

# Unearthing American Roots

*Discourses of Authenticity, Nostalgia and Race in  
American Roots Music and Literature*

Claudia Colombo



A Thesis Presented to

The Department of Literature, Area Studies and European

Languages

University of Oslo

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the MA Degree

Spring 2017



# Unearthing American Roots

Discourses of Authenticity, Nostalgia and Race in American  
Roots Music and Literature

Claudia Colombo

© Claudia Colombo

2017

Unearthing American Roots: Discourses of Authenticity, Nostalgia and Race in American  
Roots Music and Literature

Claudia Colombo

<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

Print: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo

IV

# Abstract

In this thesis I aim to expose and explore the ubiquitous presence of discourses of authenticity and nostalgia in American literature, culture and music. For this purpose I outline the reasons and history lying behind America roots music community's fascination with discourses of authenticity and nostalgia, while contemplating similar patterns in literary works that deal with music from the American South. By sketching the history of the genre from its earliest commercial days, I intend to show how aesthetics of authenticity have been fabricated and romanticized in order to downplay the role of economic interest, a fact that has generated a problematic and whitewashed definition of American roots music, in spite of its great cultural cross-pollination. By exposing the ideologies hidden behind specific aesthetic and musical choices I point out the dangers inherent in discourses of authenticity, but I also stress its potential empowering aspects. Looking at several contemporary roots music acts, as a matter of fact, it is possible to identify how their use of retro and nostalgic aesthetics is directed to the fostering of community and the reevaluation of manual work and craftsmanship as a way of countering rampant capitalism. Moreover, in my examination of contemporary bands and authors engaged with Appalachian culture, I find a possible solution to the one-sided and unjustly romanticized image of American roots music. Such a solution consists in artists celebrating and engaging with past traditions in order to uncover the rich history of the music and the region, taking into account all ethnic groups and their contribution to the vibrant culture found in the South to this day.

“America has a song on the tip of its tongue that it’s afraid to sing.”

- Ketch Secor, Old Crow Medicine Show

# Acknowledgements

“Thank you for your precious time, forgive me if I start to cry”

Tom T. Hall “That's How I got to Memphis”

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Bruce Barnhart, first of all for having inspired me to write about the connections between music and literature. His course “Jazz and African American Literature” provided me with crucial tools to think about the ways in which music and literature can be used in combination, in order to expose greater cultural tendencies and ideologies present in a given culture. I am deeply grateful that he supported my decision to write about the topic I love and to include music in a literary thesis and that he could guide me through the writing process. My gratefulness also goes to my good friend and PhD candidate Jeroen Rijnders for his supportive role both in casual discussions about my topic, in proofreading and commenting my chapters, as well as in joining me to numerous roots music concerts and sharing the same musical passion. Thank you to my parents Françoise and Francesco Colombo for always having supported my choice to follow my interests and passions in my academic path. Thank you to my good friend Soshia Samii for being in the same boat and sharing lunch breaks and the pleasures and despairs of writing. Thank you to Linn Kristine Kleppe for a final and much appreciated proofreading. Thank you to Abram Racin, socially aware multi-instrumentalist from West Virginia, for having patiently and passionately answered some questions and shared his experience about music communities in Appalachia and Nashville.





# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
1 Authenticity as a Handcrafted Identity: Roots Music’s Fascination with Craftsmanship, Tradition, Nostalgia and Community .....	15
1.1 Agrarianism and the Focus on Meaningful and Artistic Labor.....	16
1.2 Craftsmen and Musicians as Community Makers .....	21
1.3 Authenticity: a Double-Edged Sword .....	27
1.4 Roots Musicians and Hipsters .....	34
2 Commercial and Ideological Forces and the Creation of Aesthetic Standards for Roots Music .....	39
2.1 “Treasure Seekers, Beware: There is No Such Essence Here” .....	40
2.2 “All Right, Let’s Keep it Close to the Ground Tonight, Boys” .....	45
2.3 “Music Confounds the Machines” .....	53
2.4 “Betwixt and Between” .....	56
3 “As What Begins Anywhere/ Started Already Somewhere Else”: Race Awareness and the Recomposition of History in Contemporary Roots Music and Literature .....	67
3.1 The Revival of Shared Black and White Music .....	68
3.2 Old Crow Medicine Show’s Nostalgia and Anti-Industrialism.....	74
3.3 Old Crow Medicine Show’s Activism .....	81
3.4 Dom Flemons and the Power of (His)Stories .....	82
3.5 Rewriting Appalachia through Race-Informed Poetry.....	88
4 Conclusion.....	95
Works Cited .....	99



# Introduction

References to the past along with rural, retro and old-fashioned aesthetics are a trademark of American roots music, be it country, folk, bluegrass or any other subgenre related to the music of the American South. Roots artists seem to be greatly concerned with creating personas that are honest and down-to-earth at the same time as they become almost mythical figures outside and beyond time, or better, characters coming from the past and surviving and renewing themselves in the present. In spite of the almost mythical aura surrounding many of those personas, the focus is also clearly set on geographical belonging and continuity within tradition. The focus of such cultural expressions can thus be said to fluctuate between past and present, the former understood as origins and tradition and the latter as position in geographical space. In American roots music, discourses of space and time as performed by artists often reveal an underlying scope of promoting a certain ideology or on the contrary, of trying to escape a straightforward ideology in favor of a sense of shared community. The ideological question of whether art can or should be openly political, or at least engaged in providing an insight into the workings of the world and its power relations seems to be a widely complex one when it comes to American roots music, since it is traditionally associated with conservative values and aesthetics. Music journalist Chris Willman, in his work on the politics of country music, describes the status of the genre in 2005 as: "...though hardly unilateral as a genre, [it] typically gravitates more toward expressing the fears, beliefs, and hopes of conservatives, who occupy a majority of the artist roster as well as fan base at this point in the music's evolution." (Willman 3). Looking more deeply in to the matter, however, it does not take great effort to find all possible shades of political affiliations or even apoliticism among artists and their supporters. This does of course not coincide with the automatic associations and stereotypical images evoked when thinking or talking about American roots music, especially when using the term country music - its most well-known genre - which leave little space for progressive and liberal topics and agendas. Images of pickup trucks, cowboy boots and hats along with "Lonestar belt buckles and old faded Levis" - as Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson sing in "Mammas don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys" - immediately come to mind. The stereotypes of country are tough guys and loners preaching and celebrating personal liberty and self-determination, almost incarnations of the American Dream and a self-made man with a guitar, leather boots, a hat and a good dose of alcohol. Although such stereotypes do not merely originate out of people's fantasy, and the former elements can actually be found in a lot of

country music acts both recent and old, it might prove more useful to analyze such characteristics in terms of performance and personas put on by performers and to try to understand what values stand behind such celebrations, romanticizations and uses of traditional symbols. What emerges from the analysis of various Southern roots music acts is indeed an appreciation of older tradition as a way to find meaning in the production of music by being part of a community. The space between musicians' real life personas and the ones created by their performances, choice of songs, and the marketing around them is particularly interesting if we are to examine which elements are central to the genre, specifically those subgenres with a more or less clearly recognizable Appalachian influence.

For the scope of this thesis I chose to use the term American roots music to refer to traditional music of the American South, with a focus on the Appalachian area. Questions of musical genres and their definition by means of a specific terminology are by no means straightforward and they pose several problems due to specific sets of ideological, political, social and historical beliefs associated with them. The term country music, for instance, has been institutionalized in 1953 after Hank William's death, and it came to denote a genre previously referred to as old-time, hillbilly or folk music (Peterson 194). With William's legacy, however, the genre and its term became more commercial and to this day country music is often associated with great commercial success and the so called stadium-country music phenomenon. However, each genre has numerous sub genres, as for instance outlaw country in the case of the umbrella term country music, which differs greatly from mainstream country both in themes, musical style and audience. Hillbilly and old-time music are more specific terms that refer to rural and often acoustic kinds of music of Appalachia and cannot be used for a wider discussion of the genre. The term folk is a very general term that has been used to refer to, among others, bluegrass, honky-tonk, country, hillbilly and western and all of these terms have been used somewhat interchangeably (Peterson 198). As a result of McCarthyism and the red scare, however, in the 1950s, folk came to be associated with the political left and several folk artists faced charges of communism, rendering the term problematic and too politically charged for a common and generalized use (198). Lately, the term Americana has been popular to refer to new folk-pop acts that include instruments traditionally associated with Southern music, such as the banjo, mandolin and fiddle, and the term is quite flexible and includes a degree of musical innovation and experimentation that does not necessarily fit the acts I am analyzing. Bluegrass has somehow been overused in recent years, often becoming a term to define any act where a banjo could be heard, in spite of being a term that refers to a specific

blend and development of various elements of Southern music originated in the late 1948. Therefore, American roots music is a less specific term that can encompass a vast variety of genres and also has the potential to include expressions more typically associated with African American music, such as work songs, field hollers and blues, since it is not as stereotypically associated with white music, as is the case for the term country music. In my usage of the term, American roots music is an umbrella term for any genre, newer or older, that is not classified as mainstream and that is actively engaged in the re-discovery and revival of early 20<sup>th</sup> century American music and aesthetics, i.e. the early stages of the history of recorded music.

While considering contemporary values and ideologies present in the musical genre, I will also include instances of Southern literature that illustrate both the close interplay between music and literature and the affinity of themes found in the two forms of artistic expression. In the wake of the fact that the last Nobel Prize in Literature was given to Bob Dylan, the quintessential American singer-songwriter, the fluidity of the boundaries that separate music and literature has been officially recognized. Such an award makes a multidisciplinary discussion of music and literature and their interplay and overlapping concerns especially relevant within the field of English literature. Dylan himself has been engaged in a lifelong journey through the history and genres of American music and his earliest interests lie in American folk and blues music and singer-songwriters from the 1930s and 40s, such as Woody Guthrie. Moreover, Dylan is also mentioned as an inspirational figure for artists that I will discuss in my thesis, such as Dom Flemons and Ketch Secor from Old Crow Medicine Show. Hence, it is easy to see that older forms of music have always played crucial roles in the taste creation of contemporary musicians and audiences. I am therefore interested in exploring the renewed interest in American roots music of Appalachian descent and through that trying to trace patterns and possible explanations for a wide use of retro aesthetics among numerous artists in the genre, a tendency that is by no means new and is expressed in literary movements such as the Agrarians, to which Donald Davidson is affiliated. I am also interested in outlining the elements that can be seen as positive and empowering and provide a tool or a vision for a better world but also in pointing out the problems that certain aesthetics and creations of performing personas might bring about. In order to do so it is necessary to talk about the notion of authenticity, a topic that is widely discussed in the genre and that serves often as a strict and exclusive standard to judge good or bad music and to grant artists affiliation to the genre or exclude them from it.

American roots music has been significantly permeated by the discourse of authenticity at least since its debut as a commercialized form of entertainment in the mid-1920s. Concerns with authenticity are to be found already in the earliest forms of radio programs, most notably the show that later became famous as the Grand Ole Opry, aired by Nashville's WSM radio station for the first time in 1925 (Peterson 69-71). As sociologist and country music scholar Richard A. Peterson illustrates in his extensive work on authenticity in country music, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, George D. Hay, the father of the Opry, was actively engaged in the creation of a certain image for the performers in the show, through actors and musicians impersonating stereotypical characters and rural aesthetics (75-80). The argument central to Peterson's work establishes two central aspects that define authenticity in music and that will be dealt with more in depth in chapter 2. The first aspect is being believable in relation to a model and the second one is being original and not being limited to a mere imitation of a given model (220). His claim also implies that the concept of authenticity is a changing one (ibid.) and that shifts in meaning of authenticity are not random but reflect different and sometimes contending agendas and attempts to naturalize ideology (ibid.).

Another academic take on authenticity, that is useful in that it addresses the audience's projection of their own set of beliefs onto performers, is provided by Michael Strand, in his article "Authenticity as a Form of Worth". The main claim here is that the discourse of authenticity surrounding country music is tightly related to value judgement and worth, whose assessment is made possible by tests made consciously or unconsciously by fans and by how closely the tested item is situated to the parameters set by the test (61). Strand sets the parameters of worth for country music as follows: "authentic musicians and songs embody a domestic worth achieved through demonstrations of a concern with reality ... domestic worth involves a concern with tradition, tight-knit and personal relationships, "the soul of the home," and trust." (62). Strand also highlights how discourses of authenticity are generated as a reaction and opposition to commerce by writing: "That the discourse of authenticity surrounding indie and country music involves a commercial critique is no surprise: strident opposition to commodification is largely constitutive of the modern "discourse of authenticity" (62).

While I find his point about the opposition of country music to commerce through the discourse of authenticity very valid and interesting, also in connection to Donald Davidson's Agrarian beliefs and mistrust towards industrialization that I will explore in this thesis, I would like to go a step further and not limit myself to the simplification that country music is mainly

appreciated for its domestic worth. To be sure, Strand's point is valid for certain social and geographical groups in the U.S. My argument, however is that country music's reach is not limited to its typical audience of people that are "rural, working class, middle-aged, with relatively low levels of cultural capital." (Strand 72), but that it has the potential to become an expression that values a sense of community and promotes the great social, cultural and racial diversity present in the United States.

Roots music is now played and appreciated all over the world and therefore I find it more useful and inclusive, especially in the light of what I interpret as a sort of revival in popular culture that happened in the late 90s and is still ongoing, to analyze country music by taking into account some recent developments of authenticity in music that are particularly concerned with ideas of nostalgia and the simplicity of pre-industrial or early industrial times. This tendency is on the one hand reflected in the production of several movies and documentaries to celebrate American roots music, as for instance the iconic *O Brother, Where Art Thou* (2000) by the Coen Brothers, that helped renew the interest in American vernacular music from the Appalachians. On the other hand, a similar retro aesthetic is found in several roots music bands and solo acts such as The Old Crow Medicine Show, Dom Flemons and many young Appalachian string bands such as The Hogslop String Band and acts the likes of Matt Kinman & Moses Nelligan, that use old photographic techniques for their albums and dress in old-fashioned clothes.

Chapter 1 will be dealing with this interest in the past and in antiquated aesthetics and techniques of production, which is also very prominent in what has been called the hipster movement. The latter is exemplified by communities of people highly concerned with their looks and obsessed with vintage items and artisanal products, whose histories can be traced and reproduced to compensate for the loss of meaning and understanding of the processes of production that came with industrialization. Typically, the hipster movement is interested in re-attaching history to objects and I will argue through my musical examples, that a similar trend is present in a semi-alternative/not-so-commercial kind of roots music of Appalachian descent. The artists I explore are concerned with the reenactment of older American musical genres and they do that either through imitation and role-playing or by incorporation of older musical elements with varying degrees of innovative and original elements. Along with the reenactment of older traditions comes a sense of nostalgia and mixed feelings towards technology and commerce, sentiments expressed by the roots music community, that is fans and artists, by the

author Donald Davidson and the Agrarians and also by such contemporary trends as the hipster movement. As a matter of fact, the efforts of such a community originated by the wish to be innovative, different, alternative and even opposed to consumerism, as cultural critic Mark Greif writes in his article “What Was the Hipster?” (2). This desire resulted into a proliferation of commodities and companies with a strong focus on the rural, the nostalgic and the pre- or early-industrial. In the food industry, coffee shops and restaurants, the focus is on the local and organic and the preservation of indigenous species and recipes. In fashion and design the aesthetics used are old-fashioned and second hand markets become a place where people are able to create their identity by picking and combining old objects and situate them in a new context. In technology there is a strong interest for retro equipment, polished and renovated or re-invented, as for instance record players, analogue cameras, polaroids and gearless bicycles. The focus is often on the origins and history of the commodities and also on methods of production and techniques that are more manual and less automated and homogenized than regular everyday goods found in large scale supermarkets. A narrative of origin and history is added to commodities making them appear more sustainable and valuable, and making the buyer feel less involved in capitalism, where products are often mass produced and the consumer is alienated from the methods of production. These tendencies are to be observed in the roots music community, especially in the way numerous artists select old-fashioned aesthetics for their clothing styles, accessories, album artworks and pictures.

There is thus a renewed interest in exposing the mechanisms behind the production of commodity and a certain fascination with the old, the analogue, the manual and the artifact that is created with effort and craftsmanship. In a debate that includes craftsmanship, especially in the scope of this essay, that looks at the topic in order to apply it to the creation and performance of music, it is necessary to reflect on the differences and similarities between art and craftsmanship. Sociologist Richard Sennett, in his work *The Craftsman*, starts his discussion of art vs. craftsmanship by stating that professional artists are numerically inferior to craftsmen, since the latter are less narrowly defined and include numerous practices (65). The next step Sennett takes is to point out that “there is no art without craft; the idea for a painting is not a painting.” (65) and then he complicates the question by suggesting that what distinguishes art from craftsmanship is the idea of expression as opposed to technique (ibid.). Sennett provides a partial answer to the debate by using Margot and Rufold Wittkower's idea that in the Renaissance individual artists start to emerge from the typical medieval context of the communal workshop and distinguish themselves by being concerned with their interiority and



individuality, whereas the craftsmen are concerned with the community (65). In medieval workshops it was not common practice to emphasize the work of individuals but rather the product was labelled with the name of the whole workshop that was composed by many different artisans. In the Renaissance, however, there is a new tendency of using the maker's name on the artifact and this fact becomes more and more important for selling products (68). The Wittkowers explain that the artists' new tendency of claiming the originality of their works reinforces the idea that originality is an individual feature (in Sennett 66). Despite the fact that even Renaissance artists did not work in isolation but rather had a workshop that helped them in their creations, what they did differently is that they claimed the originality of their works, while in medieval times originality was not sought after or valued (66). Sennett sums up by writing:

The contrast still informs our thinking: art seems to draw attention to work that is unique or at least distinctive, whereas craft names a more anonymous, collective, and continued practice. But we should be suspicious of this contrast. Originality is also a social label, and originals form peculiar bonds with other people.

Explaining the term “Originality” Sennett shows how it signifies “something where before there was nothing” (70) and that it contains an element of suddenness, something that comes into being and causes intense emotional reactions (70). He also specifies that innovation happened in the Middle Ages too, but it happened much slower and was the result of the work of a community and not of an individual (70).

The sense of communal effort to create something, without necessarily putting a name on the product or idea, applies to roots music too, where musicians often play, sing and interpret songs coming from a long tradition. Traditional songs typically do not have a known composer but rather numerous versions that differ from performer to performer or geographical area. For this reason roots musicians can be compared to craftsmen rather than artists, if we think of Sennett's definition, since they engage in the performance of material that is already there and part of a tradition and from there they interpret it in their own way, or in a lot of cases, try to reproduce it in a way that they feel is true to the tradition. There are, of course, several degrees of originality across roots artists, some of whom are only loosely inspired by traditional themes, but I am mostly concerned with those who try to reproduce older material faithfully and in exploring why this is the case and what it says about their ideologies. In this chapter I will argue that the quest for authenticity in selected roots acts is a

process of identity creation that is done in subtle ways and is comparable to a craftsman's work of creating in communion with others. Artists try to learn traditional techniques, often by engaging in historical research or by learning from older performers. After having acquired the traditional technique they also experiment with it and put their personal touch in their music, thus renewing and keeping the tradition alive, a process undergone also by the protagonist of Davidson's novel. The same tendency of craftsmanship I see in the roots music revival of the past decade is also present in the hipster movement and its obsession with old objects and processes of production.

Along with my exploration of artists and aesthetics of American roots music I will also analyze an artistic take on authenticity in the form of a novel, *The Big Ballad Jamboree* written by Donald Davidson, which will be the matter of chapter 2. This well-known Southern poet's only novel illustrates some of the core beliefs and schools of thought that have originated from the Appalachian area and it creates a scenario for how roots musicians should be in order to be accepted as authentic within a community. Interestingly, the topics and beliefs expressed in his novel overlap greatly with the discourses of authenticity found among roots music fans and scholars. The tension between commercial and anti-commercial forces, for instance, is central to the novel, where the protagonist is torn between a band that performs for the radio and has to accept compromise in order to generate income, and a beloved that is completely immersed in the academic study of ballads for the sake of preservation and appreciation of the culture. Moreover, the novel partly illustrated Peterson's idea of authentic country music being rooted in tradition, by means of the relationship to some models, while at the same time presenting new and original or personal elements. The epilogue of the novel, indeed, suggests that the protagonist has found a balance between commercial and anti-commercial music, and has accepted both sides and complemented them with his own original material. What emerges throughout Davidson's narrative is a contrast between the rural and the urban, and more specifically, an ambivalent and often sceptic relationship to industrialization and new technologies. Davidson's Southern upbringing and Agrarian background and engagement makes him by definition concerned with the interest of promoting regional identities and traditions, often by adopting an extreme standpoint that results in racist and separatist agendas. His novel is also ambiguous when it comes to modern technologies and lifestyles, and he seems to accept a certain extent of technological means as well as commercial compromises if the scope is that of documenting, promoting and conserving rural cultures and traditions. While Agrarians are typically opposed to capitalism, the novel stresses the necessity of pandering to it

if one is to make a living as a musician and bearer of tradition. The protagonist of the novel moves from a predominantly commercial performance of music, embodied by the necessity of appearing on radio programs and endorsing frequent advertising songs, to a combination of commercial and non-commercial engagements. This shift happens through the discovery and study of the tradition of old songs of Anglo-Irish descent and through fieldwork in the mountains of North Carolina to try to preserve rural people's musical heritage. Technology and capitalism, hence, are only accepted inasmuch as they promote or support the preservation of rural cultures and are used by and for local people and not outsiders. The novel's engagement in discourses of capitalism and commercial use of music reflects the ubiquitous tension present in American roots music about whether it is good or bad to deal with economic forces.

Chapter 2 will also deal with the history of roots music, focusing specifically on economic and technological forces that have played a central role in its development. Until the 1920s, country music was not a commercial genre and had been neglected by the music industry, since the standards of the time tended more towards urban genres or European-oriented music, styles that were accepted and promoted as fine-art and deemed more sophisticated. (Malone 30-31) This meant also that music was seen as separate from life and the forms that were most valued were the rare and complex ones, the exceptions of the elite rather than the expressions of the people (31). However, the two poles of the music industry, divided into ideological and commercial forces, in other words, those who set the standards of music and those who sold it, had different roles in the promotion of rural music (31). The commercial pole was the first one to react to this kind of music in the attempt to understand rural people's tastes and in this way widen its profits by extending its market (33). This happened mostly as a consequence of increased diffusion of new means of communication: both the automobile and the radio reduced the distance between urban and rural spaces (34). Rural Southern music, although having existed and thrived for centuries before, owes its debut in popular culture and its exposure to the masses both to commercial and technological forces. Chapter 2 will also illustrate how individual people have been influential in the creation of a certain aesthetic for the genre of American roots music, both in the past and in the present. Early radio and recording industry entrepreneurs such as George D. Hay, Ralph Peer, Polk Brockman and folklorists such as John and Alan Lomax, as a matter of fact, have both preserved and renewed the music that was previously part of a predominantly oral tradition and have packaged it in a way that it became accessible to wider audiences as well as recorded and archived it, thus making it possible to be retrieved by contemporary audiences. Contemporary music industry magnate T

Bone Burnett makes use of such materials and through his combination of the medium of film with music and literature has been a crucial figure in the revival of early 20<sup>th</sup> century American music in the popular culture of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. My focus in this chapter will be on the interplay between commercial forces and discourses that oppose them and I will point out the interdependence of such forces for the survival and renovation of American roots music.

Chapter 3 will be devoted to the exploration of contemporary performers that use music from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to both entertain and inform their audiences. Through almost forgotten instruments and musical styles, performers such as Dom Flemons and the Carolina Chocolate Drops and Old Crow Medicine Show mix their nostalgia and fascination with the past with the desire to retrace the history of American roots music from a more complete perspective, namely taking off the lenses of white domination and appropriation in favor of the acknowledgement and celebration of the great cultural diversity of the music. The same process is found in instances of contemporary Appalachian poetry, where authors both white and black write about their shared lives and music. The poetry of Frank X Walker and Jake Adam York, in other words, stands in stark contrast with Donald Davidson's writings when it comes to race, but also shares a similar engagement with music as a quintessential element of Southern culture. The importance of the discussion of alternatives to the predominantly white perspective on the history of American roots music is legitimized by novels such as *The Big Ballad Jamboree*, which in addition to being situated within the discourses of a certain brand of Southern nostalgia that celebrates unspoiled nature and the rural home as an idyllic and peaceful place, is problematically neglecting the African American influence in the creation of American roots music, a fact still reflected in the collective imagination of the genre as a quintessentially white one. It is nowadays known and accepted that American roots music originated at a crossroads of cultures and whose influences can be traced back to Europe, Africa and South America (Malone 22-32). Yet Davidson's novel, based in a fictitious southwestern town in North Carolina, makes no mention of African American presence, neither as characters nor as musical influences, while it repeatedly mentions Anglo-Irish influences. As country music scholar Bill Malone explains in his *Country Music, U.S.A.*, what he calls country music had been widely used before the 1920s when it started to become commercialized and aired on the radio and he stresses that already before the radio, the music was thriving thanks to the most disparate influences brought by mobile people (18). Hence, the very music that is often seen as a quintessential expression of a community in a specific place is really the result of a multiplicity of influences. As a factor of influence Malone mentions the role of the traveling show, which

took musical ideas from urban to rural spaces (19). Such shows, as for instance medicine shows, where composed of a wagon and a pseudo doctor trying to sell patent medicines and of entertainers that would joke, sing and play instruments often with their face painted black to imitate and mock African American characters (19). Such traveling shows played an important role as career starters for several legends of country music the likes of Jimmie Rodgers, Roy Acuff and Hank Williams (20), who by traveling came in contact with musical genres such as blues, ragtime and jazz and thus widened their repertoires (22). Another factor of influence were young workers that would move from rural places to cities to work and would later bring back new influences to their native places, especially after the Civil War and the development of a railroad system (21). Malone mentions an interesting process of absorption of such urban influences into rural contexts, and explains that songs and styles were either approved or rejected, and if the latter was the case, they were modified into country songs over the years and then preserved sometimes in rather remote places, a process that made them seem typical and timeless country songs originated from that particular place rather than acquired and transformed sounds (23). This makes Malone conclude that the origin of a country song is not what determines its classification in the category of country and folk: “Whether the song comes from urban or non-Southern areas makes no difference: if the rural people accept it as one of their own and perform it in their native manner, then it becomes a “country” song. And if the song enters oral tradition it becomes a “folk” song regardless of its origin or quality.” (23). Along with the sad, melancholy and often religious songs that seemed to be the most popular type of music in the rural South, there was also a repertoire of faster and more joyful tunes of Celtic and English descent, used to accompany country dances and often played on the fiddle (25). In addition to influences from the various ethnic groups populating the South, such as Mexican and Cajun, Malone stresses the central and crucial role that African Americans have played in the creation of country music (27). Malone's seminal work on country music was published in 1968, and in spite of its somewhat outdated terminology, he makes the following important point for scholars of country music to come:

Nowhere is the peculiar love-hate relationship that has prevailed among the southern races more evidenced than in country music. Country music – seemingly the most “pure white” of all American musical forms – has borrowed heavily from the Negro. White southerners who would be horrified at the idea of mixing socially with Negroes have enthusiastically accepted their musical offerings: the spirituals, the blues, ragtime, jazz, and a variety of instrumental techniques (27).

Malone adds that also in the 1960s, African American rhythms found in rock'n'roll and rhythm-and-blues have been widely popular among young Southerners, some of whom were raised by members of the Ku Klux Klan and Citizens' Council and he uses this point to claim that "It has never been possible in this country to segregate musical forms." (27). Since the onset of commercialization of roots music in the mid-1920s, however, markets for black and white music have been separated and the presence of African Americans severely limited in the genre's crucial institutions such as the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville. The fact that African American music has been crucial in the development of the genre has been bypassed along the way, a fact that created a general consensus that genres such as country, bluegrass and old-time are quintessentially white forms of expression. As shown by Malone, however, African Americans are credited with having contributed to the style through rhythmic and instrumental techniques and by making the guitar a central element, almost a second voice to the singer's song (29). Malone argues that the value of African American music had already long been noticed by whites, who would engage in imitations of characters and speech in forms of entertainment such as minstrel shows (30). Moreover, as professor of music and folklore Paul F. Wells summarizes in his article "Fiddling as an Avenue of Black-White Musical Interchange", Dena Epstein demonstrated in 1975 that the banjo has African origins and that slaves played fiddles and banjos already as early as 1774 (143). Later fieldworks about North Carolina Piedmont string band traditions concluded in 1995 by Cecelia Conway show that African Americans were in direct contact with whites living in the mountains and influenced their style of playing and tuning without the mediation of minstrel shows (Wells 143).

North Carolina, the setting of Davidson's novel and the place where Dom Flemons and the Carolina Chocolate Drops are based, is a state that has been involved in slavery since its beginnings and the greatest presence of African American population was, and still is to be found in the eastern part of the state, due to its geographic position along the coast, where it was possible for slave ships to stop ("The The growth of slavery in North Carolina"). By 1860 North Carolina could count the presence of 361,522 African Americans ("Slavery and the African American Experience") in a total population of 992,622 ("Results from the 1860 Census"). In 1940, a couple of years before Davidson wrote his novel, the "Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1951" reports 981'298 African Americans in North Carolina for a total of 3'571'523 (33). The fact that there is no mention of this part of the demographics, although almost one third of the population of North Carolina was African American around the time Davidson wrote the novel, and also that the music that permeates the whole novel has strong African American

influences, reveals Davidson's agenda of neglecting or excluding parts of the local cultural heritage in his production of cultural material. Even in Southwestern North Carolina, an area at the edge of the Appalachian Mountains vaguely mentioned as the setting of Davidson's novel, the presence of African Americans ranges from one fifth to one eighth of the total population, according to the 1950 Census of Population (33-108, 33-111). Luckily, however, recent developments in roots music and Appalachian literature are showing the true face of the region by revealing its rich and mixed musical history and thus working towards a less stereotypically white representation of the genre.

I have personally always been attracted to and fascinated with traditional music and I have been trying to learn Irish traditional fiddle for several years and been on several musical trips to Ireland and to the southern states of the U.S. Thinking about my own taste in music I realized that I also often prefer music that I unconsciously perceive as authentic, meaning a kind of music that has been played for a lot of years in a certain geographical and social context and that is clearly recognizable because of its stylistic idiosyncrasies. Part of the fascination with traditional music comes from the sound itself, that resonates deeply within me and allows me to create a mental space that represents the way I imagine a fulfilling and ideal life to be. I also associate it with a sense of community and a way of being together that is fully satisfying and allows people to be in a state of enjoyment of the present moment. This happens both when playing, especially in the popular format of the jam session, by being a quiet spectator of the music or by being a more active one engaged in dancing and singing along. The elements I find so enticing about this music are of course not exclusive to traditional music and this is why I want to explore further where this fascination comes from. Having read and reflected a lot about authenticity I came to realize that it is a profoundly complex concept that is often used and abused without a reflection about what it actually means and whether it is a term that is useful at all. My impression is that it contains a major contradiction, in that by using it, people think they can express something pure, real and tangible but as it turns out, it becomes a term to disguise people's or communities' constructions, imaginations and values about what they deem to be the real thing. This longing for the real thing is indicative of a desire to attach meaning to artifacts, actions and cultural expressions and it might also be a reaction to the sense of fakery or role playing that might originate from performances. It seems that artists want to compensate for their performative personas by consciously or unconsciously making them appear as real as possible. On the one hand, the concept of authenticity, be it used overtly as a word or covertly through certain kinds of aesthetics that recall past traditions and realities, is a dangerous one in

that it provides space for exclusion and strict value judgement instead of promoting diversity and inclusiveness. On the other hand, however, it also promotes a strong sense of community and group affiliation and enjoyment of the present that can prove positive in an individualistic and fast-paced reality. I will explore what this sense of authenticity and romanticization of the past does for artists, fan communities and music consumers. More specifically, whether authenticity is used to try to compensate for the space of the performance, which can be perceived as constructed or as a space outside of the ordinary, or rather to actually embody and enact specific values and agendas selected by the music community as positive and empowering. I will also try to point to the problems facing discourses of authenticity, namely the danger of exclusion and creation of a closed community whose approval is needed in order to be part of it.



# 1 Authenticity as a Handcrafted Identity: Roots Music's Fascination with Craftsmanship, Tradition, Nostalgia and Community

“They don't make 'em like they used to”

“Gran Torino 1963” The Family Hammer

One of the American South's greatest cultural exports to the North and to the rest of the world is its music, which originated because of the complex historical and social context created by the coexistence of numerous and heterogeneous groups of immigrants. Whether they were forced there, or migrated by choice or necessity, people from vastly different cultural traditions came to live closely together, giving birth to some of the most popular genres of music in the world. That this music also plays an important role in Southern literature is thus not surprising. Folklorist William Ferris points out that literature, oral tradition, visual arts and music are closely intertwined through storytelling and a blend of voices (Ferris 139). He illustrates his point with the example of Mark Twain, who uses both white and black voices in his novels and renders them in a transcription of their dialects, thus opening the path for the use of vernacular language in American literature (140). Although Mark Twain is not strictly speaking a Southern writer, his writing is inspired by Southern geography and themes. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for instance, deals with slavery and the interaction between blacks and whites and unfolds on the Mississippi River, a river that is often associated with and referenced in roots music and blues. Ferris quotes professor Shelley Fisher Fishkin's words that Mark Twain's writing also “helped open American literature to the multicultural polyphony that is its birthright and special strength” (Fishkin qtd. in Ferris 140). This interaction of different elements in Southern writing is also reflected in what Ferris calls an important link between visual artists and writers (143). His point is that the South has been represented visually through a panoply of media such as photography and film and that it has become “the most closely seen region in our nation.” (143). In addition to influences from a strong visual tradition, musical forms have also been essential to Southern authors and their writing (147). While the blues shaped the way many African American authors wrote, the ballads of European descent

influenced white writers such as Donald Davidson, one of the founding fathers and active member of the Agrarian movement (Ferris 147). For these reasons, my analysis is going to encompass instances of Southern literature, music and aesthetics related to bands' image-building, as well as references to visual forms such as photographs and movies.

## 1.1 Agrarianism and the Focus on Meaningful and Artistic Labor

One way to connect Southern music, literature and to expose common ideological traits found in both forms of cultural expressions and in some segments of society, is to look at the works of Donald Davidson, whose ideas of anti-commercialism, nostalgia and the appreciation of craftsmanship and local communities are shared by various roots music acts as well as by the hipster movement. In 1930, twelve Southern intellectuals among whom Donald Davidson, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren published their manifesto of Agrarian principles, named *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. The collection of twelve individual essays by each of the members starts with a common "Statement of Principles" in which the authors state their common thread. The main point of the collection is to state why and how industrialization is detrimental to Southern society and life in general and one interesting point is made about the change in the perception of labor. The authors claim that industrialization promised a greater amount of leisure time by making labor easier through machines and advanced technology, but they see the promise broken by an acceleration of the work rhythms and an increased insecurity of employment (xii). In contrast, they believe that labor is central to life and therefore it should be enjoyed: "Labor is one of the largest items in the human career; it is a modest demand to ask that it may partake of happiness" (xii) and they accuse industrialization to be promoting the idea that "labor is an evil, that only the end of labor or the material product is good" (xii). Following this line of thought, they claim that labor becomes something negative and degrading, a mere means to attain a final product that involves no enjoyment in the process (xii-xiii). The authors also express their preoccupation over the state of arts and humanism under industrialism, which, they feared, would become too abstract and detached from everyday life, in other words, dictated by standardized tastes of northern descent, instead of being rooted in Southern preindustrial lifestyle and traditions (xvi).

In his personal contribution to the collection, titled "A Mirror for Artists", Donald Davidson focuses on art and its relationship to nature as opposed to industrialization and argues

that the main subject of art is nature and thus, the artist should not be removed from it (Davidson, "A Mirror for Artists" 29). In his understanding of art it becomes apparent that he has a rather fixed and conservative view of what good art is, and he also makes it clear that Hollywood and film in general, jazz and Tin Pan Alley music are not part of his ideal and belong to the category of the industrially reproduced and distributed art which he despises and dismisses as vulgar (35). He illustrates his idea of the detrimental effect of industrialization on art by means Romantic literature, which he deems individualistic and self-absorbed, a result of the poet's alienation from society and the loss of shared experience (44). He also adds that the 18<sup>th</sup> century novel reflected "a shift from objective narrative to the problematic, the satirical and the critical" (45) and that literature focused on the wrongs of the world instead of its beauty (45). This tendency he also sees in realism, which tries to approach reality in a more objective way, by observing, documenting and classifying it, but, according to him, ends up exposing its ugliness and lack of meaning (45-46).

In his opposition to industrialization he imagines Southern society as a homogeneous civilization which is "true and indigenous, well diffused, well established" (53). He praises Southern culture as something distinct, by means of the idyllic image of a country home: "[...] and nothing more clearly and satisfactorily belongs where it is, or better expresses the beauty and stability of an ordered life, than its old country homes, with their pillared porches, their simplicity of design, their sheltering groves, their walks bordered with boxwood shrubs" (55). Davidson also stresses the importance of folk-arts for Southern culture, and mentions musical forms such as "ballads, country songs and dances, [...] hymns and spirituals," but also folk-tales and the crafts of furniture making, quilting and weaving (55). Moreover, he opposes the understanding of art as something detached from life, as a statue in a museum could be, but rather, he prefers the idea of art being part of one's everyday life and more like a picture hanging on one's wall (39). He sees the advent of industrialization as a way to turn art into private property, detached from life and reserved for display in places accessible to few (39). In the essay, he expresses his ideal of a meaningful art and life as follows: "The truly artistic life is surely that in which the aesthetic experience is not curtailed off but is mixed up with all sorts of instruments and occupations pertaining to the round of daily life" (39-40). As a solution to what he perceives as a deterioration of the arts through industrialization, he proposes that artists focus on the local and the provincial, in order to restore a "harmonious relationship between artist and environment" (57) and this can be done through physical proximity with nature (57) and far from commercial forces (58).

Professor of English literature Andrew Hook, in his contribution to *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South* called “Fugitives and Agrarians”, describes how the Southern Agrarians were regionalists who believed that “the South and the Southern tradition, preserved a way of life in which there was order and stability, the correct adjustment between man and nature, between the individual and his community, which was fast disappearing from the rest of American society” (Hook 433). Overall, the Agrarian's manifesto, although it contains some interesting and valid points about cherishing the local culture and community and experiencing art in everyday life, paints a remarkably naïve picture of the South by neglecting all the social problems that define the region, such as racism, segregation and poverty. “A Mirror for Artists” seems to be the point of view of a wealthy white man satisfied with his privileges, enamored with his region and afraid of change. The view of a unified and flawless Southern culture is a pure abstraction and idealization that reflects the urge to neglect all questions of race in a region that has been historically determined by centuries of slavery. A major part of Southern history and culture is being neglected, and this is reflected in the very name of the Agrarian's manifesto. The phrase *I'll Take My Stand*, as Hook points out, is taken from the song “Dixie” and can be considered the unofficial anthem of the confederate South (430). The song's composition in 1859 has long been attributed to a white man by the name of Daniel Decatur Emmett from Ohio and was allegedly designed for minstrel shows (“Daniel Decatur Emmett” *Britannica Online*). The narrator, whom in minstrel shows would be interpreted by a blackface performer, is said to be an African American who is longing for his Southern homeland and remembers the place as an idealized one where he is happy with his place in society, which, in a white perspective, coincides with the negation of the issues of segregation and with the endorsement of confederate values (Nathan 42). The theme of the song, thus, reflects Davidson's neglect of any issue of social inequality, since, as more recent research has shown, the origins of the song are less straightforward than exclusively white and more in favor of Southern culture as an intersection of different cultures and histories. Folk music scholars Judith and Howard L. Sacks, in their 1993 publication titled *Way up North in Dixie: A Black Family's Claim to the Confederate Anthem*, advance the hypothesis that Emmet learned the song from a neighboring family of African American musicians (Sacks and Sacks 197). Although questions of song origins are extremely hard to answer with certainty, the story of the composition of “Dixie” illustrates the problems and complexity of Southern society and more specifically, the arbitrary selection and (ab)use of cultural items on the part of white Southerners and the negation of the African American contribution to the culture.

On a more positive note, *I'll Take My Stand*, by being titled after a line in a song, establishes an important link between Southern literature and music, both topics that were very dear to Donald Davidson. His point about the importance of living an artistic life and the fact that he sees art expressed in the aesthetic experience that can be found in everyday life through music, work and crafts is a very useful one for a discussion of why nostalgia and the attraction to old-timey traditions are still so present among contemporary musicians. The question of the role of art in life is also what informs the work of German-American philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who in his work, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, argues for art's subversive potential realized through the creation of a space where new and alternative realities can be imagined. His work is a critique of what he interprets as an overly rigid Marxist aesthetic, according to which art, seen as part of the superstructure, is a product of material factors and power relations (base) and can thus only be revolutionary if made by the ascending class, i.e. the proletariat, and if it is realistic in its depiction of social relations (Marcuse 1-2). In contrast, he stresses the importance of the subjective experience of subversive ideas, claiming that “radical change must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves, in their intelligence, passions, their drives and their goals” (3-4). This view implies that there has to be a relationship between one's everyday life and one's subversive potential in order for the work of art to be successfully revolutionary. Furthermore, Marcuse's approach allows more flexibility on what the art form itself is, since it is considered as a space that can be free from the social and material context, i.e. the base:

the radical qualities of art, that is to say, its indictment of the established reality and its invocation of the beautiful image (schöner schein) of liberation are grounded precisely in the dimensions where art transcends its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behavior while preserving its overwhelming presence. Thereby art creates the realm in which the subversion of experience proper to art becomes possible: the world formed by art is recognized as a reality which is suppressed and distorted in the given reality. (6)

A more recent use and partial critique of Marcuse's ideas come from Angela Davis, professor of African American and Feminist studies. In the collection of essays *Marcuse: A Critical reader*, inspired by a 1998 conference on Marcuse's legacy, Davis stresses how Marcuse's ideas are still relevant, especially because of his inclination to combine academic work with political action (Davis, “Marcuse's Legacies ”46) and also because she finds his ideas on the concept of utopia useful. She stresses how Marcuse was concerned with the possibilities of utopia as a space for positive change, a sort of goal towards which to aim instead of an

unreachable and unrealistic ideal (45-46). She also reinterprets Marcuse in a more contemporary key, by criticizing his vision of art as limited to high art and she expands the relevance of his theory to popular culture, which she sees as an effective means through which to “forge radical political vocabularies today.” (50). In “When a Woman Loves a Man: Social Implications of Billie Holiday's Love Songs” Davis uses Marcuse's idea of aesthetic dimension for her analysis of Billie Holiday's songs to show the subversive potential of her art. More specifically, she claims that in spite of the fact that Holiday was mostly performing and reinterpreting popular songs handed to her by commercial forces the likes of Tin Pan Alley (Davis, “When a Woman” 165), she managed to overturn such forces and to turn her performance into a challenge of the dominant race and gender discourses (166). Interestingly, her music is not known for its political content, but nonetheless, according to Davis, Holiday was able to turn her interpretation of preexisting songs into something new and subversive (163). By using popular songs in the style dictated by the market, she could appropriate the material and bring it into a different context, i.e. black society, and transform it into something new and empowering, especially in terms of a new and more complex view of black female sexuality, while still being part of the mainstream and thus having a wide range of influence (166). The way this aesthetic transformation of non-original material was brought about, according to Davis, was by playing and struggling with every word of the songs, a fashion that she identifies as a typical trait of African American speech and musical tradition which was mostly based on the human voice (166-167). Through her complex and often ironic interpretation of the songs, she was able to turn the original meaning upside down causing a reversal of conservative values and their transformation into more empowering versions for African American women (175).

What I find particularly interesting and useful about Marcuse and Davis for my own analysis of contemporary roots music acts, is the belief that non-overtly political art can still be subversive and function as a tool to envision new ways of life. Marcuse's point is important since it allows art to transcend the influence of society while being part of it, and because it argues for the creation of a space in which new ideas and lifestyles can be imagined and thus also brought into reality. Moreover, Davis' elaboration and use of Marcuse's aesthetic dimension is a necessary step for the use of this theory in a contemporary context that takes into account popular culture and its subversive potential. Another crucial aspect of Davis' use of the aesthetic dimension is the fact that art does not necessarily need to be completely original in order to carry subversive potential. As a matter of fact, she shows how something

commercial can be reused and by a slight shift of meaning and performance turned into something new and refreshing. This point is especially important for an analysis of roots music, a genre in which originality is not the crucial aspect of the performance.

## 1.2 Craftsmen and Musicians as Community Makers

The fact that art can be valued not only in terms of its originality and individuality, connects to Sennett's argument (based on the Wittkowers) about the shift of focus from community to individuality which happened in crafts during the Renaissance (Sennett 65). By trying to answer the question “what is art?”, especially in relation to crafts, he describes the rising opposition between the two agents as follows: “... the craftsman outward turned to his community, the artist inward turned upon himself.” (65). While artists become individuals whose value is judged and recognized by their originality, craftsmen act as part of a community and do not necessarily enjoy recognition for what they have invented or produced, while still producing objects that are useful and widely used by consumers.

Sennett, being a musician himself, uses music to better illustrate the shifting understandings of craftsmen and artists throughout history. He uses the example of the rising interest in musical virtuosity in the mid-eighteenth century and describes its effect as follows:

By the 1850s the musical virtuoso appeared to be someone whose technical skill had developed to such perfection that amateur players in an audience felt small, almost worthless in comparison. The rise of the virtuoso on stage coincided with silence and immobility in the concert hall, the audience paying fealty to the artist through its passivity. The virtuoso shocks and awes. (116).

The interest in virtuosity coincides thus with the alienation of the spectators, who are left feeling inferior and are stuck in a passive position that is mixed with positive feelings of awe and negative feelings of worthlessness. This type of artistic performance does not aim for the establishment of a sense of community between artists and spectators, but rather promotes the view that the artist is separated and different from the rest of the people. Sennett's engagement with craftsmanship tries to blur the line between art and crafts by arguing that both require expressive actions (290). His definition of craftsmen is based on the idea of engagement in work for its own sake (20) and he claims that craftsmanship can provide emotional reward to craftsmen, by anchoring them in reality and by making them feel proud of their work (21). He also tries to restore the worth of practical work, often seen in contemporary society as a

constraining and debilitating force devoid of any expressive or imaginative elements (21), in that he illustrates the role of experience in work. He uses the help of the German terms *Erfahrung*, and *Erlebnis*, which he describes as “an event, action, or relationship that turns one outward and requires skill rather than sensitivity” (288) versus “an event or relationship that makes an emotional inner impress” (288), to explain the notion of experience, which in English carries the meaning of both the German terms (288). Sennett's view of craftsmanship emphasizes the importance of *Erlebnis*, that is the awareness of how it feels to be working and not merely an execution or repetition of actions. Moreover, his discussion also focuses on the communal element of work, which he defines as the necessary condition for craftsmanship to be positive and successful and this communal effort is reminiscent of the workshop in which people worked together and created by experimentation, trial and error (288).

Craftsmen, by carrying out their work, are at the same time part of a community, rooted in reality but also in touch with their inner life, which they see reflected in their activity and artifacts. Sennett's attempt of bringing value and dignity back to craftsmanship by assessing it as an activity that provides satisfaction, participation in community and self-expression is reminiscent of Donald Davidson's wish that work should be enjoyed and that art should be part of people's daily life. Sennett's rehabilitation of craftsmanship is a contemporary step in the direction wished for by Davidson, since in the former's view, craft work is able to provide satisfactory and enjoyable labor as well as the artistic elements of self-expression and inner exploration. The elements of community, and Sennett's sense of experience as *Erlebnis*, which focuses on the inner experience in addition to the more physical and skill-based experience, are, in my opinion, crucial to an analysis of roots music acts and for the exposure of the agendas hidden behind discourses of authenticity.

In my analysis, I want to take into account recent developments in popular culture that are concerned with the revival of American roots music, and situate them into a historical and ideological context that is also reflected in the Agrarian literary tradition that originated in the 1930s, in the very place where so called hillbilly music was institutionalized and commercialized through radio and recordings, namely Nashville, Tennessee in the mid-1920s. My method of analysis includes multiple media and is mainly concerned with the exposure of the aesthetics chosen by artists in the creations of their performing personas. Such aesthetics are to be found in their clothing, their promotional pictures both on social media, websites, album covers and merchandising but also in interviews, performance styles and venues, the



style of music they play, the topic of the songs and their musical collaborations with other artists. At times I will also analyze how the public, critics and interviewers take part in deeming music acts as authentic, in order to better understand the criteria that are behind such judgements. By identifying contemporary bands engaged in discourses of authenticity, I will try to expose the values they are embodying and transmitting to their audiences. Such values will be based on the above-mentioned theory by Sennett and Davidson as well as inspired by Marcuse and Davis' desire to find subversive and positive elements in art that is not necessarily and overtly political.

A couple of days ago I went to J.P. Harris and the Tough Choices' concert in Oslo and sitting outside before the show, I overheard J.P. Harris talking to someone about how he never thought music would become his main occupation and that he had been a carpenter for most of his life and played in his spare time. J.P. Harris is an Alabama born and Nashville based country singer-songwriter and instrumentalist whose main project is a band that plays old school honky tonk country music. Country music scholar Richard Peterson defines honky tonk as the music that originated in the mid-1930s (Peterson 159) in so called roadhouses, places outside of towns where the grip of Prohibition was looser and where alcohol and music could be enjoyed (162). Since space was scarce in such venues, string bands had to adapt by decreasing the number of musicians and using electronic amplification, which proved easier on the guitar, making the latter the leading instrument instead of the fiddle (162). J.P. Harris is also a banjo player and regularly performs with West Virginia fiddler Chance McCoy from Old Crow Medicine Show in an old-time duo and the two, according to their website, are said to have met at “a week-long, muddy, moonshine-fueled fiddler's convention, set high in the West Virginia Mountains many summers ago” (*Jpandchance.weebly.com*). The informal and entertainment-driven setting of their meeting, which resulted in a friendship and a musical cooperation, is defined both by a rural setting and by a sense of community present in the event, where people have the chance to jam together spontaneously and bond. Fiddler's conventions are common in the Appalachian area and often have the format of big campsites where people live for a week or more, with their tents, vans or campers, and in addition to the official competitions and stages, every tent becomes a mini arena for spontaneous clusters of musicians.



Chance McCoy and J.P. Harris, Credit: © Emilia Paré 2016

What is striking about J.P. Harris' persona is his self-assessed craftsmanship and his focus on living in the present and enjoying the ongoing activity as well as his interaction with the audience. Musician Bill Scorzari interviewed him after his performance at the Newport Folk Festival in July 2016, the festival that became famous for Bob Dylan's controversial turn to electric equipment. In the interview, Scorzari stresses how his performance was striking because of his engagement with the audience, which gave him the impression of having met J.P. Harris personally even before he actually got to talk to him (Scorzari, "Interview: Jp Harris"). Having seen J.P. Harris perform twice, I also noticed how his relationship with the audience is very personal, since he introduces every song with an explanation of why he wrote it, or in the case of cover songs, why he likes it or finds it fitting to his own performance. All the songs, he claims, are directly inspired and written based on his own experience and he

repeatedly tells the audience that the next song will give them an insight into his life. Also in the interview, Harris stresses how he believes he is being honest in communicating the content and meaning of his songs, since they are autobiographical (Scorzari, “Interview: Jp Harris”).

Furthermore, Scorzari focuses on Harris' aura of authenticity by describing him as a craftsman and a builder of community:

JP prides himself on authenticity both on and off stage. He’s a master craftsman, not only of music, but also at carpentry, positivity of the human spirit, and core values that exalt true talent over commercial packaging. His goal is to simultaneously create music, while building a community, all as one and the same entity. One which forms an oasis where the best attributes of character are graded select or better, solely upon their inherent imperfect beauty, the uniqueness of their intrinsic worth and upon nothing more. (Scorzari “Interview: Jp Harris”).

Harris' authenticity is given by a sense of honesty, since he claims to have lived what he sings about, but also by the fact that he is engaged in manual work. Further on in the interview he also states the following about his carpentry:

. . . my focus has always been on historic restoration and real old-fashioned building methods. Country music makes sense to me for the same reasons. It’s real honest work, and it gives me a real sense of purpose — that I have something beyond just my music. It’s my connection to the world — that I work with my hands, physically. It’s a great thing and really meditative. It’s a great feeling, especially repairing, that you are potentially and hopefully a part of a long line of people who will study their craft and care enough about it and the people you are working for, and the people who came before you who built these things and they continue to be a legacy. The older things get, the more of an identity and community it has. You have to see the labor of your people for generations and generations before it really holds a serious weight. For me, it’s always been a connection to the community I’m living in. (Scorzari “Interview: Jp Harris”).

He uses the term honesty to describe both country music and carpentry and points out how his manual work is driven by the desire to restore and to use old-fashioned methods, a desire also reflected in his music, which appropriates and renews the tradition of the 1930s' honky tonks. Moreover, he states that craftwork connects him to the world and gives him a sense of purpose while also situating him within a community characterized by people that are engaged and interested in the preservation of crafts. Harris' focus on the enjoyment and fulfillment provided by crafts translates directly to his musicianship. As a matter of fact, he is not so concerned with on stage perfection and virtuosity:

. . . It's Country music. It's not supposed to be super refined. It's not wine. It's some shitty beer, ya know. That's the point. It's for everybody . . . And I respect to the highest degree when people can pull together the unbelievably tight musicianship that I've seen so many times and with bands I've played with over the years. But I feel there is the element of stress that comes with that, that I don't want to introduce into my music. I don't want my guys who are playing with me to feel it. I don't want to feel it. I always get to play with the most amazing musicians and I feel super lucky that no matter who is behind me, they are always good and always good people and it's made me a better musician to get to work with these people. (Scorzari "Interview: Jp Harris").

Music, according to Harris, has to be enjoyed both by the audience and by the musicians, and the very fact that he is not obsessed with precision of execution renders him a more down to earth performer, closer to the audience in that he does not impose a sense of superiority on the spectator. His persona, thus, stands in stark opposition to the mid-eighteenth century tendency of virtuoso performers described by Sennett, and held responsible for the feeling of alienation from the part of the audience. Instead, Harris embodies the elements crucial to Sennett's agenda of restoring the importance of craftsmanship. He is namely more interested in *Erlebnis* than *Erfahrung*, since he sees music and craftsmanship as sources of purpose and spaces in which to feel connected to his community. Furthermore, the satisfaction he gets from work and from music connects to Davidson's ideas about the importance of the enjoyment of work. By combining craftwork and music, moreover, Harris is also able to exemplify both Sennett and Davidson's ideal of a close relationship between art and everyday life, carried out through self-expression and a sense of meaningful and fulfilling work. In addition to craftsmanship and community discourses, Harris aesthetics reflected in the pictures on his website and Facebook page, are also evoking a sense of nostalgia that can be traced back to Donald Davidson and his contempt for industrialization. As can be seen in the picture above, the choice of black and white coloring immediately gives it a retro feel, which is only enhanced by the two musicians' clothes and by the setting of the picture, a worn out stair-steps on which J.P. Harris sits and by the flaking chair that hosts Chance McCoy.

Craftsmanship, community, nostalgia, authenticity and honesty are topics that are connected with each other in the aesthetics of roots musicians and they are, interestingly, also part of a Southern literary and ideological tradition that can be traced back to Donald Davidson and the Agrarians. Roots musicians, in their creations of honest and true to life personas can be compared to craftsmen, since they usually play music that is part of a preexistent tradition and whose authorship is often unknown because songs have been handed

down orally and aurally. There are, indeed, various degrees of the use of traditional versus original material, but the common element of the bands and individuals that I analyze is a concern with honesty and authenticity, understood as being true to life and true to oneself. The use of retro aesthetics is a prominent feature of all music acts considered in the scope of this thesis and this fact can be read as an attempt to create an aura of authenticity and honesty surrounding the music and the people that make it. Whether overt, by using the term directly, as in the case of Scorzari's interview of J.P. Harris, or covert, by the creation of a retro aesthetic and the adoption of older forms of music and tradition, it seems, indeed, that discourses of authenticity help bands in their attempt to embody an ideal of community, tradition and purpose in life. Authenticity work, that is, the efforts of being recognized and accepted within a given tradition, can be read as an attempt to restore direct experience and *Erlebnis* where there is division and a sense of community where there is a strong tendency of individualism. The term, however, is not unproblematic and limited to positive outcomes such as inclusion in a community and one needs to delve deeper into the meaning of the word to unmask both the positive and the negative aspects of such a powerful concept.

### 1.3 Authenticity: a Double-Edged Sword

Since I started reading and reflecting about authenticity I have noticed how often people use the term 'authentic' in everyday conversation, implying something positive and desirable, that gives one the experience of the real thing, unspoiled by commercial forces or contaminations of all kinds. Curious travelers, for instance, often express the wish to taste authentic food when they head somewhere new. What I imagine such a statement means, is that they want to try something typical and specific to that place, something made the way it has been made for a long time and that is documented in tradition. When traveling to Mexico looking for authentic food, would that mean that one has to eat at some grandmother's house, or at a street food stall or market stand that has been around for a long time; or can it be a rather new restaurant run by young people making traditional food with a modern twist? Is it only authentic if it is made by a person born and raised in Mexico, or can it be learned by anyone with a special interest? Are the ingredients authentic, or is it the technique used? In Mexico City, one of the most common snacks one can run into is taco al pastor, which is a mixture of Mexican and Middle Eastern ingredients and techniques and is now considered an authentic Mexican dish. Could another new kind of taco invented by a young Mexican chef be considered equally authentic? And what about one created by an American chef living in Mexico City? The same question

can be transferred to music, since everything in a culture is a product of various influences and contaminations. Authentic Appalachian music found in the hills and mountains of Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Kentucky is, indeed, the result of several migratory waves that have settled in the Appalachian Mountains and interacted with one another over time. African Americans, Native American, Anglo-Irish and other European instruments and sounds met and resonated together to create, among other genres what we nowadays call jazz, blues, country, old-time and bluegrass. What we now consider as a typical and authentic token of tradition belonging to a certain geographical space, was once a novelty and is a result of contact and curious people adopting and integrating different ways into what they do. What does it take, then, to make something that was new at some point, become authentic? Looking at definitions of the word 'authentic' might shed some light on the usage and nuances of a complex and potentially controversial term. The *OED* provides several present and past usages among which the following I find most relevant and current:

“Authentic”

7. Genuine; not feigned or false. Now the usual sense.

a) Of a document, artifact, artwork, etc.: having the stated or reputed origin, provenance, or creator; not a fake or forgery.

b) That is the actual thing or person; that rightly or properly bears the name; genuine, real.

c) Presenting the characteristics of the original; accurately reproducing a model or prototype; made or done in the original or traditional way.

d) That truly reflects one's inner feelings; not affected, unfeigned.

The focus is clearly on tradition, on the sense of a prototypical existence, or similitude to an original form, but also on honesty and absence of fakery, and it implies the honest and straight forward expression of one's inner feelings. All these elements are crucial for a discussion of the discourses of authenticity in roots music, and several expressions and understandings of the word are found in the tokens of cultural expressions that I analyze.

Since authenticity calls into question notions of origins, it also translates into discourses of geography and roots, which easily slip into homegrown exclusivity, i.e. the belief that someone or something needs to be from a particular place in order to be authentic and that the experience and expression of authenticity is not open to anyone or anything. This interpretation of authenticity can be problematic and controversial, in that it leads to the definition of the real versus the fake and the othering of the outsider and can result into exclusion, narrow-

mindedness and elitism. Another aspect of authenticity discourse is its close connection to nostalgia and the desire to preserve old ways of life and cultural production. In discourses about the American South, there is a fascination with the retro, the old-fashioned, the manual and the handcrafted and a romantic idea that things were better before, made with more soul, quality, durability and less mass produced and impersonal. This nostalgia also translates in various shades of anti-commercialism and anti-industrialism and the desire to go back to the community where one's origins can be easily tracked and where means of subsistence are produced locally. The tensions between insider and outsider, local and global, old and new, real and fake, noncommercial and commercial, shine through the content and the aesthetics of the works I analyze, and show how there are different solutions and approaches to authenticity and, most importantly, different ideologies and agendas attached to the way authenticity is used.

My own understanding and definition of authenticity involves a romanticization of an imagined way in which things are done within a certain culture or tradition that is often derived from the past. It is a phenomenon that implies the passage of a certain amount of time, which functions as one of the authenticating agents for a given token of cultural expression. Most importantly, authenticity always contains a judgement and a subjective set of values that are projected on the object in question. It is a term that is widely used in a seemingly straightforward way but that actually calls for more specific definitions and interrogations of one's sets of ideas when putting something in the box of authenticity. What is authentic Appalachian music? Is it music played by old people, songs sung by secluded people in a mountain hollow, music made by a band from Oregon with a passion for mountain music, music made by a song collector from New York or from a European band fascinated with Southern USA?

The risks posed by authenticity discourses are those of lacking factual knowledge of the historical developments and assuming that some forms of cultural expressions are purer and more righteous than others because they have been uncontaminated and unchanged over a long period of time. This can be done candidly by simply indulging in a romantic and pleasant idea of how we would like things to be, or also in a detrimental way, excluding parts of the truth and the history in order to create a pure ideal and exclude unwanted influences, as in the case of Donald Davidson's writing. This latter view is very powerful in its promotion of exclusion and racism and needs therefore to be handled with care. The very factor that makes authenticity discourse potentially dangerous, however, also offers empowering and positive elements, since

it can help create a sense of community and togetherness. It can also help explore and preserve old knowledge and techniques and push people to re-evaluate modern capitalistic values. The process of exploring and reviving older techniques of production and music making can be read as a way to give meaning, a sense of origin and tangibility to the creation, providing the performer or creator with a heightened awareness of the object produced. It is not surprising that such a tendency comes about in an era where access to commodities is easy and quick and where substitution happens by discarding the old and broken and substituting it with a new item. Repairing and fixing is usually not worth the money, at least in countries where labor is paid more or less fairly. Therefore, in a culture where it is more profitable to discard and replace it is significant that some people choose to turn to the old and try to keep it alive and renew it.

The case of Matt Kinman, an Appalachian old-time fiddler and banjoist from Arizona raised in South Carolina, can serve as another example of various elements explained in the theory above. He is, indeed, the personification of a performer looking back to the past for inspiration and, as J.P. Harris, he is also deeply interested in craftsmanship and community. In the creation of his performing persona there are several elements that are interesting for authenticity work. From his website it can be read that he also goes by the name of Little Hobo, because of his simple lifestyle and frequent wanderings around the country to play and learn from different folk musicians. His description stresses that he abandoned both school and his plumbing job to follow his musical passion and has since been playing both in bands and as a solo act. The short bio on his website quotes what looks like Kinman's own words to describe himself as follows:

Currently, Kinman performs solo most of the time and “trades on about anything” to make ends meet. “I just try to be honest and go out there and play music and trade around. I’ve been fortunate to play with a lot of big names... It ain’t that I’m anything great, by no means... I just play old music the way that I hear it in my head and that’s the way it comes out.” (*Mattkinman.com*)

The description of his latest album stresses how the songs “will be sure to take you back to a simpler times of when songs to[lld] the stories of the good ole' days.” (*Mattkinman.com*). The focus of this image-building is clearly on the past, seen as a positive space and the function of the music is that of taking the audience back to this space, where simplicity, modesty and honesty were cherished personal characteristics that the performer tries to adopt as a lifestyle.





Matt Kinman and Moses Melligan, Credit: © Lisa Elmaleh 2013

In an interview with *Blues.gr*, when asked to which time period he would choose to travel if he had a time machine, Kinman replies: “Nowhere in particular, but I’d like to go back to the early 1800s before the industrial revolution, before the technology started developing so rapidly.” (*Blues.gr*). He also explains the rural working-class origin of the music and underlines work as a unifying factor in music, a factor that in his opinion goes beyond race and class: “True American roots music has no cultural boundaries. It comes from all races of people because they come from a working community, working communities where they work together and depend on one another.” (*Blues.gr*). Kinman's focus on work shines through every aspect of his persona and actions: he is to be seen performing in a shirt, blue denim overalls and trucker hat, or blue jeans, shirt and cowboy hat, both garments worn by handworkers and farmers. Moreover, in 2012 he started a project called *The Back Porch of America*, which is a series of short documentary films about several artisans or “craftspeople” as they are called in the series. The idea is that of documenting and preserving old traditions that are dying out and the series

features, among others, a chair-maker from Tennessee and a fiddle-maker from Virginia, both living in rural areas and using old and artisanal techniques (*Thebackporchofamerica.com*). Kinman visits them and talks to them in his thick accent, plays music with them and presents their work and craftsmanship with admiration and respect. Also the picture on the cover of his album shows a fascination with the revival of old techniques, in that it was taken by young American photographer Lisa Elmaleh. The picture is part of her photographic project called “American Folk”, in which she took pictures of various old-time musicians using the technique of tintype photography, a manual technique that involves a thin metal plate on which the picture gets impressed and a portable darkroom. Tintype photography was used in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as a rather inexpensive form of pictures and became thus popular in the US among Civil War soldiers, immigrants and workers. (“Tintype” *Britannica Online*). According to *Britannica Online*, it is also considered as a form of folk art used by street performers. The common and folkish aspect attached to the history of such a technique fits perfectly with Matt Kinman's agenda of re-exploring and reviving old and manual techniques of production and enhances his nostalgic approach to music and craftsmanship in a visual way. Through Elmaleh's tintype he creates an image of himself situated in the tradition of his ancestors and provides a strong visual working-class and rural aesthetic, reflected in the very setting of the picture, a forest with a tree to lean on and in his own (and his fellow musician's) clothing, namely overalls, western shirt and jeans. The pose is also very stiff and the expressions serious, in the fashion of old pictures, where the event of taking a photograph was a special occasion that needed dressing up, composure, and the careful disposition of the photographed object and props. In other words, the opposite of nowadays' almost infinite reproductive capacity of images, that can be snapped individually and without skills by anyone possessing a phone.

Another band, The Hogslop String Band, which also appears on Kinman's *Back Porch of America's* video, uses similar authenticating elements reflected in the aesthetics of their album artwork and promotional pictures. In addition to common musical repertoire and origins, both acts perform Appalachian old-time and they both appear on Lisa Elmaleh's *American Folk* series. Even more prominently than Kinman, this Nashville based string band uses her pictures to create a retro image on their website and social media. On her November 2010 blog entry, Elmaleh displays 9 tintypes of the band, 2 being group pictures and 7 being portraits of every musician, with a strong resemblance to Kinman's aesthetic. The band did a new photo session with Elmaleh in 2015 to update the band pictures after a change of members, but the visual style remains the same, with tintype photographs and stiff poses both

for group and individual photos. There is only a slight change of setting, from the river and forest setting to the porch of an old wooden mountain house, but the latter also remains rural and absent from signs of modernity and technology. The sense of nostalgia and the use of retro techniques and imagery seen in these performers' construction of their personas is part of a cultural tendency that started around the 2000s and is still ongoing.



The Hogslop String Band, Credit: Lisa Elmaleh © 2010



The Hogslop String Band, Credit: Lisa Elmaleh 2010

## 1.4 Roots Musicians and Hipsters

The roots acts I use in my analysis share some characteristics with the hipsters, a cultural phenomenon that will be described in the following section. The careful styling of looks in order to create a retro aesthetic and a sense of nostalgia, combined with the fascination and revival of old techniques of production, are traits that can be observed both in roots music and in the hipster movement. The following discussion will attempt to identify useful and empowering traits found in recent cultural phenomena and will also expose the risk posed by a superficial fascination with the past and its aesthetics. Mark Greif, in his 2010 *New York Magazine* article “What Was the Hipster?”, defines the hipster movement as originating from indie youth cultures of the 90s, which were characterized by their opposition to consumerism (2).

The term hipster is rather controversial and often takes on negative connotations when used to describe people, since it seems that no one wants to be called one (2). As a matter of fact, the term is very fluid and can mean different things to different people, with the common denominator that it is used to define something against something else, often something fake, over-the-top and pretentious against something real and “authentic”. Greif cleverly describes the hipster as:

that person, overlapping with the intentional dropout or the unintentionally declassed individual—the neo-bohemian, the vegan or bicyclist or skatepunk, the would-be blue-collar or postracial twentysomething, the starving artist or graduate student—who in fact aligns himself both with rebel subculture and with the dominant class, and thus opens up a poisonous conduit between the two (2-3).

Greif also sketches the origins of the word hipster and explains that it was first used in the 1940s to refer to a black subcultural group and was then used by “a white avant-garde to disaffiliate itself from whiteness, with its stain of Eisenhower, the bomb, and the corporation, and achieve the “cool” knowledge and exoticized energy, lust, and violence of black Americans.” (3). Characteristic of both black and white hipsters was their striving for exclusive and original knowledge. Greif uses Anatole Broyard's 1948 essay “A Portrait of the Hipster” to highlight the hipster's obsession of being first in acquiring information to provide a form of power to contrast the frustration felt by American minorities over the fact that the power of the system controlling their lives was too great and inaccessible (Greif 3). Typical of hipster culture is to do things before they become mainstream, know about the latest secret bar before anyone else, listen to obscure artists before they become famous. Another important fact about 2000s' hipsterism is its beginning as a white phenomenon that fetishized suburban and lower-middle class whiteness (4). However, Greif also argues that the second generation hipsters that came about after 2003 had less focus on whiteness in favor of greenness, i.e. environmentalism and “rudimentary or superannuated technologies” (6). Greif calls this later form the **Hipster Primitive**, a movement that “recovered the sound and symbols of pastoral innocence with an irony so fused into the artworks it was no longer visible” (6). This meant the creation of an imaginary space of idealized rural past and a reintroduction and proliferation of the lumberjack, hunter, cowboy and outdoorsy type looks (6). The paradox of hipsterism identified by Greif is its ambiguous relationship to consumerism, in that mass consumption is seen as an act of rebellion (7). Greif uses social critic Thomas Frank's term ‘rebel consumer’ for “the person who, adopting the rhetoric but not the politics of the counterculture, convinces himself that buying the right mass

products individualizes him as transgressive” (7). Greif thus concludes that hipsterism is not a counterculture but rather a “superior community of status where the game of knowing-in-advance can be played with maximum refinement” (7) and “something like bohemia without the revolutionary core” (7).

Drawing from Mark Greif’s portrait of a hipster, it seems that hipsterism is mostly concerned with mimicking past countercultures and with cherishing exclusivity and the skills of adopting or readopting styles, commodities and places before they become mainstream, and then move to the next obscure item. Hipsterism thus becomes synonymous with identity creation through visual styling rather than political or artistic action and because of that the term takes on negative connotations of fakery, and the idea that a person can create a merely visually rebel or countercultural persona by choosing the right clothes and going to the right places. The insecurity about defining what the real thing is, or who is entitled to be the real and heartfelt hipster connects to notions of authenticity, understood as a performance of rituals that validate one’s persona as real and honest. Authenticity work, thus, can be read as an attempt to defy the fear of meaninglessness and fakery and the active engagement in strategies that guarantee meaning and depth. The paradox that defines hipsterism and to a certain extent also roots music discourses, is that by wanting to appear original, honest and interesting, one has to adopt validating strategies such as wearing old-fashioned clothes and gadgets and risks ending up looking like a parodic or over-the-top character of a world of fantasy. Another paradoxical element is that the hipster’s obsession with aesthetics and the creation of an original and retro look can be fulfilled by purchasing items that will allegedly provide exclusiveness. The very act of styling carefully styling one’s appearance exposes the theatrical element or the constructedness of identities, which stand in opposition to the desire to be and appear real, honest and authentic. A way of bypassing the paradox and moving beyond a mere exposure of the constructedness of identity is to look at the ideologies and agendas that lie behind such efforts to appear authentic. The history of roots music, as will be shown in chapter II, is rich in examples of attempts of establishing authenticity and credibility through the careful styling of looks and performances.

Whereas I agree with Greif on his critique that hipsterism can be a superficial and commercial style obtainable by anyone with the right taste and some money, and that it also gentrifies formerly more alternative and subversive currents, my own interpretation of the movement is a little more positive. What Greif calls the Hipster Primitive, I understand as a

certain group, among others American roots music performers and fans, currently interested in all things rural and past-related. The rise of artisanal and locally sourced products and artifacts, although it might be trendy, is not necessarily a merely commercial tendency but rather it connects to a desire of living a more sustainable life and being more in touch with the things around us. If you grow food and consume it, or if your friend does and gives some to you, or the restaurant serves you local food that comes with a story of its production, you will more likely feel connected with what you consume and understand the origins and appreciate the effort behind the finished product. This is a way of giving meaning back to production and a way of connecting nature, producers and consumers in an ideal landscape of communal cooperation and respect. The narrative of origin becomes a way to attach meaning and value to objects and it creates a stronger personal bond to between consumer and consumed. If we look beyond the hipsters' indulgence in style, exclusiveness, self-absorption and lack of subversive energy, which are at the extreme end of the hipster continuum, and rather focus on the elements of fascination with the past, the processes and histories of production and the appreciation of local communities, we can extract positive tendencies and needs that are predominant in certain segments of contemporary society.

In the case of J.P. Harris, his revival of the honky tonk tradition engagement in Appalachian old-time music, both elements that emphasize tradition, repetition and imitation over originality, reflecting a clear agenda in spite of the artist not being openly political. This interpretation is in line with Angela Davis' argument that non overtly political art can transmit an empowering message and create a space in which new or more satisfying ways of life can be envisioned. Harris' driving force, reflected in his effort to create a communal space by producing forms of cultural expression accessible and enjoyable to everyone, is conveyed through music, carpentry and the appreciation of old traditions. Similarly, Matt Kinman sees work as the unifying factor for all American people and craftsmanship as an activity that can help people find meaning and satisfaction in everyday life, His appreciation and valorization of manual work can inspire people to look at work as a way of realizing oneself by following one's passions, an idea that is also found in Donald Davidson's theoretical writings. Moreover, the Hogslop String Band, by being engaged in the revival of old-time music, and by frequently performing for large square dance events, can be said to engage in the promotion of *Erlebnis*, which in this case is given by the communal feeling of moving together in a big circle and by being able to surrender to the music.

J.P. Harris', Matt Kinman's and The Hogslop String Band's careful styling of their looks to create a connection to workers aesthetics inspired by the past, their promotion of artisanal techniques by featuring black and white or tintype photographs and by promoting local artisans in videos, as well as their engagement in activities that make themselves and the audience feel part of a community, are all part of a tendency that sees a renewed interest in American roots music and is engaged in a revival of the latter. As mentioned in the introduction, the Coen Brothers' 2000 movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*<sup>2</sup> was crucial in promoting musical styles unknown to many people both in the US and in Europe, except perhaps those with a specific interest or relationship to the Appalachian area. The very fact that the movie has a sepia tint instead of full colors is an indicator of an aesthetic reminiscent of the pre-color films era and immediately establishes a connection to the past. The movie, set in 1937 (Ching 215), deals with topics of slavery and imprisonment, escape and redemption through musical success, and aggressive and exploitative commercialism versus honest business making. It also thematizes the history of Southern music by showing the raise of popularity of radio broadcasting and the growing commercial success of recording sales, on which I will expand in the next chapter.



## 2 Commercial and Ideological Forces and the Creation of Aesthetic Standards for Roots Music

One of the elements that establishes a common thread between the bands analyzed in the previous chapter and Southern author Donald Davidson, as well as with some elements of the hipster movement, is their distaste for all things commercial and industrial. In these cases, nostalgic aesthetics and rhetorics are used to conjure up images of more satisfying ways of life and to confer meaning, honesty and a sense of tradition on one's actions. This investment with retro aesthetics also brings about discourses of authenticity, in the sense of being true to oneself and to tradition. As already hinted at in chapter 1, authenticity discourses can be very complex and have various effects and agendas, both positive and negative. Opposition to commercial and industrial forces and the idealization of an imagined past, i.e. the so called good ole' days, are ubiquitous in roots music acts and need to be analyzed and put into their appropriate historical context. The practice of adopting older musical styles and aesthetics calls for an analysis of the intentions behind the investment in some aspect of the past. More specifically, the aura of nostalgia that surrounds some reinterpretations of the past needs to be uncovered and analyzed in order to reveal potential positive or negative attitudes that hide behind such efforts.

Romanticization and nostalgia are words that are commonly used in the context of the revival of a certain tradition and they imply the desire to go back to the old days and the somehow irrational idea that everything was better in the past. The very word *nostalgia* provides a useful insight into the workings of the romanticization of the past, since it derives from Greek *nostoi*, and means “stories of homecoming” (Seeley 101). As Tracy Seeley, English professor at University of San Francisco writes in her article “O Brother, What Art Thou?: Postmodern Pranksterism, or Parody with a Purpose?”, the whole idea of nostalgia and longing for a utopian home is deeply illusory (101).

This chapter will deal with the forces that helped shaping ideas and standards of authenticity for roots music. As a matter of fact, institutions such as the Grand Ole Opry and recording industry pioneers Polk Brockman and Ralph Peer, have had a crucial role in shaping the aesthetics and the categorization of the genre, especially in terms of its rural aura and the whiteness of its participants. I will also point out the roles played by folklorists such as the Lomaxes in both popularizing the music and in attaching to it a sense of otherness. By means of

more recent forces that have played fundamental roles in the renewal of popular interest in roots music in the last fifteen years, I will show how more contemporary discourses around roots music are informed by a complex agenda of celebrating the genre, while also criticizing some of its problematic aspects. *O Brother, Where Art Thou* is an example of deep appreciation of Southern culture, mixed with a critique of Southern essentialism, while T. Bone Burnett's role as a music producer confirms how a single person can be influential in shaping taste within a genre. His role, however, is an empowering one, in that through his deep knowledge of American music, he promotes a sense of community, an appreciation of the cultural cross-pollination of the genre and he also plays an active role in the promotion of musicians' rights. The chapter will also deal with the analysis of Davidson's *Big Ballad Jamboree* in light of the genre's distaste for commercialism and it will show how the format of the novel allows Davidson to negotiate his simplistic definitions of Southern society and to acknowledge contradiction and compromise.

## 2.1 “Treasure Seekers, Beware: There is No Such Essence Here”

In her analysis of *O Brother* in the light of its hypotext, Homer's *Odyssey*, Seeley argues that the movie's subversiveness is given by the fact that it plays with cultural clichés, imaginations and romanticizations, in that it evokes the South in such a way as not to stress essential features, but on the contrary, by exposing contradictions in style and ideology (102). She interprets the movie's engagement with different styles and cultural referents – for instance the partial use of the format of old movies seen in the choice of sepia tones and the plot being set in 1937 during the Depression Era while being based on the *Odyssey* – as going against the understanding of regional culture as an essential and coherent unit (102). This reading of the movie as a sort of pastiche is also supported by John Cline, Ph.D. candidate and lecturer at The University of Texas at Austin, who published a Website dedicated to his article “American Myth Today, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and the Language of Mythic Space” focusing on the music present in the movie. More specifically, Cline stresses how there are three different musical traditions present in the movie, which although connected to each other in terms of origins and genre, are tokens belonging to three different and significative moments in the history of Southern roots music that hark back to Depression Era music from the American South (Cline “Music and Space”). The first musical reference is that of the field recordings of Alan Lomax, exemplified

by the song “Po Lazarus” by James Carter and the Prisoners, a group of African American prisoners singing while working on a chain gang (Cline “Music and Space”). What follows is “Big Rock Candy Mountain” by Harry “Haywire Mac” McClintock, which was recorded in 1928 by Victor Talking Machine (ibid.). These two instances of field recordings and early phonograph records are an important reference to the history of Southern roots music, in that folklorists and song collectors have played crucial roles in the development, definition and diffusion of the music. The second musical moment identified by Cline is the presence of Emmylou Harris, John Hartford and Norman Blake, all musicians that were active in the 1960s and 1970s at the time of the urban folk revival (Cline “Music and Space”). The third moment in American roots music represented in the movie is characterized by performers that started to emerge after the urban folk revival and were especially successful from the 1990s until the present day (Cline “Music and Space”). Such artists are Gillian Welch, who also has a short cameo appearance in the movie, Alison Krauss and Dan Tyminski, the voice behind the movie's theme song “Man Of Constant Sorrow”. The juxtaposition of different generations of roots musicians within one movie, as well as the use of the above mentioned pastiche elements of on the one hand Homeric epic and, on the other, references to older filmic techniques, stresses the constructedness and fragmented nature of culture, and, as Tracy Seeley argues, it speaks against a coherent and essential nature of music (102). Seeley writes “Treasure seekers, beware: there is no such essence here” (102) referring to the lack of a coherent and essential creation of culture that she reads at the heart of the *Odyssey*. This is a crucial idea for the discourse of authenticity, since this is often associated with ideas of purity and coherence. The movie's treasure (money buried in Everett's cabin) that the protagonist, Ulysses Everett McGill (George Clooney) promises his two runaway companions, does not exist but was invented by the former in order to keep the group together and motivated to help each other after they escape prison. Everett's fabrication of a treasure hunt narrative reflects people's fascination with and dependence on stories to be motivated for action and it exposes an ambiguous relationship to truth. On the one hand, the fictitious narrative pushes the three protagonists to stick together, creating a kind of fraternal bond that even results in the spontaneous creation of a successful bluegrass hit. On the other hand, however, Pete and Delmar are tricked into a mission and promised great economic fortune, while they are really mostly helping Everett with his personal mission of winning back his wife and his family. The treasure hunt narrative can be interpreted as an almost archetypal quest for reward, stability and an ideal state where all past worries are resolved and where bliss is achieved. It represents a point toward which all human effort is directed in the hope of redemption. In the movie, this unifying grand narrative of economic

reward and redemption falls short, in that it is only an illusion created by Everett. Seeley interprets the lack of a treasure as the absence of a unifying and coherent narrative in the movie and argues for a demythologization of the notions of cultural purity, essentialism and coherence: "In its evocation of the South, *O Brother* is as far from Homer as one can get. "There's no place like home," inflected just a little differently, says that there is no place like home. The home that nostalgia longs for doesn't exist. In fact, it never did." (102). The notion of home as a stable, ideal, peaceful, coherent and meaningful place is challenged and reduced to a mere fantastic creation of the mind.

The effect of such a nostalgic longing for something that does not exist is also connected to sentimentalism and a sense of loss, which John Cline identifies as characteristic of the South and its music (Cline "Music and Space"). Cline illustrates the process of separation, loss, nostalgia and longing for home with the case of Bill Monroe, the musician that is credited with the invention of the genre of bluegrass in the late 1930s. His argument is that the genre was created when Monroe left his native Kentucky for Chicago and that the music reflected back to his native home, thus emphasizing a sense of loss and separation (Cline "Music and Space"). Such themes are apparent in, for instance, Monroe's famous songs "I'm Going Back to Old Kentucky" and "I'm On My Way Back to the Old Home", where both the home and the geographical native place are mentioned and longed for. His nostalgic reflection upon the far away home triggers an idealized vision and creates a sugarcoated memory of home and of the past, where everything was better and life was happier. The nostalgic look to the past and the creation of an imaginary space that stands for the South is a recurrent theme in Southern roots music, literature and popular culture in general. What is at the heart of the matter in such numerous cultural artifacts engaged with Southern themes is the romantic creation of the South as a distinct community that differs from the rest of the US in various ways. This idea can be achieved, on the one hand, through a superficially empowering and positive construction of a Southern identity, as the one that can be read in Davidson's writing. His depiction of the South creates an impression of a homogeneous, orderly and down-home society, an image that presents the obvious flaw of being mostly representative of WASP ideology. On the other hand, it can be done through alienating, disturbing and gothic depictions that are apparent in movies the likes of *Deliverance* (1973), with its infamous dueling banjos scene and inbred, crooked looking, backward and vicious mountain people from Georgia. More recent depictions of the South include a growing fascination with the Southern Gothic, a genre that is also deeply engaged in the representation of the South as the locus of the mysterious, grotesque, monstrous

and uncontrollable. Examples of the latter genre are the novels of Cormac McCarthy and the first season of HBO's 2014 *True Detective* series. The series is also connected to *O Brother*, since both video productions include the presence of music producer and composer T Bone Burnett, who has played and is still playing a crucial role in the contemporary American roots music scene and whom I will discuss later in this chapter.

The relevance of the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* within a discussion on American roots music is to be found both in the fact that it played a central role in the growing awareness and popularization of the genre in the early 2000s and because it deals with issues of authenticity, history and the constructedness of the aesthetics of this musical genre. As a matter of fact, the movie was nominated for 2 Oscars and its soundtrack took on a life of its own and won 4 Grammys in 2002 for the categories of Album Of The Year, Best Compilation Soundtrack Album For A Motion Picture, Television Or Other Visual Media, Best Male Country Vocal Performance for "O, Death" by Ralph Stanley as well as Best Country Collaboration with Vocals for Dan Tyminski, the voice singing for George Clooney's character ("44<sup>th</sup> Annual Grammy Awards" *Grammy.org*). *Down from the Mountain*, the documentary that came after the movie and was produced to celebrate the music of the movie, also won the Grammy for the best Traditional Folk Album in 2001. The significant success and recognition received by the movie and its soundtrack have brought about an increased awareness of American roots music in the general public and the music, a fundamental part of the movie, which has become a product of mass consumption. Its influence in shaping the perception of the genre is thus not to be overlooked and most importantly, its above-mentioned stylistic anachronisms spark debates around the history of music and its commercial forces. The mix of styles and temporal references in music exposes the potential fake and dangerous elements present in discourses of authenticity, which are often a result of an overly simplistic definition of time, space and history. At the same time, by juxtaposing different generations of roots music artists the movie also stresses the continuity in the music in spite of the different eras and people that perform it. In her analysis of *O Brother*, Tracy Seeley uses the concept of double coding, borrowed from architect and cultural theorist Charles Jencks and literary theorist Linda Hutcheon, who applied Jencks' theory to literature. Jencks and Hutcheon's engagement is in the relationship between modernism and postmodernism and between tradition and innovation and how the use of old and new techniques can comment critically on the present reality. Seeley summarizes double coding as follows:

In simple terms, double-coding means that the self-conscious lifting of images and styles from the past and placing them in contemporary contexts does not rob them of significance or historic weight. On the contrary, the allusions now comment on both the borrowed styles and the present historical moment (Seeley 96).

Contemporary and explicit uses of past styles and imagery need thus not be a mere romanticization and nostalgic look at the past, but an attempt to comment on the status quo. Linda Hutcheon, in her article “The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction” writes: “To disregard the collective memory of architecture is to risk making the mistakes of modernism and its ideology of the myth of social reform through purity of structure.” (Hutcheon 192). Her point is thus that it is even important to remember the past and to research it historically and to reference it in order to avoid plain nostalgia, romanticization and purism and the same line of thought can be applied to literature and music, since tradition, innovation, nostalgia and romanticization are inescapable elements especially in the Southern context. Hutcheon also writes about postmodernism and its tendency to parodic and ironic recreations of the past and stresses the empowering potential of such undertakings:

Parody seems to offer a perspective on the present and the past which allows an artist to speak to a discourse from WITHIN it, but without being totally recuperated by it. Parody appears to have become, for this reason, the mode of the marginalized, or of those who are fighting marginalization by a dominant ideology. (Hutcheon 206).

The movie's parodic elements can be found in the excessive theatricality of the characters, for instance Everett's constant use of Dapper Dan pomade and general obsession with the way his hairdo looks even when he lives like a vagabond and has torn and dirty clothes and is sleeping in the forest. The same can be said about his two companions' accents and greatly expressive faces and body language. Another good example is the moment when the three characters and Tommy Johnson, the black guitar player, find themselves in a recording studio and improvise the song “Man of Constant Sorrow” that is later going to make them famous. Their expressions and eye movements while singing suggest a playful interpretation of the song and point toward a parody of a bluegrass band with its typical formula of alternating solo singing and harmonies with sharp and nasal voices. The parodic elements are easy to find at any point of the movie and their effect on the viewer can be understood in Hutcheon's own words: “Like Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, parody works to distance and, at the same time, to involve both artist and audience in a participatory hermeneutic activity.” (Hutcheon 206). The movie's postmodernity reflected in its parodic tone, intertextuality, and its use of double-coding, i.e. the reference and

juxtaposition of various temporal dimensions and styles within one cultural artifact calls for a critical interpretation and a sense of need of getting the history straight and not merely accepting a collage of signifiers as an authentic and pure image of a given culture.

The same tools Tracy Seeley uses to analyze *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* can be used for a discussion about the role played by the various folklorists and collectors that have played a crucial role in the preservation and diffusion of American roots music throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although parody might not be so relevant for this purpose, what needs to be extracted from Seeley's and Hutcheon's analyses of postmodern works, is the awareness that the use of forms of the past also have the function to comment on the present state of things and, most of all, that in order to avoid purism, essentialism and the romanticization and nostalgia for something that does not actually exist, we have to reconsider history and the roles played by those who are said to have written it and try to uncover their agendas and their personal beliefs. As seen in chapter 1, discourses of authenticity and the valorization of craftsmanship are ubiquitous in American roots music and seem to be the result of an opposition to industrialization and the loss of the home. Such tendencies were in the writings of Donald Davidson and the Agrarians and also in roots music artists such as J.P. Harris, The Hogslap String Band and Matt Kinman. This anti industrial sentiments and sense of loss led writers and artists to focus on rural cultures, especially the ones from remote areas of the American South, such as the Appalachian region. The fascination with Southern culture and music is by no means a recent phenomenon and can be said to be the driving force behind the efforts of various folklorists and music collectors who have played crucial roles in the popularization, conservation and archiving of American roots music. These people, however, although they are often seen as mere observers and collectors of music, have also played pivotal roles in the perception of the music, since they were the ones who selected what kind of music was to be distributed to the wider public and popularized. Their roles were thus not limited to collecting only and their work needs to be analyzed as a process of taste creation and storytelling.

## **2.2 “All Right, Let's Keep it Close to the Ground Tonight, Boys”**

The history and development of American roots music has been defined, at least since the commercial success of phonograph recording technology in the late 1910s and radio in the mid-1920s (Peterson 16), by the works of specific individuals invested in the promotion of the genre

for various reasons and agendas. Although commercial forces are perceived as negative by Southern artists such as the Agrarians and by contemporary roots music acts, they have also been crucial in the development of the genre of American folk music over the last century. The birth of the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville TN, for instance, can serve as an example of the institutionalization of traditional music from the Southern states. What is now considered the Mecca of commercial country music, started off in 1926 when George D. Hay created the WSM Barn Dance radio show that was aired every Saturday night and which later in 1927 came to be called Grand Ole Opry (Peterson 70). As Richard Peterson explains, the format of this radio show was loosely modeled on a barn dance - which was a festive gathering involving traditional music and square dance - but resembled more to a vaudeville show (Peterson 70). The reason why this kind of format became so popular and authentic in the eyes of the audience, according to Peterson, is because it reflected people's nostalgic memories of "community dances, medicine shows, and street-corner singers" (Peterson 70). Peterson, in his extensive work on the origins of country music, outlines George D. Hay's role in the creation of this successful radio show and stresses his deliberate efforts in packaging the show in a way that would be accepted as authentic by its audience. More specifically, Hay was actively engaged in the creation of a specific aesthetic for the show and its participants. This agenda is reflected in his motto, which he would say right before the show: "All right, let's keep it close to the ground tonight, boys" (73). The desire was thus that of giving the show a down to earth feel and Hay was deliberately changing the names of the bands featured on the Grand Ole Opry to sound more rural (75). When the Opry started having a live studio audience in 1928, Hay insisted in making performers dress like hillbillies, with defining garments such as overalls, straw hats or kerchiefs and checked shirts (76). The interesting fact about such a careful construction of a rural, casual and non-professional musical aesthetic is that most performers were actually more professional and less rural than Hay was trying to show (77) and were Nashville residents engaged in urban trades and not poor mountaineers living in remote rural areas (75). Hay did not explicitly use the term hillbilly, for the music of the early Opry, but rather preferred to call it old-time (71), a fact that shows how terms to describe what I am mostly calling American roots music are rather complex and often interchangeable. Indeed, different terms have been preferred over the years depending on the context and the function of the music.

Richard Peterson shows how what he refers to as country music has been called in the different decades after its institutionalization and what emerges is a connection between the name in use and the ideology and aesthetic that is being promoted through it. For instance, in



the 1920s, Henry Ford, a major actor in American industrialization and technology and in the popularization of cars thanks to his inexpensive Model T, was also a nostalgic soul and paradoxically saw the modern city as a vicious place (59). He identified the reasons for such urban corruption not in his own deeds to accelerate mobility, technology and consumerism, but rather he blamed African Americans, immigrants and Jews and the musical context of jazz dancing, alcohol consumption and a freer sexuality, all in all, what he dismissed as foreign and non-American values (60). To counteract such values he was engaged in the promotion of old-time fiddling and dancing, which he saw as representative of more virtuous, agrarian, white Anglo-Saxon and truly American forms of cultural expression (60). In the 1930s, as part of an effort to find a national American music, old-time music, understood as folk music from the remote mountain regions and plains, where contact with outside influence was minimal and unaffected by more hybrid and mixed influences such as minstrel shows, was used to represent American music by influential people such as Henry Ford and composer Lamar Stringfield (64). The 1930s idea of a national music was thus a strictly purist and white Anglo-Saxon one, one that actively excluded African American influences because they were understood as non-American and too exotic and primitive, as well as Native American ones, seen as expressions of a disappearing and not representative race (64). Peterson describes how the typical old-timer outfit would initially be a conservative dress-up, of the kind rural people would wear when going to town (66). The clothing style promoted by Hay and the Opry, in contrast, was less formal and more peasant-like, and came to stand for the stereotypical hillbilly look. In the 1920s, the old-timer look gave way to that of the hillbilly and the singing cowboy (67). According to Peterson, the latter two personas were more appealing to the audience, since they were indicative of a region of the US, as well as of an occupation and a way of life, whereas the old-timer was mostly associated with and old fashioned and outdated lifestyle (67). Most importantly, however, since the hillbilly and the cowboy looks were about lifestyle, they also provided space for variation over time and they allowed for a less rigid definition of the music that fitted such aesthetics (67). Peterson interprets the personas of the hillbilly and the cowboy as fitting with “a self-reliant (most often male) child of nature, unfettered by the constraints of urban society - an image that has been a distinctive element of American fictional heroes at least since James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* was published in 1826.” (67). Such images imply a distaste for urban environments and an admiration for the stereotypically American concept of the self-made man and the explorer and they establish an important connection between history, music, aesthetics and ideologies. The institutionalization and popularization of American roots music through the creation of radio shows such as the Grand

Ole Opry in the 1920s played a crucial role in the awareness of the role of aesthetics for the creation and promotion of the genre. As Peterson shows in his research, it is only when the music needs to attract the masses that attention begins to be paid to aesthetics, be it clothing styles, band names or, more in general, the creation of a marketable and apparently coherent image for bands. Thus, recognizing and analyzing such images together with the driving forces behind their creation is a necessary step to understand the ideology behind them.

Another pivotal element for the history and categorization of American roots music has been the recording business. In his book *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*, history professor Benjamin Filene writes that the first wave of popular interest in what he calls “indigenous American vernacular music” (Filene 34) was due to commercial reasons and not by the fact that folklorists and ballad collectors were trying to collect and revive the tradition (34). Filene explains that in the 1920s, thanks to the commercial work of Ralph Peer, talent scout, recording engineer and producer for Okeh Records, there was a shift away from the purely white and British-derived ballad collection and an increased interest in more mixed forms of music, which also included African American expressions. Peer was a pioneer of field recordings in the early 1920s and would carry his recording equipment wherever he saw music that could potentially be sold (34). Although the music played by African Americans was included in such recordings trips, and although it was recorded at the same time and place as white music, all the record companies divided black and white music into two distinct categories, which they called “race records” and “hillbilly records” and which were marketed for two different and separate audiences (36). The hillbilly series included mostly fiddle tunes and instrumentals, and only in the latter part of the 1920s did it also turn to vocal music, while the race series encompassed blues, jazz, work songs and spirituals (36). With this system of categorization, record producers managed to sell greatly throughout the 1920s and early 1930s (36) and, according to Filene, the hillbilly series' success was due to the fact that it satisfied the audience's interest in a sense of tradition (37). However, Peer was mostly interested in popularizing the songs he recorded and he welcomed original compositions with open arms since these allowed him to copyright songs and get more profit (37-38). This means that he was less engaged in authenticity work, understood as the selection of songs that had been part of the tradition for a long time, and more with introducing American roots music in the realm of more widely marketable pop music. Ralph Peer is also the person responsible for the 1927 Bristol Sessions, a twelve-day recording session arranged in Bristol TN, thanks to which the Carter Family and Jimmy Rodgers were recorded and gradually turned into celebrities (Huber 32). As

a result of the great legacy brought about by the Bristol Sessions, Bristol is now considered the birthplace of modern country music. Although the former two acts were listed as hillbilly music, its clear cut classification is vastly problematic. As can be seen with the example of the Carter Family, A.P Carter, the male component of the trio, is known to have wandered about the hills of Virginia, close to the Tennessee and Kentucky lines on song collecting trips (Peterson 41). While doing so, he was at times accompanied by Leslie Riddle, an African American guitar player who is also credited with having written some of the Carter Family's songs and with having taught Maybelle Carter the guitar technique for which she is famous, namely picking the rhythm and the melody at the same time (41). Black and white music was much more intertwined than the categorization into two distinct series destined to two different markets – made by music collectors – shows. Ralph Peer and his Okeh partner Polk Brockman were primarily interested in the economic possibilities they unexpectedly found after the recording of Georgia fiddle player Fiddlin' John Carson in 1923 turned out to be a major success (Roy 274). According to William G. Roy, professor of sociology at UCLA, these marketing categories turned into musical genres over time, and even when the race and hillbilly categories ceased to be used, black and white music remained two widely segregated genres, the hillbilly one turning into country & western and the race one into rhythm and blues (277-78). George D. Hay, Ralph Peer and Polk Brockman have been crucial in the development of the genre, and they represent the commercial end of the spectrum. Interestingly, it is said that both Peer and Brockman did not actually enjoy the music that they were recording and producing (Peterson 47; Roy 274). The purely commercial interest in the music, however, translated into a critical division between black and white culture and can be seen as the reason why even today country, bluegrass and old-time, are considered predominantly white forms of American music.

Other folklorists have approached the same music in a different way, namely with extreme fascination, interest and lifelong dedication. John and Alan Lomax, father and son, were both folklorists and ethnomusicologists and their names appear in most discussions of early recordings of American roots music. Their roles in the preservation and promotion of the music are fundamental to today's aesthetics and understanding of the genre. As Benjamin Filene writes, through their recording trips they recorded thousands of songs and made the innovative move of going beyond the recording industry's obsession with promoting songs only and started promoting and shifting the focus on the performers of such songs (49). At the same time, according to Filene, they established criteria for the definition of a true folk singer and promoted aesthetic and musical standards for how performers should be, creating what Filene

calls a “cult of authenticity” (49) that would then be used and expanded by artists and audiences to come (49). One of the criteria for selecting who to record was isolation from the city and from modern forms of popular culture, which meant predominantly rural areas where people were seen as part of an isolated and homogeneous culture (50). The Lomaxes famously recorded in places like cotton plantations, cowboy ranches and also Southern penitentiaries, especially the ones for African Americans, which they found interesting because they were places where the informants were kept away from modernity and in an isolated and racially unmixed environment (50). In 1933, in one such prison in Louisiana, the Lomaxes recorded singer and guitarist Lead Belly and valued him greatly since he had been imprisoned for 11 years and, according to them, had not been in contact with radio, phonographs and commercial music in general (51). The Lomaxes's agenda was that of showing that American music had elements that were independent from the British tradition, which had been the main focus for folklorists and song collectors such as Cecil Sharp and Francis James Child and which still represented the canon at the time (52). They also differed from Sharp and Child in that they did not believe that music they labelled as authentic should be centuries old and they were more interested in showing how alive and vibrant American folk music was (55). Their approach, moreover, was also centered on field recordings and unlike Child's work, which revolved around manuscripts, they wanted to capture musical expressions directly from their sources without the altering process of transcription (55). The focus was thus on minimum editing and maximum fidelity. As Filene also points out, through the use of the newest recording technology, the Lomaxes claimed a neutral role in their work, which they understood as a mere collection and representation of the folk music landscape of the time (56). They were working for the Library of Congress' Archive for American Folk Song and were involved in what William Stott called the documentary motive of the 1930s (Stott in Filene 56). By working for governmental institutions, moreover, they were able to combine their personal tastes in music with a “sense of national mission” (56) and to make their work appear reliable and capable of reaching wider audiences (56). Filene argues that the Lomaxes were crucial in associating a sense of authenticity to performers and their personas, and not merely to songs as had been the case before them (58). As a matter of fact, after he was freed, they carefully promoted Lead Belly's persona as an ex-convict and bearer of an old and pure, unrefined musical tradition, uncorrupted by modernity and fully sincere and primitive (58-59). Filene underlines that the making of such a persona also simultaneously had the effect of exoticizing him, since the Lomaxes capitalized on his convict past and characterized him as “a savage, untamed animal” (59) and made him dress in convict clothes even though he did not like it

(59). It becomes apparent that the Lomaxes created a narrative of authenticity around Lead Belly, by magnifying and modifying both his personal story, his appearance and character, while he was described by others as gentle, and smartly dressed (61). Filene concludes that there is an element of difference that remains constant in discourses of authenticity through time. He writes:

Revival audiences yearn to identify with folk figures, but that identification is premised on difference. Roots musicians are expected to be premodern, unrestrainedly emotive, and noncommercial. Singers who too closely resemble the revival's middle-class audience are rejected by those audiences as "inauthentic". Generally, then, the most popular folk figures - those with whom revival audiences most identify - are those who have passed a series of tests of their "Otherness" (63).

The idea of otherness is a defining characteristic of early-twentieth-century modernism, which is reflected in an interest for primitivism, an artistic current that is defined by use and appropriation of forms of cultural expression coming from non-Western societies and that usually implies a scarce knowledge of the appropriated cultures and the use of powerful and exotic aesthetics, in which violence and sexuality and a rowdy lifestyle could be more openly expressed (63). Filene identifies the fascination for the outcast, the folk and the people at the margins of American society and a tendency to romanticize the past as a form of "outsider populism" (64-65) that was brought about by the Great Depression and by a general mistrust of politics and the effects of accelerated industrialization and consumerism. Such a populism is defined by a romantic and nostalgic look back to an era where the American character was stronger and more alive and it was manifested in the middle-class's fascination with people living outside of the modern industrial world and were thus outsiders (65). This tendency is to be seen in the photography of social realist artists such as Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and their works for the Farm Security Administration which they conducted among rural families in the South ("Walker Evans" *Britannica Online*).



Floyd and Lucille Burroughs on Porch, Hale County, Alabama. Credit: Walker Evans 1936.  
Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This picture of an Alabama sharecropper family portrays a poor father and his daughter in simple clothes and an expression that matches what Filene identifies as characteristic for the artist's subjects, namely the “strength and forthrightness of downtrodden men and women who leveled their gaze at the camera” (65). Moreover, the picture also establishes a parallel with the pictures of the performers I have shown in chapter 1, and can be seen as a source to which contemporary photographers and performers turned for aesthetic inspiration. Filene's point about otherness is insightful and true in many respects, especially if we think about the artists discussed in chapter 1 and how they are engaged in the creation of a retro aesthetic, which can be interpreted as a way of setting themselves apart and outside of the present day and to be othered.

In addition to the sense of otherness that the performers create and the audiences demand, however, there is also the desire to identify with the artists and this is seen clearly in the roots music tradition of down to earth, friendly, entertaining and approachable artists that are also very much part of the community they play for. Otherness and community, commercialism and non-commercialism, honesty and constructedness are concepts that are crucial for the discourse of authenticity and their interplay appears to be complex and contradictory. While the very word authenticity, as we have seen in chapter 1, is synonymous

with prototypical existence, similarity to an original, honesty, absence of fakery, direct expression of inner feelings, in its manifestations within the context of roots music it comes to signify what could be interpreted as its opposite, creating thus the paradox of authenticity. This dynamic is revealed by the history of commercial roots music since the 1920s and in particular by the roles played by promoters of the genre such as Ralph Peer, Polk Brockman, George D. Hay and the Lomaxes. These influential people wrote the early history of authenticity in American roots music, both by promoting it for purely commercial reasons, such as Peer, Brockman and Hay, or because of their passion and personal investment as in the example of the Lomaxes. The brief overview over these people's work exposes how constructed and orchestrated authenticity work actually is, in spite of being associated with honesty, a sense of being real and true to oneself and often also to non-commercialism.

### 2.3 “Music Confounds the Machines”

A contemporary example of an influential person for the revival and taste creation of roots music is musician and record and soundtrack producer T Bone Burnett. As a matter of fact, his pervasive presence behind several cultural productions surrounding roots music helped renewing popular interest in the genre. T Bone Burnett's role as a music producer confirms how a single person can be influential in shaping taste within a genre. His role, however, is an empowering one, in that through his deep knowledge of American music, he promotes a sense of community, an appreciation of the cultural cross-pollination of the genre and he also plays an active role in the promotion of musicians' rights. Although he is also engaged in the creation of a certain aura of authenticity attached to his persona by downplaying the commercial elements present in his work, he does so in order to stress the human and cultural dimensions of music and to empower musicians to be valued and rewarded as crucial actors in the attempt of living a meaningful and artistic life. In addition to being the producer of the successful soundtrack for *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and of its follow up documentary *Down from the Mountain* (2000) he also worked as a producer and composer for the first season of *True Detective*, a Southern gothic series set in Louisiana and featuring music by among others Bob Dylan, The Handsome Family, Townes Van Zandt, Steve Earle, Bo Diddley and Emmylou Harris, all of which are or have been active in the roots music scene. His name is also to be found in the production of another Coen brothers movie titled *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013) and loosely based on folk blues artist Dave Van Ronk and his life in Greenwich Village in the 1960s. The movie was immediately followed by a documentary about a concert that was made in honor of

the music used in the film, called *Another Day, Another Time: Celebrating the Music of Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013) and featuring a long list of roots music artists the likes of Joan Baez, Gillian Welch, Dave Rawlings, Willie Watson, Jack White and Rhiannon Giddens. The list continues with a 2009 movie called *Crazy Heart*, about a tormented country music singer-songwriter and the famous biopic *Walk the Line* (2005) about country music legend Johnny Cash. Burnett also produced the soundtrack for *Cold Mountain* (2003), a Civil War movie set in North Carolina and based on Charles Frazier's novel of the same name. Although the movie is about war and a dramatic love story, music plays a crucial part, and there are old-time tunes and ballads played on fiddles, banjos and mandolins by the characters, one of which is played by musician Jack White. In addition to soundtracks for movies, Burnett also produced albums for artists such as Gillian Welch, Willie Nelson and Ralph Stanley, all of which makes him a crucial actor in the promotion of roots music aesthetics, sounds and stories, thanks to the combination of movie, music and literature. Jeff Smith, professor of film criticism, wrote an article about music in selected Coen Brothers movies and he points out how T Bone Burnett is listed as “music archivist” in *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and becomes in this way a preserver of “lost or neglected vernacular music traditions” (Smith 1). Smith further explains what the title of music archivist is doing in terms of downplaying the purely commercial role of a music producer in favor of a more historically and culturally enriching one:

A “music archivist,” on the other hand, occupies a different institutional niche, one whose mission is educational rather than commercial and preservationist rather than promotional. An archivist is more or less a public servant, one whose role involves safeguarding our shared cultural heritage. In contrast, the music supervisor is frequently characterized in industry discourse as a cog in a much larger system of corporate synergies, a system designed to maximize the economic value of those intellectual properties that comprise that same cultural heritage. (28)

His approach to music is more in line with folklorists such as Alan Lomax, who were engaged in the creation of music archives in order to preserve what they understood as endangered forms of American music. Smith reads the minimization of commercial and mainstream forces that goes along with Burnett's role in the movie as a strategic move towards a more meaningful and educational way of making culture and also as a way to preserve a sense of authenticity:

... the varied meanings of authenticity are typically mobilized to highlight the ways in which a particular artist is positioned outside of the matrix of commercial entertainment. Authenticity thus serves as a kind of guarantor of a particular artist's ambition, sincerity, importance, and insight into everyday life or social experience. (28).



The same rhetoric is used by T Bone Burnett in his recent speech at the Americana Music Festival & Conference on September 22nd, 2016. The speech, with its most quoted “music confounds the machines” phrase, went viral in the roots music milieu and its content reflects a homage to art for its own sake, a distaste for greedy capitalistic commodification and even technology, but also a sense of social action for the protection of artists' rights. As a matter of fact, Burnett is an advocate of the Fair Play Fair Pay Act that aims at making a bill of rights for artists to receive fair pay whenever their music is played, especially aimed at Internet platforms such as Youtube, where legislation is fuzzy and artists are not able to retrieve their share from the music being played. Burnett defends his position about the importance of allowing musicians to make a living on their art by means of a theory from physics:

Beneath the subatomic particle level, there are fibers that vibrate at different intensities. Different frequencies. Like violin strings. The physicists say that the particles we are able to see are the notes of the strings vibrating beneath them. If string theory is correct, then music is not only the way our brains work, as the neuroscientists have shown, but also, it is what we are made of, what everything is made of. These are the stakes musicians are playing for. (Chandler 3)

His statement is thus not limited to a concern with the artists' financial situations, but he extends the importance of supporting music to the wider scope of supporting human existence in general, since he sees music as the matter of the universe. He articulates his critique of technology by claiming that a vast amount of technological inventions that are now used for recording, were created for the scope of war and also that technology tends to separate the world into binaries in order to be efficient, whereas, he understands all the good things in life as happening between the binaries (Chandler 4). Music, in contrast, has been able to turn the “swords into plowshares” (4), transforming a war tool into a tool that promotes community and enjoyment. About American music he says “Our history, our language, and our soul are recorded in our music. There is no deeper expression of the soul of this country than the profound archive of music we have recorded over the last century (7) and mentions names such as Elvis Presley, Jimmie Rodgers, Rosetta Tharpe, Johnny Cash, Howlin Wolf, Bob Dylan, John Coltrane, Billie Holiday, Loretta Lynn, Chuck Berry, Hank Williams, Aretha Franklin and Jack White, demonstrating his wide and all-encompassing understanding of American music, which includes all genres from blues, to jazz, to country and beyond. If we understand Burnett's role in roots music as being similar to the Lomaxes and the other above mentioned figures that shaped the music into what it is today, be it commercially or ideologically, we can see that the same process of downplaying commercial forces and maximizing humanity and

tradition are at play. In fact, Burnett is a wealthy man profiting from a technological network of music and film production, but what emerges from his speech is a sense of himself in opposition to the tyrannical technocrats that want to destroy artists. Writer and editor Paul Elie, in his article “How T Bone Burnett Plays Hollywood” writes: “More than anybody, Burnett has kept alive the informal, collective music-making that the folk movement was all about. He’s done it by taking the hootenanny to the movies—using Hollywood cash and clout to get people with old-school wooden instruments to make music together.” Despite the contradictions between money making and ideological work, what remains interesting and positive about Burnett is his engagement within the roots community and his pioneering role in promoting an ideology of music understood as a community in which artists can collaborate with one another, as for instance in the documentary *Another Day, Another Time*, where artists from different bands are repeatedly filmed jamming together backstage and creating what they define as a campfire atmosphere. In this way, he tries to give art and in particular music a space in people's everyday lives, since he believes that music is part of what we are and part of how we understand our past, present and also how we can shape our future.

## 2.4 “Betwixt and Between”

Similar concerns and interests are to be found in Donald Davidson's writings mentioned in chapter 1, where industrialization is being accused of detaching art from everyday life by making the latter too abstract and not local enough and by dissipating the bond between humans and nature. Davidson's only novel, *The Big Ballad Jamboree*, written in the 1950s and published posthumously in 1996 presents a story about the struggle between commercial and non-commercial forces, urban versus rural settings and lifestyles and the role of music within such binaries. The narrative itself is set in Carolina City, a fictitious town in North Carolina in 1949 and is about two musicians and ex-lovers who are separated because of conflicting interests. Cissie, a brilliant musician and singer, decides to abandon her band and the radio show to wander off to New York to study the old British ballads, which she thinks are the most noble and high kind of music. Danny, on the other hand, is left behind in North Carolina to his old life and hillbilly band and performs radio shows in which the band is constantly asked to arrange and play silly advertisement songs for the audience. At the end of the narrative, Cissie and Danny get back together after Danny acknowledges the value of Cissie's academic work on ballads and even partakes in it. Cissie also gives in a little and accepts the compromise of playing more commercialized music at the Grand Ole Opry to finance her further academic

work. Furthermore, the couple plans to start a new project that combines the old songs with the new and more commercial style. Also, by the end of the novel, Danny learns to write his own songs, based on his own feelings and experiences but also modeled on the old ballads and on the more commercial music that he performs with his band. Tellingly, the new songs he writes are inspired by the nature surrounding his ancestors' birthplace and the memory of his grandfather. Both Danny, Cissie, the old ballads scholars and the audience are particularly enthusiastic about this new song and the couple finds a common ground to renovate their musical and romantic relationship.

The tension between commercial and non-commercial forces is constantly felt throughout the novel and permeates the whole narrative in ways that are more complex than a mere rejection of the former in favor of the latter, which would be expected from an Agrarian author such as Davidson. On a basic level, commercial forces are depicted in a negative way and are associated with the urban spaces, the radio station that forces bands into performing silly advertisement jingles, and also to a certain type of northern intellectual that studies Southern music not for the love of it but for personal economic gain and exploiting others' intellectual properties. An example of the latter is Dr. Hoodenpyl, Cissie's overly intellectual and pedantic supervisor who turns out to be exploiting her dedicated work for his own personal fame without acknowledging her efforts. The WCC Carolina City radio station is also partly described as a force that spoils good music, in that advertisements are a necessary part of its revenues and thus performers are forced to play along with it. In chapter 14, Danny and his band, the Turkey Hollow Boys, – a rural sounding name of the type George D. Hay might have crafted for Opry performers – are rehearsing an old tune whose words have been changed into an ad for a bank. Danny bursts out laughing when his bandmate Rufus sings it for them to learn and says: “Rufus, I think it's the limit. Makes me want to take my account out of that bank, and derved if I don't believe I will” (Davidson 161). Rufus replies: “Well, of course hit does make you wonder if they got good sense. But hit's their program, and money in our pockets, and let's git over with it and learn it. And don't you start no run on that bank because I got some money in it too.” (161). This exchange makes it clear that although the musicians do not appreciate these kinds of assignments, they are also deeply involved in the commercial system, since it is the one that pays them and also takes care of their savings, as in the case of the bank. The only option that is left is to temporarily adapt to that system.

Danny is torn between commercial engagements and the intellectual and far less profitable work that Cissie is pursuing. On the opposite end there is Cissie, whom Danny loves and is almost blindly dedicated to. Her approach is in line with the more conservative and purist tradition of folklorists that transcribed songs and traveled to remote places to record them firsthand. Her massive and heavy equipment that constitutes the tape recording, which Danny has to carry wherever she wants to record, is her preferred tool for carrying out her academic work, since she states "... the field work - that's the big thing" and "the recorder is the new thing" (Davidson 33). When Danny and Cissie meet again after her stay in New York, the two have several discussions and disagreements about what kind of music is the better and more authentic one. Cissie is a supporter of old ballads of Anglo-Irish descent and she is interested in finding the origins in every newer interpretation of performance made by contemporary artists. In this context she accuses Rufus, the bandleader, of having copied old material without acknowledging it: "I'll give Rufus credit for the words - but not the tune. He stole the tune, Borrowed it if you want to be polite ... Rufus' new tune is just an old, old Irish reel. You can get Petrie's *Irish Airs* out of the library and look it up for yourself" (21-22). Danny does not see this cross pollination as a problem and Cissie feels attacked and utters: "You keep on thinkin I'll give up everything I'm interested in just to get up before the mike with a gang of hillbilly singers, and call it 'country music.' If it brings money, you'd be pleased to have me on the Grand Ole Opry stage in a short skirt and fake country costume..." (22). Cissie is clearly the purist among the two characters and the fact that her full name is Cecily Timberlake establishes a connection to Cecil Sharp, a notorious British ballad collector. Sharp's interest in Appalachian music was due to his moral belief, common among folklorists at the time, that remote and rural communities that emigrated from England were able to remain uncorrupted by commercialism and preserve their true Anglo-Saxon folk music and spirit (Roy 472). Such a definition of Appalachian folk music, as William G. Roy points out in his article "Aesthetic Identity, Race, and American Folk Music", does not reflect the creolized character of the region's music and exposes a limited understanding of history which has led to the racial separation of black and white music (Roy 472-473). Cissie is also compared to John Lomax, in a sentence uttered by Dr. Hoodenpyl while he talks with Danny:

... if John Lomax could go all around the country with Leadbelly - with old Leadbelly, a convicted criminal and jailbird - and present him in concert, think of what our beautiful Cissie - pardon me, Miss Timberlake - can achieve with a real mountain singer like Buck Kennedy, with his wonderful repertory of ancient ballads. (Davidson 124-125).

This sentence is the novel's only straightforward instance where African Americans are mentioned, and it is about white people exoticizing and exploiting blacks for entertainment. Despite her purist interests in old unaccompanied ballads, by the end of the novel Cissie adopts a more open-minded point of view when she presents the types of music that will be played at the festival she organized: "There's two kinds of music ... The kind that keeps everybody tuned in for the Turkey Hollow Boys and the good old-fashioned kind that you've known all your lives if you were raised in these hills. The two are not so far apart as some folks think" (248). The Turkey Hollow Boys is the band in which Danny plays and its front man is Rufus, whom Cissie accused of being a plagiarist of old ballads and too commercially oriented. As mentioned before, the band regularly performs for the WCC radio where they also have to turn commercials into songs to make the products more appealing to the audience. Through radio they were able to achieve stardom, a fact seen in the quantity of fan mail that the radio receives and are addressed to the various members. The novel, although it presents various characters standing for different degrees of acceptance of commercial forces, concludes that a certain amount of the latter is necessary for the survival of musicians and also in order to have the means to study and preserve the older musical forms.

Stardom and commercialism are particularly relevant in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a period where Hank Williams' popularity rose significantly until he became member of the Opry in 1949 (Peterson 182). The novel is also set in 1949 - although written in the 1950s - and this fact suggests that Davidson was interested in the commercial developments of what had been called hillbilly or old-time music thus far. Indeed, only after 1949, the term country music started to be used (Barker and Taylor 126) and it was institutionalized through a lengthy *Billboard* magazine article in 1953, the year of Hank William's early death (Peterson 199). Since that date, country music came to substitute the terms hillbilly, old-time and also folk, the latter being deemed too dangerous following McCarthy's efforts to associate it with what he thought to be Communist sympathizers, among which Pete Seeger (Peterson 198-199). Davidson, at the beginning of the novel, as he describes the characters, writes: "All fictitious - but since they must behave as if they were "real," they do know and make mention of certain well-known personalities in "hillbilly music" - later more euphemistically known as "country music." (2). Davidson, through Danny as the narrator and focalizer, also mentions Hank Williams on page 13 of the novel, comparing Rufus' privileges and economic wealth to Danny's more simple lifestyle and stressing how stars like Williams can enjoy the luxury of being independent and getting help from managers (13). Hank Williams was also a regular radio

performer, as are the Turkey Hollow Boys and he also had to sing advertisement jingles for “The Garden Spot Programs” to promote a plant nursery called Naughton Farms (*Omnivore Recordings*, “Press Release”). The commercial side of Hank Williams, who became an even bigger star and institution of country music after his death (Peterson 182-183), is thus relevant for Davidson and his novel that is constantly negotiating the tensions between commercialism and anti-commercialism. Another side of Williams’ persona that can be found in Davidson’s novel is his rowdy and self-destructive side. As Peterson describes, he expressed both sacred and lusty sentiments in his songs, an uncommon combination at the time (177) and his personal life was marked by heavy drinking and poor health, conditions that made him unreliable and resulted in his exclusion from the Opry in 1952 due to frequent no shows at concerts (180).

Hank William’s rowdiness probably fascinated and appalled Davidson, who on the one hand admired his great commercial success but also felt that he could pose a threat to the virtuous and orderly life he identified with rural communities of the Appalachian area. The presence of the character Buck can be read as a critique of a rowdy lifestyle such as that of Hank William, but it also shows an awareness of the great talent that can accompany such a tumultuous temper. Davidson’s complex take on authenticity and commercialism is to be seen also in his depiction of Buck. While he embodies the prototype of the rural, moonshine-producing hillbilly musician, he is presented as an immoral, dangerous and exploitative character. Davidson also addresses the issues of immoral behavior, open sexuality and alcohol consumption through the character of Buck Kennedy. Buck is described as a former vagabond and ne’er do well living in an old log house in a remote place, but also as a fine singer and living encyclopedia of old songs. He also has the reputation of being a ladies man and charmer and for this reason Danny dislikes the fact that Cissie is so interested in him and wants to record him and even brings him to her campus to teach her students about ballads, where it turns out that he is illegally selling his home brewed liquor. Despite all the negative and threatening characteristics that Danny assigns to Buck, he is also able to appreciate his music: “Yet when Buck Kennedy started singing, I own up that I didn’t have to strain and pretend. I always listen hard when a real good singer is rocking along with a good tune and making it ring – and making the story come out clear, the way it ought. Buck was doing just that” (95). Danny sees Buck’s magnetic persona as a threat to his relationship with Cissie and starts spying on him unbeknownst to her and finds out about his illegal liquor sale and uses it to further damage Buck’s already dubious reputation. The interesting aspect of Buck’s character is that on the one hand, he represents the old songs tradition that has been handed down orally for generations

and the allegedly unspoiled folk spirit that is to be found in the rural areas of Appalachia and is described by Cissie as a “true folksinger... The genuine article, unspoiled by civilization.” (100). On the other hand, however, his depiction in the novel is predominantly negative and he's seen as a threat to the order of the city people, since he's a charmer, sings songs with explicit sexual references, deals liquor, drinks heavily and is unpredictable. Having read about Davidson's Agrarian beliefs, one would think that he would depict a character such as Buck in a positive light and use him as an example of unspoiled virtue of the rural communities. What emerges from the novel, however, is a much greater complexity and the lack of a clear-cut moral judgement, in that it seems that all characters have some kind of flaw and contradiction. The novel's resolution is also rather progressive for Agrarian standards, and it advocates compromise and mutual understanding instead of purism and exclusion. Danny's symbolic journey starts from being a commercially oriented hillbilly performer, who starts being interested in old ballads mostly to please his beloved Cissie. From there he wholeheartedly embraces the study of ballads and begins exploring the realm of original songwriting, when he finds himself in the place where he grew up surrounded by nature. He defines his song as follows: “...it's not a hillbilly song exactly. It's more like some old songs Cissie's been a-teaching. But it's not a ballad either. It's betwixt and between” (220). Coming from a commercial setting, and having learned about old ballads, Danny makes it his future plan to combine the two genres and his own experience and inspiration to create new songs together with Cissie, in what he calls “our own songs, the old and the new. Our own songs... It's all country music – the good country music, both the old and the new.” (285-286). In addition to their songwriting plan, they also agree to keep performing with Rufus and the band, in their new engagement at the Grand Ole Opry and are open to other managers' propositions of more commercial shows that might eventually involve the up and coming medium of television.

The novel delivers several fundamental messages that speak against Davidson's own principles declared in *Ill Take My Stand*, namely hybridity and lack of absolute coherence and authenticity. The very expression “betwixt and between” (220) used by Danny shows that the narrator is aware of and embraces the mixed origins of the music and does not see this as a threat to tradition or to the quality of the music. The sentence also calls attention to the difficulty of naming what I have been referring to as American roots music, and has been interchangeably been labelled as old-time, hillbilly, country, folk, American vernacular music and even bluegrass or Americana in its more recent developments. Also when it comes to authenticity, the novel does not provide a coherent model that allows readers to easily identify

one character that embodies an authentic and exemplary Southern musician. Buck Kennedy, who is the closest to what might be expected to be an authentic musician, with his close tie to the rural community and old ballads singing, is dismissed as an unworthy and dangerous character. Cissie, the nostalgic ballad scholar, is appreciated for her work and for her inspiration on Danny, but she is also abused by other intellectuals and is sometimes depicted as naïve and in need of Danny's protection and intervention in order to be successful. Danny, in contrast, is torn between commercial music and ballads, between the city and his forefathers' rural home and between performance of existing songs and original songwriting. In the end he manages to combine these binaries and finds back his balance in life, which is crowned by the renewed blossoming of love between him and Cissie. The fact that the ideologies that shine through Davidson's novel are more complex than the ones he proclaimed in his theoretical works, speaks for art's potential to create a space in which new possibilities can be envisioned. More specifically, through the artistic act of writing a novel, Davidson is able to move beyond his simplistic view of Southern society and manages to make conflicting forces, such as commercialism and anti-commercialism, coexist within one narrative.

Another element that makes *The Big Ballad Jamboree* particularly relevant within discourses of authenticity is the fact that it fits the description of ideological patterns identified by seminal roots music scholars. Danny's debut and success with songwriting and his future plan of writing and performing original material with Cissie, can be read as the embodiment of Richard Peterson's model of what is considered authentic country music. The novel's positive depiction of the combination of commercial and personal elements partly illustrates Peterson's idea of authentic country music being rooted in tradition by means of the relationship to some models, while at the same time presenting new and original or personal elements:

Authenticity in a living art form can have a number of meanings, but as we have seen, in popular culture, where experts and authorities do not control the particulars of the world's meaning, the definition centers on being *believable* relative to a more or less explicit model, and at the same time being *original*, that is not being an imitation of the model. Thus what is taken to be authentic does not remain static but is continually renewed over the years. The changing meaning of authenticity is not random, but is renegotiated in a continual political struggle in which the goal of each contending interest is to naturalize a particular construction of authenticity. (Peterson 220).

Another element identified by Peterson is the cyclic nature of authenticity discourses, a fact that is reflected in the kinds of aesthetics that are prevalent within the genre at a given point in time. More specifically Peterson argues that there are two poles in what he calls country music, the



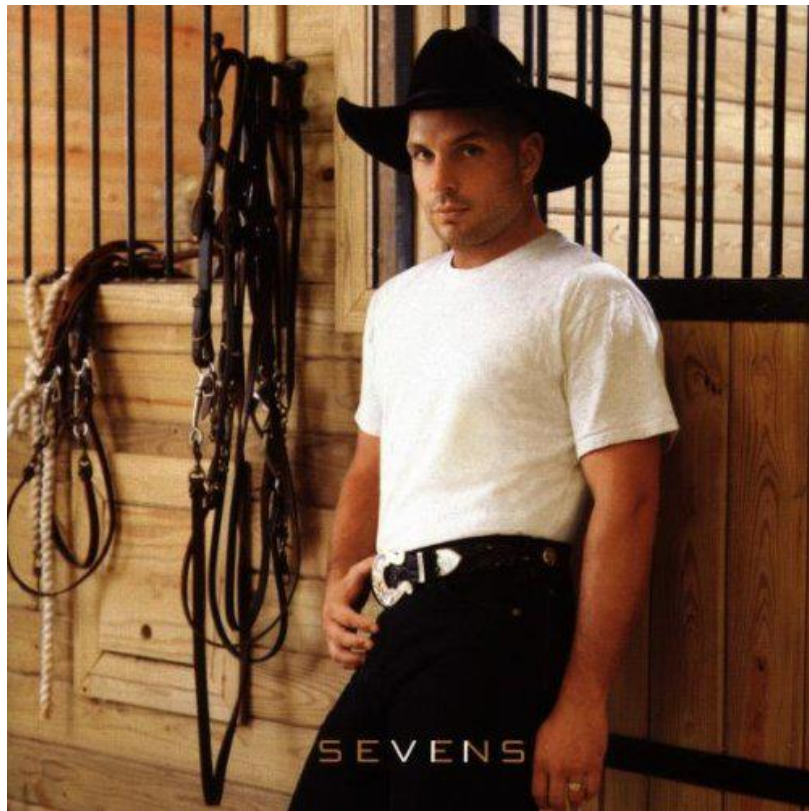
hard core one and the soft shell one and that such poles, although always coexisting, alternate each other in mainstream popularity (Peterson 229-230). Typically, thus, a hard core period, characterized by focus on old traditions, is followed by a soft shell one defined by a more commercial, poppish and easily accessible kind of music (150) in what he calls the “dialectic of generations” (230). In such a dynamic, artists tend to turn away from the music of their childhood and to hark back to a previous generations for inspiration (230). Peterson identifies the characteristics of the two tendencies as follows:

Soft shell acts are defined by a rather standard use of American grammar and accent, trained voices, crooning, instruments such as pedal steels, brass and wind instruments, synthesizers and their performances are formal, professional, and distanced from the audience and the clothing style is in line with what is considered trendy and sexy at a given time (151-154).

Hard core acts, on the other hand, use Southern accents and Southernisms that give a sense of informality and their voices are often untrained, nasal, rough and raw-sounding. The focus is on the personal expression of lived and concrete situations. Typical instruments are fiddles, banjos and dobros and there is an interest in stressing one's origins if they are rural or Southern. The atmosphere created on stage is informal, modest and friendly and gives a sense of proximity and fusion between audience and performers. They also include the narration of personal anecdotes and reference to other hard core legends and suggest that performers have ordinary lives or jobs in addition to (or before) music making. The clothing style is typically hillbilly or western, leather or denim wear for men and dowdy or excessively sexy for women (151-154).

The theory of the dialectic of generations and the soft shell and hard core elements identified by Peterson are useful for the analysis of numerous contemporary bands and their interest in old performance styles and aesthetics. Peterson argues that at its beginning, the institutionalization of country music through the Grand Ole Opry was marked by hard core spirit (139). The bands that I use in my analysis fit into the hard core category and their aesthetic and stylistic choices reflect Peterson's pattern of harking back to previous generations and denial of the closest one. As a matter of fact, Peterson identifies a popularization trend of soft shell aesthetics in the 1990s reflected in the so called “hat acts” or “country hunks” (232) the likes of Garth Brooks. Such aesthetics usually include tight jeans and tight t-shirts or shirts,

belts, big cowboy hats and shiny boots. The expressions and postures of the artists are also often rather sensual, as can be seen in Garth Brook's hand at the opening of his jeans.



Garth Brooks's cover art for his 1997 album *Seven*. © Capitol Records

Interestingly, and in accordance with what Peterson wrote in his 1997 book, in 1995 a new hard core current emerged and the magazine *No Depression* was launched. As professors of English Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching write in their collection of essays *Old Roots and New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, the magazine's name comes from The Carter Family's "No Depression in Heaven" song, but also from Uncle Tupelo's 1990 remake of the same song, which marks a turn to edgier and more punk-related sounds within a branch of country music (2). The magazine was and still is an important platform for American roots acts that are identified as operating outside of the mainstream, and the term alt.country, used in the magazine (8), tries to establish, as Fox and Ching put it, "the authenticity of a utopian community outside the marketplace, free from the depressing constraints of commodification." (3). The artists I use in this analysis are considered non-mainstream and they repeatedly appear on *No Depression* articles, which makes them part of the alt.country movement. As I have shown through all the texts and personalities analyzed in this chapter, the tension between commercial and non-commercial forces is crucial to the genre's formation and history, and

remains so even today, in the attempt of creating expressions that tend to distance themselves from capitalism.

As we have seen, however, the endeavor of downplaying commercial elements is often a conscious attempt to hide elements that are seen as non-desirable in the genre, while highlighting and promoting utopian ones. This was true in the case of the early Opry's aesthetic choices as well as with Polk Brockman and Ralph Peer, who whitewashed and ruralized the appearance of the performers in order to appeal to the audience. The Lomaxes, moreover, were pioneers in promoting single performers, but also in attaching a sense of otherness to musicians and in exaggerating or inventing stories in order to exoticize them and to create an aura of mystery around them, which does not correspond to their actual reality, in spite of being done in an attempt to be more authentic and credible, as in the case of Lead Belly. Through their work, the Lomaxes have also contributed to the promotion of purist ideologies that understand music as an essential expression of a certain race, and they were more interested in isolating musical genres and observing them as essential and unspoiled units rather than products of manifold influences. Their efforts, however, were crucial in the preservation of American roots music and their passion and lifelong engagement also helped the audience become aware of the richness and liveliness of the genre.

The element of nostalgia often found in American roots music, expressed through the fascination with an idealized past unspoiled by industrialization and the desire for the home, remembered as in idealized space of peace and happiness, is also crucial for this discussion since it exposes an irrational and idealized picture of the past, which is heavily processed by the filter of memory and the human tendency to remember the positive. Such a process creates sugarcoated and unrealistic pictures of a past that never was, which translate into idealized pictures of an essential, coherent, harmonic and morally unspoiled past that needs to be cherished. Moreover the use of constant nostalgia and tradition are also connected to the creation of an aesthetic that tries to deny highly commodified genres of music or production forms. Hence, the theme of commercialism vs. non commercialism is a rather contradictory one in the genre of American roots music, both nowadays and during its early institutionalization, and it seems to be illustrating Marcuse's idea, paraphrased by alt.country musician Jon Langford, that “whatever you throw at capitalism, it'll just sell it right back to you” (Langford qtd. in Fox and Ching 3). However, more straightforwardly positive and empowering elements are also being promoted by contemporary forms of cultural expressions. *O Brother,*

*Where Art Thou*, for instance, breaks with essentialism and pure nostalgia by exposing the artificiality of the genre, and T Bone Burnett is sincerely engaged in the fight for artists' rights and manages to create a sense of community among musicians and fans. Moreover, both Burnett and *O Brother* include the African American side of the story, thus breaking with the problematic racist or denialist tendencies of the earlier actors that have defined the genre and with Donald Davidson. As we have seen in Burnett's discourse and in the fact that he is called a musical archivist, his effort to downplay commercial forces stands in stark contrast to the vast commercial empire he has created in the field of American roots music and culture. His approach, however, is an empowering one in that his main focus is the promotion of the richness and multiracial nature of the genre and the creation of infrastructures that support musician's livelihoods and allow them to interact with each other and create a community.

What emerges from this chapter is a complex dialectic between anti commercial sentiments and between the need to adopt a certain degree of commercial platforms for the music to exist in the reality of a given time. This tension is also predominant in Davidson's novel, which in spite of its problematic depiction of Appalachian music and culture as an exclusively white phenomenon, offers a high degree of compromise and fluidity between old and new traditions. The novel also proposes an interaction between commercial and non-commercial forces and an unexpected complexity of characters that go beyond the stereotypical elements of the rural, old and traditional as the good and moral part and the urban, new and innovative as the negative and corrupting force. The novel's takeaway could be summarized as a celebration of contradictions and compromise which stands in stark contrast with the simplistic and essential definitions of Southern society that can be read in Davidson's theoretical writings as a member of the Agrarian movement.

The concept of double-coding used in the analysis of *O Brother*, moreover, provides a useful tool for the interpretation of contemporary aesthetics that make use of past ones. Double-coding is indeed based on the idea that whenever images and styles from the past are used in a contemporary context, such references have the potential to comment both on the present and the past reality. This means that nostalgia and fascination with the past can also be used in an empowering way, and if used intelligently they can be effective in showing the past with its pros and cons and also contribute to the creation of a better present. Examples of such workings will be provided in chapter 3, where I will analyze several bands and authors that are rewriting the history of roots music and Southern culture focusing on inclusiveness.

### 3 “As What Begins Anywhere/ Started Already Somewhere Else”: Race Awareness and the Recomposition of History in Contemporary Roots Music and Literature

While the artists used for the discussion of chapter 1 had several empowering messages for their audiences, such as the promotion of practices and spaces in which individuals can feel part of a community, they represent the stereotypical white category of musicians that have come to define Southern roots music. In order to counter the tendency present in the collective imagination to reduce the South and its culture to a somehow backward and self-contained bubble of racism and conservatism, I will use examples of contemporary musicians and writers who show its richness, complexity and cross-pollination. The examples of the Old Crow Medicine Show and Dom Flemons illustrate how music making can be complemented by a deep understanding of history and by the desire to spread knowledge and fascination for a genre rich in multi-colored influences. These artists, through imitation, impersonation and revival of old traditions are able to expose and shed light on parts of history that have been forgotten or ignored. Their music is an attempt to broaden the perspective on the vastness of the genre of roots music, which is far from being reduced to the stereotype of belligerent rednecks playing a banjo, and to acknowledge its various facets.

In chapter 2 I tried to expose the relationship between commercial forces and discourses of authenticity, an effort that has uncovered complex and sometimes contradictory practices of playing along with the market while at the same time adopting strategies to erase all visible signs of such an association, which results in the fabrication of authenticity. The efforts of hiding all signs of constructedness and commercial interests have been exemplified by various folklorists, radio personalities and entrepreneurs from the 1920s, 1930s and 40s and through their roles in the creation of specific personas for performers. Artistic takes on the topic, in contrast, have proven to be more flexible. Donald Davidson's novel *The Big Ballad Jamboree*, for instance, proposes a rather fluid relationship between American roots music and commercialism, at least compared to his own theoretical writings. The problem, however, is that he completely leaves out the African American perspective and its fundamental impact of

the music of the region, a factor that has become much more prevalent in recent form of cultural expressions that will be dealt with mainly in this chapter. As we have already seen in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, more recent takes on American roots music have included both the African American role in music and a parodic and playful approach to the monolithic and coherent unit that the music represents for some. The same inclusive spirit and the breaking down of stereotypes is to be found in the poetry of contemporary writers such as Jake Adam York and Frank X Walker, who write about their region in a way that uses music to illustrate the richness of cross-pollination and the desire to create a community in which all races can be valued and acknowledged. Walker moreover, is also the man who coined the term Affrilachia, a concept now used by various African American writers from the Appalachian area who felt the need to find their place within a culture that had traditionally been defined as exclusively and uniformly white.

### 3.1 The Revival of Shared Black and White Music

The two roots music acts that will be dealt with in this section have been selected on the one hand because they partake in the nostalgic discourses that define Southern culture by reviving old traditions and aesthetics, but also because in doing so, they are more successful in providing a complete picture of the richness of that culture compared to the ones analyzed in chapter 1. Both Old Crow Medicine Show and Dom Flemons and the Carolina Chocolate Drops display ironic elements indicative of an attitude of criticism of narrow-minded traditionalist tendencies but also show a heartfelt appreciation and involvement in the genre, achieved by means of the inclusion of topics that have been rather taboo in the past.

Old Crow Medicine Show is a band based in Nashville TN that started off in 1998 as a group of buskers that were eventually discovered by folk legend Doc Watson in 2000, while busking on the streets of Boone NC. From that day on, their career kicked off dramatically and their achievements include 2 Grammy Awards and membership in the Grand Ole Opry as well as world-wide touring (“Bio” *Crowmedicine.com*). The very choice of the name reveals how the band uses old traditions and puts them into a modern context. The medicine show is an American form of entertainment common in the mid-1800s and until the early 1900s which combines various elements taken from vaudeville, minstrelsy and burlesque (“About Medicine Shows” *Folkstreams.net*). Such shows would typically be composed of a host of traveling musicians and performers, whom, in addition to entertaining the audience, would also use an

improvised doctor to sell so-called patent medicines, dubious and exotic cure-all elixirs sometimes referred to as snake oil (“Art of the Medicine Show Pitch” *Folkstreams.net*). Moreover, as it was common practice in minstrel shows, medicine shows also regularly hosted blackface characters that were initially performed by whites painting their face black and later also by African Americans (“Black Entertainers and the Medicine Show” *Folkstreams.net*). Banjo scholar and performer Tony Thomas, in his article about African Americans and the banjo called “Why African Americans Put the Banjo Down” quotes Phil Pastras' claim that blackface performances were adopted by African Americans in order to mock the interpretations of blacks made by whites (qtd. in Thomas 153) and were thus not a mere passive act of doing what was popular at the time and seen as racist today. The terms minstrel show and medicine show are used somewhat interchangeably and share a basic structure of a variety show that includes dance, music, blackface, jokes and traveling crews. An important aspect of minstrel and medicine shows for the scope of this discussion is pointed out by ethnomusicologist Kip Lornell his article “Old-Time Country Music in North Carolina and Virginia”. His claim is namely that those forms of entertainment have played a crucial role in the geographical and commercial diffusion of music born out of the interaction of blacks and whites: “Mid-nineteenth-century minstrelsy marked the first instances of direct, commercialized crossover of black and white musical cultures ...” (Lornell 188). The choice of the name Old Crow Medicine Show, which revives an old American tradition that is often seen as controversial because of its caricatures and ridiculing of African Americans, can pose some problems if we think that the band is composed by only whites and is thus not an instance of double irony as in the case of blacks playing blackface. My argument is, however, that the band has various strategies to downplay a possible racist scenario that can be seen in subtle as well as explicit deeds and is, on the contrary, engaged in the celebration of the great musical mixture found in the South.

The music video for their most successful song “Wagon Wheel”, for instance, shows the band playing at a fun fair, on an improvised open air theatre stage made of timber and cardboard and reminiscent of minstrel and medicine show stages. What is shown at their show is the band playing and, as the stage sign says, “exotic girls”. The women are all scantily dressed and the atmosphere is that of a burlesque show. What could have been the display of exotic blacks at the time of the 19<sup>th</sup> century medicine shows, is now turned into a display of women. In the best case scenario this could be a step in the direction of arguing that women are also dealt with in a problematic way in American roots music, a topic that would require a whole new

thesis in itself and will thus not be further examined here. In this particular video there is a reference to traveling shows and minstrelsy, but none to African Americans. The problematic aspect of such a tradition has been erased and substituted with another problematic topic that is perhaps better accepted and more common than a display of African Americans as exotic creatures would have been. There are, however, other elements in the band's music and aesthetics that suggest their active incorporation of and openness towards the African American tradition.

The predominance of the harmonica in their music, for instance, can be read as a tribute to the great tradition of early black radio performers that have been overlooked until the recent years. Richard Peterson explains how in 1928, in the early years of the Grand Ole Opry, an African American musician called DeFord Bailey performed on forty-nine out of the fifty-nine weeks that were aired that year and that no other artist had performed as often as him (Peterson 73). What is curious, is that the artists that came to be identified as the iconic character for the Opry was Uncle Dave Macon, a white old-time banjo player and singer that appeared only three times on the show in 1928 (Peterson 73). DeFord Bailey was a virtuoso harmonica player from Tennessee, also known as the Harmonica Wizard, who performed what he referred to as black hillbilly music (Huber 39). His specialties were harmonica impressions of animals and locomotive whistles, and despite his great popularity among the Opry audience, his face rarely featured on WSM advertisements, which made it difficult for people to know that he was black (Huber 39-40). After having performed for fifteen years, Bailey got fired from the Opry in 1941, and the next regular African American Opry performer only came as late as 1991, when Charley Pride was made a member (40). Bailey also features in several recordings classified under the Hillbilly series, but as was the case in the various instances of whites or blacks appearing on the series marketed for the opposite race, their very racial identities were disguised and hidden (48-49). These facts show how the actual music was greatly mixed both on records and on radio, but that marketing factors tended to separate the races and to create the impression, throughout the years, that the two musical traditions were completely independent from one another. In the case of Old Crow Medicine Show, there are various elements that stress the cross-pollination that is at the heart of American roots music. One such instance is to be found in the pervasive presence of the harmonica, that can be read as a hat tip to DeFord Bailey's virtuoso imitations of train sounds and the tradition of black harmonica players. As producer for Smithsonian Folkways' album *Classic Harmonica Blues* Barry Lee Pearson explains, the harmonica is a 19<sup>th</sup> century German instrument, adopted by African Americans



because of its accessible price and portable size (Bischeglio “Inhaling the Blues”). Interestingly, African Americans found new techniques of playing the instrument such as inhaling while playing it and thus bending notes, making the harmonica sound more like the human voice and achieving great expression (Bischeglio “Inhaling the Blues”).

Old Crow Medicine Show, on their 2006 album, *Big Iron World*, recorded “Minglewood Blues”, a song that is also present in the above mentioned blues harmonica album. In the booklet for *Classic Harmonica Blues*, Barry Lee Pearson and co-producer Jeff Place write that the song was composed by black harmonica player Noah Lewis (Pearson and Place 21), who also played with popular jug band musician Gus Cannon in Cannon's Jug Stompers. Although OCMS's version is played faster and with harmonizing voices in the refrain, the element of the harmonica remains and the solo lines are sung, in a similar fashion as Noah Lewis, in a trembling and nasal voice by Willie Watson while he was still part of the band. OCMS, in their albums up to 2006, typically combine traditional songs, which they often rearrange and songs of their own composition. In the song “New Virginia Creeper”, – whose lyrics about riding the Virginia Creeper are highly sexually allusive – sounds similar to those produced by locomotive whistles can be heard on the harmonica, a fact that connects the band to DeFord Bailey and the history of the early Opry, of which Old Crow Medicine Show are members since 2013. Their 2001 album *Eutaw*, is composed by twelve tracks of which eleven are listed as traditional and one is composed by the band. The first song, “Raise a Ruckus”, is a song that has been played by several artists, among whom Gus Cannon, who recorded it with Stax Records in 1963. Gus Cannon was a medicine show entertainer and played with jug bands and skillet bands, both band formats that originated in the early 1920s out of street performances and they were typically composed by either white or black musicians playing similar music on homemade or inexpensive instruments such as jugs, kazoos, washboards and harmonicas (Charters 4-6). Even earlier, however, the song was recorded in 1954 by the Mobile Strugglers, another skillet band from Alabama (Charters 4), and in 1934 by John Lomax as sung by a group of African American convicts in Atlanta (Lomax). The song's presence in the African American musical tradition is thus indisputable and its rendition by a band of white musicians shows awareness and appreciation of such a tradition.

Another OCMS song that stems from skillet bands is “Cocaine Habit”, a traditional song also known by the names of “Cocaine Habit Blues” or “Take a Whiff on Me”. The song has been recorded by Tennessean Memphis Jug Band in 1930 (Rudgley 222) and by Lead

Belly in a 1934 recording session made by Alan Lomax, as well as by Woody Guthrie (Parrett 64). By listening to the three versions it becomes clear that OCMS have been primarily inspired by the Memphis Jug Band version, which is in the style of skillet band music with the presence of instruments such as harmonica, jug and kazoo. By reviving the lost tradition of the 1920s skillet bands, OCMS both pays homage to African American music but also engages in a genre that exemplified common musical expressions between blacks and whites, since, as music historian Samuel Charters argues, it was often difficult to distinguish whether a recording was made by blacks or whites by only hearing it (4). The genre, hence, is a prime example of a common musical tradition, in which blacks and whites shared both geographical, social and musical spaces and influenced each other in an enriching way. Moreover, in adopting a style that is inspired by street performers, and by having started off as street performers themselves, OCMS promote a communal and participatory performance style, where the distance between audience and performers is erased by the lack of physical alienating factors such as elevated stages and overly formal settings.

OCMS' fascination with African American music is not limited to their revival of skillet bands, but they also pay tribute to the great tradition of black blues guitarists. The songs “Wen Dey Wud No Crawfish” and “That’ll Be a Better Day”, among others, start with a distinct steel guitar melody and rhythm played by Critter Fuqua in a way that is typically associated with early blues bottleneck guitar playing such as that of Robert Johnson. The first of the two songs, moreover, also clearly alludes to African American Vernacular English and the transformation of the fricative [ð] into [d] and the use of ‘wud’ for General American ‘was’.

In addition to musical references to African American culture, such as the pervasive presence of the harmonica, the bottleneck guitar and the revival of skillet band traditions, OCMS also recorded songs and videos dealing with issues of slavery, labor and human rights. One such example is the song “Take ‘Em Away”, which, according to an interview with Critter Fuqua, was written in honor of Mance Lipscomb, a black musician and sharecropper from Texas (Milner “Old Crow Medicine Show”). The lyrics are about a poor man that spends his days working hard in the field to feed his family and asks the Lord to give him freedom: “Take ‘em away, Take ‘em away Lord, Take away these chains from me. My heart is broken cause my spirit's not free, Lord take away these chains from me.” (“Take ‘Em Away” OCMS). The chains mentioned in the songs are figurative chains that are perceived by the speaker through the lack of freedom due to the dependence of hard work for survival, and also by the forced

subordination to a landowner. Such chains, moreover, allude to slavery, especially the verse “Sun beatin' down my legs cant seem to stand, there's a boss man at a turnrow with a rifle in his hand. I've got nine children, nothin' in the pan. My wife she died hungry while i was plowin' land.” (“Take ‘Em Away” OCMS). The presence of an armed overseer reminds the listener of how present the theme of slavery was in early blues music, especially if we consider that Mance Lipscomb's father was a slave (Miller and Smith 510). On their 2008 album, *Tennessee Pusher*, they dedicated a song titled “Motel in Memphis” to the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., who was shot at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis TN in 1968. In the song, the speaker revisits the day of King's assassination and describes the huge unrest caused by it with the sentence: “If you were there, you'd swear it was more than a man who died” (“Motel in Memphis” OCMS). The day of King's funeral is also mentioned along with various Civil Rights activists that contributed to the event, notably gospel singer Mahalia Jackson: “Were you there with Mahalia wailing at the funeral? Did you watch them lower his casket in? Did you tremble when you thought about the future? And cry out for a martyred man?” (“Motel in Memphis” OCMS). The song mentions a sense of preoccupation and uncertainty towards the future in a society where a crucial promoter of non-violent civil disobedience is brutally killed and elevates King to martyrdom.

A song that also contains social commentary, but which carries a more hopeful message for the future, is “I Hear Them All” from *Big Iron World*. The following verse is interesting in terms of hope for the future but also because it can be read as a wakeup call for powerful, rich and conservative people to be more open minded and aware of injustice and misery within their own country.

So, while you sit and whistle Dixie  
With your money and your power  
I can hear the flowers a-growing  
In the rubble of the towers  
I hear leaders quit their lyin'  
I hear babies quit their cryin'  
I hear soldiers quit their dyin', one and all

(“I Hear Them All” OCMS)

The reference to whistling the song “Dixie” connects to what I wrote in chapter 1, namely that the song has become an anthem for the confederate South and thus bears strong racist connotations. A powerful and rich person whistling “Dixie” represents a critique of a brand of

Southern racism, which is opposed to a more hopeful and open-minded kind of mentality embodied by the band, who sees in music a chance to build community and make a better world. This feeling is especially emphasized in the video that they made for the song. The video was made in 2006 to support an association engaged in rebuilding New Orleans communities that have been destroyed by hurricane Katrina and shows the band performing on the streets of New Orleans, at a bus stop in a black neighborhood. The song starts with a blues style bottleneck guitar, joined in by the harmonica and the video shows a street with a visible “blues club” sign. What follows are shots of devastated areas of the city alternating with scenes of the band playing and waiting for the bus, while they are joined by an increasing number of African Americans. When the bus arrives, it turns out to be a yellow school bus driven by an African American man and the small crowd hops on and the band keeps playing and everyone is smiling and greeting each other, enjoying the music and the ride. The fact that the band is waiting for the bus – and then riding the bus – in what looks like a poor black neighborhood, breaks with the stereotypical images ubiquitous in country music where white artists are shown driving or standing by their pickup trucks and even singing about them. Rather, the band prefers a communal means of transportation over one that has become a symbol of freedom, independence, wealth and also individualism. The fact that the bus is a school bus, moreover, can be read as a suggestion that everyone, white or black, can hop on the metaphorical bus and go to school to learn about each other's lives, history and music, which, as I have shown so far, have a lot in common. The focus on a sense of community, as we have seen in chapter 1, is also a crucial aspect of music making for other roots music acts such as J.P. Harris and Matt Kinman and it is at times accompanied by the distaste of commercialism and by the resulting affinity towards more manual and less alienating activities and a sense of appreciation of hard work, craftsmanship and nostalgic aesthetics. OCMS, while being more openly oriented towards social issues and integration, display some of the stereotypical Southern distaste for industrialization and the appreciation of hard work and the preoccupation with the loss of traditional values found in a predominantly rural and pre-industrial society.

### **3.2 Old Crow Medicine Show's Nostalgia and Anti-Industrialism**

Old Crow Medicine Show's relationship to aesthetics, nostalgia and the past is more complex than the bands mentioned in chapter 1, since they often change clothing styles and album artworks, and also write songs and make videos about the present social and political situation,

rather than only revisiting old traditional songs. In some of their songs, however, there are elements of continuity that situate the band within discourses of nostalgia and anti-commercialism and a certain problematization of industrialization is present, a fact that reflects the larger tendency of Southern culture to look back to the good ole days with admiration and longing. “James River Blues”, for instance, is a song composed by the band and it is about the gradual disappearance of steamboats and boatmen in favor of the expanding railroad system that was being built in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the song, a boatman laments the loss of his job on the river and expresses preoccupation for his uncertain future where technology is advancing and where his skills become less and less useful compared to the greater strength of the train:

James River blues  
That train came on through  
And the work's gotten slow  
Now wheres a boatman to go  
I think I'll float on down  
To Richmond town  
They don't need us anymore  
Haulin' freight from shore to shore  
That big iron hauls much more  
Than we ever could before  
I've see good men going wrong  
I've seen bad ones get it right  
As that river rolls along  
I'll be steppin' out tonight  
("James River Blues" OCMS)

In addition to the helplessness and feeling of inutility felt by the speaker, there is also a sense of moral decay that goes along with the advent of the train, a symbol of advancing industrialization. The good men in the song were probably the speaker's fellow boatmen who are now forced out of their jobs and into misery, while the bad ones, who operate within the industrial system, thrive and flourish. A similar theme is found in “We Don't Grow Tobacco”, whose melody is based on “Bootlegger's Blues”, a song by a popular black country blues band from the 1930s, the Mississippi Sheiks, as Rupert Cross observes in his interview with OCMS (Cross “Old Crow Medicine Show”). The lyrics, however, are rewritten by the band, and instead of being about smuggling moonshine as in the original song, they are about the decline of tobacco farming and the movement of people from rural to urban places:

Hardest work that ever I done, bent beneath that burnin' sun  
Haulin' that tobacco 'round to cure  
How we chopped that wicked weed 'till our hands and fingers bleed  
Workin' like a mule, maybe more  
We been farmin' on this land  
Since eighteen hundred ten  
Through flood and drought  
And pestilence and war  
Now I sure am sad to say  
That I've lived to see this day  
When we don't grow tobacco  
'Round here no more

The first part of the song underlines the hard work of growing tobacco, but it also engages in a romanticization of the hard and manual labor that makes hands bleed but also gives a sense of stability and continuity of tradition that is now undermined by industrialization and technology. The notion of change, as can be seen in the rest of the song, is a threatening one and is compared to thunder and to a force that leaves behind devastation of the land and the disruption of rural communities. There is also the allusion to the railroad as a contributing factor to such developments and it can be read in the metaphor of iron weeds growing out of the floor, as if the railroad tracks just keep spreading like weed, but are infertile and dry as opposed to the green tobacco fields.

Granpa told me, this I know, change is comin', won't be slow  
Knockin' just like thunder at the door  
Fallow fields are all around, empty barns just fallin' down  
Iron weeds comin' up through the floor  
Once we growed it by the pound  
Now the kids all move to town  
And all that's left are elderly and poor  
Now I sure am sad to say  
That I've lived to see the day  
When we don't grow tobacco  
'Round here no more  
("We Don't Grow Tobacco" OCMS)

The song brings up several of the themes that have been crucial in chapter 1 and 2, first of which is the focus on and fascination with manual work. The latter is understood as *Erlebnis* in the song, a sort of craftsmanship that gives meaning to people's actions and makes them feel

connected to their land, allowing them to feel present in the making of a product. This understanding reflects Sennett's notion that craftsmen are deeply connected to their community and feel meaningful within it rather than being individual geniuses that rely on their own power and originality. Moreover, the preoccupation with the loss of the fertile land and the familiar and repetitive activity of growing tobacco recalls Donald Davidson's fear of the decline of craftsmanship which would lead to privatization, loss of community and loss of the presence of art in people's everyday activities. The song expresses nostalgia for a way of life that is slowly disappearing, and also fear of the future, which is seen as a time when the once uniform community is deranged, dislocated and left alone facing its own decay, all sentiments that are present in Davidson's theoretical writings about Southern society, found in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*.

OCMS also have another song that can be read as a revival of anti-industrial sentiments and a critique of the tragedies that some individuals had to face as a consequence of the advent of technology. "Half Mile Down" tells the story of a speaker who is forced out of his home town because some Northerners have come to the Blue Ridge Mountains to build a dam which will flood the whole area:

First they started their surveyin'  
And makin' up their plans  
To flood that peaceful valley  
Just to build Watauga dam  
Oh they brought in their bulldozers  
And pushed our homes away  
And they handed me a shovel  
And sixty cents a day

Singin' my home town  
Is a half mile down  
It's a half mile o' water  
All around, all around  
My home town is a half mile down

So they stripped out all the timber  
And they leveled all the land  
And they drilled and dynamited  
'til they blew the mountains in

I tore down my old homeplace  
And I dug up Daddy's grave  
And I relocated Momma to 14 miles away  
  
("Half Mile Down", OCMS)

In addition to having to abandon his home place, the speaker is also forced to work for the exploitative Northerners to be able to move his parents' graves and bury them in a safer place. The song also stresses how nature is being destroyed while trees and mountains are torn down. The nostalgia for the loss of home combines with the concern for the annihilation of nature and the increasing disconnection between people and nature. This mood is similar to Davidson's own sense of nostalgia both for the home and for nature found in his writings, which he extends to art by claiming that true art can only result from the artist's closeness to nature and distance from technology. Thus, "Half Mile Down" and Davidson's beliefs share a negative vision of industrialization, in that the latter is seen as a force that disrupts nature, families, order and the possibility of integration between art and everyday life.

The motif of the dam brings to mind the looming advent of progress present throughout the narrative of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, a threat that urges the protagonist to go back home in order to save his family. The movie's take on modernization and technology is more ambivalent than the Old Crow Medicine's interpretation of the misery brought by it, a dynamic that reveals the constant tension between progress seen as empowering and at the same time threatening and destabilizing. In the movie, set in 1937, this tension is signified in the presence of the dam that is mentioned throughout the narrative and is supposed to bring enlightenment to the South, in the form of electric power. The same dam, however, is also the cause of the imminent flooding of the area where Everett's old home is situated – a place he remembers as a happy abode where he lived peacefully with his family – and thus the protagonists need to hurry there to save the alleged treasure. What is actually left behind in Everett's cabin is his ex-wife's old wedding ring, which she wants back as the only condition to remarry him. Once the three protagonists and Tommy Johnson make it to the cabin, Sheriff Cooley, the devilish villain, is waiting for them and has already dug their graves even though they have been pardoned publicly and the event was broadcast on the radio. Cooley states he doesn't have a radio and thus does not care what happened, since in his mind, his intentions and ideas cannot be spoiled by technology, but rather, he follows his own natural law. As Everett kneels down for his last prayer, invoking God to help him, the water that is going to create the lake for the hydroelectric plant suddenly floods all the area and saves the protagonists who reemerge once the waters have



calmed and the lake is formed. The flood and the dam, symbols of industrialization, are what saves Everett, Pete, Delmar and Tommy and is thus a force for good. However, Everett is unable to find the right ring for his ex-wife, and the movie ends by her refusing to retie the knot until she sees her old ring. Industrialization, thus, brings progress, wealth and salvation, but at the same time, it threatens to destroy family ties and erases the possibility of going back to the past, seen as a stable and peaceful condition where the nuclear family can be reestablished. At the end of the movie, in spite of being saved, Everett's future remains uncertain and this fact renders a straightforward and conclusive interpretation of industrialization impossible. The symbolism of dams is not unique to Old Crow Medicine Show's music and it signifies the taming of nature by industrial forces. "Half Mile Down" provides a plainly nostalgic image of idyllic Blue Ridge Mountain landscapes and families being destroyed by the advent of technology, which goes along with the nostalgic sentiments and the notion that the good ole days were better, often encountered in cultural productions about the South in varying degrees of complexity.

Old Crow Medicine Show, the band that was discovered by Doc Watson, in their last album wrote another song where the fascination with the past can be easily discerned. "Doc's Day" is a playful song that deals with audience expectations and stereotypes, but also with the past as a source for inspiration:

We were rolling down King Street a quarter to twelve  
When we found a little corner to play  
So we plugged in our guitars and tightened our drums  
And hollered out, "Hey, hey, hey"  
When this old hillbilly with a cheek full of chaw  
Rambled on over to our tip jar  
He said I like what I see but it's not like I saw  
Way back in old Doc's day

He said if you wanna rock, listen to Doc  
If you want the girls better pick like Merle  
Cause them High Country blues  
Still blow all the women away  
So beat on the corner with your flat top box  
Pick on the banjo, boys don't stop  
Give me old-time music, Lord make it hot  
Just like it was in Doc's day

In this part of the song, the band is playing on King Street in Boone, where they were actually found by Doc Watson, on instruments that show they were not playing traditional acoustic music, but probably rather amplified punk music, which is what many members of the band claim as an inspiration. After this stereotypical nostalgic and tobacco-chewing hillbilly approaches them and asks for old-time music, the band gets rid of amplifiers and turns to picking traditional music instead:

So we sold our amps and pawned our drums  
Now we're picking like a couple of native sons  
And that old hillbilly he's sure buck dancing away  
Lord the crowd's all packed in at Cherry and King  
Leaning in close to hear the banjo ring  
And everybody raises their voice to sing  
Just like in old Doc's day

("Doc's Day" OCMS)

After the band turns to old-time music, the audience gets more interested and even joins in a communal moment of spontaneous enjoyment on the streets of Boone, North Carolina.

Through several songs recorded by Old Crow Medicine Show, I have tried to illustrate how the band's artistic expressions are situated within discourses common in Southern culture, such as nostalgia and longing for a more peaceful and rural past, the value of hard work, especially manual work, understood and valued as craftsmanship, the fear of industrialization and loss of rural communities and culture, all of which are very much in line with Donald Davidson's conservative values and views of the South. The band, however, does not limit itself to a nostalgic look backward towards a golden past, but also engages in progressive songwriting that fosters community, and also includes and celebrates the role of African American tradition in the making of the genre of American roots music. This progressive and multifaceted perspective on the history of the genre is also present in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and in other recent manifestations of Southern culture.

### 3.3 Old Crow Medicine Show's Activism

To balance a partly traditional approach focused on nostalgia, anti-commercialism and manual work with a more progressive one that includes taking a stand on contemporary political and social issues, OCMS engages in open discussion about the role of artists in today's society. That OCMS take social issues to heart in the in music, is apparent when listening to the words of Ketch Secor, one of the founders of the band. In a podcast hosted by Dom Flemons, former member of Grammy Award-winning band Carolina Chocolate Drops, the two musicians talk about the state of old-time music in present-day America and about social and political activism. In the conversation with Flemons, Secor states that his interest in old-time folk music originated as a consequence of his great passion for Bob Dylan and his and Pete Seeger's topical songs from the 1960s' apex of the American folk revival (Flemons "Ketch Secor"). In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Secor says that in spite of having grown up in Virginia, he came to appreciate old-time music when he was in New York state, which he describes as a prolific place for the genre (Donohue "Listening Booth"). He stresses the crucial role that northern college educated musicians and folklorists played in the revival and popularization of Appalachian mountain music and he mentions the name of John Coen who discovered Roscoe Holcomb, the ultimate "high lonesome sound" singer, banjo and guitar player from Kentucky (Donohue "Listening Booth"). About the contemporary New York pop scene, Secor says that since the success of British indie-folk band Mumford and Sons, banjos have become a must in most pop music acts in the area, reflecting a renewed interest in American roots music (Donohue "Listening Booth"). Secor also believes in American roots music's power to survive and be renewed over generations in a circular motion of rise and decline, a notion compatible with Richard Peterson's dialectic of generations. In this respect he states "Fiddles and banjos won't be denied... I believe they'll outlast most other American institutions." (Donohue "Listening Booth"). In the interview he is described as a "musical evangelist" (Donohue "Listening Booth"), who wants people to be active more than merely listening to the music:

I like libraries so much more than museums... I like to take things off the shelves, see? I don't want my information behind glass or, more likely, behind a screen. I want to experience it, rough it up, beat on it, utilize it, see what I can do with it. Folk music requires this of its participants. Pete [Seeger] always asked the audience to sing along. We are the song, he said. I would argue that this continent has the richest musical expression of any place on earth. But music is only as alive as the people who make it. If you're sitting in front of the computer instead of singing to your kiddos, if you're stuck in traffic instead of stuck in a festival parking lot with twenty banjos blaring, if you think music is just something to download on

your personal device and enjoy on the train home in your ear buds, then you got it all wrong. America has a song on the tip of its tongue that it's afraid to sing. (Donohue "Listening Booth").

Secor's idea of the function of American roots music can be compared to Donald Davidson's wish for art to be accessible and present in everyday life and not be set apart in museums and privatized. Once more, community is the focus and the goal of music making, and in the case of Ketch Secor, there is also an interest in political activism, which he emphasized in the podcast, when he asks Flemons where the songs about the refugee crisis in Europe and the Black Lives Matter movement are (Flemons "Ketch Secor"). He also expresses the wish to witness a revival of topical songs that deal with the present socio political issues, a development that will be especially interesting to follow in the years to come, given many artists' opposition to the newly elected president of the United States. Secor's vision of music is thus an active and empowering one, which is able to bring people together and which can offer tools for change and his imperative for the future is "music needs to respond" (Flemons "Ketch Secor").

### 3.4 Dom Flemons and the Power of (His)Stories

Dom Flemons, multi-instrumentalist, singer and former member of the Carolina Chocolate Drops has been very active in reviving and promoting the black string band tradition since he met the former members of the band, amongst which Rhiannon Giddens, at the first Black Banjo Gathering in Boone, North Carolina, in 2005 (Dawson "Episode 23"). In his podcasts and shows, he likes to call himself "The American Songster", a name that reflects his interest in the exploration and revival of black musical traditions from the past. As Kristin Fawcett writes in her article called "Before There Was the Blues Man, There Was the Songster" published on the *Smithsonian Magazine*, songsters were traveling instrumentalists and singers, typically African Americans, who would perform in many different setting and musical styles, varying from blues, to country, radio hits, ragtime and mountain music (Fawcett "Before"). According to Barry Lee Pearson, scholar of African American music interviewed in Fawcett's article, songsters were popular in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when many slaves were freed and could travel and play music for a living (Fawcett "Before"). Examples of such musicians are Lead Belly and Mississippi John Hurt, both celebrated by Flemons as inspirational artists for his own music. Flemons' revival of the persona of the songster allows him to erase the stereotype of the black bluesman and to stress how African Americans performed within various musical genres. The songster becomes thus a strategic tool to celebrate the diversity of Southern music and the fact

that performers are seldom limited to one kind of music only, but rather cut across boundaries of genre definition. Flemons' approach to music and performance is a historical one, and his main interest is promoting knowledge and curiosity about musical genres that are not well known or have been forgotten over the years. He is not directly and openly political, but his interests in old traditions, and especially African American ones, reveal an agenda of wanting to get history straight. In an interview with ethnomusicologist and writer Devon Léger, Flemons states: "Folk music's all about thinking about stuff. That's the sort of stuff I try to put out there, so people can make their own conclusions. I don't like pushing a full agenda. That's not really my bag." (Léger "Interview"). One of the ways in which Flemons engages in the narration of obscure and forgotten parts of history is by using unusual instruments like the quills, a sort of small pan flute, and the bones. In the podcast he explains that those are instruments that African Americans played in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and most notably by Henry Thomas, whom he mentions as one of his greatest inspirations (Dawson "Episode 23"). Such instruments, being unusual and nearly unheard of in the present roots music scene, attract a lot of attention and provide a platform for Flemons to talk about the history of the genre and its most unknown aspects. Flemons will also soon release an album in collaboration with Smithsonian Folkways on the tradition of black cowboy songs, since, as he explains, one out of four cowboys to settle the West were African Americans (Dawson "Episode 23"). The album will be an interesting step in complementing the great American myth of white cowboys, so prevalent in popular culture and collective imagination with the African American side of the story.



Dom Flemons Tintype, Credit: © Tim Duffy, 2016.

Flemons explains his passion for old music and revival in terms of a need of breaking with his own personal mind-space that he felt was absorbing him when he merely wrote and composed original songs (Flemons “Meet Dom Flemons”). After he moved to North Carolina and started playing old-time music, and learning from veterans the likes of black fiddler Joe Thompson, he felt he could be part of a community, a line of thought reminiscent of Sennett's argument about craftsmen being part of a community versus artists being absorbed in their own private virtuosity. His appearance reveals a careful styling of his persona, in that he is typically performing with an old-fashioned hat, suspenders, checkered shirt and corduroy pants, a garment used by workers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. If we consider what has been discussed in chapter 1, Dom Flemons could be labelled as a hipster, given his anachronistic name - “The American Songster” - the careful styling of his old-fashioned appearance and also his interest in old and forgotten traditions. In his own podcast he says: “I’m like one of those people that doesn't wanna eat the non-localized beef, you know, but for music” (Flemons “Meet Dom Flemons”), establishing a connection with a certain hipster culture that cherishes the origins and the history behind the food that is consumed. Moreover, some of the pictures found

online and on his website are tintype photographs, made by Tim Duffy, using the exact same technique as Lisa Elmaleh uses in her band portraits of, among others, the Hogslop String Band and Matt Kinman and Moses Melligan. In another of his podcasts, Dom Flemons meets Martin Fisher, who talks about cylinder recording, an old recording technology introduced in 1877 by Thomas Edison (Flemons, "Cylinder Sessions"). In the podcast episode, Flemons expresses his fascination with the machine and even shows the audience a song recorded with present-day technology and compares it to the same song recorded by cylinder. The latter recording sounds like an old and scratchy record sound, with a lot of background noise and Flemons observes how he feels transported back to one hundred years ago and is clearly excited about the old-fashioned sound coming out of the machine.

There is, no doubt, a sense of nostalgia and fascination with the past in Dom Flemons' music and persona, traits that make him fit into Mark Greif's category of the Hipster Primitive. Greif warns the reader that such nostalgic and idealizing revivals of the past can be superficial and limited to an esthetic interest for all things *démodé* and a somehow obsessive quest for what stands in stark opposition to easily accessible and mass produced commodities, with the risk of becoming elitist and excluding who does not have the right taste or means to achieve certain exclusive items. Interestingly, Tony Thomas writes the following about the ubiquitous presence of nostalgic themes in American roots music: "Old-time music and bluegrass reflect a feature of European American culture that African American musical culture does not share so strongly: nostalgia for past music in general and nostalgia for the rural southern past in particular." (162). In the case of Dom Flemons and the Carolina Chocolate Drops, this tendency is inverted and the musicians seem to be appropriating white nostalgia and a sense of authenticity, only with a deep and passionate understanding of history and with the African American perspective added to the thus far predominantly white narrative. The Carolina Chocolate Drops, a contemporary string band engaged in the revival of black string band tradition, uses references to the past and combines them with more modern sounds. The name of the band is a reference to the Tennessee Chocolate Drops, a black string band from the 1920s, who, as folklorist and anthropologist Erika Brady explains, was active at a time when blacks and whites performed with each other and shared a common style and repertoire (109). The band's 2010 album is called *Genuine Negro Jig*, a title that is very interesting in terms of authenticity discourses. The term 'genuine' can be read as synonymous to 'authentic', and according to the *OED*, it is defined as follows:

2. Pertaining to the original stock, pure-bred.
3. Really proceeding from its reputed source or author; not spurious; = authentic *adj.*7a.
4. a. Having the character or origin represented; real, true, not counterfeit, unfeigned.

Much can be said about the association of the words ‘genuine’, ‘negro’ and ‘jig’, a title that the band chose in order to raise awareness on how the term ‘negro’ was once the preferred and politically correct one, used also in race recordings to promote African American music (Léger “Interview”). About the album title, Flemons says that it was chosen in order to raise awareness of race issues both past and present, in an attempt to create a meaningful conversation:

Nowadays, people using their modern context of what they think race should be, especially, they’ve been feeding everybody the line that we’re in a post-racial society because Obama got elected to president. I think, in one way, it eased the tension of what people thought about race, but at the same time, it’s gotten people to let their guards down, as the new social upheaval has happened. There’s something strange going on in terms of a white power struggle or adversity towards the black and the white races... (Léger “Interview”).

Flemons’ almost prophetic words are more relevant than ever after the election of Donald J. Trump, which symbolizes the triumph of xenophobic discourses and discourses that emphasize otherness at the expense of inclusion. The term ‘jig’ denotes a type of tune of English descent that is usually used for dances and the combination of ‘negro’ and ‘jig’ can be interpreted as a reference to the Appalachian region’s influences coming both from Europe and from Africa, which are reflected in the music. The addition of the adjective ‘genuine’, moreover, seems to be a subtle criticism of a certain white-only ideology that has been attached to roots music for decades since the commercialization of the genre in the late 1920s. If a song is simultaneously a jig, African American and genuine, in the sense of pure-bred, then it is either a contradiction, or the notion itself of something being authentic and pure-bred makes little sense, since, as we have seen, American roots music is a result of different musical traditions coming together. By raising awareness on topical issues within roots music discourses, the Carolina Chocolate Drops are able to counter the tendency to exclude the African American perspective and to indulge in romanticizations of the past that are clearly problematic in terms of human rights and equality. The band can be said to play an important role in contrasting what can be said to be the potential dark side of the genre of roots music, which Tony Thomas nicely summarizes as follows:



Folk and old-time music enthusiasts are overwhelmingly white, middle class, college-educated (old-time fans often have advanced degrees), and of urban or suburban origin. Yet they claim to represent the values of the rural, mountain, and small-town South of the first thirty years of the twentieth century. The segregation, terrorization and degradation blacks faced are rarely part of old-time music and bluegrass enthusiasts' nostalgic notions of the rural South (Thomas 163).

Dom Flemons' engagement in music as a force for equality and justice shines through yet another podcast, in which he talks to William Ferris, folklorist and African American studies scholar, about the songs that have changed and shaped their lives. One of Ferris' choices is Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" from 1956, which he describes as the moment in history where black music was revealed to mainstream white audiences (Flemons "3 Songs"). According to Ferris, Elvis' role in laying the foundations for early rock'n'roll music helped the end of Jim Crow and the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Ferris' approach to music and culture is very fluid and empowering, an impression supported by his statement: "Music allows us to flow and to move in and out of different schemes... no one owns the blues and no one owns country and old-time country" (Flemons "3 Songs"). His point is that different genres of music can be reclaimed and used to shed light on the nearly forgotten traditions, as in the case of Dom Flemons, who revives black string band music and combines genres and instruments to show the richness and shared culture of American roots music. One of Dom Flemons' picks is "If I Had a Hammer" a late 1940s song by Pete Seeger, which made Flemons start playing the banjo and also inspired him to think about the potential social and political role of folk music (Flemons "3 Songs"). Pete Seeger's inspirational song helped him understand folk music "as a force for justice and as a way to get the word out for things that needed changing" (Flemons "3 Songs").

Old Crow Medicine Show and Dom Flemons and the Carolina Chocolate Drops are examples of Angela Davis's concept of the subversive potential present in music even when the latter is an imitation or a performance of something pre-existent. While both bands have some elements of originality and compose new songs, their defining characteristic is the revival of old musical genres through the use of uncommon instruments and the reenactment of older forms of entertainment such as medicine shows, skilnet bands and the resuscitating the character of the songster. Although both bands incorporate some elements of nostalgia, reflected in OCMS's anti-industrial songs and in Flemons' retro aesthetics and attempt to create a timeless and old-fashioned persona, all in all their use of old traditions shows an empowering agenda of inclusion of all the different musical traditions of the region. Their passionate interest in the past and

their impersonation of nearly forgotten traditions where black and white music was still merged together, functions as an eye opener for the audience, which is pushed to appreciate the stories and the complexity behind the music. By listening to Ketch Secor and Dom Flemons talk about the history and the role of roots music, it becomes clear that the musicians spend a lot of time and effort thinking about their role in society as artists and the ways in which they can contribute to a more inclusive and informed society.

### 3.5 Rewriting Appalachia through Race-Informed Poetry

Since this thesis has tried to illustrate both the dangerous and the empowering elements present in Southern Culture and reflected in music, literature and film, it is now time to cast an eye over some contemporary tendencies in the literature of the Appalachian region. The importance of getting history straight and the desire to inform the audience about the great cultural richness found in the South as a result of the coexistence of various races, is gaining more and more terrain in discourses surrounding the region, and the same tendency found in the music of OCMS and Dom Flemons is reflected in contemporary forms of literature from the Appalachian area. OCMS and Dom Flemons, while being situated within the more stereotypical context of Southern nostalgia, have managed to find empowering ways to represent the South, its music and its history. Similarly, contemporary poets have written about Southern stereotypes and at the same time managed to include diversity and the sense that the region's culture belongs to all races, a fact that represents a step forward from Donald Davidson's exclusively white perspective.

William Ferris, as mentioned at the beginning of chapter 1, is a strong advocate for the close connection that exists between literature, oral tradition, visual arts and music in cultural expressions of the American South. His belief is confirmed in chapter 2, where I have established parallels between the commercial aspects of history of roots music and Donald Davidson's novel *The Big Ballad Jamboree* and also with the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, both cultural artifacts in which music plays a central role. The idea that music, literature and the visual arts inform each other is as valid nowadays as it was in Davidson's times. Leafing through a recent anthology of Appalachian literature published in 2013 and called *Red Holler: Contemporary Appalachian Literature*, it becomes apparent how many of the present-day writers selected for the book are engaged in reflections about the relationship between the region's history and music. The anthology contains poems, short stories and graphic novels by

black and white Appalachian writers who play with stereotypes, subversion of stereotypes and nostalgic feelings that are in a constant tension between longing and aversion for a land that seems full of contradictions while also being deeply magnetic. One poem especially, written by Jake Adam York, a poet who grew up in Alabama, emphasizes the conflation of nature, history, community and music with a focus on unity and inclusion and acceptance of all cultural aspects. The poem, “Letter to Be Wrapped Around a Bottle of Whiskey”, evokes the image of corn liquor being poured and its short stream of consciousness-like lines flow and describe aspects and impressions of the region's nature and culture:

...

As corn, once wheat thin,  
will rise from any ground.  
As it holds its sugars,  
days it's concentrated  
to such brightness  
we distill, thought  
to form, in the hollows  
where we remembered  
how to cut cadence  
from a limb, a ballad  
from a family  
tree. As the maker of fire  
brings the guitar  
and the country song  
from a turtle's shell  
and the stomach of a lamb.  
As what begins anywhere  
started already somewhere  
else. Here, in the ridge  
and valley of voice  
where you draw the well of song,

the spring that's warming now  
in your talk, maybe  
it is snowing now,  
and a string band threads  
the bruise of night  
where windows are  
crocuses offering their saffrons  
to the cold and the snake-handler's  
arms in the one-room church  
antennas raised  
to the broadcast Christ,  
the zircon in his pocket  
shaking the mustard seed  
from the mockingbird,  
gospel from the air,  
the peavine of melody curling  
on his tongue in air  
the wanderers know,  
having passed mouth  
to mouth, over the sea,  
guitar to glossolalia  
in tangled lines.  
As from the stalk  
the pone and the potable,  
from the blue hole  
the bluegrass and the blues,  
you keep pouring,  
so conversations are naturalists  
and rivers, each step,  
each stumble and address

to the ground or the stars,  
until we are chests,  
until we are rooms,  
until we are radios  
playing all stations,  
a ballad on every one. (207-209)

This rather cryptic poem seems to compare the activity of the distillation of corn liquor to the distillation of thought and culture, which are both shaped by the nature of the Appalachian region as well as by its inhabitants. As whiskey is distilled from corn, culture is distilled from the hollows (or hollers) and music is made through the memory and narration of family stories (“ballads”) and by playing rhythms with wooden sticks or bones (“cut cadence from a limb”). “The Maker of fire” can be interpreted as the distiller, where the fire symbolizes the liquor and the distiller, – a moonshiner that can be said to represent the stereotypical inhabitant of Appalachia – plays the guitar and an instrument made of turtle shell and lambskin, which can be read as a reference to the precursor of the banjo, a West African stringed instrument made with a turtle shell or a gourd. The line “As what begins anywhere/ started already somewhere else” is indicative of the problematic notion of origins, especially in discourses of authenticity. The poem seems to suggest that, although country music seems to be an essentially Southern blend of music, the various components that resulted in the genre were already present somewhere else before, namely in Africa and in Europe. The poem ends with a comparison between the corn stalk, from which corn pone and whisky (“potable”) derive, and the “blue-hole”, which could simultaneously symbolize the sea and the bottle. As food and drink come from nature, from across the sea, from Africa and Europe, come bluegrass and the blues. The music, however, also comes from the bottle of liquor that is being poured generously, until all people that are drinking from it become receivers and transmitters of all kinds of influences (“all stations”) that converge in “a ballad on everyone”. The poem emphasizes a sense of peaceful and communal appreciation of the nature, the culture and the music of Appalachia, which includes an awareness of the history of music and migrations, and sees in music the potential to represent the stories of all the diverse people that have converged to the region and have created its culture.

The anthology also includes works by African American writers such as Makalani Bandele and Bianca Spriggs, who identify as Affrilachian poets. The term “Affrilachia” was

coined by Kentucky born poet Frank X Walker in 1991, as a result of what he felt was a lack of vocabulary to refer to African Americans living in Appalachia (Spriggs 22). As Bianca Spriggs writes in her short biography about Walker, the latter felt the need of finding a new term that would include African Americans, since “Appalachian” was used to refer to white inhabitants of the mountains, according to the Webster Dictionary (22). The new term was meant to signify diversity and to subvert the stereotype of an all-white geographical and cultural space (22.23), an effort that shines through Walker's poetry. The poem “Affrilachia”, written in 1992, deals with the difficulty of finding a voice as an African American poet and human being within a predominantly white culture, in spite of the shared culture and history.

thoroughbred racing  
and hee haw  
are burdensome images  
for Kentucky sons  
venturing beyond the mason-dixon

anywhere in Appalachia  
is about as far  
as you could get  
from our house  
in the projects  
yet  
a mutual appreciation  
for fresh greens  
and cornbread  
an almost heroic notion  
of family  
and porches  
makes us kinfolk  
somehow  
but having never ridden  
bareback  
or sidesaddle  
and being inexperienced  
at cutting  
hanging  
or chewing tobacco  
yet still feeling  
complete and proud to say  
that some of the bluegrass  
is black  
enough to know  
that being 'colored, and all  
is generally lost  
somewhere between  
the dukes of hazard  
and the beverly hillbillies

but  
if you think  
makin,'shine from corn  
is as hard as Kentucky coal  
imagine being  
an Affrilachian  
poet

The poem evokes a sense of alienation felt by the African American speaker, who is confronted with stereotypes about white Appalachia, and more specifically about Kentucky, such as horse races and hillbilly exclamations (“hee haw”) but does not feel represented by them. In the collective imagination Appalachia is indeed far away from the reality of subsidized buildings where people, most notably African Americans, live far removed from idyllic hills and hollers. However, the food people eat, the sense of community and the music are shared among the inhabitants of the region. The speaker makes a point that bluegrass music is also black music and that the commercialization of the music and the stereotypical image of the hillbilly, promoted by frivolous shows such as *The Dukes of Hazzard* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, helped erase the African American role in the making of the music and the culture of the area. The poem ends with the comparison between hard work in the coal mines and in the making of corn liquor and the hardship of being a black poet in white Appalachia. The hard manual work, often cherished and romanticized by both musicians and writers from the Southern states, is compared to the even harder endeavor of trying to write poetry about the heterogeneous heritage of Appalachia.

The same developments observed in music in the last decades, are also found in the literary current of Affrilachian poets, who are engaged in a crucial conversation to try to end purist, racist and stereotyped voices in cultural expressions from the American South. Frank X Walker, Jake Adam York, Bill Ferris, Dom Flemons and the Carolina Chocolate Drops, as well as Old Crow Medicine Show share a common agenda of spreading awareness about the richness of cultural cross-pollination and they do so by underlining historical facts, reviving lost musical traditions, exposing instances of exclusion and, most of all, by emphasizing how the appreciation of music can help creating community and erasing difference.

This chapter has shown how selected contemporary Southern artists situate themselves within traditional themes and aesthetics that can be considered idiosyncratic of the South. The motifs of nostalgia, reflected in old-fashioned aesthetics, anti-commercialism and the celebration of the past through the revival of forgotten traditions, as well as the valorization of hard work

and manual work were crucial for writers such as Donald Davidson and also for the marketing of early recordings and radio programs. The artists analyzed in this chapter embrace such motifs at the same time as they offer a more complex and empowering rendition of the traditional and problematic discourses that have permeated the history of roots music and the history of the South. While Dom Flemons dresses in an old-fashioned way and uses obscure instruments, he is not merely concerned about the originality or coolness of his persona, but he is trying to unveil the richness and cross-pollination of roots music by retelling history and by including the long overlooked African American perspective. The Carolina Chocolate Drops follow a similar agenda of rewriting a more comprehensive history of the genre by reviving the African American string band tradition and by challenging the notions authenticity and whiteness associated with the music. OCMS, while presenting nostalgic and anti-commercial sentiments typically associated with Southern white ideology, also celebrate the black elements that have been crucial for the development of roots music and show a great historical awareness and appreciation of musical cross-pollination as well as promoting art's social potential to respond to the challenges of the present. Appalachian contemporary writers are also tuned into the same tendencies and are writing about the region's racial cross-pollination and rewriting history in a way that allows everyone's voice to be heard and acknowledged as fundamental for the region's great cultural richness.



## 4 Conclusion

Through this thesis I have tried to expose some thematic and aesthetic common threads that run across the cultural fabric of the Nation and in particular of the American South. The process has been informed by the desire to illustrate the cultural richness of the South, which is reflected in the music, the literature and the history of the region. Southern literature has long been shaped by the rich musical tradition of the area, a fact that is apparent in Donald Davidson's *Big Ballad Jamboree* as well as in his theoretical writings found in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, and also in more contemporary poems such as those of Jake Adam York and Frank X Walker. Music plays a crucial role in the literary works analyzed for the scope of this thesis and by means of several roots music acts I have illustrated the cultural and ideological continuities reflected in both genres. The relevance of a discussion that takes into consideration the cultural patterns and ideologies shared by both music and literature is further emphasized by Bob Dylan's recent Nobel Prize award, which represents the ultimate recognition of the deep connections that exist between the American song and the literary world. The choice of Bob Dylan over a panoply of other legendary American singer-songwriters to represent the potential literariness of music connects to this thesis in that Dylan is known for his interest in and revival of Southern roots music. As a matter of fact, his earliest musical interests and inspirations were singer-songwriter of topical songs Woody Guthrie from Oklahoma, bluesman Robert Johnson from Mississippi and country music hero Hank Williams from Alabama. Dylan, however, throughout his career, has not limited himself to one specific genre and has, on the contrary, engaged in a celebratory journey through several of the most important genres within American music. From the performance of old songs, to the composition of topical songs, passing through country music, rock'n'roll, gospel and jazz Dylan has come to represent the great variety of American music and a Nobel to him indirectly acknowledges the cross-pollination of American music in general. Although Dylan is a white northerner, his musical path is inspired by genres deriving from the South and it stretches across racial boundaries. The great bond between music and literature that has been formally recognized by the last Nobel Prize for literature, reflects the reality of Southern culture and the choice of Dylan is symptomatic of an appreciation of artists who are aware of the richness of American culture and history with all its facets. Dylan, moreover, has been an inspiration for countless contemporary artists, among which Dom Flemons and Old Crow Medicine, who have just released a live album in honor of Dylan's 1966 album *Blonde on Blonde*.

Southern culture and especially the music most stereotypically associated with the region, is often misunderstood, underrated and seen as an expression of hillbilly and redneck ignorance and backwardness. By means of cultural artifacts from the fields of literature, music and film I have shown that Southern culture is much more complex and vibrant than it is generally believed, and it becomes apparent that artists are trying to create better everyday lives for themselves and their community through their work. This thesis has been an attempt to expose some thematic and ideological continuities that have survived over time, from the early days of the radio and phonograph recordings, until the present day. Looking at the Hogslop String Band's Facebook page, for instance, one could be tricked into thinking that the pictures they use as their profile were those of some musicians playing old-time music on their porch in 1920s Appalachia. What is actually happening with such roots music acts is an engagement with the past that aims at creating meaning and a sense of community through references to an idealized past identified as a more virtuous, meaningful and coherent space. As we have seen, such idealizations and nostalgic feelings can be both empowering, when they foster an inclusive view of community, and dangerous, when they bypass the problematic parts of history and romanticize the past without a critical eye.

Nostalgic, old-fashioned and rural aesthetics were in use already in the early days of the Opry, in order to give the performers a sense of authenticity and a wider popular appeal, a tendency that is still found in numerous contemporary roots music acts and in the cultural phenomenon of the hipster. As writer, civil activist and designer Lindsay Brown observes in her article "When Hipsters Dream of the 1890s: Heritage Aesthetics and Gentrification", there is, on the one hand, a trend of dressing as white male frontiersmen which is embraced without thinking about the symbolism and the ideology displayed through such an act (Brown "When Hipsters"). The adoption of heritage style clothing, she argues, is an uninformed aesthetic collage of styles that range from the 1850s to the 1950s and that indirectly revive and promote colonial ideologies that should be looked at with a critical eye rather than romanticized (Brown "When Hipsters"). There are, indeed, hipsters that adopt retro aesthetics without much thought or with a romantic and problematic idea that the past was somehow better, simpler, more satisfying and more authentic than the easily reproducible commodities of the present. On the other hand, however, there are people who adopt retro aesthetics with a deep understanding of history, a wish to use older cultural and artisanal practices in order to foster community. Thus, nostalgia, can be both empowering and destructive. By means of examples such as J.P. Harris, Matt Kinman, the Hogslop String Band and literary currents such as the Agrarians with Donald

Davidson as an example, who are engaged in romanticization of the past, I have tried to expose their ideologies. What emerged in chapter 1 is a strong emphasis on community and on the attempt to achieve a sustainable and satisfying lifestyle, which are empowering characteristics. Inspired by Herbert Marcuse and Angela Davis' theory of the aesthetic dimension, I have argued that even non-political and non-original music acts can make a statement about the state of the world and propose solutions and ways of living together in a meaningful way.

I have also pointed to the problems inherent in discourses of nostalgia and authenticity, in that they often go hand in hand with a lack of historical awareness of the referents to which such aesthetics point and can result in a problematic romanticization of exclusion and inequality. In chapter 2, I have shown how nostalgic aesthetics and discourses of authenticity are nothing new to the genre and to the American South in general, by means of the early commercial history of roots music and the desire to manipulate the perception of the genre in order to improve sales and popular interest. Moreover, every person that has played a crucial role as a curator and promoter of roots music and culture, has played a role in the wider perception of the genre, as for instance the onset of the widespread idea, caused by the recording companies' marketing strategies, that country & western is an exclusively white genre and rhythm and blues a black one. Chapter 2 has also explored the complex and ambivalent dialectic at play in discourses surrounding American roots music when it comes to commercial forces. Through the example of Donald Davidson's novel *The Big Ballad Jamboree*, it becomes clear that commercial forces have played and still play a crucial role for the survival of the music, even though they are often despised and rejected by artists, writers and audiences by means of discourses and aesthetics of nostalgia and authenticity. Contemporary producer T Bone Burnett is clearly aware of both the commercial potential and the nostalgic tendencies that have permeated the history of American roots music and he is adopting both ends of the paradigm successfully. On the one hand, in the movies he works on, he benefits from Hollywood's economic empire and extensive outreach and on the other, he promotes a sense of community among artists who share an interest for old musical traditions and he also fights for better conditions and protection for people trying to make a living with music.

In chapter 2 and 3, I have also proposed some solutions to the dangers of genre definitions and romanticizations. The movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*<sup>2</sup> as a matter of fact, while celebrating the past and its culture and musical traditions, also provides critical cues reflected in the ironic, theatrical and historically anachronistic elements that raise awareness of

the constructedness of an essentialist and romanticized vision of the South. Similar agendas are at play in contemporary roots music acts illustrated in chapter 3, where I present artists that provide a solution to the danger of being stuck in nostalgia, of idealizing the past and of dangerous discourses of authenticity. While having some nostalgic traits, Old Crow Medicine Show and Dom Flemons and the Chocolate drops use past traditions in order to shed light on forgotten, overlooked and stigmatized forms of cultural expression, especially when it comes to the presence of non-whites in the stereotypically white genre of roots music. The same tendency is reflected in contemporary Appalachian and Affrilachian poetry, where there is an awareness of history and the desire to write about the region's cultural and racial diversity both on the part of white and black writers, as can be seen in the writings of Jake Adam York and Frank X Walker. Donald Davidson's novel, although not concerned with racial diversity, proves more open-minded and less focused on cultural purity than his theoretical writings and speaks for art's potential to envision spaces in which contradictions come together and solutions are brought forth, be they the cultivation of community, the appreciation of manual work as an enriching *Erlebnis* or the balance between commercial and anti-commercial ideologies.

In the years to come it will be especially relevant and interesting to observe the development of discourses surrounding roots music and to look at the role musicians will take in a climate of stark divisions promoted by the newly elected President of the United States. Social action and community building is now more important than ever, and it remains to be seen whether the nostalgic aesthetics of the genre will stay or transform into something different, in times where references to an idealized past and the good ole days, that resonate in Trump's motto of "making America great again", do not sound very appealing to a large portion of the American people or to many artists. Resistance has already started and is reflected in the process of double-coding – introduced by Linda Hutcheon in the field of literature and cultural studies – used by artists such as Dom Flemons and the Carolina Chocolate Drops, Old Crow Medicine Show, and several Appalachian poets. The same strategy is adopted by T Bone Burnett and reflected in cultural artifacts like the movie *O Brother, Where Art thou?* These people and their artistic work are putting the past in a present contest to comment on both temporary dimensions and to bring positive change in order to prevent American roots music from falling into detrimental discourses of uninformed nostalgia and uncritical references to an imagined history.

# Works Cited

- Bischoff, Paul. "Inhaling the Blues: How Southern Black Musicians Transformed the Harmonica." *Smithsonian Magazine Online*. April 23, 2013. Web 5 May 2017.
- Brady, Erika. "Contested Origins: Arnold Shultz and the Music of Western Kentucky." In Diane Pecknold, Editor. *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013. 100-118.
- Branscum, John, and Wayne Thomas, editors. *Red Holler: Contemporary Appalachian Literature*. Louisville: Sarabande Books, 2013.
- Brown, Lindsay. "When Hipsters Dream of the 1890s: Heritage Aesthetics and Gentrification." *Briarpatch Magazine*. May 7, 2015. Web 3 March 2017.
- Broyard, Anatole. "A Portrait of the Hipster." *Partisan Review*. June 1948. 721-27.
- Chandler, Stacey. "Music Confounds the Machines." *No Depression*. 22 September 2016. 1-12. Web. 17 Dec. 2016
- Ching, Barbara. "Country Music". *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*. edited by Richard Gray and Owen Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 203-220.
- Cline, John. "American Myth Today: O Brother, Where Art Thou? and the Language of Mythic Space." University of Virginia Master's Program in American Studies. <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma05/cline/obrother/free6/obrother1.htm>. Web 5 May 2017.
- Cross, Rupert. "Old Crow Medicine Show." *Acoustic Magazine*. May 12, 2013. Web 17 Nov. 2017.
- Davidson, Donald. "A Mirror for Artists." *Ill Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. New York: Harper and Row, 1951.
- Davidson, Donald. *The Big Ballad Jamboree*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996.

- Davis, Angela Y. "Marcuse's Legacies." *Herbert Marcuse: A Critical Reader*, edited by John Abromeit and W. Mark Cobb, New York: Routledge, 2004. 43-50.
- Davis, Angela Y. "When a Woman Loves a Man: Social Implications of Billie Holiday's Love Songs" *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999. 161-180.
- Donohue, John. "Listening Booth: Ketch Secor's Americana." *The New Yorker*. July 31, 2014. Web. 23 Jan, 2017.
- Elie, Paul. "How T Bone Burnett Plays Hollywood." *The Atlantic*. November 2013. Web 5 May 2017.
- Fawcett, Kristin. "Before There Was the Blues Man, There Was the Songster." *Smithsonian Magazine*. July 1, 2014. Web 24 Jan. 2017.
- Ferris, William. "Southern Literature: A Blending of Oral, Visual & Musical Voices" *Dædalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. Winter 2012, 141:1. 139-153.
- Filene, Benjamin. *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
- Fisher Fishkin, Shelley. *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. 4-5.
- Fox, Pamela and Barbara Ching, editors. "Introduction: The Importance of Being Ironic - Toward a Theory and Critique of Alt.Country Music." *Old Roots and New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*. The University of Michigan Press, 2008. 1-27.
- Greif, Mark. "What Was the Hipster?" *New York Magazine*. 24 October, 2010. 1-9.
- Hook, Andrew. "Fugitives and Agrarians" *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*. Edited by Richard Gray and Owen Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 420-435.
- Huber, Patrick. "Black Hillbillies: African American Musicians on Old-Time Records, 1924-1932." In Diane Pecknold. Editor. *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Jencks, Charles. "Postmodern and Late Modern: The Essential Definitions." *Chicago Review* 35: 4, 1987. 31-58.
- Langford, Jon. *Nashville Radio: Art, Words, and Music*. Portland, OR: Verse Chorus Press, 2006.
- Léger, Devon. "Interview: Dom Flemons on Race and Roots Music in America." *Kithfolk*. June 2016. Web. 24 Jan. 2017.
- Lornell, Kip. "Old-Time Country Music in North Carolina and Virginia." In Diane Pecknold. Editor. *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013. 171-190.
- Malone, Bill. *Country Music U.S.A.: A Fifty-year History*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968. Marcuse, Herbert. *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.
- Miller, Randall M. and John David Smith. *Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1997.
- Milner, Dixon. "Old Crow Medicine Show on the New Tour, Return to Roots and the Greatness of Guns N'Roses." *Culturemap Dallas*. November 28, 2012. Web. 16 Jan. 2017.
- Nathan, Hans. "The Song "Dixie"". *Bulletin of the American Musicological Society*. No. 11/12/13 Sep., 1948. University of California Press. 42-43.
- Parrett, Aaron. *Montana Americana Music: Boot Stomping in Big Sky Country*. Charleston: The History Press, 2016.
- Pastras, Phil. *Dead Man Blues: Jelly Roll Morton Way Out West*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Peterson, Richard A. *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

- Roy, William G. "Aesthetic Identity, Race, and American Folk Music." *Qualitative Sociology*. 25:3, Fall 2002. 459 - 469.
- Roy, William, G. "Race records" and "hillbilly music": Institutional Origins of Racial Categories in the American Commercial Recording Industry." *Poetics: Journal of Empirical Research on Culture, the Media and the Arts*. 32.3-4, 2004. 265-79. Web.
- Rudgley, Richard. *Wildest Dreams: An Anthology of Drug-Related Literature*. London: Arktos Media Ltd. 2014.
- Sacks, Howard L., and Judith Sacks. *Way up North in Dixie: A Black Family's Claim to the Confederate Anthem*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.
- Seeley, Tracy. "O Brother, What Art Thou?: Postmodern Pranksterism, or Parody with a Purpose?" *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 27.2, 2008. 97-106.
- Sennett, Richard. *The Craftsman*. London: Yale University Press, 2008.
- Smith, Jeff. "O Brother Where Chart Thou: Popular Music and the Coen Brothers." *Popular Music and the New Auteur*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Spriggs, Bianca. "Frank X Walker: Exemplar of Affrilachia." *Appalachian Heritage*. Volume 39:4, Fall 2011. 21-25.
- Stott, William. *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Strand, Michael. "Authenticity as a Form of Worth." *Journal for Cultural Research*, 18:1, 2014. 60-77.
- Thomas, Tony. "Why African Americans Put the Banjo Down." In Diane Pecknold. Editor. *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013. 143-170.
- Twelve Southerners. *Ill Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. New York: Harper and Row, 1951.
- Walker, Frank X. "Affrilachia." *Coal Black Voices*. Web. 28 Jan. 2017.



Wells, Paul F. "Fiddling as an Avenue of Black-White Musical Interchange." *Black Music Research Journal*, 23:1/2. Spring - Autumn, 2003. 135-147.

Willman, Chris. *Rednecks&Bluenecks*. New York: The New Press, 2005.

Wittkower, Margot and Rudolf. *Born under Saturn; The Character and Conduct of Artists: A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963.

York, Jake Adam. "Letter to Be Wrapped Around a Bottle of Whiskey." *Red Holler: Contemporary Appalachian Literature*, edited by John Branscum and Wayne Thomas. Louisville: Sarabande Books, 2013.

## Websites

Linnios, Michalis. "Interview with Roots Musician Matt Kinman: Deeply Rooted in Traditional Music at the Back Porch of America" *Blues.gr*. September 12, 2015. Web 8 Sept. 2016.

Dargan, Amanda. "Art Of the Medicine Show Pitch" *Folkstreams.net*. Web 2 May 2017.

Hinson, Glenn. "Black Entertainers and the Medicine Show" *Folkstreams.net*. Web 2 May 2017.

J.P. Harris and Chance McCoy. *Jpandchance.weebly.com*. Web 8 Sept 2016.

Matt Kinman. *Mattkinman.com*. Web 8 Sept. 2016.

McNamara, Brooks. "About Medicine Shows" *Folkstreams.net*. Web 2 May 2017.

Scorzari, Bill. "Interview: Jp Harris At Newport Folk Festival 2016." *Billscorzari.com*. Web 8 Sept. 2016.

The Back Porch of America. *Thebackporchofamerica.com*. Web 8 Sept. 2016.

"authentic, adj. and n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2016. Web 23 June 2016.

"Bio." *Crowmedicine.com*. n.d. Web 26 Jan. 2017.

- “Census of Population: 1950.” *United States Census Bureau*.  
<http://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>. Web 30 Jan, 2017.
- “Daniel Decatur Emmett”. *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica Online.  
 Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2016. Web. 29 Aug. 2016
- “genuine, adj.1.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web 26 Jan. 2017.
- “Press Release: Hank Williams The Garden Spot Programs, 1950.” *Omnivore Recordings*.  
 Web 17 Dec. 2016.
- “Results from the 1860 Census.” *The Civil War Home Page*. [http://www.civil-war.net/pages/1860\\_census.html](http://www.civil-war.net/pages/1860_census.html). Web 5 May, 2017.
- “Slavery and the African American Experience.” *North Carolina Civil War Sesquicentennial*.  
<http://www.nccivilwar150.com/history/african-american.htm>. Web 5 May, 2017.
- “Statistical Abstract of the United States,1951.” *Unites States census Bureau*.  
<http://www2.census.gov/prod2/statcomp/documents/1951-02.pdf>. Web 5 May, 2017.
- “The growth of Slavery in North Carolina.” *Learn NC*.  
<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-newnation/5252>. Web 5 May, 2017.
- “Tintype.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Enciclopædia Britannica Online.  
<https://global.britannica.com/technology/tintype>. Web 17 Aug. 2016.
- “Walker Evans” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica Online.  
<https://global.britannica.com/biography/Walker-Evans> Web. 17 Dec. 2016.
- “44th Annual Grammy Awards.” *Grammy.org*.  
<http://www.grammy.com/nominees/search?year=2001> Web 17 Dec. 2016.

## Podcasts

- Dawson, Steve. “Episode 23: Dom Flemons.” *Audio Blog Post. Music Makers and Soul Shakers*. August 17, 2016. Web. 24 Jan, 2017.

Flemons, Dom. "Cylinder Sessions: American Songster Radio Podcast Episode 5." Audio Blog Post. *American Songster Radio*. WUNC, 4 July 2016. Web 23 Jan. 2017.

Flemons, Dom. "Ketch Secor: American Songster Radio Podcast Episode 1." Audio Blog Post. *American Songster Radio*. WUNC, 4 July 2016. Web 23 Jan. 2017.

Flemons, Dom. "Meet Dom Flemons: American Songster Radio Podcast Episode 0." Audio Blog Post. *American Songster Radio*. WUNC, 4 July 2016. Web 23 Jan. 2017.

Flemons, Dom. "3 Songs With Bill Ferris: American Songster Radio Podcast Episode 2." Audio Blog Post. *American Songster Radio*. WUNC, 4 July 2016. Web 23 Jan. 2017.

## Songs & Movies

Gus Cannon. "Raise a Ruckus Tonight." *Walk Right In*, Stax, 1962.

Jennings Waylon and Willie Nelson. "Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys." *Waylon and Willie*, RCA Victor, 1978.

Memphis Jug Band. "Cocaine Habit Blues." *Great American Skiffle Bands*, Mach60 Music, 2013, Spotify.

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. Directed by Joen and Ethan Coen. Buena Vista Pictures, 2000.

Old Crow Medicine Show. "Cocaine Habit." *Big Iron World*, Nettwerk, 2006.

Old Crow Medicine Show. "Doc's Day." *Remedy*, ATO, 2014.

Old Crow Medicine Show. "Humdinger." *Tennessee Pusher*. Nettwerk, 2008.

Old Crow Medicine Show. "Half Mile Down." *Carry Me Back*, Nettwerk, 2012.

Old Crow Medicine Show. "I Hear Them All." *Big Iron World*, Nettwerk, 2006

Old Crow Medicine Show. "James River Blues." *Big Iron World*, Nettwerk, 2006

Old Crow Medicine Show. "Motel in Memphis." *Tennessee Pusher*, Nettwerk, 2008.

Old Crow Medicine Show. "Minglewood Blues." *Big Iron World*, Nettwerk, 2006.

Old Crow Medicine Show. "New Virginia Creeper." *Big Iron World*, Nettwerk, 2006.

Old Crow Medicine Show. "Raise a Ruckus." *Eutaw*, Blood Donor, 2001.

Old Crow Medicine Show. "Take 'Em Away." O.C.M.S, *Nettwerk*, 2014.

Old Crow Medicine Show. "That'll Be a Better Day." *Eutaw*, Blood Donor, 2001.

Old Crow Medicine Show. "We Don't Grow Tobacco." *Carry Me Back*, Nettwerk, 2012.

Old Crow Medicine Show. "When Dey Wud No Crawfish." *Greetings from Wawa*, Blood Donor, 2001.

Oldcrowvideos. "I Hear Them All." Online Video Clip. *Youtube*. Youtube, 9 Jul 2009. Web. 17 Nov. 2017.

The Family Hammer. "Gran Torino 1963." *The Big Ol'Golden Moon*. 2012.

The Mobile Strugglers. "Raise a Ruckus Tonight." *American Skiffle Bands*. Smithsonian Folkways Records. 1957.

Tom T. Hall. "That's How I got to Memphis." *Ballad of Forty Dollars*, Mercury Records, 1969.

Unidentified Group of Negro Convicts. "Raise a Ruckus Tonight" recorded by John Avery Lomax. Atlanta, Georgia, 1934.

## Booklets

Pearson, Barry Lee and Jeff Place. "Classic Harmonica Blues from Smithsonian Folkways." *Smithsonian Folkways Recordings*. 2012. Web 5 may 2017.

Samuel Barclay Charters. "American Skiffle Bands." *Smithsonian Folkways Recordings*. 1957. Web 5 May 2017.

## Pictures

Duffy, Tim. Dom Flemons Tintype. *Theamericansongster.com*. Web 2 May 2017.

Elmaleh, Lisa. "Matt Kinman and Moses Melligan". *Mattkinman.com*. 2015. Web 2 May 2017.

Elmaleh, Lisa. "The Hogslop String Band from Nashville, TN. *Oldpapersheets.blogspot.no*. 2010. Web 2 May 2017.

Evans, Walker. Floyd and Lucille Burroughs on Porch, Hale County, Alabama. 1936. *Walker Evans Archive*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.  
<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/282778> Web 17 Dec. 2016.

Garth Brooks. Sevens Cover Art. *Wikipedia*.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sevens.jpg> Web. 17 Dec. 2016.

Paré, Emilia. "Jp Harris & Chance McCoy: Reservoir Dogs of Old Time Pickin'" *Emiliapare.com*. 2016. Web 2 May 2017.