars like Cecil Sharp and John Lomax sought folk music in remote and isolated sections of the United States. Like Doris Ulmann, they approached folk culture as a link to a noble past. The folklorists that came of age in the 1930s and 1940s, including Alan Lomax, B.A. Botkin, and Charles Seeger, were more interested in the folklore of the present than in folklore of the past. Inspired by theories of functionalism developed within the field of anthropology in the 1920s, this new generation of folklorists treated folklore as a dynamic, adaptable phenomenon. As Alan Lomax noted in the 1941 book *Our Singing Country*, “A piece of folklore is a living, changing thing.”⁵² Rather than search for the vestiges of pure, archaic traditions, these scholars recognized that folk expression adapts to changing circumstances and isn’t inherently opposed to modern society.

In his narration for *To Hear Your Banjo Play*, Alan Lomax emphasizes that modern industrial life has profoundly affected vernacular music in the United States. The railroad was a transformative force in American society, and vernacular musicians reacted to it by writing songs about trains (like “John Henry”) and incorporating the sound and rhythm of trains in their tunes. In Lomax’s perspective, folk music wasn’t disintegrating due to the encroaching force of the modern world. The music was simply

being re-invented, as it always had.⁵³

Too many meanings or too few?: Space for interpretation in photography and film

Even though Alan Lomax works to minimize the forceful assertion of documentary authority in this film, he still wants the viewer to accept *his* vision of American folk music, a vision that emphasizes the diverse geography of the music, acknowledges the influence of the industrial world on folk music, and expresses hope for racial harmony and cooperation. While *To Hear Your Banjo Play* is educational in a rudimentary sense, it functions more as a manifesto about what folk music in America has been and has the potential to be. The running time of the film is so short and the scope so massive that it prohibits detailed examination of any one culture and space. Aside from Lomax's introductory offscreen questions and a couple of jests by Margot Mayo towards the end of the film, the only speaking voice is that of Pete Seeger. We only get to know Seeger superficially as the film's mediator, and we don't learn much about the other musicians that appear onscreen.

Comparing the FSA music photographs of Ben Shahn to *To Hear Your Banjo Play* might lead one to conclude that photography is better suited to documenting the social context of music making and that film is more useful for delivering generalized information about music. It's true that the film offers "more" sensory information than the photographs. A scene from the film contains hundreds or even thousands of individual images with accompanying sound, whereas one of Shahn's series contains at most a few dozen silent images. Nevertheless, Shahn's series provide elements that are

missing in Van Dyke and Lerner's film, a specificity of time and place and a lingering sense of ambiguity about what we see.

In his article "The lexical spaces of eye-spy," Chris Pinney assesses the value of motion pictures and still pictures in regard to visual anthropology. He acknowledges that film delivers a higher quantity of sensory information but argues that, compared to photography, it actually delivers "less" in terms of meaning. He claims that "film situates otherwise undecidable images within sequences that produce argument and express intention. They close off plural readings in the temporal flow of succession and destruction."⁵⁴ Shahn's FSA photos complicate Pinney's argument because they are still images that often borrow the sequencing logic of motion pictures. As Shahn explained, he "looked at it almost like a movie script except they were stills." With that said, though, Shahn doesn't sequence his images to develop an argument in the fashion of *To Hear Your Banjo Play* but, rather, to document a precise social moment. While there is a narrative flow to some of Shahn's series, it's different than the fixed temporal flow of narrative cinema. Because of the silence, the gaps between the images, and the relative lack of information about who the subjects are and what they are doing, there is a sense of indeterminacy and even mystery to Shahn's series.

According to Pinney, the problem that many anthropologists have with still images is that they "contain too many meanings." The open-ended nature of the photographic medium generates ambiguity and contradiction. As a result, most visual anthropologists gravitate towards film because of "its ability to constrain meaning."⁵⁵ Photography continues to play an important role in visual anthropology, but the photograph, unlike the film, is almost never allowed to stand on its own. It must be

densely captioned so that the meaning of the image can be reigned in. Pinney claims that words tend to shut down the wide range of meanings that are possible in anthropological films.

How does silent film fit into Pinney's argument? I am not referring to silent film with character and plot development in the manner of Chaplin, Murnau, or even Flaherty, but to silent film that merely displays the actions of non-actors in a specific location at a specific time, in the style of Shahn's FSA photography. Most wouldn't consider this a film at all, but rather just fragments of footage, much like home movies. We are willing to apply the term documentary to individual photographs but are unwilling to label a fragment of film footage a "documentary" until it is incorporated into a finished film. According to this logic, Abraham Zapruder's 8mm film of the assassination of John Kennedy is not a documentary, but a non-fiction film in which this footage is inserted is considered a documentary. The problem is that, when a fragment of archival film footage is inserted into a larger documentary film, the footage typically loses its autonomy and must serve a specific purpose within the larger film. The bias against fragments of filmed actuality—accepting them if they're edited into a streamlined film but not if they simply stand on their own—is unfortunate because these fragments can, on their own, provide rich details about subjects and spaces.

The depiction of context in the "amateur" films of Alan Lomax

In the early 1940s Alan Lomax submitted a collection of 16mm film footage to the Library of Congress. It was catalogued as a "collection of amateur films made by

Alan Lomax and others from 1936-1940.”⁵⁶ According to a current employee at the Folklife Reading Room at the Library,⁵⁷ this footage was originally used as promotional material for the Archive of American Folk-Song, as a way to promote the Archive’s efforts and immense holdings. The film footage brought subjects to life in dramatic fashion but was ultimately considered secondary to audio recordings and to written accounts about fieldwork. The majority of the footage (which amounts to just less than an hour of material) depicts mostly vernacular musicians and dancers, but there is other non-musical material, including log rolling and church services.

It’s not clear whether Lomax or a Library representative applied the tag “amateur” to this footage. It’s also not clear why this tag was applied. Because it was shot by a non-professional and contains some technical mistakes in terms of exposure and focus? Because it was shot silent on 16mm, which was marketed by camera manufacturers at the time as an amateur format for families? Because it is a collection of unrelated fragments rather than an edited and unified film?

A large portion of the footage in this amateur film collection are simple, straight-on shots of musicians playing and singing. Typically Lomax begins with a wide shot of the scene and then adds tighter shots of faces, hands, and instruments. We can’t hear the music, but the closer shots do provide some valuable details about instrumental technique. Lomax used this basic style of shooting in documenting performers at the 1938 National Folk Festival in Washington, D.C. Instead of filming them at the festival grounds (where lighting might have been a concern), Lomax filmed the performers on the small balcony of a multistory building, perhaps outside his office of the Archive of

American Folk-Song. Here are a group of lumberjack musicians that Lomax filmed on this balcony [Figures 15-16]:



Figs. 15-16

In the National Folk Festival footage and in several other scenes from Lomax's collection of amateur films, the performing space is largely irrelevant. Musicians play on nondescript balconies or porches, and we are simply meant to look at them: at their instruments, their clothing, their faces.

Lomax periodically deviates from this basic shooting style when he allows his camera to take in details of the surrounding environment. In filming the banjo player Pete Steele, Lomax begins with a standard wide shot that shows Pete with his wife Lillie on their front porch in Hamilton, Ohio, and then provides a closer shot which reveals Pete's nimble banjo technique. Lomax returns to the wide shot [Figure 17], but this time takes the time to pan from the Steeles on their porch to what they are facing behind Lomax, a huge industrial structure [Figure 18] (In 1938 Hamilton was a major center for the paper industry, for iron works, and for general manufacturing):



Figs. 17-18

If Lomax hadn't panned the camera to take in the background scene, many viewers might assume that Steele's home was located in a rural area. The pan situates the musician in heart of an industrial area but also suggests an important influence on Steele's music. Steele worked for over two decades as a coal miner in Harlan County, Kentucky, and the rhythm and struggles of an industrial work life undoubtedly shaped his music. Lomax's simple pan from the porch to the background helps point out this connection.

Representing the folklore encounter

Unlike Ben Shahn, who seemed to stumble upon musical scenes and document them unobtrusively with his Leica, Alan Lomax set up musical situations through his field recording work. Disc recording machines were bulky and cumbersome in the late 1930s, and a crowd in a small town was likely to gather at the sight of a professional folklorist recording a local musician. This is evident in Lomax's field recording trip to Middlefork, Kentucky, in September 1937. Lomax set up a microphone to record G.E. Morris playing banjo, and a crowd gathered, many of which began to dance and clap. He captured this scene with his 16mm camera [Fig. 19]:



Fig. 19

This scene didn't happen organically in the way it might have if Lomax wasn't there with his recording equipment, but that doesn't mean that it's any less real. The active participation of the documentarian and the willful acknowledgment of the documentary process doesn't "invalidate" the reality that is represented. It simply means that the documentary encounter is more readily apparent. And almost all documentary representations—from the most seemingly unmediated to the most manipulated—are the result of an encounter.

This is apparent in one of Lomax's long takes from the Middlefork footage. It is a long pan [Figs. 20-25] that begins with the camera fixed on the two musicians being recorded and then moves from right to left across the assembled crowd, most of whom return the gaze of the camera. The pan ends with a woman seated on a porch next to a phonograph machine. This is most likely Alan's wife Elizabeth, operating the recording machine as Alan uses the film camera.



Figs. 20-25

Many of the assembled people stare intensely, perhaps even suspiciously, at the camera. On the audio recordings from this session, the sense of encounter between the Lomaxes and the Middlefork residents is not readily apparent, but, in this long take, the musical performance is secondary to this sense of encounter.

Music recedes in the footage of one musician's life

In documentary depictions of music, there is often a tension between the representation of performances and the representation of surrounding social details. Is the music the most important element to be documented? Or is the social world that circumscribes musicians more important? If they both warrant attention, how are they properly balanced? This issue surfaces in footage Alan Lomax shot of the accordionist John Frederickson in Calumet, Michigan. Lomax spent several weeks in the Upper Midwest in the fall of 1938, and he discovered a rich heritage of European folk music sustained by the large immigrant populations there. He recorded more than a dozen Finnish folk musicians, including John Frederickson, and shot several minutes of 16mm film while there. What's striking about the nearly four minutes of film footage that Lomax shot of John Frederickson is that less than fifteen percent of it actually features Frederickson singing and playing his accordion. For more than three minutes, Lomax follows Frederickson and his son as they pick fruit and carry water from a well to put on their stove at home. [Figures. 26-29]



Figs. 26-27



Figs. 28-29

In the final moments of the Frederickson footage, Lomax finally captures the musician playing his accordion, beginning with a standard long shot and then with a variety of closer shots. [Figs. 30-31] While Frederickson is the main focus, background details—like two small children who walk into the frame—compete for our attention.



Figs. 30-31

Lomax cut seven Frederickson songs to disk, so perhaps he felt liberated from having to show the musician actually playing and felt like he could take the time to reveal details of Frederickson's personal life and of the surrounding landscape and architecture.

In this collection of film fragments, Lomax opened up a series of questions that would be taken up more substantially in the 1960s, when synchronous sound recording with 16mm equipment was introduced. This new portable equipment made it possible to

simultaneously record the sound and image of vernacular musicians in the field rather than in a controlled environment, but the same difficult issue remained: is the documentarian obligated to represent the social context out of which music emerges, or is it enough to simply present the music?

Documenting Coahoma County

Three years after his trip to the Upper Midwest, Lomax traveled to Mississippi to do more field recording. The purpose of the Mississippi trip, however, wasn't to just collect more songs but was to exhaustively document the social context of music in one particular area, Coahoma County. This was a collaborative project between the Library of Congress and Fisk University, an historically black college located in Nashville. This was Lomax's first major collaboration with an academic institution and his first opportunity to work collaboratively with a team of African American scholars. The renowned African American sociologist Charles Johnson was involved in the early stages of the project but, in the end, did not contribute to the fieldwork or to the written analysis. On the Fisk end, the major contributors were Lewis Jones, Samuel Adams, and John Wesley Work III. Jones and Adams were trained as sociologists, Work as a musicologist. Work's family had a long association with Fisk. His father had taught there, and his grandfather helped organize the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, who had promoted the African American spiritual around the world in the late nineteenth century. Work began doing field recording starting in 1938, and, at a time when the vast majority

of attention on black vernacular music was focused on the spiritual, Work's enthusiasm for black secular folk music was unique.⁵⁸

Lomax, Jones, Adams, and Work conducted two intensive fieldwork trips to Coahoma County for the Library of Congress/Fisk University project, one in the summer of 1941 and one in the summer of 1942. Lomax summarized the goals of the project: "To explore objectively and exhaustively the musical habits of a single Negro community in the Delta, to find out and describe the function of music in the community, to ascertain the history of music in the community, and to document adequately the cultural and social backgrounds for music in the community."⁵⁹

As a collector and popularizer of folk music, this project was an unusual undertaking for Lomax, who wasn't accustomed to gathering sociological and historical data. It's not surprising that Lomax clashed with his Fisk partners about the direction and methodology of the study. In his journal, Lomax penned this highly critical entry about Work: "Rest of evening with John Work getting his records ready for deposit and trying to work out his problems—mostly of incompetence, laziness and lack of initiative on his part."⁶⁰ It's shocking to hear John Wesley Work III described as incompetent, lazy, and lacking initiative, for Work spent months producing precise notated transcriptions of the songs he, Jones and Lomax recorded, along with a detailed monograph about the musical community of Coahoma. Work sent the transcriptions and the monograph to Lomax, who subsequently misplaced them. The manuscript was discovered nearly sixty years later—after Lomax's death—by Robert Gordon as he was sifting through the Alan Lomax Archives at Hunter College. Work was precise and meticulous, and Lomax may have interpreted the slowness of his colleague's scholarship as laziness.⁶¹

Unfortunately, visual documentation was a low priority for the Coahoma project. The only visual material collected during the 1941 and 1942 trips was five minutes and thirty-three seconds of silent 16mm film. This footage has the same “amateur” quality (meaning, technical problems in terms of exposure and focus) as the collection of films from 1936-1940 that Lomax submitted to the Library of Congress. With the exception of some opening shots of a crowd assembled outside a church for the State Missionary Baptist Convention, all the footage depicts folk culture.

The bulk of the performances are children’s sing-along games. Lomax and the Fisk team captured young girls playing a variety of different games in the street and in a field. The team audio recorded several of the games, but, perhaps because the audio recordings and the written descriptions couldn’t adequately capture the rhythm and direction of the girls’ movement, they opted to supplement their work with motion picture film. Even though the 1936-1940 films and the Coahoma footage look similar, the Coahoma footage was positioned more as data than as casual documentation. The 1936-1940 films show the faces and expressions of vernacular musicians and occasionally offer details about the surrounding social environment, but the Coahoma material precisely documents the movement and arrangement of the girls as they play their games, which could be subsequently analyzed and interpreted by scholars.

At the very end of the Coahoma footage, there is fifty-two seconds of footage of Charles Edwards playing guitar and harmonica. He is presented in a basic medium shot as he plays next to a city street [Figure 32]. There is no indication that Lomax and the Fisk team did any audio field recordings of Edwards. They shot film footage of the guitarist probably because his rhythmic right hand technique was so unusual:



Fig. 32

Like the footage of the children's games, the Edwards material was meant to be a source of data, a visual resource that could provide details about the distinctive musical traits of Coahoma County.

John Wesley Work III: Seeing Coahoma County as a “living, changing thing”

The Library of Congress/Fisk project on Coahoma County got derailed in the fall of 1942 as Alan Lomax left the Library of Congress and Lewis Jones and Samuel Adams entered the military. The institutional support from Fisk and the Library of Congress disappeared, but John Work, who saw immense value in the project, was compelled to complete his portion of the study. In June 1943 Work returned—on his own and most likely at his own expense—to Coahoma County to re-interview key subjects in order to fill in some gaps in his research. He brought along a photographic camera to capture images of the landscape, the buildings, and the people. One of the subjects Work re-connected with was McKinley Morganfield, who later became internationally known as the blues musician Muddy Waters. Work probably interviewed Morganfield again to fill

in details about the musician's repertoire and personal life. Work snapped this photo of Morganfield, seated with the fiddler Son Sims, on his porch at Stovall's plantation

[Figure 33]:

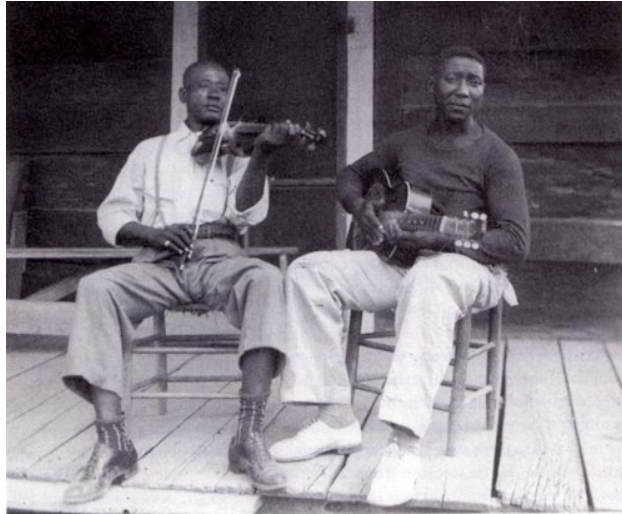


Fig. 33

This has become one of the most iconic photographs in blues music history. It is special because it is the only surviving photograph of Morganfield playing music in Mississippi before he moved to Chicago and helped develop the electric blues style.⁶²

Although Alan Lomax did advocate a progressive vision of American folk music during the 1930s and 1940s—a vision that emphasized change and adaptability—he tended to gravitate towards the more archaic forms of traditional music in Coahoma County. He repeatedly sought out the African American spiritual, even though this form was rarely sung in Coahoma in the 1940s, having been largely eclipsed by modern church practices. As Robert Gordon notes, “while [it was] noteworthy to present a disappearing culture, that was not the mandate of this study. To ignore the society's changes and developments is disingenuous; it underscores Lomax's preference for what he understood

as the tradition of the area over a more authentic representation of the community as it was functioning in the early 1940s.”⁶³

John Work, on the other hand, seemed to have a keener understanding of how the vernacular music of Coahoma County was rapidly changing. For instance, he recognized the new ways in which musicians were learning and absorbing songs. He noticed that Morganfield “copied the styles of the guitarists to whom he listened constantly on phonograph records. A particular favorite of his was Robert Johnson, whose playing he studied assiduously. Many of the features of his playing were learned from Johnson’s records. Most of Muddy’s repertory has been acquired from listening to jukeboxes. But not all.”⁶⁴ In less than a decade and a half, downhome blues musicians shifted from a traditional folk model of musical transmission to a model that relied heavily, almost exclusively in Muddy Waters’s case, on commercial sources. John Work was attuned to this fundamental shift.

Eight years after John Work took the historic photo of Muddy Waters, Frederic Ramsey, Jr., a writer and producer for Folkways Records, traveled to the Deep South to record and photograph traditional African American musicians. In the following chapter, I show that, while Ramsey’s methods of documentation were innovative and he was able to capture the social context of music making in great detail, he tended, like Alan Lomax in Coahoma, to gravitate towards archaic forms of vernacular music rather than come to terms with how the old music was changing.

Notes

¹ Rogier Kapper's 2004 documentary film *Lomax the Songhunter* examines the early part of Lomax's career in great depth.

² Filene, Benjamin. *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) pp. 39-44. Gordon also helped to expand the canon of American folk song by championing the rich tradition of African American folk music and by placing this tradition alongside the Anglo folk song heritage of the Southern mountains.

³ Filene, pp. 32-34. Lomax used a cylinder recorder to document some of the cowboy songs he discovered.

⁴ Lomax, John. "Sinful Songs' of the Southern Negro," *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (April, 1934) p. 181.

⁵ Quoted in Filene, p. 56.

⁶ Hamilton, Marybeth. *In Search of the Blues: Black Voices, White Visions* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007) p. 81.

⁷ John Lomax quoted in Hamilton, p. 81.

⁸ Filene, pp. 51-58, Hamilton pp. 77-85.

⁹ Lead Belly also worked as a servant at the Lomax household in Connecticut, preparing meals, cleaning clothes and tidying up.

¹⁰ Hamilton, pp. 86-91.

¹¹ According to Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, "Lead Belly enjoyed no success whatsoever with his African American peers (the few 'race records he cut for ARC sold poorly, and his stint at Harlem's Apollo Theater was a complete flop)..." from Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor's *Fakin' It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007) p. 9. It should be noted, however, that Lead Belly's commercial success was minimal, even among white audiences, during the course of his entire career from 1935 until 1949.

¹² Filene, p. 49.

¹³ Ellis, Jack C and Betsey A. McLane. *A New History of Documentary Film* (New York: Continuum, 2005) p. 78. Despite its popularity and innovations in the field of visual journalism, *March of Time* was never financially successful and ultimately folded in 1951 as television began to render newsreels irrelevant.

¹⁴ This information is from http://www.culturalequity.org/ace/leadbelly_faqs.html, accessed on May 21, 2007. It's not clear whether Alan's draft was overridden by his father or by the *March of Time* producers.

¹⁵ Fielding, Raymond. *The American Newsreel, 1911-1967* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972) pp. 148-149.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁸ While *The March of Time* newsreel did utilize professional actors for some of its re-enactments, their overwhelming preference was to use the actual historical participants of an event. *The March of Time* producers often emphasized the authenticity of its onscreen subjects. This is evident in a publicity article for a newsreel about a family from York, Pennsylvania: "When the film was developed Pa Perkins washing his hands was real.

Ma Perkins preparing supper, the Perkins kids, the simple men who worked for Pa Perkins in his battery shed—they were all real. From the Perkinses *The March of Time* discovered that real people can be photographed doing naturally that which it is their nature to do.” [Fielding, Raymond. *The March of Time, 1935-1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) p. 137]

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 150.

²⁰ Hamilton, p. 82.

²¹ Quoted in Barker and Taylor, p. 19.

²² Filene, p. 49.

²³ Stott, William. *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) p. 43.

²⁴ Lomax, John Avery. *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Macmillan, 1934) p. xxxv.

²⁵ Quoted in Hamilton, p. 100.

²⁶ Cohen, Ronald D. *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002) p. 13.

²⁷ John Lomax opposed any fundamental challenge to the existing social structure. It’s worth noting that he intensely opposed Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal policies.

²⁸ Quoted in Hamilton, p. 98.

²⁹ The Lead Belly *March of Time* newsreel segment has been posted to the popular internet video sharing site YouTube, where nearly eighty comments have been posted to date. The consensus is that the newsreel is a racist abomination. It is described as “disgusting”, “sad”, “a shame”, and “painful to watch”. While some commentators argue that the musician was willfully participating in the newsreel in order to further his career (that he “knew what he was doing”), most commentators stress the exploitative nature of the film. [Note: the YouTube video has been taken down but is now available at http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1ca9y_leadbelly-news-report_music]

³⁰ Hamilton, p. 86.

³¹ Benjamin Filene notes the contradiction in how the Lomaxes promoted Lead Belly: “On the one hand, the Lomaxes depicted Lead Belly as the living embodiment of America’s folk song tradition, a time capsule that had preserved the pure voice of the people... At the same time, though, that the Lomaxes enobled Lead Belly as an authentic folk forefather, they thoroughly exoticized him. Their publicity campaign depicted him as a savage, untamed animal.” [*Romancing the Folk*, pp. 58-59]. Lead Belly was presented by the Lomaxes as both an everyman and an outlaw, but the outlaw portion typically won out in the press coverage, which tended to emphasize his murderous past. For example, the headline of the January 3, 1935 *New York Herald Tribune* read, “Lomax Arrives with Lead Belly, Negro Minstrel. Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here to Do a Few Tunes Between Homicides.”

³² From http://www.culturalequity.org/ace/leadbelly_faqs.html, accessed on May 21, 2007.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Wright, Richard. “Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist,” *The Daily Worker*, August 12, 1937, p. 7.

³⁵ Hamilton, p. 122.

³⁶ In 1935 Alan Lomax did fieldwork in Georgia and Florida with Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle. In 1936 the Library of Congress sent him on a folksong recording trip to Haiti. While there, he married his girlfriend Elizabeth Harold.

³⁷ Lomax also worked on the grant-funded Radio Research Project in 1941 and 1942. This was an extremely innovative project because it was the first radio program to extensively feature audio recordings of ordinary Americans providing their perspectives on a wide variety of topics from the Pearl Harbor invasion to the TVA. It was a highly edited program that mixed together interview fragments, Lomax's narration and snippets of folk music. Lomax brought his expertise to the program but didn't speak in the didactic, commanding style of *The March of Time*. As Benjamin Filene notes, "The Radio Research project avoided assuming an authoritative, expert voice in favor of a more open-ended, contingent stance that left room for the diverse voices and opinions of the people." [*Romancing the Folk*, p. 151]

³⁸ Filene, pp. 151-158.

³⁹ Filene, pp. 162-164.

⁴⁰ <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/Huffman/Frontier/hurwitzreview.html>, accessed on May 24, 2007.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Quoted in Charlie Keil's "American Documentary Finds its Voice: Persuasion and Expression in *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and *The City*" from *Documenting the Documentary* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998) p. 119.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 123.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 131.

⁴⁵ Lomax, Alan. "The Best of the Ballads," *Vogue*, Dec. 1, 1946, p. 208.

⁴⁶ <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA05/luckey/amj/folk.htm>, accessed on February 8, 2008.

⁴⁷ Filene, Benjamin. "O Brother, What Next? Making Sense of the Folk Fad," *Southern Cultures* 10 (Summer 2004) p. 67.

⁴⁸ For the immensity of Woody Guthrie's cultural impact on America, it's astonishing how little film footage of him was shot and/or has survived. *To Hear Your Banjo Play* is one of only three surviving sound films that feature Guthrie playing music (the others are a ten second cameo in the 1940 staged documentary *Fight for Life* and a performance of "Ranger's Command" in a 1945 OWI film). For the immensity of Woody Guthrie's cultural impact on America, it's astonishing how little film footage of him was shot and/or has survived. *To Hear Your Banjo Play* is one of only three surviving sound films that feature Guthrie playing music (the others are a ten second cameo in the 1940 staged documentary *Fight for Life* and a performance of "Ranger's Command" in a 1945 OWI film).

⁴⁹ Hawes married Alan's sister Bess a couple years prior to the making of this film.

⁵⁰ Alan Lomax, Pete Seeger, and Woody Guthrie collaborated on a book called *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, a collection of protest songs and songs of struggle. In the postscript, Lomax criticizes the generations of folk music scholars who neglected the social conditions out of which the folk songs emerged: "The literary scholars... have failed generally to perceive the undercurrent of tragedy and of protest that underlay the songs they footnoted and published. Since they had not been in the dismal prisons of the South; since they had not sat in the bare and flimsy shacks of sharecroppers and factory

hands; since they had not seen the lines of sadness on the faces of singers; or, even if they had seen such things; since they preferred not to see their singers as they were—people with a very low standard of living,—scholars usually have not regarded folk songs as relevant to the real problems of everyday life. [Lomax, Alan. *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* (New York: Oak Publications, 1967) p. 365.]

⁵¹ Coelho, Dennis. “Review: *To Hear Your Banjo Play*,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 92, No. 364. (Apr. - Jun., 1979) p.351.

⁵² Lomax, John Avery. *Our Singing Country: A Second Volume of American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941) p. xiv.

⁵³ Folklorists like B.A. Botkin even began to recognize that there was more than just folk revivalism in big cities. Under the direction of Botkin, workers for the Federal Writers project “began collecting *urban* folklore, gathering the songs and stories of New York Jewish needleworkers, Pennsylvania steelworkers, and Connecticut clockmakers.” [Filene’s “O Brother, What Next? Making Sense of the Folk Fad,” p. 54]

⁵⁴ Pinney, Chris. “The lexical spaces of eye-spy,” in *Film as Ethnography* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press in association with the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, 1992) p. 27.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁶ The actual tape of this material also contains the Fisk/LOC material from 1941-1942.

⁵⁷ Email correspondence between the author and Judith Gray, Reference Specialist at the American Folklife Center.

⁵⁸ From the general introduction to *Lost Delta Found: Rediscovering the Fisk University-Library of Congress Coahoma County Study, 1941-1942*, edited by Robert Gordon and Bruce Nemerov (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005) pp. 3-5.

⁵⁹ Quoted in *Lost Delta Found*, p. 14.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶¹ Perhaps the tension arose from the realization that Lomax was adept at collecting but wasn’t equipped with the scholarly skills to decipher and interpret what had been collected. According to Jeff Todd Titon, there is a “distinction between the collector or traveler who gathered the music, and the scholar or scientist (and this is how Work must have increasingly have seen his role) who transcribed and analyzed it and prepared it for publication. [Work] may have regarded Lomax’s role as principally that of collector, not as scholar—and in so thinking he would have been exactly right. Work probably regarded his scholarship, and the published work that was to come out of it, as pre-eminent and far more important than Lomax’s collection of the material. Indeed, Lomax was incapable of Work’s kind of scholarship, and Work knew it.” [*Ibid.*, p. 21]

⁶² The 1941 and 1942 field recordings of Morganfield were issued on CD in 1993. As is common with many of the projects Alan Lomax was affiliated with, he is given the primary credit for the recordings. The CD is described as the “Historic 1941-42 Library of Congress Field Recordings”, which erases the significant contributions of the Fisk scholars. In the liner notes, Mary Katherine Aldin acknowledges the partnership of the two institutions but implies that Work and the Fisk team were there to assist Lomax and that Lomax is the one who “discovered” Morganfield. While John Wesley Work III’s legacy has been obscured by time and by the Lomax cult of personality, his image of

Muddy Waters sitting with his guitar on his porch in Mississippi continues to circulate today, a testament to John Work's skill and dedication as a scholar.

⁶³ From the Editors' Introduction to "John Work's Untitled Manuscript," in *Lost Delta Found*, p. 52. Lomax's decision to record mostly poor and uneducated subjects also led to a skewed picture of Coahoma County, whose African American community was in fact quite diverse in terms of class and education level.

⁶⁴ Work III, John Wesley. "John Work's Untitled Manuscript," in *Lost Delta Found*, p. 118-119

Chapter Four

Deep Country Roots: Frederic Ramsey, Jr. and *Been Here and Gone*

Doris Ulmann and Ben Shahn both took excellent photographs of American vernacular musicians in the 1930s, but music wasn't the primary concern of either photographer. Music *was* the primary concern for Alan Lomax during his various field-recording expeditions of the 1930s and 40s, but visual documentation was only of secondary importance to him, at least during this period. It wasn't until the 1950s that the notion of doing visual documentary work on music really took hold.

One of the pioneering music documentarians in the United States was Frederic Ramsey, Jr. In this chapter I examine Ramsey's 1960 book *Been Here and Gone*, which was based on the photographs and field-recordings he made in the South between 1951 and 1957. *Been Here and Gone* is an innovative work in the way it mixes multiple forms of discourse (music history, biography, song lyrics, and oral history) and multiple forms of media (text, photographs, and audio recordings). The most significant achievement of Ramsey's project, however, is that it helped solidify the notion of roots music, the idea that vernacular musical styles can serve as foundations for the major genres of mainstream popular music (in Ramsey's case, for jazz).

Despite the many innovations of *Been Here and Gone*, it's clear that it was informed by previous documentary work. On his first trip through the South, Ramsey was accompanied by ex-FSA photographer John Vachon, and, indeed, much of the content and style of Ramsey's book mimics the work of the FSA photographic unit. On the other hand, Ramsey's text positions him ideologically closer to Doris Ulmann than to

the FSA. He framed his field-recording expeditions as an urgent salvage mission, as a race against time to capture traces of fading folk music practices before they slipped away due to modernization. His refusal to acknowledge how older musical styles were changing and adapting is egregious, as is his avoidance of segregation and how it was being challenged at the time. Nevertheless, *Been Here and Gone* is a touchstone in the history of documentary work on American vernacular music, partly because it serves as a key transitional work between the first phase of the American folk music revival, which ended in the late 1940s, and the second phase of the revival, which began in the late 1950s.

Ramsey, Lead Belly, and the roots of jazz

On a September evening in 1948, Huddie Ledbetter and his wife Martha visited the New York apartment of Frederic Ramsey, Jr. Ramsey had just acquired a brand new piece of audio equipment—a tape recorder—and wanted to test it out with the veteran folk singer. Lead Belly didn't bring along his guitar, so he just sang a series of songs a cappella for Ramsey. Unlike the older disc-based recorders, which typically allowed for only about three to five minutes of recording time, Ramsey's tape machine could continuously record for over thirty minutes at a time. This meant that Lead Belly's commentaries in between songs and his imaginative sequencing of material could be documented along with his songs. Ramsey spoke about the benefit of long recording times in a 1953 issue of *High Fidelity* magazine: "For Leadbelly, when he got going, had a routine that was like that of the record collector who, with a large library to choose

from, spends an evening pulling out his favorite disks in a sequence both varied and suggestive. With tape, it was possible to record in sequence, and to preserve that sequence.”¹ The recording Ramsey made that night contains thirty-five songs, several informal commentaries by Lead Belly, and some interchanges between the singer and Ramsey. It’s an altogether different type of recording than the commercial discs Lead Belly recorded for the ARC, Asch, Musicraft and Victor labels and probably did not resemble the singer’s standard public performance style. Shifting seamlessly between remembered songs, relevant song and biographical details, and tangential asides, this first section of what would later be known as *Lead Belly’s Last Sessions* has a spontaneous, stream-of-consciousness feel and is now regarded as “a groundbreaking documentary sound recording.”²

Ramsey’s connection to Lead Belly stemmed from his interest in jazz. Almost a decade before the Lead Belly sessions, Ramsey, along with Charles Edwards Smith, wrote *Jazzmen*, which was a landmark, “the first history of jazz by American writers and the first anywhere to be based on research.”³ *Jazzmen* recounts how jazz emerged at the turn of the century in the Storyville section of New Orleans, and through this book and through other promotional efforts, Ramsey and Smith helped ignite a revival of interest in early New Orleans jazz styles. In the late 1940s, Ramsey began to increasingly recognize that, while jazz had developed in an urban milieu, “it, like many cultures that have flowered in many cities, had deep country roots.”⁴ He became interested in the pre-history of jazz, in the wide variety of African American vernacular music that contributed to the development of his beloved genre. By burrowing into these old vernacular styles

and tapping living performers like Lead Belly, Ramsey was effectively shifting the origins of jazz from New Orleans to the rural farms of the Deep South.

In 1948 Moe Asch's Disc Records morphed into Folkways Records. Folkways was atypical in that it sold most of its releases via mail-order catalogues rather than through conventional retail outlets. Through mail-order, Asch targeted a small but reliable clientele that included librarians, teachers, and museum archivists.⁵ Soon after Folkways was formed, Ramsey and Asch launched an ambitious eleven LP history of jazz anthology, which reflected Ramsey's newfound interest in the downhome musical styles which had served as the foundation for jazz. Ramsey had linked up with Disc Records in 1943, helping Asch arrange recording sessions and penning liner notes for some of the label's releases. While Asch had developed a reputation as a purveyor of American folk music, during the war years he was releasing as much jazz as folk music.

Most of the material on the Folkways jazz anthology came from Ramsey's own record collection, and he wrote the liner notes for several of the albums. The first two volumes—*The South* and *The Blues*—featured African American vernacular music, including folk tunes by Lead Belly, Brownie McGhee, and Sonny Terry and downhome blues tracks by Blind Willie Johnson and Blind Lemon Jefferson. Ramsey's Folkways volume on the blues holds the distinction of being the first blues anthology ever issued.

Ramsey presented himself as an objective disseminator of music, noting at one point that his editorial policy "has been never to glamorize, never to depart from or distort a strictly chronological sequence in order to make jazz as it was recorded either better or different from what it really was; in a word, to report."⁶ Ramsey's own liner notes, however, betray this professed sense of objectivity. For example, for *The Blues*

album, Ramsey's prose deviates from reportage and moves decidedly in a more lyrical direction: "A lone worker in a wide, parched field, a mother with a child, a slave with a complaint, a lover without love, a moaning eerie unison of voices rising and falling across hot plains, the sharp, rollicking click of guitar strings at a sukey jump, a sad song in a shack along some lonesome railroad line, all gave blues their sadness, their joy, their country start and their country ways."⁷

Music from the South

In 1951, shortly after *The Blues* album was released, Ramsey, along with former FSA photographer John Vachon, drove from New Jersey to the deep South to locate and document African American musicians still making the type of downhome music featured on Ramsey's blues LP. Two years later Ramsey secured a Guggenheim fellowship to continue his fieldwork throughout the South. He explained the main goal of his work in a 1956 article for the journal *Ethnomusicology*: "I hoped to tap sources that would provide needed information for assessing musical activity in the period 1860-1900. This span of years was selected because I felt that it had witnessed the development in and around New Orleans, Louisiana, of a dance music which later evolved into the form, or forms of a form, which is now called jazz."⁸ Ramsey received another Guggenheim fellowship in 1955, which allowed him to make a few more extended trips through the South. In the end, Ramsey made five trips to the South between 1951 and 1957, accompanied on these trips by his wife and young son. He brought along tape recorders to document examples of blues, jazz, and gospel, and,

starting in 1955, Moe Asch began to issue albums of Ramsey's field-recordings on Folkways in a series called *Music from the South*.

Ramsey established a couple of ground rules for his field-recording. He avoided areas which had already been explored by previous folklorists. This disqualified huge swaths of the South worked by John and Alan Lomax and also a large section of western Alabama, which had been documented by Ramsey's Folkways colleague Harold Courlander for his 1951 LP anthology *Negro Folk Music of Alabama*. Ramsey also explained that "another rule of exclusion applied to persons who had already recorded, and to professional performers."⁹ Not a single musician on the entire *Music from the South* series earned their living from music or had had their material documented for commercial or scholarly purposes. Ramsey sought talented non-professionals who had had no contact with folklorists or the recording industry because he wanted to demonstrate "both the range and richness of new material still available in the South."¹⁰

And while Ramsey worked extensively in remote areas of Alabama and Mississippi, he was primarily drawn to these areas not for their supposed isolation but because they had managed to maintain a certain type of musical environment. In a 1955 *New Yorker* article about his *Music from the South* project, Ramsey revealed that the idea for the project formed fifteen years prior when he read Katherine Ann Porter's introduction to Eudora Welty's "A Curtain of Green." Porter sketches the life and personality of Welty, noting at one point that she likes to listen to "songs and stories of people who live in old communities whose culture is recollected and bequeathed orally."¹¹ Ramsey sought communities in which musicians learned songs from their family and friends and then passed the songs on in person to other musicians in the

community. And yet, despite his commitment to work in supposedly pure spaces where music was transmitted in an entirely oral manner, it was unlikely that any exclusively “oral” music communities existed in Alabama and Mississippi in the 1950s. Radio and records were ubiquitous at this point, and most rural musicians, despite their poverty and relative isolation, would have at least some contact with them.

Been Here and Gone: Representing the “everyday environment” of African American vernacular music

Ramsey took more than a thousand photographs during his trips through the South, which he used in the liner notes for the *Music from the South* releases. After his last field-recording trip in 1957, he decided that his visual material warranted its own special treatment outside the domain of commercial LP’s. He began work on a book that combined his documentary photographs with prose. Part of his motivation to launch this project stemmed from his dissatisfaction with previous books on African American vernacular music: “I had looked vainly in them, and in journals by travelers who had visited the South, for any accurate and convincing account of the *persons* who were making music. Nor were there any images—old engravings, early sketches, photographs and the like—which revealed other than superficially what they and their musicmaking had been.”¹² Ramsey’s book, *Been Here and Gone*, was published in 1960. The same year Folkways released the tenth and final volume of *Music from the South*, also titled *Been Here and Gone*, which was designed as an aural complement to the book.

Ramsey wrote in the liner notes to the *Been Here and Gone* album, “In the record, as in the book, I have attempted to go beyond documentary cataloging and presentation

of material, in order to present as inclusive an account as possible of the lives of people who make music in the South.”¹³ Ramsey associates the term documentary with the organization and categorization of cultural artifacts and assures the reader/listener that his project will transcend this detached stance by attending to the “lives of people who make music.” The term documentary had been widely applied to film and photography for two decades prior to the release of *Been Here and Gone*, and much of the documentary work of the 40s and 50s involved very close attention to subjects’ lives, so it’s surprising that Ramsey defines documentary as a scientific and even anti-social term. Ramsey continually stresses that his book is about people who make music and that the only way to appreciate their lives is to document them within their native contexts. Not content with merely capturing performances, Ramsey sought “the *everyday environment* to which so much of music heard in the South relates.”¹⁴ And, while the *Music from the South* LP’s tends to privilege the music over a presentation of the context out of which the music emerges, the book aims to rectify this by presenting the music’s “everyday environment.”

Introducing Horace Sprott

Been Here and Gone contains a prologue and an epilogue and two main parts, labeled “Past” and “Present and Near Present.” Each of the two parts contain four sections. I will examine two consecutive sections from “Part I: Past,” entitled “Making it Through” and “Good Times.”¹⁵ I have chosen to examine these sections rather than the whole book in order to allow for more thorough analysis. I have also chosen these

sections because they are ones that focus on Horace Sprott, who is arguably the central figure of the whole *Music from the South* project. Three whole volumes of the *Music from the South* LP series were dedicated to Sprott because, as Ramsey claims, “his old songs, his way of singing them, and his way of learning them, cut close to the heart of tradition...[and] embod[y] it best.”¹⁶ Ramsey compares Sprott to Lead Belly because he believed that their huge repertoire of old songs provided a link to pre-blues, pre-jazz musical forms.

Sprott isn't formally introduced to the reader until about halfway through the “Making it Through” section, at which point Ramsey displays a solo portrait of the musician and begins to provide some biographical details. There are traces of Sprott before the halfway point—Ramsey quotes lyrics from Sprott songs he recorded and includes obscured photographs of him in a group and in long shot hoeing a field with his back to the viewer—but, without listening to the LP's or carefully comparing the later photographs to the two partially obscured ones, we have no way of knowing before the halfway point that Ramsey will be narrowing his focus onto one individual.

The first half of “Making it Through” situates Horace Sprott as a member of a community, but it also gives Ramsey the opportunity to provide some historical details about African American vernacular music. Ramsey explains how slaves adapted the lyrics of old hymns to fit their own circumstances and emotions, notes the development of call and response patterns and work songs, demonstrates how songs were used to pass on stories about everyday life, argues that the easing of restrictions in the post-slavery world contributed to more musical alterations and improvisations, and cites two types of African American vernacular musicians, “songsters” and “musicianers.” When Ramsey

finally introduces Sprott, he provides our first clear image of the musician, an image that would adorn the first LP volume of Sprott material:



Fig. 1

In a page and a half of expository text, Ramsey then provides some key details about Sprott's life: his parents were slaves, he was incarcerated for six months at age eighteen and subsequently wandered for years picking up work and learning songs, and late in life he finally returned to the sharecropping community where he was born, got married, and had two sons.

The “Mama, Don't Treat Your Daughter Mean” series

Immediately after this short biographical section, Ramsey shifts the tone and structure of the chapter. The next five pages each feature a photograph, four inside Sprott's cabin and three depicting Horace's wife Annie. All but the last of these images are accompanied by a lyric from the song “Mama, Don't Treat Your Daughter Mean”:



Fig. 2

The blues come slidin', mama, just like showers of rain,



Fig. 3

Blues in my kitchen, blues in my dining room



Fig. 4

Went to bed last night, the blues in my bed,
 I stood then this mornin' about half past four,
 Blues standin' a-knockin' on my front door,

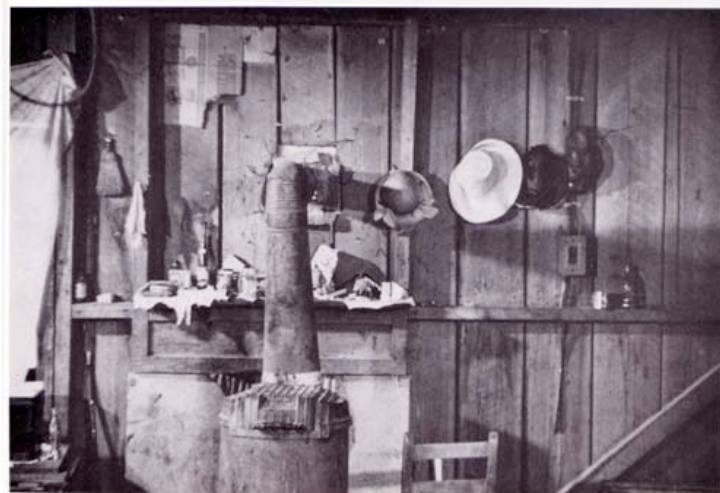


Fig. 5

Said blues, blues with a feelin', please don't jump on me,
 Ain't got nowhere, nowhere to go.

Yes, rock was my pillow, cold iron was my bed,
 Got nobody to hug an' call me babe,
 Say blues with a feeling, don't you worry me,
 If I don't go crazy, sure goin' lose my mind.

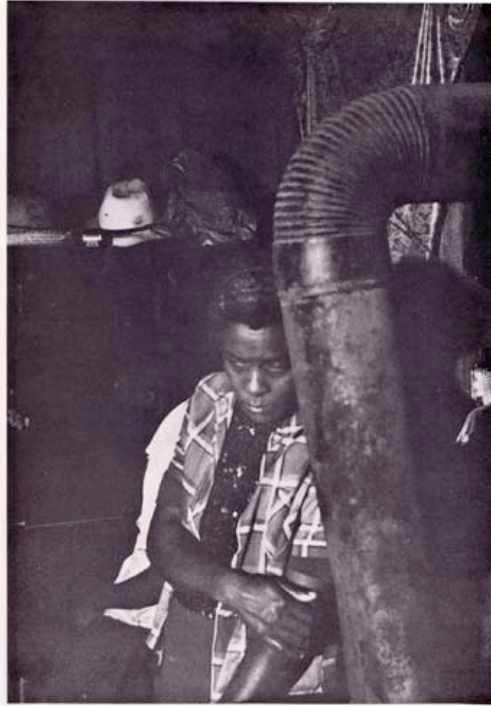


Fig. 6

There is an intentional compositional logic in how these five images are arranged. In the first three a chair is positioned in the middle of the frame, the first outside on the porch and the subsequent two inside the cabin. In the second image (Figure 3), a cat is seated in a chair, but, in the third image, Annie is seated once again (Figure 4). In the next photograph (Figure 5), Annie disappears as Ramsey focuses on the wall next to her. In the last image (Figure 6) of this mini-sequence, Ramsey has moved around to side of the stove and shoots Annie from a high angle, which was understandable, considering that Ramsey was six foot five. The stovepipe occupies the right front third of the composition, and the background is mostly obscured in darkness.

Horace Sprott's "life story"

After this glimpse inside the Sprott cabin and the snippets of blues poetry, the final segment of the "Making it Through" shifts to yet another mode of discourse, oral history. The brief section includes three photographs, one of Sprott with his family and two of him alone.¹⁷ Of the two solo images, this is the only one in the entire chapter that features Sprott with an instrument, either just finishing or just about to start a new song [Figure 7]:

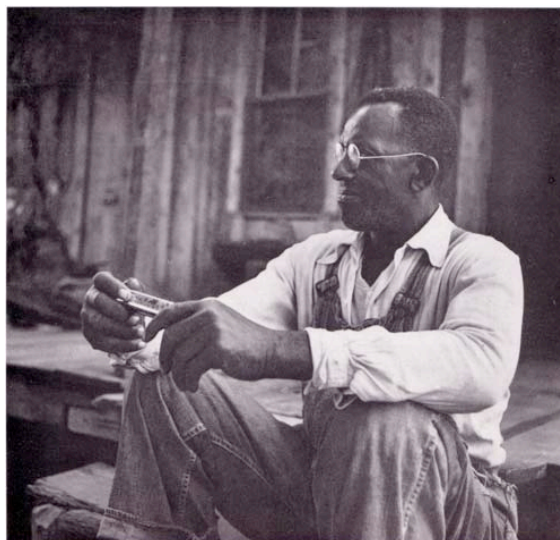


Fig. 7

In a little over a page of text, Horace Sprott is quoted talking about his life, his troubles and his music. His statements are taken from the recorded interview excerpts Ramsey includes on the three Sprott LP's.

Ramsey and Charles Edward Smith initiated their *Jazzmen* project after they heard the interviews that Alan Lomax had conducted with Jelly Roll Morton in Washington D.C. in 1938. Astounded by the insights and energy of the Morton

recordings, the two writers recognized the immense value of capturing the direct testimony of musicians. In the introduction to *Jazzmen*, Ramsey and Smith disparage contemporary jazz criticism, noting that writers, “chiefly concerned with their appraisal of the music, have forgotten the musicians.”¹⁸ Ramsey and Smith contend that, in order to properly understand jazz and its history, writers need to do more than just sift through recordings. They must engage the actual musicians. It’s worth noting that, at the time of the *Jazzmen* project, Smith was working for the Federal Writers’ Project, and one of the primary missions of the FWP was to collect oral histories from ordinary Americans.

For their book, Ramsey and Smith attempted to interview “every living jazz musician who could contribute factual material.”¹⁹ While they didn’t have the resources to record their conversations with their jazz informants to disc, they transcribed their interviews meticulously in order to preserve the precise phrasing and rhythm of the informants’ speech. The majority of *Jazzmen* is written in the scholarly third person, but Ramsey and Smith frequently rely upon interview excerpts to flesh out the historical narrative.

With the introduction of tape recording in the late 1940s,²⁰ it became much easier to document long sections of speech, and many contend that this marks the beginning of oral history as a distinct and self-conscious practice. Oftentimes, oral history is confused with a related form, the life story. According to Jeff Todd Titon, a key distinction is that the life story is documented with minimal intervention by a folklorist (or other interested party) whereas oral history involves significant intervention on the part of the folklorist (or other party) in asking questions and then editing the relevant information into a coherent and engaging account.²¹ Titon argues that many oral history accounts actually

masquerade as life stories:

Most of the published documents appear to be life stories but are not. That is, they give the impression that someone is speaking about his life in his own voice, but in reality someone else has muffled and distorted it. What appears to be a person telling a life story is usually an informant answering a series of questions. Then by a common ruse the interview comes to masquerade as a life story. The interviewer or an editor selects the relevant answers; arranges them according to editorial purposes, be they chronological, topical or historical; smooths out the talk for the printed page; and then removes the questions. This false alchemy is clear enough when one compares [Studs] Terkel's writings with his tapes. . .²²

While Horace Sprott's testimony in the "Making it Through" section appears continuous and unedited (there are no ellipses), comparing it to the recordings (and the detailed transcriptions Ramsey provides in the LP liner notes) reveals that the text in the book is highly edited. Sentences spoken minutes, hours or perhaps even days apart are fused together into what is made to seem a continuous whole. In the shift from LP to book, Ramsey transforms an oral history account collected from Horace Sprott into what appears to be Horace Sprott's life story. In the process, Ramsey's own presence and method recedes.

Before one castigates Ramsey for his editorial mischief, it's important to note that it's fairly obvious that Ramsey is utilizing textual fragments throughout "Making it Through." He quotes snippets of song lyrics throughout the chapter, and, in these instances, it's clear that he's extracting relevant lines from longer songs. Ramsey's editorial intervention in this chapter isn't invisible; in fact, it's proudly on display. The sheer variety of textual discourse—music history, biography, lyrics, oral history—serves as a constant reminder that a creative force has assembled all this material together.

While Ramsey's literal voice disappears in the move from LP to book, his authorial voice

emerges more fully in the pastiche method of the book.

Connecting the text, photographs, and audio recordings

Like “A Banjo Song” (the 1899 poem crafted by Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Hampton Institute Camera Club), *Been Here and Gone* is a hybrid work that features both text and photographs. However, *Been Here and Gone* incorporates an additional medium and mode of expression, audio recordings. It was technically possible for Hampton Institute Camera Club to capture musical recordings of their subjects in 1899 (albeit in much lower quality than was feasible in the 1950s), but, because music was not the primary focus of the Dunbar/Camera Club project, because many of the people who handle instruments in Camera Club images were probably not even musicians, and because there was virtually no market for recorded vernacular music in 1899, recordings were not included as part of their project.²³ Recording was a central component of Ramsey’s project, and, as a result, the connections and disjunctions of *Been Here and Gone* are not simply between the text and images of the book but between the text, images, and the LP recordings that they relate to.

In the liner notes to the *Been Here and Gone* album, Ramsey acknowledges the interconnection between the LP and the book: “Although the order of presentation is different, it is hoped that the careful listener (and reader) will find much to correlate between the two efforts, and that themes as well as episodes will be discovered which are common to both.”²⁴ The “correlations” are not just between the *Been Here and Gone* book and album but between the book and the entire *Music from the South* LP series.

When a song lyric or interview fragment is quoted in the text of the book, it is easy to locate what song or interview it is from by cross-checking the excerpt with the full transcriptions in the LP liner notes.²⁵ When the song or interview is located and played, one is compelled to return to the photograph the recording relates to.

For example, in the section of “Making it Through” where Ramsey discusses work songs, he quotes a section of a work song and pairs it with an image of a man hoeing a field (we learn through subsequent photographs that this is Horace Sprott). A check of the transcriptions in the *Music from the South* liner notes reveals that this lyric is from a field-recording Ramsey made of Horace Sprott and Nellie Hastings singing “My Hoe Leadin’ My Row.” When the song is played, one is compelled to return to the photograph in the book of Horace Sprott hoeing his field. The photo and the recording are not in “sync,” meaning that Ramsey didn’t take the photograph and make the audio recording at precisely the same moment, but they were likely produced within hours or at most days of each other. Hearing the audio track while one looks at the photograph deepens the appreciation of both the song and the image. The photograph provides a visualization lacking in the audio recording, revealing the field that Sprott hoed while singing this song countless times. The audio recording provides a richer sense of context for the image, fills out not just what Sprott’s work looks like but also what it usually sounds like. Paired together, the song and image form a new expression that is more than the sum of the individual parts. Because there is not a continuous stream of imagery, the Sprott song and image do not constitute a sound film, but Ramsey’s hybrid creation does offer some of the immersive qualities of sound film.

The FSA connection

The subsequent section of the *Been Here and Gone* book, entitled “Good Times,” takes place outside Horace Sprott’s cabin. Sprott appears in a few of the photos in this section, but he is not the focal point. In fact, no one individual is singled out for special consideration. This section documents a community get-together that features music, dancing, and goofing around, and Ramsey seeks to emphasize the social nature of this event rather than the personal histories of the assembled musicians. There are fourteen pictures in this section, but, because there are some redundancies, I will include only nine here: [Figures 8-16]



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

Been Here and Gone was undoubtedly inspired by the FSA photographic project. On his first trip to the South in 1951, Ramsey was accompanied by ex-FSA photographer John Vachon, and in the book's acknowledgements, Ramsey acknowledges that Vachon provided him with some training in how to take pictures. Ramsey adheres closely to the "straight" photographic style of the FSA. He might have occasionally asked subjects to position themselves in a good location in order to get the best lighting or composition, but there's no indication that any of the subjects were asked to play a role or that what we see deviates in any substantial way from the subjects' typical routines.

Many of Ramsey's images, with an emphasis on vernacular architecture, signs, and geography, mimic the style and content of classic FSA shots. Ramsey also utilizes another FSA method, the photographic series, to document musical events in *Been Here and Gone*, including the church service section that opens the book and the musical gathering featured in the "Good Times" section.

Ramsey begins the "Good Times" section in the midst of the action, as Philip Ramsey (no relation to Frederic), his son, and Mozelle Moore play a skiffle improvisation in front of Sprott's cabin [Figure 8]. In the background, people can be seen sitting on Sprott's porch, and, in the second photograph, Ramsey provides a clearer view of the spectators sitting on the porch [Figure 9]. In the next four images (the last three of these are not displayed above), Ramsey returns to the musicians. In the first of these images, Horace Sprott appears to be dancing along to the skiffle song. After the shot of the woman sitting on the porch with a troubled look on her face, Ramsey then shifts his focus to a pair of dancers. In two images, Ramsey captures the movement of

the dancers as they spin their bodies and move their feet and arms. In the second image, the female dancer acknowledges the camera in the midst of her jubilant dancing. In the next image, a cropped rectangular composition, all the participants at this gathering can be seen: the musicians (including Sprott on harmonica), the dancers, and the spectators on the porch.

Like Ben Shahn's photographic series documenting a country dance in Skyline Farms, Alabama, Ramsey's "Good Times" section doesn't privilege one group at the gathering over another. Rather than focus in on one set of participants, Ramsey instead attempts to take in the whole scene and to demonstrate the interconnections between the different participants. At informal musical gatherings like this, where fun is the primary goal, the traditional boundary between performer and audience is lessened and even blurred. As Ramsey notes in the text that accompanies the dancing photographs, "The musicians wander in and out, take turns on each other's instruments and maintain a rhythm that sets others to dancing. From time to time, one of them drops out of the small band to join the dancers."²⁶ Ramsey understands this fluid dynamic and reacts accordingly in the "Good Times" section by opting to focus on the entire social context rather than narrowly on the select individuals making the music.

The last few images of this series depict the winding down of the get-together. In figure 15, Phillip Ramsey holds his guitar, chatting with another man at the back of the house, and, in the final image of the series [Figure 16], a horse-drawn carriage moves down a dirt path. Ramsey's concluding bit of text clarifies these final images: "Late in the afternoon, the band begins to break up. Stragglers gather at the back steps. Cars and wagons go down the long lane that leads from Horace Sprott's cabin to the road."²⁷

Sequencing similarities

While there is no evidence to suggest that Ramsey was aware, much less influenced, by the Dunbar/Hampton Camera Club books produced over a half century before, there are, nevertheless, some notable similarities between “Good Times” and “A Banjo Song,” other than the obvious fact that both depict African American vernacular music performed outside a cabin. Both pieces establish a sense of temporal progression, a sense of music developing and then subsiding. The camera angles and shot sizes in both pieces constantly vary. The two pieces even feature some similar images: the seated woman in Figure 11 resembles the seated elderly woman in “A Banjo Song” (Figure 6 in Chapter 1), and both include “cutaway” shots of landscapes. Ramsey didn’t stage action for the camera or use actors like the Hampton Institute Camera Club did, but the photographic series of Ramsey and the Camera Club are similar in the way they create an impression of temporal and spatial movement.

Like “Good Times,” almost all of the photographic series in *Been Here and Gone* depict music making in a single social context on a single day, but there are a few moments in the book when Ramsey takes an imaginative leap by linking together different contexts in conceptual ways. For instance, in the final section of the book, entitled “Among the Living,” Ramsey juxtaposes photographs taken in a variety of different locations in order to forge visual and metaphoric associations between photographs and the text of a sermon about the need to turn away from sin and towards religion. While this section deviates from the straightforward photographic series produced for the FSA, it does resemble a noteworthy project in which a former FSA

photographer assembled his FSA images, along with images from other projects, into a conceptual piece about America. In 1938 Walker Evans published *American Photographs*, a collection of photographs from his different assignments of the 1930s. Rather than focus on one group of people or social context (like he did with James Agee on the *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* project), Evans intentionally jumps around in order to reveal aspects of a changing America. As Alan Trachtenberg notes, *American Photographs* represents not “a reality not of this or that place or time but of a larger, implied place and time fabricated out of the links and ties, the multiple cross-references and echoes of the images in their order, an America of the imagination.”²⁸ While *Been Here and Gone* differs significantly from *American Photographs* in its use of text and its connection to Ramsey’s field-recordings, it does appear in certain instances, like in “Among the Living,” to draw upon the imaginative sequencing of Evans’s book.

Capturing the aural environment

It’s easy to locate the audio complement to the “Good Times” section of the book. On the *Been Here and Gone* LP, Ramsey includes a track simply titled “Good Times,” which is a field-recording of Philip Ramsey, his son, and Mozelle Moore playing at the gathering depicted in the “Good Times” series. This track deviates from a typical field-recording of a musical performance. Rather than focus solely on the performance, Ramsey’s microphone picks up the sounds of the whole boisterous environment, which includes people talking (some to each other and some back to the musicians), clapping, laughing, and dancing. Even if Ramsey had moved his microphone as close as possible

to the music, he still would have picked up the “background” sound of the audience members. Ramsey recognized that, in this instance, it was futile to force a separation between music and crowd noise, for these layers were woven together into a continuous texture of sound. He notes in the text accompanying the dancing images that “just as the music never stops, talk and song go along with it. The result is a blending of song and movement, speech and song, movement and dance.”²⁹ Paired together, the images and audio recordings provide a detailed sense of what it was like to be at this gathering.

The aural environments circumscribing musical performance that Ramsey documented extended beyond just the speech that swirled around live music. Ramsey often captured the sounds of everyday life, including doors opening and closing, cars driving by, and the revving of farm equipment engines. For example, on the *Been Here and Gone* LP, Ramsey includes a recording of Horace Sprott singing a work song entitled “My Little Annie, So Sweet.” Unlike “My Hoe Leadin’ My Row,” which was probably recorded in Sprott’s home, “My Little Annie, So Sweet” was literally a field-recording, captured as Sprott was working on his land. As a result, the sounds of the surrounding environment, including an automobile and a tractor, seep into the recording.

“From here on, the journey will have to be imagined”

Beyond fulfilling Ramsey’s desire “to create a comprehensive aural survey”³⁰ of his subjects’ musical lives, Ramsey reads a troubling message into the sounds drowning out Sprott’s work song: “The sound of automobiles along the highway close to the field, and the louder roar of a tractor driven by a white man in another part of the same field,

help to tell why so much southern song will soon be gone.”³¹ For Ramsey, it’s not a matter of noise pollution, of loud machines drowning out voices and acoustic instruments, but that the machines are replacing the way of life that developed and sustained vernacular forms of African American music. In the Foreword to *Been Here and Gone*, Ramsey explains this change:

That music suited many other older ways of living, and these, too, are all destined to go. Tractors will replace mules; automobiles and trucks will push aside wagons. Machines to plow and cultivate and harvest will do the work of men and women in the fields. Electricity has nearly done away with kerosene lamps and hand pumps. In twenty years or less, both music and artifacts will be forgotten, as they have been elsewhere in the United States. Also, there will be the loss of most of the older persons who I came to know in the course of my trips. When they have died, little enough of what they remember will have been preserved.³²

Ramsey isn’t documenting this shift. He’s lamenting it because, for him, it wasn’t just a shift but a monumental loss as well. Due to the speedy and inevitable effects of modernization, African American folkways were being pushed into “extinction,” and Ramsey believed he arrived on the scene at the very last moment to witness these folkways in person before they perished at the hands of paved roads, jet planes, supermarkets, and telephones.

Ramsey suggests that what he discovered in the American South from 1951 to 1957 was not a living, dynamic culture but, rather, a relic from the nineteenth century “that had somehow got itself perpetuated into the present.”³³ In the 1955 *New Yorker* article about his *Music from the South* series, Ramsey literally describes the culture as being frozen in time: “It was just like going to Alaska and finding a perfectly preserved mastodon in a glacier. I mean here was previously unrecorded instrumental music being

played pretty much as it had been in the [eighteen] sixties, seventies, and eighties—when it was carried into New Orleans—before jazz was born.”³⁴

In the *Ethnomusicology* article he wrote about his Southern fieldwork, Ramsey describes his project as “a study of the Afro-American music of Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, 1860-1900.” The 1860 date is significant because it stretches Ramsey’s inquiry into the waning years of slavery in America. The lyrics of the spirituals and work songs that Ramsey quotes, then, aren’t just testaments to a hard life but anguished reactions to the “peculiar institution.” Rather than extend the second date to 1957, which would suggest a living, dynamic culture still in existence, Ramsey cuts the timeframe off at the century mark, implying that whatever you see and hear in *Been Here and Gone* is a vestige from a much older era. Like *Poems of Cabin and Field*, *Been Here and Gone* evokes the past through representations of the present.

In the Foreword to *Been Here and Gone*, Ramsey claims that, in the space between his last field-recording expedition in 1957 and the publication of his book in 1960, the last traces of vernacular African American music disappeared in the South. He states, “I have already known the shock of returning to one home where I had taken recordings on a previous trip and finding no sign of dwelling or of people... So, I believe that now it would not be possible to duplicate the experience, the impressions, the images perceived between 1951 and 1957. From here on, the journey will have to be imagined.”³⁵ Earlier in the foreword, Ramsey describes his book as an “imagined journey.” The term “imagined” doesn’t imply that the book is a work of fiction but that the material Ramsey collected no longer exists in the real world. Because a literal journey to see and hear this culture is no longer possible, the only journey that can be

made is by sorting through and assembling traces of the now-vanished culture. The sense of loss is expressed through the very title “Been Here and Gone.” While the title could perhaps be interpreted as a reference to a bluesman or even Ramsey rambling across the southern landscape,³⁶ it primarily functions as a way to set up the elegiac tone of loss that there was once a remarkable culture here but it is now gone.

Doris Ulmann and Frederic Ramsey, Jr. both approached their fieldwork³⁷ with a salvage mindset. They believed that they were preserving valuable traces of American folk culture before modernization annihilated the delicate folk societies they visited. And yet, characterized by the use of the photographic series and the tendency to capture subjects in motion and actually playing music, Ramsey’s aesthetic is more akin to Ben Shahn’s style than to Doris Ulmann’s. Ben Shahn didn’t approach his FSA work with a salvage mentality. In fact, in much of his FSA work, he intentionally exposed poor social conditions in order to persuade legislators and the general public to eliminate these problems, not preserve them. Ramsey’s use of the FSA style while trying to communicate a nostalgic, salvage message demonstrates that style doesn’t guarantee a particular type of message. Photographers and filmmakers can approach similar subject matter with a similar style and still communicate vastly different messages.

Letting go of the “good old music”

If Ramsey believed that vernacular African American culture had all but vanished by 1960, does he provide any sense of what took its place? He cites technological advancements like automobiles, tractors, and electricity as forces that dismantled the old

folk culture, but those advancements don't constitute culture in the same way Ramsey defines culture in *Been Here and Gone*. In his own writings, Ramsey didn't provide much of a sense of what replaced the vanishing vernacular music of African Americans in the 1950s, although in one brief comment in the 1955 *New Yorker* article, Ramsey does briefly reveal his thoughts on the matter: "The kids down South, more's the pity, would rather listen to some juke box cutting loose with rhythm and blues than learn the good old music."³⁸ Ramsey saw the situation as a generational rift in which the young people, tired of the old music and eager to hear something new, gravitated more toward the music disseminated through mainstream culture rather than the local music they had heard all their life played by family and friends. For Ramsey, this was more than the typical intergenerational clash of taste, for he felt the young people were wasting a unique opportunity to preserve traces of the old folk culture before they slipped away.³⁹

Ramsey fails to recognize, however, that many of the individuals featured in his book and on his LP's were unlikely to be nostalgic for the social conditions that gave rise to the "good old music." As Marybeth Hamilton notes, many of these people "might have welcomed seeing some of the old ways go."⁴⁰ While there was pride in the rich musical culture forged under oppression, there was a strong sentiment among African Americans in the 1950s to focus on the music of the present rather than on the music of the past.

The history of the Fort Valley State Folk Festival, the first and one of the only folk festivals organized by and geared primarily for African Americans, reflects this shift. The festival began in 1940 and was hosted at the small African American college in middle Georgia. In the first few years, the festival was an immense success, and a

number of world renowned black artists, including Langston Hughes, William Grant Still, and W.C. Handy either attended the festival or wrote short statements for the festival program guide. By the early 1950s, though, the festival began to fall apart. The last presentation of secular music was in 1954, and the last presentation of sacred music was in 1955. As Bruce Bastin notes in *Red River Blues*, “Changing attitudes among students caused it to close, for students so ridiculed folk artists that they refused to attend.”⁴¹ By the mid-fifties, new forms of music were gaining momentum, including electrified rhythm and blues and rock n’ roll, which meant that older traditional forms of music were increasingly viewed as antiquated and irrelevant by younger African Americans. Ramsey interprets young blacks’ rejection of older vernacular music as a sign of rebelliousness or lack of respect, but, as John Dougan points out, “the fact that younger African Americans were disinterested in the music had to do with [this music] representing slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and any number of unpleasant circumstances and experiences.”⁴²

The politics and poetics of the blues revival

In *Been Here and Gone*, Ramsey doesn’t deal with the contemporary struggles of southern blacks in any great detail. As Marybeth Hamilton points out, the words “racism” and “segregation” never appear in his book. While Ramsey acknowledges past suffering wrought by the slave system, the source of contemporary miseries remains vague and non-specific. While some of Ramsey’s fieldwork (including both the “Making it Through” and “Good Times” sections of *Been Here and Gone*) was conducted before

the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision and the mass action phase of the African American Civil Rights Movement, his book was published at a time when the Movement was in full swing. Most of the areas Ramsey worked in were small communities off the beaten path, but, of course, these were segregated communities and, for Ramsey not to acknowledge that this segregation was being openly challenged throughout the rural and urban South at the time his book was published is a serious oversight.

As a point of comparison, consider Alan Lomax's book *The Rainbow Sign*, published a year before *Been Here and Gone*. The book contains oral history accounts from an African American singer and a preacher, plus a transcription of an entire sermon (no photographs are used). In the introduction, Lomax praises African Americans for their serenity and valor during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and notes how African American music continually adapts to address contemporary circumstances. In *Been Here and Gone*, the continuing problem of racism is all but elided, whereas Lomax foregrounds the issue and how it affects his subjects' lives. Lomax also considers how race is at play when a white folklorist like himself collects material from black subjects: "I had also to overcome the ingrained and understandable reluctance of Southern Negroes to talk frankly to a white man. Bitter experience has taught them to maintain a whole range of fictions, which support the Southern white's feeling of unchallenged superiority."⁴³ In Alan Lomax's vision, politics and folklore are intimately intertwined. In Ramsey's vision, politics and folklore are conveniently disconnected.

Frederic Ramsey, Jr. was a pioneering figure in American blues revival, and a key element of that revival was its apolitical nature. Like others, I maintain that the American blues revival began with the publication in 1959 of *The Country Blues* by

Samuel Charters, along with an accompanying LP of the same title that contained commercial recordings of blues artists from the 1920s and 30s. Like his close friend Frederic Ramsey, Jr., Charters was frustrated with previous studies of African American vernacular music. In the introduction to *The Country Blues*, he distances his work from the dry academic works that preceded his study, saying, “It has seemed to me artificial to discuss the music on any other level than that of its relationship with its own audience. . . . It would be relatively simple to select groups of recordings and develop a thesis on either a musical or sociological basis, but the truth has been that the blues audience is capricious and not in the least concerned with musical or sociological concepts.”⁴⁴ Steering clear of “sociological concepts,” Charters instead focuses on the blues as a vehicle for intense personal expression and, to get at this wellspring of intense emotion, Charters utilizes a prose style that is lyrical and romantic.⁴⁵

Ultimately, Charters’s book tells us more about the revivalist imagination than about the downhome blues tradition. As Jeff Todd Titon explains, this imagination involved both a rejection of mainstream values and an idealization of rural African American life:

It was a romantic movement among idealists of all ages, involving a love for blues as a stylized revolt against bourgeois values. . . . Rejecting conformity to middle-class values, blues revivalists embraced the music of people who seemed unbound by conventions of work, family, sexual propriety, worship, and so forth. The blues revival was a white, middle-class love affair with the music and lifestyle of marginal blacks. The romantic strain projected a kind of primitivism on the blues signer and located him in a culture of natural license.⁴⁶

The blues revivalists’ “revolt against bourgeois values” was rooted in a dissatisfaction with the mass consumer culture of the 1950s. Even Alan Lomax, who had for decades

celebrated the adaptability and hybridity of American folk music, was beginning to express fear about the homogenizing effects of mass culture:

Now, we of the jets, the wireless and the atom blast are on the verge of sweeping completely off the globe what unspoiled folklore is left, at least wherever it cannot quickly conform to the success-motivated standards of our urban-conditioned consumer economy. What was once an ancient tropical garden of immense color and variety is in danger of being replaced by a comfortable but sterile and sleep-inducing system of cultural super-highways—with just one type of diet and one available kind of music.⁴⁷

Like Lomax, Ramsey and Charters rejected the shimmering world of newness and abundance in favor of a homemade culture filled with the old and fading. They were fascinated with communities—and an idealized “community”—where music was woven into the everyday social fabric, where people gathered regularly at house parties or at juke joints to hear their friends and neighbors swap songs and dance.⁴⁸

Ramsey and Charters gravitated towards a style of music that was well past its heyday, and they either downplayed or completely ignored the monumental transformation that blues was undergoing in urban areas of both the South and North. They didn't deal with urban electric blues because, in 1959-1960, it was still a relatively new phenomenon (and they preferred examining older musical styles) but also because looking at it would have forced them to address complicated and contentious social issues. Charles Keil noted this flaw in blues revivalist writing in his groundbreaking 1966 study *Urban Blues*. He detects a strain of escapism in revivalist scholarship: “By concentrating on old-timers and scorning today's blues as commercial or decadent, the writer can effectively avert his eyes from the urban ghetto conditions that spawn the contemporary forms.”⁴⁹

Unlike Charters, though, Ramsey had written a book about a distinctively African American form of music which emerged from “urban ghetto conditions.” In *Jazzmen* Charles Edwards Smith and Ramsey recounted how jazz developed in an impoverished section of New Orleans around the turn of the century. According to Marybeth Hamilton, Smith and Ramsey’s book reflected the contemporary politics of the Popular Front in the way it fashioned Storyville into “a black proletarian haven where outcasts and disreputables expressed resistance.” Ramsey’s shift in focus from the city to the country during the 1950s, according to Hamilton, represented a “critical about-face,” a turn away from the urban underground towards “a hermetically sealed harmonic landscape cut off from the taint of modernity” and from the political imperatives of the day.⁵⁰

The roots of “roots music”

As I’ve explained, there are some significant flaws to *Been Here and Gone* and the *Music from the South* series. Ramsey didn’t adequately understand why traditional African American music had fallen out of favor among many African Americans in the 50s, and his wholesale avoidance of segregation and the struggle to end it is egregious. And yet, in the critique of Ramsey’s shift from city/political to rural/apolitical, scholars like Marybeth Hamilton lose sight of the historical significance of *Been Here and Gone* and the whole *Music from the South* project.

Hamilton claims that *Been Here and Gone* exists in a “landscape cut off from the taint of modernity,” but this isn’t an accurate claim.⁵¹ While the bulk of the action is set within traditional rural communities, the urban and semi-urban world figures heavily

within Part II of the book. There are no jets and skyscrapers, but we do see power lines, modern automobiles, and comic books, particularly in the section “The Streets of New Orleans.” In Hamilton’s formulation, Ramsey made a clean break in shifting focus from the city to the country, but the fact is that Ramsey’s entire project hinged upon the intricate relationship *between* city and country, upon the migration of musical practices from rural to urban areas.

It’s tempting to dismiss Ramsey as nostalgic antimodernist like Doris Ulmann or as a romantic blues revivalist like Samuel Charters, but this would be a mistake because the guiding premise of Ramsey’s 1950s work—unearthing and celebrating the traditional, non-commercial music that formed the basis of a genre of popular music—represented an entirely new paradigm in how American vernacular music was conceptualized. I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that Frederic Ramsey, Jr. was instrumental in developing the concept of “roots music.”

Progressive folklorists like Robert Gordon and Alan Lomax embraced the race and hillbilly records of the 1920s, 30s and 40s and the idea that vernacular music could circulate commercially, but Ramsey shifted the focus by considering how traditional music served as the basis for a new genre of popular music, a genre that was decidedly urban and contemporary and one that couldn’t be appropriately understood as “folk” or “vernacular” in the same way that race or hillbilly records could. That’s not to say that race and hillbilly records shouldn’t be considered popular music. It’s just that race and hillbilly records were largely produced and purchased by a specific and limited section of the American population—working-class blacks and whites—whereas jazz, particularly at the moment *Jazzmen* was published, was an international, mainstream form of music,

the quintessential popular music of its time. Ramsey was interested in Horace Sprott and the other downhome musicians he found in the Deep South in the 1950s because they represented the non-commercial “roots” of (commercial) jazz.

In the 1960s, the concept of “roots music” changed. Young British musicians embraced downhome African American music—particularly the urban electric blues of the 1950s and the acoustic blues of the 1920s and 30s—and channeled this inspiration into another new form of popular music, rock n’ roll. In contrast to Ramsey’s conception of roots as non-commercial, “orally bequeathed” music, the British musicians reframed roots as any older commercial music that inspired their rock n’ roll creations. The concept was still the same—downhome music targeted at a specific (racial) audience provides the foundation for a new, mainstream form of popular music—but now the transmission process takes place entirely within the commercial realm. While I’ve never found any comments by Ramsey about rock music, it’s likely that he loathed it, but I’m sure he appreciated that his notion of roots music took hold and thoroughly transformed the field of popular music.

The 1960s was a transformational time for American vernacular music. There was a surge of interest in traditional acoustic music. Urban revivalists interpreted and promoted old songs, and older musicians who had recorded in the prewar era were “rediscovered” and presented to adoring revival audiences. The 1960s was also a transformational time for American documentary film. With the new, more portable camera and audiotape equipment, documentary filmmakers began to capture life as it spontaneously happened, in moving images accompanied with sound. The new

emphasis upon observation during the 1960s was a challenge to the entrenched expository methods of documentary film. In the following chapter I show how American vernacular music and documentary film intersected during the 1960s and 70s in the form of a new genre, the folklore film.

Notes

¹ Quoted in Neil Rosenberg's "Lead Belly Reissues as Sound Documentary: From Item to Event," *Journal of American Folklore*, 116 (2003) p. 224.

² *Ibid.*, p. 224. Eight years before Ramsey's recording, Alan Lomax interviewed Lead Belly on a series of 16 inch 78rpm discs, which allowed for fifteen minutes of recording per side. Neil Rosenberg notes how the Lomax recordings differ substantial from Ramsey recordings, in that Lomax was involved more in directly questioning Lead Belly about his past and his repertoire whereas Ramsey allowed Lead Belly to dictate the pace and flow of events. Rosenberg also notes that Lead Belly was aware of the differences between Lomax and Ramsey in terms of methodology and sensibility, saying at one point, "Alan hear that, he gon' kill him [Ramsey]! . . . [to Ramsey:] you should let, you got to let Alan hear some of that stuff. Yeah, he'll fall out." [Rosenberg, p. 228]

³ Hamilton, Marybeth. *In Search of the Blues: Black Voices, White Visions* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007) p. 132.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁵ Skinner, Katherine. "'Must Be Born Again': Resurrecting the *Anthology of American Folk Music*," *Popular Music*, Volume 25/1 (2006) p. 68.

⁶ Goldsmith, Peter David. *Making People's Music: Moe Asch and Folkways Records* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998) p. 229.

⁷ Liner notes for *The Blues* LP (New York: Folkways Records, 1951).

⁸ Ramsey, Jr. Fredric. "A Study of the Afro-American Music of Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, 1860 - 1900" *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 1, No. 8. (Sep., 1956) p. 29.

⁹ Liner notes for *Music from the South, Vol. 1* LP (New York: Folkways Records, 1955) p. 2.

¹⁰ "A Study of the Afro-American Music of Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, 1860 - 1900", p. 29.

¹¹ Quoted in "Orally Bequeathed," *New Yorker*, August 6, 1955, p. 14.

¹² Ramsey, Jr. Frederic. *Been Here and Gone* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1960) p. xi.

¹³ Liner notes for *Music from the South, Vol. 10* LP (New York: Folkways Records, 1960) p. 1.

¹⁴ "A Study of the Afro-American Music of Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, 1860 - 1900", p. 29.

¹⁵ These are the second and third sections of "Part I: Past" and run from page 30 to 61 out of a 177 page book.

¹⁶ Liner notes for *Music from the South, Vol. 2* LP (New York: Folkways Records, 1955) p. 2.

¹⁷ Annie's eyes appear to be closed in both Figure 6 and the subsequent shot of Sprott with his family.

¹⁸ Frederic Ramsey, Jr. and Charles Edwards Smith. *Jazzmen* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939) p. xiii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

²⁰ See “The Tape Recorder, Home Entertainment, and the Roots of American Recording Culture” in David Morton’s *Off the Record: The Technology and Culture of Sound Recording in America* (New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 2000).

²¹ Around 1950 Allan Nevins, a historian at Columbia University, persuaded the school to establish an archive of audio taped interviews of prominent New Yorkers. Rather than simply turn the tape on and let informants tell their life stories, Nevins encouraged a highly interactive mode of inquiry in which historians asked “lawyers’ questions in an effort to get evidence from living witnesses.” [Jeff Todd Titon’s “The Life Story,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 93, No. 369 (Jul.-Sep., 1980) p. 281] Soon after oral history projects began to spring up around the country. In contrast to Nevins’s focus on the elite, many of these projects sought “the experiences and perspectives of groups of people who might otherwise have been ‘hidden from history.’” [“Introduction to second edition,” in *The Oral History Reader*, Second Edition, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) p. ix]

²² “The Life Story”, p. 277.

²³ In an email correspondence with the author, Tim Dowd points out that there was a market for vernacular music prior to 1920, just not in recordings: “Arguably there was an interest for vernacular music in the realm of sheet music/publishing. Think of the work of Scott Joplin, for instance (and later Handy). That’s different from what we see in recording, radio and performance rights.”

²⁴ Liner notes for *Music from the South, Vol. 10*, p. 2.

²⁵ It is worth noting that the song transcriptions in the liner notes contain numerous errors. Instead of “Smokestack Lightning”, Ramsey lists “Smoked Like Lightning” and instead of “My Chaffeur”, he lists “Me and My Short Box (or Pork Chop)”. In the latter example, Ramsey at least acknowledges his confusion.

²⁶ *Been Here and Gone*, p. 55.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p61.

²⁸ Trachtenberg, Alan. *Reading American Photographs* (New York : Noonday Press, 1990) p. 258.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

³⁰ Liner notes for *Music from the South, Vol. 10*, p. 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³² *Been Here and Gone*, pp. xii-xiii.

³³ Liner notes for *Music from the South, Vol. 10*, p. 2.

³⁴ “Orally Bequeathed”, p. 16.

³⁵ *Been Here and Gone*, p. xiii.

³⁶ Marybeth Hamilton describes the bluesman structure of *Been Here and Gone* in her article “Sexuality, Authenticity and the Making of the Blues Tradition”: “Although we meet him in the flesh only occasionally, we feel his presence throughout the book. Indeed, in wending our way through the Delta, we are effectively seeing the South through his eyes, for in mapping his journey, Ramsey attempts to follow in the footsteps of the blues minstrels—or, rather, to follow the traces they left behind them, for these ‘men who carried the devil on their backs, the box pickers and songsters who were the vagrants, easy riders and drifters of a period just past, are hardly ever to be encountered along southern highways today.’”

³⁷ I recognize that “fieldwork”, in the anthropological sense of the word, may not be the best term to describe the efforts of Ulmann and Ramsey (or Shahn and the Lomaxes, for that matter) because they both constantly moved from location to location and subject to subject, never fully immersing themselves in one localized place or one set of people (with the exception of Horace Sprott in the case of Ramsey).

³⁸ “Orally Bequeathed”, p. 15.

³⁹ To be fair, Ramsey did leave this issue of musical preservation somewhat open-ended. In the section on New Orleans in *Been Here and Gone*, he says, “It will remain for a younger generation—the dancers and would-be musicians and second-liners who follow the Eureka on its parades through the streets of New Orleans—to decide whether they wish to carry on when their elders have gone.” [*Been Here and Gone*, p. 162]

⁴⁰ Hamilton, Marybeth. “Sexuality, Authenticity and the Making of the Blues Tradition,” *Past and Present*, No. 169 (Nov. 2000) p. 154.

⁴¹ Bastin, Bruce. *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986) p. 82.

⁴² Dougan, John. “Two Steps from the Blues: Creating Discourse and Constructing Canons in Blues Criticism,” unpublished dissertation completed for The College of William & Mary, 2001, p. 211.

⁴³ Lomax, Alan. *The Rainbow Sign: A Southern Documentary* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1959) p. 5.

⁴⁴ Charters, Samuel Barclay. *The Country Blues* (New York: Rinehart, 1959) pp. 7-8.

⁴⁵ The romantic label followed Charters throughout the blues revival, and, in the 1975 reprint to his landmark book, he addressed the issue, saying, “If my books from this time seem romantic it’s because I tried to make them romantic... [*The Country Blues*] was a romanticization of certain aspects of black life in an effort to force the white society to reconsider some of its racial attitudes... I believed that if I could make people hear the voices of black Americans they might begin to see them as human beings, and not as stereotypes.” [Quoted in Jeff Todd Titon’s “Reconstructing the Blues: Reflections on the 1960s Blues Revival in *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, edited by Neil Rosenberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993) p. 235.] Despite Charters claim to the contrary, romanticizing downhome bluesmen inevitably transforms bluesmen into romantic stereotypes.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁴⁷ Lomax, Alan. “Saga of a Folksong Hunter —A Twenty-year Odyssey with Cylinder, Disc and Tape,” *HiFi Stereo Review*, May 1960, reprinted at <http://www.culturalequity.org/alanlomax/saga.html>.

⁴⁸ To be fair, *Been Here and Gone* doesn’t exhibit the same degree of romanticism that *The Country Blues* does. Ramsey provides a more thorough base of geographical and historical information, and, unlike Charters, he extracts long sections of interview material, which diminishes the opportunities for authorial flights of fancy. *The Country Blues* also contains relatively few photographs, most of which are publicity shots or basic portraits of musicians, whereas *Been Here and Gone* is a hybrid of text and image, which helps to ground the reader in a specific space and time and prevents forays into imaginative speculation. The biggest difference between the two books is obviously that Ramsey is documenting anonymous, non-professionals and Charters is examining key

figures in the history of *recorded* blues. Because of consumerist mechanisms like marketing and collecting, recorded musicians are more likely to be mythologized than the anonymous music makers who never cut a single commercial track. (There are some exceptions to this, though. The cornetist Buddy Bolden never recorded, but he is one of the most legendary figures in American music history for the role he played in early jazz.)

⁴⁹ Keil, Charles. *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) p. 38.

⁵⁰ *In Search of the Blues*, from pages 144, 155, 160.

⁵¹ I also take issue with Hamilton's characterization of the world depicted in *Been Here and Gone* as one marked by "hopelessness and degradation." While there is certainly a sense of pain and loneliness in some of the song lyrics and pictures, it hardly qualifies as "degradation."

Chapter Five

In and Out of Context: American Vernacular Music and the Folklore Film of the 1960s and 70s

The 1960s was a time of immense change for documentary film and for the study of American folklore. In many respects, the major practitioners in both of these fields emphasized the same thing: the need to move beyond a strictly textual approach, towards a methodology that could more effectively capture the full context of events. After nearly thirty years of adhering mostly to a Griersonian model of exposition, documentary filmmakers increasingly sought to record life as it happened. Documentary photographers had been utilizing a loose, mobile style to document vernacular music since at least the 1930s, but it wasn't until the 1960s when new technology finally made it possible for filmmakers to shoot in this style. With new cameras and tape recorders that allowed for increased mobility and longer recording times, American documentary filmmakers like Richard Leacock and D.A. Pennebaker sought to position viewers in the midst of action and to allow viewers the interpretive space to decipher events on their own, without the guidance of a didactic commentator.¹

The work of folklorists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including the work of folk song collectors like Francis Child and Cecil Sharp, was focused almost exclusively upon the textual. The progressive folklorists that emerged in the 1960s, including scholars like Alan Dundes and Dan Ben-Amos, recognized the importance of apprehending the flux of life that circumscribes folkloric expression. This new generation of scholars stressed that the field of folklore must be attuned to a wide

variety of non-textual elements, from the physicality of the surroundings to the intricate interactions between performers and spectators.

During the 1960s and 70s, the two fields intersected, and the result was a new genre of documentary film: the folklore film, i.e. documentaries that focus on some aspect of folkloric expression. Since its inception, the folklore film has had limited commercial success and low visibility within mainstream culture. Tom Davenport, a folklore filmmaker and coordinator of a website that makes classic folklore films available in streaming media formats, provides a couple of potential reasons for the marginalization of the folklore film. He cites three main reasons: 1) the films have unconventional running times that don't correspond to the standards of television, movie theaters, and commercial video; 2) many subjects in folklore films don't speak "broadcast English," which alienates some viewers; and 3) the films often deal with small local or regional cultures as opposed to the national historical subjects that documentary audiences have gotten accustomed to. The folklore film has occupied a marginal niche in the documentary film world, appreciated mostly in educational settings, at film festivals, and occasionally on public television stations.² The folklore film is also largely neglected in the major survey works on documentary film.³

In this chapter, I consider three folklore films produced during the 1960s and 70s that focus on American vernacular music: *The High Lonesome Sound* (1963), *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category* (1975), and *Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas* (1970). In examining the definitive index on American folklore films, I determined that, between 1960 and 1979, there were approximately one hundred and forty documentaries produced that focus on the vernacular music styles relevant to this

study.⁴ I have chosen to examine *The High Lonesome Sound*, *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category*, and *Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas* because they are landmark works and reflect the major currents within both documentary film and folklore during this period.

All three films diverge, some more than others, from the expository documentary tradition that developed during the 1930s (exemplified by the Grierson films in the U.K. and the Lorentz films in the U.S.). Unlike the earlier expository works, these films rely heavily upon observation and allow subjects more opportunities to “speak for themselves.” Like the new folklore scholarship, these films were also attuned to the contexts that surround and inform folk music.

Instead of discussing the films in the order in which they were made, I arrange them in terms of musical style (old-time music and blues) and region (Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta). The notion of place is critical, both the place depicted in the film and the native place of the filmmakers themselves. In the case of *Nimrod Workman*, the filmmakers came from the cultural community they represented, but, in the other two cases, the filmmakers did not, which brings up the delicate issue of why their films were made and for whom.

The Folk Music Revival and John Cohen

In 1958 The Kingston Trio’s single “Tom Dooley” hit number one on the pop music charts and arguably launched the second phase of the American folk music revival (the first phase stretched from the mid 1930s through the late 1940s and was halted

largely because of the Red Scare and the folk music establishment's association with Communism and progressive causes). The same year "Tom Dooley" was released, John Cohen, Tom Paley, and Mike Seeger formed the band The New Lost City Ramblers and recorded their debut album for Moe Asch's Folkways Records. While the Kingston Trio's sales dwarfed those of the Ramblers,⁵ the contrast between these two bands epitomized a central tension in the folk revival between slick, commercial entertainment and what was presented as authentic traditional music.

When the folk music craze peaked around 1962, *Time* magazine put Joan Baez on its cover and provided readers with a lengthy article about the major figures of the revival. *Time* separated revival participants into three camps: "the Impures or the Popularizers. . . led by the Kingston Trio," "the Pures, the Authentics, the Real Articles—singers who are above criticism because they are living source material," and "the vast middle ground occupied by the Semipures, the Adapters, the Interpreters" like Baez and Bob Dylan.⁶ A few years later Ellen Stekert added a fourth group to this formulation, the "imitators," those who faithfully mimicked old songs and styles.⁷ The New Lost City Ramblers fit squarely in this fourth group. They reproduced old songs virtually note for note. In fact, on their first album, they even included a discography to let listeners know the precise sources for of the songs they presented.

"Imitator" groups did more than ape archaic tunes. They served as advocates for traditional musicians. In 1960, John Cohen, along with Ralph Rinzler and Israel Young, started the Friends of Old Time Music, which brought older vernacular musicians like Clarence Ashley, Dock Boggs, Mississippi John Hurt, Gus Cannon, and the Stanley Brothers to New York City for concerts. For many of these traditional musicians, the

Friends of Old Time Music concerts represented the first time they ever played in New York City, and, for some, the first time they had played publicly in several decades. Cohen's motive for putting on these shows went beyond introducing "citybillies" to their roots music forebears. He wanted "folkniks" to reject the slick veneer of commercial folk music: "[The Friends of Old Time Music] was our response to the commercial music industry which had sprung up around the folksong revival. We knew that if people could experience the real thing in all its complexity, they would see beyond the mass marketed entertainment which dominated the airwaves at that time."⁸

For Cohen, though, listening to old records and even bringing old musicians to New York wasn't enough. He felt compelled to experience old-time music in its own context. As he later noted, "The best way to experience this music fully was to hear it in its own setting, and that required traveling great distances to the musicians in their communities and at their homes."⁹ Cohen sold photos he had taken of Beat luminaries Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac to *Life* magazine for six hundred dollars and used the money to travel to eastern Kentucky to record and photograph traditional musicians. This trip was also meant to educate Cohen for the Ramblers' upcoming album of 1930s Depression-era songs, for he wanted to visit a region of the country that was currently experiencing an economic depression. The field recordings and photographs Cohen produced on this trip were showcased on the 1959 Folkways LP "Mountain Music of Kentucky."

The High Lonesome Sound: Background and style

Cohen returned to rural areas of the South over the next few years to make recordings and take photographs of traditional musicians, but, because he didn't feel that he was adequately capturing the context of the music, he decided to make a film. In August 1962 Cohen set out with Joel Agee, son of writer James Agee, to document the traditional music styles of Eastern Kentucky. They spent six weeks in the region, and then Cohen returned to New York to work with Pat Jaffee on the editing. The resulting thirty-minute film, *The High Lonesome Sound*, was released in 1963 to little fanfare, but, over the course of the following decades, its significance has become apparent. In 1977 Cohen noted that it "was an early part of the movement towards folk-film,"¹⁰ and in 1997 Daniel Patterson claimed that it was "the first serious film on American folklife."¹¹

Prior to *The High Lonesome Sound*, Cohen and Agee had no experience making films.¹² Their lack of training is most evident in the fact that the film does not feature synchronous sound. Portable 16mm cameras capable of sync sound weren't readily available in 1962, so Cohen used an unblimped Arriflex camera that wasn't designed for sync sound use. In the musical sequences, this means that the sound drifts from sync or doesn't match at all. This technical problem was as much a product of Cohen's naïveté about mountain culture as it was a reflection of his amateur filmmaking ability. In *Remembering The High Lonesome*, a 2003 documentary about Cohen's films, Cohen discusses this issue: "I had this peculiar notion from anthropology classes that people in traditional societies did everything the same way every time, so I figured, if I recorded them once on the tape recorder and then filmed them later, they would be in sync. They

weren't, but that was my conceit."¹³ Because the sync problem prevented Cohen from showing performances in uninterrupted takes, he had to rely more upon editing to structure his film. Many documentary films of the early and mid-1960s featured long, uninterrupted takes (the Bob Dylan portrait *Don't Look Back* is a good example), but *The High Lonesome Sound* is a highly edited film that shifts continuously between places within Eastern Kentucky.

The High Lonesome Sound begins with a short scene of a Baptist river baptism. Cohen then shows images of coal mining as he delivers this voice-over: "Music is a celebration of the hard life here in Kentucky. The home music and the church singing are a way of hanging onto the old dignity. Music is not an escape, it gives a way of making life possible to go on. Life is hard here, and music is the celebration." Out of the fifteen films Cohen made between 1963 and 1991, *The High Lonesome Sound* is the only one that utilizes narration. He discussed this issue with the scholar and filmmaker Sharon Sherman: "In my first film I was the narrator, but still feel discomfort at being the spokesman for people who don't need me as such. . . I have increasing trust in the intelligence of the film audience and their ability to perceive things and draw conclusions for themselves."¹⁴

The High Lonesome Sound: Politics and the FSA connection

After the coal mining section, *The High Lonesome Sound* shifts to scenes of people congregating on the streets of Hazard, Kentucky. Cohen's narration continues:

Hazard, Kentucky in 1962 is reminiscent of the Depression of the 1930s. People are in town looking for work. They say these are the worst times they have ever seen. In earlier years the hills of Eastern Kentucky provided land for farming to raise enough food to live on but now the mountains are about worn out. Farms gave way to mining, and now machinery is replacing the miners. Times are hard and people don't see how they are going to get better.

Cohen links the economic downturn in Appalachia during the early 1960s to the national Depression of the 1930s explicitly through his narration but also implicitly by mimicking the documentary style of the FSA for the Hazard street scenes. Aside from the modern automobiles visible in the background, Cohen's images of men sitting on curbs or standing together resemble Ben Shahn's FSA images of small town life in the 1930s. Like Ben Shahn, Cohen's camera moves all around the subjects, from long shot to medium shot, from behind to in front, from straight-on to a high angle. Both Shahn and Cohen utilize a mobile, handheld camera style, but, of course, because Cohen is working in the time-based medium of film, we can literally experience the movement of his camera as he pans over subjects or shakily holds a composition.

Cohen discovered FSA photography as a young child when he happened upon an article on the FSA in an old copy of *U.S. Camera*. When he became a professional musician, the FSA influence was readily apparent. Several of The New Lost City Ramblers LP's incorporate FSA images, including the cover of their first record in 1958, which features a photo by Russell Lee. The covers for *Songs from the Depression* and *The New Lost City Ramblers Volume 3* both feature Ben Shahn FSA photographs of acoustic musicians, which generates some confusion about the identity of the musicians on the LP's. When Cohen began to visually document traditional musicians in the South, the influence of Evans, Shahn and Lange was clear. In a 1990 article in *Visual*

Anthropology, Cohen explained that his “first films had the look of 1930s documentaries—reflecting my childhood memories of *Nanook of the North* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, mixed with my appreciation for the FSA photographers.”¹⁵

The High Lonesome Sound's connection to the FSA is not just through the “straight” black and white style but also through its acknowledgment of poor economic conditions. Before or even perhaps during his trip to Kentucky in 1962, Cohen read Harry Caudhill's book *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, an exposé about how absentee industrialists devastated the land and working-class of Appalachia. Cohen's opening voice-over acknowledges the crippling unemployment of the region, caused in part by the rapid depletion of the land and the increase in labor mechanization. However, unlike his FSA predecessors, Cohen acknowledges these problems not to spur change but simply to provide viewers with an honest assessment of the social context in which traditional musicians live. In *Remembering The High Lonesome*, he discusses this issue:

I always knew that I didn't want to *use* the culture in the South or in any of the rural or traditional places that I'd been. I didn't want to use them as examples. I didn't want to point out, "Look at the poverty here" or "Look at what the capitalist system has done" or "Look at what the mining system has done." I just wanted people to see it, and I just wanted to present it so that the people in the cultures themselves would recognize themselves in it. . . I am interested in music, culture, and people who I find beautiful, exciting and moving, who I find traditional and wonderful. And that is why I show the whole setting where the music comes from. I don't do it to point out some poverty issue. Really, I am not interested. That is not my purpose.¹⁶

Doris Ulmann thoroughly ignored the economic conditions of Appalachia in her 1930s photographs. Cohen didn't fall into the same trap of romantic narrow-mindedness, but he also didn't want to make the economic conditions of Appalachia the sole focus of his

efforts. For Cohen, art was the primary concern, the art of the traditional musicians and the artistic merit of his film. Cohen has acknowledged that his philosophy of documentary was informed by Walker Evans, who didn't describe his images as documentary photographs but, rather, artistic images produced in a "documentary style." Content originates in the real world, and, through the skill and imagination of the documentarian, it is transformed into an artistic and sometimes transcendent expression.

Cohen as outsider, Appalshop background

As a Jew who was raised on Long Island and who was living at the time in Greenwich Village, John Cohen was an outsider in Appalachia. He certainly wasn't the only outsider to visit the region in the 1960s. In fact, the region was teeming with outside visitors during the 1960s and 70s. In the wake of *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* and Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty,¹⁷ scores of television news and documentary film crews descended on Appalachia to document the Third World living conditions of its poorest residents. While some of these visiting filmmakers were sensitive about how they depicted the poverty, many sought out sensationalistic images that would shock and attract viewers. As Elizabeth Barret points out in her documentary film *Stranger with a Camera*, many of these outsiders exploitatively "mined images" of Appalachia in the same way the coal companies had been mining the hills. In recent years, Cohen has been careful to differentiate his fieldwork from the sensationalistic coverage of Appalachia by 1960s film and television crews, noting that he went there first and foremost to document the traditional music and not to put the poverty on

display.¹⁸ Nevertheless, some Appalachians have apparently expressed displeasure that Cohen was even there documenting the region's music, feeling that this is a task best left to native residents. In *Remembering The High Lonesome*, Cohen discusses this:

And I know in the South in recent years, there's been a very confusing—to me confusing—resentment that I was down there before some of them were born. “What right do you have to make *The High Lonesome Sound*? You're an outsider.” I said, “Nobody was interested in documenting that music back then. So I did it.” If I hadn't found [Roscoe Holcomb] where I had found him, he would have never been recorded. No one was interested in him, and he wasn't interested in coming out. No one was interested in coming in to listen. He didn't want to go make records or anything. But the fact that myself, again a Northerner who was curious about the world, should meet him and say, “This really wakes me up. This really says something to me,” when people in the South weren't interested in themselves.

Indeed, in the early and mid-1960s, there weren't any sustained efforts by native Appalachians to audiotape or film the region's traditional culture, but that changed in 1969 with the founding of the Community Film Workshop of Appalachia, created through a grant from the federal Office of Economic Opportunity, the agency that administered all the War on Poverty initiatives. In 1971 the organization changed its name to the Appalachian Film Workshop and then again in 1975 to Appalshop, the name by which it's known today. In addition to facilitating documentary filmmaking, the organization also produces theater, musical recordings, still photography, and a quarterly journal about mountain art and literature. In 1985 a community-sponsored radio station was launched. The non-profit Appalshop survives through a combination of grants and revenue generated from their artistic endeavors.¹⁹

The impetus behind the initial grant funding in 1969 was simply to train young Appalachian men and women for something other than coal mining, but the fledgling

filmmakers saw the film workshop as an opportunity to articulate a regional self-image, an “Appalachian consciousness.” To them, Appalachia had been defined from the outside for too long, fashioned into an object of pity by visiting news crews or into a demeaning caricature through the endless stream of hillbilly stereotypes that circulated in popular culture. If they could master the tools of representation and present examples of actual Appalachian life, the Appalshop filmmakers felt that they could transform outsiders’ perceptions of the region and make insiders proud of their culture once again. As Stephen Hanna notes,

These young filmmakers were part of a new regional politics devoted to rebuilding pride in mountain heritage, a pride that had been destroyed by mass media images coupled with a dependence on absentee corporations and corporate welfare. This required the search for a “real” mountain heritage that could provide the basis for a positive regional identity. Following the example of inner-city blacks, Hispanics, and post-colonial peoples around the globe, Appalshop felt an authentic identity had to be constructed by “insiders.”²⁰

Hanna puts quotes around the word “real” because he recognizes that the insiders’ assertion of an authentic Appalachian identity was just as fabricated as the outsiders’ various depictions.

Jane Gaines explains that the early Appalshop films—from 1970 until 1984—can be fit into two categories: the “people’s-struggle films,” which deal explicitly with political issues (like the 1975 film *The Buffalo Creek Flood: An Act of Man*), and the “folk documentaries,” like *Sourwood Mountain Dulcimers* (1976), that focus on aspects of Appalachian traditional culture. While Gaines respects the “people’s-struggle films” as “bold political statements,” she argues that the “folk documentaries” were the dominant genre during this period.²¹ Hanna reiterates this point, noting that “while the

group still tackled the coal industry and strip mining throughout the 1970s, even Appalshop members describe this period as dominated by the production of cultural material.”²² According to Gaines and Hanna, there was no crossover between the two types of films: the “people’s-struggle films” don’t focus on cultural expression and the “folk documentaries” avoid economic and political issues.

The “folk documentaries” typically focus on an older Appalachian who is proficient at a traditional skill. The skill is positioned along a generational continuum; the subject learned it from an ancestor and now passes it on to younger Appalachians eager to preserve and maintain the tradition. Sometimes, this “passing on” process is merely implied, but, in other instances, like in *Sourwood Mountain Dulcimers*, the process is literally depicted as an elder shares his or her wisdom with a young person. In *Sourwood Mountain Dulcimers*, I. D. Stamper, a master dulcimer builder and player, talks and plays music with John McCutcheon, a talented young musician.²³ The film is meant to inform the viewer about the dulcimer and its history, but the primary message is the need to respect and preserve traditional mountain music. Like the other “folk documentaries,” the filmmakers of *Sourwood Mountain Dulcimers* simply let the subjects speak for themselves. There is no voice-over narration, and the subjects never address the filmmakers or viewers directly.

While the “folk documentaries” provide valuable glimpses of traditional culture, I agree with Jane Gaines that the Appalshop filmmakers, in trying to recover authentic Appalachian culture as an antidote to the stereotypes and sensationalism, constructed an image of the region that, in many cases, wasn’t any more accurate than the depictions of pity and derision fashioned by outsiders. Similar to Doris Ulmann’s photography four

decades before, the “folk documentaries” present a homogenous view of Appalachia as a traditional society rooted in nature.²⁴ Although this was largely a positive view of the region, it was, nevertheless, an invention that served particular interests.

Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category: Representing Music and Class

Not all the Appalshop films dealing with traditional culture fit neatly into Gaines’s “folk documentary” category. A notable example is the 1975 film *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category*. The title suggests that Nimrod Workman and his music can’t be pigeonholed, and the film shares this same quality. It has characteristics of both the “people’s-struggle films” and the “folk documentaries” but ultimately belongs in a category all its own.

Nimrod Workman worked in Kentucky coalmines for over forty years and was a dedicated union man. He was also a brilliant ballad singer. It would have been nearly impossible for filmmakers Scott Faulkner and Anthony Slone to focus exclusively on Workman’s politics or on his traditional singing, for the political and the artistic aspects of his personality were thoroughly intertwined. He sang and composed many songs about coal mining and the unscrupulous practices of mining bosses. At two moments in the film, he explains that he can’t sing properly or at all because of the “black lung” disease he contracted from working in the mines. Unlike the standard Appalshop “folk documentaries,” in which a traditional skill is presented in a straightforward manner, *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category* confounds the viewer’s expectations by including these moments when Workman can’t sing. In the standard “folk documentary,”

we expect to see a skill on display, but Faulkner, Slone and Workman frustrate this expectation. This is similar to the remarkable moment in the 1966 film *Music Makers of the Blue Ridge*, when folk music aficionado Bascom Lamar Lunsford brings a documentary film crew from New York deep into the North Carolina Mountains to hear a song from a grizzled old man. The man is exhausted, seemingly near death, and can't muster up the strength to sing for the visitors. As Greil Marcus has noted, the filmmakers could have easily excised this strange scene from the film, but, instead, kept it in as a way to remind viewers "that there are some songs you're never going to hear."²⁵

Unlike the "folk documentaries," in which social conditions and issues of class are never acknowledged, *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category* foregrounds the fact that Workman and his family are poor, working-class Appalachians. *Nimrod Workman* is atypical, for, within the broad field of folklore studies, issues of class are often neglected. There is an unacknowledged bias against discussing working-class culture as folk culture. Contemporary conceptions of folklore—like Michael Owen Jones's definition of it as "expressive or symbolic behavior learned, taught, displayed, or utilized in situations of firsthand interaction"²⁶—infinitely broaden the range of who or what can be considered a folklore subject, but this broadening obscures the historical links between folk culture and the working-class.

Nimrod Workman depicts poverty in a much different manner than the news coverage of Appalachia during the 1960s. As Eliabeth Barret notes in *Stranger with a Camera*, news crews that visited Appalachia during the 1960s tended to use sensationalistic images like children eating dirt or shacks falling apart in order to shock and attract viewers. There is none of this type of imagery in the *Nimrod Workman* film;

his home may not be equipped with an array of modern amenities, but it is comfortable and tidy. At one point, Workman explains, “We live a good life to be poor people. . . We don’t suffer, we have something to eat, good long place to lay and that’s all we could ask for.” Repairing old clothes and pickling vegetables from the garden, Workman’s wife Molly shows how the family survives with little income. The poverty of the Workman family is acknowledged but not sensationalized for the camera. In a rebuke to the capitalist system he rails against throughout the film, Workman demonstrates that leading a full life doesn’t depend on accumulation. He has little, but, as he says, it is enough. This attitude is at odds with visitors’ depictions of poverty, from the FSA to Charles Kuralt, which treated poverty, first and foremost, as a problem needing to be fixed.

The High Lonesome Sound, Nimrod Workman, and the salvage mentality

I’d like to return to the issue of music and to compare the depictions of music in *The High Lonesome Sound* and *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category*. *The High Lonesome Sound* is, in many ways, a survey of traditional music styles in Eastern Kentucky. Cohen has remarked that, “out of some self-inflicted respect for scholarship,”²⁷ he “made sure to include a sampling of all the types of folk music that existed in the region at that time.”²⁸ In the film Cohen documents examples of religious music, ballad singing, instrumental dance music, bluegrass (performed by Bill Monroe and his band on the streets of Hazard), and even some country-style rock.

Despite the survey-like approach, one person emerges as the primary subject of the film: Roscoe Holcomb. Roscoe is shown in the beginning, middle, and end of the film, and, aside from Cohen and the random crowd noise, he is the only person who speaks on the soundtrack. Cohen was attracted to Holcomb because he believed the musician was a holdover from an older era. As he later noted, “Roscoe was one of the last traditional singers whose music took shape before the influence of radio and phonograph.”²⁹ Unlike Doris Ulmann and John Jacob Niles, who ignored the presence of popular culture in Appalachia, Cohen is careful to acknowledge the omnipresent traces of popular culture in the region, from commercial radio to local rock ‘n roll bands to professional bands (like Bill Monroe’s Bluegrass Boys) that played “traditional” music. What surprised Cohen wasn’t the presence of popular culture in Appalachia but, rather, the fact that a tiny pocket of “pure” folk music—around Roscoe Holcomb’s home in Daisy, Kentucky—had managed to survive. Cohen later discussed how he and Joel Agee had conceptualized the film:

We developed long lists of opposing traditions and forces, and tried to capture them on film. . . Roscoe’s belief in old-time living—gardening, hard physical work and home-made music and dances—contrasted with the mechanization of the coal mines, juke box music and white bread and baloney sandwiches. His own kids listened to country rock ‘n roll, and shunned their father’s music.³⁰

The contrast between the “old-time living” and the forces of commercial culture is established in the film as Holcomb’s daughter turns on the radio and dances the twist as Roscoe hoes his garden in front of their house.

Nimrod Workman was born in 1895, sixteen years before Roscoe Holcomb. As you would expect, Workman’s repertoire contained a number of archaic tunes, from the

British ballad “Lady Gay” to the white spiritual “Angel, Get My Mansion Ready,” but his music also reflected the influence of commercial country music. In one scene in *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category*, a group of young men visit the Workman house to hear the old balladeer sing a song. What we expect to follow is a moment of out of the typical Appalshop “folk documentary,” in which an old-timer passes on an old folk expression to a new generation, but Workman does not share an old ballad but, rather, a variation of a commercial country song from 1968 (Merle Haggard’s “Sing Me Back Home”). Because he sings the song with the same twang and emotion that he delivers the older songs, viewers not familiar with the Haggard tune might assume that the song is an old ballad.

The High Lonesome Sound, at least in the Roscoe Holcomb sections, is driven by a salvage mentality. Cohen wanted to document an instance of “uncontaminated” traditional culture before it vanished in the flux of the commercial, industrial world. In his 1990 *Visual Anthropology* article, Cohen acknowledges that his films have been as much about the external threats to traditional music as they are about traditional music itself: “My objective in filmmaking is to show the working of the cultures that produced the songs and to examine how these traditions survive in the present. Consequently, my films necessarily deal with the forces that also tend to destroy these traditions.”³¹ In *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category*, there is no fragile traditional culture threatened with extinction but simply cultural forms that are adapting and transforming to fit current circumstances. At one point in the film, Workman sings an original song for the filmmakers entitled “Watergate Boogie” about the Watergate scandal that had played out in the previous few years. Cohen could perceive only the passing of traditional music

making, but the Appalshop filmmakers, because they were enmeshed within the culture and had a stake in its outcome, emphasized the resiliency and versatility of musical forms.

Representing music in context

The High Lonesome Sound and *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category* do, however, share one notable characteristic: an attention to the social context in which traditional musicians live and perform. In his *Visual Anthropology* article, Cohen is explicit about this intention: “My efforts for the past twenty-seven years have been to produce films that focus on traditional music, placing the music in the context of the culture and using it as a way to interpret the culture.”³² In one respect, context refers to the social and political atmosphere of the local or regional area in which a film is set. The coal industry was a major component of the social and political landscape of Kentucky in the 1960s and 1970s, and both *The High Lonesome Sound* and *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category* acknowledge this. In another respect, though, context has a more intimate meaning and refers to the immediate surroundings and everyday rhythms of subjects. The camera picks up details of the interior and exteriors of subjects’ homes and follows them as they perform domestic duties. Music isn’t separate from the observation of household spaces and activities, for, in most cases, a song is what initiates these observations. In an early scene in *The High Lonesome Sound*, Cohen films Roscoe Holcomb singing “Across the Rocky Mountains.” Because Cohen didn’t have the technical capability for sync sound filming, he couldn’t keep his camera

fixed on Holcomb for an extended period of time, so he focuses on contextual imagery while the song continues to play on the soundtrack. Cohen turned a technical limitation into an innovative technique. He began using sync sound equipment on his next film in 1970, but he still periodically used the non-sync technique he developed on *The High Lonesome Sound* because of the possibilities it offered. He later explained this, saying, “There are levels of meaning that can be conveyed by not using sync sound and some of the most satisfying moments in my films have been constructed this way. The contextual material and related visuals are introduced while the sound of the musical performance continues. . . it is important to have the music complete, while the camera eye is gathering images that can illuminate the sounds.”³³

In his *Visual Anthropology* article, Cohen explains in depth the scene in which Holcomb sings “Across the Rocky Mountains”: [Figures 1-12]

I filmed Roscoe Holcomb sitting on his porch with a guitar, singing an old broadside ballad that he had personalized. During his “performance” the camera showed him from the front. . . It then moved around the interior of his house—showing how he lived—and the particular look and lifestyle of a rural home, along with a view out the windows to the corn, and another view out a window to Roscoe’s back, as he sat on the porch. Then the camera moved from behind his head, past his shoulder, to the view he was looking out at and then, with montage, surveyed the countryside and the coal fields around this region. The text to the song went back to a battlefield in Europe, the wounded soldier, and the girl who followed him. Roscoe sang, “she picked him up all in her arms, and carried him to the town.” At this point, the image showed a coal miner with blackened arms moving in front of a coal train. Having established this text-image interplay, the film could now move freely from past to present and survey the several contexts in which the song might exist, and the many levels of meaning one could bring to the performance.³⁴



Figs. 1-6



Fig.s 7-12

To clarify the flow of this sequence, figures 3 and 4 comprise one shot, with the camera tilting up slightly and shifting exposure from the interior (beds, nightstand, etc.) to the exterior (revealing the grass outside the window). Figures 6 and 7 also comprise one shot, with the camera panning from right (displaying the interior space of the bedroom) to left (revealing Holcomb sitting just outside the window). The glimpse of Holcomb on the

porch at the end of this shot serves as a transition into the next shot, in which the camera is back out on the porch with Holcomb. Cohen begins this shot with a tight profile framing of Holcomb as he plays his guitar and sings (figure 8). He then shifts the camera over Holcomb's head (figure 9) and then settles on a composition of the field in front of Holcomb's house (figure 10), simulating what Holcomb is currently looking at.

Cohen has said of *The High Lonesome Sound*, "Music was the film's subject, yet the camera always looked over the musician's shoulder to catch the life around him."³⁵ The phrase "over the musician's shoulder" is not just a figure of speech, for Cohen's camera literally peers over Holcomb's shoulder into his home and then again over his shoulder at the surrounding landscape. As the song "Across the Rocky Mountains" rings out, Cohen shifts seamlessly from the personal space of Holcomb's home to the wider social context of coal mining in Eastern Kentucky. The song refers to mountains in the American West, but, nevertheless, the image of moving across mountains reiterates the film's spatial move from Holcomb's home in Daisy, Kentucky to the Eastern Mountains Coal Fields.

In *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category*, Slone and Faulkner utilize a strategy similar to what Cohen used in *The High Lonesome Sound* to depict the context of the Workman family's space and routine. In an early scene, Workman launches into the traditional white spiritual "I'm Looking for that Stone" as he sits in his living room (figure 13). After a verse, the film shifts to Nimrod's wife Mollie making biscuits (figure 14) as the song continues to play on the soundtrack. In the next shot, Nimrod walks to his chicken coop to collect eggs (figure 15). For the next series of shots, Slone and Faulkner crosscut between Mollie in the kitchen and Nimrod outside until they are both

sitting at the table eating together (figure 16). The song ends as they eat, marking the end of this sequence.



Figures 13-16

The examination of the Workman home and the couple's everyday life (as a song continues on the soundtrack) isn't always achieved through montage. In a later scene, Workman sings another classic spiritual, "Angel, Get My Mansion Ready," as Slone and Faulkner show Workman and another man renovating a building on Workman's property. This sequence contains only two shots: a minute and twenty second take of Workman handing wood to the other man on the roof and a twenty-five second shot of Workman looking up towards this other man on the roof. The first shot is almost a film in an of itself: Workman hands a board up, walks over the woodpile, carries a board back to the

house, begins to hand it up, nearly gets hit with a falling piece of wood (which the other man doesn't appear to notice), and continues to hand the long board up the man on the roof as the film shifts to the next shot. Like Cohen's "Across the Rocky Mountains" sequence, there are connections between the song "Angel, Get My Mansion Ready" and the images displayed in this sequence. Workman sings about angels readying his mansion in heaven, but we see him building his own modest house on earth. The film's editing creates a contrast between the expected splendor and ease of the afterlife, and the toil and simplicity of human life.

The Changing Field of Folklore

In the period between the release of *The High Lonesome Sound* and the release of *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category* (from 1963 until 1975), the field of American folklore studies underwent a significant transformation. Since its inception in the late nineteenth century, folklore had primarily been a textually-driven discipline. Folklorists working with music transcribed the lyrics and melodies of folk tunes and then shared this material with colleagues in the form of books and articles. John and Alan Lomax shifted the direction of folklore in the 1930s by supplementing written transcriptions with disc recordings, which emphasized a singular performance rather than a fixed song text. The method of documentation might have evolved, but recordings didn't fundamentally alter the textual basis of folklore. Collected, anthologized, and preserved like relics, folklorists' recordings became a new type of text.³⁶

In the 1960s, folklorists began to stress the necessity of moving beyond a purely textual approach. In his landmark 1964 essay “Texture, Text and Context,” Alan Dundes acknowledged that the vast majority of folklore work up until that point had been textually oriented. Folklorists had let linguists handle the documentation of texture (characteristics of the spoken word like stress, pitch, and tone), and, everyone, folklorists and linguists alike, had ignored context, which Dundes described as “the specific social situation in which [a folklore item] is actually employed.”³⁷ Dundes argued that texture, text, and context must all be recorded by folklorists. Capturing the texture and context of a folkloric expression can open up a whole series of new questions and paths of inquiries. For instance, as Dundes notes, “One reason for collecting context is that only if such data is provided can any serious attempt be made to explain WHY a particular text is used in a particular situation.”³⁸

Another landmark work in American folklore studies was the publication of *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore* in 1972. This edited collection confirmed the paradigm shift in folklore towards the consideration of text in context. The central essay in this collection was arguably Dan Ben-Amos’s “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context,” in which he defines folklore not as an aggregate of things but as a communicative process. For Ben-Amos, it is absolutely critical that folklorists consider social context:

Folklore is very much an organic phenomenon in the sense that it is an integral part of culture. Any divorce of tales, songs, or sculptures from their indigenous locale, time, and society inevitably introduces qualitative changes into them. The social context, the cultural attitude, the rhetorical situation, and the individual aptitude are variables that produce distinct differences in the structure, text, and texture of the ultimate, verbal, musical, or plastic product.³⁹

Ben-Amos and the other contributors to *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore* went beyond Dundes's 1964 article by stressing the notion of the folklore "event." For these scholars, understanding the context of a folkloric expression meant apprehending "external" contextual elements (like the domestic spaces and routines of Holcomb and Workman and the wider social context of coal mining in Eastern Kentucky) but also the specific context of folkloric performance itself. Considering the context of a folkloric performance means approaching the performance holistically as a complex interaction between musicians and audience members. The audience is not a passive recipient of one-way communication but actually contribute to and shape the direction of the folkloric expression.

The key to the notion of folklore as "event" is that folkloric expression is generated in a group environment. As Ben-Amos notes, "The small group. . . is the particular context of folklore. . . folklore communication takes place in a situation in which people confront each other face to face and relate to each other directly."⁴⁰ According to this definition, much of the action that Ben Shahn and Frederic Ramsey, Jr. captured in their music photographs would qualify as folkloric communication because it depicts face-to-face communication and acknowledges the rich interplay between performers and audience members. Conversely, the songs Roscoe Holcomb plays in *The High Lonesome Sound* would not constitute folkloric communication because he is alone, playing only for the assembled filmmakers and not for some small group of local people. Until the 1960s, American documentary photographers were more attuned to the full performance contexts of vernacular music expression than their colleagues working in

documentary film, but, of course, the still photographs lack the sounds depicted in the images.

Bill Ferris's background in folklore and film

Folklore filmmakers in the 1960s and 70s increasingly captured the social context of folklore expression, but relatively few of these filmmakers were academically trained in folklore and were aware of the field's contextual turn. One exception was Bill Ferris. Ferris was trained as a folklorist in the late 1960s under the direction of Dan Ben-Amos at the University of Pennsylvania. Ferris is a pioneering figure in American folklore studies because he helped establish film as a legitimate form of folklore scholarship and was one of the first filmmakers to *self-consciously* document the context of folkloric expression.

In Ferris's first major scholarly publication, *Blues from the Delta* (1970), an examination of a group of blues performers in Leland, Mississippi, it's clear that he had absorbed the contextual shift in folklore studies. He acknowledges the importance of considering the culture out of which folkloric expression emerges, saying, "Scholars have rarely tried to relate folklore material to black culture, and have thus recorded text without context. . . In my own work I approached the lore as an index to the black culture in which it functions."⁴¹ Ferris also acknowledges the importance of studying small groups and being attuned to both performers and spectators: "Like prose narrative, the blues should be studied in the context of a field-recorded session to appreciate the drama and complexity of each song as it emerges from the conversation of others present, who

respond to and interrupt the singer during his performance.”⁴² In *Blues From the Delta* and his later writings, Ferris called the small group in Leland that he studied “the blues family,” noting that the musicians, while not literally related, shared the deep emotional bonds typically associated with kinship.

Ferris studied literature as an undergraduate at Davidson College, but, while researching Joyce in Ireland, met a professor who convinced him to pursue folklore. He entered the graduate folklore program at the University of Pennsylvania, one of the few Ph.D. programs in folklore at the time. From the outset, his research focused on the blues traditions in his home state of Mississippi. As an undergraduate, Ferris had made amateur recordings of African American musicians around Davidson College (in North Carolina) and around his hometown of Vicksburg, Mississippi, but, as a graduate student, his recordings and photographs became more than just casual documentation.⁴³

However energized Ferris was by the photographs and sound recordings he was amassing and sharing with his colleagues at Penn, he still felt that these materials didn’t adequately capture his experiences in Mississippi. Like John Cohen a few years before, Ferris was looking for a way to capture more of the context and emotion of vernacular music making. He felt that film could provide him with this wider scope. He later explained his move into filmmaking: “I felt that there were limits in the printed word when you were describing an experience and when you were playing a tape or when you were showing still photography. It seemed to me that film came closest to the total experience of being in the room with the music, somehow feeling it in a very deep sort of visceral way, rather than a cerebral way. It’s much more emotional, much more holistic as an experience than any of the other forms.”⁴⁴ In 1968 Ferris obtained a Super8 camera

through a cousin who was in the military, and he began to shoot footage of African American musicians and church services near Leland, Mississippi.

Ferris's colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania were receptive to his early film work in the late 1960s, but it would take a few more years before film was fully embraced by the folklore discipline. *The Journal of American Folklore* reflects the field's acceptance of film during the mid-1970s. The journal's first film review appeared in 1974 (a survey of the early Appalshop films), but it wasn't until 1976 that film became a regular feature of the journal.⁴⁵ In the July-September 1976 issue, there were six film reviews, including one written by Ferris,⁴⁶ and, in the October-November 1976 issue, there were nine film reviews, including a review of Ferris's early blues films written by the journal's lead record and film reviewer David Evans.

Evans revealed his thoughts about folklore film in his first article as lead reviewer: "As folklorists, we must ask for more than artfully edited raw footage, which may make fine entertainment and may boost the reputation of the producer for creative artistry but which is of little use for research or instruction. . . Art is vitally important to film making, but through constructive criticism we should try to make it complement and enhance the presentation of information."⁴⁷ Evans implies that the primary function of a folklore film is to reveal and/or explain aspects of folklife. In other words, a folklore film can be artistic, but art is not the ultimate goal of this kind of film.

Ferris's films embody this emphasis upon "information" rather than art. Unlike Cohen, who considered himself an artist and his films artistic expressions, Ferris had no illusions that his early films were works of art. He felt that the musicians he documented made a raw and beautiful form of art but that his films were just modest records of the

music in context. Ferris had no training in filmmaking and very little knowledge of the history and aesthetics of cinema. Although there is an admirable homemade quality to his early films (like the handwritten titles on posterboard), they are crude and filled with technical mistakes, including poor sound quality and jarring edits. Ferris acknowledges that he considered these films more as data than as satisfying aesthetic statements, noting that he “saw film as a means to an end more than as a kind of art in itself.”⁴⁸

While Cohen and Ferris differ about whether their work constitutes art, their early films share one major stylistic feature: lack of synchronous sound. *The High Lonesome Sound* and Ferris’s first three films—*Mississippi Delta Blues* (1969), *Black Delta Religion* (1969) and *Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas* (1970, alternately known as *Sonny Ford, Delta Artist*)—all feature soundtracks that drift from sync or don’t match the image at all. Like Cohen, Ferris wasn’t trained in filmmaking and simply used whatever equipment he could get his hands on. For his first two films, he shot in Super8, a relatively affordable and easy-to-use consumer format, but, for *Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas*, Ferris used a wind-up 16mm camera. Using a wind-up meant that the longest shot Ferris could capture was around forty seconds, but, like Cohen with *The High Lonesome Sound*, Ferris turned this technical limitation into an asset. The lack of sync freed his camera from a strict adherence to the musical performances and allowed him to roam around to pick up details of the environment and the subjects’ interactions while the audio recorder ran continuously.

Ferris and the politics of the blues

In *Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas*, Ferris is attuned to the social context the music is embedded within and to the specific performance contexts of the music itself, but he also developed a special understanding of how blues music was intertwined with the everyday lives of his subjects. As he later noted, "I was drawn to blues just as a way of seeing life. . . There's a limitless kind of depth to it if you begin to look at it in that way, it's not simply identifying who is singing which song."⁴⁹ Other scholars have reiterated this idea that the blues is not merely a form of expression but should be considered a type of worldview. As Clyde Woods explains in *Development Arrested*, "Working-class African Americans in the Delta and in the Black Belt South have constructed a system of explanation that informs their daily life, organizational activity, culture, religion and social movements. They have created their own ethno-regional epistemology. . . the blues epistemology."⁵⁰

For Ferris, approaching the blues as a "way of seeing life" was a much richer and more fruitful strategy than "simply identifying who is singing which song." When Ferris began his Mississippi fieldwork in the late 1960s, there was, however, a sizeable community of blues scholars and enthusiasts whose primary goal was to identify and classify all the major and minor blues artists. Establishing the blues taxonomy mostly involved sifting through recordings, and the definitive index of blues recordings, Robert Dixon and John Godrich's *Blues and Gospel Records 1890-1943*, was first published in 1964. As John Dougan notes, "Dixon and Godrich were driven by scientific objectivity; there was not a critical word written of any of the recordings listed."⁵¹ The canonical

task of identifying the “best” and most significant blues records was left to writers like Sam Charters and Paul Oliver and to the reissue labels like Origin Jazz Library and Yazoo. The blues reissues labels drew upon the immense holdings of individual collectors (Pete Whelan for Origin Jazz Library and Nick Perls for Yazoo), and these recordings were assembled into LP anthologies that focused on individual performers, styles, regions, or various themes.

Unlike blues enthusiasts like Dick Waterman, who facilitated the “rediscovery” of old blues recording artists like Mississippi John Hurt and Skip James, or Alan Lomax, who “discovered” and launched the career of previously unrecorded bluesmen like Fred McDowell, Ferris had no interest in resuscitating old recording artists or building the careers of new ones. Making commercial recordings was not a priority for Ferris, nor was collecting old recordings. Ferris encountered blues collectors like Nick Perls, but, as he explains, he wasn’t at all interested in accumulating old records: “I met Nick Perls. He was interested in some of the 78’s that I had picked up along the way, but I really could have cared less about collecting records. I was really coming out of the 60s and the Civil Rights Movement and had—and still have—an anger about the injustice that black people have faced for centuries and continue to face. For me I was trying to open a voice to the public that allowed us to confront that injustice.”⁵² Unlike the majority of writers and record label heads connected to the blues revival, who intentionally avoided making links between blues and politics, Ferris, perhaps because he grew up in the tense racial world of 1950s Mississippi, recognized the political implications of blues and hoped that his own work could serve as a positive political step.

The political message of *Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas* is not,

however, explicitly articulated by Ferris or by any of the subjects in the film. The political message is, as Ferris explains, “implicit,” meaning that the sense of politics emerges not from what people say but from what the film reveals.⁵³ Like the work of the FSA photographic unit in the 1930s, the radical element of Ferris’s early films was how they revealed a section of American social life that had been rarely seen by people outside the communities depicted in the films. In 1976 David Evans reviewed *Mississippi Delta Blues* and *Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas* for *The Journal of American Folklore*, and, while he criticizes the films for their technical crudeness, he praises them for revealing “activities and expressions that folklorists rarely have the opportunity of witnessing. Ferris' camera, as in many of his other films, probes into a level of his subjects' lives that they would not normally be expected to show outsiders. This is an indication of the high degree of acceptance Ferris must have had in the communities where he worked.”⁵⁴

When John Cohen traveled to Eastern Kentucky to make *The High Lonesome Sound*, he was a long way from home, about seven hundred miles. When Bill Ferris made *Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas*, he was only about eighty miles from his hometown of Vicksburg but arguably had to travel a much greater cultural distance than Cohen to connect with his subjects. As the news coverage of Appalachian poverty increased in the 1960s, some Appalachians became antagonistic to “strangers with cameras,” but this paled in comparison to the tense racial situation between black and white Mississippians during this same period. Ferris later explained some of the challenges he faced in documenting African American culture in the Delta:

When I began my work in the Delta in 1967, I was told that it was “past strange” for a white Mississippian like myself to record blacks in their homes. I found it impossible to work with both whites and blacks in the same community, for the confidence and cooperation of each was based on their feeling that I was “with them” in my convictions about racial taboos of Delta society. When whites introduced me to blues singers, our discussions were limited to non-controversial topics since performers felt my tapes would be played before whites in the community. In fact, local whites who provided contacts were suspicious of my work and often asked to hear the tapes...After [one unfortunate] incident I approached blacks directly and found that as long as I remained in their section of town I could work freely and effectively without interference from local whites.⁵⁵

Ferris defied the “racial taboos of Delta society” and forged a close bond with “Son” Thomas, his immediate family, and the extended “blues family” of Leland.

His early films reveal and celebrate unique characteristics of African American vernacular culture in the Delta, but they also give voice to a humanist vision of racial harmony. At one point in the film, “Son” Thomas shares his vision of racial interdependence: “You want me to tell you the truth: you can’t do without me and I can’t do without you. If you don’t need me now, you’ll need me one day, and, if I don’t need you now, I’ll need you one day. . . I gotta have somebody to help me live here. I gotta have white people to help me live here, and I gotta have some colored people to help me live here.” Thomas is talking, in part, about economic relationships between the races based on labor and capital, but he’s also suggesting that whites and blacks in the Delta need each other in more psychic and emotional ways.

Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas: structure, style and the representation of music

Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas contains eight major sections:

- 1) Establishing shots (many of which are taken from a moving car) of the landscape surrounding Leland and of the town and its African American community. On the soundtrack, “Son” Thomas sings “Rock Me Baby” and then provides some details about his life. Ferris can be heard asking Thomas questions. (This section is just under five minutes in length)
- 2) Thomas outside his home and then inside his home with his family. Thomas continues to talk about his life on the soundtrack, and his wife Christine then talks about eating dirt as we see her pull dirt from a large box. (about two and a half minutes in length)
- 3) The first extended musical sequence. A house party in which Thomas and a few other men play and sing while other men dance and drink. The soundtrack includes both music and excerpts of Ferris’s interview with Thomas. (just under nine minutes in length)
- 4) Thomas constructs a clay sculpture of a head outside his home with his children. He continues to talk about his life on the soundtrack. (just over four minutes in length)
- 5) Scene at a local blues club, in which Thomas and his band play for a large group of people. Only music on the soundtrack. (just under five minutes in length)
- 6) Christine doing housework around the Thomas home. On the soundtrack she discusses her life with James and the rest of her family. After a brief snippet of “Son” singing “Bottle Up and Go,” the soundtrack then shifts to James and Christine’s daughter talking about herself⁵⁶ as images of her and her mother preparing a meal are shown. (a little over eight minutes in length)
- 7) Another musical house party, this one apparently at the Thomas home. As opposed to the other party, women and children attend this gathering. Although there are shots of Thomas playing and singing, most of the images are of the spectators and dancers. Like

the previous house party, the soundtrack alternates between music and Thomas talking to Ferris. (just under six minutes in length)

8) A slow haunting song—“Cairo Blues,” about the drowning of the singer’s lover—carries over from the house party section into this final section, in which we see the Thomas family preparing the food and table for a meal. “Cairo Blues” continues on through the final credits. (about two and a half minutes in length)

In *The High Lonesome Sound* and *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category*, Cohen, Faulkner, and Slone often cut in images of domestic spaces and routines as a subject performs a song, but, with one brief exception,⁵⁷ Ferris doesn’t adhere to this editing strategy until the very end of his film, when “Cairo Blues” plays as the Thomas family prepares their meal. And while Cohen, Faulkner, and Slone attempt to make at least some subtle connection between the song being performed and the images being displayed, there doesn’t appear to be any rationale in Ferris’s film for linking a song about a drowned woman with images of the Thomas family preparing its meal. For the most part, then, depictions of musical performances and of subjects’ domestic lives are kept entirely separate throughout *Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas*. Musical performances are set aside as a special time outside of work in which people gather to blow off steam. This is altogether different from the depiction of music in *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category*. Faulkner and Slone often reveal how song is woven into everyday labor of Workman and his wife Mollie. As he digs up roots and as she washes dishes, they sing old ballads. Their singing in these instances doesn’t constitute a performance or an “event”; it is simply a way to make their work more pleasurable.

Because the image and music don't sync-up in the musical scenes of *Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas*, it's not jarring or frustrating when Ferris inserts interview material on the soundtrack or includes a high ratio of spectator shots. In fact, in the second and third musical sequences, there are more shots of the assembled onlookers and dancers than of the musicians themselves. Through his academic training, Ferris was attuned to capturing the entire scope of a "folklore event," which includes not just the expression of the musicians but the reactions and input of the assembled "audience." Like in the "Good Times" section of Frederic Ramsey's *Been Here and Gone*, the line between performer and audience member often blurs in Ferris's early films.

Other than the occasional moment when he can be heard asking "Son" Thomas a question, Ferris has no presence in *Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas*. Years later, Ferris wrote and discussed how he established close relationships with the "blues family" of Leland, but the film itself does not include any of this information or show Ferris as a participant at any of the blues gatherings. Nevertheless, while subjects don't talk directly to Ferris as he operates the camera, many of the subjects do acknowledge his camera. This isn't surprising, for Ferris had to use a high wattage light for many of the house party scenes in order to obtain a proper exposure. He later explained that his observational style was based on the level of comfort and trust he could establish between himself and his subjects:

I really just tried to be an observer, in the sense that I did not want to orchestrate. I tried to capture what was happening and to move in and out of it in a way that was unobtrusive—which obviously is impossible to do—but you have an instinct in your gut that people are with you or they are nervous about you. When I felt that people were comfortable with me, I was able to film. And that usually came pretty quickly when you're

dealing with music. You're much less interesting than the musician and the dance.⁵⁸

Ferris attempted to remain relatively unobtrusive, but he understood that the subjects wouldn't altogether forget that he was there but, rather, would eventually become accustomed to his presence.

Conclusion

What links the films in this chapter and many of folklore documentaries about vernacular music during the 1960s and 1970s is the emphasis upon context. Rather than artificially re-create vernacular musical practices, documentary filmmakers increasingly wanted to capture vernacular music in its native context, be it in the hills of Kentucky or the Delta of Mississippi. In the same way Ben Shahn was able to photograph the flux of musical life in the 1930s, filmmakers during the 60s and 70s began to capture music as it happened. Filmmakers continued to rely upon explanatory commentary to orient the viewer, but they also increasingly gave viewers the freedom to make sense of films on their own.⁵⁹ In the following chapter, I explore further the tension between observation and exposition in documentary work during this period.

Filmmakers like Cohen, Slone, Faulkner, and Ferris recognized that effectively capturing the music meant paying attention to things that weren't purely musical: the texture of interior and exterior spaces, domestic routines and rhythms, gestures and facial expressions, the reactions and input of audience members, and so on. The issue of context is not just relevant to what is displayed in front of the camera but also to who

produced the film itself and whether the filmmakers share the same cultural community as the film's subjects. The 1960s and 1970s marked the rise of indigenous documentary filmmaking,⁶⁰ and *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category* embodies this "insider" advocacy approach. In the following chapter I discuss the 1980 film *Mississippi Delta Blues*, another example of an "insider" production.

Of course, many of the documentary films about vernacular music during the 60s and 70s involved a transcultural dimension. Filmmakers traveled outside their own familiar context, outside the boundaries of race, class, and geography, in order to document the musical practices of others. As I explained in the Doris Ulmann section of Chapter Two, sometimes this can be a perilous journey, for the assumptions and motivations of the person behind the camera can cloud and distort the image. While many documentary filmmakers during this period continued to fall into the old traps of romanticism and exoticism (Les Blank is a good example), there was more of an awareness of these traps and of the underlying political and economic realities of subjects' lives.

Notes

¹ See Jack C. Ellis and Betsy A. McLane's "Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité, 1960-1970" from *A New History of Documentary Film* (New York : Continuum, 2005) and Erik Barnouw's "Observer" and "Catalyst" from *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1993).

² Discussed by Davenport in the "About" section of the Folkstreams website: <http://www.folkstreams.net/pages/about.html>, accessed on Dec. 3, 2007.

³ Erik Barnouw's *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, Bill Nichols's *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) and Jack Ellis and Betsy McLane's *A New History of Documentary Film*.

⁴ To arrive at this number, I went through the two major indices of folklore films produced by the Center for Southern Folklore: *American Folklore Films and Videotapes: An Index* (published in 1976) and *American Folklore Films and Videotapes: A Catalog* (published in 1982). I checked every film in the following categories: "Folk Music", "Folk Music—Afro-American", "Folk Music—Afro-American—Blues", "Folk Music—Afro-American—Fife Music/Drumming", "Folk Music—Afro-American—Surveys", "Folk Music—Afro-American—Work Chants", "Folk Music—Ballads", "Folk Music—Bluegrass", "Folk Music—Country and Mountain", "Folk Music—Cowboy Songs", "Folk Music—Music Festivals", "Folk Music—Folk Music Festivals", "Folk Music—Instruments", "Folk Music—Instruments—Banjo", "Folk Music—Instruments—Dulcimer", "Folk Music—Instruments—Fiddle", "Folk Music—Instruments—Guitar", "Folk Music—Protest Songs", "Folk Music—Work and Labor Songs." I excluded instructional films, films that were exclusively performance-based and didn't seem to capture the surrounding context of the performance, and listings that did not indicate a date. I included films in which music seemed to be a primary focus (it didn't need to be the major focus or the only focus), which meant that films in which the music merely serves as background didn't qualify. While my one hundred and forty number may be slightly off, it does demonstrate that there was a huge increase in documentaries on roots music produced in the 60s and 70s.

⁵ According to a Time magazine article in 1962, "Tom Dooley" sold more than 2.6 million copies. While I have not located precise sales figures for the Ramblers records, it's fair to assume that they sold in the typical Folkways range, from a couple hundred to a couple thousand copies.

⁶ "Sibyl with Guitar," Time, Nov. 23, 1962,

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,829501-6,00.html>, accessed on Oct. 4, 2007.

⁷ Stekert, Ellen J. "Cents and Nonsense in the Urban Folksong Movement," originally published in 1966, reprinted in *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, edited by Neil V. Rosenberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993) p. 97.

⁸ Cohen, John. *There is No Eye: John Cohen Photographs*. (New York: powerHouse books, 2001) p. 156.

⁹ Liner notes for CD *There is No Eye: Music for Photographs* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2001) p. 4.

¹⁰ Cohen, John. "A Visitor's Recollection," in *Long Journey Home: Folklife in the South*, edited by Allen Tullos (Chapel Hill, N.C.: *Southern Exposure*, 1977) p. 117.

¹¹ Patterson, Daniel W. "A Case for the Folklife Film," in *Documenting Cultural Diversity in the Resurgent American South* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 1997) p. 13.

¹² Cohen and Agee did a test run with the camera on the roof of a Greenwich Village building with a notable musician: "The trial run took place on top of a second friend's house. We were going to film the roofs of the Village, the sky, the pigeons, each other. But a third friend of John's dropped by, a folksinger named Bob Dylan who was all excited about some new songs he had written, and we ended up making a fifteen-minute film of him." [From <http://www.archipelago.org/vol7-1/agee2.htm>, accessed on May 24, 2007].

¹³ Film available in streaming video format at <http://www.folkstreams.net/pub/stream.php?s=25&f=42>

¹⁴ Sherman, Sharon. *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video and Culture* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998) p. 215.

¹⁵ Cohen, John. "Musical Documents," *Visual Anthropology*, Vol. 3, Issue No. 2/3 (1990) p. 460.

¹⁶ Transcript for *Remembering the High Lonesome* is available online at <http://www.folkstreams.net/context,92>.

¹⁷ During this period, the most influential book on the problem of poverty in the United States was Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, which, like *Night Comes to the Cumberland*, was released in 1962. Lyndon Johnson read *The Other America*, and the book was reportedly a driving force behind his War on Poverty initiative.

¹⁸ Cohen talked to Tom Davenport about this issue: "Now the film that has recently been made, *Stranger with a Camera*, about a Canadian filmmaker who was shot because people thought he was depicting them in a bad light. The same people who made that film, asked for all my cuts from *The High Lonesome Sound*. They thought if they had my vision of how I looked at the South, they would have more evidence for their case. From what I understand, they never used any of my footage in their film because they won't find anything in my films that supports their arguments."

[<http://www.folkstreams.net/context,39>]

¹⁹ Hanna, Stephen P. "Three Decades of Appalshop Films: Representational Strategies and Regional Politics," *Appalachian Journal* 25 (Summer 1998).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

²¹ Gaines, Jane "Appalshop Documentaries: Inventing and Preserving Appalachia," *Jump Cut*, No. 34 (1989) p. 55.

²² Hanna, p. 380.

²³ McCutcheon is not a native Appalachian. He was born in Wisconsin and now lives in Charlottesville, Virginia.

²⁴ In 1978, Appalshop produced a portrait documentary on John Jacob Niles, which adheres to the basic conventions of its "folk documentary" genre.

²⁵ Marcus, Greil. "13 Essential Southern Documentaries: Music Makers of the Blue Ridge" *Oxford American*, Issue 43, Winter 2002 (Southern Movie Issue), accessed at <http://www.oxfordamericanmag.com/content.cfm?ArticleID=164> on July 2, 2007.

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- ²⁶ Jones, Michael Owens. "Foreword," in Sharon Sherman's *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video and Culture*, p. x.
- ²⁷ "A Visitor's Recollection," p. 117.
- ²⁸ "Musical Documents," p. 459.
- ²⁹ Liner notes for CD *There is No Eye: Music for Photographs*, p. 17.
- ³⁰ "A Visitor's Recollection," p. 117.
- ³¹ "Musical Documents," p. 461.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 457.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 473.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 459-460.
- ³⁵ "A Visitor's Recollection,"
- ³⁶ This wasn't just the case with non-commercial, folkloric recordings. In 1940 Alan Lomax prepared a list of 350 folk songs on commercial records that the Library of Congress had been collected. In the 1930s and 40s, progressive folklorists like B.A. Botkin and Lomax stressed that folkloric expression could be preserved within a commercial medium.
- ³⁷ Dundes, Alan. "Texture, Text and Context," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 28 (1964) p. 255-256.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 256.
- ³⁹ Ben-Amos, Dan. "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," in *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, edited by Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman (Austin: Published for the American Folklore Society by the University of Texas Press, 1972) p. 4.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.
- ⁴¹ Ferris, William. *Blues from the Delta* (London: November Books Limited, 1970) p. 23.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- ⁴³ Phone interview between Bill Ferris and the author, June 19, 2007.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ After 1976, most every issue of *The Journal of American Folklore* included at least a few film reviews, and some issues even featured a separate section designated just for reviews of folk music films.
- ⁴⁶ Ferris wrote a review of Colin Young's 1967 film *The Village*, about the state of Gaelic culture in a small Irish town. Ferris praises Young's ability to capture life spontaneously: "*The Village* is an important contrast to Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934), which dramatized Flaherty's vision of peasant life. Flaherty insisted, for example, that the Aran Islanders learn to hunt sharks as their ancestors had done and filmed a staged shark hunt in which several nearly lost their lives. Rather than try to recreate a vision of the past, *The Village* places us in the midst of daily life and the many characters and events which flow through it during a weekend."
- ⁴⁷ Evans, David. "From the New Record & Film Review Editor," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 88, No. 350 (Oct. - Dec., 1975) p. 444.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Woods, Clyde. *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London; New York: Verso, 1998) p. 16.

⁵¹ Dougan, John. "Two Steps from the Blues: Creating Discourse and Constructing Canons," unpublished dissertation for The College of William and Mary, 2001, p. 177.

⁵² Ferris phone interview.

⁵³ Although this is not referenced in the film, Ferris does mention in *Blues from the Delta* that some of Thomas's songs deal with racial conflict and that his repertoire was geared exclusively towards black audiences. [p. 103]

⁵⁴ Evans, David. "Review: *Mississippi Delta Blues/Delta Blues Singer: James 'Sonny Ford' Thomas*," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 89, No. 354. (Oct.-Dec., 1976) pp. 512-513.

⁵⁵ Ferris, William R. "The Blues Family," in *Long Journey Home: Folklife in the South*, edited by Allen Tullos (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Southern Exposure, 1977) p. 21.

⁵⁶ Like *The High Lonesome Sound, Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas* reveals a generational rift over music. Thomas's daughter says that blues is "old folks music" and that she prefers the contemporary soul music.

⁵⁷ The short snippet of "Bottle Up and Go" in section six.

⁵⁸ Ferris phone interview.

⁵⁹ I don't want to create the impression that these films were "made" by viewers through their active process of seeing and interpreting. Of course, it was the filmmakers who made these films by recording the original footage, designating certain portions of it as significant, and arranging these pieces into sequences to emphasize particular details and ideas. All I'm saying is that observational documentaries tend to be more "open" than traditional expository documentaries, in that they typically allow the viewer more freedom to absorb details and formulate interpretations.

⁶⁰ A landmark of indigenous documentary filmmaking was the 1966 documentary series *Through Navajo Eyes*, in which anthropologists trained Native Americans to make their own films.

Chapter Six

In and Out of the Picture: Documenting Shifts in Blues Music

In the early 1960s, a group of American filmmakers used the new portable camera and audio equipment to create a new kind of documentary film. Based on observation of subjects and events, this new style came to be known as direct cinema.¹ As Stella Bruzzi has noted, there was a certain evangelical quality in the comments of early direct cinema practitioners. Some described their work as “pure” and claimed that they didn’t impose anything on the people they filmed. As Bruzzi explains, though, if one even casually watches the major works of direct cinema, the “discrepancy between execution and ideal” is obvious.² Many of the direct cinema films incorporated stylistic and thematic features typically associated with narrative film, and, even in the more straightforward productions, it’s clear that the filmmakers shaped the material to accentuate certain points. In other words, the direct cinema claims of purity and objectivity are contradicted by the obvious creative logic of the films themselves.

I mention this contradiction not to debunk the value or sincerity of the direct cinema movement but because it highlights a central tension within all documentary work: how to represent subjects fairly while still acknowledging and maintaining the perspective of the documentarian.

In this chapter I demonstrate how this tension informs two documentary films that focus on blues music: *And This is Free* (1965) and *Mississippi Delta Blues* (1980). In these two films, there is a dialectical tug between showing and telling. *And This is Free* was shot in the observational spirit of direct cinema, but the film’s editor Howard Alk

crafted the raw material into an intricate city symphony³ teeming with cryptic social messages. The folklorist Worth Long worked on Alan Lomax's documentary *The Land Where the Blues Began* (1979), but for *Mississippi Delta Blues*, Long's documentation of the third Delta Blues Festival, he intentionally avoided Lomax's didactic expository approach in order to let the music and the musicians tell the story.

According to documentary theorist Bill Nichols, there have been six major modes of documentary film: Poetic, Expository, Observational, Participatory, Reflexive, and Performative.⁴ For the most part, *And This is Free*, *Mississippi Delta Blues*, and the three films discussed in Chapter Five exhibit characteristics of just two of the modes, the Observational and the Participatory.⁵ *The Land Where the Blues Began* is notably different than these five films because it functions predominately within the Expository mode. Expository documentaries are structured around commentary which is communicated through an on-screen presence, an off-screen voice-over, or intertitles. The function of the commentary is to "propose a perspective, advance an argument, or recount history."⁶

The Observational mode is exemplified by the early direct cinema films of the 1960s, in which filmmakers recorded human behavior as it unfolded, with little or no intervention. The early direct cinema filmmakers rejected the earlier tradition of expository documentary, which meant they included "no voice-over commentary, no supplementary music or sound effects, no intertitles, no historical reenactments, no behavior repeated for the camera, and not even any interviews."⁷ The purism of this stance has proven difficult to maintain over the past several decades, and most

documentaries rooted in observation feature at least some elements of the other documentary modes.

The Participatory mode (labeled the Interactive mode in Nichols's earlier scholarship) includes two types of films, those in which the encounter between the filmmaker and the subjects is foregrounded and those in which the filmmaker's presence recedes and the subjects are allowed "to speak for themselves." *And This is Free*, *Mississippi Delta Blues*, and the films discussed in Chapter Five fall in this latter category of Participatory documentary, for, aside from the occasional off-screen comment, the filmmakers are largely absent from the action. Subjects "speak for themselves" via interviews and performances setup by the filmmaker.⁸

As Nichols explains, the emphasis in participatory films is upon a "witness-centered voice of testimony" rather than upon the "author-centered voice of authority" that is central to expository documentaries. Participatory documentaries structured around interviews are closely related to oral history in that the aim is to capture subjects' experiences and perspectives rather than to develop an author's line of thinking. Of course, like in printed oral history accounts, the interview comments in participatory films are often highly edited, but, nevertheless, the "textual authority" typically resides more with the speaking subjects than with the filmmakers.

This notion of "textual authority" also applies to music, and, in this chapter, I consider the contentious issue of who played blues music and to whom during the 1960s and 70s. In *And This is Free*, all of the onscreen blues musicians are African American. Michael Bloomfield, the musician that helped coordinate the film and who plays on a number of songs in it, never appears onscreen. Mike Shea, the director of *And This is*

Free, intentionally framed Bloomfield out of the picture because Bloomfield was white and Shea believed that blues was and should remain black music. Nevertheless, despite Shea's effort to maintain the African American identity of blues music, Bloomfield represented the increasing appropriation of blues by whites during the 1960s. By the end of the decade, the audience for blues was no longer predominately black. Worth Long's Delta Blues Festival and the *Mississippi Delta Blues* film were a reaction to this shift. Long sought to restore, or at least to honor, blues within the racial and geographic community that originally nurtured it.

Music as the main focus/Music as one element among many

Bill Ferris provides a wealth of detail about "Son" Thomas's upbringing and home life in *Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas*, but, ultimately, the main focus of the film is the music Thomas makes and shares with others in Leland. The title of the film is not *James "Son" Thomas* but *Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas*. In the same way, John Cohen's film is not generically titled "Life in Eastern Kentucky" but, rather, *The High Lonesome Sound*, signaling that the primary focus is the traditional music styles of the region. Contextual information about musicians' lives and the larger social worlds they inhabit are important elements, but the reason Ferris and Cohen made their early films was because they were attracted to a particular style of music.

Ballad singing is a significant part of *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category*, but it's not the primary focus of the film. Ballad singing is part of Workman's story, but so is coal mining, pickling vegetables, and maintaining a large family. As

Carolyn Lipson-Walker noted in a review of *Nimrod Workman* in *The Journal of American Folklore*, “The film is a good illustration that folklore is just one aspect of a person's life and personality.”⁹ This brings up an important distinction in evaluating documentary films that depict music. In some documentaries, music is the primary focus, but, in other films, music is just one component of many.

The 1965 film *And This is Free*, set in the Maxwell Street market of Chicago, teeters between these two poles, between music being the primary focus and music being just a single ingredient among many. Initially the film was conceived as a portrait of the outdoor market where music—predominately blues and gospel—was to be just one (albeit highly significant) part of the portrait, but, in the editing room, Howard Alk emphasized the musicality of every aspect of street culture. Gordon Quinn, who was the sound recordist for the film and went on to become a significant documentary filmmaker in his own right, discusses the unique “life as music” quality of *And This is Free*:

We considered calling [the film] “The Music of Maxwell Street,” but we didn’t think it would convey what we meant because we meant the kid who plays the box, we meant the pitchman, we meant the guy who’s selling the little sparkplugs that you put in your car. That’s a kind of music too. We thought of it in a broader sense that there were a lot of people who were doing different kinds of performances on the street and we weaved those different things together and that those performances had a rhythmic quality and sometimes other qualities that made them a kind of music.¹⁰

Almost everything in *And This is Free*, including the sales pitches and the curbside sermons, is a type of performance, and, in the hands of the editor Alk, the non-musical portions of the film are imbued with a sense of musicality. Alk emphasized the internal rhythms of each performance but also assembled all the performances into one

continuous forty-seven minute street symphony.

And This is Free: Background information and the direct cinema influence

And This is Free was directed by Mike Shea. It was his first film. He was not trained as a folklorist—in fact, he never went past the eighth grade—and he probably never thought of what he was doing as folklore. Shea was born in 1925 and began to work as a news photographer in the 1940s. In the 1950s he established himself as a successful freelance photographer and frequently contributed to major magazines like *Life*, *Time*, and *Ebony*. His photographic idol was W. Eugene Smith, a pioneering American photojournalist who produced searing images of World War II and some of *Life* magazine's major photo-essays of the 1950s. In the early 1960s, Shea was ready to transition out of photography. The dominance of the old photo magazines like *Life* and *Look* was beginning to break down. The fresh currents in visual journalism were not emerging from photography but from film.¹¹

As an undergraduate at The University of Chicago in the early 1960s, Gordon Quinn met Mike Shea. The two men bonded over their love of the new journalistic films that were being made with the portable, sync-sound equipment, a genre of filmmaking that would come to be known as direct cinema. Quinn later remarked on seeing the early direct cinema films with Shea, “We saw them together, and [Mike] was like, ‘This is it.’ This is what he had been waiting for his whole life to be able to make these kind of films.”¹²

In 1960 Robert Drew formed Drew Associates and produced three films for Time-Life with the new sync-sound-capable cameras and audio recorders. The most well-known of the Drew Associates films is *Primary*, an examination of the presidential primary race between Hubert Humphrey and John F. Kennedy. The film reveals the behind-closed-doors strategizing and the informal behavior of candidates when they weren't on camera or meeting the public. Aside from showing these behind-the-scenes moments, the film also captures the energy of public moments on the campaign trail, including a famous long take of Kennedy as moves through a crowded convention hall and gets on stage.

Shea and Quinn were particularly impressed with the 1963 film *Happy Mother's Day*, about the birth of quintuplets in Aberdeen, South Dakota. *The Saturday Evening Post* and the television network ABC commissioned Richard Leacock and Joyce Chopra to make a film about the quintuplets and their parents but rejected the filmmakers' final edit (and subsequently re-cut their own version) because ABC's sponsors felt the original cut, by revealing the exploitation of the event and the family's ambivalence about the wave of attention, undermined what was supposed to be a celebratory story. Quinn saw the film as a revelation because he recognized that Leacock and Chopra found the film *as they were shooting* rather than before they began shooting: "By looking at life's ambiguities, emotions and empathies stirred by concrete details, the 'story' was allowed to emerge from what the filmmakers experienced before the camera."¹³

In 1964 Mike Shea bought a portable sync-sound camera rig from the people who had built a similar rig for Richard Leacock the previous year. In August he and Gordon Quinn began shooting what would eventually become *And This is Free*. They shot only

on Sundays, the only day the Maxwell Street market was in full swing. The market, located on the west side of town, had been established by European Jewish immigrants in the 1870s and was affectionately known in Chicago as “Jewtown.” In the post-World War II era, the cultural makeup of the market began to change with the influx of African Americans into Chicago.¹⁴ The Maxwell Street market became much more of a multicultural space, not just in terms of the merchants and shoppers but also the rich variety of street entertainment. In the film, a few of the merchants say that they preferred the market the way it used to be, an unobvious way of saying that they preferred it before the influx of African Americans.¹⁵

In many respects, *And This is Free* adheres to the basic style and strategies of the early direct cinema films: all the action is observed and not staged, subjects generally don’t interact on screen with the camera and the filmmakers, and there is no voice-over narration.¹⁶ In a few instances, like when Shea shoots from the rooftops of Maxwell Street buildings, subjects weren’t even aware that they were being filmed, but, most of the time, though, people on the street were fully aware that the crew was filming and felt comfortable because the filmmakers had become “regulars” at the market. Rather than record events in a detached manner like a “fly on the wall,” the crew attempted to become another part of the street culture.

Like the classic shot of Kennedy walking through the political rally in *Primary*, Shea attempted to put the viewer in the middle of the action through the use of long, mobile takes. This is particularly evident in the scene of Jim Brewer’s street corner band performing the gospel tune “Power to Live Right” as Shea follows Carrie Robinson from her singing into the movements of her ecstatic dance [Figure 1].



Fig. 1

And This is Free: Divergence from direct cinema

In 1971 Richard Leacock reflected on the purism of early direct cinema: “We now subjected ourselves to a rather rigid set of rules. If we missed something, never ask anyone to repeat it. Never ask any questions. Never interview. We rarely broke [these rules] and when we did we regretted it.”¹⁷ *And This is Free* adheres to basic observational style of early direct cinema but obviously diverges from the tradition by including extensive audio interview excerpts. Quinn recorded interviews with many of the street merchants and performers, and their comments are interspersed over images of the market. Unlike Ferris’s *Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas*, where the interview segments typically run in long continuous blocks, the interview excerpts in *And This is Free* are, in the words of Gordon Quinn, “extremely crafted pieces of track.”¹⁸ The segments rarely run longer than twenty seconds, and, in some cases, a series of

segments from different interviewees are assembled together to address a particular point about the market.

More than the use of audio interviews, what really differentiates *And This is Free* from the early direct cinema films is the film's intricate, conceptual editing by Howard Alk. Like Shea, Alk was a generation older than Quinn. By all accounts, Alk was an extremely intelligent and talented person. In 1959 he was one of the founders of The Second City, Chicago's legendary improvisational comedy troupe. At some point in the 1950s, he was taught film editing by Johnny Link, who had been editing Hollywood films since 1930. In 1959 Alk edited his first major film, *The Cry of Jazz*. Centered around the contentious (and fictitious) debates about jazz and race among black and white members of Chicago jazz society, *The Cry of Jazz* includes stunning footage of jazz performances, most notably of Sun Ra and his Arkestra. Like *And This is Free*, though, there are no full performances of songs in *The Cry of Jazz*, only highly edited excerpts. In Alk's mind, if full performances were desired, one could simply attend a concert or listen to an LP. The point of representing music in film was not to reproduce a performance but to communicate ideas and stir feelings.

Even though Alk's film career blossomed at the same time direct cinema emerged, he was more anchored in the old Griersonian tradition of expository documentary (according to Quinn, Alk had studied many of the 1930s British documentaries by the Grierson team). Alk believed more in crafting a message rather than in presenting long, continuous blocks of human behavior. With that said, though, Alk's editing is much less didactic and much more imaginatively associative than the 1930s Grierson documentaries (with the possible exception of *Song of Ceylon*).

Sometimes the associations are merely repetitions of words that help ease the transitions between scenes. For instance, when the Brewer band finishes their rendition of “Power to Live Right,” Alk cuts to a salesman demonstrating sparkplugs who says, “When you talk about power, watch this!” And, after a preacher talks about how a woman is upset that her husband John no longer gives her money, Alk cuts to a harmonica player performing the song “Long Gone John.” In other scenes, the editing associations are more complex and conceptual. There are several examples in the film, but I’ll cite two, both of which incorporate the performance of a traditional American song.

In one of the interview excerpts, a street merchant discusses the changing landscape of American business: “Years ago if a fella didn’t want to go to college he had a little chance if he went out in business. You know, you could get somewhere. The big guys took over, you know, IBM machines and one thing led to another, you know what I mean, I see the whole thing happen.” After this excerpt, Alk shifts the audio track to Maxwell Street musician Blind Arvella Gray performing the folk standard “John Henry.” Alk links the merchant’s comments about big corporations marginalizing small businessmen to the well-known nineteenth century folk song about technology challenging and ultimately supplanting African American manual labor. In both cases, it’s the machine—the “IBM machine” in the contemporary instance and the steam-powered hammer in the folk song—that squashes the dignity and promise of individual labor. The images in this sequence, however, don’t always correspond to this familiar narrative of the domination of machine over man. Over the tune of “John Henry,” Alk cuts in images of machine parts scattered over Maxwell Street and merchants cashing in on the industrial debris [Figures 2-5].



Figs. 2-5

Machines don't drive the small Maxwell Street merchants out of business, for some of the merchants base their livelihood on selling old machine parts. In a clever juxtaposition of song and image, Alk undercuts the narrative about the dominance of the machine and of big business and shows how resourceful small businessmen—specifically, African American small businessmen—make a living by recycling components of the machine age.

Another clever juxtaposition of song and image occurs with Fanny Brewer's rendition of "I Shall Overcome." Emerging out of the African American slave song "I'll Be All Right," "I Shall Overcome" was an important song in African American labor struggles of the 1940s. A variation of "I Shall Overcome," "We Shall Overcome,"

became the primary anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. Alk begins this scene with Fanny Brewer and another woman performing “I Shall Overcome” for pocket change on Maxwell Street. Alk again makes clever associations through the editing, cutting to a shot of men walking past Brewer (who is blind) as she sings the line “I will see his face” [Figures 6-7].



Figs. 6-7

As Brewer’s rendition of “I Shall Overcome” continues on the audio track, Alk cuts in a series of shots of people on Maxwell Street. These shots were likely filmed on different days and at different locations, but Alk makes it seem like a single place and time. A man on a bicycle rides down the street. He wears what appears to be a Navy-issued hat, and an American flag is affixed to his bicycle basket. In the next shot, a man, also wearing what appears to be a military hat, looks in the direction of the camera and unfurls a homemade sign that reads “Free Africa.” This man is white and he is standing next to two African American men. Alk cuts back to the man on the bicycle. This man waves his hand in disgust in the direction of the camera as he moves past.

Alk makes it seem that the sign is unfurled specifically for the man on the bicycle and that the man on the bicycle is reacting in disgust to the sign, but, because *And This is*

Free was shot with only one camera, that is simply not possible. The “Free Africa” sign was displayed for the filmmakers, and the man on the bicycle was either reacting to the filmmakers or to something else in their vicinity. The connection between the two men was created solely through editing. In the final shot of this sequence, an African American boy pedals his scooter past the camera. The camera focuses in on the side of his scooter, where the word “Prosperity” is printed on a board that likely came from a consumer crate [series runs from figure 8 to figure 11].



Figs. 8-11

In this sequence Alk probably didn't intend to communicate a single, specific message but, rather, attempted to generate associations that were suggestive but still ambiguous. “I Shall Overcome” was used extensively in African American social struggles after

World War II. In the context of 1964, the song wasn't a generic tune about overcoming hardship but was explicitly about racial struggle and triumph. Race is key to the song's contemporary meaning, and Alk appears to understand this.

The action in Figure 9—the “Free Africa” sign and the black and white men standing together—suggests a vision of racial integration and justice, whereas the dismissive gesture on the man on the bike suggests an intolerant rejection of this vision. With their military clothing, both men appear patriotic and proud of their country, but the editing implies that they are divided in their attitudes about race. The final image of the “Prosperity” sign on the African American boy's scooter is tricky to interpret, suggesting, in one respect, that America puts its economic self-interest ahead of its egalitarian ideals, and, in another respect, that the country's economic well-being is entirely dependent upon resolving racial strife and getting African Americans “on board.”

Alk's intricate editing is also evident in a moment shortly after the “I Shall Overcome” sequence. The camera observes a man standing on a street corner. It seems that this man doesn't notice that he is being filmed. He stands on the corner looking somewhat befuddled and tentative about where he is going. On the audio track, a woman can be heard preaching to a crowd. She tells them, “Without Jesus I would be sick, without Jesus I would be miserable. . . Jesus loves me. He says to praise him, and, folks, how can you refuse to praise such a wonderful wonderful sweet wonderful lover that loves your soul?” As the woman preaches, the man begins to cross the street, suggesting perhaps that he has found some “direction” and that he is heading towards a more pious life. However, when the woman stops speaking, the soundtrack shifts to the sound of an electric blues band, and it is revealed that the man is walking not “towards God” but

towards the blues music that he hears. Suddenly, the “wonderful lover” the preacher mentions doesn’t refer to Jesus but to the men and women dancing erotically to the music.

Robert Night Hawk, Michael Bloomfield and the debate over white blues

What follows is the most extended blues sequence of *And This is Free*. The song featured in this sequence is the classic blues tune “Dust my Broom,” performed by Robert Night Hawk and a small band. Like second and third musical sequences of *Delta Blues Singer: James "Son" Thomas*, there are more shots of the crowd than of Night Hawk and his band playing (although, in the hands of Alk, the crowd shots were likely assembled from a variety of different performances and not just from a single Night Hawk set).

As one of the key figures in the history and development of the blues, Robert Night Hawk was one of the central reasons why *And This is Free* was made. Born in 1909 in Helena, Arkansas, Night Hawk was one of the early practitioners of downhome acoustic blues (he made his first commercial recordings in 1937). He migrated to Chicago after the war and, along with Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf and others, helped to establish the sound and style of urban electric blues. Waters and Wolf became recording stars on the Chess label in the mid-1950s, but Night Hawk never managed to establish more than a small regional reputation in Chicago and in Mississippi. His passion for making records was limited, and he didn’t have the alluring stage presence of the Chess Records stars. As Waters, Wolf, and the other Chess standouts performed at

the large clubs in Chicago, Night Hawk continued to play at small bars and on Maxwell Street on Sundays.

During some of Night Hawk's Maxwell Street jam sessions, he was joined by a young, white guitar prodigy named Michael Bloomfield. Unlike Night Hawk, who lived the prototypical blues life of rambling and hard times, Bloomfield grew up in a well-off family on Chicago's North Side. As a young teenager, he began frequenting the blues clubs of Chicago's South Side and was periodically invited to come onstage to sit in with his musical idols. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, Bloomfield had become an important figure within the Chicago blues scene. He managed a club, played in several different bands, and began to get steady session work. It was during this time that Bloomfield met Mike Shea. Like Howard Alk, Shea was a devoted fan of jazz, and most jazz aficionados in the postwar era appreciated blues because it was viewed as one of the key ingredients in the development of jazz. Bloomfield suggested that Shea film some of the blues performances on Maxwell Street, and, because Bloomfield knew almost all the blues musicians on Maxwell, he offered to serve as a mediator between the film crew and the musicians.¹⁹

Bloomfield didn't just help setup the musical sequences for the film, for he, in fact, played guitar along with Night Hawk and his band during the performances depicted in the film. Mike Shea, however, decided not to include Bloomfield in the frame when he filmed these scenes. Gordon Quinn discusses why Shea did this: "Because [Bloomfield] was white, when we filmed down on Maxwell Street in some of those scenes on the back porch. . . [Shea] framed [Bloomfield] out of the picture. [Shea] was very much into quote authenticity even though he was well aware that the traditional

musicians had enormous respect for Bloomfield.”²⁰ Shea apparently believed that, because blues was developed by African Americans and was a unique reflection of their history and experience, the music was only “real” when played by African Americans. According to this logic, whites like Bloomfield might be technically proficient at the form, but, because they weren’t directly raised in the “blues family,” they would never be more than imitators when playing blues.²¹

The emergence of high profile white musicians playing blues was a contentious issue within the folk and blues revivals. This was evident at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival when the group Bloomfield played with, the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, performed at a blues program hosted by Alan Lomax on the Friday night of the festival (On the Sunday night of the festival, several members of the band backed Bob Dylan for his first-ever electric performance, an incident which has taken on the status of legend, symbolizing the end of the commercial folk music revival of the 1960s). Lomax assembled a diverse array of musicians—former prison inmates, a quartet from the Delta, the downhome blues guitarist Mance Lipscomb, bluegrass pioneer Bill Monroe and his band, Chicago blues master Willie Dixon, and the Butterfield band—in order to demonstrate variations of the blues form. In introducing the Butterfield group, Lomax was dismissive and rude, which angered Albert Grossman, who had just become the group’s manager (and had been serving as Dylan’s manager). Folk revival historian Ronald Cohen interviewed Paul Rothchild, the Elektra Records representative who had signed the Butterfield band and who witnessed the altercation between Lomax and Grossman:

Lomax introduced the group: “Today you’ve heard some of the greatest blues musicians in the world playing their simple music on simple instruments. Let’s find out if these guys can play at all.” Lomax left the stage and was immediately confronted by Grossman, who had already decided to manage the group: “What kind of a fuckin’ introduction was that?” After a few more harsh words, “there were these two giants, both physically and in the business, wrestling around in the dust!” For Rothchild, this “was the exact moment of transition between the old roots music which we loved and cherished, and the next evolution of that music.”²²

Alan Lomax was arguably *the* primary force behind the American folk music revival of the 1930s and 1940s, but, in the revival of the 1950s and 1960s, Lomax was just one player in a crowded field of cultural mediators all trying to push their own folk music agendas and visions. He didn’t support slick, commercial acts like The Kingston Trio but also didn’t appreciate “imitator” groups like The New Lost City Ramblers and the Butterfield Blues Band that copied styles without living the life that helped create the music in the first place. Lomax’s public complaints about these groups, however, could not stop the forceful efforts by music industry personnel and grassroots organizers in establishing both the slick and “imitator” acts as major parts of the revival.

Reframing urban blues as roots music, shifts in blues audiences

While Lomax wasn’t the dominant mediating figure he had been two decades before, he did help enact some key shifts in how Americans thought about their vernacular music traditions. One of his most notable achievements was helping to expand the range of musical styles that could be considered folk music. In April 1959, shortly after returning to the United States from his nine year stint working in Europe,

Lomax organized “Folksong ’59,” a musical program at Carnegie Hall. This event included acts one would expect at a folk song concert—like Jimmy Driftwood and some gospel groups—but also a series of acts that stretched the conception of American folk music, including a bluegrass band and an African American rock ’n roll group. Lomax also included on the program a musician that he had recorded nearly two decades before as a part of the Library of Congress/Fisk project of the early 1940s, Muddy Waters, who, in the years since Lomax had seen him, had helped develop the urban electric blues style.

Urban electric blues was nationally popular among African American audiences for a relatively short period of time. Muddy Waters first landed a song on the national R & B charts in 1950 but didn’t have a sustained hit until 1954 with his Chess single “Hoochie Coochie Man.” Waters had several more hits in 1954 and 1955, all penned by the bassist, producer, and composer Willie Dixon, but the electric blues sound was quickly supplanted on the charts by the newest musical phenomenon, rock ’n roll. Chess Records put all its energies into its promoting African American rock ’n roll musicians like Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, who, in a major cultural shift, were “crossing over” from the (primarily African American) R & B chart to the mainstream pop chart. Even though urban electric blues developed just a few years before rock n’ roll and incorporated familiar elements of popular music, it sounded anachronistic to young black consumers who wanted something new and propulsive. Electric blues quickly faded commercially in the late 1950s. 1958 was the last year Muddy Waters had a song on the R & B charts.²³

Willie Dixon recognized the commercial decline of electric blues but noticed the resurgence of interest in the late 1950s in the old downhome blues. Record labels like

Origin Jazz Library began to issue LP anthologies of prewar blues recordings, writers published some of the first book length studies on blues, and, most importantly for Dixon, blues artists began to get steady gigs at coffeeshops and festivals. Dixon and pianist Memphis Slim performed at the first Newport Folk Festival in 1959 and, in 1960, began to record for revival labels like Folkways. Though some blues scholars, like Sam Charters, preferred only the prewar acoustic sound, key mediating figures like Alan Lomax²⁴ and Willie Dixon pushed for the acceptance of both the old downhome style and the new urban sound within the blues revival.²⁵

In the mid 1960s, there was a resurgence of interest in electric blues, due to the efforts of mediators like Lomax and Dixon but also because of the explosive popularity of British rock 'n roll.²⁶ Fans of British rock recognized that their beloved music was significantly influenced by a variety of U.S. and British musical genres, including skiffle, rockabilly, acoustic downhome blues, rhythm and blues, and urban electric blues. Even though these foundational genres were all different musically and emerged from different cultural environments, they were increasingly all viewed as “roots” music, as the building blocks for the popular musical styles of the 1960s. So, even though Muddy Waters's commercial heyday was only a few years removed from the moment when The Rolling Stones publicly acknowledged him as their musical mentor, his music was reframed in the 1960s as foundational and traditional.

When the transformation of urban electric blues into roots music was complete, the audience for the music had shifted from being almost exclusively black to being only partially black (and, in some performance contexts, like at Newport, predominately white). Lomax undoubtedly recognized that blues was drifting away from the people that

had originally developed it, and perhaps that recognition fueled his displeasure with the Butterfield Blues Band. It wasn't that he objected to whites playing blues—at the Newport blues workshop, Bill Monroe and his bluegrass band demonstrated a blues variation—but that he suspected that blues was becoming no more than a style that could be picked up and put down at will. Like Mike Shea, Lomax held fast to particular notions of musical authenticity, and he preferred music developed by discrete cultural groups at specific locations and times. Musicians who hadn't grown up in the “blues family” were beginning to imitate the form, and, as result, the music was beginning to lose its connection to African American communities in both rural and urban areas.

Alan Lomax's scholarly and documentary turn

Place was arguably *the* defining principle of Alan Lomax's musical efforts. According to Lomax, musical genres emerge out of specific places because of the intersection of a variety of factors, including race, ethnicity, class, geography, and industry. Cultural geography was a vital thread in Lomax's work during the first folk revival and during his stint in Europe in the 1950s but became the central issue of his work after he returned to the United States in 1958. Starting in the late 1950s, Lomax initiated a period of intensive academic research and writing, directly primarily at the scientific study of folk song and dance traditions around the world. The two primary findings of his major research projects—Cantometrics for folk song and Choreometrics for dance—were 1) that the mechanics of song and dance style represent and reinforce the social structure out of which this expressive behavior emerges and 2) that each of the

world's major geographical areas exhibits its own distinctive style of song and dance. An early proponent of multiculturalism, Lomax celebrated and sought to preserve cultural differences around the world as a corrective to what he felt were the destructive and homogenizing effects of mass culture.

For the Choreometrics project, Lomax produced a series of documentary films from 1976 until 1986. For the first three films, Lomax took a global approach; he broke down the basic stylistic elements of dance within the major cultural groups of the world and demonstrated how these stylistic elements represented and reinforced the social structures of the major cultural groups. For the last film, *The Longest Trail* (1986), he focused on the dance patterns of North American Indians.

During this period, the most prolific portion of Lomax's career in terms of filmmaking, he also co-produced five documentary films about vernacular music traditions of the American South, all of which eventually aired on PBS in 1991 as the "American Patchwork" series. Unlike the Choreometrics films, which Lomax produced as "training" films for professional ethnographers, the "American Patchwork" series was intended to appeal to a general audience. With that said, the "American Patchwork" productions were similar to Choreometrics films in that they were all informed by a sense of musical geography. Four of the five PBS films were rooted in a specific geographical setting: the Mississippi Delta, New Orleans, Louisiana bayou country, and Southern Appalachia. The film on the Delta, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (1979), represented the most extensive work Lomax had done in the South since his field recording expeditions with Shirley Collins in 1959.

***The Land Where the Blues Began* and the expository mode of documentary**

The Land Where the Blues Began is structured around Alan Lomax's commentary. He serves as an expert tour guide, navigating the viewer through the main features and basic history of Delta blues. Unlike *To Hear Your Banjo Play*, in which an off-screen Lomax asks intentionally ignorant questions of Pete Seeger in order to communicate basic information about the banjo, Lomax appears on-camera in *The Land Where the Blues Began* and his expertise is assumed. Unlike some expository commentators, he is not dry and detached. He is passionate and engaged and, at one point, even breaks into song.

His commentary sets the pace, direction, and tone of the film. The images serve only "a supporting role [to] illustrate, illuminate, [and] evoke . . . what is said."²⁷ We see Mississippi landscapes and scenes of boisterous social gatherings, but the commentary interrupts the direct sound from these images and forces us to read these images according to Lomax's interpretation. In the same way a caption can reign in the inherent ambiguity of a photograph, Lomax's spoken commentary "guides our attention and emphasizes *some* of the many meanings and interpretations."²⁸

There are extensive interview excerpts throughout *The Land Where the Blues Began*, but these function differently than the interview segments in the folklore films that I examined in the previous chapter. Some of the interviewees in *TLWTBB* relate highly personal and even painful experiences, but their comments are less designed to acquaint us with the subjects as individuals and more intended to illustrate Lomax's sweeping account of blues (like the music's roots in work and prison songs, the nomadic

experience of bluesmen, the tension between blues and religion, etc.).²⁹ Lomax's voice hovers over all the interview and performance excerpts of the film, and he often talks over subjects as they speak or play music.

There's a critical difference between interviews which serve as "voices of testimony" and interviews which serve as evidence for a commentator's perspective, argument, or historical account. In a participatory documentary, interview subjects "speak for themselves," but, in an expository film, the voices of interview subjects "are woven into a textual logic that subsumes and orchestrates them."³⁰

Worth Long: Background and folklore philosophy

Alan Lomax is cited as the writer and director of *The Land Where the Blues Began*, but an opening credit makes it clear that the film was a collaborative effort between three individuals: Alan Lomax, John Bishop, and Worth Long. John Bishop was the technical coordinator and did almost all of the videography and editing. The final credits state that the film was "researched and developed" by Worth Long, which, in practical terms, means that he provided the contacts. All of the subjects in the film were people Long had worked with in previous years or were people he located specifically for the project. Although Alan Lomax had developed an international reputation for his fieldwork efforts from the 1930s through the 1960s, the primary fieldwork for *TLWTBB*—in other words, locating and establishing relationships with subjects—was conducted exclusively by Long, an African American man about twenty years younger than Lomax.

The Land Where the Blues Began was certainly not Long's first foray into locating, preserving and promoting African American vernacular music. In 1959 he obtained an Ampex tape recorder and began to record blues musicians around Little Rock and West Memphis, Arkansas. In 1962, after organizing a sit-in demonstration in Little Rock, he was enlisted as the Staff Coordinator of SNCC, and, among other duties in this role, he worked to incorporate traditional African American songs into the Civil Rights Movement. For him, song was more than just a form of expression. Rather, it was central to the power of the Movement: "I look at culture from the standpoint of power, how it will and can empower people. Song can give you the strength to go out and fight for your liberation."³¹ Long made extensive recordings of songs used for the Civil Rights struggle.

When the Movement shifted to a new direction in the late 1960s after the series of legislative achievements and the assassination of Dr. King, Worth Long also shifted to a new direction, focusing most of his efforts on preserving and promoting the rich heritage of African American vernacular culture. When Mississippi was chosen as the featured state for the Smithsonian's 1974 Festival of American Folklife, he was hired as a researcher and began canvassing the state, looking for exemplars of traditional culture.³² Mindful of imposing his own vision of the state's cultural legacy, he made a habit of asking ordinary Mississippians who they thought should represent the state in the nation's capital. While Long considers himself a folklorist, he also believes that ordinary people can function as folklorists—and, in some cases, more effectively than supposed professionals—by working to locate and preserve culture within their own communities.³³

In 1977 Long worked with the African American photographer Roland Freeman as part of the Mississippi Folklife Project. Freeman took thousands of pictures of traditional culture in Mississippi, from quilters to basketmakers to bluesmen, and these images were presented in a touring exhibition called “Folkroots.” Long had immense respect for Freeman for the way the photographer could respectfully develop a rapport with his subjects but also for the way he could capture culture in context. As Long later noted, Freeman

went beyond just the ordinary photoethnography. He didn’t just go in and shoot pictures; he shot people in context. We stopped by a funeral. He shot people going in and folks standing outside talking. The funeral is going on inside and people are outside telling stories and jokes. And he shot inside with the funeral; he shot people coming out with the casket; the kids on the ground; the food. I said, “This dude is serious,” and also he seems to understand culture.³⁴

Long helped present African American vernacular culture outside of its native context to receptive audiences around the country, but his fundamental goal was to take expressive culture back to the communities that originally nurtured it and “see if they could use it for their own purposes.”³⁵ Long believes that a folklorist’s job is to work with and for communities and not just to extract culture from them. As he explained to Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Some people call what I do participatory research. I feel that if you’re simply doing applied research, in a real sense you’re wasting people’s time, except that you do provide documentation of them for archives.”³⁶ This comment might have been a subtle jab at Long’s old friend and colleague Alan Lomax, who had always stressed the importance of archival preservation but never was particularly adept at mobilizing vernacular culture at the community level. Both folklorists worked as

advocates, but the difference was that Lomax vision's of vernacular culture was global and Long's vision has always been intensely local.

Mississippi Delta Blues: Reclaiming the music

In 1977, Long was asked to help organize a festival in honor of Fannie Lou Hamer, the Civil Rights leader who had just died. He felt that a blues festival was appropriate and that the location should be not just in the Mississippi Delta but at Freedom Village, the small community outside of Greenville founded by black sharecroppers who had been evicted from their land for their participation in the Civil Rights Movement. The location was intentionally chosen to emphasize the link between political and cultural aspects of African American life.

Through the Delta Blues Festival, Long was attempting to “to legitimize and to make the blues song and blues person more respected and understood in his own community,”³⁷ but he was also trying to rectify the misperceptions and misappropriations of blues music. One problem he recognized was that blues music and musicians were often viewed as relics from a distant past. He discussed this problem with Molly McGehee: “The problem with a lot of people, even the scholars, is that they separate the person from the genre, and, as a result, we objectify people in a real sense. It means that very often a bluesman is seen as an object of the past.”³⁸ Long recognized that, even though some of the original purveyors of the music were aging and the traditional styles were gradually fading, blues music was still vibrant in the Delta. There was still a wealth of downhome blues musicians in the region, but, what was most important to

Long was that the *message* of the blues lived on and continued to be relevant, especially for African Americans in the Delta. For Long, the blues is about the dignity and solidarity of the marginalized: “The blues lyric is very important to me because it expresses a particular philosophy that I support, the philosophy of the outcast, of people who are down or down-n-out, excluded.”³⁹ This message resonated within the Civil Rights struggle, but Long feels that it’s a “timeless” message that remains continually relevant and useful generation after generation.

Another problem that Long recognized was that, when recorded blues began to circulate as a commodity in the 1920s and, then, later, achieved success outside the African American communities that initially nurtured it, downhome blues musicians started to lose financial and creative control of their music. Record labels, promoters, and DJ’s increasingly dictated the direction and flow of the music, and, unfortunately, the blues developed a reputation as a genre rife with exploitation. Stories of musicians being grossly underpaid or, in some cases, totally cheated out of royalties became all too common. In response to this sad legacy, Long not only helped bring Delta blues back to the Delta but insisted that the people in and around Greenville control and own the festival. He discussed this issue of creative control with McGehee:

We don’t have any ownership or control of our culture. Now that’s a kind of slavery. . . there are what I call creative rights, and that, within the realm of individual and collective responsibility, should belong to the community that nurtured it. And that’s what [the] Delta Blues [Festival] was set up for, more than anything else. It was set up to honor, to showcase and to liberate. . . to liberate the musician and his or her rights within the culture.⁴⁰

The first festival in 1977 was a modest event with only about a thousand people in attendance, but, the following year, the attendance swelled to ten-thousand. The festival grew even larger in 1979, and, sensing the importance of this success, Long coordinated for the festival to be documented by Mississippi Public Television. The resulting video, entitled *Mississippi Delta Blues*, ran on Mississippi public television stations (but, unlike *The Land Where the Blues Began*, is commercially unavailable on video today). Aside from two brief backstage interviews with musicians, conducted by Willie Dixon, who also serves as the on-stage emcee, the film is a fairly straightforward concert documentary that includes full performances of songs rather than just excerpts.

As the festival director, Worth Long set the order of performances. In a 1981 review of the *Mississippi Delta Blues* film in the journal *Ethnomusicology*, Mellonee Burnim commented on the logic of Long's structure: "The performers are sequentially programmed to illustrate the chronological development from the rural Delta Blues tradition to its urban derivative, the Chicago Blues."⁴¹ In his interview with Bernice Reagon, Long denies that he was trying to present an evolutionary flow of the music's development. Instead, he was trying to enact a shift from the solitary individual to the large group: "I didn't do it in a chronological order, but based on social organization: one person singing alone without accompaniment, one person singing with accompaniment, duos, ensembles and big bands."⁴² The festival and the film concludes with a performance by Lefty Dix and his big Chicago-style blues band, not so much to show an example of the modern blues style but to re-affirm the importance of the big group, the extended "blues family."

The festival and the *Mississippi Delta Blues* film are as much about the group—

meaning the audience and the communities of the Delta—as they are about the music. To emphasize this point, the film features, more than the typical concert documentary, numerous shots of the assembled crowd as they watch, cheer, dance, chat, and generally have a good time. There are shots of both black and white audience members, although there are more shots of blacks, perhaps because the audience of the festival in its early years, according to Worth Long, was approximately eighty percent black. While Long and the other coordinators fostered a spirit of inclusivity, the Delta Blues Festival was, at least initially, designed by and for African Americans. Willie Dixon makes this clear as he introduces the first performer, the Rev. Boyd Rivers: “This blues message has been carried through many generations of our people, and our people years ago, when they couldn’t pray, when they wasn’t allowed to talk to each other, they could always communicate with each other with the blues.” As Dixon says this and Rivers begins to play [Figures 12-13], we see only shots of African Americans [Figures 14-15], which confirms what Dixon means by “our people.”



Figs. 12-13



Figs. 14-15

I don't want to overstate the significance of the early Delta Blues Festivals or the *Mississippi Delta Blues* film, but they do represent an important moment in the history of blues music when the community that originally developed the form, after losing some of the control and direction of it, attempted to regain autonomy of the music and “use it for their own purposes.” Willie Dixon, who had spent twenty years promoting blues around the world, recognized late in his career the importance of promoting blues in the land where it began.

Mississippi Delta Blues embodies the participatory spirit of letting people speak, or rather, sing, for themselves. Performances aren't cut off or spoken over, and there's no outside expert explaining to the viewer what he or she is seeing. Willie Dixon talks briefly about the blues in between songs, but he is speaking as a member of the community, both as a blues musician and a native Mississippian.

The “golden age” of the folklore film and beyond

A lot of the work Worth Long did as a folklorist during the 1970s was made

possible through a variety of public and private grants. In the same respect, the folklore film flourished during the 1970s, partly due to the exponential increase in grant funding for arts projects, folklore included. According to Tom Davenport, the 1970s and 80s represent the “golden age” of the folklore film because of a huge funding infrastructure developed that was able to support filmmakers working on projects about regional and local folk cultures.⁴³ The funding history of the National Endowment for the Arts reflects the huge increase in institutional support for arts projects during the 1970s. In 1970 the NEA’s budget was around eight million dollars, but by 1980 it had grown to one hundred and fifty-five million, an increase of nearly two thousand percent.

Between 1980 and 1995, NEA funding didn’t grow much, remaining between one hundred forty and one hundred seventy-five million dollars. Factoring in inflation, the NEA’s funding was, in fact, decreasing by the late 80s, reflecting a more widespread drop in funding for federal and state arts agencies (culminating in 1996, when the NEA budget was cut nearly in half due to conservative groups’ complaints about the agency’s support of controversial art projects).⁴⁴ As institutional support waned, the “golden age” of the folklore film came to an end.

Of course, it’s possible that the “golden age” of the folklore film ended less because of the decrease in grant funding and more because of the continuing transformation of American society. The commercial development of rural areas, combined with the increased dissemination of mass media, thoroughly changed and in some cases destroyed communities where traditional culture had thrived. Perhaps Frederic Ramsey’s warnings that American vernacular music traditions were rapidly vanishing turned out to be accurate and these traditions, rather than surviving or morphing into some other

vernacular forms, in fact disappeared, replaced by the flow of mass culture. Or maybe, as scholars and consumers increasingly recognized that authenticity is a cultural construction rather than a tangible quality, quests for the “real thing” became irrelevant.

The folklore film lost momentum in the 1980s, but that didn't mean that there was a noticeable decrease in the number of documentary films about American vernacular music. In fact, during the 1990s, the number of documentaries produced about American vernacular music increased. However, there was a clear shift in style and methodology, and many of the new films couldn't be considered folklore films, at least by the standards set during the 1960s and 70s. There was less of a focus on examining contemporary examples of vernacular music and more of a retrospective push to survey what had happened over the past century. Sweeping, expository histories of musical subjects became the norm. Rather than capture music as it happened, filmmakers began to build films almost entirely with archival traces. In the next chapter, I consider how filmmakers in the twenty-first century have used archival materials to tell the story of American roots music.

Notes

¹ See Jack C. Ellis and Betsy A. McLane's "Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité, 1960-1970" from *A New History of Documentary Film* (New York : Continuum, 2005) and Erik Barnouw's "Observer" and "Catalyst" from *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1993).

² Bruzzi, Stella. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000) p. 70.

³ The "city symphony" was a genre of documentary film that developed in the 1920s, mostly in Europe (two landmark city symphonies are Walter Ruttmann's 1927 film *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* and Joris Ivens's 1929 film *Rain*). These films provide an impressionistic glimpse of life in bustling cities. They contain very little narrative and characterization and rely, instead, upon the play of composition, subject and camera movement, and montage. See "Reporter" and "Painter" from Erik Barnouw's *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*.

⁴ Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001) Chapter 6.

⁵ *And This is Free* exhibits qualities of the Poetic mode, and *The High Lonesome Sound*, with its use of voice-over commentary and survey-like intentions, exhibits qualities of the Expository mode.

⁶ Nichols., p. 105.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁸ *Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category* features on-camera interviews, but the other four films incorporate audio-only interviews.

⁹ Lipson-Walker, Carolyn. "Review: *Homemade American Music/Nimrod Workman: To Fit My Own Category*," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 97, No. 383. (Jan.- Mar., 1984), p. 113.

¹⁰ Phone interview between Gordon Quinn and the author, October 22, 2007.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Quinn, Gordon. "Playback: Richard Leacock and Joyce Chopra's 'Happy Mother's Day,'" *Documentary Magazine*, Sept./Oct. 2005, accessed at <http://www.documentary.org/resources/zine.php?stage=3&articleID=54> on October 25, 2007.

¹⁴ Benjamin Filene provides some statistics about this massive migration: "Between 1940 and 1950 the African American population in Chicago had grown from 277,000 to 492,000, an expansion of 78 percent. From 1950 to 1960 it surged to 812,000, a growth of another 65 percent. At one point in the 1950s, 2,200 African Americans were moving to Chicago each week, the vast majority of them from the South." [*Romancing the Folk*, p. 105]

¹⁵ One merchant notes, "In them days it was terrific, but I mean terrific, you know, there was a world to see and it was very interesting. Of course it's interesting today too but not like it used to be."

¹⁶ There is a very small bit of narration in some of the early direct cinema films like *Primary* and *Happy Mother's Day* that helps to establish the setting and basic facts.

¹⁷ Quoted in Sharon Sherman's *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video and Culture* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998) p. 21.

¹⁸ Interview with Gordon Quinn.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Shortly after *And This is Free* was completed, Michael Bloomfield was interviewed by filmmaker Murray Lerner at the Newport Folk Festival, and, in the interview, Bloomfield addresses the issue of blues authenticity. Murray Lerner documented the Newport Folk Festival on film from 1963 through 1966, recording performances and crowd scenes but also conducting extensive interviews with musicians and fans. Fresh off editing *And This is Free* and working as a cinematographer on the classic direct cinema portrait of Bob Dylan *Don't Look Back*, Howard Alk was hired as the editor of *Festival*. Consistent with his editing work on *The Cry of Jazz* and *And this is Free*, Alk used a intricate montage style that de-emphasized individual musical performances and, instead, attempted to work through key issues about folk music and its place in American society. Rather than present folk music as a monolithic phenomenon, Alk juxtaposes a variety of perspectives, never settling on one perspective as the definitive summation of the music and its function. For instance, Alk includes excerpts of musicians and fans praising folk music as an alternative to mainstream commercial culture but complicates this pure vision with scenes of fans swarming Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. Alk isn't debunking the perception of the music as noncommercial but, rather, simply presenting folk music as a contested terrain where musicians and fans struggle over the meaning of the music.

Perhaps the boldest editing in *Festival* is when Alk crosscuts between the Bloomfield interview and an interview with Son House, the legendary Delta bluesman. Son House explains that "the real old blues" aren't upbeat dance songs but are piercing expressions of loneliness and anxiety. Bloomfield praises Son House's intense emotional investment in his music and recognizes that his own playing doesn't spring from a tortured existence:

I will swear to God, it's some kind of a mystic thing. Son House turns into the blues, he turns into a demon of some sort. He doesn't hear. He doesn't feel. Every fiber of his body is taken up in the music. Son House is stone blue, he's where it's at... With Son House, it's a more serious thing. I'm not Son House, I'm not Son House. I haven't been pissed on, stepped on and shitted on, you know, like he has. I haven't gone through that. My father is a multi-millionaire you know. I've lived a rich, fat happy life, and I had a big bar mitzvah, you know. I'm not Son House. I can play blues and I can feel it in a way, man. Those guys are a different story, that's a different thing altogether, but you can quote me on this man, Butterfield is something else, he feels it just, he's in there all the way. Butterfield is a blues singer, there's no white bullshit with Butterfield, no white colored thing with him. He's there. If he was green, it wouldn't make any difference. If he was a tuna fish sandwich, Butterfield would be

into the blues.

Bloomfield can “play” blues but acknowledges that he hasn’t lived the blues. Despite his virtuosity on the guitar, he understands that what he does is a “different thing altogether” than what Son House does. And yet, after establishing the criterion for blues authenticity along the lines of race and class, Bloomfield contradicts himself by suggesting that his bandmate Paul Butterfield—another white blues musician from Chicago who came from a privileged background—can sing the blues with the same intensity and honesty of a Son House. According to Bloomfield, Butterfield is able to transcend his own whiteness and tap into the spirit of the blues. Because Butterfield is sufficiently “into the blues,” race becomes irrelevant.

²² Cohen, Ronald D. *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002) p. 235.

²³ Filene, Benjamin. “Mastering the Cult of Authenticity: Leonard Chess, Willie Dixon, and the Strange Career of Muddy Waters,” in *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

²⁴ At the 1966 Newport Folk Festival, Alan Lomax filmed performances by some of the major figures of blues and old-time music. Together, this material didn’t constitute a “film”; it was more like a collection of audio-visual field recordings (The footage wasn’t made publicly available until thirty years later when Vestapol issued it in a series of three VHS tapes). Some of Lomax’s filming was done at the festival itself, but the majority was done in private at off-site locations probably because, in a private space, Lomax could control the technical factors and create a mood that was relaxed and relatively informal. The primary off-site location was a large mansion, where Lomax filmed performances and conducted interviews. The most striking aspect of the mansion footage is that Lomax often assembled a large group of musicians—including both white folk musicians and black bluesmen—and would frame the entire group sitting together as one musician talked or played. This is consistent with Lomax’s previous work, in that he is bringing together disparate traditions—black and white, rural and urban, acoustic and electric—into a unified vision of American vernacular music. These groups scenes are immensely valuable because they represent some of the only recorded instances of legendary blues musicians enjoying old-time music and legendary old-time musicians enjoying blues. The other off-site location Lomax filmed at during the 1966 Newport festival was a bar that he rented. For this material, Lomax didn’t mix musical styles. He just filmed blues, performed by some of the African American pioneers of the form, including Skip James, Bukka White, Son House, and Howlin’ Wolf. Aside from the musicians, a small group of African Americans watch the performances and occasionally dance. What’s unusual about this footage is that shifts back and forth from being a straightforward record of musicians’ performances into being a record of a complex event in which performers and audience members interact. In one uncomfortable scene, Howlin’ Wolf, one of the legends of the Chicago blues scene, chides a drunk Son House, jolting us out of a comfortable performance context into a moment of tense human interaction.

²⁵ Folklorists and ethnomusicologists during this period expanded their fieldwork more and more into urban areas. In 1966 Charles Keil published *Urban Blues*, one of the

earliest works that attempted to unravel the unique musical and social characteristics of city blues, and in 1968 Richard Dorson conducted extensive folklore fieldwork in Gary, Indiana and East Chicago.

²⁶ One of the first times the fledgling British rockers got to see their musical forebears in person was for the American Folk Blues Festival, an annual “package” tour of Europe which launched in 1962 and consisted of the major figures of American downhome and urban blues. Benjamin Filene notes that, on its promotional flyer, the festival billed itself as “A Documentary of the Authentic Blues.” With the blending of urban and downhome performers, the notion of blues authenticity was being stretched, but so was the notion of documentary. Could a concert be considered a documentary? Perhaps the term documentary referred to the television programs that the promoters, German jazz afficianados Horst Lippmann and Fritz Mau, produced in conjunction with the tours. The television program featured full performances from the public concerts but also performances that were captured in a non-public studio setting. For these studio performances, the blues musicians performed in elaborate sets that were designed to look like authentic American locations: urban street corners, smoky blues clubs, front porches, and lonely rooms. In these two stills from the American Folk Blues Festival, Walter “Shakey” Horton (Figure 16, from the 1965 AFBF) performs in front of a photographic enlargement of an urban scene reminiscent of Maxwell Street, and Howlin’ Wolf performs in a simulated blues club (Figure 17, from the 1964 AFBF).



Fig. 16



Fig. 17

²⁷ Ibid., p. 107.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 107, italics mine.

²⁹ In a couple scenes in *The Land Where the Blues Began*, Lomax asks men to re-create musical practices that no longer exist. In one scene, Lomax asks two African American men to show him how they used to sing while working as roustabouts on the river. On the voice-over track, Lomax says, “These old-time roustabouts had such fond memories of river life that they fixed up a rig to show us how the work was done and the songs were sung.” In another scene, he brings a group of African American men to a prison to re-enact how they used to sing work songs while doing prison labor. Lomax explains that “they brought us out into the Mississippi river bottoms to show us what it was like in the state penitentiary in the bad old days when they were driven all day in the fields under the

gun and it was only their bluesy songs and the strength of working and singing together that kept their hearts alive under the Mississippi sun.”

³⁰ Nichols, Bill. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) p. 37.

³¹ McGehee, Molly, "'You Do Not Own What You Cannot Control': An Interview with Activist and Folklorist Worth Long," *Mississippi Folklife*, 31:1 (Fall 1998) p. 20.

³² Long remained a consultant to the Festival in '75 and '76.

³³ Long, Worth. "Cultural Organizing and Participatory Research," in *The Arts of Black Folk* (New York: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 1991) p. 32.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³⁷ McGehee, p. 18.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴¹ Burnim, Mellonee. "Review: *The Land Where the Blues Began/Mississippi Delta Blues/Delta Blues: Festival '79*," *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. XXV, No. 3 (Sep. 1981) p 566.

⁴² Long, pp. 33-34.

⁴³ From <http://www.folkstreams.net/pages/proposal.html>, accessed on March 24, 2008.

⁴⁴ Information from "The National Endowment for the Arts: A Brief Chronology of Federal Support for the Arts," The National Endowment for the Arts, 2000, PDF of study accessed from <http://www.nea.gov/pub/pubAbout.php> on March 24, 2008.

Chapter Seven

Gold Records in Space and on the Floor: The Archival Imagination of American Roots Music

As I explained in Chapter Three, the 1930s was a transformative period for both American vernacular music and American documentary film. Alan Lomax, Pete Seeger, and others helped orchestrate a folk music revival while stressing the flexible and adaptable nature of the music. Willard Van Dyke, Irving Lerner, and others helped launch the first documentary film movement in the United States, and, while they avoided didactic commentary, their films were largely expository, in that they were designed to “propose a perspective, advance an argument, or recount history.”¹

As I explained in Chapters Five and Six, the 1960s was a transformative period for both American vernacular music and American documentary film. The second phase of the American folk revival took shape during this period, and vernacular music achieved an unprecedented level of popularity and visibility. During this time, folklorists also began to stress the importance of documenting the context of folkloric expression, in addition to the text itself. In the 1960s, there was also a “contextual turn” in documentary film, as filmmakers began to deviate from a purely expository mode in favor of more observational and participatory approaches.

Is it appropriate to call the first decade of the twenty-first century a transformative period for American vernacular music and American documentary film? Commercially speaking, perhaps. In a few short years, documentary has shifted from a niche market into a major position within the film industry. Eight of the highest grossing documentaries of all-time were released in the past six years, two of which even

surpassed the seventy-five-million-dollar mark.² With the huge success of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and various other film and CD projects, roots music is also undergoing its biggest period of commercial viability since the 1960s revival.

While there have been commercial breakthroughs in both documentary film and roots music over the past decade, it doesn't appear that we are undergoing major paradigm shifts—like there were during the 1930s and 1960s—in how we *approach and understand* documentary film and roots music. Our postmodern era is marked less by wholly new styles and methodologies and more by the re-activation and combination of previous styles and methodologies. For example, in the case of contemporary documentary film, observational methods persist, but there has also been a return to highly edited, self-consciously “authored” pieces as well.

While there haven't been fundamental shifts in methodology, there has been at least a partial re-orientation towards the past in both American documentary film and American roots music. Today there is less of an emphasis upon documenting and examining living culture and more of an emphasis upon looking back on previous events. The “historical turn” in both documentary and roots music means that archival traces—films, photographs, recordings, etc.—are valued now more than ever.

In this chapter I consider how contemporary documentary films about American roots music incorporate and treat archival materials. The World Wide Web is opening up new possibilities for the organization and interpretation of archival materials related to American music, but, so far, this potential has gone largely unrealized. Filmmakers are still the most sophisticated manipulators of archival materials, and, for the past two decades, filmmakers have increasingly relied upon archival materials to tell the story of

American roots music. In this chapter, I discuss the recent roots music revival and also consider the standard ways documentaries utilize archival material. I then focus on a documentary produced in 2003 by the German director Wim Wenders. This film, which focuses on the careers of three legendary bluesmen, is unique in how it handles archival material. Wenders allows archival material to “speak for itself” rather than force it to rigidly follow exposition, but he complicates matters by including historical re-enactments that are designed to look like authentic fragments of archival footage.

In the final section of the chapter, I examine a 2003 Johnny Cash music video. Like the Wenders film, the Cash video incorporates old film footage but does so in a fundamentally different way. The Wenders film tends to fetishize archival material and celebrate its immortality, whereas the Cash video is a poignant reminder of the ephemeral nature of life and its traces. Ironically, Cash’s acceptance of decay and death is what gives his music life and longevity.

It’s worth noting that the distribution and audience for the Wenders film and the Cash video is much more extensive than the distribution and audience for the folklore films discussed in Chapters Five and Six. The Wenders film was part of a seven-part documentary series that aired nationally on PBS, and a wide range of commercial products were tied in with this series, including a book and several CD anthologies. The Cash video was in regular rotation on the cable television channel MTV and was nominated as one of the channel’s top videos of 2003. In contrast, the folklore films discussed in Chapters Five and Six all had limited distribution through small media organizations or through the filmmakers themselves. Today, most of these folklore films are out-of-print or are available only through specialized institutional distributors.

The Archival Imagination and the Shift from Cabinet to Computer

For the 1988 book *Documenting America, 1935-1943*, Alan Trachtenberg wrote an essay entitled “From Image to Story,” and, though the book was mainly designed to showcase some of the classic series produced by FSA photographers, the hero of Trachtenberg’s essay is not a photographer but, rather, the man who served as head archivist for the FSA collection. In 1942, when the government’s photographic unit was still operating, the Library of Congress hired Paul Vanderbilt to organize the nearly two hundred thousand images into an efficient filing system. Vanderbilt’s first act was to create two distinct archives with all the images: one that maintained the original assignments and chronology and one that organized the pictures by subject headings. While Vanderbilt claimed that his subject headings were neutral and objective, Trachtenberg argues that the subject headings crafted the pictures into a story, a story that reflected “the era’s ideology of human history as ‘universal’ and ‘progressive.’”³ Trachtenberg debunks Vanderbilt’s claims of neutrality and, in the process, reminds us that ideology operates by framing *a* view of society as *the* natural and inevitable way of the world.

While Trachtenberg criticizes Vanderbilt for obscuring the agenda that informed his filing system, he does praise Vanderbilt for envisioning archival work as an active, imaginative process:

He built into the file the theory that, like words, images can and should be endlessly recombined into new relations to generate new ideas, new cognitions, new senses of the world. Though he also designed the file for the single-image needs of picture editors and historical researchers, he described his primary goal as facilitating the use of pictures to make new

and original 'stories'. Thus he wrote in 1959 that the task of assembling a file 'is to provide for recombination and reuse'. . . Vanderbilt encourages us to repeat his own act of myth making, of finding or inventing lines of force and resistance, patterns of order among discrete images.⁴

Vanderbilt's implication is that archival materials become history only when an archivist or researcher imposes a creative, associative logic upon them.

When Trachtenberg wrote this essay, the FSA file was, as he says, "tangible: actual file cabinets, microfilm readers, card catalogs."⁵ However, less than a decade after Trachtenberg's essay, the Library of Congress began to digitize the FSA collection and make it publicly available on their "American Memory" website. Now, in 2008, almost the entire FSA collection—over 160,000 black and white photos and 1,600 color photos—is online and instantly accessible. Perusing the collection no longer requires a trip to the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, and the amount of time needed to search and locate images has been drastically reduced to a matter of seconds.

Despite this quantum leap in terms of access, the organization of the FSA collection has remained basically the same in the shift to the digital world. One searches the online collection by a keyword of one's choice or by the original subject headings devised by Paul Vanderbilt.⁶ Perhaps the Library of Congress didn't have the time or resources to re-organize the file, or, maybe they felt that Vanderbilt's elegant system couldn't be improved upon. Whatever the case, the online FSA collection is typical of how archival materials are presented on the web: access is instantaneous, but, in terms of how materials are arranged and can be searched, online collections aren't fundamentally different than tangible archival collections. And though the technology exists to allow

users of digital archives to arrange material and share their interpretations online with other users, few archives have implemented this level of interactivity. Media scholars often describe the participatory dynamic of the Web as a kind of folk culture,⁷ but the online dissemination and circulation of materials about American's actual folk culture history have yet to embody the collective sharing and tweaking associated with the folk process.

Michael Frisch argues that searchable online databases of audio and video material are opening up entirely new paths for the interpretation of history. He believes that the Web is encouraging a “post-documentary sensibility,” by which he means that researchers are shifting from linear end products—like books or films—to projects that are non-linear and never totally finished.⁸ Unfortunately, though, for all the dazzling modular and dynamic possibilities that the Web offers, many researchers seem to be stuck in the old linear, textual models.

In terms of online archival material related to American vernacular music, no one has attempted, as far as I can tell, to organize and interpret archival items in imaginative, associative ways in order to tell a new kind of “story” about the music. Take, for instance, the two major online exhibits of the Southern Folklife Collection (located at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the Southern Folklife Collection is arguably the premier archive for materials related to American vernacular music). While it's clear that it took a lot of work to produce these two exhibits, they are, nevertheless, indicative of how unimaginatively archival materials are organized and presented online. One exhibit, entitled “Hillbilly Music: Source and Symbol”, is based on a 1965 academic article of the same name. The text of the original article (a landmark essay about the

formation of the hillbilly music market) is included, but the primary utility of the exhibit is to provide the user with the still images and music that the original article references. Another of the Southern Folklife Collection's online exhibits is a retrospective of the Fiddler's Grove fiddling contest. Organized chronologically, the exhibit displays press and promotional materials, audio recordings, and video for every year of the festival between 1970 and 2000.

The Web is opening up new paths for historical inquiry, but, so far, the potential has been largely unrealized. Filmmakers still remain the most adept manipulators of archival material. Since at least the 1920s, documentarians have appropriated and re-interpreted photographs, graphic material, audio recordings, and clips from other films in order to generate new insights and histories.

Documentary Film and the Archival Imagination

In his 1973 article "Cinema, Science, and Cultural Renewal," Alan Lomax emphasized the importance of preserving filmed records of marginalized cultures around the world. He acknowledged the dominance of the written word in academic scholarship but maintained that film is the most effective medium for cultural preservation:

although ethnographic books and museums store knowledge for science and enrich the life of the urban elite, they seldom strengthen or even adequately represent folk and primitive culture. The new media—tape and color film synchronized with sound—produce virtually total documents of culture. . . . The extant corpus of newsreel, documentary, travel, amateur, and ethnographic film, with all its defects, forms the richest body of behavioral data available to the social scientists, the historian, and the humanist.⁹

Lomax cites the example of Henry Langlois—the French film collector who saved some of the masterworks of European cinema from the dustbin of history—and calls upon anthropologists to exhibit the same kind of passion and dedication to preserving ethnographic film material. One of the key steps in doing this is the establishment of international archives which can serve as repositories for the immense quantities of film and video footage.

For Lomax, establishing and maintaining archives was important not just for the sake of preservation but also for the educational potential archives offer. Fragments from the archive can be perpetually extracted and combined to generate new insights and new histories. For instance, the four Choreometrics films Lomax made between 1976 and 1986 consist entirely of archival film footage of traditional dance styles from around the world, all tied together with Lomax's extensive voice-over commentary.¹⁰

Of course, Lomax was not the first documentary filmmaker to construct films entirely or almost entirely out of archival traces. The practice goes back at least to Esther Shub's 1927 film *The Fall of the Romanovs*, in which pro-tsarist newsreels and home movies are reconfigured into a scathing critique of the tsarist regime. Another landmark work of archival reconfiguration was *Point of Order* (1964). For this film, Emile de Antonio whittled down over two hundred hours of kinescopes of the Army/McCarthy hearings into a ninety-seven minute reflection on the politics of fear and destruction. A few years later, with *In the Year of the Pig* (1968), de Antonio mixed archival footage with contemporary interviews to construct a sprawling, critical history of the Vietnam War.

In the 1980s documentary films about American roots music began to rely upon old film footage more and more.¹¹ By “footage” I mean any non-fiction film record of vernacular musicians or music making, a massive swath of material which includes, among other things, newsreels, television programs, documentary films, and home movies.¹² In the 1990s, archival footage became a much more prominent feature in roots music documentaries. This can be partially attributed to the growing influence of a streamlined style of expository documentary. This style, popularized by Ken Burns in a series of sweeping historical documentary films like *The Civil War* (1990) and *Baseball* (1994), wasn’t new per se, but, in the wake of the huge success of the Burns films, it became the dominant manner in which history is recounted through documentary film. The Burns style mixes a few basic elements: interviews, voice-over narration, landscape imagery and other “b-roll” material, music, and archival film and photographs. Burns never delivers a voice-over himself, nor does he ever appear on camera. There are no observational moments in his films, and filmed subjects only speak to the camera within an interview context. Because there are no traces of the contemporary world in Burns’s documentaries (aside from the context of the interviews), his films draw extensively upon archival materials in order to present the sweeping accounts of history.

The Roots Music Revival

Roots music archival material was also used more in the 1990s because there were simply more documentaries about roots music produced during this period, which was an outgrowth of a widespread resurgence of interest in traditional music. This

resurgence has been notably different than the folk revivals of the 30s/40s and the 60s because it has been an almost entirely commercial “revival,” marked by a string of highly publicized boxsets and films. In 1997 *The Anthology of American Folk Music*, a collection of classic roots tracks from the 1920s and 30s that was assembled by Harry Smith onto a series of Folkways LP’s in 1952,¹³ was reissued on compact disc and went on to earn two Grammy awards. The soundtrack for the Coen Brothers’ 2000 film *O Brother, Where art Thou?*, which features covers of classic roots songs by young and old musicians plus a couple of actual vintage recordings, sold over five million copies and earned a Grammy for Album of the Year.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the *O Brother* phenomenon was that it reflected how the notion of roots music authenticity had changed since the 1960s. In the twenty-first century, the background of a roots musician has become less of a criterion for acceptance. The United States has become so thoroughly modernized and suburbanized that few performers could sincerely claim that they were born in a “little old log cabin in the lane.” The withering of roots authenticity has opened up the field to artists like Gillian Welch, who weren’t reared in a high lonesome place but can evoke the spirit of the old music.

American Roots Music and the dominance of streamlined exposition

Because a roots performer is as likely to emerge today from Beverly Hills as from the hills of Kentucky, there is less of an emphasis today on capturing the music in its “native context.” Rather than burrow into instances of contemporary music making, the

overarching tendency of documentary filmmakers has been to look back and recount histories of musicians, scenes, and styles. The preferred method for recounting these histories has been the streamlined expository approach, with its heavy emphasis upon interviews and archival material.

In 2001 a book, a set of CD's, and a documentary film—all titled *American Roots Music*—were released by Palm Pictures and Abrams Books. It's an ambitious attempt to sum up the entire history of roots music in the United States, and the whole range of roots genres are swept into the fold, including spirituals, early country, Delta blues, electric blues, gospel, folk, bluegrass, Cajun, Zydeco, Tejano, and Native American styles.¹⁴ The *American Roots Music* film adheres to the Burns formula of combining interviews with contemporary “b-roll” footage (mostly landscape shots), voice-over narration (by Kris Kristofferson), and archival film and photographic material.¹⁵

The *American Roots Music* film is an archive in its own right. It contains a vast quantity of archival film clips, photographs, and song excerpts. No other documentary that deals with American roots music can match this film's quantity and scope of archival material. While *American Roots Music* examines vernacular music traditions in which musicians often borrowed lyrics and melodies from other songs and other singers, the filmmakers, of course, didn't borrow the archival clips they use in their film. They had to license the footage from individuals, institutions, and stock footage companies, and, in the instances when a clip includes the performance of a copyrighted song, they had to license the rights to the song as well.¹⁶ For documentarians who want to reflect on American roots music history, audio-visual archival material is available to use but at

steep prices. For the most part, music footage archives are privately controlled and are only accessible to those who can afford it.¹⁷

The subservience of archival clips to exposition

American Roots Music uses brief clips from many of the films I have discussed in this study, including the Lead Belly *March of Time* newsreel, *To Hear Your Banjo Play*, *The High Lonesome Sound*, and *And This is Free*. In this study, I have attempted to provide close readings of each of these films, paying close attention to formal characteristics and to the specific contexts in which these films were produced. When excerpts from these films are inserted into *American Roots Music*, suddenly the formal properties and the original production contexts vanish, overwhelmed by the momentum of the exposition. For instance, when the scene of John Lomax recording Lead Belly from the *March of Time* newsreel is used in *American Roots Music*, John Lomax's troubling racial paternalism—which is obvious when one sees the newsreel in its entirety—recedes and the clip merely functions as a visual confirmation of the story of the Lomaxes discovering, recording, and promoting Lead Belly.

As Catherine Russell notes in *Experimental Ethnography*, “All too often, the archive serves as visual evidence of history, with the role of found footage reduced to the textual authority of the documentary fact.”¹⁸ The commentary of a narrator or an interviewee provides the historical narrative, and the archival clip functions merely as a piece of evidence confirming the spoken narrative, much like a slide in an illustrated lecture. The limited time the typical archival clip is allowed to play within a

documentary doesn't encourage much scrutiny on the part of the viewer. The viewer is simply expected to accept the clip as a visual confirmation of the spoken account.

In *The Last Bolshevik*, his 1993 documentary about the Russian film director Alexander Medvedkin, Chris Marker includes a clip from a 1913 newsreel of Russian dignitaries parading through the street. Marker slows the clip down, and the narrator (not Marker) comments upon what we see: "Every documentary on the period shows this parade of dignitaries. But who has looked at it? That gesture of the big chap tapping his own head, what does it mean? That the crowd is crazy? No. He's telling them to take off their caps. You don't keep your hat on before nobility." In the conventional historical documentary, this clip would sweep past the viewer as a piece of illustrative evidence about tsarist Russia, but Marker takes the time to actually look at the clip for what it can reveal about Russian social structure. As Marker zooms in on and highlights the "big chap tapping his own head," the narrator continues: "And since the fashionable sport these days is to rewind time to find culprits for so many crimes and sufferings inflicted on Russia within one century, I would like everyone to remember—before Stalin, before Lenin—this fat man who ordered the poor to bow to the rich." Freed from its role as expository evidence, this archival clip is reinvigorated as a document that has its own story to tell. It doesn't confirm a commentator's sweeping historical account but, instead, reveals history through its own set of details.

***The Soul of a Man* and the autonomy of archival material**

The 2003 film *The Soul of a Man* is a notable example of a documentary about American roots music that maintains the autonomy of archival material.¹⁹ This film was part of a seven-part documentary series produced by Martin Scorsese entitled *The Blues*, which was meant to commemorate the hundred year anniversary of the genre (marked by the moment in 1903 when W.C. Handy first heard blues at a train station in Tutwiler, Mississippi). Like Ken Burns's *Jazz* project, a wide range of commercial products were tied in with *The Blues*, including a book and a series of CD anthologies. Unlike Ken Burns, though, Scorsese had a different director handle each of the seven episodes. Scorsese directed the first episode and handed the reins over to other leading directors, including Clint Eastwood and Charles Burnett, for the six remaining installments.

German director Wim Wenders handled the fourth episode, *The Soul of a Man*, which focuses on Wenders's three favorite blues artists: Blind Willie Johnson, Skip James, and J.B. Lenoir. What's peculiar about *The Soul of a Man* is that the film isn't so much about these three bluesmen as it is about the archival traces they left behind. While there is a sizeable amount of archival material in the film not directly related to these three men (including excerpts from Bill Ferris's first film *Black Delta Religion*), Wenders is primarily interested in the visual and aural traces of Johnson, James, and Lenoir.

The Soul of a Man is narrated by the professional actor Laurence Fishburne, who pretends to be Blind Willie Johnson speaking to the viewer from beyond the grave (Johnson actually died in 1947). About forty minutes in, the film shifts from the 1930s to the 1960s as "Johnson" discusses how English kids in the sixties began to embrace

American blues. Playing over black-and-white performance footage of John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers (a popular English blues band at the time) is the song “The Death of J.B. Lenoir,” which Mayall wrote in 1967 in response to the death of Lenoir, one of the African American pioneers of Chicago electric blues.

The film shifts from the archival footage of Mayall to images of Wenders in his first feature film, *Summer in the City* (produced in 1970). “Johnson” explains the connection between Wenders and Lenoir:

John Mayall’s tune “The Death of J.B. Lenoir” impressed a young film student in Germany so much that he started to wonder who this J.B. Lenoir was and dug out everything about the man who became his all-time blues idol. Our film student became a director who, over the years, met lots of other folks who loved J.B. They could find no filmed record of their hero until one day unseen footage of J.B. Lenoir turned up, shot in the early sixties by two art students, one American, and one Swedish.

The film then introduces Steve and Ronnog Seaberg, the two art students that filmed Lenoir in 1964 and 1965 in their Chicago apartment. In a contemporary interview filmed in their Atlanta home, the Seabergs discuss how they met and befriended Lenoir and how they decided, after being frustrated with Lenoir’s appearance on a gospel television program, to shoot some film footage of Lenoir themselves. Their hope was to get this footage played on Swedish television, which would potentially generate more gigs for the bluesman throughout Europe. The Swedish station refused to air the footage the Seabergs shot in 1964, claiming that the quality of the sound was too poor to be broadcast. The following summer the Seabergs shot more film of Lenoir, this time in J.B.’s apartment and with better sound quality and more camera setups. In the

contemporary interview, Ronnog Seaberg holds up the old reel containing the 1965 footage and says, “This is it.” [Figure 1]



Fig. 1

Steve Seaberg explains that the couple didn’t shoot much footage of Lenoir because their “purpose was just to introduce people to [Lenoir].” He adds, “We didn’t think we were making a documentary in any way.” And yet, resuscitated by Wenders’s film, the Seaberg’s footage re-emerges as a mini-documentary, as a record of a fascinating collaboration across cultural lines.

A large portion of the 1965 footage simply features a long shot of Lenoir playing music by himself, but some sections show the odd interaction between the Seabergs and Lenoir (In the contemporary interview, the Seabergs explain that it was J.B.’s idea that everyone should, at least partially, appear and participate on camera). In one setup, Steve and Lenoir chat about where they both grew up and learned to play guitar. Before they launch into the song “I Want to Go,” Steve translates what J.B. has said into Swedish. While the Seabergs most likely didn’t intend for their film to be campy, Steve’s tentative translation, mixed with the unexplained patch on his eye and his awkward delivery, nevertheless make this a silly and amusing scene. In a later scene,

Ronnog and Steve ask J.B. about his wife and children and then translate his song “Round and Round” as he sings it. [Figure 2]



Fig. 2

In the traditional historical documentary, archival footage functions merely as visual evidence confirming the spoken commentary, but, in *The Soul of a Man*, the Seaberg footage is allowed to exist as a rich, autonomous document that has its own story to tell. As Wenders has noted, this footage serves as “the backbone of the second half of [the] film.”²⁰ Wenders conducted interviews with Lenoir’s surviving family members and with admirers and old associates of Lenoir but decided not to use any of this material in the final edit. He realized that he “wasn’t so much interested in making a film with talking heads and people who remembered J.B. . . [but instead] wanted to have the music speak for itself.”²¹ In the context of a documentary film, letting the music “speak for itself” means allowing it to unfold in extended performance footage. For Wenders, the old footage reveals infinitely more than any contemporary interview ever could.

***The Soul of a Man* and the production of traces**

But what if there is no archival material of a musician available? For the portion of *The Soul of a Man* that deals with the early careers of Blind Willie Johnson and Skip James (during the 1920s and 1930s), there was no archival film footage that Wenders could draw upon. The only footage of James is the material shot after his 1964 “rediscovery,” and there is no filmed record of Johnson whatsoever (in fact, the only visual trace of Johnson is a single publicity photograph). Faced with this lack of archival material, Wenders decided to re-enact key moments in the early careers of Johnson and James.

Of course, re-enactments have been used in documentary film from the very beginning. In *Nanook of the North*, Robert Flaherty had Nanook “re-enact” hunts and some of his family’s domestic routines, and, as I noted in Chapter Three, newsreels frequently utilized re-enactments, oftentimes with the original participants of the historical event. Because there is relatively little archival film footage of roots music before the advent of television, many contemporary documentaries about roots music frequently incorporate re-enactments. For instance, the 2005 PBS “American Experience” documentary *The Carter Family: Will the Circle Be Unbroken* features re-enactments of The Carter Family’s recording sessions.

What’s different about the re-enactments in *The Soul of a Man* is that Wenders intentionally makes them look like actual fragments of archival footage [Figure 3]. For these scenes, he used a Debie Parvo, a hand-cranked film camera from the early 1920s. According to Wenders, this camera produces

a really beautiful and authentic effect and transports you right back in time—so successfully, in fact, that when we showed a first cut of the film, most of the people who saw it believed we had found all this original archived material and didn't really understand that we had produced it ourselves. The hand-cranked camera enables you to make this jump and single-handedly, so to speak, produces the feeling of the era. . . [and] scenes that look as if they were filmed at the time.²²

Wenders mixes in authentic, non-music archival clips alongside the re-enactments, which further blurs the line between authentic clip and simulation.²³



Fig. 3

In all likelihood, Wenders wasn't trying to deceive viewers by passing off newly shot material as actual archival footage.²⁴ His primary motivation to use the vintage film style was, as he says, to transport viewers back in time, to make them feel like they were really experiencing events from the 1920s and 1930s. Rather than have contemporary interviewees look back and reflect on Johnson and James, Wenders's aim was to put the viewer within the flux of these men's lives.

How do the re-enactments in *The Soul of a Man* compare to the other instances of staged action discussed in this study, like “A Banjo Song” and the Lead Belly *March of Time* newsreel (Figures 4 and 5)?



Figs. 4 and 5

For “A Banjo Song,” the Hampton Camera Club photographers self-consciously arranged their subjects for the camera, but, as I explained in Chapter One, the images don’t truly qualify as re-enactments because there is no indication that they were intended to represent any other moment than when the photos were taken. “A Banjo Song” is a constructed vision of black vernacular culture but one that is meant to evoke the contemporary moment of 1899 and to demonstrate the significance and relevance of traditional culture. The re-enactments in some of the early landmark anthropological films, like Alfred Cort Haddon’s 1898 Torres Strait footage and Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*, are similar in that they all attempt to bring traditional culture associated with the past into the present moment.

The Lead Belly *March of Time* newsreel does rely upon re-enactments. The opening scene [Figure 5] is a re-creation of a specific moment in the past, a moment that occurred approximately six months before the filming. It is important to remember, however, that the *March of Time* was a journalistic operation and that its primary goal was to inform viewers about current events around the world. It might have simulated events from the past, but they were events from the very recent past. In contrast, the re-enactments in *The Soul of a Man* are simulations of events that happened over seventy years before. As I've said, Wenders used the old Debie Parvo camera as a way of transporting viewers *into the distant past*.²⁵

Another important distinction to make is that contemporary documentarians appear to have more of an awareness that re-enactments are often based on the clichéd and stereotypical. For instance, for his 1988 documentary *The Thin Blue Line*, director Errol Morris relied on generic imagery for his re-enactments of a 1976 murder and the subsequent prosecution. Bill Nichols has commented on this feature of the film:

Instead of “actual” proof—“real” images of the murder weapon or the crime itself, for example—Morris resorts to typical or stereotypical images of a crime and its prosecution. “Murder weapon,” “police interrogation,” “signed confession,” . . . stock images . . . or illustrations of the kind found in dictionaries . . . these iconic representations . . . [and] generalized images remind us of the degree to which our perception of the real is constructed for us by codes and conventions.²⁶

Chris Thomas King, the actor who portrays Blind Willie Johnson in *The Soul of a Man*, remarked in an interview after the film's release, "I don't mind being typecast in Hollywood, but the blues image as a man on the porch with a guitar and a blind dog is embarrassingly outdated."²⁷ King didn't account for the fact that Wenders might have

included the clichéd image of a bluesman strumming a guitar on a porch precisely because it is clichéd and “embarrassingly outdated,” because it reminds us “the degree to which our perception of the real is constructed for us by codes and conventions.”

Archival dead ends

In recounting the lives of his three favorite bluesmen, Wenders prefers to show (through authentic and simulated archival clips) rather than tell (through contemporary interviews). This is, however, more than just a directorial preference for primary sources. The archival material in the film does more than just open a window onto a subject. In many respects, the archival material *is* the subject of the film. *The Soul of a Man* is as much about the archival traces of Johnson, James, and Lenoir as it is about the music and lives of these musicians. In other words, the film is as much a work of historiography as it is a work of history. Wenders claims that he simply wants the music and the archival material to “speak for itself,” but the film does more than this by considering the very nature and availability of archival material and how these factors shape the writing of history.

While I commend Wenders for the historiographical dimension of his film, the problem he generates from focusing so intently upon archival traces is that the traces themselves become fetishized and threaten to supersede the people Wenders is trying to represent. Instead of revealing an intricate historical web, the film at times resembles nothing more than a stockpile of historical relics, much like Ken Burns historical documentaries.

Wenders begins *The Soul of a Man* with “Johnson” describing how a copy of one of “his” songs, “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground,” was put on a record that went out with the Voyager space probe in 1977. Voyager’s mission is to explore the outer reaches of the solar system and beyond, and, in the unlikely event that it is intercepted by intelligent alien life, the spacecraft contains a “golden record” of sights and sounds that is meant to show the diversity of culture on Earth. Johnson’s recording was intended to represent the richness of traditional African American culture and music. As “Johnson” discusses the Voyager disc, Wenders includes an archival clip of the “golden record” being loaded onto the spacecraft [Figure 6] and an animation of Voyager traveling through deep space [Figure 7].



Fig. 6

Wenders is obsessed with the physical traces of blues history, from the Seaberg’s 16mm film reel to the golden record aboard Voyager to the photograph Dick Waterman took of Skip James at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival. It’s not that there’s anything inherently problematic with these visual and aural traces. As I noted previously about the Seaberg footage, sometimes old archival material can be revelatory and can reveal aspects of personality and ideology that would be nearly impossible to communicate through any

other means. The problem is that, the more one connects to archival traces as physical objects with their own “aura” and value, the further away one tends to get from what the traces originally documented, in this case, musicians and their complex cultural worlds. For many roots music fans and aficionados, what really matters are the recordings that have survived, not the lives and histories that the recordings emerged from.²⁸

Roots music, at a distance

Originally, Wenders provided the narration for *The Soul of the Man*, but he didn't like it. He felt his narration was pretentious and made the film too much about him rather than about the music. That's when he settled on the “impossible perspective” of “Johnson” narrating the film from outer space and beyond the grave. In Wenders's mind, shifting the narration to “Johnson” saved the film from becoming too self-indulgent. As Wenders explains, “The fact that [‘Johnson’s’] voice was out there in space on Voyager—by now on the outskirts of the solar system—made him the perfect instrument to narrate our film. He had the necessary distance, so to speak; he had a beautiful ‘objective’ point of view.”²⁹

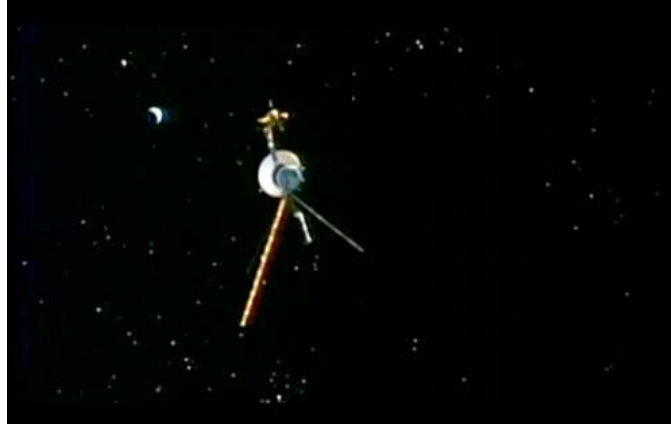


Fig. 7

But it's precisely this need for distance that continues to be a major stumbling block for roots music. The problem is that roots music, both the new music being produced today and the old music that continues to circulate, is often seen as existing in a cultural sphere that has no connection to the modern world. In an essay in which he tries to come to terms with his dissatisfaction with the *O Brother* phenomenon, Benjamin Filene claims that fans and writers are marginalizing roots music more than ever, even as they praise it for being quintessentially American:

What I think rankles me about the *O Brother* phenomenon is that even as the artists it features gain a degree of fame and fortune and a passel of awards, the revival in several key respects holds them and the music itself at a remove, depicting both as relics from another world and time. . . At every turn, the appeal of this music today seems to be its isolation from contemporary reality.³⁰

Wenders portrays Johnson as figure that lived (and, through the golden record, continues to live) in an ancient, otherworldly realm. Nothing could be more detached from contemporary reality or the lived history of the Jim Crow era than the golden record aboard the Voyager spacecraft. As the record floats beyond the outer reaches of our solar system, the historical details of Johnson and his music recede into oblivion.

Reconnecting with the present

Observational documentaries flourished in the 1960s and 70s, but, in the 1980s, the expository documentary based on interviews and archival footage became the dominant strain of documentary film work. As ethnographic filmmaker and theorist David MacDougall explains, this has meant that documentarians have been less inclined and less adept at examining the culture of the present moment:

I have mentioned my reservations about a documentary practice centered on interviews about the past and archival footage. It is unquestionably worthwhile to try to regain and reassess the past, particularly if this bears on current issues, as many of the best films of this documentary genre do. But I fear that if that is primarily what documentary does, we shall have turned our backs on the present and, in the process, leave poorer records of our own time.³¹

The expository, past-oriented approach of recent documentary film has widened the distance between contemporary listeners and American roots music.

Wenders does seem aware that detachment from the present can be a problem. He is careful not to treat blues music as a dead form. In the article he wrote for *The Blues* book, he describes how his crew happened to film the bulldozing of Chicago's Maxwell Street, the legendary street market that played a key role in the development of urban blues. Despite the destruction of such a historically significant place, Wenders is confident that blues music will endure on some other street in some other city:

the music itself is so vibrant that it will survive even the sort of callow indifference that would fail to preserve an institution like Maxwell Street. And my awareness of how the music is still alive in our culture today, still flourishing, really allows me to feel less blue about the loss of Maxwell

Street—because no doubt the things that made Maxwell Street so remarkable at one time are happening right now, someplace else.³²

For Wenders, it's not just that the old recordings of blues icons like Blind Willie Johnson, Skip James, and J.B. Lenoir have survived and continue to move contemporary audiences. For him, blues is “still alive” and “still flourishing.” Unfortunately, to demonstrate the vitality of contemporary blues, Wenders does not locate a twenty-first century Maxwell Street or unearth some new and original blues songwriting but, instead, has established commercial artists perform old tunes by Johnson, James, and Lenoir. Wenders assembles an impressive array of musicians to perform these covers (most of whom are not strictly considered blues artists), including Lucinda Williams, Alvin Youngblood Hart, Bonnie Raitt, The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, Beck, Lou Reed, Nick Cave, Los Lobos, Shemekia Copeland, T-Bone Burnett, and Cassandra Wilson. Some of the covers are relatively faithful to the original songs, but some, like Jon Spencer Blues Explosion's version of the Skip James classic “Devil Got my Woman,” are radical re-interpretations. Regardless of the level of variation, having new artists perform old songs doesn't prove the contemporary vitality of blues music. Instead, it serves as a well-intentioned tribute to a few pioneering bluesmen and their enduring legacy.

“It's Just as Radical”

Wenders could have learned something from a music video that appeared a few months before *The Soul of a Man*. Instead of a new musician performing an old song, the

video features an old musician performing a relatively new song: Johnny Cash doing the Nine Inch Nails' song "Hurt."

During the last ten years of his life, Cash teamed up with noted producer Rick Rubin for a series of critically-acclaimed studio albums. Along with some new compositions and some interpretations of classic country tunes, Rubin encouraged Cash to re-interpret songs by popular contemporary artists like Beck, Soundgarden, U2, Depeche Mode, and Nine Inch Nails. It's not so much that Cash was transforming popular songs into folk songs as he was taking other peoples' material and making it his own. Unlike the covers of blues tunes in *The Soul of a Man*, which are primarily meant to honor the legacy of a few pioneering bluesman, the covers on the Cash/Rubin records are intensely personal reflections on faith, love, and, above all else, mortality.

Music video director Mark Romanek pleaded for years with his friend Rick Rubin to allow him to direct a video for one of Cash's new songs. When Romanek heard Cash's version of "Hurt" (before it was commercially released), he was so moved by the song that he was able to convince Rubin and Cash to go ahead with a video. Due to Cash's deteriorating health, Romanek was forced to film at the musician's home in Hendersonville, Tennessee, and at the nearby House of Cash museum. While more than half the video features contemporary footage of Cash and his wife June Carter, a large portion of the video is comprised of archival material.

Early in the song, Cash sings, "The needle tears a hole / The old familiar sting / Try to kill it all away/ But I remember everything." Upon the words "remember everything," the first archival clip of the video is shown, an excerpt from the 1974 documentary *Ridin' the Rails* (a film in which Cash explores the history of railroading in

America through song and story). The clip plays for a couple seconds, and then Romanek cuts back to the contemporary Cash as he sits at a piano singing the line, “What have I become?” [Figure 8] This prompts a cut to another archival clip, this one featuring Cash walking next to the Dead Sea (from his 1973 documentary *The Gospel Road*). Romanek cuts back to Cash at the piano as he finishes the “What have I become” line by addressing it to his “sweetest friend.” Romanek continues the alternating editing pattern by cutting to old home movie clips of Cash walking through a field [Figure 9].

Through this cross-cutting, Romanek makes it seem like the 2002 Cash is addressing the youthful Cash shown in the archival footage. The question “What have I become?” becomes, then, a painful reflection on the deterioration of his own body. A sprightly and energetic Cash from the 1950s, 60s, and 70s is juxtaposed with a feeble and weakened Cash in 2002, demonstrating the song’s message that everyone “goes away in the end.” Archival footage is typically utilized to recount an historical narrative or develop an argument, but, in the “Hurt” video, Romanek lyrically uses the Cash archival material as a reminder of human mortality.



“What have I become, my sweetest friend?” (Figs. 8 and 9)

The “Hurt” video was a critical sensation in 2003, but it was an anomaly among the contemporary music video landscape. Rather than the frenetic spectacle typical of videos on MTV, BET, and CMT, “Hurt” features an aging artist reflecting on the ephemeral nature of human life. Many of today’s music videos are expressions of unbounded youth and vitality, but “Hurt” diverges from this to acknowledge the inevitability of death. Rick Rubin discussed the video with U2 frontman Bono, who recognized its unique and even radical quality: “I spoke to Bono and he compared what Johnny is doing now to what Elvis Presley did in the 1950s. Then Elvis represented a new youth culture, and it shocked and terrified everyone because culture wasn’t about

youth before him. Now we live in a youth culture, and Johnny Cash is showing the experience of a much older generation. It's just as radical.”³³

Fleeting Traces

After asking “What have I become, my sweetest friend?” Cash sings, “You could have it all / My empire of dirt.” This initiates a series of shots from within the House of Cash Museum. Due to flood damage, the museum had been closed for several years before Romanek and his crew arrived, and the “Hurt” video reveals the museum to be in a state of dereliction. When Cash sings the word “dirt,” Romanek cuts to a wide shot of what appears to be the former gift shop of the museum. The room is devoid of people, but visual traces of Cash—in posters, cardboard cutouts, and illustrations—fill the space. After a few shots of the gift shop, Romanek cuts to an image of one of Cash’s gold records laying on the floor [Figure 10]. The display glass for the record frame has shattered, and pieces of errant debris (a wire, a piece of paper) are strewn nearby. Most would consider a gold record to be a prized possession, but, in the House of Cash, it is but another neglected relic gathering dust.



Fig. 10

“Hurt” not only acknowledges the ephemeral nature of human life but also serves as a reminder that the objects humans cling to are ephemeral as well.

In an interview with MTV after “Hurt” was nominated for the channel’s Video Music Awards, Cash somberly noted, “It’s all fleeting. As fame is fleeting, so are all the trappings of fame fleeting. The money, the clothes, the furniture.”³⁴ In this comment, Cash reiterates a common belief about the relative unimportance of possessions. He refers to luxury items like clothes and furniture, but his comment can be applied to any kind of object, be it a jet plane, a gold record, or an old photograph.

And therein lies the fundamental difference between the “Hurt” video and *The Soul of a Man*. In Wenders’s film, archival traces exhibit an almost mystical quality. The old records, reels, and photographs are fetishized like holy relics, and, like the golden record sealed inside Voyager, are somehow immune to the ravages of time. With the smashed gold record in the “Hurt” video, we see instead how fragile and vulnerable those traces are. The smashed record is not a testament to the magnificence of human creativity but a caution about becoming too absorbed with human magnificence. When

the old archival footage of Johnny Cash flashes by, it's not meant to pay tribute to the man but to remind us of our own mortality.

Conclusion: Living, dying, and the documentary imagination of American roots music

Examining American roots music through documentary photographs and films reveals the fundamental tensions in how the music is appreciated and understood. As I have noted throughout this study, one of the central tensions has been the fluctuation between claims that the music is dying and claims that the music is healthy and strong. Doris Ulmann and Frederic Ramsey, Jr. believed that the culture they documented in rural sections of the South was rapidly disappearing and would soon be gone. Other documentarians, like Ben Shahn and Alan Lomax, revealed vernacular music traditions that were vibrant, relevant, and adapting to the massive transformations of American life.

Dying doesn't always mean disappearing. As I've shown, sometimes it means objectification, treating vernacular music like a collection of artifacts. Over the past century, folklorists and record collectors have meticulously researched American roots music, but, in all the accumulation and categorization, the connection to the people who made the music and to the present moment is often lost. I've cited several examples in this study of individuals and groups who have resisted the fossilization of vernacular music, from the Hampton Institute Camera Club to Worth Long to the Appalshop collective. They have worked to represent the music as *living* culture and have stressed that it can and should be useful to the communities that create it.

Many of these threads run through the Johnny Cash video. Cash's final records demonstrate the old folk song method of absorbing and adapting contemporary material. He remained rooted in the traditional sounds of gospel and early country but continually found ways to keep it fresh and new. And yet, he didn't work as an advocate for a specific community; he wasn't preserving and adapting the old music for the betterment of a race or region. His final music was intensely personal. It's not about solidarity and camaraderie but, rather, about the unraveling of all the ties that bind.

Notes

¹ Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001) p. 105.

² From <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm>, accessed on June 3, 2008. Also see Paul Arthur's "Extreme Makeover: The Changing Face of Documentary," which can be accessed at <http://www.cineaste.com/parthur.htm>.

³ Trachtenberg, Alan. "From Image to Story," in *Documenting America, 1935-1943*, Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (editors) (Berkeley: University of California Press in association with the Library of Congress, 1988) p. 45.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 52, 70.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶ To determine the original assignments, one has to select a photograph and then browse the "neighboring" related images.

⁷ See Henry Jenkins's *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

⁸ Frisch, Michael. "Oral History and the Digital Revolution: Toward a Post-Documentary Sensibility," in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd Edition, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁹ Lomax, Alan. "Cinema, Science, and Cultural Renewal," in *Selected Writings 1934-1997* (New York: Routledge, 2003) pp. 301, 304-305.

¹⁰ Archival material is even used in a couple of instances in *The Land Where the Blues Began* when Lomax tries to make connections between Mississippi blues and African musical traditions.

¹¹ A notable example is Raul Zaritsky and Linda Williams' 1981 film *Maxwell Street Blues*. Like the 1965 film *And This is Free, Maxwell Street Blues* examines the famous Chicago open air street market where blues and gospel were often performed in clubs and on street corners. *Maxwell Street Blues* is less observational and more specifically focused on music than *And This is Free* but is highly conscious of its connection to the 1964 film and even includes a few clips from *And This is Free*. Zaritsky and Williams record some of the same musicians as Mike Shea did in 1964 and, in one scene, actually cut back and forth between Jim Brewer and his band playing on a Maxwell Street corner in 1964 (from *And This is Free*) and Jim Brewer playing on that same street corner in 1980. Maxwell Street in 1964 reverberates with Maxwell Street in 1980, and, as a result, we can begin to understand the historical shifts that have happened in the interim. By juxtaposing contemporary footage with archival footage of the same location, Zaritsky and Williams demonstrate how blues music on the street has begun to move from a living tradition into a nostalgic trace of its former self.

¹² Of course, clips from narrative films are often used in documentaries, but I've chosen to focus just on the use of non-fiction material, with the recognition that the boundary between fiction and non-fiction is not always easy to determine.

¹³ The first hugely successful multi-CD retrospective of roots music was *The Complete Recordings of Robert Johnson*, which was released in 1990 and went on to sell over a million copies.

¹⁴ The film synthesizes so much material and tries to bring it all together in a spirit of melting pot harmony that we don't get to know anything beyond the standard facts and anecdotes that have circulated for years. *American Roots Music* is bad filmmaking and bad history.

¹⁵ Like Burns's *Jazz* series, *American Roots Music* also includes newly staged musical performances.

¹⁶ Of course, some of material in the film, including *To Hear Your Banjo Play*, is in the public domain, which means that it's available to use in a film for free without any restrictions. In fact, a high quality copy of *To Hear Your Banjo Play* is available through the online public domain clearinghouse archive.org. In terms of roots music archival clips, the primary value of the internet has not been its potential as a stock footage resource but simply its ability to make obscure and hard-to-find material available (although typically in a low quality, non-downloadable form). Two trends have emerged online: legal but limited archiving of documentary films and the illegal but sprawling archiving of music performance footage. A notable example of the legal but limited archiving of roots music documentaries is Tom Davenport's Folkstreams website, which offers over forty films about vernacular American culture for free in video streaming formats. For Davenport, the motivation is to make films available to the general public that are out-of-print or hard to find but, nonetheless, provide valuable glimpses of American vernacular culture. An example of the illegal but sprawling archiving of performance footage is the website YouTube. YouTube isn't just an archive for music footage; the website is an archive for whatever videos its users choose to upload, from amateur video of street fights to a James Brown Japanese soup commercial. In terms of roots music, the site contains hundreds of clips of roots music performances. Because most users and YouTube have not cleared the proper copyrights to stream this material, many of the videos on YouTube are being archived illegally.

¹⁷ One of the saddest stories illustrating the challenges in securing clearances for intellectual property in documentary work is the landmark series *Eyes on the Prize*, which remains out-of-print on video because the clearances have expired and it is estimated that it would cost a half a million dollars to re-instate them.

¹⁸ Russell, Catherine. *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999) p. 240.

¹⁹ Another example is Robert Mugge's 1999 film *Hellhounds on my Trail*, which documents the 1998 induction of legendary bluesman Robert Johnson into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In 1998 researchers stumbled upon what they believed to be a five-second archival clip of bluesman Robert Johnson playing on a street corner. In the subsequent months, blues scholars debated the authenticity of the clip, but it wasn't until the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame ceremony week that the clip was officially debunked. Mugge captures this debunking process in *Hellhounds on my Trail* with blues scholar Tom Freeland dissecting the clip on stage and Johnson's protégé Robert Lockwood, Jr. reacting to the proceedings with the comment, "I don't care how many times you look at this film—it ain't never gonna be Robert Johnson."

²⁰ Wenders, Wim. "The Soul of a Man," in *Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues: A Musical Journey* (New York: Amistad, 2003) p. 161.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 161,

²²Ibid., pp. 159-160.

²³ Despite the technical similarity between the authentic footage and the re-enactments, it's obvious that the scenes featuring Johnson and James are staged. The camera setups are seamless, and it makes no sense that the musicians sing and play but are never heard speaking. While the clips are almost perfect technical simulations of archival footage, the narrative action and the editing of the clips reveal that they are obviously staged.

²⁴ Some recent documentaries have caused controversy by passing off fake, manufactured archival footage as authentic material. It was revealed that the filmmakers for the 2004 Oscar-nominated documentary *The Children's March* had manufactured a large portion of archival footage, which caused the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to review the veracity of the film.

²⁵ Thanks to Anna Grimshaw for pointing out this distinction and encouraging me to explore it in this chapter.

²⁶ Nichols, Bill. "Getting to Know You...": Knowledge, Power and the Body" in *Theorizing Documentary*, Michael Renov, ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) p. 179.

²⁷ Gilgoff, Dan. "Where the blues still lives," *U.S. News & World Report*, October 6, 2003, Vol. 135, Issue 11.

²⁸ The fetishization of roots music traces hits its peak in the 2003 documentary *Desperate Man Blues*. As opposed to *The Soul of a Man*, which at least purports to be about musicians, *Desperate Man Blues* is about the adventures and tastes of a collector of roots music records. For a large chunk of the film, we simply watch this collector, Joe Bussard, as he listens to records in his basement. Director Edward Gillan includes one re-enactment, not of an event in the life of a classic musician, but a re-enactment of the time when Bussard discovered the rarest and most valuable record in his collection (a 78 of "Original Stack O' Lee Blues" by the Down Home Boys). Bussard believes that the real roots music stopped being produced in the early fifties, and so, all were left with are the magical spinning discs and the nostalgic reminiscences of a collector's career.

²⁹ Wenders, p. 162.

³⁰ Filene, Benjamin. "O Brother, What Next? Making Sense of the Folk Fad," *Southern Cultures* 10 (Summer 2004) pp. 56-57.

³¹ MacDougall, David. "Film Teaching and the State of Documentary," in *Transcultural Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) p. 229.

³² Wenders, p. 164.

³³ Quoted in Dave Urbanski's *The Man Comes Around: The Spiritual Journey of Johnny Cash* (Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Books, 2003) p. 176.

³⁴ D'Angelo, Joe. "Johnny Cash Says Unlike Most Videos, 'Hurt' Wasn't Too Painful," August 26, 2003, accessed at http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1477648/20030826/cash_johnny.jhtml, accessed on January 10, 2008.

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_____. [Untitled]. Call # LC-USF33- 006119-M5. N.d.

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