



# Musical Racism and Racial Nationalism in Commercial Country Music, 1915-1953

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**Musical Racialism and Racial Nationalism in Commercial Country Music, 1915-1953**

A dissertation presented  
by  
Samuel Jennings Parler  
to  
The Department of Music

in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in the subject of  
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Musical Racialism and Racial Nationalism in Commercial Country Music, 1915-1953

Abstract

This dissertation probes the tension between multiracial performance history and discourses of whiteness in commercial country music during its formative decades, the 1920s through the early 1950s. I argue that nonwhites were pivotal in shaping the sounds and institutions of early country music. However, new commercial technologies like radio and audio recording enabled alternative racial meanings by removing the physical presence of the performer. Industry entrepreneurs exploited this fact to profess the music's whiteness for commercial gain. Country's racialization as white was further consolidated through a white-coded nationalist rhetoric emerging in the 1940s, motivated by white, working-class anxieties over the genre's cultural prestige as it aspired to mainstream acceptance. Combining multisite archival research, musical analysis, and theoretical perspectives on class, race, and nation, this dissertation overturns popular narratives which view country music's whiteness as inherent, static, and univocal.

I approach these issues of racialization by contextualizing the careers of four early performers within broader social and commercial currents. Native Hawaiian steel guitarist Sol Ho'opi'i (chapter 1) inspired generations of white country musicians with his virtuosic style and eclectic repertory. However, his own recordings were consistently marketed as exotic, and he remains marginalized within country music historiography. By comparison, African American harmonicist DeFord Bailey (chapter 2) is today often cited as evidence of country music's

biracial history, yet early radio audiences tended to hear his music as white or un-raced. These performers expose the ironies of country music's putative white identity and the ways in which new media could amplify or mask racial difference. White performers Carson Robison and Gene Autry (chapters 3 and 4) achieved commercial success in part by deflecting country's working-class associations and reframing the genre as white and American. Robison's anti-Japanese songs during World War II promoted racially-exclusionary politics while Autry's postwar "pro-Indian" films advocated assimilation of American Indians. Nevertheless, both performers located country music audiences at the center of American cultural life.

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## **Abbreviations**

- CPM: Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University
- CRC: Carson J. Robison Collection, 1903-1988, Special Collections and University Archives, Leonard H. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University
- DBC: David C. Morton DeFord Bailey Collection, Special Collections Division, Nashville Public Library
- FLACMHOF: The Frist Library and Archive of the Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum
- GAPPBA: Gene Autry Personal Papers and Business Archives, 1900-2002, on loan from Mr. and Mrs. Gene Autry, Autry National Center, Los Angeles; MSA.28
- GOOC: Grand Ole Opry Collection, 1930s-1960s (Collection Number: MSS 178), Special Collections and University Archives, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee
- PCAR: Motion Picture Association of America: Production Code Administration Records, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library
- WSMRTC: WSM Radio and Television Collection, 1928-1966 (Collection Number: MSS 535), Special Collections and University Archives, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee



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## Introduction

*They came to town from them thar hills  
But now they're flashin' dollar bills.  
Them Hill-Billies Are Mountain Williams Now.*

-- The Hoosier Hot Shots, "Them Hill-Billies Are Mountain Williams Now" (1935)<sup>1</sup>

*In view of the nationwide vogue of revamped mountain music, looks as if the Hoosier Hot Shots had the gift of prophecy some 15 years ago when they made [a] record called "Them Hill-Billies Are Mountain Williams Now."*

-- Jim Walsh, "Everyone's Writing P.D. [public domain] Melodies as Tin Pan Alley Digs Hills for Hits," *Variety* (May 16, 1951).

Some are blessed with the gift of prophecy. With their 1935 recording of "Them Hill-Billies Are Mountain Williams Now," the Hoosier Hot Shots gazed into the future, foretelling the rise of commercial country music just as it was coming to national attention. The song offers a compelling origin story, as Appalachian musicians bring their old-time repertory to the cities and harness the power of radio and recording to achieve wealth and fame. More than anything else, the song is a story of upward social mobility, rendered as ambivalent satire. It congratulates hillbillies on their success but also pokes gentle fun at their fish-out-of-water foibles. The hillbillies of the song grasp for middle-class respectability, trading in their boots, overalls, and "hi, y'all's" for the chance to "play guitars at cocktail bars and ride around in motorcars." This social climbing is right there in the song title: hills become mountains, Billy becomes William.

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<sup>1</sup> I transcribed the lyrics. The song was written by James Cavanaugh, Dick Sanford, and Sammy Mysels. Personnel on the 1935 recording were Gabe Ward (clarinet and vocal), Ken Trietsch (guitar and vocal), Frank Kettering (string bass and vocal), Paul "Hezzie" Trietsch (washboard, percussion, slide whistle, motor horn, vocal). America's Hill-Billy Aces, The Original Hoosier Hot Shots, "Them Hill-Billies Are Mountain-Williams Now," ARC 6-06-62, Vocalion/OKeh 03731, Conqueror 8635, 78, 1935. See Tony Russell, *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 436.

Although never explicitly mentioned in the lyrics, the issue of race is crucial to this story of upward mobility. Listening in 1935, most audiences probably would have recognized the title's punning allusion to another song from a decade earlier. "Big Bad Bill (Is Sweet William Now)" was written in 1924 by Milton Ager and Jack Yellen and recorded by pop vocalist Margaret Young.<sup>2</sup> In this song, a similarly ambivalent transformation takes place, as the formerly fearsome "Big Bad Bill" is reformed and arguably emasculated by his recent marriage. The song's narrator rejoices and mocks simultaneously, explaining, "Big Bad Bill don't fight anymore. He washes dishes and he mops the floor." "Big Bad Bill" is explicit in its racial dimensions. Margaret Young's recording describes Bill as "a darkey," and most recordings refer to his wife as "brown-skinned." Comparing these two songs thus renders visible the hillbilly's whiteness, reminding us that "hillbilly" is a racialized epithet as well as a classed one, a fact which we are apt to take for granted. As told by "Them Hill-Billies Are Mountain Williams Now," country music history thus becomes a story of *white* upward mobility, as well as a confluence of technology and tradition, of rural pride and class shame.

This dissertation places race, especially white identity, at the center of country music's messy history. To be sure, few listeners today would challenge the idea that country music is white music. In the public imagination, country music remains the defining sound of white working-class America. Popular histories routinely characterize country music as the "white man's blues," locating its origins in an "authentic" white Anglo-Saxon and Appalachian folk

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<sup>2</sup> Milton Ager and Jack Yellen, "Big Bad Bill (Is Sweet William Now)" (New York: Ager, Yellen and Borstein, 1924). The recording by Margaret Young, accompanied by pianist Rube Blume, was released as Brunswick 2736. The Don Clark Orchestra also recorded a popular instrumental version (Victor 19622). See David Jasen, *A Century of American Popular Music: 2000 Best-Loved and Remembered Songs (1899-1999)* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 21.

culture.<sup>3</sup> Popular music historiography mostly upholds racially segregated genres of blues and country music, predicated on a belief in fundamental cultural differences between black musicians and white musicians. This mythology has contributed to a “musical color line” that has helped to perpetuate notions of racial difference and reinforced a segregated American cultural life.<sup>4</sup> Country’s whiteness is so ingrained that it seldom merits mention, let alone explanation.

But it was not inevitable that country music should become white. Recent scholarship has begun to recognize the substantial contributions of African American performers to country music, upending ideas of whites-only racial origins and cultural ownership.<sup>5</sup> Given this multiracial history, I am after an explanation of country music’s persistent racialization as white. This dissertation probes the tension between multiracial performance history and discourses of whiteness in commercial country music during its formative decades, the 1920s through the early 1950s. I argue that racial minorities played a pivotal role in shaping the sounds and institutions of early country music. However, emergent commercial technologies like radio and audio recording enabled a range of alternative racial meanings by removing the physical presence of the performer. Industry entrepreneurs often exploited this fact to profess music’s whiteness (or non-whiteness) for commercial gain. Country’s racialization as white was further consolidated

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<sup>3</sup> See Bill C. Malone, *Don’t Get above Your Raisin’: Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Paul Hemphill’s discussion of “white soul” in *The Nashville Sound: Bright Lights and Country Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970); Nick Tosches, *Country: The Twisted Roots of Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> My notion of a “musical color line” comes from Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 5, and throughout.

<sup>5</sup> Some examples include Pamela Foster, *My Country: The African Diaspora’s Country Music Heritage* (Nashville, TN: My Country, 1998); Pamela Foster, *My Country, Too: The Other Black Music* (Nashville, TN: My Country, 2000); David Morton and Charles K. Wolfe, *DeFord Bailey: A Black Star in Early Country Music* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991); Diane Pecknold, ed., *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); and the CD box set compilation *From Where I Stand: The Black Experience in Country Music*, Warner Bros. 46428, 3 CDs, 1998.

through a rhetoric of white nationalism emerging in the 1940s, motivated by the social upheavals of World War II and by white, working-class anxieties over the genre's cultural prestige. All this took place in a decade when country music courted mainstream popularity at the national level. Claims to whiteness and American identity were a conscientious rhetorical strategy designed to deflect country's undesirable class associations as the genre aspired to middle-class respectability. This racialized patriotic posture has ebbed and flowed in the intervening years, usually surfacing when the status quo seems jeopardized by an easily-racialized threat. By engaging with whiteness as a social and musical construct, this dissertation overturns popular narratives which view country's whiteness as inherent, static, and univocal. In so doing, it aims for a more desegregated history of American popular music.

I approach these issues of racialization by examining key moments in the careers of four early performers—some well-known, others largely forgotten—and placing them within a broader network of musical entrepreneurs, social conventions, and technological possibilities.<sup>6</sup> Native Hawaiian steel guitarist Sol Ho'opi'i (chapter 1) and African American harmonica virtuoso DeFord Bailey (chapter 2) are among the many nonwhite performers who helped to shape country music as a commercial genre. Commercial forces worked mightily to absorb nonwhite influences and recast them as white music while marginalizing the nonwhite performers themselves. Bailey has only recently begun to achieve posthumous recognition for his work, and Ho'opi'i remains obscure outside of steel guitar circles. Both performers expose

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<sup>6</sup> As explained by sociologist Richard Peterson, the agents involved in constructing country music's meaning include not only performers, but also songwriters, recording engineers, various industry entrepreneurs, and audiences. Over time, certain stylistic markers and ideologies become conventionalized, although not impervious to change, and country music's accumulated history (or collective memory) begins to exert an influence on what music gets produced. The musicians studied in this dissertation worked within a commercial frame, such that their musical choices and messages shaped and were shaped by the expectations of producers and audiences. Peterson calls this process "institutionalization." Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 8-10. For more on the tension between individual agents and industry conventions, see also Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).



the ironies of country music's putative white identity and the ways in which new media could amplify or mask racial difference. White performers Carson Robison and Gene Autry (chapters 3 and 4), on the other hand, realized considerable commercial success in their own time in part by framing country music as a white and American—and therefore respectable—genre. In so doing, Robison and Autry also located country music audiences at the center of American cultural life.

Throughout these chapters, I embrace an interdisciplinary methodology that combines popular music analysis with multisite archival research and theoretical perspectives on identity formation, particularly in regards to race, class, and nationalism. My primary sources comprise a diverse array of country music media, from commercial and archival audio recordings, sheet music, and films, to print advertising, business correspondence, interviews, and musical manuscripts. In their diversity, these sources also demonstrate the geographic push and pull of early country music. While today we are apt to locate country music's origins in the U.S. South, with Nashville as the commercial epicenter, the sources in this dissertation attest to the considerable influence of New York and Los Angeles entertainment industries in country music's early decades.<sup>7</sup> Most of these primary sources are receiving scholarly attention for the first time in this dissertation.

This research joins the small but growing body of scholarship addressing issues of race in country music, offering new insights to historians of the genre as well as scholars working in the areas of media studies and identity formation. At the most basic level, this is the first scholarly work to include extended biographical and stylistic discussion of influential performers Sol Ho'opi'i and Carson Robison, based on original archival research. By foregrounding musical analysis in each of the chapters, I challenge musicologists to rethink the racial assumptions that

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<sup>7</sup> To be sure, musicians from the U.S. South have enjoyed an outside influence upon various strains of U.S. vernacular and popular music. See Bill C. Malone and David Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music*, rev. ed. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2003).

often undergird analysis of popular music, highlighting the ironies and contradictions between what we hear today and what audiences would have heard in the early 1900s. In so doing, I argue for a more historicist hermeneutics that takes into account such factors as media, law, geography, and audience demography. Another important contribution is the explosion of the black/white racial binary that guides so much popular music historiography. Chapters here consider the complex racial politics among African Americans, American Indians, Asians, Latinx, Native Hawaiians, and whites, overturning any notions that country music is *a priori* white music and exposing the limitations of merely biracial thinking. As with the blues, jazz, and other genres, country music is on one hand a fundamentally multiracial music, and at the same time irredeemably raced. Country music's white identity was not inherent in the music itself but actively constructed by its practitioners, entrepreneurs, and audiences, underwritten in large part by the unspoken exigencies of class.

### **The Early Era**

The 1920s through the early 1950s were defining years for country music as a commercial and cultural institution, including its attendant racial ideologies. These thirty years were a period of bold diversity and experimentation in style and marketing, and the instability of the "country music" label during this period makes for fascinating study.<sup>8</sup> The claims to whiteness that emerged during this early period were shaped by three fundamental factors specific to the era. The first was the reality of racial segregation in most public spaces, particularly in the American South where country music achieved initial popularity. A patchwork of state and municipal laws, legal segregation encouraged the application of racial labels in the

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the industry only settled on the label "country music" in the 1950s with the formation of a centralized trade organization, the Country Music Association; prior to this, the music had gone by myriad names including "country," "hillbilly," and "old-time. See Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 194-201; and the chapter "Masses to Classes: The Country Music Association and the Development of Country Format Radio" in Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*.

cultural sphere. Furthermore, it isolated mass musical audiences from one another according to race (although there is evidence suggesting that white and black musicians often interacted).<sup>9</sup> Another defining factor for country music's white identity was the rise in the 1920s of the commercial film, radio, and recording industries, each of which operated within this cultural framework of legal and de facto segregation. Finally, these thirty years saw substantial internal migrations in the United States by both white and black working-class populations. The Depression led millions of rural Southerners to urban centers in the Midwest and North in search of work, a trend that accelerated with the surge in demand for industrial labor precipitated by World War II.<sup>10</sup> This diaspora of the country music audience effectively led to the nationalization of country music as well as the elevation of millions of country music listeners into the middle class. I address each these phenomena—racial segregation, technology, and nationalization—in the ensuing sections of this introduction, highlighting how they contributed to country music's racial meaning during this pivotal early period.

Circumstances changed considerably after 1950. The U.S. Supreme Court struck down segregation with the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, bolstered by civil rights legislation in the early 1960s. With the end of legalized segregation came greater scrutiny of the musical color line; no longer did segregated musical genres seem so natural or inevitable, particularly given the rise of rock 'n' roll, which invited narratives of both racial integration and

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<sup>9</sup> For examples of black/white musical interactions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Tony Russell, *Blacks, Whites, and Blues* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), which begins its story with minstrelsy.

<sup>10</sup> This story and its cultural implications are recounted in James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

white appropriation.<sup>11</sup> Television eclipsed radio and film as the dominant medium, although in many ways country-related programming like *Hee Haw* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* merely transplanted the comic stereotypes of radio to the small screen.<sup>12</sup> And in terms of migrations, the 1950s and 1960s were dominated by white flight into suburbia, with newly middle-class country audiences among those relocating in response to racial anxieties and consumerist desires.<sup>13</sup>

The country music that came after 1950—from the “Nashville Sound” onwards—is in many ways stylistically and ideological distinct from the music under consideration here. But while country music has weathered many social and technological changes, its white identity has remained largely intact. Yet this too is whiteness of a different kind, moving from aspiration to preservation as country music audiences sought to protect and expand economic and cultural gains.<sup>14</sup> I briefly explore some of these issues in the conclusion. But by focusing largely on the pre-1950 period, we gain insight into the ways that country music, in its earliest days as a commercial endeavor, actively constructed an image of whiteness and the reasons for doing so.

### **Musical Racialism**

By now it is a truism among academics that race is a social construct rather than a genetic or otherwise natural phenomenon, but race nevertheless has been and remains a powerful force shaping our understanding of musical genres. In this dissertation, my phrase “musical racialism”

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, the view of rock as an integrated music combining country with rhythm and blues further solidified perceptions of country music as purely white. On racial integration in 1950s rock, see Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Anthony A. Harkins, “The Hillbilly in the Living Room: Television Representations of Southern Mountaineers in Situation Comedies, 1952-1971,” *Appalachian Journal* 29, no. 1/2 (Fall 2001-Winter 2002): 98-126.

<sup>13</sup> The process of white suburbanization is recounted in Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003). Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, deals specifically with country music audiences as consumers.

<sup>14</sup> The social and economic motivations of the 1950s and 1960s Nashville Sound era are explored in Joli Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), although Jensen does not explicitly consider race as a factor.

refers to the notion of an indelible, causal link between musical ability and the racialized body. Musical racialism persists in the idea that black voices are inherently more “soulful” than white voices or that African Americans are more adept at twelve-bar blues and rap, while whites with their “twang” are better suited to country music. My preference for the term “racialism”—as opposed to “racism”—draws from the work of cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah. The distinction is one of ethics. For Appiah, racialism is a theory or worldview positing the existence of different races “in such a way that all the members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race.” Thus defined, racialism may be regarded as neutral and non-hierarchical; as Appiah explains, “Provided positive moral qualities are distributed across the races, each can be respected.” However, racialism is a precondition for racism, an ideology in which perceived racial difference forms the basis for discriminatory treatment.<sup>15</sup> Racism is always already morally suspect in a way that racialism is not. In colloquial contexts today, the word “racism” is similarly pejorative, used as an epithet that can stifle more meaningful discussion on the complexities of racial identity. Writing about a historical period in which racial views and language were quite different from present, I wish to avoid the connotation of judgment that “racism” carries.

Musical racialism undergirded country music’s claims to whiteness from its earliest commercial stages. Sometimes overt and sometimes implied, this musical racialism was wrapped up within country music’s discourse of folkloric authenticity.<sup>16</sup> While the valorization of

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<sup>15</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13-4.

<sup>16</sup> This discourse of authenticity has met sustained scrutiny within country music scholarship, inspired most notably by the work of sociologist Richard Peterson. He argues that “authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially agreed-upon construct in which the past is to a degree misremembered.” Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 5. For other helpful analyses of authenticity as a social construct, see Barbara Ching, “Acting Naturally: Cultural Distinction and Critiques of Pure Country,” in *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, ed. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, 231-48 (New York: Routledge, 1997); Barbara Ching, *Wrong’s What*

authenticity signals primarily a critique or rejection of commercialism and modernity, the most “authentic” and therefore most successful performers have typically been those who also articulate a white, working-class identity. Accordingly, working-class whiteness (as well as Southern and socially conservative identities) has remained a preferred analytical perspective through much of country music historiography, although authors typically acknowledge that country’s working-class whiteness is complicated.<sup>17</sup> Only more recently has country music’s unitary identity received sustained critique along lines of class, race, gender, sexuality, geography, religion, and politics. But a monolithic view of country music’s white identity often abides in the popular imagination, running a double risk. On the one hand, it neglects and marginalizes the lives and contributions of racial minorities to country music past and present. At the same time, it perpetuates a notion of whiteness as fixed and ahistorical, rather than constructed and contingent. My dissertation joins a growing body of scholarship dedicated to correcting these silences in country music historiography.

My thinking on racial identity as a social construct is informed by three strains of scholarship: whiteness studies, blackface minstrelsy studies, and popular music historiography. Whiteness studies is a subfield of racial formation theory and critical race theory. Focusing on aspects of culture, economics, and law, these scholars argue that race is not a fixed, biological fact but is socially constructed and historically contingent; furthermore, racial categories are

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*I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Jensen.

<sup>17</sup> Country music’s relationship to white, working-class identity is explored in depth in Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Richard A. Peterson, “Class Unconsciousness in Country Music,” in *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music*, ed. Melton A. McLaurin and Richard A. Peterson, 35-62 (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992); Malone, *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’*; and Tex Sample, *White Soul: Country Music, the Church, and Working Americans* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

policed in order to maintain or challenge existing power structures.<sup>18</sup> Whiteness studies specifically seeks to decenter whiteness as a normative racial and cultural identity by revealing its own constructed history and fluid boundaries, defined by forces like Jim Crow and immigration law as well as racially-segregated popular cultures.<sup>19</sup> Many of these scholars have observed that, in the United States, race has long acted as a proxy for class politics. Upper and middle class elites have used the issue of race to drive a wedge between black and white working classes, granting token economic and symbolic concessions to working-class whites to forestall broad-based multiracial challenges to the economic order.<sup>20</sup> To do so, the upper classes also exploited fears over miscegenation and the presumed irrationality of blacks—fears rooted in scientific racism which largely transcended class boundaries. To be sure, the slavery, segregation, and racial violence that resulted from such fears were in excess of socioeconomic concerns. But economic considerations are necessary to any explanation of whiteness, which has acted as a smokescreen to obscure the machinations of class politics.

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<sup>18</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw et al., eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1995); Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon, 1998); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Peter Kolchin, “Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America,” *Journal of American History* 89, no. 1 (June 2002): 154-73; David R. Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> One example can be found in the social and economic programs of the New Deal, which disproportionately aided whites. Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005). See also David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 2007).

While history has made whiteness into a privileged position, its privileges are not bestowed equally upon all nominally “white” people, as the label “white trash” suggests.<sup>21</sup> Country music exists in this unusual, ambivalent space between white privilege and class prejudice. In this dissertation, I view early country music’s affirmations of its whiteness as largely aspirational, a means of deflecting a working-class identity in order to achieve greater social respectability and prestige. Country music’s status as a white music, rather than inherent or incidental, is deliberate on the part of its creators, performers, entrepreneurs, and audiences, who together found in whiteness a path toward upward mobility.

Scholarship on blackface minstrelsy has also deeply influenced my study of racial formation in country music. As a theatrical and musical phenomenon, nineteenth-century blackface performance helped to define racial identity as cultural practice, showing audiences what sights and sounds counted as “black” or not. Scholars have particularly emphasized minstrelsy’s notion of performative identity and the socially-liberating role of the blackface mask. The mask allowed white performers and audiences to simultaneously celebrate and disavow “black” culture while also reinforcing racial hierarchies.<sup>22</sup> The conventions of nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy—as well as its racial and class ambivalences—are echoed in early country music. The use of literal blackface on country stages and radio programs helped to delineate the musical color line, implying the whiteness of country music through

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<sup>21</sup> Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Kirby Moss, *The Color of Class: Poor Whites and the Paradox of Privilege* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> This argument is made most famously by Eric Lott in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrels and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), where he also argues that antebellum performers occasionally embraced working-class solidarity with blacks even as they plundered and traded upon black culture. Other influential works to consider the racial and class dimensions of blackface are Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).



juxtaposition with caricatures of black culture. And as some have argued, rube and hillbilly caricatures merely transformed the ideologies of blackface into a kind of rustic, class-based minstrelsy.<sup>23</sup> Country music's recasting of blackface from racial to class parody can be read as both a transgressive celebration of the lowbrow as well as a stern dismissal of the worst of working-class culture. But more significantly for this dissertation, blackface reveals the instability of racial identities in popular music.

Finally, this dissertation is inspired by recent musicological scholarship critiquing popular music's tendency towards racialized genres, a tendency echoed in most historiography. Calls to desegregate the canon argue that doing so will help to dismantle the persistent racial essentialism in popular culture and to undermine elitist and often racialized hierarchies and epistemologies of art, world, vernacular, and popular music.<sup>24</sup> Ronald Radano has provided one of the more forceful critiques of the current historiography, arguing that "black music" is less a set of musical practices intrinsic and exclusive to black musicians than it is a result of historiography which has fetishized racial difference; because of this, Radano suggests, scholars have difficulty addressing histories in which integrated musical exchange was the norm.<sup>25</sup> The political terrain here is potentially treacherous; imagining a biracial soundscape has allowed cultural space for black voices to be heard, and dissolving racialized boundaries might well silence those voices. But it is true that racialized musical genres can perpetuate essentialist listening habits and dominant epistemologies. For example, scholars are primed to highlight

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<sup>23</sup> See Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); and Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); and Charles K. Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville, TN: Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Leo Treitler, "Toward a Desegregated Music Historiography," *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 3-10.

<sup>25</sup> Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

rhythmic practices in black music, while the history of Western art music remains a teleological story about ever-increasing harmonic sophistication.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, musical cultures that don't fit into the current existing binaries of black/white music—such as black country musicians in the early twentieth century—are also obscured in the historical record.<sup>27</sup>

In recent years, several country music scholars have sought to address the shortcomings of a segregated popular music historiography through two basic approaches. The first is a reclamation project—scholarship that uncovers the contributions of racial minorities to country music history.<sup>28</sup> In celebrating and promoting artists of color that have traditionally been excluded from the country music canon, this scholarship ultimately suggests that, at least in practice, country music is a multiracial music. Although an important corrective, these studies tend to reinforce a black/white racial binary, often neglecting the contributions of other racial minorities and reifying rather than destabilizing whiteness as a racial and musical identity.

Other scholars have instead investigated constructions of whiteness in country music, seeking to understand how country music became white and how it has stood to benefit from that racial designation. This is a diverse body of scholarship in terms of methods and focus, but most scholars agree that by 1950 audiences had accepted country music as white, a situation brought about primarily by a recording industry that distinguished between the music of white and black

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<sup>26</sup> Tom Perchard, “New Riffs on the Old Mind-Body Blues: ‘Black Rhythm,’ ‘White Logic,’ and Music Theory in the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 9, no. 3 (August 2015): 321-48.

<sup>27</sup> Dale Cockrell, “William Johnson: Barber, Musician, Parable,” *American Music* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 1-23.

<sup>28</sup> Prominent examples include Foster, *My Country and My Country, Too; From Where I Stand*; Frye Gaillard, *Watermelon Wine: The Spirit of Country Music* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978); Morton with Wolfe; Pecknold, ed., *Hidden in the Mix*; Charley Pride with Jim Henderson, *Pride: The Charley Pride Story* (New York: William Morrow, 1994); Russell, *Blacks, Whites, and Blues*; Nick Tosches, *Country: The Biggest Music in America* (New York: Stein and Day, 1977).

performers, despite obvious overlaps in style and repertory.<sup>29</sup> This argument is most powerfully articulated in Karl Hagstrom Miller's *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*. Miller convincingly demonstrates that the "musical color line" segregating blues (black) and country (white) developed in the early 1900s through the combined efforts of academic folklorists and recording industry entrepreneurs; the folklorists sought and lauded the oldest, most ethnically "pure" versions of various vernacular styles, while the recording industry divided their product into "old-time" and "race" record catalogs in order to market them more efficiently to white and black audiences, respectively.

My scholarship builds upon previous examinations into country music's whiteness by moving beyond the documentation of racially-charged language, discrimination, and the conscious creation of racially segregated cultural spheres. I strive to highlight more forcefully its class-based motivations and dimensions, showing that claims to whiteness were brought on not just by racial fears and prejudices, but also because whiteness offered a chance for greater respectability than country music's working-class status alone could offer. Furthermore, I extend beyond Miller's analysis of the recording industry to consider different kinds of media, each with its own set of challenges in delineating race.

### **Technology and Media**

In addition to surveying a diverse range of country music performers and styles, this dissertation also engages with a broad matrix of different commercial media, focusing especially on the audio recording, radio, publishing, and film industries. All of the chapters here, but

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<sup>29</sup> J. Lester Feder, "'Song of the South': Country Music, Race, Region, and the Politics of Culture, 1920-1974" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2006); Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Angela Denise Hammond, "Color Me Country: Commercial Country Music and Whiteness" (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2011); Geoff Mann, "Why Does Country Music Sound White? Race and the Voice of Nostalgia," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 1 (2008): 73-100; Erich Nunn, *Sounding the Color Line: Music and Race in the Southern Imagination* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

especially those on Sol Ho‘opi‘i and DeFord Bailey, demonstrate the ways in which race and media have both shaped and been shaped by the other. Rather than ideologically-neutral means of transmission, sound technologies like audio recording and radio are intimately bound up with the creation and reproduction of racial ideologies.<sup>30</sup> The stark racial definitions applied to early country music and contemporaneous genres were shaped less by the sounds themselves than by media and marketing directed towards preserving a racially-segregated soundscape.

The commercial industries of radio, sound recording, and sound film all arose during the 1920s. And as commercial enterprises, they quickly organized themselves to maximize profits as efficiently as possible. To do this, entrepreneurs identified different target demographics and calibrated their products and advertising to the presumed tastes of each group, usually distinguished along the lines of class, race, gender, and geography. The musical cultures generated by these new media were mapped onto those target demographics. The invention of separate “race,” “old-time,” and “popular” categories in the 1920s and 1930s by recording companies like Brunswick, Columbia, and Victor was motivated by this capitalist logic; race records were by and for African Americans, old-time records for rural whites, and popular music for the urban middle class.<sup>31</sup> Things were messier in practice; performer repertoires and listener tastes proved more eclectic than these stark categories could accommodate. But with time and effort, the segregated categories came to seem more natural, marginalizing musicians who transgressed stylistic boundaries and segregating listeners in the process. Radio replicated these divisions and reinforced them with targeted advertising. Daytime urban broadcasters balanced romantic pop crooners with advertisements for household goods aimed towards middle-class

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<sup>30</sup> The inseparability of content and medium is one of the central insights of Marshall McLuhan, as articulated in his famous phrase “the medium is the message.” See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

<sup>31</sup> Miller.

women, while old-time and barn dance broadcasts in the South offered products like farm equipment and livestock feed.<sup>32</sup> Once a media outlet's image and market demographic became well-established, these associations could reflect back onto a performer. When Gene Autry left the low-budget Republic Studios for the more prestigious Columbia Pictures in the late 1940s, the move could be seen as an upwardly mobile vindication of country music.<sup>33</sup>

In almost all cases, media outlets during this period were white owned and operated. It is therefore unsurprising that media worked cooperatively via airwaves and movie screens to reinforce the system of racial segregation that obtained throughout the country—a system which sought to preserve the racial privileges of white entrepreneurs. Additionally, media also often served to create and reinforce cultural hierarchies of highbrow and lowbrow, which tended to mirror class identities.<sup>34</sup> Early radio programmers often spoke of the medium's capacity for cultural uplift, citing classical music as particularly edifying.<sup>35</sup> By comparison, the “Grand Ole Opry” name was a satirical take on the grand opera and classical music broadcasts of Walter Damrosch on the NBC radio network. When radio emcee George Hay ad-libbed the “Opry” name at the beginning of a 1927 broadcast, he was explicitly contrasting “earthy” country music

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<sup>32</sup> On middle-class female audiences, see Allison McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). On advertising to rural farmers and factory workers, see Pamela Grundy, “‘We Always Tried to Be Good People’: Respectability, Crazy Water Crystals, and Hillbilly Music on the Air, 1933-1935,” *Journal of American History* 81, no. 4 (March 1995): 1591-1620.

<sup>33</sup> See chapter 4 of this dissertation.

<sup>34</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1986); Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>35</sup> One particularly strong advocate of this view was the conductor Walter Damrosch, whose weekly radio program, the *NBC Music Appreciation Hour* (1928-42), taught schoolchildren about classical music. Brian Gregory, “Educational Radio, Listening Instruction, and the *NBC Music Appreciation Hour*,” *Journal of Radio and Audio Media* 23, no. 2 (2016): 288-305.

with the elitist pretensions of classical music, critiquing in the process radio's cultural condescension in its efforts to uplift working-class listeners.<sup>36</sup>

The highly stratified and tightly controlled system described here—one in which moneyed, usually white entrepreneurs were ultimately responsible for the final product—raises the question of performer agency. As will be seen, performers and media culture are mutually constitutive, but the most financially successful performers are typically those most savvy in manipulating the media elites to their advantage. DeFord Bailey's dismissal from the Grand Ole Opry in 1941 resulted in part from his failure to comply with the changing demands of the radio industry as it battled with publishers over performance rights. On the other hand, Carson Robison's conformity to Tin Pan Alley's hierarchical standards of respectability and musical literacy ultimately led to a lucrative publishing career as a member of ASCAP. Gene Autry, by far the richest and most famous performer under consideration here, amassed enough wealth and cultural capital through twenty years in the entertainment industry that by the late 1940s he had established his own film production company. This allowed him a degree of freedom in shaping the message of his films that few other performers enjoyed in any medium. A performer's understanding and ease within a media industry are thus essential for achieving power within it.

As sound-only media, radio and recordings had the effect of divorcing sound from the performing body. This multiplied the possibilities for music's racial meaning, leading to moments of confusion as listeners fell back on familiar racial tropes. At the time, there was almost no radio programming directed towards black audiences or which featured primarily black performers. Instead, the effort to codify and hear "blackness" in these disembodied new media relied largely upon the sounds and styles of blackface minstrelsy. For millions of radio

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<sup>36</sup> George D. Hay, *A Story of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville, TN[?]: self-published, 1945), 19, GOOC B4-F8. See also chapter 2 of this dissertation.

listeners in the 1930s, the minstrelsy-derived *Amos 'n' Andy* program set expectations for what constituted “black music” on the radio.<sup>37</sup> Blackface caricatures came to represent black music for radio audiences invested in the musical color line, yet radio minstrelsy also required a bit of racial doublethink: audiences heard the white blackface performers Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll as both black sound and as whites sounding black. Given this paradox, it is no surprise that listeners regularly misidentified the race of radio performers. To give just one example, DeFord Bailey, the African American harmonica virtuoso, was often mistaken for white by his listeners.<sup>38</sup> Anecdotes like this echo the racial confusions of minstrel show audiences in the 1840s, some of whom believed the performers were genuinely black.<sup>39</sup> But in obscuring the performing body, technology only multiplied the confusion. I explore the musicological implications of this confusion in chapter 2, arguing in favor of a racial hermeneutics more attuned to reception history.

The musical racialism reinforced by new media was especially powerful because of its national reach. As with novels, newspapers and other print media, electronic media invited audiences to imagine a national community, only now the flow of information was much faster, more accessible, and more widely dispersed.<sup>40</sup> Aimed at white, working-class consumers, country music media also contributed to a monolithic view of working-class whiteness in the United States in large part by obscuring demographic diversity. Radio and recordings especially

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<sup>37</sup> See chapter 3 of Hilmes, as well as Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

<sup>38</sup> See chapter 2 of this dissertation. This racial confusion flowed both ways. The black musician John Jackson, recalling the early days of the Grand Ole Opry, once claimed that he believed the white performer Uncle Dave Macon to be black on the basis of his radio performances. Russell, *Blacks, Whites, and Blues*, 55.

<sup>39</sup> Lott, 20.

<sup>40</sup> On the role of media in creating “imagined communities,” see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2006); and Hilmes.

helped to render invisible a mixed-race audience, allowing white listeners to think of themselves as belonging to a racially homogeneous but nationwide group.<sup>41</sup> Buying into this notion of country music as a thoroughly white and thoroughly American music, some country entrepreneurs sought to exploit narratives of racial nationalism for economic gain for themselves and their white, working-class audiences.

### **Racial Nationalism**

As new media enabled the nationalization of country music, its practitioners increasingly came to describe the genre as a quintessentially “American” music. This assertion signified not just country music’s geographic origins within the United States but also that country music articulated ostensibly and distinctly American social and cultural values—patriotism, self-determination, and religious devotion among them. The strategy of Americanization had the practical advantage of making country music seem accessible to a broader audience beyond its mostly rural, working-class, and arguably Southern origins. Especially during the Depression and World War II, the patriotic rhetoric pushed by country musicians and industry figures resonated widely, and many musicians were genuine in their belief that country music could contribute to national solidarity and boost morale during times of crisis. But to the extent that they proved profitable, claims to Americanness also had self-serving social and economic motivations, especially for the white working class.

Implicitly or explicitly, country entrepreneurs defined American identity in racial terms. Positioned as white, deep-rooted, and authentically American, country music was regularly contrasted with the ephemerality of modern, urban, and cosmopolitan genres like jazz, typically understood as black, as well as other music deemed foreign or racially different. Arguments like

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<sup>41</sup> As Pamela Foster and others have pointed out, the country music audience, like its performers, has been more racially heterogeneous than acknowledged in most official accounts. Foster, *My Country* and *My Country, Too*.



this articulated an acutely racialized vision of American culture that placed whiteness above class or other sociocultural considerations. Such a view would have been pervasive and uncontroversial given dominant discourses of white supremacy, bolstered by the daily reality of Jim Crow segregation. This aspirational whiteness sought to obscure country music's less desirable working-class identity, hoping to render the music safe for middle class consumption.

The conflation of whiteness and American identity in country music contributed to and participated in an ongoing discourse of racial nationalism in the twentieth-century United States. Historian Gary Gerstle has argued that much of twentieth-century U.S. social and political history was framed by competing discourses of racial nationalism and civic nationalism. Racial nationalism defines national identity and belonging in explicitly racial terms; in the twentieth century, racial quotas in U.S. immigration and naturalization law, for example, were inspired in large part by the notion that the United States is fundamentally a white nation and should remain so (although who or what constituted "white" was still contested). Civic nationalism, by comparison, views national identity in cultural terms, especially values of freedom, democracy, and equality shared among all citizens.<sup>42</sup> This is a stark polarity, and country music, like most popular culture, falls somewhere in the middle. But more so than laws or geography, popular culture is responsible for negotiating the ever-shifting boundaries of national identity.<sup>43</sup> And in the case of country music, whiteness is made central to those boundaries.

Explicit articulations of racial nationalism in country music have waxed and waned through the years, usually peaking during moments of national crisis. This is especially the case

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<sup>42</sup> Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>43</sup> That culture is primarily constitutive of the nation is a central insight in Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990). This work is in turn strongly influenced by Benedict Anderson's observation in *Imagined Communities* that national identity is articulated by and through a shared language, particularly once the language appears as print media.

when country music seeks to define the United States in contrast to a foreign racialized enemy, as during the Vietnam War or in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.<sup>44</sup> Even during relative peacetime, country music and its supposed folk antecedents have served nation-building projects in which whiteness is assumed but unremarked. This has included the work of early ballad hunters like Cecil Sharp and John Lomax, government programs like the New Deal's Federal Music Project and Smithsonian Folkways collections like the *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952), and even more recent historiography.<sup>45</sup> Several popular and scholarly titles explicitly link country music to American national identity, a trend captured most succinctly by Bill C. Malone's standard history of the genre, *Country Music, U.S.A.*<sup>46</sup> First appearing in 1968, Malone's account begins, "Country music is no longer simply an American cultural expression; it is now a phenomenon of worldwide appeal."<sup>47</sup> He goes on to admit that country music "defies precise definition," with regional connections to the U.S. South and, before that, the British Isles and Africa. But his history is essentially national in perspective. At the time of its publication, Americanist musicology was in its infancy. This discipline challenged

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<sup>44</sup> Aaron A. Fox, "'Alternative' to What?: *O Brother*, September 11, and the Politics of Country Music," in *Country Music Goes to War*, ed. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson, 165-91 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005). See also Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: New Press, 2005). The work of midcentury country acts like Col. Sharecropper, while far outside the mainstream, provides a radical example of white nationalism in response to the Civil Rights Movement. See Michael Wade, "Johnny Rebel and the Cajun Roots of Right-Wing Rock," *Popular Music and Society* 30, no. 4 (October 2004): 493-512.

<sup>45</sup> Regarding Sharp and Lomax, see Kenneth J. Bindas, *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA's Federal Music Project and American Society* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995); Richard Carlin, *Worlds of Sound: The Story of Smithsonian Folkways* (New York: Smithsonian Books, 2008); Filene; and Peter Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal: The Federal Music Project in the West* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

<sup>46</sup> Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 3rd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010). Some additional examples include: Charles T. Brown, *Music U.S.A.: America's Country and Western Tradition* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986); Paul Kingsbury and Alanna Nash, eds., *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music in America* (New York: DK, 2006); George H. Lewis, ed., *All That Glitters: Country Music in America* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993); Bob Millard, *Country Music: 70 Years of America's Favorite Music* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993); Robert K. Oermann, *America's Music: The Roots of Country* (Atlanta: Turner, 1996); and Tosches, *Country: The Biggest Music in America*.

<sup>47</sup> Malone and Neal, 1.

the hegemony of elite European cultures in the academy and asserted American popular culture as a legitimate field of study. Embracing this historiographical enterprise, Malone's work and other early country music scholarship self-consciously promoted a nationalist agenda based on intellectually progressive impulses. One consequence of this influential early scholarship today is that country music's embrace of American identity appears to have been given an intellectual imprimatur.

In this dissertation, I am after both the ways in which musicians and entrepreneurs promoted racial nationalism in early country music as well as the ways in which historiography has sustained these narratives. In chapters 3 and 4, I focus specifically on country music during World War II and its immediate aftermath. This was a pivotal historical period in which the nationalization of country music coincided with the ascendance of the United States on the geopolitical stage. Country musicians supporting the war effort positioned their music as fundamentally and thoroughly American in its origin and values and promoted a staunchly pro-American and anti-Axis (especially anti-Japanese) message in song lyrics. This was no doubt partly a sincere expression of patriotism and hope for Allied victory. But the pro-American posturing also provided a means of cultural uplift for country music, sweeping up the music and its audience along with whatever economic and social gains accrued to the United States, which proved to be considerable. Even after the war, newly middle-class country musicians and audiences continued to promote the genre's whiteness and American heritage, embracing a racially-charged politics of respectability intended to guard against social backsliding.

My historiographic interventions in this dissertation are particularly inspired by the work of black nationalist intellectuals and the field of postcolonial studies. Together, these scholars have staged a powerful critique of the European-derived concept of the nation-state and the white

supremacy inherent in its intellectual, political, and social institutions.<sup>48</sup> As scholars from Edward W. Said onward have observed, Western culture is defined and maintained through contrast with external Others, perceived as racially and culturally inferior.<sup>49</sup> Music and its history have long been a part of this nation-building enterprise, with a nation's "folk" musics serving as a particularly potent symbol.<sup>50</sup> By looking at the contributions of colonized subjects and racial minorities to country music history, this dissertation challenges a historiography which has routinely participated in a white-centered brand of American cultural nationalism.

## Chapter Overview

This dissertation's four chapters are organized into pairs. The first two chapters examine the careers of nonwhite musicians whose performances challenged the logic of musical racialism in the recording and radio industries as commercial country music first gained definition.

Chapter 1 reconstructs the career of Native Hawaiian steel guitarist Sol Ho'opi'i (1902/3-53), an unjustly obscure musician whose stylistic and technical innovations in the 1920s and 1930s were adopted by contemporaneous white country musicians. Despite their contributions, Ho'opi'i and other Native Hawaiian musicians remain marginal within country music and its historiography.

This exclusion stemmed from a recording industry that marketed music according to segregated

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<sup>48</sup> Black nationalist thinkers like Stokely Carmichael, Frantz Fanon, and Marcus Garvey are among those offering this critique. Notably, all these leaders were born or spent considerable time outside of the United States. See Stokely Carmichael, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967); and Marcus Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, ed. Amy Jacques-Garvey (New York: Universal, 1923). Other important scholarship to emerge from black nationalist and Afro-diasporic thought include: Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Guthrie P. Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>49</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>50</sup> On the role of folk music in forging national culture, see the introduction to Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, eds., *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). See also Charles Hiroshi Garrett, *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

genres defined as either black or white, leaving no space for Ho‘opi‘i despite considerable stylistic overlap. At the same time, sheet music and films presented Ho‘opi‘i’s music as an exotic novelty, standing in direct contrast to country music’s discourses of Anglo-Saxon origins and rustic authenticity. Efforts to consider Ho‘opi‘i as a country musician expose the disjuncture between country as stylistic formation and racialized ideology, challenging popular music historians to reassess the relationship between sound and genre and encouraging a more desegregated, polyvocal historiography of popular music. At the same time, this postcolonial perspective acknowledges the very real racial privileges enjoyed by the white working class in the early twentieth century, complicating country’s self-image of working-class marginality.

Like Ho‘opi‘i, African American harmonicist DeFord Bailey (1899-1982) exposed the paradoxes of the musical color line. Bailey was one of the most popular performers during the early years of the Grand Ole Opry radio program and its sole black member during the 1930s. Chapter 2 considers the racialized reception of Bailey’s radio performances in the 1930s against his latter-day reputation among critics and historians, who have focused on Bailey’s status as a black performer within a majority-white cultural scene. Revisionist historians like David C. Morton have cited Bailey as evidence of country music’s multiracial performance history, elevating Bailey to canonical status and thus countering notions of country as a purely white genre. These advocacy efforts led to Bailey’s induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2005. By foregrounding Bailey’s blackness, however, these advocates ignore the fact that radio audiences tended to hear Bailey’s performances as white or un-raced rather than sonically black. Bailey was discouraged from singing or speaking on the air, and station broadcasters conscientiously obscured Bailey’s race in publicity materials. While Bailey’s repertory drew upon the blues, his signature pieces, such as “Pan-American Blues” and “Dixie Flyer Blues,”

were onomatopoeic pieces for solo harmonica, offering audiences little insight into their racial signification. For musicologists, the paradox of Bailey's racialized reception then and now highlights the need for a more historicist hermeneutics. Moreover, rather than confirming a biracial history, Bailey's early reception demonstrates how the medium of radio, by keeping race literally hidden, helped to shape country music towards a white identity from its earliest days.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine country music's assertions of white identity during the 1940s, which were increasingly conflated with American identity. This rhetorical strategy developed as a response to working-class anxieties as country music entered the national mainstream. Chapter 3 looks at the anti-Japanese songs written and recorded by Carson Robison (1890-1957) during World War II. Robison's songs routinely labeled Japanese nationals as "rats," "yellow scum," and other racial epithets. Through references to an explicitly racialized Japanese enemy, Robison's songs articulated an ideology of racial nationalism, tacitly imagining the United States as a racially-homogeneous white population. Robison was not alone in promoting this message; his songs mirrored the same negative stereotypes pervasive in many Tin Pan Alley wartime songs. Robison's mimicry of this racial rhetoric reflected his pop music ambitions and concomitant ambivalence towards country music's working-class reputation. In their displays of race-based patriotism, Robison's wartime songs deflected the negative class associations of country music, affirming instead its whiteness and American heritage. Robison's correspondence with ASCAP from this period demonstrates his sensitivity to Tin Pan Alley's class prejudices and his subsequent efforts to downplay country's working-class sound. Analysis of songs like "Remember Pearl Harbor" and "1942 Turkey in the Straw" likewise illustrate how Robison's repertory increasingly tended towards middle-class pop sensibilities while still remaining nominally "country."

Chapter 4 moves from anti-Japanese songs to the so-called “pro-Indian” films produced by cowboy star Gene Autry (1907-98) at midcentury. The westerns *The Last Round-Up* (1947), *The Cowboy and the Indians* (1949), and *Apache Country* (1952) dramatized the plight of contemporaneous American Indian communities, advocating for Indian civil rights and economic aid via portrayals of Indian heroism, quiet dignity, and a capacity and enthusiasm for sociocultural assimilation. The films abandoned the crass racial stereotypes typical of the western genre in favor of ostensibly authentic representations of Indian culture. However, the films continued to articulate an ideology of racial nationalism, locating white Americans—and, most importantly, country music’s working class—at the center of American cultural life. Indian characters in the films persist as racial Others whose culture commands respect but whose assimilation into white society is the most urgent goal. In addition to analysis of the films, publicity materials and business correspondence reveal the ways in which Autry’s cowboy persona actively cultivated a white nationalist identity, even as these tendencies were mollified by shifting racial politics following World War II. Although less overt here than in Robison’s anti-Japanese music, assertions of racial nationalism are still very much at work. In fact, the subtlety of the message suggests how comfortably country music was easing into a more mainstream (and whiter) position within American culture during the early postwar period.

A brief epilogue considers two moments from the contemporary era, revealing how racial ideologies established in the 1920s through early 1950s continue to percolate and resurface even as they evolve. The efflorescence of country songs responding to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks attested to the enduring resonance of pro-American rhetoric for country music audiences. At the same time, the induction of African American performer Charley Pride to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2000 signaled contemporary country music’s heightened

sensitivity to racial issues. There are now clear efforts towards more progressive policies than in previous eras, from promoting more artists of color to acknowledging past injustices on the part of the industry. At the same time, this embrace of multicultural politics also seems to aspire to the same middle-class respectability that whiteness once provided.

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Cultural histories of race are a tricky genre. I try to avoid race hero hagiography, but I recognize and celebrate musicians of color like Sol Ho‘opi‘i and DeFord Bailey, their achievements all the more remarkable given the racial barriers they faced. I try to avoid casting blame, but I acknowledge country music’s history of racial exclusion and its complicity in segregation and various forms of racial violence. But most crucially I am concerned with the shifting cultural definitions of whiteness and its allure for country musicians and audiences in the early twentieth century. As this dissertation reveals, racial boundaries in country music are constantly in flux, controlled by the forces of class, technology, nationalism, and a host of other interrelated factors. In the 1930s and 1940s, unashamed assertions of whiteness helped to launch country music from the working-class fringes into the mainstream. Country music today has retained a prominent place in the firmament of popular music, and racialized strategies and language are often more subtle. But as contemporary country music and its historiography strive towards greater inclusivity, this project reasserts the persistence and centrality of whiteness to country music’s historical and ongoing self-construction.



## Chapter 1

### Sol Ho‘opi‘i, Hawaiian Steel Guitar, and Racial Politics in Country Music Historiography

In the beginning, there was no country music. The introduction of commercial recording technology at the turn of the twentieth century was a disruptive event, fundamentally reshaping the dissemination and categorization of popular music in the United States. The 1910s and 1920s ushered in a period of bold experimentation as fledgling recording companies sought out the most popular performers, successful styles, and marketing strategies. Made to seem natural and obvious now, newly-invented genres like country, blues, and jazz were forged through a process of trial and error and were often based not on fundamental differences of musical style but on more tenuous distinctions of personal identity.

The musical instability of genres during this early period creates problems for country music historiography, especially in fixing the early development of the genre, its canonical performers, and works. Scholars have identified several important landmarks in the genre’s commercial development in the 1920s, all of them involving technological interventions.<sup>1</sup> But tracing the genre’s *stylistic* origins to discrete moments in time and place proves much more difficult. This goal is complicated by the fact that “country music” is itself an unstable musical signifier, broad enough over time to encompass everything from Jimmie Rodgers to Taylor Swift. To even the most untrained or indiscriminating ears, country comprises a stylistically-diverse bunch. As Richard Peterson has suggested, such stylistic diversity and change has been

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<sup>1</sup> These landmarks include the 1923 recordings of Fiddlin’ John Carson produced in Atlanta, the first radio broadcasts of the *WSM Barn Dance* (later renamed the *Grand Ole Opry*) in Nashville in 1925, and the 1927 Bristol recording sessions that introduced Jimmie Rodgers and The Carter Family to the world—what many have called the “Big Bang of Country Music.” On these moments, see the chapter “Atlanta: The Birthplace of Commercial Country Music” in Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Charles K. Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville, TN: The Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 1999); and Nolan Porterfield, “Hey, Hey, Tell ’em about Us: Jimmie Rodgers Visits the Carter Family,” in *Country: The Music and the Musicians*, ed. Paul Kingsbury, Alan Axelrod, and Susan Costello, 12-39 (New York: Abbeville, 1994).

accommodated in part through a discourse of rustic authenticity—the sense that musicians are performing their real selves on the stage, without the artifice of modernity or commercialism.<sup>2</sup> In country music, this notion of authenticity is linked to a rural identity that is usually also understood as Southern, working-class, and white.

Yet in embracing this identity for country music, ironies and inconsistencies still persist. Diane Pecknold has recently argued that apparent contradictions in style are also obviated via a “history as definition” model of country music in which the genre is understood less as a shared set of stylistic traits and more as a continuous tradition that could be flexible and changeable. Citing the formation of the Country Music Hall of Fame in the 1970s, Pecknold shows that such a model has allowed the country music industry to lay claim retroactively to repertoires that it had previously excluded, for example the rockabilly of Elvis Presley.<sup>3</sup> While Pecknold spoke primarily of the Hall of Fame, country music historiography plays a similar custodial role. Through the inclusion or exclusion of certain performers, recordings, and repertoires, the boundaries and values of the genre are defined. And this power becomes especially acute in studies that explore country music’s early history.

In recent years, country music entrepreneurs and historians have embraced this “history as definition” model, critiquing country music’s racially-coded authenticity narratives and seeking to diversify the canon through highlighting African American contributions to the genre. Recent African American performers have challenged audiences’ preconceived notions of country music’s white identity; to give just two examples, Darius Rucker became a member of the Grand Ole Opry cast in 2012, and Beyoncé’s performance with the Dixie Chicks at the 2016

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<sup>2</sup> See Peterson, *Creating Country Music*.

<sup>3</sup> Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 198-9.

CMA Awards spurred dozens of conversations about race and genre.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, scholars have rewritten the genre's history from its pre-commercial origins in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to today with an eye towards recovering the voices of black musicians. This has taken the form of new popular and scholarly publications as well as more overt advocacy directed towards industry institutions like the Country Music Hall of Fame.<sup>5</sup>

And yet these efforts still perpetuate a black/white racial binary around American popular music, often failing to account for other nonwhite contributions to the genre. Critiquing this tendency, in this chapter I reconstruct the career and racialized reception of Native Hawaiian steel guitarist Sol Ho'opi'i (1902/3-1953). Ho'opi'i was perhaps the most celebrated and influential performer among the generation of Native Hawaiian musicians who introduced the steel guitar to the mainland United States in the 1910s and 1920s. Although originally coded as exotic, the steel guitar is now ubiquitous in country music, ironically serving as a sonic signifier of the genre's supposed rustic authenticity and its white, working-class identity. But with few exceptions, the contributions of Native Hawaiian steel guitarists to country music go unexamined in histories of the genre.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On Rucker, see "Darius Rucker: Artist Bio," Grand Ole Opry, <http://www.opry.com/artist/darius-rucker> (accessed May 8, 2017). On Beyoncé's performance, see Jewly Hight, "Beyoncé and the Dixie Chicks Offer Up Lessons on Country Music's Past (And Future)," NPR Music, November 4, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2016/11/04/500562813/beyonc-and-the-dixie-chicks-offer-up-lessons-on-country-musics-past-and-future> (accessed May 8, 2017); Spencer Kornhaber, "What Beyoncé's 'Daddy Lessons' Had to Teach," *The Atlantic*, November 3, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/11/cmas-beyonce-daddy-lessons-dixie-chicks-country-music-awards-race/506375/> (accessed May 8, 2017); and Emily Yahr, "Did Beyoncé and the Dixie Chicks Have a Sly Message in Their CMA Awards Performance," *The Washington Post*, November 3, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/11/03/did-beyonce-and-the-dixie-chicks-have-a-sly-message-in-their-cma-awards-performance/?utm\\_term=.952009111a76](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/11/03/did-beyonce-and-the-dixie-chicks-have-a-sly-message-in-their-cma-awards-performance/?utm_term=.952009111a76) (accessed May 8, 2017), among many other articles.

<sup>5</sup> Regarding recent scholarship, see the introduction. On advocacy for the Hall of Fame, see chapter 2.

<sup>6</sup> An important and recent corrective to this trend is John W. Troutman, *Kīkā Kīla: How the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Changed the Sound of Modern Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016). Although focused primarily on the development of the pedal steel guitar in the mid-1900s, Timothy Miller's dissertation also discusses the history of the Hawaiian steel guitar in the chapter "Forging the Steel: The Steel Guitar in America, 1900-1950."

Ho‘opi‘i’s career acts as a lens onto the tension between style and racial politics in country music history and historiography. On the one hand, Ho‘opi‘i’s music bears striking stylistic similarities to that of his white contemporaries in country music. However, for mostly racial reasons, Ho‘opi‘i was never advertised in his own time in relation to country music, and he does not appear in monographs about country music but rather in those on Hawaiian music. This exclusionary ideology of musical racialism springs from the earliest days of commercial recording, and it remains entrenched in most of the current historiography. By thinking about Ho‘opi‘i in the context of country music, I reveal the sometimes negligible role of musical style in the formation of popular genres, which are often determined more by identity categories than by sound itself. Ho‘opi‘i’s exclusion speaks to the persistence of whiteness in country music’s self-construction, which has in turn prevented a more wide-ranging examination of country music’s complicity in racial appropriation and U.S. imperialism.

In this chapter, I begin by reconstructing Ho‘opi‘i’s life and career as a touring and recording musician; although Ho‘opi‘i is often regarded as the preeminent virtuoso of the steel guitar, precious little is known about him, and much of the existing literature is contradictory, bereft of scholarly citations, or otherwise problematic. Ho‘opi‘i deserves a rigorous and thorough biography, and this chapter offers a few steps in that direction. I am particularly interested in charting the shape and trajectory of his recorded repertory, which included traditional Hawaiian pieces; *hapa haole* (or “half-white”) songs by white Tin Pan Alley composers; and elements of ragtime, blues, and jazz. I focus specifically on Ho‘opi‘i’s most prolific, experimental period from 1925 to 1938, after which he recorded primarily religious material for smaller record labels following his conversion to Christianity.

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Timothy David Miller, “Instruments as Technology and Culture: Co-Constructing the Pedal Steel Guitar” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2013).

The eclecticism of Ho‘opi‘i’s repertory should have thrown into disarray the racial hermeneutics of his style. Indeed, for the contemporary listener many of his recordings continue to defy easy categorization, and as I show, many of his songs, stylistic developments, and technological innovations would soon be found on records advertised as country music. But Ho‘opi‘i’s first commercial recordings in 1925 came amidst a national fad for Hawaiian music as exotic novelty, and it was in this context that his music was heard and understood. Despite Ho‘opi‘i’s eclecticism, the culture industry remained hard at work throughout his career linking his music to Hawai‘i, no matter how tenuous the music’s actual relationship to that of the Hawaiian Islands. This placed him in stark contrast to music marketed variously as “hillbilly,” “old-time,” or “country” music, all of which emphasized familiar, working-class rusticity. As a result, Ho‘opi‘i was never viewed in his own day as a country musician, despite obvious stylistic affinities. This racialized bias largely persists in country music historiography, where the contributions of Native Hawaiian steel guitarists remain obscure. Instead, steel guitar remains a marker of exoticism in the hands of Ho‘opi‘i but a signal of rustic authenticity in the hands of white country musicians, even when they are playing the same tunes.

The steel guitar was one of the earliest “new sounds” to emerge in commercial recordings of the 1920s.<sup>7</sup> To briefly introduce this sometimes unfamiliar instrument: steel guitar design and performance technique differ markedly from that of the standard acoustic guitar. Unlike the acoustic guitar, the steel guitar is played in a horizontal position with the strings set to open-tuning, usually either a C<sup>6</sup> or an E<sup>9</sup> chord. Instead of pressing strings against a fret board, the performer slides a steel bar along the strings to produce different pitches. This steel bar, for which the steel guitar is named, gives the instrument its distinctive glissandi. The performer then

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<sup>7</sup> Most of the information in this paragraph comes from *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 9: Australia and the Pacific Islands*, s.v. “Musical instruments.”

uses the other hand, often fitted with metal finger picks, to pluck or strum the strings. The image of Ho‘opi‘i in Figure 1.1 demonstrates this technique.



Figure 1.1: Sol Ho‘opi‘i performing the steel guitar in a 1943 short film. He holds the steel bar in his left hand, while his right hand is fitted with finger picks. “Musical Moments with Sol Hoopii and His Hawaiian Guitar” (C.O. Baptista Film Mission, 12 minutes, 1943). The film is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gb0A2RLE32U> (accessed May 10, 2017).

Joseph Kekuku is widely credited for having developed this performance technique in the 1880s, and Hawai‘i is where the technique first gained widespread acceptance.<sup>8</sup> Electronic amplification was introduced in the mainland United States during the 1930s; this was soon followed by a switch to a solid-bodied box-frame. This box design allowed for multiple sets of strings to be

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

placed adjacent to one another, enabling the performer to switch easily between different tunings. The latest development came in the 1940s with the pedal steel guitar, in which pedals and knee-levers were added that could alter a sounding pitch by a whole step or half step without affecting the pitch of the other strings.<sup>9</sup> These technological developments played a crucial role in the eventual assimilation of the steel guitar as a country instrument. Steel guitar is a virtuosic instrument requiring years of practice before proficiency can be achieved, and the community of active professional players in contemporary country music remains relatively small. Rather than standardized, many steel guitars today are custom-made and vary in number of strings and pedals according to the needs of the performer.

### **Sources and Biography**

Sol Ho‘opi‘i has been lauded by generations of musicians as perhaps the most virtuosic and influential steel guitarist ever recorded.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, reliable biographical information about his life and career are surprisingly difficult to come by. For the longest time, most existing profiles of Ho‘opi‘i proliferated the same inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and especially apocryphal stories intended to demonstrate his incredible virtuosity, charisma, and emotional sensitivity as a performer. It is only through the recent scholarship of T. Malcolm Rockwell that a fuller, more accurate picture of Ho‘opi‘i has emerged, especially of his early life. Rockwell also produced a stable discography of Ho‘opi‘i’s work.<sup>11</sup> Most of Rockwell’s writing appears in liner notes, and as such they lack scholarly citation, which is unfortunate. However, these notes are meticulously researched, relying on official government documentation, commercial

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<sup>9</sup> See Timothy Miller’s dissertation for more detail on the development of the pedal steel guitar.

<sup>10</sup> See for example the testimonies given by Sol Bright, Jerry Byrd, and Robert F. Gear in George S. Kanahale, ed., *Hawaiian Music and Musicians: An Illustrated History* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawai‘i, 1979), 143.

<sup>11</sup> T. Malcolm Rockwell, *Hawaiian and Hawaiian Guitar Records, 1891-1960* (Kula, HI: Mahina Piha Press, 2007), CD-ROM, 496-508.

recordings, films, and record company archives, and in this section of the chapter I have attempted to verify this information as much as possible. Rockwell also conducted interviews with Ho‘opi‘i’s professional and personal acquaintances, which have in turn yielded additional material from personal collections, especially photographs. Bud Tutmarc, a steel guitarist who befriended and performed regularly with Ho‘opi‘i in the 1940s and 1950s, is another important source of biographical information on Ho‘opi‘i. Archival recordings of their concerts are now commercially available, capturing Ho‘opi‘i in live public and private performances, including autobiographical vignettes and musings between songs.<sup>12</sup>

Kolomona (Solomon) Ho‘opi‘i Ka‘ai‘ai was born in Honolulu in either 1902 or 1903, probably on December 18.<sup>13</sup> He was the eldest of twenty-one children born to Solomon and Annie Ka‘ai‘ai.<sup>14</sup> Ho‘opi‘i began performing on ukulele as early as age three, switching to steel

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<sup>12</sup> Sol Hoopii, *Sol Hoopii: From the Personal Collection of Bud Tutmarc*, Marc Records, 9 CDs, 200?.

<sup>13</sup> Ho‘opi‘i’s gravestone lists only a birth year, 1902. However, two ship manifests both list his birthdate as December 18, 1903. See Rich H., “Sol Hoopii,” Find a Grave, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=10928932&ref=acom> (accessed on May 9, 2017); Manifest for SS *City of Los Angeles*, Voyage 69, Los Angeles to Honolulu, June 16-22, 1928, U.S. Department of Labor, Immigration Service, 5, Ancestry.com, [http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/1502/31073\\_169539-00319?pid=2211361&backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangsg%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26msT%3d1%26gsfn%3dsol%26gsfn\\_x%3d0%26gsln%3dHoopii%26gsln\\_x%3d0%26MSAV%3d0%26catbucket%3drstp%26uidh%3du7g%26pcat%3dROOT\\_CATEGORY%26h%3d2211361%26recoff%3d6%2b7%26db%3dHonoluluPL%26indiv%3d1%26ml\\_rpos%3d1&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true#?imageId=31073\\_169539-00319](http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/1502/31073_169539-00319?pid=2211361&backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangsg%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26msT%3d1%26gsfn%3dsol%26gsfn_x%3d0%26gsln%3dHoopii%26gsln_x%3d0%26MSAV%3d0%26catbucket%3drstp%26uidh%3du7g%26pcat%3dROOT_CATEGORY%26h%3d2211361%26recoff%3d6%2b7%26db%3dHonoluluPL%26indiv%3d1%26ml_rpos%3d1&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true#?imageId=31073_169539-00319) (accessed March 28, 2016); Manifest for SS *Lurline*, Honolulu to Los Angeles, July 1948, U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, 108, Ancestry.com, [http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/1502/31178\\_170010-00323?pid=4429321&backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangsg%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26msT%3d1%26gsfn%3dsol%26gsfn\\_x%3d0%26gsln%3dHoopii%26gsln\\_x%3d0%26MSAV%3d0%26catbucket%3drstp%26uidh%3du7g%26pcat%3dROOT\\_CATEGORY%26h%3d4429321%26recoff%3d6%2b7%26db%3dHonoluluPL%26indiv%3d1%26ml\\_rpos%3d3&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true](http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/1502/31178_170010-00323?pid=4429321&backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangsg%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26msT%3d1%26gsfn%3dsol%26gsfn_x%3d0%26gsln%3dHoopii%26gsln_x%3d0%26MSAV%3d0%26catbucket%3drstp%26uidh%3du7g%26pcat%3dROOT_CATEGORY%26h%3d4429321%26recoff%3d6%2b7%26db%3dHonoluluPL%26indiv%3d1%26ml_rpos%3d3&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true) (accessed March 28, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> T. Malcolm Rockwell, liner notes to Sol Hoopii and His Novelty Quartette, *Classic Hawaiian Steel Guitar Performances, 1933-34*, Origin Jazz Library OJL-3000, CD, 2007. I have been unable to confirm this information independently. The earliest archival source I have found on Solomon and Annie Ka‘ai‘ai comes from the 1930 Census, at which date they are aged 46 and 41, respectively, and living in Honolulu. At that time they are living with four children—Lucille (aged 12), James (12), Robert (5), and Julia (1)—so it is quite possible that Ho‘opi‘i came from a large family. Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Precinct 15 B, Honolulu, Honolulu County, Oahu,



guitar some time in his early teens. He was evidently a precocious performer early on, playing with his friend Bill Tapia between sets of the Royal Hawaiian Band at Kapi‘olani Park in Honolulu. Tapia, who would go on to become a well-known ukulele virtuoso, later recalled in an interview with Rockwell, “When the band took a break, we would sit on the grass and play. And we would draw a bigger crowd than the Royal Hawaiian Band. The tips were good! Sol was the best.”<sup>15</sup>

The circumstances of Ho‘opi‘i’s initial voyage to the mainland United States have taken on mythic status, helped in no small part by Ho‘opi‘i’s tendency to exaggerate details later in life. The popular version of events is that in late 1919, Ho‘opi‘i stowed away on a Matson ocean liner, sometimes recounted as the *Matsonia*, en route to San Francisco from Honolulu. He was joined by two musician friends, the brothers Clarence and Theodore Decker. As a stowaway, Ho‘opi‘i faced reprimand upon his discovery by the crew, until he gave an impromptu performance on steel guitar. The beauty and virtuosity of this performance is said to have so captivated passengers that they paid for his fare. This fanciful story would have been favored by Ho‘opi‘i and his biographers for its vivid demonstration of Ho‘opi‘i’s technical command and personal charisma, and for the romantic notion that music conquers all, even the regulations of commercial sailing vessels. The truth is, unfortunately, more mundane. A manifest for the SS *Sonoma* (not the *Matsonia*, but a Matson line ship) lists among its crew “Sol Hoopi” [*sic*], who boarded the ship on October 21, 1919 during a stop in Honolulu from the port of Sydney. Ho‘opi‘i is here listed as a “workaway,” meaning that he was a stowaway who, after being

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Hawaii, 6 B, Ancestry.com, [http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/6224/4661340\\_00886/104060854?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgst%3d-6&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnSearchResults](http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/6224/4661340_00886/104060854?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgst%3d-6&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnSearchResults) (accessed April 4, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Rockwell, liner notes to *Classic Hawaiian Steel Guitar Performances*.

discovered, worked in order to pay his fare.<sup>16</sup> (The Deckers seem to have been legitimate members of the crew, having boarded the *Sonoma* on October 15 as waiters.) Ho‘opi‘i’s labor may well have included musical performance, but this is unspecified; likely he also worked as a waiter, cook, and/or deckhand, as most of the other crewmembers did. At any rate, the story about passengers paying for his fare (except in an indirect sense) is probably a fabrication.

Ho‘opi‘i and the *Sonoma* arrived in San Francisco on October, 27, 1919, and Ho‘opi‘i began his musical career in earnest. He seems to have stayed only briefly in San Francisco before moving to Los Angeles in 1920. The 1920 Census shows him as a lodger at the home of Francis and Martha Smith on South Grand Avenue in Los Angeles.<sup>17</sup> The Smiths were a white family originally from the Hawaiian Islands, and Rockwell has speculated that they were family friends with whom Ho‘opi‘i reconnected upon his arrival in Los Angeles.<sup>18</sup> Ho‘opi‘i was still only seventeen years old at this time, and he listed his occupation as “none” on the official census rolls. Nevertheless, he soon began making professional connections among musicians in the Los Angeles area. Photographic evidence suggests that he continued to play for a short while with the Deckers, although Ho‘opi‘i primarily played ukulele in the group since steel guitar was covered

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<sup>16</sup> Manifest for SS *Sonoma*, Sydney to San Francisco, October 27, 1919, U.S. Department of Labor, Immigration Service, [no page number], Ancestry.com, [http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/7949/cam1416\\_31-0754?pid=2473771&backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangs-g%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26gsfn%3dsolomon%26gsfn\\_x%3d0%26gsln%3dhoopi%26gsln\\_x%3dNN%26MSAV%3d0%26catbucket%3drstp%26uidh%3du7g%26pcat%3dROOT\\_CATEGORY%26h%3d2473771%26recoff%3d7%2b8%26db%3dsfp%26indiv%3d1%26ml\\_rpos%3d1&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true](http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/7949/cam1416_31-0754?pid=2473771&backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangs-g%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26gsfn%3dsolomon%26gsfn_x%3d0%26gsln%3dhoopi%26gsln_x%3dNN%26MSAV%3d0%26catbucket%3drstp%26uidh%3du7g%26pcat%3dROOT_CATEGORY%26h%3d2473771%26recoff%3d7%2b8%26db%3dsfp%26indiv%3d1%26ml_rpos%3d1&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true) (accessed April 1, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States – 1920, Precinct 247, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, California, 101 B, Ancestry.com, <http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/6061/4293716-00442/742430?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgst%3d-6&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnSearchResults> (accessed April 1, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Rockwell, liner notes to *Classic Hawaiian Steel Guitar Performances*.

by one of the Deckers;<sup>19</sup> by the time of the 1920 Census, the Deckers had moved to nearby Azusa, California, about thirty miles outside of Los Angeles. Although at this time Theodore (aged 23) was officially listed as a garage mechanic, Clarence (aged 21) seems to have found his primary income as a stage musician, and it is likely that they continued as a trio with Ho‘opi‘i for a short while.<sup>20</sup>

For the next several years, Ho‘opi‘i played in local California circuits, mostly in restaurants, clubs, and theaters, with a variety of different ensembles. One of these ensembles included Eddie Stiffler (guitar) and his sister Georgia Stiffler (ukulele), a dancer whom Ho‘opi‘i likely met during a gig in a Los Angeles club; Ho‘opi‘i and Stiffler married in 1921 and had a daughter, Iolani, born in mid-1931.<sup>21</sup> Stiffler, born August 22, 1902 in Missouri and raised for the most part in Tulsa, Oklahoma, was a white woman.<sup>22</sup> This potentially could have led to

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<sup>19</sup> See photograph in Rockwell, liner notes to *Classic Hawaiian Steel Guitar Performances*.

<sup>20</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States – 1920, Precinct 21, Azusa City, Los Angeles County, California, 26 B, Ancestry.com, <http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/6061/4293702-00148/165533?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgst%3d-6&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnSearchResults> (accessed April 1, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Information on the Stifflers comes from Rockwell, liner notes to *Classic Hawaiian Steel Guitar Performances*. Birth year for Iolani comes from: Manifest for SS *President Coolidge*, Honolulu to Los Angeles, December 23, 1931, U.S. Department of Labor, Immigration Service, 25, Ancestry.com, [http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/1502/31178\\_169944-00052?pid=3446928&backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangs-g%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26gsfn%3dsolomon%26gsfn\\_x%3d0%26gsln%3dhoopii%26gsln\\_x%3d0%26msypn\\_ftp%3dHonolulu%252c%2bHonolulu%252c%2bHawaii%252c%2bUSA%26msypn%3d71034%26msypn\\_PInfo%3d8-%257c0%257c1652393%257c0%257c2%257c3249%257c14%257c0%257c1386%257c71034%257c0%257c%26msbdy\\_x%3d1%26msbdp%3d1%26MSAV%3d0%26msbdy%3d1902%26catbucket%3drstp%26uidh%3du7g%26pcat%3dROOT\\_CATEGORY%26h%3d3446928%26recoff%3d6%2b7%26db%3dHonoluluPL%26indiv%3d1%26ml\\_rpos%3d1&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true](http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/1502/31178_169944-00052?pid=3446928&backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangs-g%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26gsfn%3dsolomon%26gsfn_x%3d0%26gsln%3dhoopii%26gsln_x%3d0%26msypn_ftp%3dHonolulu%252c%2bHonolulu%252c%2bHawaii%252c%2bUSA%26msypn%3d71034%26msypn_PInfo%3d8-%257c0%257c1652393%257c0%257c2%257c3249%257c14%257c0%257c1386%257c71034%257c0%257c%26msbdy_x%3d1%26msbdp%3d1%26MSAV%3d0%26msbdy%3d1902%26catbucket%3drstp%26uidh%3du7g%26pcat%3dROOT_CATEGORY%26h%3d3446928%26recoff%3d6%2b7%26db%3dHonoluluPL%26indiv%3d1%26ml_rpos%3d1&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true) (accessed March 31, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Stiffler’s birthdate in Manifest for SS *Calawaii*, Los Angeles to Honolulu, August 25-September 1, 1923, U.S. Department of Labor, Immigration Service, 127, Ancestry.com, [http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/1502/31073\\_169515-00388?pid=2497231&backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangs-g%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26gsfn%3dgeorgia%26gsfn\\_x%3d0%26gsln%3dhoopii%26gsln\\_x%3dNN%26MSAV%3d0%26catbucket%3drstp%26uidh%3du7g%26pcat%3dROOT\\_CATEGORY%26h%3d2497231%26recoff%3d1](http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/1502/31073_169515-00388?pid=2497231&backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangs-g%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26gsfn%3dgeorgia%26gsfn_x%3d0%26gsln%3dhoopii%26gsln_x%3dNN%26MSAV%3d0%26catbucket%3drstp%26uidh%3du7g%26pcat%3dROOT_CATEGORY%26h%3d2497231%26recoff%3d1)

problems during an era in which interracial marriage was still largely taboo—even illegal in many states—although there is no evidence to suggest that Sol and Georgia ever faced outright discrimination as a result of their marriage. However, following the logic of the “one-drop rule,” their daughter was listed simply as “Hawaiian” in official government documentation, underscoring the fairly rigid lines of perceived racial difference between Pacific Islanders and whites in the United States during the early twentieth century.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to performances with the Stiffers, the early 1920s also saw Ho‘opi‘i collaborating with Kenelle’s Hawaiians, an ensemble with rotating membership that at various times included Dick McIntire and Lani McIntire. The McIntires, and Lani in particular, would become regular members of Ho‘opi‘i’s ensembles and would later go on to play important roles in some of the earliest country music recordings.<sup>24</sup> In 1922, Ho‘opi‘i made his first radio performances with Kenelle’s Hawaiians on radio station KHJ in Los Angeles.<sup>25</sup> The following year, Ho‘opi‘i and Lani McIntire joined Queen’s Hawaiians, led by George Mackie. The group was a resident ensemble for a time at the Dragon Café, a Los Angeles-area Chinese restaurant.

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3d6%2b7%26db%3dHonoluluPL%26indiv%3d1%26ml\_rpos%3d1&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true (accessed April 1, 2016). Her birthplace is here listed as Tulsa, but elsewhere it is listed as Missouri: Sixteenth Census of the United States – 1940, Block 9, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, California, 10 B, Ancestry.com, <http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/2442/m-t0627-00397-00281/72523794?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgst%3d-6&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnSearchResults> (accessed April 1, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Sixteenth Census of the United States – 1940, Block 9, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, California, 10 B. Regarding legal sanctions against interracial relationships, see Rachel F. Moran, *Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race and Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> For Lani McIntire’s recordings with Jimmie Rodgers in summer 1930, see Nolan Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers: The Life and Times of America’s Blue Yodeler* (1979; repr., Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 251-6.

<sup>25</sup> Rockwell, liner notes to *Classic Hawaiian Steel Guitar Performances*.

Following a brief visit to Honolulu that year, Ho‘opi‘i resumed playing with the McIntires on KHJ, now billing themselves as the Hoopii Novelty Three.<sup>26</sup>

Although Ho‘opi‘i would continue to perform locally and on tour throughout much of the 1920s and 1930s, he made his greatest impact through his commercial recordings, the first of which appeared in 1925. His recordings had huge implications for the dissemination and popularization of his style at the national level, and they provide the most vivid, concrete evidence of his career as a creative working musician and innovator. His total output numbered around three-hundred recordings by the end of his life, and these are the primary foundation upon which his legacy rests today. Ho‘opi‘i recorded only a dozen of these in late 1925, released on the small regional label Sunset Records. Most were recorded under the name the Waikiki Hawaiian Trio, with Ho‘opi‘i on steel guitar and lead vocals, Lani McIntire on guitar, and Glenwood Leslie on ukulele, with occasional singing by the entire trio.<sup>27</sup> This combo seems to have been relatively short-lived, although Ho‘opi‘i would continue to record with McIntire and Leslie on various occasions throughout his career.

1926 saw Ho‘opi‘i’s first recordings for Columbia Records, following his discovery by Columbia A&R man Tommy Rockwell (father to T. Malcolm Rockwell) during a Los Angeles club date.<sup>28</sup> Rockwell evidently heard in Ho‘opi‘i’s music something unprecedented, taking out a notice in the November 15, 1926 issue of *Talking Machine World*: “Of special interest to the trade will be the recordings by the Sol Hoopii Hawaiian Trio, of Los Angeles, which Mr. Rockwell states will reveal something new in Hawaiian music played to dance tempo when the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Information about recording and release dates, record labels, and personnel can be found in Rockwell, *Hawaiian and Hawaiian Guitar Records*, 496-7.

<sup>28</sup> Rockwell, liner notes to *Classic Hawaiian Steel Guitar Performances*.

records are released in the near future.”<sup>29</sup> Ho‘opi‘i’s recording tenure at Columbia lasted from October 1926 through March 1931, during which time he performed with a rotating ensemble billed variously as Sol Hoopii and His Novelty Trio or simply Sol Hoopii’s Novelty Trio. Among band members were McIntire and Leslie (his primary sidemen through the end of 1928), as well as Sol K. Bright on guitar and vocals, George Kainapau on ukulele and vocals, and other unknown session players. The trio’s total output during this period numbered almost ninety recordings. This period also saw the trio cutting four records with Andrew [Andy] Aiona’s Saxophone Trio.<sup>30</sup>

Ho‘opi‘i’s move to Brunswick in 1933 was accompanied by the addition of a string bass to his ensemble. (There is some evidence to suggest that Ho‘opi‘i had recorded two tracks previously for Brunswick in late 1931—“Honolulu Hale” and “Na Lei”—for Johnny Noble and His Hawaiian Music, but this is difficult to confirm.) Now billed as Sol Hoopii’s Novelty Quartet, the ensemble, again with a rotating cast of mostly unknown session musicians, recorded forty records for Brunswick from 1933 to 1935. Most significant during this period was Ho‘opi‘i’s transition to using electric steel guitar, beginning on his recording session of December 12, 1934; after this date, Ho‘opi‘i primarily used electric models in his recordings. Concurrent with this period in his discography, Ho‘opi‘i also served as the musical director for the Moana Serenaders, a group specializing exclusively in Hawaiian material. Ho‘opi‘i was not an instrumentalist with the quartet, however; Bob Nichols played steel guitar for all the group’s recordings, and the other instrumentalists are unknown. The group produced fourteen records for Decca over three dates—August 19, 1934; October 5, 1934; and March 25, 1935. 1935 also saw Ho‘opi‘i sitting in on

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Rockwell, liner notes to *Classic Hawaiian Steel Guitar Performances*.

<sup>30</sup> Rockwell, *Hawaiian and Hawaiian Guitar Records*, 497-501.

sessions with the well-known Hawaiian alto Lena Machado.<sup>31</sup> Together with guitarist Harry Baty, George Piltz on ukulele, and unknown string bass players, the ensemble released four records for the Machado label: “Hoonanea,” “Kamalani O Keaukaha,” “Kauoha Mai,” and “Mai Lohilohi Mai Oe.”

The first recordings by Sol Hoopii and His Novelty Five came on February 16, 1936 for Brunswick—only six tracks were recorded at this session, his last for Brunswick. Personnel included Ho‘opi‘i on electric steel guitar, probably Dick McIntire playing a second electric steel and providing some solo vocals, Harry Baty on guitar, Tom Ainahau on ukulele, Bill Ahuna on string bass, and Bob Cutter also on vocals.<sup>32</sup> The Novelty Five had only one other recording session, for Decca on December 15, 1938, yielding eight records. The personnel, too, had changed: Ho‘opi‘i on electric steel guitar, Jack Mitchell on ukulele, Anthony Asam on guitar, Benjamin Ahuna on second guitar, and Bob Matthews on string bass. With the exception of “Hui Mai”—a one-off vocal performance recorded for 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox in 1941<sup>33</sup>—these sessions marked the end of Ho‘opi‘i’s work for the major labels, and thus his records which would have had substantial national distribution and advertising. His work in the studio during the 1920s and 1930s thus constitutes the most important, lasting part of his legacy.

Concurrent with his busy schedule of live performances and recording dates, Ho‘opi‘i maintained an active career as a composer, arranger, musician, and sometimes actor for Hollywood films. Unfortunately, many of these films are obscure today and difficult to access. Furthermore, Ho‘opi‘i was rarely named in film credits. During the 1920s and 1930s, it was rare

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<sup>31</sup> See the profile of Machado in Kanahale, 236-7.

<sup>32</sup> Rockwell, *Hawaiian and Hawaiian Guitar Records*, 505.

<sup>33</sup> Although the recording is billed as “Sol Hoopii & Orch.,” Ho‘opi‘i did not serve as steel guitarist for this recording but only provided tenor and falsetto vocals. Andy Iona is believed to be the electric steel guitarist.

for arrangers and other film crewmembers to be so acknowledged, especially for the kind of low-budget films and shorts on which Ho‘opi‘i collaborated; his omission from the credits seems not to have been motivated by any kind of racial prejudice. As a result, it is difficult to establish a reliable filmography for Ho‘opi‘i. The Internet Movie Database (IMDb), a usually-dependable online resource, lists eleven credits for Ho‘opi‘i as either actor and/or musical contributor (not including the 2011 film *The Descendants*, starring George Clooney, which used some of Ho‘opi‘i’s recordings on its soundtrack).<sup>34</sup> Other sources have suggested that Ho‘opi‘i was involved with a few other film projects. Table 1.1 lists the films to which Ho‘opi‘i has been linked. The far right column indicates film for which I have been able to independently verify Ho‘opi‘i as a contributor. This summary suggests that IMDb provides a more or less reliable list of Ho‘opi‘i’s film work, while more informal and fan-generated filmographies, usually posted online, tend to inflate Ho‘opi‘i’s contributions to film. Especially suspect are the connections to *Bird of Paradise* and *Waikiki Wedding*, perhaps the two most canonical films of the 1930s boom in Hawaiian exoticist cinema. Ho‘opi‘i is nowhere listed in the credits for these big-budget, mainstream (and thus more easily accessible today) pictures. And listening to the soundtracks proves inconclusive. For example, *Bird of Paradise* has a few moments of sighing steel guitar couched within a more conventional orchestral score; written by well-known Hollywood composer Max Steiner and conducted by Clem Portman, the music is by no means characteristic of Ho‘opi‘i’s other work.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “Sol Hoopii Jr.,” IMDb, [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0393813/?ref\\_=fn\\_al\\_nm\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0393813/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1) (accessed on May 9, 2017).

<sup>35</sup> Title credits for *Bird of Paradise* list “Music by Max Steiner” and “Recorded by Clem Portman.” The brief moments of steel guitar occur as part of the film score during scenes of romantic frolic at approximately eighteen minutes and forty-two minutes into the film. King Vidor, dir., *Bird of Paradise* (Narbeth, PA: Alpha Video, 2003, DVD).



**Table 1.1: Sol Ho‘opi‘i Filmography, 1930-1943**

Year	Film Title	Source of Attribution	Independent Verification
1930	<i>Divorced Sweethearts</i>	IMDb	36
1930	<i>Grandma’s Girl</i>	IMDb	
1930	<i>Radio Kisses</i>	IMDb	37
1931	<i>Aloha</i>	IMDb	
1931	<i>The Black Camel</i>	IMDb	
1931	<i>The Fainting Lover</i>	IMDb	
1932	<i>Betty Boop’s Bamboo Isle</i>	Madsen, <i>Slide Guitar</i> <sup>38</sup>	39
1932	<i>Bird of Paradise</i>	www.findagrave.com	
1932	<i>States Attorney</i>	www.beerrecords.com	
1933	<i>Blood Money</i>	www.youtube.com	40
1933	<i>Little Giant</i>	www.beerrecords.com	
1934	<i>Flirtation Walk</i>	IMDb	41
1936	<i>High Tension</i>	IMDb	
1936	<i>King of the Islands</i>	IMDb	
1936	<i>Waikiki Wedding</i>	www.findagrave.com	
1938	<i>The Hawaiian Buckaroo</i>	www.findagrave.com	
1939	<i>Hawaiian Nights</i>	IMDb	42
1941	<i>Navy Blues</i>	www.findagrave.com	

<sup>36</sup> A shooting script for the film lists on its cast page a “Sol Hoppie” playing the role of “Mexican Guitar Player” during the finale scene. “Divorce Story” shooting script, July 8, 1930, 23pp., Mack Sennett Collection, Folder 140 – *Divorced Sweethearts*, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

<sup>37</sup> A script lists among the cast of characters, “MUSIC BY SOL HOOPII’S HAWAIIAN TRIO,” although Ho‘opi‘i seems not to have had a speaking role. “Dialogue used in Mack Sennett Talking-Sound Picture #360 – ‘Radio Kisses,’” dialogue sheet, 11pp., [1930?], Mack Sennett Collection, Folder 508 – *Radio Kisses*.

<sup>38</sup> Pete Madsen, *Slide Guitar: Know the Players, Play the Music* ([no city]: Backbeat Books, 2005), 8.

<sup>39</sup> Ho‘opi‘i’s involvement is confirmed on the basis of musical evidence in the film itself; the arrangements of “Twelfth Street Rag” and “Chimes” used in the film are identical to those on his commercial recordings. The complete eight-minute short is available online: “Betty Boop ‘Bamboo Isle’ 1932,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UT-Gi8RC5o> (accessed May 9, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> Greg Tutmarc, “Sol Hoopii Hawaiian Music in Pre-Code Hollywood,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYPnPf6zcyQ> (accessed May 9, 2017).

<sup>41</sup> The name “Sol Hoopi” appears on a piece of musical manuscript for the “Hawaiian Routine (Ballet)” portion of the film. It is unclear if the name is intended as composer attribution. “Mele” musical manuscript, “Flirtation Walk” folder, Music 343. Warner Bros. Archives Music 343, “Flirtation Walk” folder, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California.

<sup>42</sup> A review lists the “Sol Hoopii Hawaiian Band” among the film’s cast, adding “Sol Hoopii and his Hawaiian Band contributed some very pleasing Island music.” “‘Hawaiian Nights’ Tuneful Musical for Dual Program,” *Hollywood Reporter*, August 16, 1939, file on *Hawaiian Nights*, PCAR.

**Table 1.1: Sol Ho‘opi‘i Filmography, 1930-1943 (cont.)**

Year	Film Title	Source of Attribution	Independent Verification
1942	<i>Song of the Islands</i>	IMDb	43
1943	<i>Musical Moments with Sol Hoopii and His Hawaiian Guitar</i>	www.youtube.com	44

Ho‘opi‘i’s involvement, if any, would have been minimal. Both of these films were cultural touchstones during the Hawaiian film fad of the 1930s and have achieved a kind of canonical status today for that reason. Perhaps hoping to forge an indelible link between Ho‘opi‘i and that broader cultural moment, some of Ho‘opi‘i’s biographers have been overeager to associate him with those films. But these links, valid or not, have contributed to a narrative around Ho‘opi‘i that emphasizes the apparently exotic status of Hawaiian steel guitar. I consider the cultural meanings of Ho‘opi‘i’s film music, especially their tendency towards exoticist portrayals of the Pacific, later in the chapter.

1938 marked an important shift in the trajectory of Ho‘opi‘i’s career and personal life. Ho‘opi‘i converted to Christianity that year after attending religious services at the Angelus Temple, established by the charismatic and media-savvy Los Angeles-based evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson; specifically, Ho‘opi‘i would later recall his conversion moment came after hearing a sermon entitled “Be Ready,” delivered by a twelve-year-old girl congregant.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ho‘opi‘i provided Hawaiian-language lyrics for two songs, “Home on the Range” and “Hu‘i Mai.” The full Hawaiian texts, English translations, and attributions to Ho‘opi‘i are found as enclosures in Jason S. Joy, Director of Public Relations of Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, to G. M. Shurlock, Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, 21 October 1941, file on *Song of the Islands*, PCAR.

<sup>44</sup> This film is available online in two parts: Greg Tutmarc, “Rare 1943 Sol Hoopii Video – Part 1” and “Rare 1943 Sol Hoopii Video – Part 2,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gb0A2RLE32U> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=422yGi5zhP4> (accessed May 9, 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Liner notes from Sol Hoopii, *Sol Hoopii: The Sacred Recordings*, Marc Records, 2 CDs, 2005. For two recent works on McPherson and her role in the twentieth-century evangelist movement, see Chas H. Barfoot, *Aimee Semple*

Following his conversion, Ho‘opi‘i began devoting his recording talents almost exclusively to steel guitar and vocal performances of religious material, such as “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” “The Old, Rugged Cross,” and “In the Sweet Bye and Bye.” Occasionally, Ho‘opi‘i would compose new lyrics to transform a secular piece into a devotional one, as in his reworking of “To You, Sweetheart, Aloha” into “To You, My Lord, Aloha.” B-sides of his religious recordings would also sometimes include uncontroversial secular genres like marches, most notably his recordings of “Hilo March,” “Kohala March,” and “Indiana March.” But Ho‘opi‘i’s popularity had peaked by the end of the 1930s. His recording activities during the 1940s and 1950s, all for small, Los Angeles-based religious labels, are summarized in Table 1.2 below.

**Table 1.2: Sol Ho‘opi‘i Sacred Recordings, 1941-1952**

Year	Label	Billing	Number of Recordings
1941 (prob.)	Haven of Rest Records	Lorin Whitney – Organ & Vibraharp – Sol Hoopii – Steel Guitar	14
1947-48	Sacred Records	Sol Hoopii and His Hawaiian Group; Sol Hoopii – King of Hawaiian Guitar	14
1952	Eldee Records	Sol Hoopii and His Novelty Four	24
1952 (prob.)	Eldee	Sol Hoopii with Ray Odegaard	2
unk.	Hymntime	Ira Stamphill and the Hymntimers	4

Ho‘opi‘i still lived in Los Angeles for a time following his religious conversion, but his involvement with Hollywood—like his work for the major record labels—was substantially curtailed for the remainder of his life. Instead, Ho‘opi‘i toured the evangelist circuit up and down the west coast, plus a few trips to eastern and Midwestern states, performing in Assembly of God

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*McPherson and the Making of Modern Pentecostalism, 1890-1926* (Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2011); and Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

temples associated with McPherson.<sup>46</sup> At some point during the 1940s, Ho‘opi‘i divorced, and in 1948 he remarried to Anna Eleanor Hutchinson (1913-2003) of Seattle, Washington.<sup>47</sup> The couple moved from Los Angeles to Seattle in 1952, where Ho‘opi‘i lived for the remainder of his life.<sup>48</sup> Around this time, Ho‘opi‘i befriended Bud Tutmarc, a fellow steel guitarist and gospel music enthusiast. Tutmarc began the “Gospel Monday Musicales” in the early 1950s at the Moore Theater, Masonic Temple, and Civic Auditorium in Seattle, a weekly program on which Ho‘opi‘i would regularly perform.<sup>49</sup> Ho‘opi‘i’s health quickly deteriorated after 1950, and by 1953 he had grown blind due to complications from diabetes. Despite his years of recording and film work, he faced financial hardship during this period, exacerbated by medical costs; during one of Tutmarc’s Musicales on September 28, 1953, which would prove to be Ho‘opi‘i’s last public performance, Tutmarc solicited donations from the audience in order to help Ho‘opi‘i pay his rent.<sup>50</sup> Ho‘opi‘i died November 16, 1953 in Seattle and is now buried in Forest Lawn Memorial Park in the Hollywood Hills.<sup>51</sup>

### **Continuities with Country Music**

Relying primarily upon Ho‘opi‘i’s pre-1938 recordings, I now consider the shared characteristics between Ho‘opi‘i’s work and contemporaneous country music, focusing on three

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<sup>46</sup> Rockwell, liner notes to *Classic Hawaiian Steel Guitar Performances*.

<sup>47</sup> Marriage year of 1948 is given by Rockwell, liner notes to *Classic Hawaiian Steel Guitar Performances*. The married couple traveled together on the SS *Lurline* in 1948, which helps to corroborate this as the marriage year. See Manifest for SS *Lurline*, July 1948. The couple had no children. Dates for Anna Eleanor Hutchinson-Ho‘opi‘i are from Melinda St., “Anna Eleanor Hutchinson Ho‘opi‘i,” <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=55844122&ref=acom> (accessed May 9, 2017).

<sup>48</sup> Rockwell, liner notes to *Classic Hawaiian Steel Guitar Performances*.

<sup>49</sup> Brandon Tutmarc, “Bud Tutmarc, July 11th, 1924-December 4th, 2006,” <http://www.budtutmarc.com/index.html> (accessed May 10, 2017).

<sup>50</sup> See the live recording “Testimony by Sol Hoopii (9/28/1953),” on *Sol Hoopii: From the Personal Collection of Bud Tutmarc*.

<sup>51</sup> Rich H., “Sol Hoopii.”

areas—technological innovations, eclectic repertory, and performance style. Ho‘opi‘i played an important role in the transformations of the steel guitar during the 1920s and 1930s as performers of all styles sought the most efficient, versatile open tunings and, more importantly, greater volume to compete with increasingly large ensembles. Ho‘opi‘i was an early innovator in tunings. He experimented with several different options during his career, eventually coming to favor the “C# Minor tuning” (open strings B D E G# C# E). Although it is difficult to ascertain whether Ho‘opi‘i was the first to develop this tuning (unlikely), he was one of its early adopters.<sup>52</sup> The tuning’s popularity spread among the community of West Coast steel guitarists over the course of several decades and eventually became one of the preferred tunings among country steel guitarists by midcentury.

Ho‘opi‘i also helped to popularize several of the top steel guitar models developed during the 1920s and 1930s, including those with electronic amplification. In 1926, the National String Instrument Company attracted financing for their acoustic “tricone” resonator guitar only after Ho‘opi‘i performed on a prototype for investors at a Los Angeles party.<sup>53</sup> While Ho‘opi‘i did not record with the electric steel until 1935, he began performing on electric models as early as 1932. In that same year, he helped George Beauchamp secure a patent for the “electric fry pan” steel guitar, traveling with the inventor to Washington, D.C. to demonstrate the instrument’s capabilities to skeptical patent officers; Beauchamp received his patent on August 10, 1937, and the “electric fry pan” model subsequently came to be favored by many steel guitarists.<sup>54</sup> Ho‘opi‘i

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<sup>52</sup> Liner notes for Sol Hoopii, *Master of the Hawaiian Guitar, Volume One*, Rounder 1024, CD, 1991.

<sup>53</sup> For his performance at this private party, Ho‘opi‘i was paid \$500 (\$6,887 in 2017 dollars) by National’s founders, George Beauchamp, John Doyera, and Rudy Dopyera. Troutman, 135. Conversion amount is based on the CPI Inflation Calculator available on the website of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm) (accessed May 8, 2017).

<sup>54</sup> This history is recounted in more detail in John Troutman, 135-7.

was also involved in several endorsement deals for various steel guitar companies in the 1930s and 1940s, suggesting his notoriety among professional and amateur players.<sup>55</sup>

Ho‘opi‘i’s late-career turn to religious material notwithstanding, his recorded repertory divides into three overarching categories. The first is traditional Hawaiian music, usually with Hawaiian-language lyrics and often of uncertain authorship dating to the nineteenth-century.<sup>56</sup> The second category, comprising a plurality of Ho‘opi‘i’s recordings, consists of newly-composed songs written about Hawaii, usually with a combination of English and Hawaiian lyrics. These are the so-called *hapa haole* songs—a Hawaiian phrase meaning “half-white.”<sup>57</sup> The songs were composed primarily by white mainlanders, often with a connection to Tin Pan Alley publishing companies. As the name “half-white” implies, these songs are in a hybrid style that incorporates superficial exoticist markers of Hawaiian-ness, such as pentatonic melodies and glissandi, within European-derived harmonic and formal structures typical of most Tin Pan Alley compositions of the period. The vast majority of *hapa haole* songs recorded by Ho‘opi‘i were composed by three white men who dominated the *hapa haole* genre during the 1910s through 1930s: Charles E. King, Johnny Noble, and Harry Owens. Aspiring professional musicians living on the Islands were typically expected to perform the songs as part of the nascent Hawaiian tourist industry. As a result, this repertory was regarded with ambivalence by many Native Hawaiian musicians; yet over time, the line between “authentic” or traditional Hawaiian song and the *hapa haole* has become increasingly blurred as several *hapa haole* songs have achieved

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<sup>55</sup> Photographs of Ho‘opi‘i endorsing Dickerson and Rickenbacker guitars appear in Rockwell, liner notes to *Classic Hawaiian Steel Guitar Performances*.

<sup>56</sup> It is worth remembering that this repertory was also a product of earlier colonial encounters, particularly Christian missionizing and maritime trade. See Elizabeth Buck, *Paradise Remade: The Politics of Culture and History in Hawai‘i* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); and James Revell Carr, *Hawaiian Music in Motion: Mariners, Missionaries, and Minstrels* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

<sup>57</sup> For historical discussion and critique of the *hapa haole* genre, see Troutman, 208-14.

canonical status among Hawaiian musicians. Ho‘opi‘i seems to have performed and recorded these songs as a strictly commercial venture, because as a Native Hawaiian he was perhaps expected to do so, and not because he felt any particular fondness for the repertory.

The third category, for which Ho‘opi‘i evidently felt the greatest attraction and which most interests me for this chapter, was contemporary popular music of the mainland United States. Today we would class many of these pieces as ragtime, blues, jazz, and/or Tin Pan Alley pop; this diversity suggests Ho‘opi‘i’s versatility as a musician as well as the fluidity of musical styles during this period. Ho‘opi‘i recorded around fifty pieces in this vein, and I have given here a selection of some of the most well-known titles and composers among them:

- “Charleston” (James P. Johnson)
- “Farewell Blues” (Paul Mares, Leon Roppolo, and Elmer Schoebel)
- “I Ain’t Got Nobody” (Roger A. Graham and Spencer Williams)
- “I Like You” (Andy Iona and Sam Koki)
- “Fascinating Rhythm” (George Gershwin)
- “Oh, Lady Be Good” (George and Ira Gershwin)
- “An Orange Grove in California” (Irving Berlin)
- “Singing the Blues” (Bix Beiderbecke)
- “St. Louis Blues” (W. C. Handy)
- “Stack O’Lee Blues” [“Stagger Lee”] (traditional)
- “Twelfth Street Rag” (Euday L. Bowman)
- “Wang Wang Blues” (Henry Busse, Gussie Mueller, Theron E. Johnson, and Leo Wood)

The goal for Ho‘opi‘i seems not to have been recreating these pieces with a Hawaiian flair—perhaps something akin to “jazzing the classics.” Beyond the presence of the steel guitar, the performances are generally free of the overt exoticizing musical gestures found in *hapa haole* repertory. Instead, these recordings reveal Ho‘opi‘i applying the steel guitar to new repertoires, developing new techniques to craft an adventurous, idiosyncratic approach to steel guitar performance. While record companies may have encouraged Ho‘opi‘i to record this particular material, since the pieces had already proven profitable by other artists, Ho‘opi‘i was ready to oblige. According to Ho‘opi‘i’s friend Ernie Coker,

Sol considered himself more of a jazz and blues performer than a Hawaiian musician. [...] He was a blues and jazz man, and if you got him off the stage and sitting in his living room at home, he's sitting there playing "St. Louis Blues" and "Sophisticated Swing," and like that. In some respects, he wasn't too popular among the true-blue, dyed-in-the-wool Hawaiians, because he went so far away from the traditional Hawaiian music. If you sat and listened to Sol Ho'opi'i's riffs, just imagine he's playing a trumpet. All of that fast fingering and stuff that he's doing are trumpet ripples.<sup>58</sup>

Coker here links Ho'opi'i to jazz and blues, which are typically perceived as predominantly African American genres. But much of Ho'opi'i's repertory transcended lines of genre and race, finding a home among jazz, blues, pop, and country musicians. For example, the folksong "Stack O'Lee," or "Stagger Lee," recorded by Ho'opi'i in 1926 and again in 1938, exists in literally hundreds of recordings by black and white musicians during the first half of the twentieth century. Table 1.3 offers additional examples of this trend in Ho'opi'i's repertory. As Karl Hagstrom Miller has argued, black and white popular musicians in the early twentieth-century United States actually drew from a vast shared repertory.<sup>59</sup> While Miller's narrative is primarily biracial and does not consider the repertories of Native Hawaiian musicians, Ho'opi'i too participated in this phenomenon.

Beyond shared repertory with country musicians, however, Ho'opi'i's recordings also resonate stylistically with country music recordings—that is, they *sound* remarkably similar. This is due in large part to the prevalence of string instruments in early country music. The steel guitar could be easily assimilated alongside the banjo, fiddle, and guitar. Moreover, the nasality and emotionalism associated with country music found a timbral equivalent in the similarly "twangy" and "crying" steel guitar.

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Rockwell, liner notes to *Classic Hawaiian Steel Guitar Performances*.

<sup>59</sup> Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).



**Table 1.3: Sol Ho‘opi‘i Repertory Recorded by His Labelmates at Columbia, Brunswick, and Decca (1926-1941)**

Song Title	Artists sold as “Popular”	Artists sold as “Race”	Artists sold as “Country”
“Farewell Blues”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gus Mulcay (408-H)</li> <li>• The Charleston Chasers (1539-D)</li> <li>• Ted Lewis and His Band (2029-D)</li> <li>• Mills Merry Makers (7121-V)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Georgia Washboard Stompers (De 7003)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clayton McMichen’s Georgia Wildcats (De 5436)</li> </ul>
“Feelin’ No Pain”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Charleston Chasers (1229-D)</li> </ul>		
“I Ain’t Got Nobody”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raderman’s Roysterers (48-H)</li> <li>• The Arkansas Travellers (505-H)</li> <li>• Ruth Etting (1312-D)</li> <li>• Ted Lewis and His Band (1428-D)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bessie Smith (14095-D)</li> <li>• Hot Lips Page (De 7714)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roy Evans (15272-D)</li> </ul>
“Oh, Lady Be Good”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carl Fenton’s Orchestra (Br 2790)</li> <li>• Ben Bernie and His Orchestra (Vo X9775, X9814, Vo 14955)</li> <li>• Louisiana Rhythm Kings (Br 4706)</li> </ul>		
“Right or Wrong”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jane Gray (646-H)</li> <li>• Art Gillham (1540-D)</li> <li>• Louisiana Collegians (5002-C)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clint Jones (14322-D)</li> </ul>	
“St. Louis Blues”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frank Ferera-John Paaluhi (339-D)</li> <li>• Gus Mulcay (408-H)</li> <li>• Fletcher Henderson and His Orchestra [pseud. The Dixie Stompers] (451-H)</li> <li>• Johnny O’Brien (1749-D)</li> <li>• The Aaron Sisters (2699-D)</li> <li>• Frankie Trumbauer and His Orchestra (2729-D)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bessie Smith (14064-D)</li> <li>• Virginia Childs [pseud. Daisy Douglas] (14175-D)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clayton McMichen (15190-D)</li> <li>• Milton Brown (De 5070)</li> <li>• Pete Cassell (De 5954)</li> </ul>
“Stack O’Lee Blues”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Duke Ellington and His Orchestra (as The Washingtonians) (601-H)</li> </ul>		
“Ten Tiny Toes”			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jimmie Davis (De 5349)</li> </ul>
“Tin Roof Blues”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ted Lewis and His Band (439-D)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wingy Manone (De 7425)</li> </ul>	

**Table 1.3: Sol Ho‘opi‘i Repertory Recorded by His Labelmates at Columbia, Brunswick, and Decca (1926-1941) (cont.)**

Song Title	Artists sold as “Popular”	Artists sold as “Race”	Artists sold as “Country”
“12th Street Rag”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Johnny Marvin (as Honey Duke) (115-H)</li> <li>• Georgia Cotton Pickers (6064-G, 7090-V)</li> </ul>		
“Wang-Wang Blues”			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clayton McMichen’s Georgia Wildcats (De 5646)</li> </ul>
“Yes Sir, That’s My Baby”			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dixie Demons (De 5163)</li> </ul>

Country steel guitarists like Jerry Byrd, Cliff Carlisle, Don Helms, Leon McAuliffe, Joaquin Murphey, Herb Remington, and Roy Smeck have all cited Native Hawaiian steel guitarists—and Ho‘opi‘i in particular—as influential, with some players admitting to copying Ho‘opi‘i’s solos note-for-note.<sup>60</sup>

One particularly powerful example of this sonic overlap can be heard in two recordings of the song “Ten Tiny Toes”—Ho‘opi‘i’s recording from 1933, and a 1937 recording by hillbilly act Jimmie Davis, with Charles Mitchell on steel guitar.<sup>61</sup> Both recordings alternate between vocals and steel guitar solos on the standard 16-bar, AABA form. Backing instrumentation in both consists of steel guitar and a chugging ukulele accompaniment. Beyond trivial differences of tempo and key, Ho‘opi‘i’s solos are more virtuosic and improvisatory, while Mitchell hews

<sup>60</sup> See quotes from Jerry Byrd (28), Don Helms (60), and Herb Remington (117) in Andy Volk, *Lap Steel Guitar* (Anaheim, CA: Centerstream, 2003); Cliff Carlisle and Henry Gilbert, interview by Douglas B. Green (transcript), July 11, 1974, OH30-LC, 7-8, FLACMHOF; discussion of Leon McAuliffe in Lorene Ruymar, *The Hawaiian Steel Guitar and Its Great Hawaiian Musicians* (Anaheim Hills, CA: Centerstream, 1996), 50; discussion of Smeck in liner notes to Sol Hoopii, *Master of the Hawaiian Guitar, Volume One*. According to these liner notes, Don Helms also copied one of Ho‘opi‘i’s solos for a recording with Hank Williams. Unfortunately the author does not mention specific song titles, and I have been unable to independently verify this information.

<sup>61</sup> Davis recorded the song on February 17, 1937 in Dallas. Session information can be found in Michel Ruppli, *The Decca Labels: A Discography: Volume 2: The Eastern and Southern Sessions (1934-1942)* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 829. Other session musicians included Bill Harper (fiddle), Tex Swaim (guitar), Ova Mitchell (ukulele), and Hershel Woodal (bass). Both versions of the song are available on YouTube: Sol Ho‘opi‘i, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMFdu-r3IV4>; and Jimmie Davis, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRmywmmtQGY> (both accessed May 9, 2017).

more closely to the melody. Vocals also distinguish these two recordings; Ho‘opi‘i alternates between soloist and vocal trio, while Davis sings the entire piece solo, arguably with a more nasal delivery. Despite these small differences, however, the similarities in arrangement, and particularly the prominence and timbre of the steel guitar make for a nearly identical sonic experience. Given the relative small number of recordings of this particular song, as well as the chronology of these two recordings, it seems likely that Davis and Mitchell used Ho‘opi‘i’s recording as a model in crafting their own country music version.

A comparison of three recordings of the piece “Farewell Blues” reveals similar sonic resonances between Ho‘opi‘i’s work and that of country musicians. The recordings are Ho‘opi‘i’s recording from 1926; a 1951 recording by the country/bluegrass ensemble the Foggy Mountain Boys, headed by Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs; and the third by the Duke Ellington Orchestra from 1935.<sup>62</sup> While each offers a very different, mutually distinctive arrangement of the piece, the versions by Ho‘opi‘i and the Foggy Mountain Boys are much closer in style to one another, while Ellington’s arrangement is sonically quite different. The stylistic similarities between the Ho‘opi‘i and Foggy Mountain Boys versions again have much to do with the timbral possibilities afforded by string instruments, which are absent in the wind and brass version by Ellington. The plucked steel guitar and banjo, the respective lead instruments in the Ho‘opi‘i and Foggy Mountain Boys recordings, yield a “twangy” timbre that is regarded as a crucial sonic characteristic of much country music. At the same time, all three recordings have their own unique idiosyncrasies and sound quite different from one another, suggesting how arbitrary taxonomies of musical style often are.

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<sup>62</sup> These recordings are all available on YouTube: Sol Ho‘opi‘i, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9DpR7gPBYo>; The Foggy Mountain Boys, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McvTz0j\\_Pt0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McvTz0j_Pt0); and Duke Ellington, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbYDtYXSTJE> (all accessed May 9, 2017).

## Marking the Steel Guitar as Exotic

Although Ho‘opi‘i made clear contributions to early country music and overlapped stylistically with the genre, he was never regarded as a country musician in his day. His work was instead subsumed by the explosion of Hawaiian exoticism following U.S. colonization of Hawai‘i in 1898. In the years leading up to eventual statehood in 1959, the songs, books, films, and other popular media about Hawai‘i often tapped into Americans’ fascination with its ostensibly exotic status. Hawai‘i was represented as a carefree tropical paradise, while its peoples were likewise perceived as easygoing and peaceful, posing little resistance to U.S. imperialist aims.<sup>63</sup> Against this backdrop of Hawaiian exoticism, Ho‘opi‘i’s recordings were typically cataloged in record labels’ popular or “Hawaiian” series, even as the same repertory by different performers was cataloged in the emergent segregated categories of “hillbilly” and “race records.” In films, which linked Ho‘opi‘i’s music to exotic settings and racialized narratives, the designation as a foreign Other was even more overt.

For most mainland Americans, the first musical encounters with ostensibly Hawaiian culture came from the music publishing houses of New York. Tin Pan Alley began releasing songs with Hawaiian-themed lyrics in the 1890s, such as “Ma Honolulu Queen” (1896), “My Honolulu Lady” (1898), and “My Gal from Honolulu” (1899). As Charles Hiroshi Garrett has shown, the earliest of these songs often drew upon the dialect and musical style of the so-called “coon songs” of the late 1800s, a homogenizing gesture which conflated Hawaiians and African Americans under the same rubric of racial Otherness. As shown in Figure 1.2, this was also true of sheet music iconography, in which blackface caricatures were deployed in apparently exotic Hawaiian settings.

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<sup>63</sup> Charles Hiroshi Garrett, *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 170.

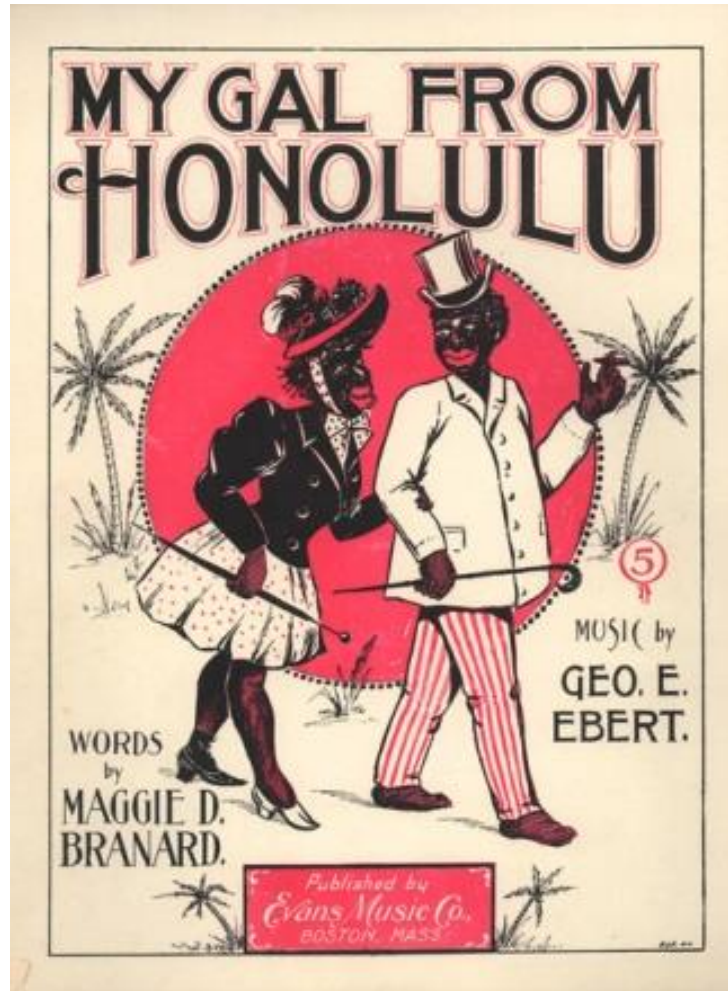


Figure 1.2: This sheet music cover used the stereotypical “coon song” image of ridiculous blackface aristocrats, juxtaposing them with palm trees meant to signal the exoticism of Hawai‘i. In so doing, images like this conflated the racial Otherness of African Americans and Native Hawaiians. George E. Ebert and Maggie D. Branard, “My Gal from Honolulu” (Boston: Evans Music, 1899). Reproduced from the African American Sheet Music Collection, Brown University Library Center for Digital Scholarship.

As Hawaiian instruments became more well-known in the U.S., however, some songs attempted to approximate the effects of steel guitar through piano glissandi and suspensions.<sup>64</sup> One of the most prominent popular demonstrations of Hawaiian exoticism in the early twentieth century was Richard Walton Tully’s 1911 play *The Bird of Paradise*, which premiered in Los Angeles and later ran on Broadway. With a plot similar to Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* (1904), the play

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 172.

spoke to the budding sense of voyeurism, sexual taboo, and exoticism that Americans had begun to associate with Hawai‘i while again reinforcing imperialist attitudes regarding colonialist inferiority and difference as well as racial concerns over miscegenation.<sup>65</sup>

American fascination with Hawaiian culture also created a market for its music, and enterprising performers and record companies rushed to fill the demand. The Thomas Edison Company began releasing ethnographic recordings of Hawaiian music as early as 1899, followed in 1904 by commercial recordings from the Victor Recording Company.<sup>66</sup> Some Native Hawaiian musicians toured the country extensively during the early decades of the twentieth century, often in productions of *The Bird of Paradise*.<sup>67</sup> Others played the vaudeville circuit, coming into contact with jazz and country performers, leading to some early moments of stylistic cross-pollination.<sup>68</sup>

Despite this early exposure, the steel guitar first gained widespread notoriety in the United States during the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco, which celebrated the completion of the Panama Canal and which served as a conspicuous demonstration of the United States' burgeoning imperial power.<sup>69</sup> The Exposition included a Hawaiian Pavilion, organized by the colonial government, as well as concession areas with performances by Native Hawaiian musicians and dancers. During the Exhibition's seven-month run, an estimated seventeen million

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 177-8.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>68</sup> The U.S. careers of several first-generation Native Hawaiian steel guitarists are detailed in chapter 3 of Troutman.

<sup>69</sup> On the imperialist impulses of the Exposition, see Sarah J. Moore, *Empire on Display: San Francisco's Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013).

American visitors heard the steel guitar for the first time.<sup>70</sup> The conflation of the steel guitar with specifically Hawaiian themes, even absent song lyrics, continued through at least the 1960s with the marketing of Hawaiian “easy-listening” albums and several Hawai‘i-based films by the likes of Bing Crosby and Elvis Presley, in which the steel guitar served as a convenient symbol of Hawai‘i, quickly setting the musical scene.<sup>71</sup>

The instrument’s popularity with U.S. audiences led to the proliferation of steel guitar manufacturers, door-to-door salesmen, and method books. Particularly prominent was the Oahu Publishing Company, which boasted 1,200 instructional studios with around 200,000 students worldwide, most of them in the mainland United States.<sup>72</sup> The company embraced a vertically integrated business model; door-to-door salesmen would convince families to sign up their children for a year of lessons with the promise of a “free” guitar at the end of the year. The company also sold Oahu-brand sheet music, accessories like steel bars and picks, and a national magazine. Oahu-sponsored recitals and competitions helped to foster a sense of community among aspiring young steel guitarists, and the most capable performers were encouraged to open their own Oahu franchises and give lessons upon successful completion of their instruction.

Many of the earliest country music steel guitarists emerged from Oahu’s business model, but several also studied with Native Hawaiian teachers and often toured with Hawaiian ensembles early in their careers.<sup>73</sup> Bob Dunn, who would later become one of the top American steel guitar virtuosos, first encountered the steel guitar at a Hawaiian music concert in his

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<sup>70</sup> Robert L. Stone, *Sacred Steel: Inside an African American Steel Guitar Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 54-5.

<sup>71</sup> Amy Ku‘uleialoha Stillman, “Textualizing Hawaiian Music,” *American Music* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 74.

<sup>72</sup> Information on the Oahu Publishing Company can be found in Troutman, 187-93.

<sup>73</sup> For example, see interviews with Marian Hall in Volk, 72; and Leon McAuliffe in Jean A. Boyd, *The Jazz of the Southwest: An Oral History of Western Swing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 117.

hometown of Kusa, Oklahoma; soon thereafter he began taking correspondence lessons with Walter Kolomoku.<sup>74</sup> The experience of Herb Remington, later steel guitarist for Bob Wills's Western swing ensemble, seems to have been typical:

They [door-to-door salesmen] came to the door with this thing, this guitar that they put on your lap. You had a metal bar in your hand and you would slide that thing up and down, and some of the noises on that just really excited me. I had to do that. So here we go again, lessons for that. Then Hawaiian music got my attention. Back then there were Hawaiian movies like *Song of the Island*, Betty Grable and Bing Crosby. And so the music was in the air, and movies, and I was familiar with that and how that steel guitar sounded. I really loved it. After a while, I got proficient enough that I got an electric steel guitar and then formed my own little Hawaiian group. Now, here we are back in Indiana, about as far from Hawaii as you can get.<sup>75</sup>

By 1930, then, the steel guitar had become coded in the American listener's mind as a signifier of Hawai'i and all the exotic cultural associations that came with that romanticized paradise. Even ethnomusicologists perpetuated an exoticist view of Hawai'i and its music. Orme Johnson, in his 1939 organological study of ancient Hawaiian music, summed up this attitude rather succinctly:

Hawaiian music—what do these words bring to your mind? Probably a picture of flowered-shirted natives sitting around, strumming *ukuleles* or singing to the gliding tones of the steel guitar. The melodies themselves have an appealing charm, a certain melancholy that catches at the throat, and a peculiar novelty that gives them a character all their own. Who can hear the wistful strains of *Aloha Oe* without feeling the sweet sorrow of parting?<sup>76</sup>

Released during this fad for Hawaiian exoticism, Ho'opi'i's recordings reveal the racial paradoxes of the recording industry in the 1920s and 1930s. These decades saw the emergence of segregated "Race" and "Hillbilly" or "Old-Time" catalogs by leading record companies. The idea among record executives was that black consumers would want to hear music performed by

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<sup>74</sup> Kevin Coffey, "Steel Colossus: The Bob Dunn Story," in *The Country Reader: Twenty-five Years of the Journal of Country Music*, ed. Paul Kingsbury, 91-10. (Nashville, TN: The Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 1996), 93.

<sup>75</sup> Boyd, 128-9.

<sup>76</sup> Orme Johnson, "Musical Instruments of Ancient Hawaii," *Musical Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (October 1939): 498.



blacks, and rural whites would want to hear music performed by rural whites; developing separate catalogs would allow a company to open up new, previously underserved markets and to advertise their products more efficiently and effectively to those target demographics.<sup>77</sup> The catch-all “popular” catalog, intended to serve white, middle-class tastes, still comprised the majority of a label’s recorded output.

Ho‘opi‘i’s repertory challenged this new binary taxonomy, however, even though it overlapped stylistically with elements of jazz, blues, and country music. Instead of the “race” or “hillbilly” designation, Ho‘opi‘i was much more apt to be cataloged as a novelty artist within a company’s popular music series or, in some cases, placed within a separate, smaller “Hawaiian” or “ethnic” series. Some of these racial categories were developed by the major companies during the course of Ho‘opi‘i’s recording career. His earliest years with a major label were spent at Columbia, from 1926 through 1931.<sup>78</sup> By the time of his first recordings, Columbia had already established a race records series (13000-D, 14000-D) and a “Familiar Tunes Old and New” series (15000-D), a label which was synonymous with “hillbilly” and “country.”<sup>79</sup> However, through January 1929, Ho‘opi‘i’s recordings were always listed in the popular series, regardless of whether the pieces were in the Hawaiian language, *hapa haole* compositions, or pieces from other popular traditions. For example, Ho‘opi‘i’s recording of “I Ain’t Got Nobody (And Nobody Cares for Me)” was released in Columbia’s popular catalog; by comparison, the recording of this same song by African American blues singer Bessie Smith was released under

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<sup>77</sup> See chapter 6, “Race Records and Old-Time Music: The Creation of Two Marketing Categories in the 1920s” in Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound*.

<sup>78</sup> For Ho‘opi‘i’s recording dates and catalog numbers, I rely upon Rockwell, *Hawaiian and Hawaiian Guitar Records*.

<sup>79</sup> Tim Brooks, *The Columbia Master Discography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 1:26-7. “Familiar Tunes Old and New” designation mentioned in Patrick Huber, “Black Hillbillies: African American Musicians on Old-Time Records, 1924-1932,” in *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold, 19-81 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 34.

the race series (14095-D), while the recording by yodeler Roy Evans was released under the hillbilly series (15272-D).<sup>80</sup> In 1929, Columbia introduced a new, short-lived “Hawaiian” series (40000-D).<sup>81</sup> All of Ho‘opi‘i’s recordings for Columbia in 1930 and 1931 were released in this series, although they were all Hawaiian-language pieces and/or *hapa haole* compositions (such as Johnny Noble’s “Royal Hawaiian Hotel”) rather than more conventional popular material. During Ho‘opi‘i’s tenure at Brunswick, from 1933 to 1936, his recordings were likewise classified in either the “Popular” or “Hawaiian” series, placed in one category or the other seemingly at random, but never in Brunswick’s “Dixie” or “Race” series.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Ho‘opi‘i’s recordings for Decca (1934-5 and 1938) were classified under its generic pop series rather than those dedicated to country or other ethnic categories.<sup>83</sup> The habit of cataloging Ho‘opi‘i as popular rather than race or country reflects not only the mainstream acceptance of Hawaiian exoticism, but also the demographic profile of the record-buying public. In the mainland U.S., African American and rural white consumers far outnumbered Native Hawaiians. As a result, it

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<sup>80</sup> For catalog numbers, see Brian Rust, *The Columbia Master Book Discography, Volume III: Principal U.S. Matrix Series, 1924-1934* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 38, 258. A singer in the mold of Jimmie Rodgers, Roy Evans’s racial identity is unknown. Huber, 35.

<sup>81</sup> A helpful, user-generated online database of the short-lived 40000-D series is Malcolm Rockwall and Tyrone Settlemier, “COLUMBIA 40000-D 78rpm Numerical Listing Discography,” *The Online Discographical Project*, October 14, 2014, <http://www.78discography.com/COL40000D.htm> (accessed May 10, 2017).

<sup>82</sup> Brunswick had a more robust, diverse classification system than Columbia during these years. In addition to its “Dixie” (100, 1000), “Race” (7000), “Hawaiian” (55000), and “Popular” (various numbers) series, it also had several smaller “ethnic” categories, such as “Jewish,” “Cantonese,” “French/Cajun,” “German,” and several others. Ross Laird, *Brunswick Records: A Discography of Recordings, 1916-1931; Volume 1: New York Sessions, 1916-1926* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 41-2.

<sup>83</sup> The 1934-5 recordings were released by The Moana Serenaders, a group Ho‘opi‘i is believed to have directed, although he did not play steel guitar on the recordings. The 1938 recordings are billed as Sol Hoopii’s Novelty Five. Decca introduced its 5000 series for country musicians in September 1934. All other recordings prior to this time were cataloged in one continuous series. In 1935, new ethnic series were introduced: Cajun, which included several country musicians (17000), Mexican (10000), Irish (12000), and Scottish (14000). Cary Ginell, *The Decca Hillbilly Discography, 1927-1945* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), xiii-xiv. Decca’s 7000 series, also inaugurated in September 1934, was designated for race records. Charles Garrod, *Decca Records: 5000 & 7000 Series* (Zephyrhills, FL: Joyce Record Club, 1993), 43. See also the three volume discography Charles Garrod, *Decca: Los Angeles Master Numbers*, 3 vols. (Zephyrhills, FL: Joyce Record Club, 1992, 1993, 1994).

made economic sense to pursue these sizable minority groups via parallel markets with directed advertising, while the relatively low numbers of Native Hawaiians discouraged similar efforts in the field of Hawaiian music. At any rate, musical style was generally an afterthought in the construction of these categories.

But while Ho‘opi‘i’s recordings were spared the “race” label, his music was still racialized, and thus positioned as distinct from white “country.” The use of Ho‘opi‘i’s music in exoticist films particularly reinforced notions of Hawaiian racial Otherness, even when the repertory involved came from non-Hawaiian sources. Two examples are particularly illuminating. The first is Ho‘opi‘i’s work for the 1932 animated short *Betty Boop’s Bamboo Isle*. The opening titles credit an ensemble called “the Royal Samoans” as the cartoon’s musical performers, but some of the recordings used throughout the short are clearly by Ho‘opi‘i’s trio; perhaps Ho‘opi‘i joined the Royal Samoans for some of the pieces by this larger ensemble (although, of course, he was not Samoan). The short film opens with a brief live-action performance by the Royal Samoans, a bare-chested, all-male ensemble, fronted by a female hula dancer (see Figure 1.3). The music is an upbeat, major-key piece featuring guitar, steel guitar, ukulele, handclaps, and group singing in a foreign language, punctuated by vocal shouts that seem to be directed towards the sexually-provocative hula dancing. There is a steel guitarist seated with the group, but it does not appear to be Ho‘opi‘i. At any rate, the steel guitar is barely audible within the context of the large ensemble. This scene sets an exoticist tone for the remainder of the film that is unambiguous.



Figure 1.3: The Royal Samoans performing in the opening live-action sequence of *Betty Boop's Bamboo Isle* (1932), fronted by a female hula dancer. Note also the presence of a steel guitarist, seated just right of the dancer. Still image from *Betty Boop's Bamboo Isle* (dir. Dave Fleischer, Paramount Publix Corporation, 8 minutes, 1932).

The main action of the cartoon begins with the dog-like character Bimbo sailing the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. His frenzied ship soon runs aground on an unidentified island in the Pacific—a stereotypically enchanted but dangerous place with beautiful waterfalls, magical singing trees, unfriendly natives, and the alluring grass-skirted Betty Boop, whose bronzed skin in this short distinguishes her from the lily white Betty of other installments in the series (see Figure 1.4). In the opening sequence during which Bimbo is sailing, we hear Ho‘opi‘i’s recording of “Twelfth Street Rag,” composed by Euday L. Bowman and published in 1914. Although the tune and song title originally referenced a street in Kansas City, Missouri, the song is here repurposed in steel guitar arrangement as a sonic signifier of the Pacific.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> The story of the song’s origin is recounted in Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop—A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 32-3.

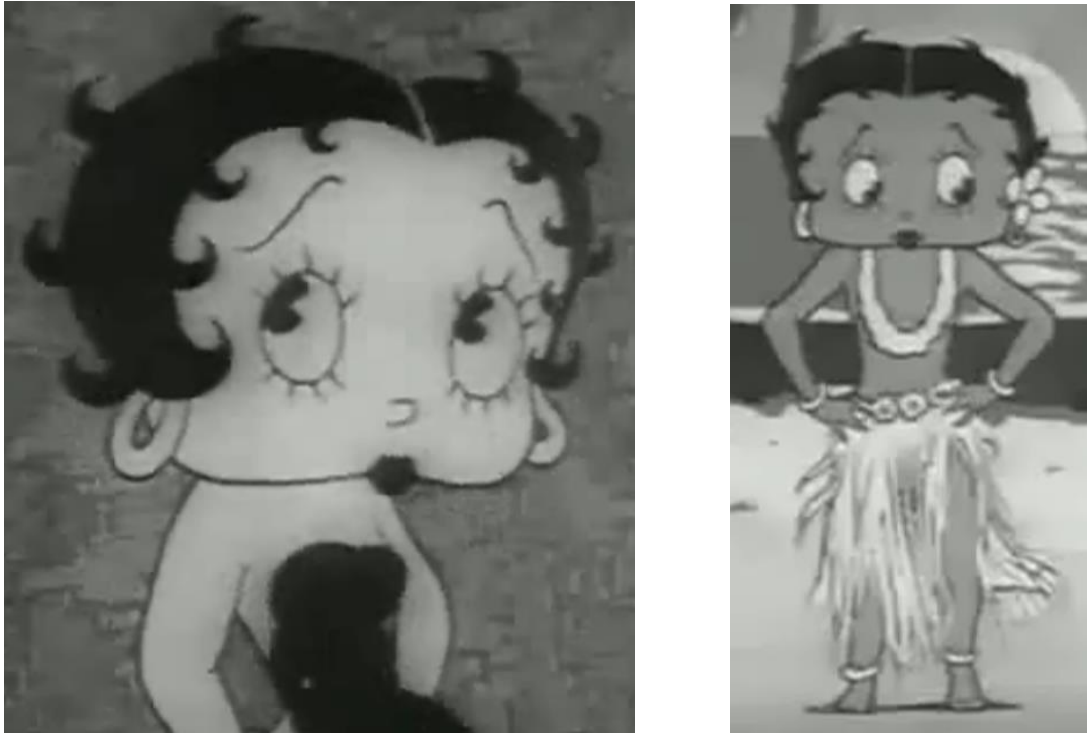


Figure 1.4: The white Betty Boop as she typically appears in animated shorts (left) and the bronzed Betty Boop as she appears in *Betty Boop's Bamboo Isle* (right). Their juxtaposition here draws our attention to racial difference as highlighted by the film. Both still images taken from the short film *Betty Boop's Bamboo Isle* (1932).

The connection between steel guitar repertory and racial difference is made explicit later in the film. About to be accosted by stereotypically menacing Pacific Islanders, Bimbo tries to blend in by smearing mud on his white face, resulting in a kind of blackface performance.<sup>85</sup> This transformation is shown in Figure 1.5. He succeeds in gaining the Islanders' trust and admiration after singing a song, and in the following scene we see him crowned ruler. The music during the coronation is Ho'opi'i's recording of the piece "Chimes," so named for its use of upper string harmonics. Although neither piece specifically referenced Hawai'i, their presence in the film served to position Ho'opi'i's steel guitar music as exotic and thus racially distinct from more familiar white musical and cultural forms.

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<sup>85</sup> On the links between blackface minstrelsy and early animation, see Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

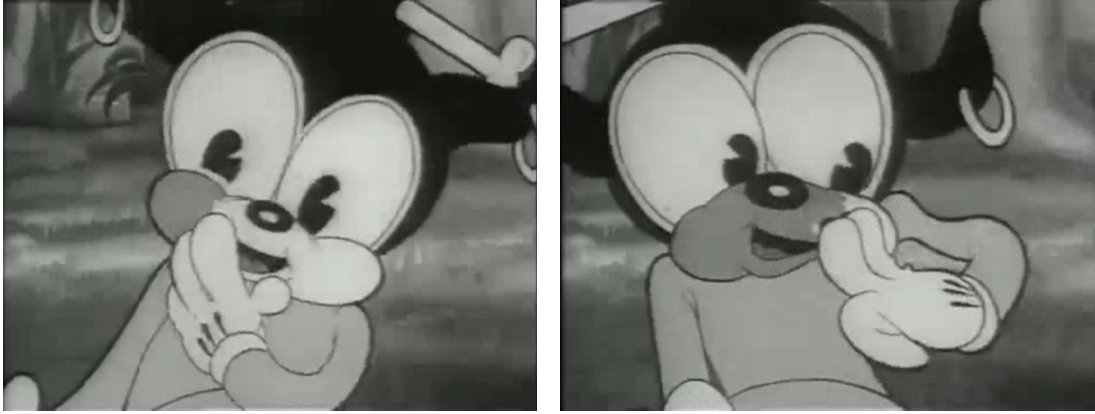


Figure 1.5: From left to right, Bimbo's transition from "white" to "Hawaiian" via the application of mud. This moment of masking resonates with blackface performance. Still images from the short *Betty Boop's Bamboo Isle* (1932).

While *Betty Boop's Bamboo Isle* highlights racial difference, particularly through reference to blackface minstrelsy, scenes in *Song of the Islands* comment explicitly on the seeming incompatibility of Hawaiian music and country. Released in 1942, the film is set in the fictional Pacific island of Ahmi-Oni. The Americans Jeff Harper (played by Victor Mature) and his comedic sidekick Rusty (Jack Oakie) travel to Ahmi-Oni to purchase land from Dennis O'Brien (Thomas Mitchell) on behalf of Jeff's father, who is a cattle rancher. While there, Jeff falls in love with O'Brien's daughter, Eileen (Betty Grable), and conflict ensues.<sup>86</sup> Ho'opi'i contributed at least one composition and appears onscreen with an ensemble of musicians. However, he is not explicitly acknowledged for these contributions; Harry Owens and His Royal Hawaiians are the only musicians billed in the film credits.

The musical scenes in the film are incidental to the plot, but they draw a stark contrast between the music of American cowboys and that of the Pacific.<sup>87</sup> When Jeff, Rusty, and

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<sup>86</sup> This plot summary paraphrased from Paul Penna, "Song of the Islands (1942)," IMDb, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0035361/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0035361/?ref_=nv_sr_1) (accessed May 10, 2017).

<sup>87</sup> Timothy D. Taylor's discussion of the 1997 album *Songs of the Hawaiian Cowboy/Na mele O Paniolo* echoes the racial tensions of *Song of the Islands*, demonstrating how more recent commercial categories like "country" and "world" perpetuate essentialist views of race and class. See the chapter "You Can Take 'Country' Out of the

O'Brien return to the ranch one evening, they overhear a group of six or seven Hawaiian ranchers—Ho‘opi‘i among them—singing a lilting melody in three-part harmony with accompaniment on guitar and ukulele.<sup>88</sup> The song, written by Ho‘opi‘i specifically for the film, is entitled “Hu‘i Mai.” The lyrics are in Hawaiian:<sup>89</sup>

Lyrics in film:

*Hu‘i mai ka kou  
Me na lio o wai mea  
Hui mai ka kou  
Me ke paniolo owai mea  
Hui ka kou  
Me ke kahu lio  
Hui mai ka kou  
Holo ae holo kai kalio  
O Hawaii nei*

English Translation:

*Come on home, folks  
With the horses of Waimea,  
Let's get together  
You cowboys of Waimea  
Let's get together  
With the care taker of horses  
Come on, boys, let's ride  
Over there, over here,  
Gidi yah-whoa  
And here we go*

Upon hearing the ranchers sing, Rusty asks, “What is that tune?” O'Brien explains that they are singing a cowboy song, and Rusty incredulously replies, “Cowboy song? *That's* a cowboy song?!?” He then makes his way over to the ranchers, asks for their “Gene Autry” guitar, and proceeds to perform for them a “gen-u-wine”—that is, American—cowboy song. Rusty then sings a hammy version of “Home on the Range” in a pompous, almost operatic voice

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Country, but It Will Never Be ‘World,’” in Timothy D. Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>88</sup> This scene is available on online: Greg Tutmarc, “Sol Hoopii Plays and Sings Home on the Range – Hawaiian Style,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjAtAwn0Q10> (accessed May 10, 2017).

<sup>89</sup> Attribution to Ho‘opi‘i, Hawaiian lyrics, and translation are given in Joy to Shurlock.

accompanied only by his own guitar picking. After this comedic performance, Rusty encourages the ranchers to learn the piece. Later in the film, the ranchers return to perform their version of “Home on the Range” for Rusty. At first, they hew closely to Rusty’s model, albeit with vocal harmony and accompanied by guitar, ukulele, and an opening flourish on steel guitar. But soon, much to Rusty’s chagrin, they begin to intersperse Hawaiian lyrics—“Home, home on the range/Where the deers and the antelopes play... Ya hula!”<sup>90</sup> Once again played for laughs, this Hawaiian version of the American cowboy song works to draw a stark line of musical difference between Hawaiians and white Americans.

### **Ho‘opi‘i in Country Music Historiography**

Pervasive media portrayals of Hawaiian exoticism like these contributed to the powerful racialization of the steel guitar as nonwhite. Racial distinctions were further reinforced via the creation of segregated record catalogs and early advertisements for country music that emphasized the music’s familiarity and ostensible roots in Anglo-Saxon or Appalachian folk traditions, thus implicitly valorizing the music as white.<sup>91</sup> Since then, country music historiography has by and large neglected the contributions of Native Hawaiian steel guitarists like Ho‘opi‘i to the genre. For example, in Bill C. Malone’s *Country Music, U.S.A.*, the standard history of the genre originally published in 1968 and now in its third revised edition (2010), steel guitar is briefly introduced early on in a chapter on “The Folk Background” of country music. Malone writes that:

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<sup>90</sup> The additional lyrics are attributed to film composer Mack Gordon and *hapa haole* specialist Harry Owens. Joy to Shurlock.

<sup>91</sup> See chapters 6 and 7, “Race Records and Old-Time Music: The Creation of Two Marketing Categories in the 1920s” and “Black Folk and Hillbilly Pop: Industry Enforcement of the Color Line,” in Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound*; and the chapter “Setting the Stage: Identifying and American Folk Music Heritage, 1900-1930” in Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).



Some instruments became known to folk musicians through their appearances in chautauqua or vaudeville performances, or in urban music clubs which flourished at the turn of the twentieth century. Some of these instruments had a foreign, and therefore exotic, aura about them. Hawaiian musicians began appearing in the United States shortly after the Islands became part of the American empire. After World War I such troupes took the country by storm, popularizing Hawaiian melodies and introducing the ukelele [*sic*] and steel guitar to American audiences. Fretted with a steel bar, the Hawaiian steel guitar emitted a melodious, but crying sound that has thrilled generations of country listeners.<sup>92</sup>

Only two native Hawaiian steel guitarists receive acknowledgment by Malone—Frank Ferera and Joe Kaipo—and then only in passing because they served as backing musicians for white country singers.<sup>93</sup> Even more telling is an interview conducted by country historian Douglas Green on behalf of the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1974. Green here interviews early country steel guitarist Cliff Carlisle as part of the Hall of Fame’s ongoing Oral History Collection.

**Douglas Green:** I wonder about the influence of the Hawaiian music. Where had you first heard it?

**Cliff Carlisle:** They [*sic*] was a fellow by the name of Sol Hoopii. You remember him?

**Green:** Hmm-mm [No].

**Carlisle:** Well, if you’re a record collector—looks like you would get ahold of some of these records through the Hall of Fame.

**Green:** I’m sure we’d have them there. I’m sure we’d have them.

**Carlisle:** Yeah. I thought this was for the college. This is for the Hall of Fame in Nashville.<sup>94</sup>

Carlisle goes on to claim Ho‘opi‘i as an indispensable influence on his own performance style. Yet as a leading historian of the country music at the time, Green’s apparent unfamiliarity with Ho‘opi‘i suggests the Hall of Fame’s inattention to the role of Native Hawaiian music and musicians within country music history. Carlisle’s confidence that the Hall of Fame would almost certainly have recordings by Ho‘opi‘i is actually undercut by Green’s feigned assurances. As a researcher at the Hall of Fame in 2014, I can vouch that they do now have a small handful

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<sup>92</sup> Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 3rd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 26.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>94</sup> Cliff Carlisle and Henry Gilbert, interview by Douglas B. Green (transcript), 7-8.

of recordings by Ho‘opi‘i, but archival collecting and museum exhibitions on the subject of Native Hawaiian musicians remain scarce. Even in its role as the most visible custodian of country music history, the Hall of Fame has not made documenting the early history of the steel guitar one of its priorities.

The last twenty-five years have seen a sustained effort among academic historians to address issues of race in country music. Books like Pamela Foster’s *My Country* (1998) and the edited collection *Hidden in the Mix* (2013) have recovered the histories of forgotten African American performers. Others, such as Anthony Harkins’s *Hillbilly* (2004), Pamela Fox’s *Natural Acts* (2009), and Karl Hagstrom Miller’s *Segregating Sound* (2010) all examine the ways in which country music’s whiteness has been actively constructed against notions of black culture.<sup>95</sup> Grappling with the racial binary instigated by 1920s recording companies, however, these studies can overlook other musicians of color, like Ho‘opi‘i, who participate in the same musical cultures but who fall outside of that binary.

Instead, most studies on Ho‘opi‘i and his contemporaries remain the work of steel guitar specialists like Bob Brozman, T. Malcolm Rockwell, Lorene Ruymar, and Tony Todaro.<sup>96</sup> Their work appears most often in online and print newsletters, magazines, CD liner notes, and illustrated guitar books. Although backed by meticulous research, these sources fall outside of academic musicology and sometimes lack needed context on histories of U.S. racism, empire, and industry. Recent monographs on Native Hawaiian musicians in the United States, most notably John Troutman’s 2016 book *Kīkā Kīla*, are still outliers within a country music historiography that is only now coming to terms with how interactions between black and white

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<sup>95</sup> I discuss several of these books in more detail in the introduction to the dissertation.

<sup>96</sup> Rockwell and Ruymar have been cited previously in this chapter. For others listed here, see Bob Brozman et al., *The History and Artistry of National Resonator Instruments* (Anaheim Hills, CA: Centerstream, 1998); and Tony Todaro, *The Golden Years of Hawaiian Entertainment* (Honolulu: Tony Todaro Publishing, 1974).

musicians have shaped the landscape of U.S. popular music.<sup>97</sup> As these recent studies suggest, much work remains to be done in documenting the influence of Native Hawaiian musicians upon country music and in assessing the complex implications of U.S. imperial history upon the genre's racial politics.

### **Assimilation Strategies and Conclusions**

Even today, the steel guitar can serve as a powerful signifier of Hawai'i in various musical contexts. Yet it loses this exotic status in country music. Given country's guiding discourse of rustic authenticity, which would seem to imply resistance to commercial influence and stylistic change, country music's ultimate embrace of the steel guitar is surprising.<sup>98</sup> Although a thorough exploration of the steel guitar's assimilation into country music is beyond the scope of this chapter, I offer here a few brief, tentative explanations. One simple reason is the increased public exposure and familiarity of the steel guitar as the Hawaiian fad dominated popular music in the 1920s and 1930s. As critic Abe Olman observed in *Billboard* in 1939, "Because Hawaiian music is comparatively new to our ears, it appears to be foreign in nature. But its enlarged use in coming years will become so common that it is destined to become a part of our own musical character."<sup>99</sup> As a string instrument, the steel guitar's timbre could also be more easily assimilated into the repertory of early string bands. And changes in technology,

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<sup>97</sup> Other scholars to discuss this early generation of Native Hawaiian steel guitarists include Timothy Miller and Anthony Lis. Gary Y. Okihiro, *Island World: A History of Hawai'i and the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) considers Ho'opi'i and other Native Hawaiian musicians from an ethnic studies perspective as part of the Hawaiian diaspora in the chapter "Poetry in Motion."

<sup>98</sup> On stylistic change in country music, see Peterson's discussions of "fabricating authenticity" and "institutionalization" in *Creating Country Music*, 4-10. Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, also offers helpful discussions on the role of commercialization and commercial values in shaping the music's sound, despite overtures to authenticity.

<sup>99</sup> In addition to the compositions of white performers like Harry Owens and Johnny Noble, Olman also noted the popularity of Native Hawaiian steel guitarists like Sol Ho'opi'i, especially on jukeboxes in public venues. Abe Olman, "The Songs of the Islands," *Billboard*, December 2, 1939.

particularly electronic amplification and the eventual development of the pedal steel guitar, helped to distance the instrument from its Hawaiian origins.<sup>100</sup>

All of these factors played a role, but also important was discursive work emphasizing the perceived elision between the microtonal inflections of the country singer and the “vocal” quality of steel guitar glissandi and vibrato. As Aaron A. Fox has suggested, the country singer’s voice remains a primary site for articulating personal and class identity, and thus authenticity.<sup>101</sup> In songs and publicity, country musicians and entrepreneurs reimagined the steel guitar as an expression of the performer’s “authentic” emotions, especially nostalgia and regret. To be sure, some songs by country musicians could still index the steel guitar as a marker of exoticism, such as Jimmie Rodgers’s risqué 1929 recording, “Everybody Does It in Hawaii.”<sup>102</sup> While avoiding exoticist references, instrumentals like “Steel Guitar Rag” (1936) by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys and “Steel Guitar Chimes” (1937) by Roy Acuff and His Crazy Tennesseans likewise showcased the steel guitar as a novelty instrument by highlighting idiosyncratic sounds and performance techniques. But over time other songs began to describe the steel guitar as a “crying” instrument that reflected the singer’s emotions, a trend that has continued through the contemporary era. Such songs include Roy Acuff’s “Steel Guitar Blues” (1937), Shorty Long and Jean Shepard’s “Crying Steel Guitar Waltz” (1953), Tammy Wynette’s “Crying Steel Guitar” (1974), and Clint Black’s “Nothing’s News” (1990), which observes, “There’s nothing like a steel guitar crying in the night.”<sup>103</sup> With the rise of the honky-tonk genre in the late 1940s, a new

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<sup>100</sup> Regarding the development of the pedal steel guitar, see especially Timothy Miller’s dissertation.

<sup>101</sup> Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 20, 276.

<sup>102</sup> According to Nolan Porterfield, the song constituted “one of Rodgers’s more blatant appeals to a pop audience” and seemed intended to capitalize on the Hawaiian fad. Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*, 209-10.

<sup>103</sup> Release dates and session information for all of these recordings are available on discogs.com.

paradigm emerged in which lyrics, vocal inflections, and the sounds of the steel guitar served as mutually reinforcing markers of country authenticity. Musicologist Joli Jensen has eloquently summarized the steel guitar's new symbolic function in this context:

[The steel guitar] stands for, invokes, and evokes emotional intensity. The steel guitar offers the wail of love and loss that men are too stoic to express directly, that they try to drown in beer and whiskey, that they live with and cannot leave behind [...] The sound of the steel is a defining aspect of honky-tonk instrumentation, and for some fans the presence of the steel is what defines "real country music." It works as a marker of authenticity because it crystallizes the emotional tone of the genre and stands for the live communal band or jukebox-mode of performance. The sound of the steel *says* honky-tonk, complete with smoke and neon lights, which *say* real.<sup>104</sup>

Using the steel guitar to articulate feelings of loss, romantic desire, regret, and nostalgia, country musicians over time dissolved the instrument's associations with Hawai'i, obscuring in the process the legacies of Native Hawaiian musicians to the genre's early development.

The steel guitar music of Sol Ho'opi'i—and, by extension, that of many of his Native Hawaiian contemporaries—demonstrates a remarkable stylistic continuity with country music of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the exoticized sounds of far-off Hawai'i. The rhetoric that surrounded their careers, however, effectively prohibited their reception as country musicians in their day and continues to do so. There is an important lesson here to be learned regarding the ways in which historiography sorts out popular music into different categories. Rather than a close engagement with sounding style alone, our received categories of genre persist largely along the lines of racial identity, perpetuating essentialist ways of listening to and thinking about music.

But I do not mean to suggest that the situation can be remedied merely by a more racially-inclusive narrative of the genre's history. Whiteness remains deeply and perhaps inescapably embedded in country music's historical construction. While Ho'opi'i's contributions

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<sup>104</sup> Emphasis in original. Joli Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), 34.

are clear, to simply accept him as a country musician without a deeper reckoning regarding the genre's racial politics risks engaging in a facile tokenism, reproducing in a way the power dynamics of colonization. Progressive efforts to expand the canon for greater inclusivity can have the unintended result of an uncritical redemption narrative for country music, in which country becomes a multicultural haven rather than a purely-white endeavor. Instead, I am advocating for a history of country music that examines more critically the ways in which the genre was shaped by histories of racial subjugation, appropriation, and U.S. imperialism beyond the usual biracial politics. As country music persists in its own racial narratives of rural and working-class marginality, we should remember that it remains also a beneficiary of white racial privilege that is global in scope.

## Chapter 2

### Hearing Whiteness and Memorializing Blackness in the Music of DeFord Bailey

Many profiles written about DeFord Bailey (1899-1982) follow a similar rhetorical trajectory.<sup>1</sup> First, Bailey's major achievements as a country musician are enumerated: he was a consummate harmonica virtuoso, best known for his onomatopoeic train compositions; he was a consistently popular performer on the Grand Ole Opry radio program, performing nearly every week from 1926 to 1941; he inspired the name of "the Grand Ole Opry"; he was among the first musicians (if not *the* first) to make a record in Nashville. Clearly, he is a pivotal, undeservedly obscure figure of country music history. Then comes the unexpected plot twist: DeFord Bailey was black. After this shocking reveal usually follows a discussion of his musical upbringing in rural Tennessee, his career touring throughout the segregated South, his unceremonious dismissal from the Opry in 1941, and his quiet, ignominious life after the Opry as a bootblack and restaurateur who lived in Nashville public housing. Once Bailey's race is made known, it becomes the prism through which his entire career is assessed.

At the risk of obscuring Bailey's individual achievements, this racial angle is usually intended to open up a deeper examination of racial politics within the country music industry past and present. Citing Bailey as evidence of country music's biracial performance history, his advocates critiqued country's institutional anti-black racism and history of racial appropriation while simultaneously countering its contemporary reputation as a purely white music. The earliest such profiles of Bailey appeared in the 1970s, written by journalists including Frye

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<sup>1</sup> For one fascinating international perspective, see "Nashville: Die Hauptstadt der Country-Music," *Stern Magazin*, June 29, 1978, 38, DBC Box 2.

Gaillard, Paul Hemphill, and David Morton.<sup>2</sup> Bailey's death in 1982, followed by the publication of Morton's biography of him in 1991, coauthored with Charles K. Wolfe, sparked a decades-long campaign to recognize his contributions to country music, culminating in Bailey's induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2005.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar vein, this period also saw an explosion in popular and scholarly coverage of African American contributions to country music as a whole, from its pre-commercial origins in the late nineteenth century to contemporary black performers, composers, and producers.<sup>4</sup> Although scholars from the 1960s onward had acknowledged black contributions, for a new generation of scholars this reclamation project took on a greater political urgency.<sup>5</sup> Pamela Foster made the revisionist goals of this scholarship explicit and assertive: "Black people have been involved in every stage of country music's development and in every facet."<sup>6</sup>

This is a hidden, neglected history that deserves to be told. Yet Bailey's role within this biracial narrative is at odds with his reception among Opry audiences. As I show in this chapter,

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<sup>2</sup> Frye Gaillard, "Blacks, Blues, and Country," in *Watermelon Wine: The Spirit of Country Music*, 82-100 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978); Paul Hemphill, "A Shoeshine from DeFord Bailey," in *The Nashville Sound: Bright Lights and Country Music*, 161-8 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970); and David Morton, "Every Day's Been Sunday," *Nashville!*, March 1974, 50-55, DBC Box 2.

<sup>3</sup> David C. Morton with Charles K. Wolfe, *DeFord Bailey: A Black Star in Early Country Music* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Some examples include: Charley Pride with Jim Henderson, *Pride: The Charley Pride Story* (New York: William Morrow, 1994); Pamela E. Foster, *My Country: The African Diaspora's Country Music Heritage* (Nashville, TN: My Country, 1998); Pamela E. Foster, *My Country, Too: The Other Black Music* (Nashville, TN: My Country, 2000); Diane Pecknold, ed., *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); and the box set compilation *From Where I Stand: The Black Experience in Country Music*, Warner Bros. 46428, 3 CDs, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Bill C. Malone's *Country Music, U.S.A.*, first published 1968 and still regarded as the standard history of the genre, acknowledges African American influences on the very first page: "Hillbilly music [...] evolved primarily out of the reservoir of folksongs, ballads, dances, and instrumental pieces brought to North America by Anglo-Celtic immigrants. Gradually absorbing influences from other musical sources, particularly from the culture of Afro-Americans, it eventually emerged as a force strong enough to survive, and even thrive, in an urban-industrial society." Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 3rd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 1. The issue of black/white musical exchanged is explored more fully in Tony Russell, *Blacks, Whites, and Blues* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Pamela Foster, *My Country, Too*, vii.



the earliest radio audiences tended to hear Bailey's performances as white or un-raced rather than sonically black; his racial identity became widely known only during the later 1930s, once he began touring and the Opry opened its doors to studio audiences. While the medium of radio was decisive in keeping Bailey's race literally hidden, his identity was further obscured by the Opry's self-mythology of European origins, as well as publicity that referred to Bailey's race euphemistically or not at all. And while Bailey's on-air repertoire drew stylistically upon the blues, his signature compositions—"Pan-American Blues" and "Dixie Flyer Blues"—were onomatopoeic train imitations for solo harmonica. Reception of these pieces focused on the fidelity of the imitation rather than the blues elements. I argue that Bailey's repertoire thus places popular music analysis in a precarious position, creating a fraught racialized hermeneutics pitting conventional sonic signifiers of blackness as understood today against a reception that heard something different. Moreover, in addition to confirming country music's biracial history, Bailey's reception also demonstrates how commercial country music was shaped from its very beginning along racial lines towards a white identity. Bailey furthermore draws out the subtle, unstable, but significant ontological distinctions between music as performing body, as disembodied musical style, and as mediated, racialized cultural form.

The first half of this chapter unpacks the racial activism surrounding Bailey's rediscovery in the late twentieth century, beginning with his 1991 biography. Based on extensive interviews with Bailey, David Morton and Charles K. Wolfe detailed Bailey's musical upbringing within the "black hillbilly" tradition, the prejudice he faced touring the segregated South, his acrimonious fights with the Opry's white management, and his subsequent antipathy towards the entertainment industry. Especially following this biography, journalists and historians increasingly emphasized Bailey's race in arguments for his historical significance and his

suitability for canonization in the Country Music Hall of Fame. Inducting Bailey, advocates argued, would serve as a much-needed acknowledgment of African American contributions to the genre and help to redress country music's past history of racial appropriation and exploitation. Those expressing skepticism towards Bailey's qualifications for Hall of Fame status were often regarded as symptomatic of institutional racial prejudice. But in a way, these racially progressive ideals marginalized the details of Bailey's music. Bailey's eventual induction in 2005 ultimately read as a moment of racial tokenism, a symbolic, superficial victory in an industry that has yet to achieve true racial parity or shed its white image, despite overtures to diversity.

The latter-day emphasis on Bailey's blackness belied his reception among Opry audiences in the 1920s and 1930s, who imagined Bailey and his repertory as white or unracial—in any event, certainly not black. The second half of this chapter examines the reasons for this racial confusion and what it means for musical analysis oriented towards racial hermeneutics and the concept of sounding race. In interviews with David Morton, Bailey and several of his Opry contemporaries attested that audiences remained unaware of his race. Intentionally or not, promotional material at the time often obscured the fact of Bailey's blackness. The presence of blackface performers on the Opry airwaves as well as the marketing of Bailey's few commercial recordings in both the "race" and "old-time" record series further added to the confusion.<sup>7</sup> As the Opry opened its doors to a primarily white in-studio audience in the mid-1930s and increasingly embraced a theatrical "hillbilly" image, older musical styles and musicians of color like Bailey were marginalized as the Opry presented a more assertive white identity.

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<sup>7</sup> On "race" and "old-time" designations, see Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

An analysis of Bailey's repertory on the Opry, comprising about a dozen pieces, throws these racial ambiguities into stark relief. I focus especially on Bailey's two most popular pieces, "Pan American Blues" and "Dixie Flyer Blues," both of which were newly composed by Bailey. As onomatopoeic train imitations, these performances superficially seemed to eschew any racial signification—audiences ostensibly heard instead a racially-neutral machine. Of course, there is really no mistaking Bailey's train sounds—whistles, steam, rhythmically accelerating steel wheels—for the real thing, and I highlight certain elements of his performances that drew upon blues styles, and thus upon perceptually "black" modes of performance. To the ears of a contemporary musicologist, the blues elements seem to stand out vividly. Nevertheless, Bailey's de-racialized reception in the 1920s and 1930s contradicts that of his latter-day advocates who emphasized Bailey's racial authenticity.

### **"Black Hillbilly Music" and Life at the Opry**

Coauthored by journalist David Morton and country music historian Charles K. Wolfe, *DeFord Bailey: A Black Star in Country Music* provides the most detailed account of Bailey's life and career. As its title suggests, the biography is greatly invested in racial issues, particularly the ostensible incongruity of an African American musician within the white world of country music. Much space is devoted to discussion of "black hillbilly music" and its influence on Bailey's musical style. Bailey's touring career in the segregated South and the racial politics of his relationship with other Opry personnel also receive considerable coverage. I survey some of this history in this section in order to summarize the career of a still relatively little-known performer and to highlight the ways in which his achievements are often filtered through the lens of race.

Before proceeding, however, the genesis of Morton and Wolfe's biography deserves comment to underscore its incredible achievement. Normally reclusive and suspicious of interviewers, Bailey granted Morton unprecedented access and participated in dozens of interviews with him during the 1970s and early 1980s. According to Morton, his relationship with Bailey came about serendipitously. In 1973, Morton worked for the Nashville Housing Authority. Among his responsibilities was writing human interest pieces for the Housing Authority newsletter. Morton's boss one day suggested offhandedly that Bailey, then living in public housing, might make for an interesting subject. Although initially met with skepticism, Morton fell into Bailey's good graces after Bailey's building manager personally vouched for him; Bailey was apparently more receptive because Morton had no discernable connection to the music industry.<sup>8</sup> As trust developed, Morton turned into a friend and outspoken advocate for Bailey, publishing short articles locally and booking occasional gigs for him. As Morton conducted background research, he met country music historian Charles K. Wolfe, who pointed Morton to other resources and interview subjects. The two decided to collaborate on the biography, published in 1991. Although written by two white men, frequent and extensive quotations of Bailey from interviews render the book almost autobiographical. Bailey's voice and perspective comes to dominate much of the narrative, to the extent that he played as big a role as anyone in shaping his own legacy.

DeFord Bailey was born into a musical family on December 14, 1899, in rural Smith County, Tennessee. He traced his lineage back to his grandfather, Lewis Bailey, who was born into slavery in 1843 in Commerce, Tennessee; after being freed in 1863, Lewis took the surname

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<sup>8</sup> The Legendary DeFord Bailey and His Unforgettable Country Blues. NAHRO National Conference, October 17-20, 1999 (audiocassette), DBC Box 7.

of his former master and served for the Union army for the remainder of the Civil War.<sup>9</sup> According to DeFord Bailey, his extended family included several accomplished musicians, some of whom enjoyed local celebrity within the black community. Lewis was an accomplished fiddler playing “all them way-back pieces, reels and breakdowns,” while various uncles specialized in fiddle, banjo, or harmonica performance.<sup>10</sup> Later in life, Bailey referred to this repertory as “black hillbilly music,” and it would serve as one of his earliest and most important musical sources. The racial designation of this label denoted primarily the race of the performer; this was the same string band music popular among whites. Black hillbilly music began to fade in public memory only with the rise of the segregated commercial blues industry in the 1920s.<sup>11</sup>

Bailey contracted polio in 1902, leading to a prolonged bout of infantile paralysis.<sup>12</sup> This was likely the cause of his short stature in adulthood; biographers give varying heights, but as an adult Bailey is consistently described as under five feet tall, which is a potentially stigmatizing height for a male. During his convalescence, Bailey remained largely confined to bed. To help pass the time, he was given a harmonica with which to occupy himself. Bailey took quickly to the harmonica, becoming quite proficient at a young age and imitating the sounds of the rural world around him, especially animals and trains.

When he was nine, Bailey’s family moved from Smith County to Newsom’s Station, on the western outskirts of Nashville.<sup>13</sup> In his teens, he then moved to Nashville to work as a “houseboy” for various wealthy white families, and filled odd jobs around town through the mid-

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<sup>9</sup> Morton with Wolfe, 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Robert K. Oermann, *Behind the Grand Ole Opry Curtain: Tales of Romance and Tragedy* (New York: Center Street, 2008), 314.

<sup>13</sup> Morton with Wolfe, 74.

1920s. Although he had learned much music from his family and friends, in Nashville Bailey had more chances to hear live performance, especially at the Bijou Theater in downtown Nashville. The Bijou was affiliated with the Theater Owners' Booking Agency, which catered primarily to black performers and drew mostly black audiences. The TOBA (or "Toby time") tours were a proving ground for many blues stars; they were crucial for the popularization of the genre. For a time Bailey regularly attended performances and even worked backstage at the Bijou; although it is uncertain which performers Bailey might have heard, blues performers at the Bijou during the early 1920s included Edmonia Henderson, Hooten and Hooten, Clara Smith, "Broadway Rastus" (Frank Melrose), Ma Rainey, Sammie Lewis, Bessie Smith, Charley Anderson, Butterbeans and Susie, Sara Martin, Mamie Smith, and Virginia Liston. Bailey himself was offered a spot on the TOBA tour by white manager and owner Milton Starr in 1923, but Bailey declined for various reasons.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, some of the music at these performances worked its way into Bailey's repertory, and the experiences there gave Bailey his first taste of show business.

By the mid-1920s, Bailey enjoyed a local reputation as an expert harmonica player, mostly through informal performances and local contests. In fall 1925, he performed in one such contest organized by the new radio station WDAD as a promotional stunt—although oddly the event was not broadcast. Bailey was the only black performer in the contest (according to Bailey, this was because all other local black harmonica players knew he was the best).<sup>15</sup> Although by the end of the contest it became clear Bailey was the strongest performer, some white contestants complained on racial grounds that a black person should not be allowed to win. Master of ceremonies Fred "Pop" Exum, who also owned WDAD, compromised by giving first prize to a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 36-9. For more on TOBA, see the chapter "Rabbit Foot and Toby Time" in Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues*, new ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 66-80.

<sup>15</sup> Morton with Wolfe, 42.

white performer and runner-up to Bailey; they were, Exum claimed, “the best of each race.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Exum invited Bailey to perform at WDAD, and by late September 1925 he began performing regularly on the air. According to a posthumous profile by Rick Petreycik, the station “did not have a studio audience; the radio executives chose deliberately not to publicize Bailey, so listeners had no idea that he was black.”<sup>17</sup> Bailey’s cool reception among some whites at the harmonica contest suggests that this might have been a savvy business decision.

At WDAD, Bailey met Dr. Humphrey Bate, who also performed regularly on another Nashville station, WSM. Through Bate, Bailey met George D. Hay, the master of ceremonies and musical director of the *WSM Barn Dance*, soon to be rechristened the *Grand Ole Opry*. According to Bate’s daughter, Alcyone Bate Beasley, Bailey tagged along with the Bates to WSM one evening and was allowed on the air without an audition after Bate said to Hay, “Judge, I will stake my reputation on the ability of this boy.”<sup>18</sup> This story may be apocryphal, but at any rate Hay was impressed enough with Bailey’s performance that by the end of 1926 Bailey was appearing regularly on the *WSM Barn Dance*.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Bailey was consistently one of the most frequent and popular performers on the Opry. Except for a brief stint at radio station WNOX in Knoxville from November 1928 to February 1929, Bailey performed on the Opry almost every week

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Rick Petreycik, “The Harmonica Wizard,” *American Legacy* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 16, DBC Box 2.

<sup>18</sup> Alcyone Bate Beasley, interview by Douglas B. Green (transcript), May 10, 1974, OH9, 30, FLACMHOF. In an interview just three days later, former Grand Ole Opry announcer Grant Turner (active 1944 to circa 1974) quoted Bate as saying “I will stake my reputation, everything I’ve been doing, on this boy.” So this story must have been in circulation well before 1974, although Beasley is probably the original source for the story. Grant Turner, interview by Douglas B. Green (transcript), May 13, 1974, OH185, 12, FLACMHOF.

through 1941.<sup>19</sup> In addition to these performances, Bailey participated in three recording sessions—for Columbia in Atlanta (April 1, 1927), Brunswick-Balke-Collendar in New York (April 15-16, 1927), and Victor in Nashville (October 2, 1928)—yielding eleven commercial recordings and seven other unissued recordings.<sup>20</sup> With the formation of the WSM “Artists’ Service Bureau” in 1933, which served as a booking agency for Opry acts, Bailey also went on regular tours throughout the South and Midwest with fellow stars like Uncle Dave Macon, the Delmore Brothers, and Sam and Kirk McGee, with whom he became good friends.<sup>21</sup> Although he drew large crowds through personal appearances, he was subject to Jim Crow segregation and was often forced to eat and sleep apart from his fellow Opry members.

While all of the earliest Opry performers were underpaid for their labor, especially given the grueling conditions and nonstop pace of touring, Bailey seems to have been particularly exploited. Unlike most early Opry performers, Bailey was paid for his radio performances, initially at \$28 a night, then \$110, and finally \$315. (Amounts are given in 2017 dollars throughout this paragraph.)<sup>22</sup> This was a considerable sum, but in other ways Bailey was cheated out of income by Opry management, which Morton attributes to racial paternalism. For example, George Hay helped to book Bailey’s 1927 recording session for Brunswick in New York. Brunswick paid \$5,637 for the sessions directly to Hay as Bailey’s manager. Hay claimed

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<sup>19</sup> A complete listing of Bailey’s Opry performances through 1939 can be found in Charles K. Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville, TN: Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 1999), 269-70. Regarding Bailey’s time at WNOX, see Morton with Wolfe, 85-7. Bailey was lured to WNOX by a nightly fee of \$20, much higher than his usual earnings of \$7 at WSM. Using WNOX as leverage, Bailey successfully negotiated for a \$20 fee when he returned to WSM in February 1929.

<sup>20</sup> See Charles Wolfe’s discography in Morton with Wolfe, 185-6. I discuss specific repertory later in the chapter.

<sup>21</sup> Morton with Wolfe, 93.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-5. These and all subsequent dollar amounts are converted to 2017 dollars using the CPI Inflation Calculator available on the website of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm) (accessed May 4, 2017). When payment dates are unclear, I have based conversions from the year 1941, the year in which Bailey left the Opry.



twenty-five percent for himself as commission and then paid the remaining \$4,228 in installments to Bailey in lieu of his usual Opry performance fee.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Bailey was paid a flat fee of \$79 a day on tour dates, while other Opry members were paid a percentage of receipts. This meant that Bailey was usually paid less than his white costars. After deducting for his travel expenses—standard for all Opry performers—Bailey would sometimes net only \$157 for a week of touring.<sup>24</sup>

Bailey was fired from the Grand Ole Opry in 1941. The specific circumstances leading to his sudden dismissal were long unclear and still remain controversial. In George Hay's 1945 account, he provocatively claimed,

Like some members of his race and other races, Deford [*sic*] was lazy. He knew about a dozen numbers, which he put on the air and recorded for a major company, but he refused to learn any more, even though his reward was great. He was our mascot and is still loved by the entire company. We gave him a whole year's notice to learn some more tunes, but he would not. When we were forced to give him his final notice, Deford said, without malice: "I knowed it waz comin', Judge, I knowed it wuz comin'."<sup>25</sup>

Leaving aside for a moment its racial paternalism, Hay's explanation—that Bailey was fired for refusing to learn and play new material—long puzzled Opry scholars. Although Bailey stuck to a fairly narrow repertory on the Opry, this was because the pieces were popular, and certainly other Opry acts wanted to continue playing their hits as well. Moreover, Bailey also later claimed that he was discouraged from playing certain types of music, especially current pop songs.<sup>26</sup>

David Morton has convincingly argued that Bailey was a casualty of the ASCAP-BMI dispute of the early 1940s. ASCAP began demanding royalties for radio performances of its

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<sup>23</sup> Morton with Wolfe, 84-5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>25</sup> George D. Hay, *A Story of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville, TN[?]: self-published, 1945), 19, GOOC B4-F8.

<sup>26</sup> Bailey recalled one particular instance in which he heard Gene Austin play "Blue Heaven" on the Opry. When Bailey returned the following week hoping to play an arrangement on harmonica, he was refused by Opry management and told to stick to his regular material. See Morton with Wolfe, 124.

members' published music, and many radio stations (including WSM) responded by boycotting ASCAP music and forming BMI as a rival performing-rights organization. This forced many performers to abandon their usual ASCAP-licensed repertory, which included some pieces regarded as traditional standards.<sup>27</sup> Morton's argument is based in part upon his 1973 interview with Kirk McGee, one of Bailey's fellow Opry performers. As McGee explained to Morton,

**McGee:** Well, what it is, you know, ASCAP, they had all these songs. Well, DeFord would play maybe this little song, "It Ain't Gonna Rain No Mo'." He'd probably do it and call it "Ice Water Blues" or something like that, you know. And he got WSM in trouble.

**Morton:** Oh, really?

**McGee:** Yeah, they did, they had a little lawsuit. So I've heard, it was fined for using ASCAP tunes. [...] They wanted him to get some songs that wasn't ASCAP. Now, I've heard Judge Hay ask people, "DeFord, is this a new tune or is it one you've rearranged and called it something else?" "No, sir, this is a new tune." Which Judge Hay, he didn't know music, he didn't know a tune, he didn't know one from another, you know? He didn't know one thing about...all he knew was the racket.<sup>28</sup>

In a separate December 1973 interview, Herman Crook confirmed that during the ASCAP-BMI feud Opry acts were required to submit their set lists ahead of time to stage manager Vito Pelletieri, who would either approve or reject pieces.<sup>29</sup> As Morton also explains in his biography, musical improvisation was specifically banned under the ASCAP boycott, which would have been particularly difficult for Bailey to abide. Beyond "Pan American Blues," "Dixie Flyer Blues," and a few other pieces, Bailey was primarily an arranger and interpreter of others' work rather than a composer of new tunes.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 123-5. For a more detailed history of the ASCAP boycott, see John Ryan, *The Production of Culture in the Music Industry: The ASCAP-BMI Controversy* (New York: University Press of America, 1985), particularly the chapter "The End of Monopoly."

<sup>28</sup> Kirk McGee (Grand Ole Opry musician), interview by David Morton (audiocassette), 1973, DBC Box 6, FS-7638. Unless otherwise noted, all transcriptions from Morton's interviews are mine.

<sup>29</sup> Herman Crook (Grand Ole Opry musician), interview by David Morton (audiocassette), December 1973, DBC Box 6, FS-7633.

<sup>30</sup> Morton with Wolfe, 127-8.

Beyond the ASCAP-BMI dispute, other factors may have played a role in Bailey's departure, such as shifting musical tastes, financial concerns, and Bailey's own sense of personal dignity. With new, innovative acts like Roy Acuff and Bill Monroe gaining increased exposure at the Opry, older acts began to wane in popularity, including Bailey.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Bailey seems to have grown fed up with an Opry management he felt devalued his contributions. He is quoted by Paul Hemphill saying that, rather than being fired, he simply "left" because "I wasn't getting but four or five dollars a night, and they kept me standing in the back."<sup>32</sup> John White, who met and befriended Bailey at Bailey's shoeshine shop in the late 1950s and 1960s, recalled:

DeFord said they wanted him to learn new music, different songs, and leave some of the blues out—he told them he wasn't gonna do it. And the man who ran the Opry told him he had to do what they asked, because that was where his living was made. DeFord said he told them, and this was the only time I ever heard him use this expression, "You'll have to get you another nigger, because I ain't gonna do it." And he quit.<sup>33</sup>

Bailey's account may be exaggerated or misremembered, but it is consistent with Bailey's bitterness and mistrust towards the Opry and show business in general following his 1941 departure. With few exceptions, Bailey declined future opportunities to perform or record commercially, opting instead to operate a shoeshine parlor, restaurant, and fill small jobs for the remainder of his life.

Bailey used his biography as an opportunity to reflect on race and the role it played in his career. On one hand, Bailey saw his race as a definite barrier in terms of professional advancement and artistic freedom, and he recognized a racial double standard at the Opry: "If

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<sup>31</sup> Peter Guralnick makes the case for Bailey's marginalization in *Lost Highway*: "As the Opry became more and more the province of professional entertainers [. . .the] anomaly of DeFord's position became increasingly evident." Peter Guralnick, *Lost Highway: Journeys and Arrivals of American Musicians* (Boston: D. R. Godine, 1979), 53. Cited in Morton with Wolfe, 123.

<sup>32</sup> Hemphill, *The Nashville Sound*, 167. Quoted in Morton with Wolfe, 123.

<sup>33</sup> "DeFord Bailey honored; first black Opry member," *Country News*, August 1983 (photocopy), DBC B3-F6.

they had let me play like I wanted, I could have stole [sic] the show. If I had been a white man, I could have done it. They held me down. ... I wasn't free."<sup>34</sup> Instead, Bailey said he self-consciously censored and groomed his act to avoid trouble: "I could have been a better musician, but I was handicapped and I was afraid I'd do something wrong. See, white people could do no wrong, they'd just do wrong. [...] It don't work like that [for a black man]. I held down a lot of things I could do playing on a harp [harmonica], which would go over big today," such as "turning somersaults" and other acrobatics.<sup>35</sup> The limitations on his act, he believed, also served to limit his financial success. Yet, as he noted, white rock musician Elvis Presley got rich by performing black repertory with stage histrionics.<sup>36</sup>

During other interviews, however, Bailey also advocated reconciliation and downplayed the inequalities of segregation. Noting that "Jim Crow didn't mean a thing to me," Bailey recalled times that he would be called to the front of segregated streetcars in order to entertain the white passengers on the harmonica.<sup>37</sup> Any bitterness he held, he claimed, was directed only towards those who cheated him and not towards all whites, yet racially based treatment left its mark: "They say I don't like white people. They got that wrong. I'm just like white people. I just want my money. ... I don't hate the man. I just hate his ways."<sup>38</sup> And during an interview in 1980, at the height of the Iranian hostage crisis, he reflected, "Now the black is got to fight for the white and the white got to fight for the black. They got to learn to understand that."<sup>39</sup> In

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<sup>34</sup> Morton with Wolfe, 124.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

general Bailey expressed solidarity with leaders advocating racial equality but felt that black militancy was a dead-end: “They’re mad at the white man. [...] But they’re bringing it down in the wrong attitude.”<sup>40</sup>

Given the close relationship between Morton and Bailey, it is sometimes difficult to disentangle Bailey’s own thoughts from the historiographic agenda of the book. Morton is clear about his role as friend and advocate for Bailey yet also strives for critical distance, pointing out when Bailey misremembered or exaggerated the historical record. But quotes from Bailey, especially when reflecting upon racial matters, are often responses to pointed interview questions from Morton. The concern that Morton might be leading the witness, so to speak, is mitigated by Bailey’s nuanced, often surprising, and occasionally contradictory responses. At any rate, quotes like these were crucial in shaping racialized narratives and advocacy efforts on Bailey’s behalf.

### **Race-Based Advocacy for the Hall of Fame**

DeFord Bailey’s induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2005 was the result of a long advocacy campaign dating back to the 1970s, waged by historians, journalists, and other industry figures. Their advocacy took several forms. Before Bailey’s death in 1982, biographer David Morton encouraged Bailey to pursue new performance opportunities, reintroducing him to listeners. Journalists told his story and recorded anthologies made his music more easily accessible. Several memorials honored Bailey’s achievements following his death, and editorials and industry figures from the 1980s onward spurred public debates on Bailey’s fitness for the Hall of Fame. Proponents of induction routinely cited Bailey’s contributions to country music’s institutional history, particularly his popularity with early Opry audiences and his participation in Nashville’s first commercial recording sessions. But the debate over Bailey also became a proxy for larger discussions on racial representation and power within country music itself. To

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

advocates, honoring Bailey would serve as symbolic redress of past prejudice and exploitation by acknowledging country music's indebtedness to performers of color; for many advocates, resistance to Bailey's induction reflected the persistence of racial bigotry endemic to country music. Bailey's eventual induction in 2005 was helped by a critical mass of support and pressure from these advocates, but it depended also upon changes to induction rules that favored older performers like Bailey. Rather than a radical restructuring of country music's racial politics, however, Bailey's induction signaled primarily the industry's seizing of multiracial rhetoric as a matter of middle-class respectability and good publicity.

Bailey kept a low public profile after leaving the Opry in 1941. The resurgent interest in Bailey beginning in the 1970s can be traced largely to the efforts of his friend, manager, and biographer David Morton. Morton's landmark article, "Every Day's Been Sunday," appeared in the local-interest magazine *Nashville!* in March 1974.<sup>41</sup> Morton's article added greater biographical detail to Paul Hemphill's brief, impressionistic essay, "A Shoeshine from DeFord Bailey," published in 1970.<sup>42</sup> By decade's end, Morton's work inspired other articles from country music journalists like Frye Gaillard and Peter Guralnick.<sup>43</sup> Morton gave frequent public talks about Bailey throughout the 1970s and 80s and published his definitive biography, coauthored with Charles K. Wolfe, in 1991.<sup>44</sup> The work of these early authors framed much of Bailey's career in racial terms, which would heavily influence later advocacy efforts.

In addition to his role as biographer, Morton served as Bailey's unofficial manager, leading to a handful of performance offers that further fueled interest in Bailey's career. Morton

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<sup>41</sup> Morton, "Every Day's Been Sunday."

<sup>42</sup> Hemphill, *The Nashville Sound*, 161-8.

<sup>43</sup> Gaillard, "Blacks, Blues, and Country"; Guralnick, "DeFord Bailey," in *Lost Highways*, 49-56.

<sup>44</sup> Morton with Wolfe. Another important profile of Bailey appears in Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*. Pamela Foster's encyclopedia, *My Country*, also includes an entry on Bailey.

helped to secure four return performances on the Opry stage—three billed as “Old Timer’s Nights” in 1974, 1975, and 1982, as well as a performance on December 14, 1974 in celebration of Bailey’s seventy-fifth birthday.<sup>45</sup> Offers to appear in a few Hollywood films, including *W. W. and the Dixie Dancekings* (1975) starring Burt Reynolds, came in the wake of Bailey’s rediscovery, but were rejected by Bailey on financial grounds.<sup>46</sup> Bailey also declined offers to record with Pete Seeger, Charlie McCoy, James Talley, and Nashville producer Mike Weesner, as well as the opportunity to perform at the Newport Folk Festival.<sup>47</sup>

Bailey’s skepticism extended also to the recording industry, and he never again produced commercial recordings after 1928. Nevertheless, these original recordings found new audiences in the LP and CD anthology era. His harmonica solos were reissued on compilations like *Sixty Years of Grand Ole Opry* (1987), *Harmonica Blues: Great Harmonica Performances of the 1920s and ’30s, Featuring Jazz Gillum, Jaybird Coleman, DeFord Bailey and Many More* (1991), *Old Time Harmonica Classics: Virtuoso Country Harmonica Performances, 1923-1937* (1991), *Harmonica Masters: Classic Recordings from the 1920’s and 30’s [sic]* (1996), *Nashville: The Early String Bands, Vol. II, 1925-1934* (2000), and *Bukka White Sings Sic ’em Dogs on Me, 1927 to 1939* (n.d.)<sup>48</sup> Bailey’s complete commercial recordings were probably first

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<sup>45</sup> Bailey appeared occasionally at the Opry during the 1940s and 1950s, but only at the request of an Opry member and not by invitation from Opry management. For example, Bill Monroe would pay Bailey out of his own pocket to appear on Monroe’s segment of the broadcast. Although Bailey appeared four times during the 1970s and 1980s, he also declined invitations from the Opry in 1976 and 1977, apparently because the sum offered was deemed insufficient and insulting. The Opry offered \$50 for each appearance, its standard rate for all performers. See Morton with Wolfe, 157-62.

<sup>46</sup> Filmmakers reportedly offered Bailey \$2,500 (\$10,982 in 2017 dollars) to play three songs in the film. Morton with Wolfe, 161.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 152-5.

<sup>48</sup> Various artists, *Sixty Years of Grand Ole Opry*, RCA CPL2-9507, LP, 1987; Various artists, *Harmonica Blues, Great Harmonica Performances of the 1920’s and ’30s, featuring Jazz Gillum, Jaybird Coleman, De Ford Bailey and many more*, Yazoo 1053, LP, 1991; Various artists, *Old Time Harmonica Classics: Virtuoso Country Harmonica Performances, 1923-1937*, Country 549, LP, 1991; Various artists, *Harmonica Masters: Classic*

collected on the 1985 LP *Harmonica Showcase*, produced by the British label Matchbox, then again on *Harp Blowers, 1925-1936* (1993).<sup>49</sup> The three-disc boxset *From Where I Stand: The Black Experience in Country Music*, places Bailey's contributions chronologically within the larger history of black country musicians through the early 1990s.<sup>50</sup> Notably, these compilations were released posthumously, and it is unclear whether Bailey's family received payment for use of the recordings. Perhaps the most significant recording during this later period was *The Legendary DeFord Bailey: Country Music's First Black Star*, released in 1998 by the Tennessee Folklore Society.<sup>51</sup> The album is a kind of ethnographic artifact, consisting of excerpts from Morton's recorded interviews with Bailey during the 1970s and early 1980s. Included are impromptu performances by Bailey on harmonica, banjo, guitar, and voice, as well as a few snippets of conversation, personal reflections, and words of wisdom. The wider dissemination of Bailey's recordings led radio disc jockeys and contemporary harmonicists to champion his work; most notable among them was the blues harmonicist Joe Filisko, who wrote reviews of Bailey discs for harmonica periodicals and often programmed Bailey's repertory in his own performances.<sup>52</sup>

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*Recordings from the 1920's and 30's*, Yazoo 2019, CD, 1996; Various artists, *Nashville: The Early String Bands, Vol. II, 1925-1934*, County 542, LP, 2000; Various artists, *Bukka White Sings Sic 'em Dogs on Me, 1927 to 1939*, Herwin 201, LP, n.d. Many of these recordings are difficult to find, but all are collected in DBC Box 4.

<sup>49</sup> DeFord Bailey and D.H. Bilbro, *Harmonica Showcase: DeFord Bailey and D.H. "Bert" Bilbro, 1927-31: Complete Recordings in Chronological Order*, Matchbox MSE 218, LP, 1985; Various artists, *Harp Blowers, 1925-1936: The Complete Recorded Works of John Henry Howard, DeFord Bailey, Bert Bilbro, and George Clarke*, Document Records DOCD-5164, CD, 1993.

<sup>50</sup> *From Where I Stand*.

<sup>51</sup> DeFord Bailey, *The Legendary DeFord Bailey: Country Music's First Black Star*, Tennessee Folklore Society, TFS-122, CD, 1998.

<sup>52</sup> For disc jockeys, see Jonathan Ware (DJ at WKCR-FM) to Morton (letter accompanies audiocassette recording of WKCR-FM broadcast of February 25, 1990), 20 March 1990, DBC Box 7. For Filisko, see Joe Filisko, "CD Review: DeFord Bailey CD," *Harmonica Happenings* 32, no. 2 (Spring 1998) (incomplete photocopy); Joe Filisko, *Joe Filisko "Live" in Trossingen, Germany*, October 26, 2001, DVD, DBC Box 4.



Beyond increased visibility through reissues and journalistic profiles, Bailey was also honored with several posthumous memorials after 1982. Foremost among them was his induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2005. But this was preceded by several other memorials, many of them organized by members of the Nashville community who would later become his strongest advocates for Hall of Fame status. A gravestone bearing Bailey's "Harmonica Wizard" sobriquet was placed in Nashville's Greenwood Cemetery in 1983, a year after Bailey's death, through the efforts of friends and family. A solemn dedication ceremony on June 24, 1983, included remarks and tribute performances by Bailey's Opry costars Roy Acuff, the Crook Brothers, and Bill Monroe, as well as presentations by Nashville Mayor Richard Fulton and officials from the Opry and Hohner Harmonicas. That year also saw the first donation of some of Bailey's personal effects to the Country Music Foundation, including two of his harmonica megaphones, a harmonica, a pair of shoes, three hats, a business card, and his folding chair, donated by his children.<sup>53</sup> Another historical marker was placed by the Tennessee Historical Commission near Bailey's childhood home in Smith County; a small dedication ceremony was held on May 15, 1991.<sup>54</sup> Yet another marker was placed at the corner of Edgehill and 12th Avenues in Nashville, near Bailey's home and shoeshine stand, achieved in part through the effort of Bailey's shoeshine employee Silas Tyrone Newsome, who claimed "I remember with fondness the lessons I learned while working for DeFord in his shoeshine parlor. I always wanted to do something special in his memory and the marker was a small tribute to his

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<sup>53</sup> Robert K. Oermann, "Country Music Commemorates Deford Bailey," [*The Tennessean*, June 24, 1983], (scanned image), Bailey vertical files, FLACMHOF. "Museum Receives DeFord Bailey Objects," *Country Music Foundation Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (Summer 1983), CRC B9-F380.

<sup>54</sup> "Bailey, DeFord Historic Marker Dedication Records" (finding aid), Center for Popular Music Archives Collection, <http://popmusic.mtsu.edu/archives/Inventory/bailey.html> (accessed May 7, 2017).

greatness.”<sup>55</sup> This was accompanied by a proclamation from Mayor Phil Bredesen designating December 14, 1992, as “DeFord Bailey Day” in Nashville.<sup>56</sup> The proclamation also commended Morton and Wolfe’s biography, published earlier that year, for helping to raise awareness of Bailey’s music and lasting influence. In 2007, the Recording Academy inducted Bailey’s recording of “Pan American Blues” into the Grammy Hall of Fame, established in 1973 “to honor recordings of lasting qualitative or historical significance that are at least 25 years old,” according to a press release at the time. Recording Academy President Neil Portnow said of the selections, “They exemplify some of the best qualities that make the recording arts essential to our culture.”<sup>57</sup> Perhaps the most curious memorial came in 2008, after his Hall of Fame induction, when the rose garden at Nashville’s George W. Carver Food Park unveiled a new rose breed named in Bailey’s honor; the rose garden itself was dedicated to Bailey in 2007.<sup>58</sup> All of these memorials attest to Bailey’s continued prominence within public debates on race and country music, particularly within the city of Nashville.

By the time the push for Hall of Fame status began in earnest in the 1990s, biographies and memorials like these provided a well-rehearsed list of Bailey’s qualifications. Advocates of his canonization cited Bailey’s crucial role in popularizing the Opry, now one of the most venerated institutions in country music, on which Bailey performed almost weekly for fifteen years. Historians also noted his participation in Nashville’s first recording sessions in 1928, and that his trademark piece, “Pan-American Blues,” was the inspiration for the Grand Ole Opry

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<sup>55</sup> Norma White, “December 14th designated Deford Bailey Day in honor of performer,” *Metropolitan Times*, December 6, 1992, 15, DBC B3-F5.

<sup>56</sup> “Proclamation of DeFord Bailey Day in Nashville” (photocopy), October 26, 1992, DBC B3-F9.

<sup>57</sup> “The Recording Academy® Announces 2007 Grammy Hall of Fame® Inductees” (press release on The Recording Academy letterhead), 4pp., January 10, 2007, DBC B3-F1.

<sup>58</sup> The *Tennessean* described the DeFord Bailey Rose as “a large bloom with a purple hue.” Colby Sledge, “Rose named for ‘Opry’ legend Bailey,” *Tennessean*, May 26, 2008 (pdf copy), Bailey vertical files, FLACMHOF.

name.<sup>59</sup> These biographical details were sometimes distorted, unintentionally or not, to make Bailey appear even more superlative. For its obituary, Nashville's *The Tennessean* ran the somewhat misleading title "Death Claims Deford Bailey at 82; Was Grand Ole Opry's 1st Musician."<sup>60</sup> The *WSM Barn Dance*, which would later become the Opry, began in 1925, one year before Bailey joined the cast. *The Nashville Banner* added, not quite correctly, that Bailey was "the first artist to record in Nashville," a distinction that actually belongs to the Binkley Brothers Dixie Clodhoppers; Bailey recorded two days later.<sup>61</sup>

Initial calls for Bailey's canonization raised the question of what qualified a performer for admittance to the Hall. Beyond Bailey's claim to several "firsts," his supporters cited his contributions to country music's institutional history. This included especially his role in popularizing the early Opry, which introduced country music to a national audience and proved pivotal to the industry's early commercial success. In a 1982 interview following Bailey's death, midcentury Opry star Minnie Pearl made such an argument:

Let's face it, they started it. [...] The young people didn't come on the scene until after country music had mushroomed. We didn't start with people making \$50,000 a night, rolling around in buses and making network television shows. They came in here and picked for nothing, played for the joy of it and were perpetuating a feeling. Deford [*sic*] was one of them and I think he should get credit.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> I recount this story in the appendix, where I also date the first Opry broadcast to November 12, 1927.

<sup>60</sup> Walter Carter and Randy Hilman, "Death Claims Deford Bailey at 82; Was Grand Ole Opry's 1st Musician," *Tennessean*, July 3, 1982, Bailey vertical files, FLACMHOF.

<sup>61</sup> "DeFord Bailey, true Opry pioneer," *Nashville Banner*, July 7, 1982, Bailey vertical files, FLACMHOF. The Clodhoppers and Paul Warmack and His Gully Jumpers recorded on Friday, September 28, 1928; Bailey recorded the following Tuesday, October 2. Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 175-6.

<sup>62</sup> Reginald Stuart, "Death of Black Opry Pioneer Leads to Disharmony in Nashville," *New York Times*, August 22, 1982, DBC B3-F5.

Pearl went on to mention that, as a sitting member of the Hall of Fame nominating committee, she would nominate Bailey following the two-year waiting period for recently deceased candidates.

To skeptics of Bailey's candidacy, however, Bailey faced an uphill battle given the industry jockeying and self-promotion associated with the Hall of Fame. Many felt that the Hall's voters, comprised of performers, producers, journalists, and various other industry figures, prioritized high record sales and name recognition over other historical considerations. Never a big-seller, Bailey's disadvantages included a dearth of easily accessible recordings and a perceived outdated musical style with little connection to contemporary country music. As Reginald Stuart, a journalist for the *New York Times* observed, "Country music of the Bailey days is light years away from that of today. The music has shifted from a plain, earthy art with minimal glitter and a limited audience to one that is amplified, sophisticated and broadcast worldwide."<sup>63</sup> This issue overlapped closely with economic considerations. Interviewing musicians about the Hall in 1974, Frye Gaillard concluded, "The Hall of Fame, many musicians feel, is like much of the rest of Nashville's music industry: It is swayed very heavily by success that can be measured in dollars and cents."<sup>64</sup> In an interview shortly after Bailey's death, singer Roy Acuff also cited industry concerns: "I think the Hall of Fame is, 'What have you done to further country music?' When it comes to that question, Deford [sic] would fall way down. He had a style of his own back at that time, others have copied it, but never matched it. But he had nothing else to offer except his harmonica and two or three numbers to play. He couldn't

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Frye Gaillard, "Sour Notes at the Grand Ole Opry," *Southern Voices*, May/June 1974, DBC Box 2.

progress that much.”<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, Acuff noted, he would vote for Bailey if nominated “because I think he’s just as deserving as some who are already in there.” And as late as 2002, country music historian Charles Wolfe lamented, “The Country Music Hall of Fame is so focused to [*sic*] internal Music Row politics. What happens when I try to lobby for [DeFord]... what I got all the time is ‘he didn’t make very many recordings.’ But we put out some of his songs on CD, and I thought, ‘OK, now we can show people what he really sounded like,’ and that didn’t cut any ice either.”<sup>66</sup>

Especially in the 1970s and 1980s, name recognition among audiences and the Hall of Fame nominating committee was a major obstacle. Even during his own seventy-fifth birthday concert at the Opry, most audience members “seemed a little perplexed,” according to the *Tennessean*. “Most of them were unfamiliar with his work—it has been a long time since he recorded.”<sup>67</sup> A glowing introduction from Roy Acuff did little to spur audience enthusiasm. The problem grew worse as the years passed. Asked why Bailey’s induction took so long to come to fruition, Ed Benson, executive director of the Country Music Association, explained in 2005 that the Hall of Fame voting committee “gets younger every year. [...] As time goes on, some of these early pioneers of country music, particularly those who came to prominence before World War II, there are fewer people around who have a personal connection to them.”<sup>68</sup> Benson’s assessment was echoed by historian Charles Wolfe in a 2002 interview with *The Tennessean*, who claimed that “many of the electors are ignorant of country music history. [...] DeFord

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<sup>65</sup> Stuart, “Death of Black Opry Pioneer Leads to Disharmony in Nashville.”

<sup>66</sup> Ken Beck, “Remembering a Wizard: ‘A Legend Lost’ Recalls DeFord Bailey’s Contributions to ‘Grand Ole Opry,’” *Tennessean*, May 7, 2002, DBC B3-F5.

<sup>67</sup> “DeFord Bailey Comes Home to the Opry,” *Tennessean*, n.d., Bailey vertical files, FLACMHOF.

<sup>68</sup> Rafer Guzmán, “DeFord Bailey’s Time Has (Finally) Come,” *Newsday.com* (printout), 3pp, 2005, DBC B3-F3.

Bailey's career was (largely) in the '30s and '40s. He was gone from the Opry when they came on the scene."<sup>69</sup>

As advocates for Hall of Fame status continued to raise awareness about Bailey's personal achievements, racial politics increasingly came to shape the terms of the debate. Advocacy focused on Bailey's status as a trailblazing black performer within a majority-white cultural scene—indeed, he was often imagined as a fearless musician determined to break the color line. Bailey was routinely compared to figures from the Civil Rights Movement who stood up to the injustices of Jim Crow segregation. In an opinion piece for *The Tennessean*, Dwight Lewis described Bailey as “the Jackie Robinson of country music” for “breaking the color barrier.”<sup>70</sup> Blues musician Aashid Himons elaborated on the comparison:

The parallel here is the Negro league in baseball. I think the same thing was happening. These great ball players were growing up totally ostracized and isolated. Finally, the industry came around and some of them are in the Baseball Hall of Fame. That's the same thing I think the country music industry has to do. That's why DeFord's induction in the Hall of Fame will say to white[s] and African-Americans: African Americans played a role in the development because that's where this all started.<sup>71</sup>

Writing for the alt-country magazine *No Depression* in 1998, Matt Hanks called Bailey “the Rosa Parks of country music,” a sentiment echoed in 2005 by country music historian Charles Wolfe: “He was the Rosa Parks of country music. He wasn't intimidated by the racism and the segregation that he ran into.”<sup>72</sup> James Talley, a Nashville musician who befriended Bailey in his later years, simply explained that “in a time and place when there was a line between the races

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<sup>69</sup> Gwendolyn C. Young, “Family, Others Still Fighting to Get Opry Pioneer into Hall of Fame,” *Tennessean*, December 5, 2002, DBC B3-F5.

<sup>70</sup> Dwight Lewis, “This Country Music Great Is Still in Need of Deserved Recognition,” *Tennessean*, [c. 2002], Bailey vertical files, FLACMHOF.

<sup>71</sup> Daryl Sanders, “DeFord Bailey: The Legacy of the Grand Ole Opry's First Star Still Shines Brightly,” *Tennessean*, February 10, 1995, DBC B3-F5. Himons also honored Bailey in his 1987 composition “Mr. Bailey.”

<sup>72</sup> Matt Hanks, Review of *DeFord Bailey: Country Music's First Black Superstar [sic]* (photocopy), *No Depression*, July-August 1998, 89, DBC B3-F6. For Wolfe quote, see Guzmán, “DeFord Bailey's Time Has (Finally) Come.”

and a double standard in effect, DeFord Bailey was able to transcend that line, even as he was victimized by it.”<sup>73</sup>

For many advocates, if Bailey’s career served as a rebuttal to the notion of country music’s whiteness, resistance to his Hall of Fame bid was another reminder of entrenched racial prejudice and white privilege within the country music industry. Shortly after Bailey’s death, *The Chicago Defender* ran an editorial critical of country’s racial exclusivity:

Prejudice, both artistically and historically, showed its ugly, cancerous character when, after Bailey’s death, it was debated whether his contributions merited recognition with the 35 immortals, living and dead, who are in the Country Music Hall of Fame.<sup>74</sup>

John Egerton, a Nashville historian, also saw Bailey’s absence from the Hall as a symptom of anti-black prejudice: “It would be a tragic miscarriage if the industry failed to honor Bailey,” he was quoted in *The New York Times*. “[Bailey] was not a Johnny One-Note, and people in country music ought to be embarrassed for their gallery of heroes to remain all white. They owe too much to black musicians and black music.”<sup>75</sup> Faced with a long history of institutional racism, many viewed recognition of Bailey as both critique and a form of reparative justice. Music historian Charles Wolfe flatly cited racism as the reason for Bailey’s exclusion: “That’s the only ugly conclusion I can come to... They don’t want him in because he’s black.”<sup>76</sup> Elsewhere, Wolfe summed up the views of many of Bailey’s supporters, for whom racial justice and recognition of black contributions to the genre took precedence over a critical mass of any specific, quantifiable achievements: “Yeah, he belongs there [in the Hall of Fame], not because

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<sup>73</sup> Manny Faria, “Followin’ the Music: DeFord Bailey Was Big Little Man,” *Danbury [CT?] News Times*, July 1[5?], 1982, Bailey vertical files, FLACMHOF.

<sup>74</sup> Earl Calloway, “Black Opry Pioneer Refused Entry into Country Hall of Fame,” *Chicago Defender*, September 11, 1982, Bailey vertical files, FLACMHOF.

<sup>75</sup> Stuart, “Death of Black Opry Pioneer Leads to Disharmony in Nashville.”

<sup>76</sup> Young, “Family, Others Still Fighting[...].”

he had a bunch of hit records or because he was doing a lot of touring, but in a symbolic way he belongs there. He represents the absolute tap roots of Grand Ole Opry music.”<sup>77</sup> Jonathan Ware, a country music DJ at Columbia University’s WKCR-FM, articulated these goals perhaps more powerfully than anyone else in a letter to David Morton:

My goal in being a country deejay has been to explore the limits of the genre in order to show people that country music is more than just the Oak Ridge Boys or Patsy Cline or whatever. I guess one of the most important and difficult aspects of this task is approaching the racial barrier. It’s easy to talk about how people like DeFord Bailey diversified old time/country music, but the truth of the matter seems to be that they got fucked over. The least I can do, I guess, is remind people that DeFord Bailey existed. I think at least a few people listening cared about that.<sup>78</sup>

As journalists made their case in favor of admission to the Hall, Roy Acuff became a particularly notable lightning rod for criticism, standing as an embodiment of the country music industry as a whole. As both a fellow Opry member with Bailey in the 1930s as well as a voting member of the Hall of Fame nominating committee, Acuff was frequently involved in conversations about Bailey. In the *Tennessean*’s coverage, Bailey’s experiences in the segregated South are described via Acuff, and his account at times strains credulity, even as it shows how structural segregation was normalized for some:

He never had a bad word to say about [segregation] and was understanding,” Acuff said last night. “I took care of him when we had trouble finding rooms or places to eat. He was real gentlemanly about it. I would have given anything if things could have been the way they are now. But that’s the way it was back then. I tried to respect him as a white boy.”<sup>79</sup>

Acuff’s effort to imagine Bailey as “a white boy” demands further comment. Although perhaps unintentional here, the term “boy” recalls its historical use by whites to paternalistically belittle

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<sup>77</sup> Beck, “Remembering a Wizard.”

<sup>78</sup> Ware to Morton, 20 March 1990.

<sup>79</sup> Walter Carter and Randy Hilman, “First Musician on Grand Ole Opry, DeFord Bailey, Dies after Long Illness” (printout), July 3, 1982, <http://www.netowne.com/deford/firstopry.htm>, DBC B3-F3.



and emasculate black men; given Bailey's short stature due to a childhood illness, the term carries an additional pejorative charge.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, Acuff's need to imagine Bailey as white in order to respect him reflects an investment in the cultural boundaries and racial hierarchies of the 1930s.

Bailey's daughter, Dezoral Bailey Thomas, found Acuff's posthumous remarks about Bailey often insensitive and sometimes oblivious. In particular, she recalled in particular remarks he made about Bailey during his funeral home visitation in 1982: "[Acuff] stood beside me and said, 'We're gonna miss DeFord. He made me what I am today. Nobody knew a Roy Acuff but everyone had heard of a DeFord Bailey and I took him everywhere with me.' [...] I took that to be a little out of place especially at a time like this to listen to Roy Acuff who leaned on this poor Black man and got famous. He earned everything and my father got nothing."<sup>81</sup> The implication is that Acuff, like many other white stars, remained oblivious to the ways in which white privilege and racial appropriation have played into his own success. A similar reaction greeted Acuff's suggestion that Bailey "had nothing else to offer except his harmonica and two or three numbers to play. He couldn't progress that much."<sup>82</sup> Acuff's ambivalence regarding Bailey's suitability for the Hall of Fame led to reader editorials in *The Tennessean*:

If Mr. Roy Acuff is correct in assessing the late Mr. Deford Bailey's place as "a legendary figure in Grand Ole Opry history," why does he not believe Mr. Bailey's contribution to country music warrants the entertainer a niche in the Country Music Hall of Fame? This significant question arises from an article printed in the July 3 *Tennessean*.

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<sup>80</sup> As recently as 2010, an employer's use of the term "boy" towards an African American employee formed the basis of a racial discrimination suit. Robert Lane Greene, "How Racist Is 'Boy'?", *The Economist*, November 1, 2010, [http://www.economist.com/blogs/johnson/2010/11/racist\\_language](http://www.economist.com/blogs/johnson/2010/11/racist_language) (accessed May 7, 2017). See also Mari J. Matsuda et al., *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).

<sup>81</sup> K. Dawn Rutledge, "DeFord Bailey: The Grand Ole Opry's First Black Country Star," *Tennessee Tribune* 5, no. 20 (May 31-June 6, 1995), 4-5, DBC Box 2.

<sup>82</sup> Stuart, "Death of Black Opry Pioneer Leads to Disharmony in Nashville."

To know and to adequately appreciate the history and contributions of any institution, one must know its beginnings. One of the most revealing aspects of *The Tennessean's* feature on Mr. Bailey was how the present Grand Ole Opry got its name. The fact that Roy Acuff referred to DeFord Bailey as the personification of Grand Ole Opry because of his masterly 'black hillbilly' folk music style, however limited his stock of tunes, should be a justifiable reason for [h]is having earned a position in the Country Music Hall of Fame. [...] If Mr. Bailey, a black man and a victim stunted from infantile paralysis actually accomplished these feats during the economic depression of the 1920s, he has rightfully won his corner.<sup>83</sup>

Picking up the story two months after Bailey's death, the African American newspaper *The Chicago Defender* ran the somewhat misleading editorial headline "Black Opry Pioneer refused entry into Country Hall of Fame," focusing its criticism especially upon Acuff's remarks:

It was argued that the country music of Bailey's day does not fit in the contemporary sophisticated style of this generation. They claim that the musical style is really not as relevant with the type of amplified music now heard. Roy Acuff stated in an article that Bailey is a significant legend, but not one who merited a place in the Hall of Fame, and the statement surprised many. Many of the Bailey fans and students of Nashville history took issue with Acuff.<sup>84</sup>

Acuff's pledge to vote for Bailey did little to mollify his critics, and Bailey remained excluded from the Hall of Fame at the time of Acuff's passing in 1992.

As Bailey's contemporaries in the music industry dwindled in number, public memory of Bailey's musical career receded, especially among the Hall's electors. By 2000, Bailey had placed as "a first-round nominee" for three consecutive years; this allowed industry figures to deflect charges of racism by citing instead Bailey's lack of name recognition and holding out hope that, as his name continued to appear on the ballot, electors would eventually come around. As CMA executive Ed Benson explained to a reporter, "It's very hard to predict. Very seldom does a person get into the Hall of Fame the first time he or she is nominated. Some names have

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<sup>83</sup> C.R. Goodwin, "DeFord Bailey Earned Place in Hall of Fame" (letter to the editor), *Tennessean*, July 11, 198[?], Bailey vertical files, FLACMHOF.

<sup>84</sup> Calloway, "Black Opry Pioneer."

come up for many years, and they're still not in.”<sup>85</sup> With the final push for Bailey in the early 2000s, his candidacy was helped by a change in the Hall’s induction rules that sought greater recognition of early country music acts. After Bailey was passed over again in 2002, Scott Stern, a media relations director for the Country Music Association, scoffed at the notion that Bailey had been denied a place in the Hall on account of race, but conceded that Bailey’s era was perhaps underrepresented: “Many of [Bailey’s] contemporaries have yet to become members. No one is excluded because of their race, as evidenced by Charley Pride’s induction into the Hall of Fame in 2000.”<sup>86</sup>

When Stern made his remarks in 2002, the CMA—the body which oversees the Hall of Fame—still abided by a completely open nomination process. Roughly three hundred electors nominated candidates on the basis of ten criteria “ranging from music quality and professionalism to the candidate’s influence on the industry.” Electors would then vote on the list of finalists to determine the new inductees.<sup>87</sup> By the time of Bailey’s induction a few years later, the CMA had adopted an “Old Timers” category in its balloting process, intended to recognize on a yearly basis nominees who achieved popularity prior to World War II.<sup>88</sup> Bailey was among the earliest beneficiaries of this new system.<sup>89</sup> Evidently responding to commercial concerns

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<sup>85</sup> Dwight Lewis, “DeFord [*sic*] Bailey: A Place Is Due Him in Hall of Fame,” *Tennessean*, June 25, 2000, DBC B3-F6.

<sup>86</sup> Young, “Family, Others Still Fighting[...]”

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Dwight Lewis, “Country Music Changes Its Tune on DeFord Bailey,” *Tennessean*, September 1, 2005, DBC B3-F6.

<sup>89</sup> The CMA changed its induction process again in 2009, reshaping its categories of eligibility. Now nominees may be elected as part of: the “Modern Era” (25 years of eligibility beginning “20 years after they first achieve national prominence”), the “Veterans Era” (eligibility beginning “45 years after they first achieve national prominence”), or under three rotating categories of Non-Performer, Songwriter, and Recording and/or Touring Musician. This system discontinued the “Old Timers” category under which Bailey was elected, officially called the “Career Achieved National Prominence Prior to World War II” category. Sarah Skates, “New Procedures for Election to the Country

about the prospect of losing tourist dollars, the CMA sought to balance inducting older, more obscure artists by simultaneously instituting a category “to honor acts that achieve prominence since 1975.” According to CMA executive director Ed Benson, the category was intended to make the Hall “relevant for today’s fans, while recognizing artists who’ve made an indelible impact on country music.”<sup>90</sup> The popular 1980s band Alabama, inducted along with Bailey and Glen Campbell in 2005, were among the first performers elected under this category.

The induction ceremony in which Bailey finally was honored took place at Madison Square Garden on November 15, 2005, at the 39th Annual CMA Music Awards.<sup>91</sup> Bailey’s induction was a relatively brief segment amidst all the other awards to be distributed that evening, but it included a performance by harmonicist and Bailey acolyte Joe Filisko, who performed a version of Bailey’s “Fox Chase.” According to Filisko, the chance to honor Bailey was “the high point of my life—past, present, and future. [...] The coolest thing for me was trying to represent the music in a way that the family really could feel the presence of Bailey. I’m happy to say I feel like I accomplished that.” Later in the evening, during the induction of the band Alabama, drummer Mark Herndon highlighted the sense of racial justice Bailey’s induction symbolized, saying “There’s a lot of love in this room, and in the case of DeFord, I think there’s a little justice too.”<sup>92</sup>

The momentum for racial justice that propelled Bailey into the Hall of Fame, however, quickly dissipated or was redirected elsewhere within the industry. As of 2017, no other

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Music Hall of Fame, MusicRow, <https://musicrow.com/2009/02/new-procedures-for-election-to-the-country-music-hall-of-fame/> (accessed May 7, 2017).

<sup>90</sup> Peter Cooper, “Bailey, Campbell and Alabama bound for Hall of Fame,” *Tennessean*, August 29, 2005, DBC B3-F6.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Petreycik, 21.

performers of color have been admitted to the Hall of Fame since Bailey's 2005 induction, and only one other performer of Bailey's "old-timer" generation—1920s white recording artist Ernest Van "Pop" Stoneman—has been inducted during that period.<sup>93</sup> Bailey's singular path to the Hall of Fame, and the resumption of the racial status quo afterwards, might thus be regarded as a moment of racial tokenism within the country music industry. To be sure, Bailey's induction instigated a much-needed conversation on country music's racialized history—indeed, this dissertation joins a considerable body of scholarship since 2005 committed to these issues. But Bailey's induction also allowed figures within the industry to dismiss charges of racial prejudice and to reframe country music as racially progressive with a minimum of effort. In the aftermath, country music past and present remains dominated by white performers, and few would contest the whiteness of country music as a genre. Any racial justice achieved by canonizing Bailey has proven largely symbolic; the benefits of the new multiracial rhetoric accrue as much to an established white industry practicing a politics of respectability as to performers of color.

### **Hearing Race on the Opry**

The emphasis on Bailey's race in the years since his rediscovery is in stark contrast to Bailey's reception among early audiences, for whom race had a negligible impact. As former Opry announcer and WSM executive Jud Collins said in an interview with Morton, "There was no tokenism involved in having DeFord on the Grand Ole Opry. [...] He was hired because he was a performer."<sup>94</sup> Indeed, Bailey's early Opry audiences often heard his music as white or unraced and imagined Bailey himself to be white. This frequent racial confusion is corroborated anecdotally in interviews with Bailey as well as by other Opry personnel and listener

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<sup>93</sup> Stoneman was inducted to the Hall of Fame in 2008. "Inductees List," Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, <http://countrymusichalloffame.org/Inductees> (accessed May 7, 2017).

<sup>94</sup> Morton, "Every Day's Been Sunday."

reminiscences. This evidence resists revisionist histories of country music's multiracialism by pointing out the ways in which commercial country has always been shaped in favor of a white identity. While WSM was host to a variety of programs, genres, and musicians of color, the Opry asserted its working-class whiteness from its earliest days both on the air and in other publicity. The use of blackface on the Opry, particularly by the comedic duo "Jamup and Honey," served to reinforce the cultural boundaries of race and effectively made the rest of the Opry's offerings appear white in contrast. Eschewing blackface caricatures, Bailey was lumped in with other ostensibly "white" music. Yet as the Opry increasingly embraced the hillbilly image—an image which Bailey actively resisted—Bailey and his music emerged as an idiosyncratic outlier, largely dissociated from questions of race and increasingly marginalized in favor of newer hillbilly acts.

Bailey confirmed on at least two separate occasions that radio audiences were unaware of his race. In a 1980 telephone interview with Morton, he insisted that:

**Bailey:** [...] They didn't know I was a black man.

**Morton:** Right...Oh, really? Did that go very long? I mean, for very long did they not know it?

**Bailey:** Yeah, I was on there a long time. [...]

**Morton:** But the first year or so at least when you were on there, they didn't know you were a black man?

**Bailey:** No, they didn't know for longer than that.

**Morton:** Huh!

**Bailey:** [unclear; "Unless people come in and see"?]

**Morton:** Well that is something. I didn't realize that.<sup>95</sup>

This echoed an assertion Bailey made in one of his earliest interviews with Morton, in 1973:

**Morton:** When you played [on these Opry tours], did you find that everybody knew you were black when you came in, or did ... did you find that, uh, they were surprised?

**Bailey:** Well, a whole lot of them didn't know until I got there.

**Morton:** Uh-huh.

**Bailey:** They didn't announce it on the radio that I was black.

**Morton:** Right, so nobody knew that?

**Bailey:** Naw.

**Morton:** A lot of 'em didn't.

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<sup>95</sup> Bailey, telephone interview by Morton (audiocassette), February 1980, DBC Box 6, FS-7612.

**Bailey:** [overlapping with Morton; unclear]

**Morton:** That's great. Well, did you have any problems with that?

**Bailey:** No, I didn't.

**Morton:** Never had any...well, that surprises me. I would've thought probably you might've had a few. Just because...

**Bailey:** Naw. [...unclear...] Nobody wanted to do nothing to me or do me no harm[...]<sup>96</sup>

Later in this same conversation, Bailey recalled a tour stop in which he initially faced resistance from a white audience because of his race, but then gained their acceptance after an impressive performance. According to Bailey, "They [were] talking a few things against me, 'cause I was black." But later, "When I got through on the stage, they all come up and shook my hand and said, 'Now, you come back here any day you want to. You're welcome back here.'" He also recalled hearing some in the audience saying "he's a black man, but he has a white heart." Bailey's reception here as culturally white, and probably also his short stature, helped him to avoid racial hostilities faced by many other black men in the segregated South; this particular performance took place in or near Scottsboro, Alabama shortly after the 1931 arrest of the "Scottsboro Boys," nine black teenagers falsely accused of raping two white women.<sup>97</sup> The notion of a black man with a white heart especially speaks to the idea that Bailey's on-air performances were coded as white, as was his cultural identity more generally.

Bailey's assertions regarding his racial anonymity on the air are corroborated by several of his peers from the Opry. In a 1973 interview, fellow Opry members Roy Acuff and Beecher Kirby conceded that "a lot of people, back then, they didn't know he was colored" when they

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<sup>96</sup> Bailey, interview by Morton (audiocassette), October 19, 1973, DBC Box 5, FS-7572.

<sup>97</sup> According to Bailey, transcribed in Morton's handwritten notes accompanying this tape, the concert took place shortly after the incident involving "white girls and black boys on a train." Morton suggests that the locale for the concert is Scottsboro, and Bailey affirms this as probably correct. Bailey, interview by Morton (audiocassette), October 19, 1973.

went on tour together in the 1930s.<sup>98</sup> Later during the interview, Morton asks whether Bailey's short stature ever helped to ease audience anxiety regarding his race:

**Morton:** Let me ask you one other thing that I'm a little curious about. You alluded to that briefly, but the fact of his being black, with other audiences, do you feel like that if he had not had the handicap, that would have presented any problems? Or that that was just sort of a little thing that got him by? I'm just wondering, you know, it was a little unusual to be a black performer in that period with the Opry. I mean, I called home and my dad, when I talked to him the other day about this, down in Alabama, didn't know for sure whether he was black. You know, he said... well, he thought he was, but he could have been someone, you know, acting that way, that sort of thing.

**Acuff[?]:** I would say his deformity was all in his favor [...] [It] made people, I think they looked at him more. I really think it might have been an asset to him rather than any setback or drawback to him. [...]<sup>99</sup>

The second-hand testimony of Morton's father raises the possibility of assuming blackface performance, an issue to which I return later. Jud Collins, an announcer for the Opry during the last year of Bailey's tenure, also introduces some ambiguity:

**Morton:** Many people quite often didn't know that a certain performer, whether he was black or white. [unclear...] A lot of people may not have known that he was black.

**Collins:** Sure, yeah.

**Morton:** Would that be your, would you think that was actually valid in many cases?

**Collins:** Well, we would call them "the Negroes" then. And nobody would ever have said "Here's our Negro Opry star." No, there's no reason to know that, and no reason to say it, and I'm sure nobody ever did.

**Morton:** Well, it was... the director of the Country Music Foundation, or the Hall of Fame, commented that he had ran into someone in Idaho the other day, or a year or so ago, and was talking about DeFord. And he mentioned that he was black. And the guy was just incensed, saying "No!" you know. And this kind of thing... and he thought he was joking. And, so this guy said he just backed off and let him go. [Laughter] Now, I wondered whether that was widespread or more of an exception really.

**Collins:** I just always had the impression that everybody knew DeFord was black, I don't know why.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> It is unclear whether Acuff or Kirby is the one speaking this line. Beecher Kirby and Roy Acuff, interview by Morton (audiocassette), 1973, DBC Box 6, FS-7635.

<sup>99</sup> It's unclear at this point in the conversation whether Acuff or Kirby is responding. Kirby and Acuff, interview by Morton.

<sup>100</sup> Jud Collins (WSM announcer and executive), interview by Morton (audiocassette), October 16, 1973, DBC Box 6, FS-7632.



This account points in multiple directions. Although Collins here assumes that Bailey's race was widely known, he also admits that it would not have been openly advertised on the air; in Collins's view, this was not because a black performer would have been controversial, but because the mention on-air of any performer's race would have been inappropriate or strange, black or white. (Then again, Collins may be willfully omitting any systematic effort to conceal Bailey's race in an effort to give the current Opry a more progressive, blameless image). Collins did not join the Opry until 1940, and in his interview he admits that he only overlapped with Bailey for a short time and so never knew him well. Nevertheless, in retrospect Collins recognized Bailey as exceptional because of his race, and that it may have made things more difficult for him. "He was sort of a loner," Collins recalled. "He would stay by himself, and it never occurred to me at the time that he might have felt uncomfortable because he was the only black there. [...] I made no effort to know him. And yes, I... It was strange that a black was performing on the Opry, because he was the only one, but that, that really didn't register strongly because he was a performer."<sup>101</sup>

In the same interview, Morton asks whether Collins can remember any other blacks besides Bailey playing the Opry during his tenure as WSM announcer. Collins replies in the negative, and then he elaborates:

I don't know why that is, David. You know, there is a sort of a blues lick that the hillbilly musicians play. And the blues are something that were associated with black music, and it looks like that somewhere along those paths [i.e. hillbilly and blues] would have crossed, but they never did. And blacks never have really been interested in country music. [...]

The hillbilly music—I'm not speaking in the derogatory sense but I'm speaking in a historical sense—the hillbilly music that we're talking about is the music of the rednecks. And this segment of Americana was the enemy of the black people at that time. [...] And

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

that may be why the blacks were always turned off, [unclear] just never had the interest in it.<sup>102</sup>

Collins here affirms the common view assigning whiteness to country or “hillbilly” music and blackness to the blues, despite his concession that they overlap stylistically. And despite evidence of black listenership, Collins asserts black resistance to the genre as symptomatic of larger patterns of black/white racial antipathy. For Collins, Bailey’s racial presence on the Opry did not undermine this larger narrative but was merely exceptional and ultimately inconsequential.

The only account I have found that openly opposes the notion of Bailey’s racial anonymity is a statement made by Bill Monroe at a dedication ceremony for Bailey’s gravestone. “He was a good, decent man,” Monroe recalled of Bailey. “The people loved him. When we toured together, people even in rural areas knew that he was black, but it didn’t matter to them.”<sup>103</sup> Monroe here seems to be making a subtle case for the racial tolerance of rural whites, in addition to eulogizing Bailey as a perennial popular performer. Monroe did not join the Opry until 1939 and would not have toured with Bailey until that time. Perhaps towards the end of Bailey’s time with the Opry, knowledge about his race had become more widespread through his frequent Opry tours. Whatever the case, it seems clear that, at least for the first several years, Bailey’s racial identity remained unknown to the vast majority of radio audiences.

It is unclear to what extent WSM and the Opry deliberately attempted to conceal Bailey’s race from radio audiences in on-air announcements and promotional materials. As Jud Collins credibly claims, “Nobody would ever have said ‘Here’s our Negro Opry star.’ No, there’s no

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Oermann, “Country Music Commemorates Deford Bailey.”

reason to know that, and no reason to say it, and I'm sure nobody ever did."<sup>104</sup> Bailey, however, argued that Judge Hay, rather than merely apathetic to race, was initially wary of mentioning race on the air, concerned that "they'd blow us out" if Bailey's race was ever discovered.<sup>105</sup> According to a profile by journalist Rick Petreycik, a similar decision had been made when Bailey performed on another Nashville station, WDAD, years earlier, presumably for the same fear of public backlash.<sup>106</sup>

This concern seems to have been particular to the Opry program, however, since WSM often broadcast music more typically associated with black performers. A WSM press release recalls that the inaugural station broadcast in October 1925 included "such features as the Fisk Jubilee Quintet with the spirituals which had made this group the most celebrated of its kind in the world"; the Fisk Jubilee Singers are later explicitly identified in this document as the "nationally famous group of Negro vocalists."<sup>107</sup> According to an article by George Hay from 1932, during WSM's first year of programming, many "colored quartets were alternated, using songs of the cotton patches and corn fields." This proved popular, as "the eastern and middle western portion of the radio audience never seemed to tire of this form of programme."<sup>108</sup> And as David Morton and Charles K. Wolfe have further elaborated, WSM in its early days was host to a variety of different styles that included "gospel, brass bands, barbershop quartets, Hawaiian music, even a little jazz," with the only real restriction that the music could not be a

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<sup>104</sup> Collins, interview by Morton.

<sup>105</sup> Morton with Wolfe, 114.

<sup>106</sup> Petreycik, 16.

<sup>107</sup> "Facilities" (document detailing history of WSM, possibly for press release), typescript, 3 parts, 11pp, [c. 1950], WSMRTC B12-F9.

<sup>108</sup> George Hay, "History of WSM from the Memorable Inaugural Program October 5th, 1925," *Broadcast News*, November 12, 1932 WSMRTC B13-F1.

contemporary pop hit.<sup>109</sup> Blacks were apparently even welcome in WSM's studio audience, small though the space initially was. Bailey remembered one Opry broadcast in which Judge Hay, as part of his sign-off, mentioned that "colored people could come" to the Opry studio to see the show, in an apparent effort to help cultivate black audiences.<sup>110</sup> This gesture, however, proved mostly futile. During Bailey's time, few blacks attended the Opry, which is affirmed by the fact that no section was cordoned off for black audience members, which is how a mixed audience would have been handled in the era of segregation.<sup>111</sup> At the Ryman Auditorium shortly following World War II, after Bailey had left the show, Jud Collins recalled that there was a designated section for black audience members, but that there were rarely more than "four or five" in attendance.<sup>112</sup> Segregated seating in concert audiences opens up a huge topic, which is beyond the range of this study.

Despite these overtures to black radio and studio audiences, in its beginnings WSM had as its primary target audience middle-class whites. According to Morton and Wolfe, the music on WSM in 1925 "was distinctly upscale: a few light classics, some art songs, selections by local dance bands—but not a note of country or folk music. National Life viewed its station as a cultural service to the people of Nashville and assumed that its audience was the upper middle-class white population who lived in the West End and bought John McCormick records for their expensive Victrolas."<sup>113</sup> This reflection layers another socioeconomic reality on top of race: radio listeners needed to own a radio, just as record buyers needed to be able to afford a

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<sup>109</sup> Morton with Wolfe, 47.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>111</sup> Bailey, interview by Morton (audiocassette), December 2, 1973, DBC Box 5, FS-7581.

<sup>112</sup> Collins, interview by Morton.

<sup>113</sup> Morton with Wolfe, 45.

turntable. George Hay was initially brought in from WLS in Chicago to replicate his success with audiences there and because he was a generally respectable figure. His work with the Opry began as a pet project and was resisted by many WSM personnel and elite Nashvillians, and then later only tolerated once it became so successful. I have been unable to find demographic data on the listenership of WSM in the 1920s and early 1930s. But given WSM's powerful broadcast signal and eventual status as a clear channel radio station in the 1930s, it might be assumed that the Opry pulled in a racially and socioeconomically diverse listenership, even if the in-studio audience was largely or even exclusively white. In a 1958 press release, the Opry imagined its own early audience as "not only the folk who usually attend rural barn dances but also many of those who had come to the city during the great urban migration of the industrial era. These folk retain their contact with the soil by tuning to the program which brings them the songs they have always known and loved."<sup>114</sup> The Opry audience in this case was defined as much along class and regional lines as along racial ones.

One of the more remarkable documents in the WSM archives at Vanderbilt University is an undated letter written by Annie Cody, a member of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, to Frank Marlow, apparently a WSM program director. Cody is here thanking Marlow for memorializing and profiling important Confederate leaders via broadcast over WSM airwaves; she requests that he continue to do so on various birthdays and Confederate anniversaries. The letter is reproduced in full here, demonstrating the conflicting racial, class, and regional allegiances at WSM in the 1930s and 1940s:

Dear 'Uncle Frank' –

As the State Chairman of Radio work for the United Daughters of the Confederacy, I wish to thank you for your sketches of Matthew Fontaine Maury, Gen. Robert E. Lee + Thomas J. (Stonewall) Jackson, all on your 'Village Serenader Program.'

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<sup>114</sup> "GRAND OLE OPRY" (press release), 4pp., January 1, 1958, GOOC B1-F5.

You will remember that I called you in regard to those birthdays after I heard you speak on Thomas Jefferson.

A number of years past, I wrote you in regard to programs on some of our Confederate Memorial Days. At that time, you remembered Sidney Lanier on the anniversary of his birth. I am asking if you can work him in this year on his birthday February 3<sup>rd</sup>. Perhaps you can have the Serenaders sing 'Ballad of Trees + the Master.'

The United Daughters of the Confederacy presented at the Hall of Fame, New York University, a bronze bust last October 3<sup>rd</sup>. The election was the year before.

We have three other birthdays of great Southerners in February, the 6<sup>th</sup> birthday of J.E.B. Stuart [*caret*: cavalry leader] + Alexander H. Stephens, of Georgia + Vice President of the Southern Confederacy; February 11<sup>th</sup> the birthday of John B. Gordon.

I will appreciate any mention you may give of these dates + others I can send you.

Sincerely,  
(Miss) Annie Cody<sup>115</sup>

This letter suggests something of the obligation and motivation WSM must have felt in upholding the community standards of white Nashville and its wider listenership. While the United Daughters of the Confederacy was not explicitly founded as a pro-white institution, notions of racial supremacy lurked within its ideology and advocacy work.<sup>116</sup> If WSM's commercial success relied in part upon the support of such civic institutions, then there may have been a real risk in advertising Bailey's race; especially for a show which traded in notions of white European origins, any evidence of racial mixing or musical miscegenation could have provoked an outcry. Hay's initial concerns about being "blown out" may have been well-founded.

Perhaps the real reason for omitting Bailey's race from mention is that it contradicted the rural, white self-image that the Opry (and Judge Hay in particular) sought to cultivate in the minds of audiences. The Opry's marketing was influenced by the work of academic folklorists like Francis James Child, Cecil Sharp, and especially John Lomax in the early twentieth century. These folklorists sought to discover the "roots" of folk music and insisted upon finding (racially)

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<sup>115</sup> Annie Cody to Frank Marlow ("Uncle Frank"), n.d., WSMRTC B1-F2.

<sup>116</sup> See Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

pure song archetypes. This led them to exclude from their research much of the music-making and interracial exchange occurring throughout the rural South. Instead, the folklorists entered the field with Anglo origins as a foregone conclusion, and songs with demonstrable links back to white Europe were the ones that were ultimately preserved, published, and valorized.<sup>117</sup>

Appearing around the same time as these folkloric studies, the Opry drew upon and played into an Anglo- and Euro-centric view of the origins of Southern music. An undated WSM press release about the Opry's founding makes this link explicitly: "it was music people recognized; the lyrics were simple; the melodies were easy to sing or hum; and the songs told a story, as had the folk music passed down for centuries in England, Scotland, Ireland, and certain parts of Europe."<sup>118</sup> Elsewhere, the press release makes a similar racialized claim on the music: "For many years the music of the Anglo-Saxon people who settled in the hills of Kentucky and Tennessee was passed on through the families, and with each generation some new music was added. This became the folk music of America."<sup>119</sup> At least as late as 1960, this was the story and self-image the Grand Ole Opry preferred to tell about itself: "It would seem that perhaps the roots of this popularity and for the popularity of all country [music] stem back a few hundred years. Early settlers in the South—from places such as Scotland and England—brought with them the music which strongly resembles country music of today."<sup>120</sup> The notion of deep historical roots in Europe was perhaps most vividly captured in the publicity surrounding fiddler Uncle Jimmy Thompson, long-credited in official Opry literature as the first performer on the

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<sup>117</sup> See Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), and Miller.

<sup>118</sup> Untitled press release detailing early history of WSM (photocopy), 5pp, n.d., WSMRTC B12-F11.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> "GRAND OLE OPRY, FROM: 'Southern Telephone News'...January 1960" (press release), 5pp., 1960, GOOC B1-F5.

WSM Barn Dance, the precursor to Opry.<sup>121</sup> In his eighties at the time of his inaugural November 1925 broadcast, Thompson's advanced age played perfectly into Judge Hay's old-time image-making that depended upon notions of roots in European folk music. Thompson's role in Opry history was heavily publicized through a photograph recreating this historic broadcast (see Figure 2.1), in which his age was made quite apparent.



Figure 2.1: A photograph with George Hay (left) and Uncle Jimmy Thompson recreating the first broadcast of the *WSM Barn Dance*, a precursor to the Grand Ole Opry. Thompson's advanced age seems to speak to the Opry's avowed roots in European folk music. "George D. Hay, founder of the Grand Ole Opry, with Uncle Jimmy Thompson – 1925," Grand Ole Opry Collection 1930s-1960s (Collection Number: MSS 178), B6-F4 [no photograph number], Special Collections and University Archives, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

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<sup>121</sup> This account, based on Judge Hay's recollections, has been contested by various other Opry personnel, most notably by Alcyone Bate Beasley, daughter of Dr. Humphrey Bate. See her interview with Douglas B. Green. For more on the career of Jimmy Thompson, see the chapter "Uncle Jimmy Thompson" in Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*.



The use and legacies of blackface on the Opry added another layer of complexity to the racial signification of its broadcasts. The duo “Lasses and Honey,” comprised of the team Lasses White and Honey Wilds, white musicians who performed in blackface, joined the Opry cast in 1932 following the theatrical success of the Lasses White’s Minstrels. The pair were especially popular on WSM tours, during which they “had ‘em hangin’ on the rafters,” in Judge Hay’s estimation, relying upon a combination of comedy routines and popular songs. Both stage and radio shows were performed in ersatz black dialect, to the extent that Wilds developed a “deep voice trained to dialect so well that he lets it run over into his private life.”<sup>122</sup> Lasses White soon left the Opry to pursue work in film, and he was replaced first by Tom Woods, then later by Bunny Biggs, both of whom worked on the Opry under the minstrel name “Jamup.”<sup>123</sup> Biggs worked with Wilds through the mid-1940s, but by 1950 he had been replaced by Harry LeVan, who also worked as Jamup. The pair were not confined to radio work on the Opry, but also appeared on WSM’s weekly program “Cotton Blossom Minstrels,” a program specializing in blackface routines.<sup>124</sup> Asked whether comedians bothered to black up for their earliest radio performances, Bailey recalled that Honey Wilds did but that Lasses White did not.<sup>125</sup> A photograph dated to the 1930s in the DeFord Bailey Collection at the Nashville Public Library shows Buck Martin, a member of Fiddlin’ Sid Harkreader’s ensemble, posing in blackface for a publicity photograph, although whether or not he performed in blackface during radio broadcasts

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<sup>122</sup> Hay, *A Story of the Grand Ole Opry*, 31.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>124</sup> Tom Stewart (WSM Publicity Director), “JAMUP AND HONEY” (press release), January 25, 1950, GOOC B1-F6.

<sup>125</sup> Bailey, interview by Morton (audiocassette), November 30, 1973 and December 2, 1973, DBC Box 5, FS-7580.

is questionable.<sup>126</sup> That Roy Acuff once performed in blackface is well known, although he did not perform such material at the Opry.<sup>127</sup>

Strikingly, Bailey seems to have maintained cordial to friendly relations with the Opry's blackface comedians, particularly Honey Wilds. Bailey toured with him during the 1930s, and Wilds was one of the Opry members who helped secure accommodations for Bailey in segregated Southern towns. Wilds was sometimes even refused service himself for assisting Bailey. According to Bailey, during tours he would go "to places with Honey Wilds where they would not sell him a sandwich for me."<sup>128</sup> In all of his recorded interviews with David Morton, Bailey seems never to have made a disparaging remark or shown antipathy towards blackface performers at the Opry.

The use of blackface would seem to undercut the Opry's explicit advocacy of an authentic white folk culture. But its presence on Opry broadcasts highlights not just the enduring popularity of blackface, but also the ways in which musical behavior was heavily and unambiguously racialized for Opry audiences, with a thorough normalization of those practices. The narrow set of musical and performance conventions associated with blackface quite probably rendered everything else "white" in comparison. Perhaps reception of Bailey's repertory as white or unracial rather than black resulted in part from his refusal to participate in the caricatures of blackface musical performance.

It is fascinating to track how Bailey is represented in various accounts by WSM of the Opry's origins. In newspaper announcements, the most ubiquitous advertisements for upcoming

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<sup>126</sup> Photograph 6-4, Clarence 'Mack' McGarr, Buck Martin, Sid Harkreader, Blythe Poteete, Emory Martin – Band at WSM microphone, c. 1930s, DBC B1-F6.

<sup>127</sup> Elizabeth Schlappi, *Roy Acuff: The Smoky Mountain Boy*, 2nd ed. (Gretna, LA: Pelican, 1993), 21.

<sup>128</sup> Morton with Wolfe, 118.

radio programming, Bailey was listed simply as “the harmonica wizard,” a nickname bestowed upon him by George Hay.<sup>129</sup> By the mid-1930s, when Bailey began touring, publicity would sometimes reference race in passing or use coded language. One press release from this period refers to Bailey as “the little colored boy”;<sup>130</sup> another release from around 1940 uses the condescending diminutive “little DeFord Bailey.”<sup>131</sup> Demeaning language like this also mocked Bailey’s short stature and hunched back, both a result of childhood polio. As a result, it could at times be hard to tell whether Bailey was degraded for his race or his disability. Bailey gained a reputation as the Opry’s “mascot,” a label used to introduce him on the air. A surviving “aircheck” transcription recording of the first NBC-syndicated Opry radio broadcast—dating to October 14, 1939—gives a sense of how this label was used, and the language is sobering to encounter. Following several performances by other Opry regulars, Hay introduced Bailey with: “Now friends we introduce our little mascot, DeFord Bailey,” after which Bailey performed “Pan American Blues” without a word. A bit later in the broadcast, Hay calls Bailey back onstage to play “Fox Chase”: “Come on out here, little DeFord, wake up, son.”<sup>132</sup> The “mascot” label, intended to render disability amusing, also marginalized and dismissed racial difference as an unthreatening curiosity rather than a challenge or an intrinsic part of Bailey’s musical expression.

Publicity photographs of the Opry cast during the 1930s and 1940s are likewise

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<sup>129</sup> According to Morton, Bailey’s first WSM performance to be listed in newspapers appeared on June 19, 1926, although he had probably played on WSM previously. Morton with Wolfe, 47. For an early example of an advertisement listing Bailey, see “WSM to Present Symphony Today,” unknown newspaper clipping, n.d., WSMRTC B13-F1.

<sup>130</sup> “THE GRAND OLE OPRY” (press release), [c. 1935], GOOC B1-F5; Hay’s authorship is corroborated by an identical signed press release found in the same collection: “WSM PRESENTS “THE GRAND OLD [*sic*] OPRY,” n.d.

<sup>131</sup> Press release with “WSM News Service” letterhead, 3pp., [c. 1940], GOOC B1-F5. This same formulation is used two decades later in WSM Grand Ole Opry, *Official Opry History-Picture Book*, Volume 3, Edition 1 (Nashville, TN: WSM, 1966), GOOC B4-F6.

<sup>132</sup> Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 262-3.

ambiguous rather than forthcoming in their representations of Bailey's race. It is impossible to know how widely such photos were distributed or published, and how carefully the photos were staged. Nevertheless, at a glance most photographs from this era give the impression of an all-white cast at the Opry. Spotting Bailey among the sea of white faces takes deliberate effort. In one Opry-produced pamphlet addressed to prospective advertisers—"The Story of: One of Radio's Biggest and Most Successful Shows: WSM Grand Ole Opry, 1925-1940"—a centerfold photograph proclaims "The Folks in WSM's Grand Ole Opry" (see Figure 2.2). While there are many conspicuous white faces wielding instruments and dressed in cowboy or hillbilly attire, a crouching Bailey is "hidden" in the foreground of the shot, his face and dark jacket disappearing against the black trousers of the guitarist standing behind him. The group photograph is flanked on either side by pictures of Opry management.



Figure 2.2: A cast photograph of the Grand Ole Opry, 1940. Bailey appears in the lower left. Centerfold from "The Story of: One of Radio's Biggest and Most Successful Shows: WSM Grand Ole Opry, 1925-1940," Grand Ole Opry Collection 1930s-1960s (Collection Number: MSS 178), B1-F7, Special Collections and University Archives, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

Another cast photograph, advertising “Purina’s Grand Ole Opry Sat. 6:30 & 8:00 P.M. (CWT)” along its bottom margin has a similar layout, with Bailey again seated on the floor, as though minimizing himself while the rest of his fellow Opry members are seated in chairs or standing behind him (Figure 2.3). Although Bailey in this photo is still somewhat tucked away, the viewer’s attention is more drawn to racial identities given the presence of the blackface comedians Jamup and Honey seated at either end of the front row. The comic duo is also among the performers receiving a solo inset photo in the upper left corner.



Figure 2.3: A photograph of the Grand Ole Opry cast, c. 1940. Bailey is once again seated on the floor, while the blackface minstrels Jamup and Honey are seated on either end of the front row. “Purina’s Grand Ole Opry,” Photograph 25 from Grand Ole Opry Collection 1930s-1960s (Collection Number: MSS 178), B6-F2, Special Collections and University Archives, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

As shown in these pictures, Bailey avoided Hay's efforts to cultivate a hillbilly image for the Opry. Rather, he maintained his reputation as a dapper dresser; on the Opry he usually performed in a tailored suit. Suit and tie were standard for the earliest Opry performers during broadcasts and in publicity photos, as the shows were radio-only and performers sought to project a professional image. Only once the Opry became a stage show with an in-studio audience did Hay enforce a hillbilly dress code.<sup>133</sup> But Bailey never made the switch. "Me and overalls can't get along no kind of way," Bailey told Morton in an interview, "But I got me some back then. I wore them two times, then I went back to my coat and tie. Nobody said nothing to me... They was just plain country and I was country enough to begin with."<sup>134</sup> Bailey's resistance to the hillbilly costumes may have simply been a matter of personal preference or a deliberate effort to maintain a respectable image. But it alienated him from the Opry's artistic direction as program continued in the 1930s. Nevertheless, his resistance to the hillbilly image did little to undermine the Opry's projection of a white, working-class identity or the association of him and his music with that white image.

### **Ironies of Musical Analysis**

Absent the overt markers of blackface or hillbilly performance, Bailey's racial identity remained ambiguous to his radio audiences. For these audiences, his repertory also appeared as racially unmarked. Most of Bailey's repertory consisted of solo harmonica pieces, many of them onomatopoeic imitations of animals or trains. This repertory derived from multiple performance traditions both white and black. For musicologists listening today, the blues elements stand out vividly, which would thus seem to mark this repertory as black music. However, reception of Bailey's music in the 1920s and 1930s focused on the fidelity of his representations to their real-

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<sup>133</sup> Morton with Wolfe, 104.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

world subjects, ignoring in the process any potential racialized readings. The friction between past and present-day interpretations of this repertory reveals a need for a more historically-informed and reception-centered approach to racial hermeneutics, particularly when the urgency of racial advocacy can lead to presentist, essentialist notions of the blues as “black music.”

Most of the early ensembles on the Opry performed string band music, sometimes instrumental-only and sometimes vocal, which had a lineage in both black and white communities in the nineteenth century.<sup>135</sup> Although primarily a harmonicist, Bailey had been raised in the string band tradition, and on occasion he played guitar and even sang songs on the Opry.<sup>136</sup> Broadcasts of Bailey’s voice were rare, however; he avoided speaking between pieces beyond offering a “thank you” to the audience.<sup>137</sup> To the extent that voices are racialized, their relative absence in Bailey’s music (and indeed in a good deal of string band music) served to obscure racial identity further.<sup>138</sup> As the 1930s progressed, string band music on the Opry was joined and eventually displaced by new vocal repertoires which articulated white, working-class identity more overtly than had been achievable through instrumental music. As noted earlier, Bailey did not perform in this newer style and was in fact often discouraged from straying from his usual material.

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<sup>135</sup> String band ensembles usually consisted of a fiddle, which served as a lead instrument, as well as guitar, banjos, and other strings, which served as the rhythm section and occasionally performed solos. Some early examples on the Opry include Dr. Humphrey Bate and His Possum Hunters, Paul Warmack and His Gully Humpers, and Binkley Brothers Dixie Clodhoppers. See both volumes of the CD anthology *Nashville: The Early String Bands*, County CO-CD-3521 and CO-CD-3522, 2000.

<sup>136</sup> Morton with Wolfe, 69.

<sup>137</sup> Walt Trott, “Bailey Bio Bares Black Experience at the Opry” (photocopy), *Nashville Musician*, April-June 1992, DBC B3-F6.

<sup>138</sup> As vocal repertory came to dominate commercial country music from the mid-1930s onward, the voice became a primary site for demonstrating a performer’s perceived authenticity, typically coded as white, working-class, and rural. For more on country music and working-class vocality, see Aaron Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

The vast majority of Bailey's repertory was for solo harmonica, making him unique among Opry performers. To be sure, the instrument was not exclusively associated with black performers. Bailey participated in mixed-race harmonica contests prior to joining the Opry, and Bailey's white Opry mates, Dr. Humphrey Bate and Herman Crook, were both harmonica players. However, both Bate and Crook performed in the context of a string band, with the harmonica taking over the melodic role of the fiddle, rather than performing solo.<sup>139</sup> Moreover, Bailey was the only one of the three to perform in the so-called "cross harp" style.

Ethnomusicologist Michael S. Licht claims that this style, in which the performer plays a fourth below a diatonic harmonica's intended pitch, was developed by African-American performers.<sup>140</sup> Playing a fourth lower—playing in the key of G on a C harmonica, for example—yields roughly a Mixolydian modality, mimicking a blues scale especially in the presence of a lower seventh scale degree. Through overblowing and other manipulations, Bailey was able to bend pitches to include the entire chromatic scale as well as the microtonal inflections that are a trademark of much blues singing.

An exhaustive list of all of Bailey's Opry repertory is probably impossible to compile.<sup>141</sup> The only extant recording of Bailey's live Opry performances is the first NBC-syndicated broadcast from October 14, 1939. Bailey's performances that evening included "Pan-American

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<sup>139</sup> A good example of the harmonica in a melodic role can be heard in the recording of "My Wife Died Saturday Night" by Dr. Humphrey Bate and His Possum Hunters, available on *Nashville: The Early String Bands Volume One*.

<sup>140</sup> Michael S. Licht, "Harmonica Magic: Virtuoso Display in American Folk Music," *Ethnomusicology* 24, no. 2 (May 1980): 212.

<sup>141</sup> An appendix in Morton and Wolfe's biography entitled "Songs Performed by Bailey" lists sixty pieces, although this is most likely a list of pieces that Bailey played during his interviews with Morton in the 1970s and 1980s. At any rate, the list includes the song "My Blue Heaven," a pop tune which Bailey was explicitly prohibited from playing on the Opry. Morton with Wolfe, 175-6.



Blues,” “Fox Chase,” “Evening Prayer Blues,” and “Memphis Blues.”<sup>142</sup> Beyond this performance, the closest access to Bailey’s sound on the Opry comes from his commercial recordings released in 1927 and 1928. A survey of these eleven recordings, listed in Table 2.1 below, suggests a strong emphasis on the blues, with some pieces newly composed and others rearranged from previous folk or popular sources, sometimes bearing new titles:<sup>143</sup>

**Table 2.1: DeFord Bailey’s Commercial Recordings, 1927-1928**

Recording Title	Label Information
“Pan-American Blues”	Brunswick 146, Vocalion 5180
“Dixie Flyer Blues”	Brunswick 146, Vocalion 5180
“Muscle Shoals Blues”	Brunswick 147, Brunswick 434
“Up Country Blues”	Brunswick 147, Brunswick 434
“Evening Prayer Blues”	Brunswick 148, Vocalion 5147
“The Alcoholic Blues”	Brunswick 148, Vocalion 5147
“Old Hen Cackle”	Vocalion 5190
“Fox Chase”	Vocalion 5190
“John Henry”	Victor 23336, Victor 23831
“Ice Water Blues”	Victor V-38014, Bluebird B5447, Sunrise 3228, Mont. Ward M-4910
“Davidson County Blues”	Victor V-38014, Bluebird B5447, Sunrise 3228, Mont. Ward M-4190

Notably, Bailey’s recordings for Brunswick were released on the label’s “Dixie” series (catalog numbers 100-601), featuring mostly white Southern musicians, rather than its “Race” series (catalog numbers 7000-7228). This was also true of the Vocalion imprint; Bailey’s recordings were released under “Old Southern Tunes” (catalog numbers 5000-5484) rather than “Race”

<sup>142</sup> Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 261-3. The piece “Memphis Blues” does not appear in the appendix in Morton and Wolfe’s book. This live performance of “Fox Chase” is available on the CD anthology *From Where I Stand*.

<sup>143</sup> Recording information comes from the discography compiled by Charles K. Wolfe in Morton with Wolfe, 185-6. The reverse side of Victor 23336 is Noah Lewis, “Like I Want to Be.” The reverse side of Victor 23831 is Bert Bilbro, “Chester Blues.”

(1000-1681).<sup>144</sup> For Victor, Bailey's recordings were released under its generic 23000 series as well as its V-38000 ("Hot Dance") series. This classification of his material meant that he was excluded from both the V-38500 ("Race") series as well as the V-40000 series designating "Old Familiar Tunes and Novelties"; most other acts to record during the 1928 Victor sessions in Nashville, including Bailey's white co-stars from the Opry, were released on this V-40000 series.<sup>145</sup> As demonstrated by this discography, Bailey's material seemed to defy easy categorization. However, he consistently avoided the "race" label in the 1920s, despite both his own racial identity and the blues elements in his repertory.

In addition to his association with the Opry, Bailey may also have been spared the "race" classification because of the seeming novelty of his mimetic repertory. Bailey's most famous and most often performed piece, "Pan-American Blues," was a virtuosic mimicry of train sounds: the departing bell, the acceleration of wheels on the tracks, and finally the train chugging along at high speed, occasionally punctuated by a series of whistles. Bailey's "Dixie Flyer Blues," although less frequently performed, followed a similar narrative trajectory. While trains were a common trope in black repertories dating back to the late 1800s, Jimmie Rodgers's "Singing Brakeman" persona of the 1920s and 1930s also attested to the popularity of train songs among white country performers.<sup>146</sup> Contemporaneous newspaper accounts suggest that most listeners focused on the fidelity of the train representation; racial coding was not a consideration. As one

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<sup>144</sup> Regarding the Brunswick and Vocalion catalog series during this period, see Ross Laird, *Brunswick Records: A Discography of Recordings, 1916-1931* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 1:41-2.

<sup>145</sup> Brian Rust, *The Victor Master Book: Volume 2 (1925-1936)* (Stanhope, NJ: W.C. Allen, 1970), 1-2, 227-9. See also John R. Bolig, *The Victor Black Label Discography: 22000, 23000, 24000, V-38000, V-38500, and V-4000 Series* (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2013).

<sup>146</sup> Regarding trains as a trope in black music, see Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. "Troping the Blues: From Spirituals to the Concert Hall," *Black Music Research Journal* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 31-51; and the anthology Norm Cohen and David Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

reviewer for the Knoxville *News-Sentinel* observed in 1928, “Bailey stands out as one of those who can make the instrument talk and trill. [...] Of course, the most difficult thing, *which is more a stunt than music*, is the locomotive trill.”<sup>147</sup> In later interviews, Bailey also emphasized the accuracy of his imitation. The Pan-American and Dixie Flyer trains passed by his childhood home in Newsom’s Station on the outskirts of Nashville, and he spent hours memorizing their sounds and patterns, claiming it took seventeen years to perfect the sound of the train whistle.<sup>148</sup> By reading these compositions as sound “stunts” rather than music, as the *News-Sentinel* reviewer did, audiences perhaps robbed them of the personally expressive agency often accorded to music, thus de-racializing and even de-humanizing them.

And yet there is no mistaking Bailey’s trains for the real thing. In particular, the “whistles” of “Pan-American Blues” and “Dixie Flyer Blues” provide glimpses of melody that contrast with the pulsating, mechanistic sounds that dominate most of the performance. Musical analysis of Bailey’s train pieces reveals several elements of the blues—pentatonicism, bent or blue notes, syncopation, and cyclic form—that are now regarded as hallmarks of music coded as black. In “Pan-American Blues,” the whistle sounds periodically, alternated with more rhythmic sections representing the clickety-clack of the moving train. With some subtle variations, every whistle follows the basic idea shown in the transcription below (Example 2.1); Bailey plays with microtones around the third scale degree, yielding a series of unstable blue notes. Most of the whistle phrases end with a blues-derived  $\flat$  3-2-1 melodic lick that is decidedly unlike an actual train whistle.

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<sup>147</sup> Emphasis added. Quoted in Morton with Wolfe, 85.

<sup>148</sup> Bailey, telephone interview by Morton (audiocassette), January 1980, DBC Box 6, FS-7611.



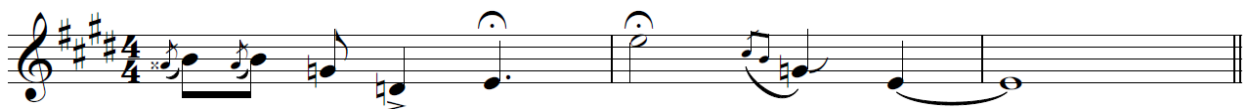
Example 2.1: The basic train “whistle” pattern in DeFord Bailey’s “Pan-American Blues.”

The whistles of “Dixie Flyer Blues” are more complex and varied, departing even further from onomatopoeic realism. The opening whistle begins with a salvo of eighth-notes, each bending up towards the fifth scale degree. The end of the phrase works down towards the tonic by way of a syncopated, accented flat-three. The second whistle mimics this downward contour. Beginning again on an approximated fifth scale degree, Bailey works a flatted third and flatted seventh into the syncopated figure before arriving on the tonic. A dramatic octave leap is then followed by a slurred grace note cluster that pauses momentarily on flat-three before falling again to one. In each of these whistle passages, elements of the blues are consistently and unambiguously present.

(a)



(b)



Example 2.2(a-b): The first two train “whistles” in DeFord Bailey’s “Dixie Flyer Blues.”

## Conclusion

Despite musical evidence suggestive of the blues, and thus perhaps of black music, Bailey’s audiences tended to hear whiteness or no race at all. Granted, by the early 1930s the blues was being adopted by white country performers, most notably Jimmie Rodgers, and

perhaps audiences imagined Bailey as a part of this trend. Yet Rodgers remained somewhat anomalous in this regard, and certainly the blues elements described here remained primarily associated with black performers and black music. Thus an analytical approach to “Pan-American Blues” and “Dixie Flyer Blues”—and much other racially-fraught repertory—must be reconciled with a reception history that yields different interpretations. In this case, the Opry’s white self-image and savvy marketing, the music’s programmatic bent, and radio’s cloak of anonymity all conspired to overshadow the author’s identity.

I would therefore suggest that we rethink Bailey’s role in histories of commercial country music. Certainly we should continue to confront the persistent discrimination that Bailey and other black performers faced, and to acknowledge their often marginalized musical achievements. But by confirming country’s biracial performance history, Bailey’s career also paradoxically reveals how powerfully commercial forces conspired to racialize the genre as white. Pieces like “Pan-American Blues” and “Dixie Flyer Blues” problematize our stylistic distinctions between country music and black music, even between music and sound. In so doing, these pieces throw into question the efficacy of stylistic analysis in parsing racial meaning—of listening for race in the face of genres always already racialized. Ultimately, Bailey’s de-racialized and sometimes re-racialized reception draws our attention ever more acutely to radio’s role in shaping music’s racial meaning, to the unstable stylistic ontology of country music, and to the often tenuous link between racial identity of performer, repertory, and genre.

## Chapter 3

### Racial Nationalism and Class Ambivalence in Carson Robison's World War II Songs

Almost from the moment of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, World War II inspired an extraordinary outpouring of new popular song in the United States—over 1,700 published pieces, by one estimate.<sup>1</sup> Country musician Carson Robison (1890-1957) was at the forefront of this trend, composing and performing twenty-three topical songs about the war from 1941 to 1947.<sup>2</sup> Robison's country repertory often ridiculed the Axis Powers, reserving the most extreme invective for Japanese nationals. In songs like "Remember Pearl Harbor," "1942 Turkey in the Straw," and "We're Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap," Robison labeled the Japanese as "rats," "skunks," and "yellow scum." Through references to an explicitly racialized Japanese enemy, these songs articulated an ideology of racial nationalism, defining American citizenship by race rather than through civic or cultural values.<sup>3</sup> Robison's anti-Japanese songs, like other American popular song of the era, imagined a U.S. population based on racial exclusion, with whiteness often assumed as the default racial identity.

Given the heated racial rhetoric that followed the Pearl Harbor attack, these songs are hardly surprising. Viewed in the context of Robison's professional life, however, his World War II songs take on unexpected additional meanings. Beyond their overt message of racial nationalism, the songs ironically reflect Robison's career-long struggle to gain acceptance among

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<sup>1</sup> John Bush Jones, *The Songs That Fought the War: Popular Music and the Home Front, 1939-1945* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 32-3.

<sup>2</sup> A complete listing of Robison's World War II-related recordings, published sheet music, and unpublished manuscripts is given in Appendix 2.

<sup>3</sup> My understanding of the term "racial nationalism" is particularly indebted to Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). For Gerstle, racial nationalism ebbed and flowed throughout the twentieth-century United States in response to various sociopolitical crises, including World War II. Competing with this race-based nationalism is "civic nationalism," the belief that Americans are defined and bound together through shared principles of freedom, democracy, and equality.

the pop music elite, a world in which country music's rural, working-class origins remained a huge liability. In their displays of race-based patriotism, Robison's anti-Japanese songs deflected country music's negative class and regional associations, affirming instead the genre's whiteness and American heritage.

In one sense, Robison was but a single cog in a massive wartime machine of intense domestic propaganda. Pro-Allied propaganda was actively cultivated by the United States government through the Office of War Information, established on June 13, 1942.<sup>4</sup> Among other activities, the OWI's music division issued recommendations to songwriters through articles in the trade press.<sup>5</sup> President Franklin D. Roosevelt likewise encouraged propagandists in the entertainment industry, claiming in a June 1943 issue of *Billboard* that "Entertainment is always a national asset. Invaluable in time of peace it is indispensable in wartime. [...] All those who are working in the entertainment industry [...] are building and maintaining national morale both on the battlefield and on the home front."<sup>6</sup>

The American popular culture industry responded forcefully to such appeals, in part through race-based attacks against the Japanese. In Hollywood, war-themed films routinely presented negative stereotypes of Japanese characters along with Orientalist soundtracks.<sup>7</sup> Popular songwriters, centered in the publishing houses of New York's Tin Pan Alley district, balanced war-inspired nostalgic fare like "Don't Sit under the Apple Tree (with Anyone Else but

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<sup>4</sup> Annegret Fauser, *Sounds of War: Music in the United States during World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 77.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the OWI discouraged songs with "swing," believing that the rhythm obscured the message of the lyrics. Krystyn R. Moon, "'There's No Yellow in the Red, White, and Blue': The Creation of Anti-Japanese Music during World War II," *Pacific Historical Review* 72, no. 3 (2003): 348.

<sup>6</sup> Roosevelt's message was originally addressed to the National Conference of the Entertainment Industry for War Activities. "Roosevelt Lauds Show Business," *Billboard*, June 12, 1943. Quoted in Jones, 31.

<sup>7</sup> W. Anthony Sheppard, "An Exotic Enemy: Anti-Japanese Musical Propaganda in World War II Hollywood," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 303-357.

Me)” with overtly patriotic material that often embraced a message of racial nationalism.<sup>8</sup> A signature song of the era, “There’s No Yellow in the Red, White, and Blue” succinctly summarized a racially-exclusionary vision of American citizenship.<sup>9</sup> Other gleefully violent Tin Pan Alley titles included “(Hallelujah 8-9-10) Hey, Tojo, Count Yo’ Men,” “Mow the Japs Down!,” and “You’re a Sap, Mister Jap.”<sup>10</sup> Such anti-Japanese rhetoric was ultimately consistent with and helped to rationalize other forms of American racial discrimination during wartime. These included the Japanese-American internment camps, the widespread desecration and plunder of dead Japanese soldiers by American troops, and even the decision to use the atomic bomb—all fates which did not befall white Europeans.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the ubiquity of this anti-Japanese rhetoric, Robison’s work was especially popular, and it helped to shape perceptions of country music as the genre began to achieve mainstream visibility. Dubbed “the Granddaddy of the Hillbillies,” Robison had been one of the few nationally-famous country musicians in the 1920s and 30s. Born in rural Oswego, Kansas in 1890, Robison began his career as a vaudevillian on radio station WDAF in Kansas City,

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<sup>8</sup> See the chapters “‘Arm in Arm’: Wartime Romance” and “‘A Boy in Khaki, a Girl in Lace’: The Servicemen Away, Their Girls Back Home,” in Jones, *The Songs that Fought the War*. The story of “Don’t Sit under the Apple Tree” is recounted on 261-3.

<sup>9</sup> Bert Salter, Lou Shelly, and Bette Cannon, “There’s No Yellow in the Red, White, and Blue” (New York: Murray Singer Music, 1942), Sheet Music Collection, John Hay Library, Brown University.

<sup>10</sup> Buck Ram and Clarence Stout, “(Hallelujah 8-9-10) Hey, Tojo, Count Yo’ Men” (New York: Noble Music, 1944); Students of Fort Vannoy School, arr. John Royce, “Mow the Japs Down!” (Chicago: Hall & McCreary, 1942); James Cavanaugh, John Redmond, and Nat Simon, “You’re a Sap, Mister Jap” (New York: Mills Music, 1941). All three titles are in the Sheet Music Collection, John Hay Library, Brown University.

<sup>11</sup> John W. Dower’s *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986) remains a classic study linking race hate and propaganda to internment and wartime atrocities in the Pacific theater, considering both American and Japanese perspectives. On racist justifications for use of the atomic bomb, see the chapter “‘A Very Pleasant Way to Die’: Science Fiction, Race, and the Official Representation of the Atomic Bomb” in Patrick B. Sharp, *Savage Perils: Racial Frontiers and Nuclear Apocalypse in American Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007). Two articles that examine the lesser-known phenomenon of the desecration of the Japanese war dead by American soldiers are: James L. Weingartner, “Trophies of War: U.S. Troops and the Mutilation of Japanese War Dead, 1941-1945,” *Pacific Historical Review* 61, no. 1 (February 1992): 53-67; and Simon Harrison, “Skull Trophies of the Pacific War: Transgressive Objects of Remembrance,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12, no. 4 (December 2006): 817-836.



Missouri, where he was a novelty act known for his two-tone whistle.<sup>12</sup> Moving to New York in the early 1920s, Robison recorded some of country music's earliest hits with Vernon Dalhart, including country music's first million-sellers, "The Wreck of the Old '97" and "The Prisoner's Song."<sup>13</sup> During his thirty-year career, Robison honed a stage persona as a hillbilly raconteur and singing cowboy, an image popularized through syndicated radio broadcasts on NBC and extensive touring, including three trips to England.<sup>14</sup> Most impressive was his success and productivity as a songwriter—nearly four-hundred songs over his lifetime.<sup>15</sup>

Contrary to his rustic self-image, however, Robison spent most of his career in New York, navigating the class politics and prejudices of Tin Pan Alley. This was an established popular music industry that engaged in protectionist measures against country musicians, typically barring them from prominent trade unions and openly mocking "hillbilly" music as low-class and disreputable. Given this antagonistic relationship, Robison's success among the ranks of Tin Pan Alley songwriters is remarkable; in particular, his membership in the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), the most important trade group for songwriters, represented an extraordinary achievement for a country musician.

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<sup>12</sup> The exact date of Robison's departure for Kansas City is disputed. Robison's son Bob claimed Robison went to Kansas City in 1920, but a profile of him in *Rural Radio* suggests he only began at WDAF in 1923. See Vicky Wilt, "Robison's Music Still Lives with Family, Fans," *The Parsons [KS] Sun*, Saturday-Sunday, October 29-30, 1983, CRC B1-F6; and Elmore Peltonen, "Covered Wagon Songs," *Rural Radio*, December 1938 (photocopy), Robison vertical files, FLACMHOF.

<sup>13</sup> Tony Russell, "Vernon Dalhart," Inductees, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, <http://countrymusichalloffame.org/Inductees/InducteeDetail/vernon-dalhart> (accessed May 6, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> For a helpful summary and assessment of Robison's career, see his profile in Tony Russell, *Country Music Originals: The Legends and the Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 145-50.

<sup>15</sup> In 1955, Robison compiled a list of his original compositions beginning with his unpublished piece "Anthem" (1904). His list totaled 357 songs, but this omits a few of his unpublished works as well as the handful of songs he would write from 1955 to his death in 1957. See Carson J. Robison, "Complete List of My Compositions in Chronological Order," typescript copy, 9pp., [1955], CRC B1-F2.

This chapter combines historical and musical analyses of Robison's songs with new findings from his extensive business and recordings archives at Pittsburg State University, exposing how Robison used claims of whiteness towards upwardly mobile ends. An overview of Robison's career during the 1920s and 1930s reveals latent racial and nationalist ideologies that would surface so powerfully during the war. The racial rhetoric appearing in Robison's World War II songs bore a striking similarity to those of Tin Pan Alley, in which denigration of the Japanese and assertions of white nationalism were rampant. Nevertheless, a survey of the trade and popular presses underscores the continued rivalry between the country and pop music industries, one that was articulated along class lines. A savvy businessman, Robison sought to have it both ways. Publicly, he crafted a persona highlighting his rural identity, but privately he eschewed rural and working-class markers by emphasizing his professionalism as a songwriter of, in his words, "American Folk Music." This is a strategy that Robison pursued most conspicuously in his correspondence with ASCAP. His multiple appeals to that organization eventually led to his membership and increasingly substantial songwriting royalties in a licensing agency that typically prohibited country musicians. Stylistic analysis of Robison's eclectic World War II songs subsequently demonstrates his indebtedness to both commercial country music's vernacular forebears as well as the songwriting approaches of Tin Pan Alley. Marketing and reception of these songs underscored their connection to American ideals and vernacular styles. Enthusiastic audiences largely accepted Robison's narratives of racial nationalism, resulting in country's branding as the quintessential (white) American music well beyond the war years.

It should be emphasized that Robison was not alone among country musicians in composing and performing this topical repertory. Nor was he alone in his invocations of country music's whiteness, which certainly predated the 1940s. However, the racial rhetoric during this

period was particularly heated, and Robison's work exemplifies this overall trend. His prolific output in this wartime genre, combined with his meticulously-kept, extensive archives of sheet music, manuscripts, and business correspondence, make him an especially compelling case study. Robison was an important bellwether for the professionalization of country musicians, especially songwriters. And through his archives, we see not just the music's racial messages, but also some of the social and financial motivations behind those messages. The discursive strategy of white nationalism was deployed in part as a response to working-class anxieties precisely as country music began to enter the national mainstream in the 1940s.

### **Racialized Identities and Repertories in the Prewar Era**

The racialized language of Robison's World War II songs was the strongest of any music in his career, but similar patterns of racial thinking had been a quiet part of his act all along. Race was seldom invoked by Robison in songs or interviews prior to his World War II repertory. Nevertheless, the issue of race manifested itself throughout his career by various means, including Robison's self-image of rustic authenticity, his use of blackface techniques and repertory, and his appropriation of different racialized musical styles. As a promoter of European-derived American folk musics, Robison staked his claim to a whiteness inextricably bound up with assertions of national identity. At the same time, Robison's occasional forays into racialized repertories like minstrelsy and jazz highlighted his privileged position as a white man, with music serving to maintain notions of racial difference and inequality.

Publicity intended to vouch for Robison's rustic authenticity often began with an idealized biographical portrait of his youth. His was a white, lower-middle-class world. Specific information on Robison's heritage is hard to come by, although certainly his family was regarded as white with European origins. Carson Jay Robison was born August 4, 1890, in Oswego,

Kansas, moving ten miles south to Chetopa, Kansas, with his family before 1900.<sup>16</sup> Robison's father, Albert Robison, had moved from Illinois to southeastern Kansas, where he worked as a farmer and grocer; Carson's mother Maggie was from Indiana.<sup>17</sup> The Robisons were a musical family—Albert was an accomplished amateur fiddler and knowledgeable about folk music, and Maggie played the organ.<sup>18</sup> According to Robison, his home was a formative musical influence, serving as the “music center” of the community where he began singing folk songs and performing on piano, guitar, fiddle, and occasionally mandolin.<sup>19</sup>

Kansas at the time was still sparsely populated and was predominantly white. According to the 1890 U.S. Census, nonwhites constituted only 3.5 percent of the state's overall population of 1.4 million; the Census classified most of these racial minorities as “persons of negro descent.”<sup>20</sup> By 1900, black families accounted for 19.5 percent of households in Chetopa, far

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<sup>16</sup> Artist Questionnaire for *Hoedown* Magazine, completed by Carson Robison, typescript, [late 1940s-early 1950s], Robison vertical files, FLACMHOF. See also Pat Murphy, “Granddad of Hillbilly Joins Stars Walkway,” *Millbrook Round Table*, June 15, 1983, CRC B1-F6.

<sup>17</sup> Albert Robison was born in March 1852 and Maggie Robison in November 1864. The 1900 U.S. Census – Twelfth Census of the United States, “Schedule No. 1 – Population” for Chetopa, Labette County, Kansas, 4B, Ancestry.com, [http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/7602/004120150\\_00085/53126384?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangsg%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26msT%3d1%26gsfn%3dcarson%26gsln%3drobison%26MSAV%3d0%26msbdy%3d1890%26catbucket%3drstp%26uidh%3du7g%26pcat%3dROOT\\_CATEGORY%26h%3d53126384%26db%3d1900usfedcen%26indiv%3d1%26ml\\_rpos%3d3&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnRecord#?imageId=004120150\\_00078](http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/7602/004120150_00085/53126384?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangsg%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26msT%3d1%26gsfn%3dcarson%26gsln%3drobison%26MSAV%3d0%26msbdy%3d1890%26catbucket%3drstp%26uidh%3du7g%26pcat%3dROOT_CATEGORY%26h%3d53126384%26db%3d1900usfedcen%26indiv%3d1%26ml_rpos%3d3&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnRecord#?imageId=004120150_00078) (accessed June 22, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Regarding Albert: John Edwards, “Carson Robison,” *Old Time Personalities* 7 (May 1956), [“From The Published Works of the Late John Edwards, by Arrangement with Garth Gibson, “C.&W. Spotlight,” New Zealand (Kingswingford, Staffordshire, England: Society for the Preservation and Promotion of Traditional Country Music, 1973), pp. 33-37”], typescript, CRC B1-F1. Regarding Maggie: Carson J. Robison to Daniel I. McNamara, 9 May 1946, CRC B1-F20.

<sup>19</sup> Carson Robison, “If...I Were a Guitar Salesman!,” *Musical Merchandise Magazine*, December 1945, CRC B1-F4.

<sup>20</sup> In Labette County, KS, where Robison's family lived, the total population in 1890 was 27,586 people, but the Census did not include racial demographics at the county level. Complete population figures for Kansas in 1890 were: “Native White”: 1,228,923; “Foreign White”: 147,630; “Colored”: 59,543 (including 49,710 “Persons of negro descent”). See Department of the Interior, Census Division, “Abstract of the Eleventh Census: 1890,” 2nd ed., Washington, DC, 1896, 11, 19. United States Census Bureau, <http://www2.census.gov/prod/decennial/documents/1890b2-01.pdf> (accessed May 6, 2017).

outpacing the state overall. However, census rolls show that Chetopa was largely segregated along class and racial lines, with even first- and second-generation European immigrants clustered together on a few streets.<sup>21</sup> Only one black family lived on Pecan Street near the Robisons. Robison thus probably would have spent most of his youth in the company of whites.<sup>22</sup>

In adulthood, Robison acknowledged himself as white in official documents, but he rarely made his race a public issue.<sup>23</sup> Prior to the war, Robison's strongest statement regarding his racial background came in an interview for *Popular Songs* magazine, in which he claimed himself as one-sixteenth Potawatomi, about which he was "quite proud." This is perhaps the only reference he made in print to any American Indian heritage; it does not figure in any other

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<sup>21</sup> The 1900 census rolls show 478 households in Chetopa, KS, of which 93 have black heads of household (22 in Ward 1, 34 in Ward 2, 37 in Ward 3). Three white households, one of which was also a hotel, had at least one live-in black servant. The European immigrants of Chetopa are listed as white in the census, and they often appear to have been professional-class workers (e.g. physician, jeweler) rather than the more typical town occupations of farmers and day-laborers. Three families in Chetopa are Indian, although for some reason they are not included in the overall count of 478 households. The 1900 U.S. Census – Twelfth Census of the United States, "Schedule No. 1 – Population" for Chetopa, Labette County, Kansas, 41 pages, Ancestry.com, [http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/7602/004120150\\_00085/53126384?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2f%2fcgi-bin%2f%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangsg%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26msT%3d1%26gsfn%3dcarson%26gsln%3drobison%26MSAV%3d0%26msbdu%3d1890%26catbucket%3drstp%26uidh%3du7g%26pcat%3dROOT\\_CATEGORY%26h%3d53126384%26db%3d1900usfedcen%26indiv%3d1%26ml\\_rpos%3d3&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnRecord#?imageId=004120150\\_00078](http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/7602/004120150_00085/53126384?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2f%2fcgi-bin%2f%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangsg%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26msT%3d1%26gsfn%3dcarson%26gsln%3drobison%26MSAV%3d0%26msbdu%3d1890%26catbucket%3drstp%26uidh%3du7g%26pcat%3dROOT_CATEGORY%26h%3d53126384%26db%3d1900usfedcen%26indiv%3d1%26ml_rpos%3d3&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnRecord#?imageId=004120150_00078) (accessed June 22, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> The 1900 U.S. Census – Twelfth Census of the United States, "Schedule No. 1 – Population" for Chetopa, Labette County, Kansas, 41 pages, 4A-B.

<sup>23</sup> In the 1930 U.S. Census, Robison listed his race as white, and his occupation as "Song Writer." The census-taker also notes Robison as a World War [I] veteran. Department of Commerce – Bureau of the Census, "Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930," Population Schedule for Mamaroneck Town, Westchester County, New York, 30-A, Ancestry.com, [http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/6224/4638875\\_00433/46893566?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2f%2fcgi-bin%2f%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangsg%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26msT%3d1%26gsfn%3dcarson%26gsln%3drobison%26MSAV%3d0%26msbdu%3d1890%26catbucket%3drstp%26pcat%3dROOT\\_CATEGORY%26h%3d46893566%26db%3d1930usfedcen%26indiv%3d1%26ml\\_rpos%3d2&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnRecord](http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com/6224/4638875_00433/46893566?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2f%2f%2fcgi-bin%2f%2fsse.dll%3fgss%3dangsg%26new%3d1%26rank%3d1%26msT%3d1%26gsfn%3dcarson%26gsln%3drobison%26MSAV%3d0%26msbdu%3d1890%26catbucket%3drstp%26pcat%3dROOT_CATEGORY%26h%3d46893566%26db%3d1930usfedcen%26indiv%3d1%26ml_rpos%3d2&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnRecord) (accessed June 23, 2015).

publicity material about him, and there is no other evidence to corroborate his claim.<sup>24</sup> Leaving the other fifteen-sixteenths of his genetic background unaccounted for, Robison assumes in the reader's understanding a universalized white subject position with no particular ethnic European affiliation. His admission of a limited Indian ancestry actually works to confer upon him a uniquely American racial background, creating an aura of racial authenticity and affirming a melting-pot ethos without passing beyond the threshold into irredeemable Otherness—that is, Robison remains just different enough to be interesting, just same enough to be safe. The fact that he could proudly declare mixed Indian ancestry without fear of repercussion, especially during a time of segregation and miscegenation laws, speaks to the idiosyncrasies in policing different racial identities and to the racial privilege Robison enjoyed as a white American. Ironically, in claiming Indian-ness, Robison revealed his whiteness.

While whiteness was seldom an explicit part of Robison's act, his cowboy and hillbilly personas traded in the burgeoning discourse of folk authenticity. As shaped by early American folklorists, this discourse held racial purity and European roots as sacrosanct and indispensable to the music's appeal, because these acted as signs of the music's resistance to commercialism and modernity. This ideology of folk authenticity had been in circulation since at least the late 1800s, promulgated by academic folklorists like Francis James Child, Cecil Sharp, and, later, John and Alan Lomax. Sharp in particular sought in the southeastern United States songs with demonstrable links back to British ballads, dismissing any songs of "mixed" influences as corrupted and unworthy of preservation.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Bill Brown, "He Writes Mountain Music," [*Popular Songs?*], [1930s], (3pp., photocopy). Located in three-ring binder titled "Carson J. Robison: Induction Request, Country Music Hall of Fame," submitted by Noelle Vetter, January 2001, Robison vertical files, FLACMHOF.

<sup>25</sup> See the chapter "Setting the Stage: Identifying an American Folk Music Heritage, 1900-1930" in Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

Robison's repertory consisted in part of some older European-based material as well as new songs composed in a similar style. In publicity, Robison revered the same Appalachian folk as the ballad collectors, stressing their tradition, emotional directness, and lack of artifice. "Sincerity" became a recurring theme, as he explained to an interviewer in 1930: "Sincerity is also important. The singer who tries to clown one of these songs is detected in a minute and doomed for a fall. The sentiment of the song and the singing must be real."<sup>26</sup> In a 1938 interview, Robison claimed that songwriting for "plain folks" was "more than a professional study or hobby. It's a religion. You see, they don't seek perfection. It's sentiment and true emotion that counts with them. Hillbilly songs are their lives, their tales of romance, pathos, and, perhaps, comedy. They don't sing them because they have good voices, but because it touches their hearts and strikes a real emotional note. [...] Hillbilly songs, especially, require the utmost sincerity."<sup>27</sup> During his 1939 tour of England, Robison accounted for his popularity there by explaining, "A good deal of our own [American] cowboy tunes have come from Elizabethan and old Irish songs. So there's some kinship between our ballads and their own." Robison here twice mentions John Lomax as an important ballad collector, and elsewhere in the article Robison is described as a "researcher" of American folksong.<sup>28</sup> Robison's upbringing in rural Kansas was often cited as proof of his own authenticity and legitimacy as a mouthpiece for America's folk peoples of

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<sup>26</sup> Doron K. Antrim, "He Found Pay Dirt on the Farm: Carson Robison, American Balladist," *Metronome* 46, no. 6 (June 1930), CRC Oversize Box F246.

<sup>27</sup> "Radio's Hillbilly King, Carson Robison, who is, with his Pioneers, a regular attraction for Oxydol every Sunday from Luxembourg, Lyons, and Normandy, tells us in this interview how he writes his world-famous songs," [no magazine title], March 28, 1938 (photocopy), Robison vertical files, FLACMHOF.

<sup>28</sup> National Broadcasting Company, Inc., "NBC Buckaroo, Musical Envoy to England Makes London Love Cowboy, Hillbilly Songs," *NBC News Service*, March 13, 1939, CRC Oversize Box F10.

European descent.<sup>29</sup> Despite his numerous original compositions, Robison positioned himself as a preservationist of the style as much as a mere performer.

The irony is that, by posing as *both* Appalachian hillbilly and western cowboy over the course of his career, Robison should have unmasked folk authenticity for the fabrication it was. Instead, Robison accommodated his eclectic identities through a white nationalist narrative. The incompatibility of Robison's various characters was not necessarily lost on his listeners. A 1951 profile of Robison made sure to cover multiple bases, noting, "He is no doubt more responsible than anyone else for the introduction of cowboy, hillbilly, and folk songs on phonograph records."<sup>30</sup> A 1939 article from the *NBC News Service* helped undiscerning audiences tease out the differences between hillbilly and cowboy repertoires: "Maybe you have been under the impression they are one and the same thing. But the difference is as wide as the broadest plain in Kansas, where Robison comes from." The difference, Robison explained to his interviewer, is mainly a distinction of geography and tone; hillbilly tunes tend to be narrative and moralistic, while "cowboy music on the other hand reflects the daring and bravery of adventure on the plains."<sup>31</sup> These were negligible differences, however, in the face of a shared sense of "sincerity" and "realness." Robison's claims to authenticity served to conflate his cowboy, hillbilly, and other "folk" styles and personas under the same rubric. This helped to legitimate certain white vernacular forms as edifying and praiseworthy, regardless of their geographic contexts or internal contradictions. Robison's synthesis provided audiences with a new commercial form of distinctly white American music.

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<sup>29</sup> Antrim, "He Found Pay Dirt on the Farm."

<sup>30</sup> H. Pearce, "Interesting Neighbors: Carson Robison," *The Counselor*, May 1951, CRC B1-F5.

<sup>31</sup> National Broadcasting Company, Inc., "NBC Buckaroo, Musical Envoy to England Makes London Love Cowboy, Hillbilly Songs."



But for all the folklorists' emphasis on European roots, contemporary "folk" music like Robison's was also steeped in the styles and conventions of blackface minstrelsy, complicating its claims to a white identity. As minstrelsy scholars like Dale Cockrell, Eric Lott, and Robert Toll have argued, the blackface mask revealed white fascination with black culture, even as it destabilized notions of fixed racial identity and cultural ownership. At the same time, minstrelsy's stereotypes of black inferiority worked to rationalize the subjugation of blacks via slavery, segregation, and racial violence.<sup>32</sup> Country music's indebtedness to the performativity and politics of blackface minstrelsy has been well-documented, and Robison was no exception in drawing upon its legacy.<sup>33</sup> His first published song, "Little Brown Baby Mine" (1921), was firmly in the "coon song" genre, including lyrics in blackface dialect.<sup>34</sup> Robison's "Open Up Dem Pearly Gates For Me" (1929) used the same dialect in the guise of a spiritual: "If you want to get to Heab'm, Heab'm, Better git down on yo' knees and pray."<sup>35</sup> Although neither of these songs was among Robison's biggest hits, they reflect his keen familiarity with blackface minstrelsy song styles.

Robison's stage and radio shows traded in the same pacing and punning humor of minstrelsy, often simply replacing a blackface stereotype with a similarly crass rube or cowboy character. Among Robison's song book collection was *Georgia Minstrel and Entertainment*

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<sup>32</sup> Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

<sup>33</sup> Two especially important works addressing the relationship between minstrelsy and country music are Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); and Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Carson J. Robison, "Little Brown Baby Mine" (Kansas City, MO: Paris Publishing, 1921), CRC B2-F62.

<sup>35</sup> Carson Robison, *Carson Robison's "CR" Ranch Song Folio* (New York: Peer International, 1941), Rare Boks and Scores, CPM.

*Folio*, an instruction manual for staging a blackface routine, including popular skits, songs, and jokes. It shows signs of use, with Robison placing an X-mark next to selected jokes.<sup>36</sup> These were perhaps for use in his act, although Robison's selections avoided the most egregious stereotypes. Nineteenth-century minstrel songs were also used to fill out Robison's radio show repertory. As late as 1940, Robison was performing James Bland's "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" and Stephen Foster's "De Camptown Races" and "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground" on the radio, including in their lyrics the word "darky."<sup>37</sup> Robison would sometimes even don the blackface mask for radio performances, presumably for the benefit of the in-studio audience. The photograph of Robison in Figure 3.1, taken from a Saturday evening performance on NBC in 1930, attests to the continued popularity of the minstrel genre. In the 1950s, Robison also served as Mr. Interlocutor—a blackface master of ceremonies character—in the local Fire Department's yearly minstrel show in Pleasant Valley, NY, although this would not have been broadcast.<sup>38</sup> As Eric Lott and Robert Toll have shown, blackface functioned as a means for actors and their audiences to police racial boundaries, and in particular for working-class and, later, middle-class whites to form community through the exclusion and denigration of blacks as racial Others. Although by Robison's time minstrelsy was on the wane, his use of blackface repertory and conventions unconsciously revealed his allegiance to—and ongoing participation in—whiteness as a continuously-negotiated racial construct.

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<sup>36</sup> Joe Davis, ed., *Georgia Minstrel and Entertainment Folio* (New York: Georgia Music, 1940), CRC B2-F85.

<sup>37</sup> Carson Robison with unnamed trio, "National Defense Program, Elk's Club," October 29, 1940, transcription disc, CRC Box I, F 373, Disc 2.

<sup>38</sup> H. Pearce, "Interesting Neighbors: Carson Robison."



Figure 3.1: Robison in blackface as part of the Dutch Masters Minstrels radio program on NBC. Doron K. Antrim, “He Found Pay Dirt on the Farm: Carson Robison, American Balladist,” *Metronome* 46, no. 6 (June 1930), Carson J. Robison Collection, 1903-1988, Oversize Box F246, Special Collections and University Archives, Leonard H. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University.

With its egregious caricatures, Robison’s blackface repertory paradoxically both undermined and reinforced the supposed racial authenticity and purity of his white folk vernacular. Further complicating matters was Robison’s occasional tendency to dabble in jazz, an emphatically commercial music in the 1920s and 1930s that could also be associated with black musical styles. Although Robison once insisted to an interviewer that hillbilly songs must contain “no jazz” or else run the risk of obscuring their sincere sentiment, in practice Robison ultimately viewed jazz as a style that could sometimes be indulged.<sup>39</sup> In this regard, Robison was viewed as a country music trailblazer for expanding the music’s sonic possibilities. Several journalists remarked upon his use of “hot muted trumpet” in his 1929 recording “Left My Gal in

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<sup>39</sup> Antrim, “He Found Pay Dirt on the Farm.”

the Mountains.”<sup>40</sup> “Carson used formerly the typical hill-billy combination of jew’s-harp and harmonica with his numbers,” Doron K. Antrim observed in 1930. “But with the song ‘Left My Gal in the Mountains,’ he decided to introduce a change. This number contains a traditional story with a popular hot tune. Although advised against it, he did away with the jew’s-harp and harmonica and introduced the trumpet, steel guitar and fiddle. And the new arrangement took hold. All of which would indicate that the farmers are taking on new ideas constantly.”<sup>41</sup>

Another of Robison’s idiosyncratic recordings in this vein was a version of “Barnacle Bill the Sailor,” which Robison re-recorded in 1930 with white bandleader Hoagy Carmichael and His Orchestra. Unlike Robison’s other recorded versions of “Barnacle Bill,” this version supplemented the standard country accompaniment of solo guitar and fiddle with a small jazz ensemble of winds and brass, including two hot solo breaks from white cornetist Bix Beiderbecke.<sup>42</sup> The familiar tune is transformed by this performance, which blurs the lines between jazz and country styles, much like Jimmie Rodgers’s famous 1930 recording of “Blue Yodel #9” with Louis Armstrong and Lil Hardin. Pegged early on as a hillbilly/cowboy act, Robison’s eclectic musical tastes reflected the fluidity of racialized musical styles as well as the commercial motivations behind cultural appropriation.

Outside of wartime, Robison generally refrained from directly addressing racial issues in songs or interviews, so his stance regarding whiteness during this period can only be inferred.

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<sup>40</sup> National Broadcasting Company, Inc., “NBC Buckaroo, Musical Envoy to England Makes London Love Cowboy, Hillbilly Songs.”

<sup>41</sup> Antrim, “He Found Pay Dirt on the Farm.”

<sup>42</sup> Hoagy Carmichael and His Orchestra (Vocal refrain by Carson Robison and Chorus), “Barnacle Bill, The Sailor-Fox Trot,” Victor V-38139-A, 78, CRC F253. This recording was made in New York on May 21, 1930, and included in the session other jazz luminaries such as Beiderbecke (cornet), Bubber Miley (trumpet), Tommy Dorsey (trombone), Benny Goodman (clarinet), Arnold Brilhart (alto sax), Bud Freeman (tenor sax), Joe Venuti (violin and vocals), Irving Brodsky (piano), Eddie Lang (guitar), Harry Goodman (tuba), Gene Krupa (drums), and Hoagy Carmichael (vocals). Tom Lord, “Bix Beiderbecke,” The Jazz Discography Online, <http://www.lordisco.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/tjd/MusicianDetail?mid=23888> (accessed May 6, 2017).

But one final curious clue can be found in his archives. Among his handwritten musical manuscripts is a two-page piece entitled “My Skin Is Black (But My Soul Is White).”<sup>43</sup> The piece was apparently never published or recorded, so it seems likely that “My Skin Is Black” was an early draft that Robison ultimately abandoned. Scored for piano, the piece contains no lyrics except for the final three chords, under which Robison has written the words “Some Sweet Day.” The piano part is written out as conventional boom-chick accompaniment without any discernable melody, suggesting that it was intended for performance with a vocalist or other instruments. One intriguing possibility is that the piece may have been intended to accompany a recitation of William Blake’s 1789 poem “The Little Black Boy.” The second line of Blake’s poem—“And I am black, but O! my soul is white”—very closely resembles Robison’s title, while Robison’s concluding “Some Sweet Day” could serve as a kind of affirming benediction to Blake’s final line. The complete text of Blake’s poem is given below:

*My mother bore me in the southern wild,  
And I am black, but O! my soul is white;  
White as an angel is the English child:  
But I am black as if bereav'd of light.*

*My mother taught me underneath a tree  
And sitting down before the heat of day.  
She took me on her lap and kissed me,  
And pointing to the east began to say.*

*Look on the rising sun: there God does live  
And gives his light, and gives his heat away.  
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive  
Comfort in morning joy in the noonday.*

*And we are put on earth a little space,  
That we may learn to bear the beams of love,  
And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face  
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.*

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<sup>43</sup> Carson Robison, “My Skin Is Black (But My Soul Is White),” musical manuscript, 3pp., CRC B7-F197.

*For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear  
The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice.  
Saying: come out from the grove my love & care,  
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.*

*Thus did my mother say and kissed me.  
And thus I say to little English boy,  
When I from black and he from white cloud free,  
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:*

*I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear,  
To lean in joy upon our father's knee.  
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,  
And be like him and he will then love me.<sup>44</sup>*

Written from the perspective of a black child from the African “southern wild,” the poem reflects on earthly (racial) difference contrasted with the indiscriminating love of God, eagerly anticipating the equality of all souls in heaven. It is there that the black child imagines joining the English child, where the black child will “stand and stroke his silver hair, and be like him and he will then love me.” Although Blake was a British abolitionist sympathetic to black slaves, the poem places the black child in a willingly subordinate position to the white child, albeit under guise of the black child’s Christian humility and subservience.<sup>45</sup> The poem maps black/white racial distinctions onto other dyads of darkness/light, death/life, sin/purity, finite/eternal, body/soul, and human/divine, with whiteness embodying the desirable qualities. This polysemy of whiteness is developed from the first stanza in the black child’s claim, “O! my soul is white.”

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<sup>44</sup> “The Little Black Boy” originally appeared in Blake’s published collection *Songs of Innocence* (1789). It is included in the anthology William Blake, *Blake’s Poetry and Designs: Illuminated Works, Other Writings, Criticism*, 2nd ed., ed. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 16.

<sup>45</sup> An early assessment of Blake’s abolitionist writing is found in David V. Erdman, “Blake’s Vision of Slavery,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 15, no. 3/4 (1952): 242-52; further details about Blake’s advocacy appear in Christine Gallant, “Blake’s Antislavery Designs for ‘Songs of Innocence and of Experience,’” *Wordsworth Circle* 39, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 123-30. In a retrospective essay on Erdman’s work, David Bindman provides additional context on scientific and theological debates about race in late eighteenth-century Britain that likely influenced Blake. David Bindman, “Blake’s Vision of Slavery Revisited,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58, no. 3/4 (1995): 373-82.

The soul's whiteness suggests not only the black child's Christian virtue and freedom from sin, but perhaps also that his practicing Christianity is unavoidably a capitulation to white European culture—that he is “acting white.” The black child's final wish to “be like” and be loved by his white counterpart underscores this point further.<sup>46</sup>

Robison's song title, even if it derived only loosely from Blake's poem, seems burdened with the same message regarding race—that, despite Christian and American values espousing compassion and equality, whiteness remains the normative, desirable, and dominant value, one to which non-whites should rightly aspire. Drawing on a discourse of folk authenticity, Robison sought to portray himself and his music as fundamentally white, papering over the music's convoluted and racially-ambiguous origins. And this aspirational whiteness would become even more pronounced for Robison—and for all of country music—in the context of war.

### **Preparing for War**

Although Robison refrained from publishing any war songs until after the United States' entry into the war, he remained attentive to international affairs as they developed in the late 1930s. By 1940, Robison seemed resigned to the fact that the United States would inevitably be drawn into the conflict, and he occasionally used radio programming as an unofficial conduit for his own pro-American domestic propaganda. On October 29, 1940, Robison performed a fifteen-minute radio segment in support of the “Elks National Defense Program.” Sponsored by the Elks Club, this grassroots propaganda initiative emphasized national defense preparedness.<sup>47</sup> Between performances of nineteenth-century minstrel songs by Stephen Foster and James Bland, Robison

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<sup>46</sup> Susan Gubar has written that the poem's black narrator “experiences his race as a catastrophe” and that “heaven for the black boy or man means obtaining the love of his white peer which is in turn predicated on the eradication of difference.” Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 12-13.

<sup>47</sup> Carson Robison with unnamed trio, “National Defense Program, Elk's Club.”

voiced his support for the work of the Elks, and he spoke in favor of the military draft and the civic duty for physical fitness. Near the conclusion of the broadcast, Robison introduced James R. Nicholson, the chairman of the Elks National Defense Commission., and in his brief address, Nicholson outlined an unabashedly conformist agenda, enumerating the Commission's goals:

First, uphold and teach Americanism in our democratic form of government; second, discover and report treasonable, subversive, and fifth column activities in America; and third, assist in the physical development of the youth of our country.

Robison's proud invocations of America and Americanism throughout this broadcast anticipated the patriotic tone of his songs that would follow in the coming years of war, especially their conformist message.

In November 1941, Robison submitted to NBC broadcasters a proposal and pilot script for an ambitious radio serial for children with an even more vehemently pro-American agenda, one which also examined issues of race. Entitled "The First Americans," the weekly program was designed to offer historical narratives of Indian/white encounters, tracing a path from warfare and violence towards eventual tolerance and cooperation. In the preface of Robison's proposal, he vouched that "The First Americans will be presented as the Red Man and his Brother—the Pale Face. [...] Treatment of the relationship between red man and white man in this series will be consistently positive."<sup>48</sup> Anticipating broadcaster objections to positive portrayals of Indians, Robison gave assurance that Indians would always be in a subordinate role to the white heroes, citing as an example Sacagawea's relationship to Lewis and Clark. He concluded his defense by writing, "This program is really a series of authentic tales of hardy, indomitable white men—whose great deeds were performed with the help of their brothers."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Carson Robison, "The First Americans," radio script and accompanying notes, typescript, [November 1941], CRC B1-F25.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



Such a program was needed, Robison claimed, because of the international climate of war and the necessity for American preparedness should it be drawn into the conflict. Robison imagined his program would inculcate among all Americans the necessary values of tolerance, cooperation, self-sacrifice, and, of course, freedom. The Indians' eventual recognition and acceptance of, in Robison's words, "the broader ideal of freedom," epitomized devotion to civic duty during a time of national crisis.

Robison's proposal offered a mostly celebratory account of Indian/white relations in the United States, glossing over much of the violence and abuse endured by American Indian communities. While Robison acknowledged that Indians suffered from the actions of a few "rascally whites," whites overall were deemed essentially "good," "honest," and "friendly."<sup>50</sup> As in Robison's anti-Japanese songs, whiteness in "The First Americans" was positioned as the normative American racial identity, a race of superior moral, cultural, and intellectual capacity, and the one in which Robison included himself. And as in Robison's anti-Japanese songs, other types of difference, especially class distinctions, were quietly elided as negotiating race became the central obstacle in America's quest for nationhood.

In the pilot script, racial difference is at every turn clearly limned. Robison plays the white protagonist, "pale-face" Sheriff Carson Robison, joined by his friend Chief Lone Bear, a "full-blood Pawnee Indian." As the story opens, the two are seated around a campfire reminiscing about the settling of the west and reflecting upon its relevance to current events:

Robison: It's awful hard to believe that there's a savage war goin' on across the sea – that men are killin' each other by the thousands.

Lone Bear: (THOUGHTFULLY) It's harder to believe, that once upon a time, men killed each other, right here where we sit.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

Robison: Yep. The Red man and the White man. We both had to learn to understand and respect each other. And when we finally did learn that lesson, we got to be mighty good neighbors.<sup>51</sup>

To exemplify his point, Sheriff Robison recalls the time decades prior when he befriended Lone Bear's grandfather, Chief White Eagle. The remainder of the story is told in flashback: the local government agent of Indian affairs, Miller, has been providing the neighboring Indian reservation with rotten beef and alcohol—one of Robison's "rascally whites." White Eagle initially abducts Miller with ominous threats of "Indian law" justice, but he relents once Sheriff Robison discovers Miller's misdeeds, gives him a good boot in the pants, and apologizes to White Eagle on behalf of whites. Robison assures White Eagle that, unlike Miller, most white men are just and trustworthy, and the two subsequently become friends.

Although the story paints a rosy picture of interracial harmony, racial and cultural difference remains stark throughout. Beyond its use of "red man" and "white man" labels, the story highlights several aspects of generic Indian culture, with references to "peace pipes," "teepees," "Indian law," and various Indian-language expressions. Music and sonic cues serve to further distinguish white and Indian characters. White Eagle speaks in broken English with a noticeably deep bass voice, while Sheriff Robison is portrayed as fluent with a more moderate vocal range. In Robison's test recording of the pilot episode, dated November 24, 1941, the action fades in with a performance of Indian chant accompanied by tom-toms. Other brief performances of generic Indian chant are heard sporadically throughout the remainder of the episode. In contrast to these, Robison is heard in the campfire scene whistling "Home, Sweet Home" with guitar accompaniment.<sup>52</sup> Racial difference is thus demonstrated even at the musical

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Carson Robison, "The First American," radio program test recording, November 24, 1941, CRC Box I, F373, Disc 3.

level, with Robison clearly occupying the position of white American hero, free of any working-class baggage.

Ever the opportunist, Robison saw “The First Americans” not only as his contribution to a nationalist agenda but also as a powerful merchandising vehicle. In his accompanying notes to the script, Robison envisioned a weekly or even daily program that would develop a dedicated national fanclub. Listeners could be organized into local “Tribes” or “Councils,” overseen by parents, who would receive instructions from the program producers on edifying group activities for young listeners. Such councils would be the target for ancillary merchandise such as a Book of Translations, a Book of Sign Language (including smoke signals), a Book of Secret Indian Magic (such as herbal medicines), a Book of War Secrets, and a Book of Songs and Incantations, as well as moccasins, arrowheads, small drums, and membership emblems.<sup>53</sup> Robison’s merchandising ideas lay bare the commercial aims of radio, suggesting that “The First Americans” was as much about the capitalist appropriation of racial Others and a narrow vision of their culture as it was about promoting interracial dialogue and patriotic unity. In this way, Robison’s proposals mirrored the power dynamics of blackface minstrelsy; in acting out Indian-ness, white consumers could indulge their fascination with other racialized cultures while also underscoring their own whiteness.

Robison’s grand schemes were not to be, however. On December 3, 1941, NBC programming executive Margaret Cuthbert wrote a letter to Robison indicating that “the Program Board was not interested in the audition as presented.”<sup>54</sup> Cuthbert left open the possibility that modifications to the script might make the board more amenable to picking up the show, although she provided no specific recommendations. At any rate, both NBC and Robison seem to

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<sup>53</sup> Robison, “The First Americans,” radio script and accompanying notes.

<sup>54</sup> Margaret Cuthbert, Director of Women’s Activities at NBC, to Robison, 3 December 1941, CRC B1-F25.

have soon dropped the idea altogether. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor came four days after Cuthbert's letter, upending Robison's more conciliatory tone towards America's racial divides.

### **Anti-Japanese Rhetoric**

Robison was among the most prolific composers and performers of topical wartime songs, and his sheet music and recordings were certainly among the most popular. Robison's performance repertory ultimately included twenty-three songs with language that references the war, many of which he also composed and recorded. Table 3.1 lists these songs by year of composition. As this chronology suggests, Robison's most productive period came in the months immediately following the United States' entry into the war, when the shock of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was still fresh and audiences were perhaps most receptive to patriotic song. After a lull around 1943,<sup>55</sup> Robison's compositional activity picked up somewhat in 1944 and 1945, as accumulating Allied victories seemed to presage an end to the war.

Of these topical songs, several make only oblique or passing reference to the war and its consequences, often in a humorous vein. For example, "The Old Gray Mare Is Back Where She Used to Be" tells of a family that has returned to riding horse-and-buggy in lieu of their car, suggesting the rubber and gasoline rationing instigated by the war.<sup>56</sup> But many songs are much more belligerent in tone, mercilessly attacking America's enemies in a subgenre of wartime song that musicologist John Bush Jones has dubbed "Axis-bashing songs."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> In a letter to ASCAP's Classification Committee detailing his activities during 1942-1944, Robison explains his reduction in published songs: "I want to explain that my publications have been curtailed in the past two years due to the controversy which is still unsettled between the Musicians Union [The American Federation of Musicians] and RCA-Victor. I do not have my works published until I have recorded them on the BLUEBIRD Records with whom I have a renewed two-year contract which goes into effect on the date the controversy is settled." Robison to ASCAP Classification Committee, 24 May 1944, CRC B1-F19.

<sup>56</sup> The reference to rationing is not immediately apparent to contemporary listeners, but probably would have been clear enough to listeners of the 1940s. See Jones, 210.

<sup>57</sup> Jones, 132.

**Table 3.1: Carson Robison’s World War II Repertory**

Year	Song Title	Composer
1941	“Here I Go to Tokio (Said Barnacle Bill the Sailor)”	Frank Luther and Carson Robison
1941	“I’m in the Army Now”	Frank Luther
1941	“Remember Pearl Harbor”	Frank Luther and Carson Robison
1941	“We’re Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap (And Uncle Sam’s the Guy Who Can Do It)”	Bob Miller
1942	“Don’t Let My Spurs Get Rusty While I’m Gone”	Carson Robison
1942	“Get Your Gun and Come Along (We’re Fixin’ to Kill a Skunk)”	Carson Robison
1942	“Hitler’s Reply to Mussolini”	Carson Robison
1942	“It’s Just a Matter of Time”	Carson Robison
1942	“Mussolini’s Letter to Hitler”	Carson Robison
1942	“1942 Turkey in the Straw”	Carson Robison
1942	“The Old Gray Mare Is Back Where She Used to Be”	Carson Robison
1942	“Plain Talk”	Carson Robison
1942	“The Story of Jitterbug Joe”	Carson Robison
1943	“That Dame I Left Behind Me”	John T. Mitchell
1943	“There’s No More Feudin’ in the Mountains”	John T. Mitchell
1944	“In Answer to Yours of December Seventh”	Carson Robison
1944	“Who’s Gonna Bury Hitler When the Onery [ <i>sic</i> ] Cuss Is Dead?”	Carson Robison
1945	“Hirohito’s Letter to Hitler”	Carson Robison
1945	“Hitler’s Last Letter to Hirohito”	Carson Robison
1945	“A Hundred Years from Now”	Carson Robison
1945	“1945 Nursery Rhymes”	Carson Robison
1947	“Predictions for a Hundred Years from Now”	Carson Robison
n.d.	“That’s What We Mean by American”	Carson Robison

The language in Robison’s Axis-bashers is raw and vindictive, delivered either with utmost solemnity or with cruel humor that celebrates violence enacted upon America’s enemies and scorns their cultural differences. And yet not all of the Axis Powers are treated equally in song lyrics. While hatred towards Germany and Italy is usually directed specifically at Hitler and Mussolini, attacks against Japan indict the whole citizenry, with figures like Hirohito mentioned only in passing. And unlike Germans and Italians, the Japanese enemy is explicitly racialized as “yellow,” a pun which both referred to skin color and served as a metaphor for cowardice or

underhandedness. Such is the case in “We’re Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap,” when Robison sings “we’ll skin that streak of yella from the sneaky little fella.” Songs could occasionally play upon common Asian stereotypes, such as the line in “Plain Talk” insisting that “if we don’t get busy and win this war we’ll all be living on rice.” In general, Robison’s songs avoided stereotypical broken English or accents, since usually they were not sung from the perspective of the Japanese, but rather that of a vengeful American. However, Robison does caricature an Asian accent in passing in “It’s Just a Matter of Time,” on the mocking words “We won’t forget to say, ‘*So sorry, ‘scuse please.*’”<sup>58</sup> In so doing, Robison was drawing upon the traditions of blackface minstrelsy, where mimicry of perceived black dialect was a common part of its humor.

Animalistic descriptions of the Japanese, especially as rats or skunks, are also typical. As Krystyn R. Moon has observed, likening the Japanese to rats was appealing poetically for the near rhyme of the words “Jap” and “rat.” But imagining the Japanese as rodents also conjured notions of infestation, recalling the rhetoric of prior debates in the U.S. concerning Asian immigration. Finally, dehumanizing the enemy as pests also eased the psychological burden of killing, as in “Remember Pearl Harbor” when Robison encourages America to “kill a hundred rats for every boy that fell.”<sup>59</sup> As Moon argues, these racial rhetorical tropes were not unique to Robison, but were widespread among other Tin Pan Alley composers of anti-Japanese song.

The notion of racial difference between the Japanese and a homogeneous white America is articulated most powerfully in “Remember Pearl Harbor,” to which Robison contributed some of the lyrics. In the song’s second verse, Robison dramatically shifts from singing to a spoken delivery, heightening the impact of the song’s most devastating lyrics:

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<sup>58</sup> Carson Robison, “It’s Just a Matter of Time” (New York: Bob Miller, 1942), CRC B1-F60.

<sup>59</sup> Moon, 333-52.

*Remember how we used to call them our little brown brothers?  
What a laugh that turned out to be.  
Well, we can all thank God we're not related  
To that yellow scum of the sea.*

*They talked of peace and of friendship.  
We found out just what all that talk was worth.  
Alright, they've asked for it, and now they're gonna get it.  
We'll blow every one of them right off of the face of the earth!*<sup>60</sup>

This startlingly violent passage captures the easy conflation of racial and national identities that the war inspired in much American propaganda. Yet with the phrase “little brown brothers”—a line attributed to William Howard Taft in the early 1900s to describe Filipinos during U.S. colonial rule—Robison points out that the racial nationalism painting America white has persisted for a long time.<sup>61</sup>

Although Robison’s erstwhile singing/songwriting partner Frank Luther (1905-1980) was given official credit as songwriter for “Remember Pearl Harbor,” draft lyrics in Robison’s hand among his manuscripts suggest his role in shaping the song’s message.<sup>62</sup> Shockingly, Robison’s final recorded version actually tones down some of the racial rhetoric originally considered for the song. The imperialist quip about “little brown brothers” seems to have been part of the lyrics from the beginning, but a second verse, later discarded, elaborated further upon American imperialist views of Japan:

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<sup>60</sup> Carson J. Robison, “Remember Pearl Harbor,” *A Real Hillbilly Legend*, Cattle 265, CD, 2002.

<sup>61</sup> According to Paul A. Kramer, Taft’s original usage of the phrase as colonial governor of the Philippines betokened a marginally more progressive, inclusive attitude of “colonial fraternalism,” one that held out the possibility of equality via Filipino assimilation. Nevertheless, “little brown brothers” subsequently became “a generic expression of colonial condescension.” Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 200. For more recent scholarship on U.S. colonialism in the Philippines, and particularly its racialized dimensions, see also Jonathan Lurie, *William Howard Taft: The Travails of a Progressive Conservative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Adam David Burns, “An Imperial Vision: William Howard Taft and the Philippines, 1900-1921” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2010).

<sup>62</sup> This view is also supported by the inclusion of “Remember Pearl Harbor” in Robison’s “Complete List of My Compositions in Chronological Order,” which he compiled in the mid-1950s.

*They were savages when Perry found them  
Ninety odd years ago  
All that they've got we gave them  
The whole world knows it's so [alternate lyric: College and ore and dough]  
They talked of peace and friendship  
To hide their cowardly attack  
They prov'd they're still just savages  
When they stab'd Uncle Sam in the back.*<sup>63</sup>

U.S. Commodore Matthew C. Perry, named in the opening line, famously negotiated a Japanese-American trade treaty in 1854 that effectively opened Japan to the West. Here he acts as a synecdoche for the United States as a civilizing influence upon the Japanese “savages.” This extended the racism of the song’s “little brown brothers” allusion further, confirming a link between race and the perceived cultural inferiority of the Japanese. Robison’s original lyrics indulge nineteenth-century racial hierarchies that legitimized U.S. imperial conquests. The verse even contains a few lines of self-congratulations for the moral rightness of America’s civilizing mission. In the final version of “Remember Pearl Harbor,” the reference to Perry is completely deleted, as is the word “savages,” which somewhat softens the blunt, pro-imperialist history behind Robison’s invocation of “little brown brothers.” Robison nevertheless retained the lines about “peace and friendship” and slightly modified the final line to “They stabbed our boys in the back.” Other discarded lyrics suggest genocide as a solution against a “disgrace of a race,” recommending that the United States “Erase every trace from the map” until “Old Glory flies o’er the Rising Sun.” Removing these lines reduced the volume of racial rhetoric, although what remained certainly delivered much the same result.

Another of Robison’s earliest anti-Japanese recordings was “We’re Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap (And Uncle Sam’s the Guy Who Can Do It),” written, recorded, and released within a matter of weeks in December 1941. Although Robison’s was the signature recording of

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<sup>63</sup> Carson J. Robison, draft lyrics for “Remember Pearl Harbor,” 1941, CRC B7-F206.



the song, credit for writing the song went to one of Robison's New York publishers, Bob Miller (of Bob Miller, Inc.), suggesting the close relationship Robison enjoyed with his publishers and the synergy between recording and publishing branches of the music industry. Like "Remember Pearl Harbor," "We're Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap" contains crass racial caricatures alongside pointed pro-American rhetoric. Against an oom-pah, accordion-heavy accompaniment, Robison boasts that "we'll skin that streak of yellow from the sneaky little fella" and "We'll reach across the ocean and grab that yellow Jap, and turn him upside down right on democracy's lap. We'll blister his Axis and do it with a snap. We gotta slap the dirty little Jap." Later, Miller and Robison mix up their Asian stereotypes, associating chop suey with the Japanese rather than Chinese in an ethnic conflation that was common at the time: "The Japs and all their hooley will be changed into chop suey, and the rising sun will set when we get through it."<sup>64</sup> A quotation of "Yankee Doodle," performed on fife, is thrown in at the end to punctuate the verse with an overt display of patriotism. The racial emphasis of the word "yellow" is intended to distinguish the Japanese from Americans, who are tacitly assumed as white. Such racial nationalism was sometimes echoed in iconography, as in the sheet music cover for "We're Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap" (see Figure 3.2). The caricatured image of a diminutive yellow Japanese soldier being disciplined by the oversized hand of a white American again plays upon American notions of superiority to the Japanese.

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<sup>64</sup> Bob Miller, "We're Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap (And Uncle Sam's the Guy Who Can Do It)" (New York: Bob Miller, 1941).

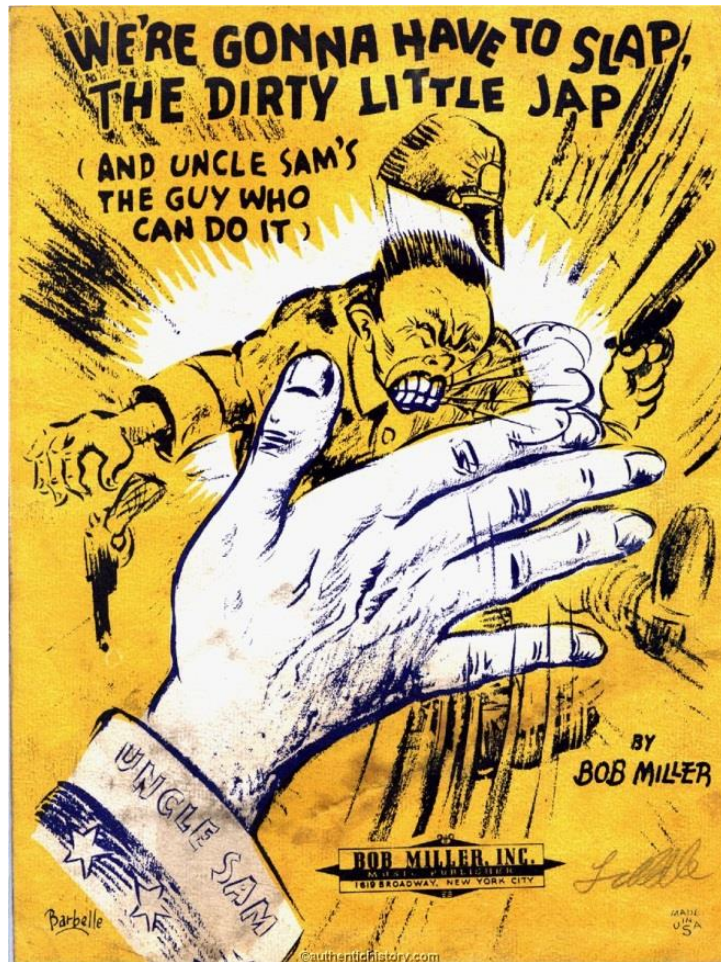


Figure 3.2: The sheet music cover for one of Robison's most popular wartime recordings, showing the white hand of Uncle Sam slapping a Japanese soldier, here overtly racialized as yellow. Bob Miller, "We're Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap (And Uncle Sam's the Guy Who Can Do It)" (New York: Bob Miller, 1941).

Songs like "Remember Pearl Harbor" and "We're Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap," are typical of much American pop music about the war, but they take on another layer of meaning when delivered by a country musician. The songs perform a rhetorical sleight of hand in which Robison and his ilk are no longer separated by prejudices of class or regionalism. Rather, they assume the voice of mainstream Americans, tacitly understood as white and united against a common enemy. The conflation of whiteness and American identity, taken for granted in much country music today, was pointedly articulated by Robison within the context of World War II.

## Country Authenticity and Pop Song Elitism

Throughout his career, Robison was at pains to strike a balance between audience expectations and his own commercial aspirations. On one hand, it was important to project an authentic rustic image unblemished by modernity and the trappings of the contemporary music business. At the same time, Robison as a songwriter was eager to break into the professional world of Tin Pan Alley publishing, a world that ridiculed the newly-ascendant hillbilly style. Although in songs and publicity Robison struck an ambivalent and sometimes disdainful tone towards slick city life, privately he kept close watch over his business dealings, joining ASCAP in 1933 and doing his best to emulate the life of a Tin Pan Alley careerist. In his business maneuvers, Robison fought to gain for country music greater economic clout and cultural legitimacy as a new style of popular music.

The rural image Robison offered the public was part honest biography, part self-invention and skillfully-calibrated artifice. His childhood in rural Kansas was a major selling point in publicity about him. A 1930 profile in the trade magazine *Metronome* proclaimed, “Carson Robison was born on a farm at Chetopa, Kansas, where his mother still lives. He is proud of his affiliation with the soil. He should be, for his sympathy, knowledge and understanding of just plain folks have enabled him to uncover a rich vein of pay dirt.”<sup>65</sup> A 1929 article in *Collier’s* likewise lauded Robison’s rustic authenticity and its connection to his music: “He was born in Chetopa, Kansas, the son of an expert fiddler of the old school. As a youngster he heard his father’s fiddle and listened to his mother’s singing of the old songs to the strains of a wheezy melodeon.”<sup>66</sup> In interviews, Robison also proudly acknowledged that his formal education ended

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<sup>65</sup> Antrim, “He Found Pay Dirt on the Farm.”

<sup>66</sup> Hugh Leamy, “Now Come All You Good People,” *Collier’s*, November 2, 1929, CRC Oversize Box F246.

with grade school.<sup>67</sup> Such candid admissions of a humble background were intended to vouch for his musical performances as artless and sincere.

Beyond touting his rural bona fides, Robison also vociferously derided New York and “the city,” which he regarded as overly claustrophobic and conformist. Nevertheless, Robison elected to center his professional life there. He never returned to Kansas after moving to New York City in 1924, although he did relocate upstate to a ranch in Pleasant Valley, NY, in 1944. Robison was evidently happy to leave Manhattan; according to his wife, Catherine, Carson “hated New York” because “it was just too much city.”<sup>68</sup>

In addition to its mild annoyances, Robison also publicly complained that New York culture was simply not conducive to writing authentic hillbilly music and that many of its professional songwriters consequently lacked the common touch needed for such repertory. In a 1930 interview, Robison detailed his efforts to avoid the city’s suffocating influence: “One of my first problems was to live in the city and still retain the perspective of the open spaces. New York almost insists on conformity to its own standard of dress, taste, and song production. But I did manage to resist this tendency to do as the Romans do and therein lay my salvation. The secret is just to stay natural.”<sup>69</sup> The inauthentic nature of Tin Pan Alley’s hillbilly knock-offs was a constant refrain in Robison’s publicity. In a 1929 article for *Collier’s* he argued, “The boys of Tin Pan Alley tried to crash this new market as soon as they realized that it was rich in possibilities, but they’ve failed so far because their stuff was too up-to-date and too neat and

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<sup>67</sup> Artist Questionnaire for *Hoedown* Magazine.

<sup>68</sup> For the Robisons’ moving dates, see Catherine Robison, interview by John W. Rumble (transcript), June 9, 1983, OHC244, 1, 11, FLACMHOF; and “A Day with Carson Robison,” *National Jamboree*, August 1949, CRC B1-F4.

<sup>69</sup> Antrim, “He Found Pay Dirt on the Farm.”

trim.”<sup>70</sup> A sympathetic article from 1938 echoed this sentiment: “After a complete study of the songs of the mountain, range, and plain, [Robison] concludes that they’re the only American music. It is Carson’s contention that they will outlast any Tin Pan Alley product because they are not based on fancy but real fact. They tell real stories, never exaggerating the true sentiments and emotions of the people they discuss.”<sup>71</sup> The article then hammers home Robison’s rustic authenticity: “‘Nature and tradition have been my best sources for material,’ says Carson. ‘I’ve learned plenty of things from her and I reckon most people could write songs about the odd characters, odd happenings right in their own backyard. [...] My heritage and tradition has come down to me from the covered wagon days and I suppose there couldn’t have been a better background for my efforts.’”<sup>72</sup>

Lest any readers think that over-exposure to New York might change Robison and his music for the worse, journalists were quick to assuage their fears. Writing for *Collier’s*, Hugh Leamy explained that

To find the author of such [hillbilly] songs you’d expect at least to have to make a mule-back journey over mountain trails to the cabin of a whiskered patriarch. But I located the writer of many of the most popular ones, a youngish man with brisk and businesslike offices in a New York hotel. His name is Carson J. Robison and for all he works within a stone’s throw of Tin Pan Alley. [...] Now you must not get the impression that this man working in his New York office has his tongue in his musical cheek as he grinds out ballads for the simple folk. He is obviously sincere. He realizes that his work is lucrative and that it is not for the sophisticates. But he doesn’t turn up his nose at his humble audiences.<sup>73</sup>

The article goes on to observe that Robison still personally answered fan mail, often keeping up correspondence with families over a period of months, suggesting that he had not lost the

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<sup>70</sup> Leamy, “Now Come All You Good People.”

<sup>71</sup> Peltonen, “Covered Wagon Songs.”

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Leamy, “Now Come All You Good People.”

common touch. Rather than succumbing to the ills of the city, Robison was often applauded for turning the tables on the Tin Pan Alley professionals: “For several years he was a laughing stock around New York. But some of those who laughed would now give their eye teeth to be in Carson’s shoes.”<sup>74</sup> Readers and listeners could thus rest assured that, while Robison was in New York, he was never of New York, shielding him from claims of cynicism and hypocrisy.

But despite all the publicity seeking to emphasize his down-to-earth rural persona, Robison remained determined throughout his career to break into music publishing and recording through traditional New York channels. And he surely knew that, pegged as a country musician, he faced an uphill battle. As Robison’s career was gaining steam in the 1920s and 1930s, country or “hillbilly” music represented an economic threat to the established world of American popular song, dominated then by New York publishers and allied record companies centered in Tin Pan Alley. To counter this threat, industry entrepreneurs engaged in a few basic strategies. Professional societies, especially ASCAP, barred most country composers and performers from membership.<sup>75</sup> In so doing, country musicians faced difficulty collecting royalty payments for their work. Denied ASCAP’s organizational clout, they also missed out on professional connections that could gain them access to publishing, performance, recording, and other publicity opportunities.

Beyond upholding its professional caste system, the established music industry occasionally engaged in a war-of-words against country music, carried out in the trade and popular presses. Their attacks relied upon class and regional prejudices in order to deny country

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<sup>74</sup> Antrim, “He Found Pay Dirt on the Farm.”

<sup>75</sup> Most black musicians and songwriters during this era likewise suffered from ASCAP’s exclusionary practices. The protectionism of ASCAP’s membership policies is covered in the chapter “Control through Structure: ASCAP and Its Membership” in John Ryan, *The Production of Culture in the Music Industry: The ASCAP-BMI Controversy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985). See also the introduction and chapter 3 of Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

musicians and audiences the respectability evidently embodied by Tin Pan Alley. Robison was a named protagonist in one of the most devastating take-downs of country music, prominently placed on the front page of *Variety* on December 29, 1926. In the article, entitled “‘Hill-Billy’ Music,” editor Abel Green wrote:

The “hillbilly” is a North Carolina or Tennessee and adjacent mountaineer type of illiterate white whose creed and allegiance are to the Bible, the Chautauqua, and the phonograph. The talking machine’s relation to the show business interests most. The mountaineer is of “poor white trash” genera. The great majority, probably 95 percent, can neither read nor write English. Theirs is a community all unto themselves. Illiterate and ignorant, with the intelligence of morons, the sing-song, nasal-twanging vocalizing of a Vernon Dalhart or a Carson Robison on the disks, reciting the banal lyrics of a “Prisoner’s Song” or “The Death of Floyd Collins” (biggest hillbilly song-hit to date), intrigues their interest.<sup>76</sup>

While Robison wore his rural identity as a badge of honor, he did so in the sure knowledge that critics like Green could use it against him. Publicly, Robison’s country pride served as a way to undermine the authority of prejudiced mainstream critics like Green by offering a different set of values grounded in rustic authenticity.

Green explicitly named the hillbilly as white, and the issue of race manifested itself in unusual ways in early critiques of country music. Although the imagined hillbilly was white like the imagined Tin Pan Alley tunesmith or fan, they represented different kinds of whiteness. A 1930 profile of Robison in *Metronome* opened with a comparison of city and country stereotypes: “City and country people have always had their traditional differences both in taste and temperament. The former have poked fun at the latter, calling him a hay seed and picturing him as a *browned* and bearded individual in overalls, straw hat and a piece of hay protruding from his mouth.”<sup>77</sup> The class disdain felt towards the rural working class is here transmuted into

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<sup>76</sup> Abel Green, “‘Hill-Billy’ Music,” *Variety*, December 29, 1926. Quoted in Archie Green, “Hillbilly Music: Source and Symbol,” *Journal of American Folklore* 78, no. 309 (July-September 1965): 221.

<sup>77</sup> Emphasis added. Antrim, “He Found Pay Dirt on the Farm.”

a distinction of color, as outdoor labor renders white people brown, literally and figuratively. This tiered spectrum of whiteness is echoed in the pejorative “redneck,” a term which first gained currency in the early 20th century to describe the suntanned necks of white Southern farmers, whose labor transforms them into a physically-marked, lower class of white.<sup>78</sup> Although this racialized language was metaphorical and deployed obliquely, it implicitly served to valorize Tin Pan Alley as possessing the normative and desirable type of whiteness.

### **Robison the Professional: Joining ASCAP**

Given the mutual antagonism between Tin Pan Alley and upstart country music, Robison’s success with New York publishers and his admission into ASCAP in 1933 were something of a minor coup. Robison remained one of a limited few country musicians to gain membership into ASCAP prior to the 1950s; in 1948, country songwriters accounted for only twenty-two out of over 2,000 members.<sup>79</sup> Although Robison spoke ill of Tin Pan Alley in public interviews, he clearly understood the benefits of membership among its professional ranks. His correspondence and business records reveal shrewd business acumen and a determination to climb Tin Pan Alley’s career ladder.

Perhaps stung by early-career missteps, which cost Robison up to \$680,000 in royalties (in 2017 dollars),<sup>80</sup> for the remainder of his career Robison was fiercely protective of his

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<sup>78</sup> An etymology of the term “redneck” is given in Patrick Huber, “A Short History of *Redneck*: The Fashioning of a Southern White Masculine Identity,” *Southern Cultures* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 145-66.

<sup>79</sup> Ryan, 69-70. Ryan also notes that most country songwriters were not “admitted until *after* the ASCAP monopoly had been broken by BMI” in 1941.

<sup>80</sup> Robison’s popular recording of “The Prisoner’s Song” (1925) with Vernon Dalhart was the first country music record to sell over a million copies. During recording, Dalhart claimed the song was in the public domain. But unbeknownst to Robison, Dalhart later filed copyright on the song, thus keeping all royalties for himself, estimated at \$85,000-\$100,000. See Robert D. Morritt, “Carson J. Robison: Pioneer Country Music Artist and Musician, August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1890 – March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1957,” typescript, 4pp. Located in three-ring binder titled “Carson J. Robison: Induction Request, Country Music Hall of Fame,” submitted by Noelle Vetter, January 2001, Robison vertical files, FLACMHOF; on Dalhart and Robison’s break-up: Frank Luther, interview by Bill Williams (transcript), May 18, 1971, OH418-LC, 3-4, FLACMHOF. Figure of \$680,000 is based on the CPI Inflation Calculator available on the



copyrights, royalties, and intellectual property. To take one example, in 1955 Robison jotted an emphatic reminder to himself regarding his pedagogical book *The Mastertone Guitar Method*: “Published by Robbins Music Corp. in 1929. I get royalty of 10¢ per copy. Copyright MUST be renewed in 1956. BE SURE that Robbins are reminded of this.”<sup>81</sup> Likewise, an August 1949 profile claimed with bemusement that, in order to protect his work, Robison kept his sheet music manuscripts in a fire- and burglar-proof vault at his home in Pleasant Valley.<sup>82</sup>

Robison was also vigilant regarding unauthorized use of his songs. Among his collection of sheet music is a 1937 book entitled *Powder River Jack and Kitty Lee’s Songs of the Range: Cowboy Wails of Cattle Trails*, including a song entitled “Once I Led a Happy Life.” While Robison seldom annotated his sheet music, here he wrote on the cover “See ‘Once I lived a happy life’ → my song ‘Goin’ Home.’” On the page of the song in question, he wrote “stolen from Carson Robison correct title ‘GOIN’ HOME.’”<sup>83</sup> Jack Lee is listed only as an arranger; many songs in this vein were considered to be in the public domain, and Lee may have simply assumed that was true of this tune. It is unclear whether Robison pursued legal action; while Robison performed the song regularly on radio shows, he never published it under his name, so perhaps he had no legal claim on the song.<sup>84</sup> But his exasperated tone in his annotations at least reflects the importance and pride he attached to song authorship.

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website of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm) (accessed May 6, 2017).

<sup>81</sup> Robison, “Complete List of My Compositions in Chronological Order.”

<sup>82</sup> “A Day with Carson Robison,” *National Jamboree*.

<sup>83</sup> *Powder River Jack [Lee] and Kitty Lee’s Songs of the Range: Cowboy Wails of Cattle Trails* (Chicago: Chart Music, 1937), CRC B3-F92.

<sup>84</sup> “Robison, Carson J. (1890-1957) Collection, 1903-1988,” finding aid, 117pp., Special Collections and University Archives, Leonard H. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University.

At the same time, Robison was certainly sensitive to and defensive about the critiques that Abel Green and others were making about hillbilly music, and Robison took conscious steps towards professional development. One such area was improving his musical literacy. According to his widow, Catherine, Robison was a self-taught pianist and was not proficient in reading musical notation. As a result, writing the orchestrations for his various ensembles was a painstaking process. He used “a piece of paper with the black and white keys drawn on the paper” which he would use as an aid for his transcriptions to five-line staff—what Robison called the “do re mi system,” according to Catherine.<sup>85</sup> Despite Robison’s apparent inability to read a score, his collected sheet music suggests his efforts to gain at least moderate proficiency on piano. While most of Robison’s sheet music is in the popular vein, he also owned a small handful of classical piano pieces, and these are the ones that received the greatest amount of annotations from Robison, mostly for fingerings, pedaling, and other performance directions. This is the case with his copy of Mendelssohn’s “Venetian Boat Song” from the *Songs without Words*, which shows evidence of some study at the piano.<sup>86</sup> Also in Robison’s collection are annotated books of piano etudes by pedagogues H. Bertini, Adolf Jensen, A. Loeschhorn, and Louis Streabbog. Their study reflects a conscious effort on Robison’s part towards professional self-improvement as he tried to break into the Tin Pan Alley class, where musical literacy was a crucial skill.

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<sup>85</sup> Catherine Robison, interview by John W. Rumble, 4-5.

<sup>86</sup> Felix Mendelssohn, “Venetian Boat Song,” rev. after the latest edition of Theodor Kullak (New York: G. Schirmer, 1891), CRC B5-F145. Other classical and piano pedagogical sheet music in Robison’s collection include *Piano Classics Volume One* (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1885), B3-F91; Louis Streabbog, *Twelve Very Easy and Melodious Studies for Pianoforte, Op. 63* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1898), B3-F94; H. Bertini, *Twenty-Five Studies for the Piano, Op. 29* (Philadelphia: Theodore Presser, n.d.), B3-F95; A. Loeschhorn, *30 Melodische Etuden für das Pianoforte, Op. 38, Part 1* (Leipzig: C. F. Peters, n.d.), B3-F96; Adolf Jensen, *25 Klavier-Etuden, Op. 32, Part 1* [Leipzig: C. F. Peters, n.d.], B3-F96.

Robison's application to ASCAP in January 1933 was perhaps encouraged by his publishers. To help his bid, Robison received a letter of support from publisher Louis Bernstein (of Shapiro, Bernstein, & Co.) As a major, well-established player within the mainstream pop market, Bernstein acted as an important intermediary between Robison and a potentially resistant professional society.<sup>87</sup> Addressing Raymond Hubbell, Chairman of ASCAP's Membership Committee, in a letter dated January 16, 1933, Bernstein vouched:

I have known Carson Robison for a number of years, and he has written a very huge quantity of songs, some of which I have published and many of which are publicly performed constantly, both here and in England.

If he is not yet a member, I would respectfully submit to the Membership Committee that he is very very deserving of membership in our Society; that he is able and capable, and that he is not a fly-by-night writer who will write one or two or ten songs and quit, but will, no doubt, write hundreds of more songs in his time, and if [he] has not yet been made a non-participating member he certainly deserves that and an immediate promotion to the active class.<sup>88</sup>

Bernstein's letter is notable for its careful avoidance of the hillbilly label, focusing solely on Robison's salability as a songwriter rather than the ostensibly low cultural register in which he operated. Hubbell's response to Bernstein on January 21, 1933, reflected a general ignorance of Robison's work as a country composer and performer:

I will certainly bring your letter regarding Carson Robison to the attention of the Membership Committee at the next meeting.

Your letter will be of assistance to the Committee because we are investigating his activities in an endeavor to find out just what he has done.<sup>89</sup>

Following upon Bernstein's recommendations, ASCAP voted Robison to the status of Non-Participating Membership on February 24, 1933, the default status for all new members while the

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<sup>87</sup> "Celebrating Centennials," ASCAP, August 27, 2013, <http://www.ascap.com/playback/2013/08/action/celebrating-centennials.aspx> (accessed May 6, 2017).

<sup>88</sup> Louis Bernstein to Ray Hubbell, copy for Carson Robison, 16 January 1933, CRC B1-F17.

<sup>89</sup> Raymond Hubbell, Chairman of Membership Committee, to Louis Bernstein, 21 January 1933, CRC B1-F17.

Membership Committee vetted them further to determine suitability for Active Membership.

According to a letter from Hubbell,

All new applicants are first elected to this class and their advancement to Active Membership depends upon the activity of their list of compositions which appears on our files.

The Membership Committee will carefully scrutinize your list of works and if it appears that your numbers are extensively performed in the establishments licensed by this Society, in due course we shall be pleased to recommend your advancement to Active Membership.<sup>90</sup>

Robison was bumped up to dues-paying Active Membership on June 29, 1933<sup>91</sup> and signed his first ASCAP contract on July 15, 1933.<sup>92</sup> He was initially placed in Class 3 in ASCAP's royalty-assigning classification system—apparently the standard class for all new Active Members—and received his first royalty check in October 1933.<sup>93</sup>

Over the next fifteen years, Robison lobbied the Classification Committee six times for an upgrade to his classification status, the practical implication of which was a corresponding increase in royalty payments. Table 3.2 summarizes the results of Robison's efforts.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Raymond Hubbell to Robison, 27 February 1933, CRC B1-F17.

<sup>91</sup> Raymond Hubbell to Robison, 30 June 1933, CRC B1-F17.

<sup>92</sup> "Agreement between Carson J. Robison and American Society of Composers, Authors & Publishers" (contract), July 15, 1933, 3pp., CRC B1-F17.

<sup>93</sup> Raymond Hubbell to Robison, 5 October 1933, CRC B1-F17.

<sup>94</sup> The October 1933 quarterly figure as a Class 3 member comes from Robison to American Society of Composers, Authors, & Publishers, 6 May 1934, 4pp., CRC B1-F17. All other quarterly royalty payment amounts are based on dated paystubs issued by ASCAP in CRC B1-F44. Under ASCAP's system at the time, membership classes 4 up through C-1A all "received a fixed sum quarterly"; members in Class C or above earned a variable amount based on the number of song plays they received that quarter (Deems Taylor, memorandum to All Writer Members of ASCAP, 5 April 1946, 2pp., CRC B1-F20). ASCAP evidently changed its distribution policies beginning in the third quarter of 1950, for there is a substantial increase in Robison's royalty payments during 1950-1953, the last year for which paystubs are available, ranging from \$1,067.59 (1950, third quarter) to \$1,959.14 (1951, fourth quarter). In 2017 dollars, these figures equal to \$10,580.47 and \$18,024.16, respectively. Robison's letters to ASCAP's Classification Committee requesting upgrades to his status (as well as the Committee's responses, variously signed by Chairman Gene Buck or Presidents Deems Taylor and Fred E. Ahlert) can be found in CRC B1-F17 through B1-F21.

**Table 3.2: Carson Robison’s Royalty Payment Receipts from ASCAP, 1933-1950**

Date of Request	Upgraded Classification Status	Effective Date	Quarterly Royalty Payment (gross) <sup>95</sup>
January 1933	3	October 1933	\$369.40
May 6, 1934	2	July 1934	\$1,364.56 (later \$1,669.87)
[unknown]	1	September 1937	\$3,132.17
October 1, 1940	DD	January 1941	\$4,688.48
May 25, 1942	C-1	October 1942	\$5,770.44
May 24, 1944	C	July 1944	Variable (\$7,829.82--\$13,802.62)
January 10, 1948	Request denied	-----	-----

On the basis of Robison’s continued activity and success as a songwriter, the Committee was generally amenable to upgrading his status every few years. He was finally denied upon his sixth request, however, as his popularity had begun to wane: “Your appeal was considered with great care,” President Fred E. Ahlert wrote him on June 21, 1948. “However, the members of the Committee did not feel that any change should be made in your present rating, and accordingly, took no action at that time.”<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, Robison’s five advancements over a decade speak to his sustained popularity as a songwriter and to his tactful negotiations with Tin Pan Alley’s most powerful trade association.

Many of Robison’s requests to the Classification Committee reflected his awareness of country music’s second-class status among the pop music elite. Beyond citing his songwriting credits and sales figures, almost all of his appeals make some mention of his “hillbilly”

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<sup>95</sup> Figures here are given in 2017 dollars using the CPI Inflation Calculator available on the website of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm), accessed May 6, 2017. Original figures are: \$20.00 (1933); \$75.00 and \$100.00 (1934); \$185.00 (1937); \$275.00 (1941); \$400.00 (1942); \$761.14-\$1,030.38 (1944-1950).

<sup>96</sup> Fred E. Ahlert to Robison, 21 June 1948, CRC B1-F21.

reputation. His letter of October 1, 1940, is by turns apologetic, defiant, and reassuring on this point:

My particular case is a little different from the usual Broadway song-writer, in that, for the past sixteen years I have been writing songs for the rural or so-called “Hill-Billy” and cow-boy fields and for that reason my works naturally have not been as well known in the metropolitan centers as other popular types.

However, without boasting, I believe I can truthfully say and you can easily confirm, that where-ever this type of music is used, my name is at the top of the list of composers. [...] I believe you will agree that the importance of the better type of Hill-Billy music as a definite contribution to the music world is not to be looked upon with a “tongue-in-cheek” attitude. After all, there is nothing much more representative of American “Folk-Music” that [than] this type. Many of Stephen Foster[']s works for instance are certainly in this category. And this is the type of music as you know, that lives on and on.<sup>97</sup>

In his letter of May 6, 1934, Robison also explained that many of his original compositions were recorded but not published due to the “small demand for sheet music among the country people.”<sup>98</sup> This tacitly confirmed that his biggest audiences were different from the urban, musically-literate, mostly middle-class market for Tin Pan Alley tunes, but Robison is steadfast in his insistence that this should not be counted against him.

Robison’s request of May 25, 1942, touted the success of such World War II-themed works as “1942 Turkey in the Straw,” “Mussolini’s Letter to Hitler,” and “Hitler’s Reply to Mussolini.” But the letter also copied verbatim much of his earlier defense of hillbilly music, with a few telling rewordings and additions (marked below in bold):

I feel that the importance of the better type of hill-billy music as a definite contribution to the music world is not to be **belittled**. After all, there is nothing much more representative of American “folk-music” than this type. Much of Stephen Foster’s work, for instance, is certainly in this category and as you know, **it certainly outlives the “boogy-woogy” and “music goes round and round” type of thing. Many of the**

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<sup>97</sup> Robison to the Chairman of the ASCAP Classification Committee, 1 October 1940, CRC B1-F18.

<sup>98</sup> Robison to American Society of Composers, Authors, & Publishers, 6 May 1934, 4pp., CRC B1-F17. In another letter, Robison explained that his usual practice was to record a song first, and then publish the song once the recording had been released: “I do not have my works published until after I have recorded them for M-G-M with whom I now have a two-year contract.” See Robison to ASCAP Writers’ Classification Committee, 10 January 1948, 3pp., CRC B1-F20.

**things I wrote back as far as 1930 are still “standard” with hundreds of radio stations.**<sup>99</sup>

Robison’s rhetorical strategies in these letters reflect a sure knowledge of just where he stands in the pop music food chain. There is the supplicant’s anxiety to please, seen in his adoption of ASCAP’s hierarchical values. The hierarchy is expressed here in the language of respectability and nationalism, especially in Robison’s invocations of “American” rather than “Southern” or “rural,” and “folk” rather than “country.” The label “folk-music,” as well as the comparison with Stephen Foster, strives to dignify music that in its time could be dismissed as frivolous, but whose longevity is later taken as proof of its aesthetic merit.<sup>100</sup> Robison, as a composer of “*the better type* of hillbilly music,” means to signal subtly his superiority to others working in the style and his willingness to denigrate them in exchange for personal gain. Finally, Robison’s disparagement of boogie-woogie and other contemporary popular styles, coded as cosmopolitan and racially-ambiguous, contrasts with his endorsement of an emphatically white style. Rather than faddish, provincial, working-class, and interracial, Robison here articulates what he thinks his “social betters” really want him to be: timeless, nationalistic, bourgeois, and white.

### **Robison’s Eclectic Musical Style**

While Robison’s anti-Japanese songs all generally pursue the same rhetorical strategies in their lyrics, their musical style is much more eclectic, reflecting Robison’s balancing act between the worlds of Tin Pan Alley and rustic authenticity. Although many songs defy easy classification into one camp or another, Robison relied upon a few basic techniques that allowed him to quickly compose and record new material in a short period of time, especially important for topical songs whose accessibility and humor would be short-lived. Some of these techniques

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<sup>99</sup> Robison to Chairman of the ASCAP Classification Committee, 25 May 1942, 2pp., CRC B1-F18.

<sup>100</sup> Robison’s final request, dated January 10, 1948, referred to this with the official-looking label “American Folk Music.” Robison to ASCAP Writers’ Classification Committee, 10 January 1948.

reflected his increasing comfort and skill in Tin Pan Alley song craft, while others spoke more to his indebtedness to and continuing affiliation with hillbilly and folk idioms.

Stylistically, Robison's repertory—like most of Tin Pan Alley's wartime songs—avoided the kind of orientalist musical techniques found in Tin Pan Alley representations of Asian-ness earlier in the century. Familiar musical tropes like pentatonic scales, parallel fifths, drone bass, and elaborate grace note gestures had previously been used to signify Asian Otherness and in some cases to imitate Asian music (or at least American perceptions and imaginings of it).<sup>101</sup> Such techniques often lumped together different Asian nationalities and ethnicities whose music and culture varied widely; the conflation of these groups reveals the cultural ignorance and blunt racial typologies Americans used during the early 1900s, ones that reflected white American desire for a homogenized, often feminized and sensual Asian Other. Robison certainly would have been familiar with these musical techniques and racial rhetoric, given the presence of such material in his collected sheet music.<sup>102</sup> In a wartime context, the omission of sonic signifiers of Asian-ness in favor of more "American"-sounding styles suggests a waning appeal for exoticism. Perhaps the racial desire implied by exoticist repertory was deemed inappropriate to the moment. In this sense, the turn to apparently non-racialized nationalist styles could actually signal a turn towards whiteness.

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<sup>101</sup> The story of one such Tin Pan Alley song, William Jerome and Jean Schwartz's "Chinatown, My Chinatown" (1910), is recounted in Charles Hiroshi Garrett, *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). See also Judy Tsou, "Gendering Race: Stereotypes of Chinese Americans in Popular Sheet Music," *repercussions* 6, no. 2 (1997): 25-62.

<sup>102</sup> See for example Richard W. Pascoe, Hans Von Holstein, and Alma M. Sanders, "Hong Kong" (New York: Leo Feist, 1916), CRC B3-F114; Joe McCarthy and Fred Fischer, "I Want to Go to Tokio" (New York: Leo Feist, 1914), CRC B4-F117; Raymond B. Egan and Richard A. Whiting, "The Japanese Sandman" (New York: Jerome H. Remick, 1920), CRC B4-F121; Julius Hart, Esq., ed., *Piano Gems of Gilbert & Sullivan's Mikado* (New York: Richard A. Saalfield, n.d.), CRC B2-F88; William Jerome and Jean Schwartz, "Chinatown, My Chinatown" (New York: Jerome H. Remick, 1910), CRC B3-F104; and several others.



Instead of exotic markers, one strategy common in much of Tin Pan Alley's wartime output was the adoption of march form, often with melodic quotations or paraphrases of patriotic and military tunes. This is the approach in Robison's performance of "Remember Pearl Harbor." Written by Frank Luther with some lyrics by Robison, Robison's was actually one of several "Remember Pearl Harbors" written and recorded in the weeks immediately following the Japanese attack. The most popular was written by Don Reid and Sammy Kaye and recorded most memorably by Sammy Kaye and His Orchestra.<sup>103</sup> Bearing a tempo marking of "March *with spirit*," the song's melodic line is distinguished by its emphasis on consonant pitches outlining the triad as well as frequent leaps by fourth that recall the crisp melodies of "Taps" and "Reveille." The song also exhibits a strong economy of composition, with fragments of the first phrase of the refrain sequenced a step higher in subsequent phrases (see Example 3.1a).

Many of these techniques are also found in Robison's "Remember Pearl Harbor." In Robison's arrangement, a bright military trumpet opens the piece with an exact quotation of "Taps," underscored by a snare drum roll. As the introduction gives way to the march rhythm of an accordion, the trumpet ascends to a rapid five-note ostinato flourish and the vocal melody enters with the first refrain. The refrain is in 16-bar AABA form, standard for many Tin Pan Alley compositions. Like the opening trumpet melody, the first "A" phrase is a quotation of "Taps," with the second phrase sequencing the melody a step higher (see Example 3.1b). Formally and melodically, the piece is remarkably generic and similar to Reid and Kaye's composition of the same name, reflecting Robison's ties to mainstream pop techniques and sensibilities.

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<sup>103</sup> Don Reid and Sammy Kaye, "Remember Pearl Harbor" (New York: Republic Music, 1941), Sheet Music Collection, CPM.

(a)



(b)



Example 3.1: The first eight measures of the refrain from Reid/Kaye, “Remember Pearl Harbor” (a) and from Luther/Robison, “Remember Pearl Harbor” (b), transposed to the same key. Both have a melodic contour outlining the triad, suggesting military music, and both follow a similar 4+4 construction in which the first phrase is sequenced a step higher in the second phrase.

Four of Robison’s songs warrant their own special category because of their fixation on Axis leaders. “Mussolini’s Letter to Hitler,” “Hitler’s Reply to Mussolini,” “Hirohito’s Letter to Hitler,” and “Hitler’s Last Letter to Hirohito” are all epistolary songs, which find humor in imagining the mounting anxieties of bombastic but bumbling dictators as they cope with humiliation and defeat at the hands of Allied forces. The lyrics are free of the racial slurs found in Robison’s other songs. Instead they offer precise commentary on the war as events unfold. “Hitler’s Reply to Mussolini,” for example, includes the lines “My promise to give you Great Britain is a promise I’ll never forget. I’ve sent Rudolph Hess to get it, but I haven’t heard back from him yet.” This references Hess’s 1941 secret solo flight to Scotland, intended to negotiate peace with the British, which ultimately led to a crash landing and Hess’s subsequent

imprisonment.<sup>104</sup> In Robison's eyes, the ineptitude of this episode deserved comic treatment. Similarly, as German defeat was imminent in the early months of 1945, "Hirohito's Letter to Hitler" opens satirically with Hirohito's imagined salutation: "Dear Hitler, I'm writing this letter, hoping you'll get it somewhere. I used to address you in Berlin, but now there's no post office there." Hitler's reply in the answer song concedes that "I don't have a Berlin post office—in fact, there just ain't no Berlin," rendered in a mock-despondent tone in Robison's recording.

Robison's formulaic but effective approach to composition helped to facilitate his up-to-the-minute topicality. To begin with, the two Hitler-Mussolini compositions are actually the same melody with different lyrics, and the recorded versions (sold as two sides on the same disc) have virtually the same instrumental arrangement. The same is true for the two Hitler-Hirohito songs, the melody and arrangement of which bear a remarkable similarity to the Hitler-Mussolini songs without being identical to them. All four songs have stanzas in 24-bar ABA form, representing a light truncation of the standard 32-bar AABA common to Tin Pan Alley. The harmonies are simple and largely diatonic; the greatest distinction between the two melodies is that the B section of the Hitler-Mussolini melody begins in the submediant, while in the Hitler-Hirohito melody it is in the dominant. The melodies of each are mostly conjunct, limited primarily to motion up and down the first five notes of the scale. The syllabic text setting against equal quarter-notes allowed Robison to spin out stanzas of rhymed couplets in a predictable, repetitive fashion. The music itself is designed to accommodate Robison's jokes; most of the work and success of the songs is in the wordplay.

All four songs are in 3/4 meter with a tempo marking that indicates waltz time. This provides an important lilt and whimsical flavor to the songs that propel them forward. Moreover, given the waltz's reputation as a dance of European origin, the music could be heard as a sly dig

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<sup>104</sup> Jones, 138.

at the pretensions of European culture, and specifically as a way to use part of Hitler's cultural heritage against him. This effect is magnified by Robison's choice of instrumentation—what John Bush Jones describes as “a typical Bavarian ‘oom-pah’ band”—that includes a prominent, plodding tuba “oom” as well as shrill clarinets and ocarinas that provide the “pah-pah,” sounding almost like derisive laughter.<sup>105</sup>

Robison also regularly engaged in country music *contrafacta*—the application of new lyrics to preexisting country, folk, or other familiar tunes. On a practical level, this conveniently removed the need to compose new music and, since most of the songs were in the public domain, allowed Robison to avoid paying royalties to a composer. Ideologically, repurposing older tunes helped Robison to demonstrate his connection to traditional song as well as flaunt his rustic sense of humor. The most extreme example of Robison's *contrafacta* is his medley of childhood songs, “1945 Nursery Rhymes,” which mostly indulges anti-German propaganda. “Three Blind Mice” is rendered here as “Three Blind Rats”; “Pop Goes the Weasel” becomes “Pop Goes the Axis”; after a reimagined “Yankee Doodle” comes “Vere oh vere is that Rudolph Hess?”; and finally a rendition of “Jingle Bells” declares “Oh what fun when the Germans run from a great big Russian sleigh.” The juxtaposition of these well-known, lighthearted tunes against such menacing figures as Hitler and Mussolini seems designed to rob the dictators of some of their bombast and fearsomeness by infantilizing them, while the quotation of “Yankee Doodle” in particular reasserts an American identity.

Robison's “‘Here I Go to Tokio,’ Said Barnacle Bill, the Sailor” resurrects one of Robison's most popular recordings, which he wrote and recorded with Frank Luther (released in 1928 under the pseudonyms Joe and Bud Billings; in 1930 Robison recorded it with Hoagy

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<sup>105</sup> Jones, 138. Robison's handwritten arrangements for “Hirohito's Letter to Hitler,” for example, include parts for piano, bass, guitar, tuba, ocarina, B-flat clarinet, accordion, and fiddle. Carson Robison, “Hirohito's Letter to Hitler,” handwritten musical parts, CRC B6-F175.

Carmichael's orchestra and Bix Beiderbecke).<sup>106</sup> The original "Barnacle Bill the Sailor" proved so popular, in fact, that Robison recorded several follow-ups with the same melody: "Barnacle Bill the Sailor No. 2," "Barnacle Bill the Sailor No. 3," and "The Return of Barnacle Bill the Sailor." According to Frank Luther, the song was based on an English drinking/sailor song titled "Baluchi Barown."<sup>107</sup> The song lyrics are a dialogue between the eponymous Barnacle Bill and the virtuous "fair young maiden" (sung in falsetto) whom he is trying to bed. In its original folk context, the song reveled in the sexual debauchery of Barnacle Bill, often with extremely bawdy lyrics, but in Luther and Robison's cleaned-up version he is merely flirtatious, if somewhat rough around the edges.

In "'Here I Go to Tokio,' Said Barnacle Bill, the Sailor," Barnacle Bill is transformed into a soldier, trading his come-ons for a series of patriotic boasts about the United States and its sure victory against the Japanese. The Japanese are stereotypically portrayed as "yellow" in these boasts, although the song is hardly among Robison's most offensive lyrics: "I'll stick their yellow nose in the ground and turn their bloomin' damper down." The early recording date of January 1942, just weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, suggests that Robison found in the "Barnacle Bill" melody a well-tested tune that could easily accommodate wartime propaganda. Since Robison was already perhaps the performer most closely associated with "Barnacle Bill,"

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<sup>106</sup> Sheet music: Carson Robison and Frank Luther, "Barnacle Bill the Sailor" (New York: Southern Music, 1931), Sheet Music Collection, CPM.; recording: Hoagy Carmichael and His Orchestra, vocal refrain by Carson Robison and chorus, "Barnacle Bill, The Sailor – Fox Trot," Victor V-38139-A, 78, CRC F253.

<sup>107</sup> Frank Luther, interview by Bill Williams, 6. According to musicologist Ed Cray, "A sea song come ashore, 'Bollochy Bill the Sailor' now appears to survive on college campuses in the United States, where it is known also under the euphemistic title of 'Barnacle Bill the Sailor.' Its progenitor, 'Abel [Abram] Brown the Sailor,' is much less well known, and may be extinct" (83). The earliest known print version of "Bollochy Bill" appeared in 1927 (85), although the version by Luther and Robison is generally credited with maintaining the popularity of the song, albeit in a much toned-down version. Ed Cray, *The Erotic Muse: American Bawdy Songs*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

this readymade recording helped maintain his popularity, sales, and name-recognition with a minimum of effort.

But more popular than “1945 Nursery Rhymes” or the new “Barnacle Bill” was Robison’s recording of “1942 Turkey in the Straw,” probably the most popular of all his World War II songs. The melody itself dated back to the 1830s minstrel song “Zip Coon,” a staple of blackface performance.<sup>108</sup> By the early 1900s “Turkey in the Straw” was largely devoid of its racialized meaning, surviving primarily as a fiddle tune. Nevertheless, its repurposing by Robison to attack the Japanese as a “little yellow rat” unwittingly returned it to its status as an instrument of racial oppression. In successive verses, the lyrics liken Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese to a monkey, a baboon, and a rat. The third verse introduces the Japanese rat, who provides much needed relief and a morale boost to the other depleted Axis Powers:

*A monkey and baboon settin' on a rail  
Feelin' mighty bad and lookin' kinda pale.  
A little yellow rat come sneakin' round a weed.  
The monkey said, "Look, there's the guy we need!"  
So the rat climbed up and they all began to grin.  
'Long come a fellow with whiskers on his chin.  
He kicked that rail and it broke with a crack,  
And that was the last of the Three Power Pact.<sup>109</sup>*

The fourth verse touts the skill of America’s fighting men, who are not likened to animals, while the fifth and final verse promises an Allied victory, after which the vanquished will be forced to dance to “Turkey in the Straw.” Beyond its familiar melody, country instrumentation figures heavily in the texture of Robison’s recording, especially banjo and fiddle. These traits signal a hillbilly performance, perhaps counterbalancing Robison’s more pop-oriented material with recordings that highlight his allegiance to country music. That “Turkey in the Straw,” in

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<sup>108</sup> See the chapter “Zip Coon” in Cockrell.

<sup>109</sup> Carson J. Robison, “1942 Turkey in the Straw” (New York: Robbins Music, 1942), CRC B2-F63.

Robison's new lyrics, might be deployed as a tool of *American* cultural hegemony abroad also suggests a subtle rhetorical shift away from regional or class identity to one that emphasizes country music's status as a national, patriotic music.

### **Marketing and Reception**

Advertisements for Robison's wartime songs likewise confirmed an emerging link between country music and national identity, typically suggesting that consumption of such songs could boost morale and thereby further the war effort. A 1942 advertisement in *Billboard* for the Mussolini/Hitler disc boasted, "This one's full of laughs that help win the war—for us!"<sup>110</sup> Another ad for "1942 Turkey in the Straw" included an illustration to personify the power of music in the struggle against America's enemies. In this imaginative scenario, a cartoonish Robison is dressed in his cowboy persona, raining justice down on Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito with a barrage of eighth-note bullets (see Figure 3.3). The accompanying text claims that "homey," "down-to-earth" country music like Robison's is the truest expression of patriotism, "express[ing] the feeling of all loyal Americans."

This pro-American rhetoric, combined with the immediate familiarity and appeal of his recordings, helped to make Robison one of the most successful country performers during the war years. The sheer number of Robison's topical wartime songs attests to their popularity, even if not every song he wrote became a hit. Exact sales figures for many of Robison's recordings are difficult to come by, especially since *Billboard* did not begin tracking sales of country discs until 1943.

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<sup>110</sup> "New Bluebird Records" (advertisement), *Billboard*, March 7, 1942.



Figure 3.3: A cartoonish Robison fighting the Axis Powers through song. “Carson Robison -- steps up to the firing line [...]” (advertisement), The Salt Lake Hardware Co., Carson J. Robison Collection, 1903-1988, B1-F49, Special Collections and University Archives, Leonard H. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University.

Nevertheless, among his latter-day recordings, Robison’s disc of “Hitler’s Last Letter to Hirohito”/“Hirohito’s Letter to Hitler” peaked at number 5 in *Billboard*’s list of “Most Played Juke Box Folk Records” on June 30, 1945.<sup>111</sup> Of course, Robison’s most fecund period for war songs predated the creation of the *Billboard* list, so it is perhaps impossible to know just how popular Robison’s songs were compared with his contemporaries in country music or on Tin Pan

<sup>111</sup> Joel Whitburn, *Joel Whitburn Presents Hot Country Songs: Billboard 1944 to 2008* (Menomonee Falls, WI: Record Research, 2008), 357.



Alley. But by all accounts, “1942 Turkey in the Straw” was his greatest success. In some regions of the country, demand for the recording outpaced supply.<sup>112</sup> The song proved such a hit that Victor Records ultimately began listing the song under its popular catalog rather than its Western and Hillbilly catalog.<sup>113</sup> This crossover to the popular label mirrored Robison’s successful entry into the ranks of ASCAP, where few country musicians had managed to find acceptance.

In part through his World War II songs, Robison thus helped bring country music to mainstream and especially urban audiences, presenting a palpable challenge to the dominance of Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths. Praising “1942 Turkey in the Straw,” one critic for *Billboard* noted that “folk tunes [...] have come thru with successfully inspiring patriotic material calculated to aid the war effort,” while most of Tin Pan Alley’s wartime offerings were merely “mediocre.”<sup>114</sup> Prominent music journalist and critic Maurie Orodener, who wrote regularly for *Billboard*, echoed this sentiment, asserting that “as morale boosters, [Robison’s songs] put all of Tin Pan Alley’s outpourings to shame.”<sup>115</sup> Robison himself also clearly relished and promoted the broad appeal of his music, one that reached into the upper echelons of high society. Responding to an ASCAP questionnaire in 1946,<sup>116</sup> Robison gleefully claimed that “Mussolini’s Letter to Hitler” and “Hitler’s Reply to Mussolini” were “a great favorite of Mr. Toscanini.”<sup>117</sup> Robison was probably overstating the case, and any fondness Toscanini expressed for Robison’s work was

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<sup>112</sup> “American Folk Records,” *Billboard*, May 2, 1942.

<sup>113</sup> Harold Humphrey, “Talent and Tunes on Music Machines,” *Billboard*, April 25, 1942.

<sup>114</sup> “Thar’s Gold in Them Thar Hillbilly and Other American Folk Tunes,” *Billboard*, September 26, 1942.

<sup>115</sup> M. H. Orodener, “On the Records,” *Billboard*, March 14, 1942.

<sup>116</sup> Daniel I. McNamara to Robison, 12 April 1946, CRC B1-F20.

<sup>117</sup> Robison to Daniel I. McNamara, 9 May 1946, CRC B1-F20.

likely also motivated by the conductor's public disdain for the Italian Fascist government.<sup>118</sup> Nevertheless, an endorsement from an artistic elite like Toscanini is surprising. Robison's songs were so widely successful in part because they articulated a broadly-popular nationalist message that transcended class concerns. This proved a boon not just to Robison, but for the status of country music overall. "It is interesting to note that the war is tending to aid the folk music field," an editorial observed in *Billboard*. "Placing greater and greater importance upon all things that are indigenously American, it is attracting more and more attention to the great field of folk records, which is entirely composed of distinctive and down-to-earth American music—strictly American music."<sup>119</sup> Through linking his music to an ideology of racial nationalism, Robison had helped country music to win, at least temporarily, not only broader commercial appeal but also the support and possibly even respect of the popular music establishment.

### **Postwar Politics and Conclusions**

Robison's World War II compositions were unsurprisingly short-lived, receiving almost no airplay after 1945.<sup>120</sup> Asked in 1983 about the afterlife of his World War II songs, Robison's widow Catherine explained, "Well, he never wanted it to be broadcast or played afterwards, after everything was over with, and I don't like to bring it up, because I'm very much against that, that sort of thing."<sup>121</sup> Robison's ASCAP paystubs from the late 1940s and early 1950s seem to bear this out. With the exception of "One Hundred Years from Now" (twice in 1949), "Predictions for a Hundred Years from Now" (once in 1950, once in 1951) and "The Old Gray Mare Is Back

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<sup>118</sup> A high-profile Italian conductor with frequent performances in the U.S., Toscanini was effectively exiled to the United States in October 1938 following a series of confrontations with Mussolini and the Italian Fascist government. Harvey Sachs, *Toscanini* ([Rocklin, CA]: Prima, 1978; paperback edition 1995), 267-8.

<sup>119</sup> "Thar's Gold in Them Thar Hillbilly and Other American Folk Tunes."

<sup>120</sup> American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers, "Writer Radio Performance" and "Writer Performance Record" (royalty statements for Carson J. Robison), (1949, 5pp.; 1950, 3pp.; 1951, 3pp.), CRC B1-F46.

<sup>121</sup> Catherine Robison, interview by John W. Rumble, 21.

Where She Used to Be” (twice in 1950, thrice on radio in 1951, once on television in 1951), Robison’s World War II songs were not performed on the radio or on television.<sup>122</sup> Of course language that referenced the war specifically would have been outdated by then, and these three songs survived perhaps because their references were less explicit and because they struck a humorous rather than violent tone.

True to form, Robison continued to compose and perform topical songs after the war—sometimes angry, often patriotic, but never with the same level of overt racial bigotry or calls for violence. The carnage of war seemed to have taken its psychic toll on Robison, as it had for many; in publicity, he sometimes struck a newly pacifist note. Answering a questionnaire for *Hoedown* magazine in the late 1940s, Robison claimed his one wish in life was “To have REAL peace throughout the world and to see the billions of dollars now spent on armament used to beautify the world instead of tearing it to pieces with wars.”<sup>123</sup> This pacifism translated into somewhat greater tolerance of difference than had been the case during the war, particularly racial and religious difference. Most notable was Robison’s assertion, in the march-style song “That’s What We Mean by American,” that America is a place “where race and creed don’t mean a thing and no dictators reign.”<sup>124</sup> Elsewhere the song claims American strength lies not in military might but in its humanitarianism and diplomacy, making oblique reference to the Marshall Plan’s efforts to rebuild war-torn European nations.

Despite this newly conciliatory, more peaceful tone, Robison continued to preach Americanism, defining citizenship narrowly based on a conformist ideological and cultural

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<sup>122</sup> American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers, “Writer Radio Performance” and “Writer Performance Record.”

<sup>123</sup> Artist Questionnaire for *Hoedown* Magazine.

<sup>124</sup> It is unclear whether this song was commercially available as either a recording or as sheet music. The only copy in Robison’s archival collection is an undated test pressing. Carson Robison, “That’s What We Mean by American,” test recording, “nola recording studios” 33 1/3 rpm disc, n.d., CRC F316.

agenda. Communism proved a popular target for Robison in the postwar years in such songs as “I’m No Communist” and the recitation piece “Seein’ Red,” both of which decried any political dissent as traitorous.<sup>125</sup> The concept and partial lyrics for “Seein’ Red” were proposed to Robison in the late 1940s by “Frank,” one of Robison’s contacts at MGM’s recordings division. In the proposal, Frank observes “There’s one [subject] that is on everyone’s lips these days; namely, Communism. [...] You and I naturally don’t like to see this egg-throwing at Wallace in the South, but it shows how the folks down there feel and somehow they can’t be blamed too much, but using that as a springboard of thought it would seem to me that they would go in a big way for such a record[...].”<sup>126</sup> “Wallace” here referred to Henry A. Wallace, former Vice President (1941-45) and the Progressive Party’s nominee for the 1948 presidential election, who was accosted by egg-wielding protesters during campaign stops in the South. While Wallace embraced progressive politics and was endorsed by the American wing of the Communist Party, his racial views, including a racially-integrated campaign team, most likely motivated his protesters.<sup>127</sup> Frank’s sympathy for Southern segregationists and their resistance to communism points out the common, facile conflation of civil rights advocacy with more Leftist politics during the early postwar period.<sup>128</sup> In “Seein’ Red,” Robison’s Red Scare rhetoric of conformity cast a veil of suspicion over not just Leftists, but also racial minorities, civil rights activists, and

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<sup>125</sup> “I’m No Communist” was written by Scott Wiseman, who also popularized the song in a performance with his wife under the stage name Lulu Belle and Scotty (Mercury 6400-X45 (YW 7356), 1952). Wiseman wrote the song after reading coverage of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s anti-communist crusades. See liner notes to *Folk Music in America, Volume 10: Songs of War & History*, ed. Richard K. Spottswood (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Music Division, Recording Laboratory LBC 10, 1978, LP). Carson J. Robison, “Seein’ Red” (New York, Alamo Music, 1949), CRC B2-F65.

<sup>126</sup> Frank [?] to Robison, dated “Monday – Labor Day,” 1948[?], 2pp., CRC B1-F25.

<sup>127</sup> John N. Popham, “Wallace Pelted with Eggs, Fists Bang His Car in South,” *New York Times*, August 31, 1948.

<sup>128</sup> As a pragmatic strategy, proponents of desegregation often sought to decouple issues of race and class. At the same time, Red Scare rhetoric attenuated the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement by effectively suppressing the voices of Leftist black radicals, who regarded class upheaval as indispensable to real, lasting racial progress. See James Zeigler, *Red Scare Racism and Cold War Black Radicalism* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2015).

anyone outside of the song's vision of a unitary American identity. The whiteness of this imagined America remained a given.

Despite their ephemerality today, Robison's anti-Japanese songs reveal much about the aesthetic, economic, and ideological compromises made by both country musicians and Tin Pan Alley composers as country music entered the mainstream. Ironically, Robison's success on behalf of country music ultimately hurt his reputation among country historians. Posterity has derided him as a "citybilly," an interloper overeager to acquiesce to the aesthetic and market principles of mainstream popular music. An obituary editorialized that "Carson Robison was not an 'unlettered chronicler,' but a song writer, with his share of cynicism, who had the knack of dashing off crudely worded 'hillbillies' and did because there was money in it."<sup>129</sup> What the author omits is the important role Robison played, particularly through his wartime compositions, in shaping and endorsing country music's whiteness and American patriotic fervor, values which much country music today continues to promote. Now maligned and marginalized for accommodating middle-class sensibilities, Robison's rhetorical strategy of racial nationalism originally developed as a logical if insidious response to working-class anxieties and aspirations while still maintaining an aura of personal authenticity. Harnessing the symbolic power of the flag, Robison showed a way forward for a country music industry still trying to overcome class prejudices without losing its sense of self.

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<sup>129</sup> Morritt, "Carson J. Robison: Pioneer Country Music Artist and Musician, August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1890 – March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1957."

## Chapter 4

### **Americanizing the First Americans: Assimilating Indians in Three Late Gene Autry Films**

From 1934 to 1953, country musician Gene Autry (1907-1998) appeared in ninety-three films, most of them so-called “singing westerns.” Pioneered by Autry, singing westerns offered a standard good guys-bad guys plot, usually set in the present-day west, punctuated by frequent diegetic musical performances that were the films’ main selling point. His extensive filmography, first with the B studio Republic Pictures, and then with Columbia Pictures beginning in 1947, is a testament to the popularity of the singing western formula and to Autry’s own on-screen charisma.<sup>1</sup> Along with his recordings and radio shows, Autry’s films helped country to shed its provincial “hillbilly” image by replacing it with the more heroic and respectable figure of the frontier cowboy. In the process, Autry shifted public perceptions of country music’s aesthetic and social values and achieved for the genre national popularity at an unprecedented level.

Racial and national identities were integral to the cowboy image, and thus the shift towards greater respectability. Although occasionally populated by racial and ethnic minorities—blacks, Latinos, and American Indians—the films were largely all-white affairs.<sup>2</sup> The whiteness of the cowboy was defined most obviously through casting decisions, but also via plot, musical style, and publicity that asserted the music’s Anglo-American origins. Whiteness was also

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<sup>1</sup> Based in Hollywood, Republic Studios was active from 1935 to 1959, after which its assets were sold off to various other film studios. This history is recounted in Richard M. Hurst, *Republic Studios: Between Poverty Row and the Majors*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this chapter, I strive for specificity in identifying the different tribes to which American Indian actors and characters belong. The homogenizing tendencies of the films, however, obscure most tribal affiliations. Therefore, I often opt for the term “Indian,” using the language of Autry’s films and following the lead of musicologists Beth E. Levy and Michael V. Pisani in their studies of “Indianist” classical repertory. I do so with full acknowledgment that the word “Indian”—and indeed any word used to designate such a diverse, historically disenfranchised community—remains insufficient and controversial. See Beth E. Levy, *Frontier Figures: American Music and the Mythology of the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 377n42. Pisani notes that “‘Indian’ has been reclaimed today as a term of unity among many First Peoples.” Michael V. Pisani, *Imagining Native America in Music* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 5.

defined in opposition to the exoticized musical cultures of nonwhites in the films. Moreover, claims to whiteness were conflated with American identity and couched in a language of patriotism, particularly during and following World War II. The cowboy rhetoric of white nationalism served to suppress the multiracial and working-class origins of country music, making it more acceptable for white middle-class consumption nationwide.

Ironically, these racial and nationalist politics played out most forcefully in Autry's so-called "pro-Indian" westerns of the early postwar period.<sup>3</sup> Progressive for their time, Autry's pro-Indian westerns explicitly critiqued common film stereotypes of American Indians and decried overt racial bigotry. Autry films like *The Last Round-Up* (1947), *The Cowboy and the Indians* (1949), and *Apache Country* (1952) advocated for greater Indian civil rights and economic aid via portrayals of Indian heroism, quiet dignity, and a capacity and enthusiasm for sociocultural assimilation. In so doing, the films joined an emergent, socially conscious genre of pro-Indian westerns that reached its apotheosis in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1964).

Nevertheless, as I argue here, Autry's films continued to articulate an ideology of racial nationalism, locating white Americans—and, most importantly, country music's working class—at the center of American cultural life. Country music is celebrated by the films, while Indian characters function as racial Others, whose culture commands respect but whose assimilation into white society is the most urgent goal.

The first half of this chapter examines the ways in which Autry's cowboy persona actively cultivated a white American identity. Publicity, songbooks, records, and the films themselves promoted a utopian narrative of the cowboy as unbounded by class hierarchies and

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<sup>3</sup> The term "pro-Indian" has become a standard designation among film historians, although the term has also been problematized. See Steve Neale, "Vanishing Americans: Racial and Ethnic Issues in the Interpretations and Context of Post-war 'Pro-Indian' Westerns," in *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western*, ed. Edward Buscombe and Roberta E. Pearson, 8-28 (London: British Film Institute, 1998).

emblematic of American civic and cultural values. These narratives particularly resonated with and uplifted working-class audiences during the Depression. Idealized in folksong collections like John Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1910), Autry's cowboy repertory actually comprised a diverse set of vernacular styles including nineteenth-century minstrelsy and parlor songs, religious and patriotic tunes, Tin Pan Alley, and contemporary country hits. This eclecticism was corralled through a discourse of racial nationalism, a claim that all of the music sprang from a common national heritage, usually labeled as white. In the films, these claims linking whiteness and Americanism were reinforced through contrast with other racialized and exoticized musical cultures, including films set in Mexico and South Africa.

Turning then to Autry's pro-Indian films, I highlight how racial politics in the United States began to shift in the years following World War II. High-profile participation by American Indians in the war effort brought renewed attention to the racial inequalities they faced at home. Autry's turn to pro-Indian material was inspired in part by his advocacy work with the American Indian Citizens League, based in Hollywood. This coincided with Autry's move to Columbia Pictures and the formation of his own production company, which gave him greater freedom to produce socially-conscious films. Analysis of key scenes from these films shows an effort to fight common stereotypes, replacing them with ostensibly authentic musical performances by Indian actors. However, these efforts were complicated by narratives of Indian assimilation in which working-class whites and country music, long marginalized in mainstream popular culture, are valorized as quintessentially American.

The focus here on pro-Indian material provides a fascinating complement to the anti-Japanese rhetoric of Carson Robison, discussed in the preceding chapter. While Robison makes very explicit claims to country music's white, American identity, Autry's films are often more



subtle, with whiteness regarded as the unremarkable, normative identity. And where Robison draws fixed lines of racial difference, Autry welcomes the possibility of nonwhites crossing those lines. But the opposing strategies of racial rejection and racial assimilation both ultimately seek to place country music at the powerful center and nonwhites at the periphery. In the process, class hierarchies are elided, whiteness is celebrated, and country music is uplifted. Contrasted with Robison's urgent racial anxieties, Autry's more confident brand of racial nationalism reveals a country music culture increasingly secure in its racial position and privilege. In this way, it asserts an even stronger, more radical claim to country music's white identity.

### **Screening New Deal Cowboys**

Emerging in the 1930s, the singing western film rejuvenated a seemingly moribund dramatic genre by yoking the western's antimodernist pastoral to an increasingly popular new musical repertory, the cowboy song. In the process, the singing western reinforced American mythologies of rugged individualism, capitalized on the still-novel medium of sound film, and made Gene Autry a national star. The genre's popularity with working-class audiences during the Depression depended in part upon the cowboy mythology, which denied class distinctions in favor of racial, gender, and nationalist ideologies that uplifted white working-class audiences. The genre's association with working-class audiences was further reinforced through a hierarchical Hollywood studio system in which smaller, less wealthy studios came to produce the vast majority of singing westerns. Scorned by middle-class critics, singing westerns thus generally catered to putative working-class aesthetics, emphasizing action and song over storyline. However, the celebration of the cowboy image ultimately showed the working class practicing a politics of respectability through tapping whiteness and Americanism.

The singing western found its ideological precedents in the western dime novel of the late nineteenth century, in more culturally prestigious western novels like Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), and in film westerns of the silent era. All these cultural forms traded in a mythology of the American west that could be read as a reaction to various forces of modernization in American life. Film historian Peter Stanfield locates in Theodore Roosevelt's 1896 book, *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, a pattern that would come to typify the western ideology, in which the Anglo-Saxon cowboy is positioned as the quintessential American identity, "formed against the combined onslaught of industrialization, urbanization, feminization, and immigration."<sup>4</sup>

Autry's singing westerns added to this white, masculinist ideological framework by highlighting class issues more explicitly. Given the context of New Deal politics, previous scholars have read Autry's films as allegories for labor against capital. As Lynette Tan has observed, Autry's films tend to be set in the "New West" of the 1930s, giving a contemporary edge to their class-based conflicts while still emphasizing "frontier values" of independence and tradition.<sup>5</sup> Many of these films cast Autry as a cowboy, rancher, lawman, or other down-to-earth champion of the people, pitted against scheming moneyed elites like bankers and real estate developers.<sup>6</sup> Plotlines like these would have been gratifying for struggling Depression-era audiences who felt exploited and neglected by the wealthy. Autry invited this interpretation in

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Stanfield, *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 12.

<sup>5</sup> See Lynette Tan, "The New Deal Cowboy: Gene Autry and the Antimodern Resolution," *Film History* 13, no. 1 (2001): 89-101. Stanfield echoes this assessment, although with a more nuanced understanding of the films' stance towards new technology. See Stanfield, 136.

<sup>6</sup> A 1939 article in *The Saturday Evening Post* attributed this tendency to an effort by movie studios not to offend "sensitive" groups such as foreigners, professionals, politicians, and racial minorities. Instead, "The villain field has practically narrowed down to businessmen. [...] The ideal villain of today should be white, Protestant, native-born of native parents, of Anglo-Saxon stock, and engaged in business, preferably banking." Alva Johnston, "Tenor on Horseback," *Saturday Evening Post*, September 2, 1939 (scanned image), Autry vertical files, FLACMHOF.

his 1978 autobiography, writing, “While my solutions were a little less complex than those offered by FDR, and my methods a bit more direct, I played a kind of New Deal Cowboy who never hesitated to tackle many of the same problems: the dust bowl, unemployment, or the harnessing of power. This may have contributed to my popularity with 1930s audiences.”<sup>7</sup>

But while westerns stoked class resentments, they also presented the cowboy as a class-independent figure. While the hillbilly stereotype was played for laughs, ridiculed for his apparent stupidity and cultural backwardness, the cowboy was dignified, intelligent, independent, and respected as an equal. An Autry song folio presented cowboy society in almost utopian terms:

The most significant thing about cowboy music is its innate democracy. Except for the Boss or Foreman, there are no definite class distinctions on a ranch. Everybody, from the straw boss down to the cook and humblest wrangler, are on equal terms. The isolation from conventional society caused by their particular sort of work breaks down any barriers among them, and since they work together, play together, and live together, they all have common thoughts, problems, and interests, and singing is one of the latter.<sup>8</sup>

Implicit in this image of classless society was also an assumption of universal whiteness and superiority.<sup>9</sup> For white working-classes during the Depression, the cowboy’s ability to transcend class hierarchies while still upholding principles of white supremacy presented a welcome alternative to the much-maligned hillbilly. Audiences could see in Autry a new and more respectable way of representing themselves.

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<sup>7</sup> Gene Autry and Mickey Herskowitz, *Back in the Saddle Again* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 53. Quoted in Tan, 100.

<sup>8</sup> Attr. Gene Autry, “Cowboys n’ Ballads” (song folio clipping), n.d., scrapbook compiled by “Gladys” (T87-36-43), GAPPBA.

<sup>9</sup> As Peter Stanfield explains, “While the white southerner retained the association with an unbridled racism, the cowboy maintained an uncontroversial image of white supremacy.” Stanfield, 72. Country music historian Bill C. Malone makes a similar argument about the class distinctions between cowboys and hillbillies in *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers: Southern Culture and the Roots of Country Music* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993).

Recognizing the working-class appeal of the cowboy, publicity in the 1930s and 1940s emphasized Autry's relatability and down-to-earth authenticity. An early Autry songbook indulged the romantic notion that Autry was born "in a little log cabin near Tioga, Texas." Readers were assured that Autry was "No 'drug store' cowboy, this lad. No synthetic crooner made cowboy over night [sic] through the acquisition of a ten gallon hat and a pair of wooly chaps. Born to the saddle, a hard ridin', straight shootin', carefree cowboy singing the songs as he learned them on the range, around the campfire."<sup>10</sup> By 1949, little had changed. Autry's favorite song was still "Home on the Range," and while he may have grown wealthy in the meantime, he never got above his roots: "The outstanding thing about Gene is not what he has accomplished, but his own conduct while doing it. He was born a cowboy and has remained one. While rising to the very heights of his chosen field, he has remained on the level of the people who put him there."<sup>11</sup> Autry's decades of success thus relied in part on his continued accessibility as a cowboy actor, the sense that he may be separated from his working-class audiences by wealth but not by sensibility.

The class politics played out onscreen were also reflected in the reputations of the studios producing the films. Most singing westerns in the 1930s and 1940s were produced by Hollywood's "Poverty Row" studios, where smaller budgets impacted production values. This included Republic Studios, which produced nearly two-thirds of Autry's ninety-three films. Poverty Row films could not afford star actors, writers, or directors. Their operating budgets often necessitated smaller casts; small and simple sets; few special effects; frequent use and re-

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<sup>10</sup> *Gene Autry's Sensational Collection of Famous Original Cowboy Songs and Mountain Ballads* (Chicago: M.M. Cole, 1932), GOOC B2-F2.

<sup>11</sup> Thurston Moore, ed., *The Hillbilly and Western Scrapbook* (Cincinnati: Scrapbook Publishers Jordan O. Zimmerman, 1949), Rare Books and Scores Collection, CPM.

use of sets and stock footage; and generally a no-rehearsals, one-take-only ethos.<sup>12</sup> This earned Autry's films the scorn of most urban, middle-class film critics, and in general Autry's films did not play in most urban markets, especially early on in his career.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, Republic catered primarily to the tastes of working-class audiences in rural and small-town markets, emphasizing spectacle like fistfights and song over original characters and complex storylines.<sup>14</sup> Autry's prolific film output is a testament to the popularity of these spectacular elements with working-class audiences.

While mainstream critics ridiculed the early films as unserious, disposable entertainment with "low" production values, eventually the western genre proved too lucrative to pass up. Major studios began producing big-budget "prestige" westerns around midcentury, and Autry himself switched over to Columbia Pictures in 1947. Autry's move signaled a populist rebuke to elitist aesthetics and class prejudices, but at the same time it marked the upward mobility and increasingly mainstream status of country music and its audiences.

### **Sounding Race in Cowboy Songs**

Although satisfying to audiences, the working-class plotlines of Autry's films were secondary to the music. Typically these diegetic musical performances were not dramatically-integrated into the plot but were inserted at pauses in the action, staged in saloons, barn dances,

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<sup>12</sup> Most filming for B westerns was completed in two to four weeks as opposed to the more leisurely pace of the major studios. Frequent Autry co-star Ann Rutherford recalled of filming: "We started working at first light, and it behooved everybody to know their dialogue. You didn't get a second shot at it, unless you really stumbled badly—and then they'd say 'cut' and they'd pick it up from where you stumbled. We had scant rehearsals—and it wouldn't have helped much if we had rehearsed, because most of the directors had previously been electricians or second assistant directors or something else!" Jon Guyot Smith, "The Wonderful Ann Rutherford," *Gene Autry's Friends* [no publication info]. Quoted in Don Cusic, *Gene Autry: His Life and Career* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), 58.

<sup>13</sup> One New York critic who did enjoy Autry's films bemoaned that they were never screened at prestigious venues like Radio City Music Hall or the Roxy. She further scolded Autry's detractors as "backward" and "self-complacent." Delight Evans, "The Editor's Page: An Open Letter to Gene Autry" (magazine clipping), n.d., Autry Scrapbook T87-36-43, GAPPBA.

<sup>14</sup> Stanfield, 41.

campfires, and other venues. Commercially speaking, Autry's frequent musical performances in the films promoted synergy with his recording, radio, and publishing interests. These commercial aims help to explain the eclecticism of Autry's repertory, which increasingly tended towards middle-class pop styles. The diversity of this repertory and the class questions it raised were circumvented through rhetoric claiming a common national heritage for the music, often also described in racial terms as white. As I show in this section, Autry's diverse repertory and pop-oriented performance strategies helped to elevate the cowboy and the country music genre to a position of greater mainstream respectability, achieved in large part through an emphasis on whiteness and Americanism.

At least in theory, cowboy folk songs comprised the foundational repertory within Autry's films. These songs sought to authenticate Autry's cowboy image by creating a historical link between Autry's contemporaneous westerns and America's mythologized frontier past. Autry favorites like "Git Along Little Dogies," "Home on the Range," "Home, Sweet Home," "The Old Chisolm Trail," "Red River Valley," and "The Trail to Mexico" appeared in the works of folksong collectors, among them John A. Lomax's seminal 1910 collection, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*.<sup>15</sup> The notion of an authentic cowboy folksong—that is, the existence of a core repertory performed by actual nineteenth-century cowboys—has been problematized, and Lomax's methods have been critiqued by several ethnomusicologists in the intervening years.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, cowboy song collections proved immensely popular with the

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<sup>15</sup> John A. Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1910). Some of these songs appear only in the 1938 edition of Lomax's book (New York: MacMillan, 1938). "The Old Chisolm Trail" proved one of Autry's favorites, appearing in six films: *Round-Up Time in Texas* (1937), *The Old Barn Dance* (1938), *Sioux City Sue* (1946), *Mule Train* (1950), *Blue Canadian Rockies* (1952), and *Wagon Team* (1952).

<sup>16</sup> Regarding the authenticity of cowboy folksong, see Ted Gioia, "The Big Roundup: John Lomax Roamed the West, Collecting Classic Songs from the Cowboy Era," *American Scholar* 74, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 101-11; regarding Lomax's ethnographic methods, see Austin Fife, *Cowboy and Western Songs: A Comprehensive*

American public; Lomax's book sold thousands of copies, with an expanded second edition appearing in 1938 (coedited with son Alan Lomax). In the words of Mark Fenster, "Lomax's work helped to define both the repertoire and the romantic nature of the singing cowboy figure that was to follow in the mass media" through much of the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup>

Autry was a curator of the cowboy repertoire and a beneficiary of its romantic allure. On a pragmatic level for filmmakers, the songs appealed for their public domain status, their relative simplicity for musicians with scant rehearsal time, and their familiarity and popularity with audiences. Seeking to burnish the authenticity of this repertoire, Autry's own songbooks and other publicity touted the songs' supposedly Anglo-American roots. The 1932 folio *Gene Autry's Sensational Collection of Famous Original Cowboy Songs and Mountain Ballads* refers to cowboy repertoire as "native American ballads," an appellation echoed as "Native American Songs" in a 1945 songbook.<sup>18</sup> A program for an Autry rodeo appearance in the 1940s includes a testimonial, ostensibly written by Autry, claiming that "better than anything else, yes, even better than the Negro spiritual, the American cowboy song typifies this great, young country of ours." Later on, the author suggests that most cowboy repertoire dates to "Elizabethan England," with the song "Dying Cowboy" originating from the melody of an English sea chantey.<sup>19</sup> A lengthier magazine testimonial attributed to Autry tells of his exploration of the cowboy repertoire and its history:

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*Anthology* (New York: C. N. Potter, 1969), and D. K. Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1959).

<sup>17</sup> Mark Fenster, "Preparing the Audience, Informing the Performers: John A. Lomax and *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*," *American Music* 7, no. 3 (Autumn 1989): 261.

<sup>18</sup> Table of contents, *Gene Autry's Sensational Collection of Famous Original Cowboy Songs and Mountain Ballads*; and cover, *Gene Autry's Collection of Jukebox, Radio, Movie Hits* (Hollywood: West'r'n Music, 1945), Rare Books and Scores Collection, CPM.

<sup>19</sup> Attr. Gene Autry, "Cowboy Songs: Familiar Tunes of the Trail Herders Important Contribution to American Folk Music," in David B. Whalen, ed., "Gene Autry's Flying 'A' Ranch Stampede" Official Program, [c. 1940s] (photocopy). Jesse Austin Morris Collection, CPM.

It wasn't until after [...] folks wrote to me or approached me and asked how I happened to write such songs, that I began to think about cowboy music as something definite in the American scheme of things. [...] The American cowboy song, so I've learned, was born of a spontaneous urge on the part of lonesome cow hands to express their feelings and emotions during the long, monotonous watches on the range or the jogging journey on the trail. A lot of Texas cowboys were southerners who drifted to the Southwest after the Civil War. They brought with them the old time romantic southern tunes and the ancient English folk songs. Some of the boys were Irish and, with the Celtic love for story and song, added greatly to the fast-growing fund of word-of-mouth ballads that the cowboys passed on to each other.<sup>20</sup>

Such publicity reinforced the notion that Autry's cowboy repertory was European-derived, and thus white, but also transformed through a uniquely American experience into a distinctive national form of folksong. The publication of new cowboy songs, such as Autry's "Back in the Saddle Again" and "Take Me Back to My Boots and Saddle," managed to escape charges of inauthenticity or commercialism by falling back on this same racially-coded nationalist discourse.

So dominant was this nationalist rhetoric in Autry's publicity that his eclectic repertory never threatened to undermine his cowboy persona. To be sure, many of these other repertories were likewise viewed as thoroughly American. The music of Stephen Foster, to take one example, proved a consistently popular choice in Autry's films.<sup>21</sup> Other musical repertories included blackface minstrel songs, sentimental Tin Pan Alley love ballads, comic novelty songs (what Peter Stanfield calls "nut jazz"), Jimmie Rodgers's hillbilly music, and Hank Williams's honky-tonk hits.<sup>22</sup> But throughout it all, Autry's cowboy image remained front and center.

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<sup>20</sup> Autry, "Cowboys n' Ballads."

<sup>21</sup> Two films that particularly showcase Foster's music are *Oh Susanna!* (1936) and *Carolina Moon* (1940). Again, the public domain status of this repertory would have been especially beneficial for low-budget film studios.

<sup>22</sup> Stanfield borrows the "nut jazz" label from jazz historian William Howland Kenney's *Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Peter Stanfield, 117. For an example of such a comic number, see Smiley Burnette's performance of "Heebie Jeebie Blues" in *Public Cowboy #1*. For a Tin Pan Alley love song, see "I'm Mad About You" in *The Big Show* and "Dinah" (performed by The Cabin Kids) in *Round-Up Time in*



Even as publicity shored up Autry's rustic, working-class authenticity, his eclectic repertory was wedded to a performance style that seemed to self-consciously court a broader audience. Most notable was Autry's early turn from a twang-filled singing style to a smoother crooning delivery. In his earliest recordings, Autry worked as a Jimmie Rodgers sound-alike for the budget label American Record Company, emphasizing nasality that indexed the vocal timbres of white Southerners.<sup>23</sup> These recordings did not reflect Autry's usual singing voice, however; he intentionally added the twang.<sup>24</sup> Autry's first national hit in 1935, "That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine," marked his switch to crooning. This vocal style is characterized by frequent use of vibrato, portamento, and, most importantly in this case, an emphatic lack of nasality. The style was popularized in the 1920s by middle-class white singers like Gene Austin, Al Jolson, and Rudy Vallée, whom Autry cited as early influences.<sup>25</sup> In addition to smooth vocal delivery, Autry's recordings throughout the 1930s and 1940s increasingly relied more on written arrangements that could involve string sections, occasional trumpet, or clarinet, rather than the

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*Texas*. Rodgers's "In the Jailhouse Now" appears in both *Back in the Saddle* and *Prairie Moon*, while Hank Williams's "Cold, Cold Heart" is sung by Autry in *Apache Country*.

<sup>23</sup> Cusic, 23. Among Autry's earliest recordings were also tributes and memorials to Rodgers, who died in 1933. They include "The Life of Jimmie Rodgers," and "So Long Old Pal." The latter can be found in *Gene Autry's Famous Cowboy Songs & Mountain Ballads: Book No. 2* (Chicago, IL: M. M. Cole, 1934), Rare Books and Scores Collection, CPM.

<sup>24</sup> Good examples of Autry's impersonation of Rodgers's drawl can be heard on Autry's recordings of "Dallas County Jail Blues" and "T. B. Blues."

<sup>25</sup> Autry initially aspired to romantic crooning rather than cowboy repertory. As he explained in a 1950 interview, "That sort of [country music] stuff didn't sound very glamorous to me. [...] My recollection of ranch life included aching muscles and endless days in the sun and dust. I wanted to be a dreamy eyed singer of love songs like Rudy Vallée." "3 Pals," *Country Song Roundup* (1950). Quoted in Cusic, 24. On Austin and Jolson, see Holly George-Warren, *Public Cowboy No. 1: The Life and Times of Gene Autry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 28. As George-Warren also notes, this more "intimate" singing style became prominent with the introduction of microphones in the 1920s and would become especially associated with "crooners" like Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra through midcentury (49). A fuller account of the genre's genesis and gendered meanings appears in Allison McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

guitar, fiddle, and banjo more typical of early country ensembles.<sup>26</sup> As with the rhetorical shift away from hillbilly towards cowboy imagery, the expansion of Autry's repertory and changes in musical style signaled an effort to capture a larger, more mainstream audience by mimicking the music and values of the white middle class.

By uniting these disparate but popular musical repertories and filtering them through Autry's signature vocal style, Autry's films expanded the stylistic scope of "country" as a genre. And where country audiences had previously been confined to a regional, mostly working-class identity, Autry's films presented alternative possibilities and helped to place them in the national mainstream. The potentially "inauthentic," emotionalist, even effeminizing effects of moving from twang to croon, not to mention the adoption of more pop-oriented arrangements, were mitigated in Autry's case by the white, masculinist, and Americanist discourses surrounding the cowboy figure.<sup>27</sup> Crucially, the presence of white bodies onscreen performing this ostensibly European-derived repertory reinforced the notion of a white American music. It was a standard to which nonwhite characters would be tacitly compared and in some cases forced to assimilate.

### **Staging Others in Autry's Prewar Westerns**

The utopian nationalism of Autry's cowboy image was built on a rejection of class hierarchies that also typically avoided mention of racial conflicts. Instead, almost all of the characters in Autry's films are white and played by white actors, especially those with speaking

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<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Guyot Smith specifically cites Autry's October 11, 1937 Los Angeles recording session as the moment when Autry switched to more elaborate musical arrangements. This was Autry's first recording session to include violinist Carl Cotner as musical director. Jonathan Guyot Smith, "The Brilliant Artistry of Gene Autry," *DISCOVERIES*, December 1993 (photocopy), Jesse Austin Morris Collection, CPM.

<sup>27</sup> This masculinist figure, however, provided room for ambivalence. As Stephanie Vander Wel explains, "Autry's musical imagery shaped the singing cowboy into a sentimental figure who underscored the vulnerability of men in the 1930s. More than this, his nostalgic expressions, which relied on the idioms of popular music, shaped the West into a site of longing and escape, an enclave of limitless opportunities." Stephanie Vander Wel, "The Lavender Cowboy and 'The She Buckaroo': Gene Autry, Patsy Montana, and Depression-Era Gender Roles," *Musical Quarterly* 95, no. 2-3 (Summer-Fall 2012): 244.

roles. Nonwhites are usually peripheral. When racial or ethnic difference is marked, American Indians and Mexicans appear the most frequently, with African Americans placing a distant third. While blacks were cast in incidental roles as servants or entertainers, and Latinos existed outside the United States as an unthreatening exotic Other, Indians were depicted as the racial group most likely to disrupt the white social order. Such racial representations often relied upon claims to historical authenticity, especially in films set in the American South or in films dealing with the violence of American westward expansion.<sup>28</sup> This section considers the ways in which Autry's films worked to highlight and contain racial difference through dramatic and musical means, which served to sharpen the contours of whiteness while erasing class differences among whites.

The marginalization of nonwhite characters was in some ways a conscious decision. As a profile of Autry in *The Saturday Evening Post* suggested in 1939, movie studios usually cast villains as white to avoid offending "sensitive" minorities and foreigners.<sup>29</sup> Asked to account for his films' success, Autry stressed a need to "forget racial prejudices," a notion that was later codified in his "Cowboy Code."<sup>30</sup> According to the Code, "[The cowboy] must not advocate or possess racially or religiously intolerant ideas."<sup>31</sup> Perhaps as a result of these PR considerations, Autry's films tended to avoid racial issues altogether by excluding nonwhite characters from

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<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting here that several of Autry's films are set outside of the American Southwest—in the American South, prairie states, Canada, the Pacific Northwest, and even once in South Africa. It was in these alternate locales that black characters were most likely to be seen.

<sup>29</sup> Johnston, "Tenor on Horseback."

<sup>30</sup> "Gene Autry was asked this week[...]" (magazine clipping), n.d., Autry Scrapbook T87-36-44, GAPPBA.

<sup>31</sup> The Cowboy Code was an Autry publicity campaign that presented a list of ethical tenets for cowboys akin to the Ten Commandments. It first appeared in *Life* magazine in 1948. Although obviously aimed at good public relations, the Code developed out of rules and standards guiding the production of Autry's films, based at least in part upon Autry's own convictions. The "Cowboy Code" is reprinted on Autry's website: Gene Autry Entertainment, "Gene Autry's Cowboy Code," [http://www.geneautry.com/geneautry/geneautry\\_cowboycode.html](http://www.geneautry.com/geneautry/geneautry_cowboycode.html) (accessed May 7, 2017). References also appear in Autry and Herskowitz, 184, and George-Warren, 256.

stories or placing them in minor, undeveloped roles. This strategy effectively positioned whiteness as a normative identity, denied nonwhite characters any notion of interiority, and glossed over the politics of racial representation, even as it avoided overt evidence of racial intolerance.

Regardless of the prohibition against intolerance, however, cross-racial casting of nonwhite characters was regular practice. In this way, the portrayal of racial and ethnic Others in Autry's films overlaps with the conventions and politics of blackface minstrelsy. Blackface itself was seldom used in Autry's films, and on those rare occasions it usually served an explicit dramatic function as a disguise rather than a portrayal of black characters.<sup>32</sup> However, white actors routinely performed as Indians and Mexicans, often employing heavy makeup and hair dye in their transformation.<sup>33</sup> Modest production budgets were at least partially responsible for the practice. Especially when filming on location in more remote parts of the southwest, it was cheaper to hire half the required number of actors and have them pull double duty by posing as Indian extras. Ann Rutherford, who starred opposite Autry in several films, recalled: "It cost them money to house people...maybe eight or ten dollars a day in a hotel there—and [the producer] Nat Levine counted every penny. [...] One of the films had Indians in it. In the morning, the cowboy riders were cowboy riders. In the afternoon, they'd put dark make-up on and they were Indians—and they spent the rest of the day chasing themselves."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> One of the more egregious examples of this racial masquerade is Smiley Burnette's performance as a mammy stereotype in *Carolina Moon* (1940). True to his typecast role as Autry's comic sidekick, Burnette hams it up, speaking minstrelsy dialect in a high falsetto. Autry himself is never known to have performed in blackface.

<sup>33</sup> Two prominent examples are the white actors Fay McKenzie and Luana Walters, who darkened their skin to play Latina characters in *Down Mexico Way* (1941) and *Mexicali Rose* (1939), respectively. For information on McKenzie, see George-Warren, 198.

<sup>34</sup> Smith, "The Wonderful Ann Rutherford." Quoted in Cusic, 58.

Among racial minorities, Latino characters are treated most favorably in Autry's films, positioned as an exotic, alluring cultural Other to the white United States. The flurry of Mexico-themed Autry films released around the time of World War II supported the United States' "Good Neighbor" policy towards Latin America, which discouraged negative portrayals of Mexico in popular culture.<sup>35</sup> Cultural differences between whites and Latinos are generally mild, marked through dress, references to Catholicism, and occasional use of Spanish dialogue or song lyrics. These included Autry's performances of songs like "Mexicali Rose" and "South of the Border (Down Mexico Way)," which painted romantic portraits of exotic Latinas; often these films had a romantic subplot pairing Autry with a Latina actress, although the onscreen romances were quite chaste, with no whiff of the politics of interracial romance.<sup>36</sup> Musical difference was also suggested through scoring and cameo performances. Orchestral scores sometimes contained flourishes in Phrygian mode, as in the opening credits to *The Big Sombrero* (1949), drawing upon a common exoticist trope denoting Latin music. Fiesta and cantina scenes provided an opportunity to interpolate performances by Latino musicians, such as the Herrera Sisters and Puerto Rican actress Cecilia Callejo.<sup>37</sup> These Mexico-based films, however, represent a small minority within Autry's overall output, most of which were set in the United States. Except for films set in Mexico, Latino characters were essentially nonexistent.

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<sup>35</sup> George-Warren, 197-8. Such films include *Rootin' Tootin' Rhythm* (1937), *South of the Border* (1939), *Mexicali Rose* (1939), *Down Mexico Way* (1941), *Twilight on the Rio Grande* (1947), and *The Big Sombrero* (1949).

<sup>36</sup> Latina actresses appearing in these roles included Armida (*Rootin' Tootin' Rhythm*, 1937), Adele Mara (*Twilight on the Rio Grande*, 1947), Lupita Tovar (*South of the Border*, 1939), and Elena Verdugo (*The Big Sombrero*, 1949). Notably, Autry was never paired romantically with African American or American Indian characters.

<sup>37</sup> Performances of Latin American repertory include the mariachi standard "Guadalajara" by The Herrera Sisters in *Down Mexico Way*; Smiley Burnette's rendition of "La Cucaracha" in *Down Mexico Way*; "La Cachita" by Fay McKenzie and the Herrera Sisters in *Down Mexico Way*; and "Cielito Lindo" by Cecilia Callejo in *Boots and Saddles*.

Black characters were likewise marginal in Autry westerns. As with most Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s, Autry's films largely denied opportunity to black actors. The few African Americans who do appear are in typecast, subordinate roles like servants, typically with no lines of dialogue and often omitted from the film credits.<sup>38</sup> Black actor Eugene Jackson appeared in such roles in several Autry films, including the dancer "Iodine" in *Red River Valley* (1936) and his recurring role as "Eightball"—named after the black billiard ball—in *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* (1935) and *Guns and Guitars* (1936). Fred "Snowflake" Toones made a similar appearance as "Sam" in *Yodelin' Kid from Pine Ridge* (1937). These are the most prominent examples of African American actors in Autry's films. Although no salary information for these performances survives, Jackson and Toones were listed in the films' opening credits, although receiving such credit was far from the norm.

Although credited black actors were a rarity, black culture appeared more often in Autry's films, and such moments tended to reinforce the musical color line. This was especially true of the minstrel show and its repertory, which was variously performed by whites, blacks, and whites in blackface. A minstrel show is staged as the opening scene of *The Singing Vagabond* (1935), while *Carolina Moon* (1940) contains a plantation scene with a sizable black chorus. Blackface and "coon song" repertory also appear in over a dozen other films.<sup>39</sup> Beyond

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<sup>38</sup> For a good overview of early Hollywood's typecast black roles, see Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 5th ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

<sup>39</sup> Blackface performances in *The Singing Vagabond* include "Lusiana Belle" and "De Camptown Races." The film is set in St. Louis in 1860, so the minstrel show is presented as a historical marker—although of course it is still played for musical entertainment and laughs. *Carolina Moon* has performances of "Dixie," "Swanee River," and "Climin' Up de Mountain." Examples from other films include "Down in the Land of Zulu" (*Springtime in the Rockies*), "Oh, Dem Golden Slippers" (*Mountain Rhythm*), "Yellow Rose of Texas" (*Night Stage to Galveston* and *Riders of the Whistling Pines*), and "Oh, Susanna!" (*Oh Susanna!*; *Valley of Fire*; *Tumbling Tumbleweeds*).

minstrel material, racialized repertoires in Autry's films include spirituals, jazz, and blues.<sup>40</sup>

These repertoires are usually performed by black characters but occasionally by whites as well. On the other hand, black characters almost never sing cowboy repertory, suggesting the racial privilege inherent in white appropriation of ostensibly black styles.

The film *Round-Up Time in Texas* (1937) nicely exemplifies the hierarchies and ironies of racialized musical performance in Autry's films. Much of the action takes place in South Africa, where Autry and his friends are captured by tribal natives. Structurally, the African tribe in the film takes the role of American Indians in a typical western, and the two "primitive" groups are often compared culturally. African characters appear in feathered headdresses and face paint, carrying spears and yelling incoherently. At one point, Autry hears natives drumming to one another and observes, "The Indians back in Texas use the same method to send their messages." In another scene just before their capture, Autry remarks, "The rhythm of that tom-tom is very much like the American Indian's. For instance, their moon song is sung to the rhythm of the tom-tom." Moments like these reveal a homogenizing racial essentialism towards nonwhite bodies.

But in a move that presaged the postwar pro-Indian westerns, the Africans undergo a civilizing process that involves musical instruction and assimilation, after which they become allies of their white counterparts. Following his capture, Autry sidekick Frog Millhouse (played by the actor Smiley Burnette) tries to curry favor with the tribal chief by teaching music to the village children, played by the child vocal quintet The Cabin Kids. After just a few lessons, Burnette manages to transform the children from untrained musicians to virtuosi, singing the black spiritual "On Revival Day" and the pop standard "Dinah." In the film's closing scene,

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<sup>40</sup> "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" appears in *Yodelin' Kid from Pine Ridge*, sung by black laborers mourning the death of their white employer. Jazz performances include Smiley Burnette's rendition of "Heebie Jeebie Blues" in *Sierra Sue* and the black vocal group The Jones Boys singing "Lady Known As Lulu" in *The Big Show*.

musical distinctions between races are shattered further as Autry, Burnette, the Cabin Kids, and the tribal chief all join to sing the cowboy song “The Bloom Is On the Sage” while aboard a ship bound for the United States. To emphasize the transformation, the black characters are now dressed in western wear rather than tribal clothing. While the first half of the film emphasizes racial difference, this ending suggests that nonwhites could be successfully assimilated into white American culture.

Autry’s films present Latinos and blacks as posing little threat to the established white American order, either because of their location outside of the United States or their ultimate assimilability into white culture. American Indians, however, present a racial menace in the prewar westerns. Indians are almost always villains, often nameless, prone to irrational violence and moral depravity—not just in Autry’s films but in most early westerns. Their deaths are relentless, remorseless, unremarkable—collateral damage in larger narratives pitting Autry against wealthy white villains who are in cahoots with the duped Indians. Their irrationality is accompanied by diegetic music that subverts the syntax of Autry’s country pop music, relying not on tonality, AABA song structures, and smooth vocal delivery, but on drums and chants more apt to be labeled “noise” by fearful whites. Orchestral scores during Indian attacks fall back on conventional exoticist signifiers—parallel fifths, drones, modal melodies, and an emphasis on woodwinds and drums. The movies of the postwar years fought consciously and assiduously to overturn these stereotypical images and sounds of Indians, while still maintaining a racial hierarchy with whiteness as the normative American identity.

### **Postwar Politics**

Autry’s postwar turn towards “pro-Indian” westerns relied upon a number of demographic and political shifts in the United States, as well as the new level of creative



freedom that came with Autry's success in Hollywood. World War II engendered unprecedented levels of economic growth, in the process relocating millions of black and white rural Southerners to urban centers in search of manufacturing work or for military service.<sup>41</sup> Migrants brought with them their music and culture, so that more than ever before, country gained widespread national exposure and popularity.<sup>42</sup> These changes were accompanied by a powerful wartime rhetoric of nationalism that, as the previous chapter demonstrates, was also heavily inflected with racial meaning. While country music began trading heavily in nationalist self-mythologizing, on the domestic front the war exposed severe social and economic inequalities among the races, including American Indians. The nascent Civil Rights Movement, usually recounted as a story of black triumph against Southern white bigotry, also drew attention to the plight of contemporaneous American Indian communities. Socially-conscious films of the immediate postwar era began attending more acutely to issues of race and inequality, and Autry's pro-Indian westerns of the late 1940s and early 1950s were among the first to do so.

In several ways, World War II helped to burnish Autry's and country music's reputation as quintessentially patriotic and American. A licensed pilot, Autry enlisted in the U.S. Army air division in 1942. His motives were not driven entirely by patriotic altruism, but also by his belief that a failure to serve would cost him audiences upon the war's end.<sup>43</sup> Autry proved an able pilot, flying "the Hump" over the Himalayas between India and China. This was a non-combat but

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<sup>41</sup> A good source on these migrations is James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> See the chapter "The War Years: The National Expansion of Country Music" in Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 3rd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> During a 1942 train trip from Phoenix to Hollywood, Autry told band member Johnny Bond that "I'm going to stay with the patriots because when this thing is over I think the public is going to remember who served and who didn't." Bond apparently recorded the conversation and reported it in his profile of Autry. Johnny Bond, "Gene Autry, Champion" (unpublished manuscript in Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum), n.d. Quoted in Cusic, 107.

hazardous cargo mission to supply the armies of Chiang Kai-shek against imperial Japan. Autry also proved a useful recruitment tool for the Army, which staged his induction during a broadcast of his *Melody Ranch* radio show.<sup>44</sup> Unsurprisingly, patriotic rhetoric became increasingly common in Autry's music and merchandise during and after the war. Topical songs of the war years included "God Must Have Loved America" and "At Mail Call Today."<sup>45</sup> Even after the war, Autry's songs admonished listeners to "believe in God and country, everything will be okay."<sup>46</sup> While Autry was away at war, fans could still purchase songbooks that celebrated Autry as patriot, such as *Sgt. Gene Autry Presents His Favorite Patriotic and Hillbilly Songs*, which included photographs of Autry in uniform as well as texts of the Pledge of Allegiance and the Declaration of Independence.<sup>47</sup> Writing to the fan magazine *Screen Stars*, one admiring reader gushed of Autry's postwar philanthropy on behalf of veterans, "He surely stands for true Americanism and so do I."<sup>48</sup> The link between Autry's country music and American patriotism was nowhere more powerfully demonstrated than in the tenth and final tenet of the Cowboy Code: "The cowboy is a patriot."<sup>49</sup>

As a uniformed Autry gained notoriety as a great patriot, military service was also changing public attitudes towards American Indians, whose work on behalf of the Allied war effort was heavily publicized at the time. Overall, an estimated 25,000 Native Americans served

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<sup>44</sup> On Autry's World War II service, see the chapter "The Last Good War" in Autry and Herskowitz.

<sup>45</sup> *Songs Gene Autry Sings* (Hollywood: West'rn Music, 1942), Rare Books and Scores Collection, CPM; Gene Autry and Fred Rose, "At Mail Call Today" (Hollywood: West'rn Music, 1945), Sheet Music Collection, CPM.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Cunningham, Leonard Whitcup, and George Bennett, "The Bible on the Table and the Flag upon the Wall" (New York: Edwin H. Morris, 1949), Sheet Music Collection, CPM.

<sup>47</sup> Dave Gordon, ed., *Sgt. Gene Autry Presents His Favorite Patriotic and Hillbilly Songs* (Hollywood: West'rn Music, 1943), Rare Books and Scores, CPM.

<sup>48</sup> Hazel R. Hall, "If I had a daughter[...]" (letter to the editor), [*Screen Stars*], n.d., Autry Scrapbook T87-36-43, GAPPBA.

<sup>49</sup> "Gene Autry's Cowboy Code."

in the U.S. military during the war, performing their duties alongside white soldiers rather than with African Americans or in other racially-segregated units.<sup>50</sup> The bilingual Navajo, Comanche, and other Native “code-talkers” provided an important means of communications encryption for the Marines in the Pacific theater.<sup>51</sup> More famously, Ira Hayes, a Pima Indian serving for the Marines, helped to raise the American flag at Mount Suribachi during the Battle of Iwo Jima. His image was captured in Joe Rosenthal’s iconic photograph *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, becoming a symbol for American Indian contributions to American history and a rallying cry for greater Indian civil rights.<sup>52</sup> Such positive press gave greater visibility to Indian communities as their veterans returned home.

The immediate postwar years consequently saw a change in legal recognition of American Indians and federal administration of reservation lands.<sup>53</sup> Prior to the 1940s, much of American Indian legal policy vacillated between the poles of assimilation and self-determination. The Dawes Act of 1887, a landmark piece of legislation passed in the waning days of the American Indian Wars, asserted federal control over tribal lands. The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 subsequently restored sovereignty to tribes, including rights to remaining reservation

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<sup>50</sup> Alison R. Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II: Toward a New Era in Indian Affairs* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 40. Regarding the question of segregation, see Bernstein, 22-4.

<sup>51</sup> Two books detailing the contributions of these soldiers are Sally McClain, *Navajo Weapon: The Navajo Code Talkers* (Tucson, AZ: Rio Nuevo, 2002), and William C. Meadows, *The Comanche Code Talkers of World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

<sup>52</sup> Like many American Indian veterans returning to inauspicious circumstances, Ira Hayes succumbed to alcoholism for much of the remainder of his life and died in 1955. His story is recounted in Peter LaFarge’s song “The Ballad of Ira Hayes,” which proved a hit for Johnny Cash. One of the few biographies available on Hayes is Albert Hemingway, *Ira Hayes, Pima Marine* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988).

<sup>53</sup> Material in this paragraph is summarized from Ned Blackhawk, “American Indians and the Study of U.S. History,” in *American History Now*, ed. Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr, 376-99 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011). Other helpful resources on the topic of American Indian legal status include: William Y. Adams, *Indian Policies in the Americas: From Columbus to Collier and Beyond* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2014); Kenneth R. Philp, *Termination Revisited: American Indians on the Trail to Self-Determination, 1933-1953* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); and Roberta Ulrich, *American Indian Nations from Termination to Restoration, 1953-2006* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

lands not already privatized. John Collier, then commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, advocated this legislation as part of an “Indian New Deal” consistent with other progressive Depression-era programs geared towards economic and social uplift. However, this new system led soon to administrative complications, mismanagement, as well as outright corruption. By the immediate postwar era, federal policy had shifted once again towards assimilationist policies in what came to be called the “termination era.” In the words of historian Ned Blackhawk, this period was marked by “a set of congressional statutes [especially those of 1953] aimed at ‘terminating’ the federal government’s recognition of tribal communities, extending state jurisdiction over many Indian reservations, and federally subsidizing the one-way migration, or ‘relocation,’ of American Indians to urban areas for job-training and placement programs.”<sup>54</sup> Termination occurred on a case-by-case basis for each tribe, with the outward justification that Indians were being pulled into modernity to enjoy the benefits (and duties) of American citizenship while eliminating costly and ineffective federal bureaucracy. This policy persisted through the end of Autry’s film career until legislation in the late 1960s and 1970s ushered in a new period of Indian self-determination that has essentially lasted through now.<sup>55</sup>

To contemporary eyes, the postwar support for Indian termination rather than self-determination appears ironic. Lauded for their bravery and valor during the war, American Indians garnered greater national sympathy and support, but this failed to translate beyond a traditionally paternalistic view of Indians as culturally backwards. Yet for many, the United States’ decisive victory at war signified the nation’s military, economic, cultural, and even moral supremacy. In this context, the project of assimilating destitute and disenfranchised Indian

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<sup>54</sup> Blackhawk, 390.

<sup>55</sup> Two pieces of legislation are particularly noteworthy. The Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 expressly extended constitutional rights to Indians. The Self-Determination and Education Act of 1975 allowed tribes to establish contracts directly with the federal government rather than soliciting funding through the BIA or other agencies.

communities to normative American values actually appeared as a progressive and humanitarian impulse. Furthermore, assimilation echoed the integrationist rhetoric of the black arm of the Civil Rights Movement, which focused initially on the fuller participation of blacks in American civic life. After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the movement faced stiffer resistance when it tried to address structural economic inequalities between whites and the rest of the country. The policy of Indian termination likewise traded in an integrationist agenda that sidestepped the issue of white economic privilege and its effects on racial minorities. Even for the staunchest supporters of Indian social and economic uplift, termination may have seemed the most pragmatic path within the social confines of the immediate postwar years.

Advocacy in favor of greater Indian rights took several forms, with the realm of popular culture focused especially on the representation of Indians in entertainment. In Hollywood, one of the first groups to articulate an explicitly pro-Indian agenda was the grassroots organization the American Indian Citizens League of California, a group with which Autry was at least nominally affiliated. The League left few archival traces, but a syndicated article in *The Chicago Defender* on March 29, 1947, announced the group's arrival: "The American Indian Citizens League was formed last week to fight discrimination against citizens of aboriginal American lineage. Will Rogers Jr. was elected chief."<sup>56</sup> Serving on the League's executive committee were several actors with Indian ancestry, including Monte Blue, Joseph DePorte, P. F. Frazier, Tom Humphrey, Reuben Jacobs, Victor M. Kelly, Arthur Manning, Andrew Mord, Ralph Roanhorse, Riley Sunrise, Tonto Thundercloud, Bryan Trueblood, Steve Whiteflower, and Bill Wilkerson.

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<sup>56</sup> "Indians Form League to Fight Race Hate," *Chicago Defender*, March 29, 1947. This news article was syndicated by the Associated Negro Press (ANP) news service. It also appeared in *Variety* under the mocking headline "Redskins Won't Bite Discrimination Dust," and opened with the added line "Latest Redskin uprising in these parts took no Paleface scalps but resulted in the formation of the American Indian Citizens League." *Variety*, March 12, 1947.

The League's advocacy included public awareness campaigns, legal action in cases of housing and other discrimination, and fundraising for Indian relief; in one highly publicized campaign, the League raised nearly \$922,000 (in 2017 dollars) "for impoverished Indians of Arizona and New Mexico."<sup>57</sup> Autry's involvement with the group is corroborated by a notice in the March 19, 1947, edition of *The Los Angeles Times*, in which he is listed among the celebrities that "have pledged their support to the American Indian Citizens League campaign on discrimination." Also in attendance with Autry at this meeting were the actors Monte Blue, Johnny Mack Brown, and Robert Montgomery, as well as war hero Ira Hayes.<sup>58</sup> Significantly, Montgomery was then President of the Screen Actors Guild, the main union for Hollywood film actors (Autry joined SAG in 1937).<sup>59</sup> It is unclear whether Montgomery, as president, influenced official SAG policy addressing hiring practices or film representation of Indians. Nevertheless, the attendance of such high-profile union actors testified to the increased industry consideration given to the politics of Indians in film.

Autry's association with the American Indians Citizens League seems to have been short-lived and obscure, but it coincided closely with a marked change in his public rhetoric about and representations of Indians—in songs, tours, publicity interviews, and films. This shift was greatly helped by Autry's switch from Republic Studios to Columbia Pictures in 1947.<sup>60</sup> At Columbia,

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<sup>57</sup> Regarding the housing discrimination suit, see Aline Mosby, "Darnell, Sheridan, Other Part-Indians on Warpath against Hollywood Judge," *Toledo Blade*, March 11, 1947; for fundraising efforts, see "League Reports \$88,875 Spent on Indian Relief," *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 1948. Dollar amount adjusted to 2017 value using the CPI Inflation Calculator available on the website of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm) (accessed May 6, 2017).

<sup>58</sup> "Film Notables Aid Indian Campaign," *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 1947.

<sup>59</sup> Montgomery became a member of SAG in October 1933. See the webpages "Early Members: 1937," "Robert Montgomery," and "SAG Presidents," SAG-AFTRA, <http://www.sagaftra.org> (accessed May 6, 2017).

<sup>60</sup> While Autry was away at war, Republic began to rely more and more on Roy Rogers for its singing cowboy films, and upon his return to civilian life Autry discovered that he had been somewhat displaced at his home studio. This, combined with apparently unfavorable contractual agreements, led Autry to file suit against Republic to escape his

all of Autry's films were produced under the auspices of his own production company, Gene Autry Productions. It is difficult to determine the extent of Autry's involvement behind-the-scenes. He is not credited as director, producer, or screenwriter for any of the films; nonetheless, in his 1978 autobiography he asserted "complete say over my films" from that period, and certainly his films for Columbia adhere to higher production standards and are generally more sympathetic in their portrayal of Indians than most of those filmed for Republic Studios.<sup>61</sup>

In later years, Autry claimed the rhetorical shift concerning Indians was motivated less by national politics of the era than it was by firsthand observation of Indian culture and exploitation. In his autobiography, Autry claimed that while growing up in Achille, Oklahoma he had sometimes witnessed how Indians would be cheated by white businessmen and prospectors:

They were mostly Choctaw and Cherokee. In Oklahoma, each of the Indians was given a portion of land, maybe a hundred acres or so. But they were never trained or prepared for the business dealings that would be coming at them. When the automobile came in, many sold off their land at a fraction of its worth, just to buy a big car they didn't know how to drive.

I had seen the Indians exploited and considered it then, as now, a tragedy. It was no protest on my part, but later when I made my own pictures, I had no taste for the stock cowboy-and-Indian scripts and we avoided them.<sup>62</sup>

While there is surely some willful revisionism here, once Autry began producing films under his own production company, he was in a powerful position to change public perceptions of American Indians through his work. Publicity for those films reveals a conscious effort to do

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contract. After some arbitration, Autry agreed to make a few more films for Republic, then quickly switched to Columbia.

<sup>61</sup> Autry and Herskowitz, 97. In the press kit for his 1949 film *The Big Sombbrero*, Autry explained, "I decided I would be producer in name only. I would hitch up with a real producer to make my pictures. The producer was Armand (Mandy) Schaefer, a real smart hombre. Now, whenever anyone wants a job, offers a prop or anything, I just turn him over to Mandy who goes by the title of president of Gene Autry Productions." Quoted in Boyd Magers, *Gene Autry Westerns* (Madison, NC: Empire, 2007), 245.

<sup>62</sup> Autry and Herskowitz, 10.

so. The press kit for the 1950 film *Indian Territory* contained a stunning short article entitled “Autry Always Gives Indian Square Deal”:

The American Indian always gets a square deal at the hands of Gene Autry. The famous cowboy star and his producer-partner, Armand Schaefer, give the script-writers of their Columbia pictures strict orders against writing anything derogatory to the Indian race.

The principal heavies in all the Autry pictures [...] are white men. If an Indian does something wrong, Autry always makes it clear that a bad white man was behind the deed.

Although Autry and Schaefer realize that there were and are bad Indians as well as bad white men, they didn't think it is required of them to point up the fact. They would rather point up the fact that the red men are and were a proud, dignified and intelligent race, and one greatly misrepresented in fiction and films.<sup>63</sup>

Particularly surprising here is the insistence that whites are ultimately responsible for racial discord. The invocation of a “square deal” linked the films’ racial agenda to the language of other progressive political movements of the early twentieth century, including the New Deal as well as Harry Truman’s recently-proposed Fair Deal domestic policies and Theodore Roosevelt’s Square Deal. Although Autry’s films bore little connection to those specific reform programs, publicity like this suggested that this new kind of racial representation was consistent with the goals of a progressively minded government and society.

Autry’s Indian-themed midcentury westerns ultimately formed part of a nascent repertory of pro-Indian westerns that emerged from the immediate postwar era through the 1960s. As an article for *The Cowboy and the Indians* (1947) observed, “there have been numerous other pictures which have utilized [...] the modern approach to the American Indian.”<sup>64</sup> The

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<sup>63</sup> “Autry Always Gives Indian Square Deal,” 7. Press book, *Indian Territory* (1950), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.

<sup>64</sup> “Autry Defends Indians in New Western Drama,” 2. Press book, *The Cowboy and the Indians* (1949), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment. The article mentions the films *Drums along the Mohawk* (1939), *Canyon Passage* (1946), *Unconquered* (1947), *Last of the Redmen* (1947), *Pursued* (1947), *Fort Apache* (1948), *The Paleface* (1948), and *Red River* (1948). To this list could be added later midcentury films like *Broken Arrow* (1950), *Devil’s Doorway* (1950), *Taza, Son of Cochise* (1954), *The Searchers* (1956), *Geronimo* (1962), and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964).



midcentury pro-Indian westerns joined Autry's in offering commentary upon race relations, historical and contemporary Indian cultures, the myths of the Hollywood western, and even recent shifts in federal Indian policy towards assimilation and termination. The vogue for these films was multifaceted. Several scholars have pointed to the guiding influence of the Civil Rights Movement upon the western's suddenly more sympathetic portrayals. As film historian Steve Neale has observed, scholars have tended to read films about historical Indian-white racial conflict merely as allegories for contemporaneous black-white racial strife.<sup>65</sup> This is especially true of John Ford's 1956 film *The Searchers*, starring John Wayne. The protagonist's obsessive, self-destructive hatred of Comanche was interpreted as a parable warning against all kinds of racial bigotry during an era of intense social unrest. But as Neale argues, this interpretation risks obscuring the particulars of specific Indian communities, their histories, and their struggles. These elisions and erasures could prove damaging to American Indians despite the good intentions of filmmakers, critics, and historians. In Autry's pro-Indian films, there remains always a sense of broader anti-racist critique. But the larger goal is the compassionate portrayal of contemporary Indians, albeit filtered through white American paternalism. As a press piece for *The Cowboy and the Indians* put it, "the Indian is portrayed in a refreshing light, just as another human being with unique problems of his own, and not as a menacing savage."<sup>66</sup>

### **Persistent Stereotypes**

Despite this progressive agenda, some old screen habits proved hard to shake. While three of Autry's postwar films—*Apache Country*, *The Cowboy and the Indians*, and *The Last Round-Up*—were largely pro-Indian in outlook, ambiguous moments persisted. Other films from the era unapologetically continued with more conventional redface stereotypes and practices.

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<sup>65</sup> Neale, 8-11.

<sup>66</sup> "Autry Defends Indians in New Western Drama."

These included the casting of white actors for Indian roles; characterizations of Indians as savage, infantile, primitive, or preternaturally wise; the routine use of war paint, feathered headdresses, teepees, bows and arrows, and other generic Indian accoutrements, regardless of their historical accuracy; and familiar musical and sonic cues signifying Indian Otherness, with inferiority to their Euro-American counterparts often insinuated.

Musically, Indians were usually portrayed through a narrow range of means, ones which were endemic not just to Autry's films but to the entire genre of the western. Otherness was most often conveyed through the use of musical scoring that emphasized certain familiar exoticist tropes. Drums and woodwinds figured prominently in orchestral scores, which often also relied on parallel fifths, drones, lowered sevenths, and other chromatic alterations suggestive of primitivism. By comparison, diegetic musical performances by Indian characters were exceedingly rare, and in fact Indians rarely spoke in most of Autry's films. Their voices are silent except for the stereotypical war-whoop of battle—not merely sound but an inarticulate, menacing noise. This sonic distinction between whites and Indians not only robbed Indian characters of the possibility of self-expression and meaningful subjectivity, but also subtly hinted that Indians were a pre-lingual people, and thus primitive and irrational.

The three pro-Indian films were scored by Mischa Bakaleinikoff (1890-1960), a Russian émigré who fled Bolshevism and moved to the United States in 1926, where he became an in-house musician, conductor, composer, and arranger for Columbia Pictures. Most of his work was for low-budget western, sci-fi, and horror films, including over a dozen Autry pictures.<sup>67</sup>

Unfortunately no written scores from Autry's pro-Indian westerns appear to have survived, and in fact those films have only fleeting moments of non-diegetic score. But it was a common

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<sup>67</sup> I. S. Mowis, "Mischa Bakaleinikoff: Biography," IMDb, [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0005955/bio?ref\\_=nm\\_ov\\_bio\\_sm](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0005955/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm) (accessed May 6, 2017).

practice for low-budget films to repurpose stock scores from previous film soundtracks, and this is likely what happened for Autry's pro-Indian westerns.<sup>68</sup> Tom-toms were a common trope for representing Indians musically, and Bakaleinikoff's archives include a few pages of score for just this purpose (Figure 4.1 (a-b)).<sup>69</sup> This music was evidently so generic and interchangeable that Bakaleinikoff never bothered to list in which films it appeared, as he usually did for most of his compositions.<sup>70</sup> This mimicked the common practice of recycling stock footage for several Autry films, especially for stampedes or other large scenes involving dozens of extras and/or horses.<sup>71</sup> The reuse of score and stock footage was born of budgetary expediency, but it also reflected apathy among some of the films' collaborators towards the representation of Indian characters. Rather than crafting new music for each film to give Indian characters a greater sense of complexity and specificity, the presence of generic scores across multiple films could create the impression of a homogenized, static Indian.

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<sup>68</sup> According to one brief biography, as "music supervisor" for Columbia, Bakaleinikoff's duties mostly included conducting music written by another composer, often for a different film, that was housed in the film studio library. "Most of the music Mischa [Bakaleinikoff] wrote consisted of bridge sections between existing library music to be tracked into the current movie he was working on." Magers, 246.

<sup>69</sup> Mischa Bakaleinikoff, "Indian Tom-Toms #1 (Fast)" and "Indian Tom-Toms #2 (Slow)" (single sheet scores, no folder), Mischa Bakaleinikoff Collection, Special Collections, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California.

<sup>70</sup> See for example Bakaleinikoff's composition "Autry's Parade," which is explicitly labeled for use in the film *The Old West* (1952). Mischa Bakaleinikoff, arranged by John M. Leipold, "Autry's Parade" (single sheet piano reduction), *The Old West* folder, Mischa Bakaleinikoff Collection. The two "Tom-Tom" scores are clean copies and similarly formatted to "Autry's Parade," suggesting that they were not simply drafts or compositional sketches but were final products intended for use in films.

<sup>71</sup> One good example of this practice is found in the screenplay for *Indian Territory*. Camera shots 102-123 are all during a stampede scene with no dialogue. The screenwriter Norman S. Hall has here penciled in "NOTE: The following stock scenes are all from THE LAST ROUND-UP, Prod #1024." Shot 104, for example, is "EXT. DESERT – LONG SHOT (STOCK) Indian warriors ride to f.g. [foreground] (Scene 89, Reel 3-B)." The parenthetical marker indicates the shot's location in the film reels for *The Last Round-Up*, presumably listed to assist the makers of *Indian Territory* in finding it. Norman S. Hall, final draft screenplay for *Indian Territory* (Gene Autry Prod. No. 981), bound typescript, 103 pages, November 1, 1949, T98-283-219-1, GAPPBA. The reliance on stock footage led to occasional disappointments as Autry strived to produce more prestigious westerns at Columbia. As Autry explained, "To my regret, *The Last Round-Up* was shot in black and white. The demands on the new Technicolor Corporation had already plunged it a year behind schedule. There was another, more practical reason for using black and white. Columbia still had a lot of stock footage, desert chase scenes, and we could take advantage of that inventory by not using color." Autry and Herskowitz, 98; quoted in Magers, 244.



Figure 4.1 (a-b): Stock scores like these, used interchangeably between films, contributed to the stereotypical portrayal of American Indians in early westerns. Mischa Bakaleinikoff, “Indian Tom-Toms #1 (Fast)” and “Indian Tom-Toms #2 (Slow),” musical manuscripts, n.d., Mischa Bakaleinikoff Collection, Special Collections, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California.

Directed by John English and released in 1950, *Indian Territory* offers perhaps the most ambiguous portrayal of Indians found in any of Autry’s movies, caught halfway between the stereotypes of the past and the pro-Indian messages that began appearing at midcentury. Unlike most Autry westerns, *Indian Territory* is set in the historical past during the years immediately following the Civil War. A U.S. cavalry sergeant, Autry is tasked with quelling violence in the Indian Territory, where white settlers are being attacked by Indian raiders. Raid scenes in the film, although brief, have all the conventional Hollywood markers of Indian Otherness. In a

stampede scene twenty minutes into the film, horse-mounted, gun-toting Indians are seen bare-chested, wearing only loincloths and headbands (their horses, too, are “bare-footed,” as Pat Buttram’s character observes), and their attack is rendered all the more menacing by the bloodcurdling sound of the war-whoop. The exoticist score, credited to Bakaleinikoff, is dominated by winds and brass, playing a pentatonic melody of asymmetric phrasing, couched within a natural minor accompaniment, all underlined by the inexorable beating of a hollow bass drum. The overall effect is geared towards inspiring in the audience a sense of terror towards Indians.

Although the violence is perpetrated by unnamed Indians, these raids are secretly being instigated by a white Austrian immigrant, Curt Raidler, who is exploiting the Indians in an effort to establish a personal empire in the American frontier. A written prologue that scrolls onscreen during the opening credits primarily blames nefarious whites for stirring up the violence: “Whole communities were left to the merciless Apaches and the lawless whites, for there was little or no civilian law enforcement on the frontier. [...] In order to control and loot these unprotected areas, unscrupulous white men did not hesitate to use the Indian tribes in their greedy attempts to halt the slow march of law and order.” Thus Indians here are not simply saddled with the burden of irrational violence but are also victims exploited by whites.

This exploitation is thematized in the character of the “Apache Kid.” Played by white actor James Griffith, the Apache Kid is a “half-breed,” “part Indian, part white” accomplice to Raidler through much of the film.<sup>72</sup> While his allegiance to Raidler is never explained, the Apache Kid gradually comes to realize that he is merely a pawn of Raidler. When the Apache

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<sup>72</sup> The role was acted by James Griffith, who was of Welsh ancestry rather than biracial. He later enjoyed a steady acting career in television, including such westerns as *The Lone Ranger*, *Rawhide*, *Wagon Train*, and *Gunsmoke*, although he was not consistently cast in Indian roles. “James Griffith,” IMDb, [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0341526/?ref\\_=tt\\_cl\\_t5](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0341526/?ref_=tt_cl_t5) (accessed May 6, 2017).

Kid confronts Raidler late in the film, a panicked Raidler shoots the Apache Kid, taunting him with “Shut up you fool, you stupid savage!” highlighting for the audience the ugliness of anti-Indian racism. The Apache Kid ultimately gets his revenge, killing Raidler in a climactic fight and saving Autry’s life in the process. The Apache Kid’s redemption at film’s end suggests that, rather than inherent in the race, Indian violence is a response to systematic exploitation at the hands of whites. In this sympathetic conclusion, *Indian Territory* may be regarded as progressive for its day, although such a view is tempered by the stereotypes encountered elsewhere in the film.

Publicity for *Indian Territory* sidestepped its racially progressive messages, opting instead for a generic approach that emphasized the thrill of violent confrontation with Indians. A poster advertising the film showed Autry struggling with a knife-wielding, headband-wearing Indian. Accompanying the image was the sensationalist tagline “Gene’s on the warpath against renegade redskins...as the frontier echoes to war-whoops and gunfire,” completely dismissing the central conflict between Autry and Raidler.<sup>73</sup> Likewise, a review in *Variety* praised the film: “Well larded with such time-tested ingredients as Injuns, wagon train raids and gun battles, the film should please both Autry fans and the average hoss-opera devotee. [...] a grimmer vendetta with renegade redman James Griffith, augment the picture’s central theme.”<sup>74</sup> Thus even as Autry actively sought a more compassionate portrayal of Indian characters in his films, stereotypes continued to persist on the screen and in publicity, often side by side with progressive ideals.

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<sup>73</sup> Poster. Press book, *Indian Territory* (1950), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.

<sup>74</sup> Review of *Indian Territory*, *Variety*, January 3, 1950, file on *Indian Territory*, PCAR.

## **Towards Authenticity**

The revisionist impulses of Autry's pro-Indian westerns took several forms. Narratives that portrayed American Indians in a positive, often sympathetic light were one common strategy. These narratives often drew loosely upon historical and contemporaneous examples of white-on-Indian bigotry and exploitation to lend greater credence to their pro-Indian message. But also significant were efforts towards racial authenticity, intended to dispel the redface stereotypes that persisted in most western films. In Autry's films, this strategy consisted of the deliberate casting of Indian actors as well as conspicuous glimpses of ostensibly authentic Indian culture within the films themselves. While the presence of "real" Indian actors was marketed as proof of cultural authenticity, only rarely did Indians participate as full creative agents in curating film representations of their own culture; with one notable exception, screenwriters, directors, and other behind-the-scenes personnel remained all white. These concerns over agency proved largely unimportant to film audiences, although critics did take note of the progressive racial shift in Autry's films.

While Autry's pro-Indian films did not eliminate the practice of casting white actors as Indians, hiring Indian actors for his films became much more common. These casting decisions were certainly more politicized and publicized. Advance publicity for 1947's *The Last Round-Up* noted that one hundred Papago (now: Tohono O'odham) Indians from a reservation outside of Tucson had served as extras for the film.<sup>75</sup> Another article mentioned that child actor Bobby Blake of the *Red Ryder* series had befriended several Papago children while on the set of *The Last Round-Up* and had "mastered enough of [the Papago language] to talk to his new friends in

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<sup>75</sup> "Cowboys and Indians," 11. Press book, *The Last Round-Up* (1947), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.

their native tongue.”<sup>76</sup> Likewise, the press kit for 1949’s *The Cowboy and the Indians* boasted that “forty-six Indians, representing eight tribes” appeared in the film, adding that “the redmen [*sic*] are all members of the Hollywood Indian Actors organization.”<sup>77</sup> An adjacent article complicated the film’s racially progressive casting decisions by noting that the role of an elderly Navajo woman was actually played by Latina actress Felipa Gomez; billed in publicity as “the oldest movie actress in the world,” Gomez was born in Mexico in 1846 and was age 103 at the time of filming.<sup>78</sup> This kind of sensationalism around casting suggested that the authenticity claims of film publicity were as much a marketing tactic as they were a sincere attempt at addressing historical injustices in film hiring and representation.

This critique is compounded by the fact that few of the Indian actors appearing in Autry’s later films were billed in the films’ opening credits; Indian actors were more apt to appear as extras rather than in speaking roles, much less leading roles. The most notable exception is the First Nations actor Jay Silverheels (1912-1980), best known for his role as Tonto in *The Lone Ranger* television series (1949-57). Silverheels played a major role as Autry’s sidekick in *The Cowboy and the Indians* and an uncredited supporting role in *The Last Round-Up*.<sup>79</sup> While Silverheels was listed in the title credits of *The Cowboy and the Indians*, his name was excluded

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<sup>76</sup> “‘Indian Boy’ at Last Learns Indian Tongue,” 11. Press book, *The Last Round-Up* (1947), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.

<sup>77</sup> “Indians Ride High in New Autry Film,” 3. Press book, *The Cowboy and the Indians* (1949), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.

<sup>78</sup> “Ancient Actress,” 3. Press book, *The Cowboy and the Indians* (1949), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment. Gomez’s age is perhaps impossible to verify, but it was a clever, apparently self-directed marketing gimmick. Gomez encouraged her reputation as “the oldest actress in pictures,” claiming her birthday as March 28, 1846, and beginning her film career at age 100. “Oldest Player in Films Is 103,” *St. Petersburg Times*, May 1, 1949, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=888&dat=19490501&id=JRRPAAAIAIBAJ&sjid=J04DAAAIAIBAJ&pg=2863,4034865&hl=en> (accessed May 6, 2017).

<sup>79</sup> For background on Silverheels, see Jim Beaver, “Jay Silverheels: Biography,” IMDb, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0798855/bio> (accessed May 6, 2017). Silverheels’s work in *The Last Round-Up* is confirmed in David Rothel, *The Gene Autry Book*, rev. ed. (Madison, NC: Empire, 1988), 163.



from the “Official Billing” in the film’s press kit, upon which exhibitors would base their marquee and advertisements. This is despite the fact that Silverheels had an equivalent or larger role than the film’s other supporting actors Sheila Ryan, Frank Richards, and Hank Patterson, all of whom were billed in the press kit.<sup>80</sup> Reasons for Silverheels’s omission remain unclear, and the billing or non-billing of actors was an inconsistent practice in Autry’s films.<sup>81</sup> But the issue of credit is important. Recognizing the contributions of Indian actors served an important symbolic function and could also help relatively unknown Indian actors to build name recognition at a crucial time in their careers, hopefully leading to more employment opportunities. The films’ inconsistencies in this regard undermined their progressive ideals. Nevertheless, the deliberate casting of Indian actors ultimately supported efforts towards racial integration onscreen and provided a revenue source for economically-depressed reservation communities.

But despite the newly pro-Indian rhetoric, white actors playing Indians remained more common in major roles than Indian actors. Among Autry’s pro-Indian westerns, white actors Claudia Drake, Sheila Ryan, George Nokes, Charles Stevens (*The Cowboy and the Indians*); Bobby Blake, Carol Thurston, and Russ Vincent (*The Last Round-Up*) all appeared in Indian roles (Ryan played a half-Indian character). As a reviewer noted in *Variety*, Blake, Thurston, and Vincent were “very believable as educated Indians.”<sup>82</sup> The most unusual case of cross-racial casting in Autry’s films is that of Iron Eyes Cody, who appeared in small roles in *The Last Round-Up*, *The Cowboy and the Indians*, and *Apache Country*. Cody (1904-1999) got his start as

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<sup>80</sup> “Official Billing,” 8. Press book, *The Cowboy and the Indians* (1949), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.

<sup>81</sup> It is unclear whether the billing or non-billing of actors corresponded to differences in wages—that is, whether Silverheels’s credited costars earned more for their performances than he did.

<sup>82</sup> Review of *The Last Round-Up*, *Variety*, October 8, 1947, file on *The Last Round-Up*, PCAR.

an actor in B films such as Autry's, later working for major film studios. He is perhaps best known as the crying Indian in the "Keep America Beautiful" television ads in the early 1970s. Although officially uncredited in Autry's films, Cody was at least acknowledged in publicity for *Apache Country*; a short article describing Cody as an Indian actor also noted that Cody had recently written a book on Indian sign language "illustrated with photographs of Iron Eyes modeling the signs."<sup>83</sup> In its citations of genuine Indian culture, this article functioned as another signal of authenticity for the film.

Such claims would be upended later, however, as late-career revelations about Cody's heritage surfaced. Throughout his career, Cody maintained he was of Cherokee and Cree parentage and born in Oklahoma, but in 1996 an article in *The New Orleans Times-Picayune* claimed that Cody was actually born to Italian immigrants in Louisiana. This accusation was substantiated by the testimony of Cody's half-sister as well as baptismal records and other official documents.<sup>84</sup> The issue remains unresolved after Cody's death, but if true, as seems likely, Cody represents an incredible contemporary case of racial passing. It would be difficult to parse Cody's reasons for posing as an American Indian, a behavior with complex ethical implications. Nevertheless, Cody remained a fierce advocate of Native peoples throughout his life; Indian communities occasionally recognized him for his service, sometimes also with an acknowledgment of his ambiguous ancestry.<sup>85</sup>

For Autry's films—and any films in which American Indians are represented—Cody's case destabilizes claims to racial authenticity in a fundamental way. On one level, Cody's

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<sup>83</sup> "Actor Author," 7. Press book [photocopy], *Apache Country* (1952), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.

<sup>84</sup> Amy Waldman, "Iron Eyes Cody, 94, an Actor and Tearful Anti-Littering Icon," *New York Times*, January 5, 1999.

<sup>85</sup> This controversy is covered in more detail in Angela Aleiss, *Making the White Man's Indian: Native Americans and Hollywood Movies* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005).

potential racial passing does not automatically nullify the historical accuracy of his representations, no more than redface stereotypes are authenticated by the presence of an Indian actor. But Cody's predicament does open up debates over who even qualifies as American Indian, on what basis, and according to whom—and thus what counts as “authentic.” Race as performative act, a model once embraced by scholars but more recently under critique, does not seem to obtain in this case.<sup>86</sup> Cody's performance of Indian culture may have sufficed for contemporaneous audiences who still believed him to be Indian, but today his supposed racial masquerade casts skepticism over the motivations and even the reliability of his cultural expertise, a skepticism resting on the basis of his bloodline. Yet even heredity seems an insufficient and flawed standard. The invented category of “American Indian” is bound not by a completely common ancestry or uniform cultural practice, but by a shared historical legacy rooted in forced migration, genocide, and disenfranchisement.<sup>87</sup> And while popular culture often imagines Indians as frozen in the nineteenth century, contemporary American Indian cultures and communities are dynamic and diverse. The complexity of this history and culture could never be perfectly captured by the fictive universe of Autry's films, which are also beholden to the aesthetic and technical demands of the medium. Representations of American Indians in Autry's films could aim for viewer sympathy, understanding, and cultural education, but any notion of authenticity is quickly rendered moot.

Instead, claims of authenticity lead inexorably to a question of power—that is, who has the authority to control the representation. While Autry's pro-Indian films were indeed

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<sup>86</sup> One such critique of this “race as practice” paradigm can be found in Dale Cockrell, “William Johnson: Barber, Musician, Parable,” *American Music* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 1-23.

<sup>87</sup> Recent work by geneticists has shown that modern-day Native peoples are descended from at least three waves of Asian migration to the Americas. David Reich et al., “Reconstructing Native American Population History,” *Nature* 488 (August 16, 2012), 370-374, <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v488/n7411/full/nature11258.html> (accessed May 6, 2017).

progressive in the casting of Indian actors, their creative teams were almost always exclusively white. One important exception was Tony White Cloud, hired as a choreographer and musician for *Apache Country*, for which he was acknowledged in film credits and publicity on equal footing with the largely all-white cast and crew.<sup>88</sup> Together with his performance troupe of Jemez Indians, White Cloud's three dance sequences in *Apache Country* constituted perhaps the most racially progressive moments in Autry's entire filmography.

By the time filming began on *Apache Country*, "Tony White Cloud's Jemez Indians" had appeared regularly on rodeo tours with Autry throughout the United States and England for a few years, beginning in 1949 with an appearance at Madison Square Garden.<sup>89</sup> Consisting of Tony, his brothers Clement and Val White Cloud, and another brother whose name I have been unable to verify, the troupe lived in Sandia Pueblo outside of Albuquerque, New Mexico. After their work with Autry, the troupe would continue to appear in rodeos and other events, with White Cloud earning distinction as an innovator of modern hoop dance.<sup>90</sup> As part of a package variety show headlined by Autry, the Jemez dancers were allotted perhaps twenty to thirty minutes for their performance, over which they exercised relative autonomy. Ritual dances of course had to be adapted to the variety show format for the purposes of accessible entertainment, and White Cloud quickly developed a regular repertory of suitable dances. In a letter to Autry dated March 20, 1952, he suggested for an upcoming concert:

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<sup>88</sup> "Official Billing," 5. Press book [photocopy], *Apache Country* (1952), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.

<sup>89</sup> White Cloud mentions a 1949 performance at Boston Garden in White Cloud to Autry, 16 December 1949, GAPPBA Box 14. Madison Square Garden is cited instead in publicity for *Apache Country*: "Indian Dance Team in 'Apache Country,'" 7. Press book [photocopy], *Apache Country* (1952), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment. Madison Square Garden is also given in Boyd Magers, 314.

<sup>90</sup> Dennis W. Zotigh, "History of the Modern Hoop Dance," Indian Country Media Network, May 30, 2007, <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2007/05/30/history-modern-hoop-dance-90866> (accessed February 6, 2017).

Lot of people have wrote [*sic*] to me. They think that the Indian Show was very nice only it was to[o] short. Thought this time we do 1 Buffalo, 2 Eagle, 3 Horsetail dances, 4 Shield dance, 5 war dance, 6 Hoop dance. What do you think.<sup>91</sup>

Whatever their intended aims, these performances could come across as exotic spectacle for an often uncritical, usually young audience. One reviewer for a 1952 performance in Canton, Ohio dismissed considerations about authenticity, describing it instead in exotic terms: “Attired in their colorful native costumes, the redmen danced and pranced their way around the stage to the beat of a tom-tom, presenting an extraordinarily eye-filling spectacle.”<sup>92</sup> Similarly, a 1954 reviewer in Illinois remarked with notable word play, “Tribal dances by Tony White Eagle [*sic*] and his National Indian Dancers brought spectators to the edges of their seats as the early frontier was brought back vividly in the buffalo dance [...] Tony White Eagle’s [*sic*] hoop dance, wherein he went through complex convolutions and twisted his body through a half-dozen surprisingly small hoops, was greeted with realistic Indian whoops.”<sup>93</sup> Perceived racial and cultural difference becomes literally embodied here in the description of White Cloud’s gyrations, while the response of “realistic Indian whoops” reinforces a sense of the Indian’s sonic Otherness.

Some rodeo reviewers were a bit more sensitive, however, assessing the performances on the basis of their authenticity. Discussing a 1951 tour stop in Utica, New York, one reviewer wrote that the “most startling innovation in the 1951 offering was a five-part number by four Indians of the Jemez tribe, in New Mexico. Brilliantly costumed they portrayed authentic tribal dances, symbolizing the eagle, horse and buffalo. The war and hoop dances completed their

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<sup>91</sup> White Cloud to Autry, 20 March 1952, GAPPBA Box 14.

<sup>92</sup> “Autry Corrals 8,800 at Two Shows,” *Canton [OH] Repository*, February 2, 1952, Autry Scrapbook T87-36-880, GAPPBA.

<sup>93</sup> “Young ‘Cowpokes,’ Parents Jam House for Autry Show,” *Rockford [Illinois] Morning Star*, January 21, 1951, Autry Scrapbook T87-36-880, GAPPBA.

stint.”<sup>94</sup> The reviewer’s specificity about the troupe and their dances reflects a turn towards the cultural edification of audiences. On tour stops and in publicity, Autry also tried to counteract stereotypes by emphasizing again authenticity, explaining to one child interviewer that the Indian dancers “are real, known as the Jamez [*sic*] Indians from New Mexico.”<sup>95</sup> These efforts were supported by the troupe themselves. In addition to performances, tour stops often included time for fan interaction with the Jemez performers, during which they could teach audiences, usually children, about the significance of dances and cultural artifacts. Figure 4.2 shows one such meeting during a 1951 tour stop in Rockford, Illinois.<sup>96</sup>

While Tony White Cloud’s Jemez Indians geared themselves towards the work of educating audiences about Native culture, they were also entrepreneurs in pursuit of scarce performance opportunities. Their tours with Autry appear to have been their first and primary exposure as professional musicians and dancers, and they leaned heavily on Autry to provide them with a steady, reliable source of work and income. This did not fully shield White Cloud’s troupe from financial uncertainty and hardship. In his correspondence with Autry, White Cloud frequently asks him for advances and loans against future earnings on tour performances.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> “Packed Houses Greet Autry; Performance Wins Cheers from Children and Parents,” *Utica* [NY] *Daily Press*, February 9, 1951, Autry Scrapbook T87-36-880, GAPPBA.

<sup>95</sup> Gary Johnson, “Other Stars Good but Autry’s Best, 9-Year-Old Interviewer Concludes,” *Elmira* [NY] *Advertiser*, February 8, 1951, Autry Scrapbook T87-36-880, GAPPBA.

<sup>96</sup> Photograph from “When Gene Autry Comes to Town, Young ‘Cowboys’ Gather ‘Round,” *Rockford* [Illinois] *Morning Star*, January 21, 1951, Autry Scrapbook T87-36-880, GAPPBA.

<sup>97</sup> White Cloud’s first letter to Autry housed in the Autry National Center is dated December 16, 1949, soon after White Cloud’s first tour with Autry had concluded, and White Cloud indicates his desire to go on tour again in the near future. White Cloud to Autry, 16 December 1949, GAPPBA Box 14. In another letter, White Cloud asks for a \$300.00 advance to cover car payments on which he and Clemente White Cloud have fallen behind. White Cloud to Autry, 27 June 27 1952, GAPPBA Box 14.

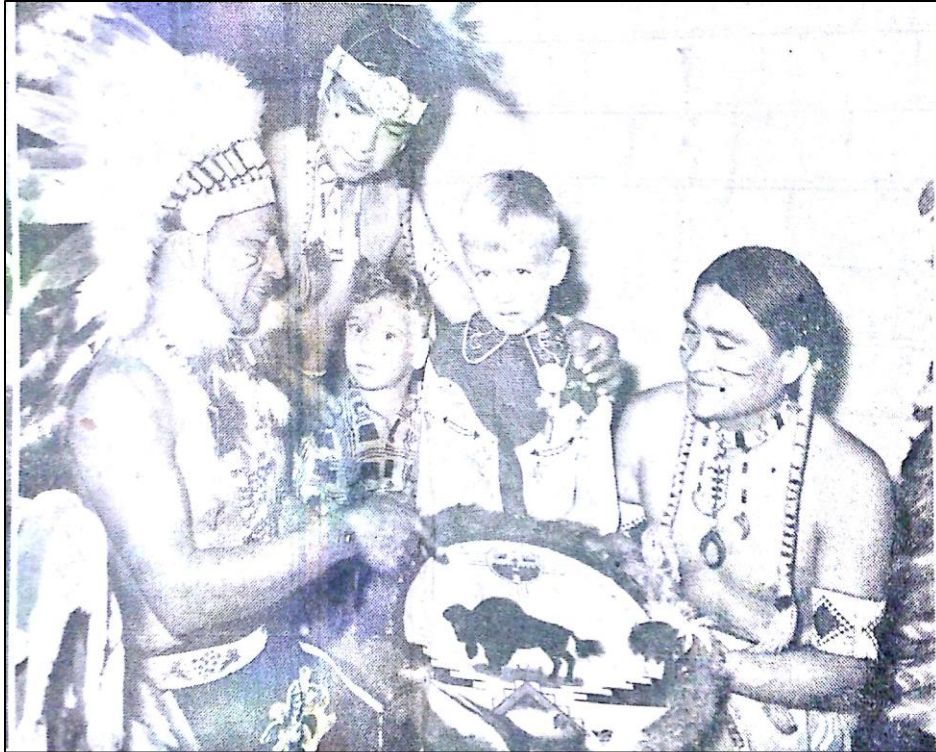


Figure 4.2: Tony White Cloud's Jemez Indians speaking to young fans on tour. Photograph from "When Gene Autry Comes to Town, Young 'Cowboys' Gather 'Round," *Rockford [Illinois] Morning Star*, January 21, 1951. Autry Scrapbook T87-36-880, Gene Autry Personal Papers and Business Archives, 1900-2002, on loan from Mr. and Mrs. Gene Autry, Autry National Center, Los Angeles; MSA.28.

White Cloud sometimes struck a sycophantic posture, variously addressing Autry as "Mr. Autry" and "our friend."<sup>98</sup> Autry's responses were always cordial and businesslike, sometimes non-committal and occasionally generous. Autry did his best to oblige White Cloud's appeals, giving him advice on copyrighting his act,<sup>99</sup> granting requests for bookings and cash advances whenever possible,<sup>100</sup> and vouching for him whenever dealing with concert promoters and other third

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<sup>98</sup> "Mr. Autry": White Cloud to Autry, 1 March 1951, GAPPBA Box 14; "our friend": White Cloud to Autry, 27 June 1952, GAPPBA Box 14.

<sup>99</sup> Apparently another act in San Antonio, Texas was using White Cloud's name without his permission, hence White Cloud's concern to secure copyright protection for his group. See White Cloud to Autry, 1 March 1951, GAPPBA Box 14; Autry to White Cloud (carbon copy), 22 March 1951, GAPPBA Box 14.

<sup>100</sup> See, for example, this letter from Autry's secretary granting a \$100.00 loan request: Virginia MacPhail to Whitecloud [*sic*] (carbon copy), 18 December 1951, GAPPBA Box 14.

parties.<sup>101</sup> On tour, the troupe interacted little with other personnel onstage or behind the scenes, although in later years Autry and others would recall various fish-out-of-water stories with condescending amusement.<sup>102</sup> Rather than a close friendship, the relationship between White Cloud and Autry seems to have been largely professional.

Beyond tours, Autry's greatest support for White Cloud's troupe came in his decision to hire them as the featured musical performers in *Apache Country*, released in 1952. The group was ultimately tangential to the action, which in many ways still adhered to conventional representations of Indian Otherness. Directed by George Archainbaud, a regular Autry collaborator, *Apache Country* follows a plot similar to that of *Indian Territory*: an all-white criminal gang is instigating Indian raids against settlers as cover for their own banditry, and it is up to cavalryman Gene Autry, bumbling sidekick Pat Buttram, and yodeling cowgirl Carolina Cotton to stop them. Much of *Apache Country* was typical of most westerns in its portrayal of Indians. They are made out as essentially violent actors, although they are sympathetic figures to the extent that they are manipulated by whites. The orchestral score, brimming with exoticist gestures, accompanies opening scenes of Otherness and carnage—static harmonies and tips; pentatonic melodies and naked, stampeding Indians; pounding tom-toms with covered wagons aflame. The montage is capped by a spinning newspaper headline: “Indian Raids Increasing!” Later, Autry and friends crack wise about their fear of being scalped. Publicity likewise

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<sup>101</sup> Autry convinced a skeptical rodeo organizer for the Ak-Sar-Ben Rodeo in Omaha, Nebraska, to advance the troupe \$200.00 to cover travel expenses. Bud Neble, Publicity Director for Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben, to Autry, 8 September 1952; Virginia MacPhail to Bud Neble (carbon copy), 10 September 1952; Virginia MacPhail to Whitecloud [*sic*] (carbon copy), 10 September 1952, all GAPPBA Box 14.

<sup>102</sup> Following a 1953 tour of England, Autry remembered, “A few of us came over early and were having so much trouble we wondered how the Indians would get along over here. We were really worried about them.” Of the same tour, Autry's tour publicist Alex Gordon mentioned that the troupe was given its own hotel room. Gordon joked about the troupe's difficulty in overcoming the language barrier with hotel staff: White Cloud's request to room service for a “needle” to repair his “suit” resulted in a bowl of “noodle soup” being delivered instead. Alex Gordon, “Thousands Cheer,” *Autry's ACES* (Fall 1953), 14-18, GAPPBA. Reprinted as Alex Gordon, “I Toured with Gene Autry,” 266-75, in *Rothel*, 270, 272.



suggested a mostly conventional storyline, but pointedly labeled whites, not Indians, as the evildoers, with taglines like “See Gene’s six-shooters nail white looters behind Apache lines!”<sup>103</sup> This line was paired with a poster image of Autry on horseback being menaced by a tomahawk-wielding Indian, which again sent mixed messages about the film’s racial agenda.

The scenes with White Cloud, however, distinguished *Apache Country* from other contemporaneous westerns through the deliberate framing of “real” Indians and Indian culture, rather than merely having whites perform blatant redface stereotypes. Publicity for the film touted the troupe by noting “authentic tribal dances performed by the Jemez Indians in ‘Apache Country’ include ceremonial, warriors’, pleasure and hunting dances of the painted desert.”<sup>104</sup> As an ensemble performing for “Carolina Cotton and Her Medicine Show” at a local club, the troupe appears only in a few carefully choreographed and dramatically isolated scenes. The first, appearing twenty minutes into the film, has impresario Cotton announcing the group to a filled club. Identifying them as Jemez Indians, Cotton explains that they will perform an “Indian War Dance” which is “sacred” to their people. Rather than offer further explanation of the dance’s significance, the ensemble proceeds directly with their performance, featuring chanting and drumming on a tom-tom by one member, while the three others dance in face paint, elaborate feathered headdresses, bead necklaces, ankle bells, and cloths about their waists. The physical presentation of Indians here thus differs little from other scenes, in which Indians are sources of menace, but the approving smiles of Autry and Buttram as they look on suggests to film audiences that such cultural displays are to be admired rather than feared.

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<sup>103</sup> Film poster, 6. Press book [photocopy], *Apache Country* (1952), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.

<sup>104</sup> “Indian Dance Team in ‘Apache Country.’”

Although the film audience is given little in the way of historical or cultural context for the “Indian War Dance,” this first brief scene proves but a warm-up for the extended dance sequences later in the film. White Cloud’s troupe appears again a few scenes later during a club rehearsal under the direction of Cotton, when Autry and Buttram happen to step through the door. Although the music is different from the earlier scene, the musical texture is the same, and the group’s dress is modified only slightly to give the appearance of feathered wings along their arms (Figure 4.3). The camera cuts away momentarily to show Buttram and Autry discussing the dance. “What’s going on?,” Buttram asks, and Autry explains, “That’s the Indians doing one of their native dances. You know, each tribe has its own particular dance. Most of them are named after some bird or some wild game that they have great respect for. This one’s called the ‘eagle dance.’” The camera then shifts back to the troupe as Autry continues to narrate the actions of the ongoing dance:

The Indian had great respect for the eagle because he was a big bird called the “king of the skies.” And he could soar for many, many hours at a time high above the terrain to scout for lesser game that he must eat... Two, the eagles feathers were very important to the Indian. He used his feathers for his war bonnet and for many of his other costumes, not to mention the fact that they were used on the ends of those arrows to make them shoot far and straight... And now, the eagles are feeding. After the feast, watch the eagle as he struts and flops his wings... And then, he flies off into the wild blue yonder.

A noticeable change in Autry’s vocal timbre suggests that this narration is a voice-over added in post-production rather than recorded live as the troupe performed its dance.



Figure 4.3: Tony White Cloud's Jemez Indians concluding the Eagle Dance in *Apache Country*.

The “Indian Buffalo Dance,” performed a few scenes later, is framed in a similar fashion. After listening to Autry and Cotton sing an impromptu duet, “Crime Will Never Pay,” during the club’s off-hours, the Indian troupe responds in kind, and Autry’s dubbed-in narration begins:

This dance is called the “buffalo dance,” the favorite of all the big game in which the Indians used to hunt in the early days of the country... This is the Indians’ interpretation of the buffalo herd as he [*sic*] gallops across the prairie being chased by the hunter... Then at nightfall, the herd would mill around in a circle, but the Indian hunter would still ride herd on him, waiting for daybreak... And then, at daybreak, the herd became frightened, and they stampede away across the prairie, still being chased by the hunter.

Unlike in previous sequences, Autry’s narration here is directed not towards another character but towards the film audience, highlighting its didactic purpose. The dance ends, and Carolina Cotton thanks them for the performance. In their lone line of dialogue, a member of the troupe replies, “That is because we liked your singing!” This is the last appearance of the group, and the

remainder of the film is devoid of any further representations of Indians, focused instead on thwarting the white bandits.

The point here is not to assess the authenticity of White Cloud's performances or Autry's descriptions of them, surely a fraught task. The significance of these scenes is that they exist at all—a conscientious effort to curate Indian culture and to educate (white) audiences about them was a rare, bold move in the midcentury western. While these scenes still on some level essentialize Indian racial difference, the curation of Jemez cultural practice as worthy of admiration and historical interest nevertheless gestured towards a more celebratory, multiracial politics. Moreover, White Cloud's authorial role in these scenes reflected a novel, progressive effort to include the voices of Native peoples.

These curatorial scenes met mixed critical reaction. Some praised White Cloud's dance scenes, although as with the troupe's rodeo appearances, critics sometimes had difficulty viewing the dances as anything other than exotic spectacle. A reviewer for *Motion Picture Daily* did manage to grasp the didactic purpose of the dance scenes, noting they were “accompanied by brief, informative commentaries which children should enjoy.”<sup>105</sup> More typical was the criticism, found in *Variety*, that the dance scenes needlessly slowed the pacing of the film overall: “Tony Whitecloud's [sic] Jemez Indians have four Indian dance numbers, three too many.”<sup>106</sup> This was echoed years later by Autry filmographer Boyd Magers, who complained that *Apache Country* “stops dead cold at 20 minutes, 34 minutes and 50 minutes while Tony Whitecloud's Jemez Indian dancers do the Eagle dance, the Buffalo dance, etc. while an off-screen Autry explains

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<sup>105</sup> Review of *Apache Country*, *Motion Picture Daily*, June 2, 1952, file on *Apache Country*, PCAR.

<sup>106</sup> Review of *Apache Country*, *Variety*, May 14, 1952, file on *Apache Country*, PCAR.

each dance. It simply doesn't work, giving the film a stitched together feeling."<sup>107</sup> Thus the most explicit attempts to portray American Indian culture in Autry's films failed to gain much traction with critics, although their stated objections were for dramatic rather than political reasons.

### **Assimilation Narratives**

Autry's most sustained commentary on Indian-white relations comes in two films directed by John English, *The Last Round-Up* (1947) and *The Cowboy and the Indians* (1949). Both films explicitly address the theme of Indian material exploitation at the hands of whites, with Autry as the agent of their deliverance. In *The Last Round-Up*, an eminent domain claim threatens to push both Indians and white ranchers off of their adjacent lands; looking to foreclose on the ranchers' land before the government can seize it, conniving Mesa City bankers provoke hostility between the Indians and ranchers. Autry eventually succeeds in exposing the bankers and convincing the Indians to move from their ancestral land to a more hospitable area nearby, enabling the continued march of industrial progress in Mesa City. In *The Cowboy and the Indians*, Navajos suffering from malnourishment trade tribal heirlooms to Martin, a dishonest white shopkeeper. Martin underpays for the heirlooms and then resells to collectors at inflated prices. A turquoise necklace is stolen from the tribal chief, and chief-in-waiting Lakohna is suspected until Autry manages to prove that Martin is to blame. With the help of his ranching buddies, Autry then delivers much needed aid to the Navajo.

While these are superficially the conflicts driving these films, at a deeper level both are about the apparent conflict between Indian and American identities, specifically questioning whether Indians can be assimilated into mainstream—that is, white—American society. The answers are mixed. In both films, it is made clear that a strict commitment to traditional Indian ideals and customs begets suffering and victimization, and that “American” practices need to be

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<sup>107</sup> Magers, 314.

adopted to uplift the community. An early scene in *The Cowboy and the Indians* shows Chief Long Arrow performing a healing chant ritual over the body of a malnourished Navajo possessed by an “evil spirit.” Sensing the futility of the chant, Autry assures him, “Long Arrow great chief, great medicine man, but this woman needs a doctor,” and rushes off to find one. Similarly, the stubbornness of Indians to leave their ancestral land in *The Last Round-Up* allows the villainous bankers to stir up violence between ranchers and Indians. Only when Autry manages to convince the tribal elders to move to neighboring Cedar Valley—its tract housing modeled for nuclear families rather than communal tribal living—is the violence quelled.

Nevertheless, these films are at pains to dispel the most vicious rumors about Indian behavior, and they manage to convey some level of sympathy for Indians living with dwindling opportunities in the mid-twentieth century. Early in *The Last Round-Up*, when one of Autry’s rancher friends hears Indians performing a song in the distance, he immediately worries that their “war dance” is a prelude to a violent confrontation between ranchers and “redskins.” Autry immediately corrects him, saying they are to be called “Indians” and that the ranchers have nothing to fear. Later, a group of white and Indian children living near the reservation play a game of cowboys-and-Indians. Mike, a young Indian playing as a cowboy, gets “captured” by white boys playing as Indians; they demand his scalp, and Mike angrily explains that Indians no longer scalp people.

*The Cowboy and the Indians* critiques white apathy for Indian affairs more explicitly, and one of the goals of the film overall seems to be to spur audiences to greater awareness and even political action. The callousness of white Americans is revealed early in the film. Autry approaches a newspaper editor to try and drum up public sympathy and fundraising support for the malnourished Navajo. The editor passes on the story, claiming quite crassly that “interest in

the noble redman died with Geronimo.” Only after the dramatic death of the tribal chief, and after much cajoling by Autry, does the public outcry appear in a litany of newspaper headlines: “Indians Starving,” “Washington Recognizes Indian Problem: Country Rallies to Indian Aid,” and “Nation’s Gifts Help Starving Tribes.”

Autry’s struggle within *The Cowboy and the Indians* mirrored the public campaign he waged by making such films: to raise public awareness about Indian suffering and to agitate for government relief at the federal level. Yet in order to do this, the films were at pains to prove some sense of the Indians’ “worth,” not only by demonstrating a reformed nature that rejected violence, or the reality of their physical need, but also their willingness to abandon certain “traditional” Indian culture practices and integrate into dominant “American” culture. Signs of assimilation appear through cowboy-like heroism, amenability to Western science and medicine, adoption of Christianity, and patriotic display, among others, and often these are articulated through musical performance.

Both *The Last Round-Up* and *The Cowboy and the Indians* feature a character who is racially Indian but culturally white—what might be termed, in the logic of these films, as an “Americanized Indian.”<sup>108</sup> Both fulfill the role of Autry’s sidekick, and both play an important part in bringing the white villains to justice. In *The Last Round-Up*, that role is filled by Jeff, played by the white actor Russ Vincent.<sup>109</sup> Early on, we learn that Jeff has received an American-style education, and he apologizes to Autry for the “rather primitive,” sometimes violent behavior of his uneducated kin. Jeff is ultimately killed in a climactic shootout, and in the next

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<sup>108</sup> My phrase “Americanized Indian” borrows from Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of the “Anglicized Indian,” a colonized subject who is almost but not quite able to assimilate fully to the culture of the colonizer. Bhabha uses the term in connection with the British colonization of India. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>109</sup> “Russ Vincent,” IMDb, [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0898748/?ref\\_=fn\\_al\\_nm\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0898748/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1) (accessed May 6, 2017).

scene we see his graveside funeral service (Figure 4.4). A cross marking his grave suggests a Christian burial. Autry sings a reverential graveside rendition of “The Last Round-Up,” a dying cowboy song, accompanied only by tolling church bells and the hums of the mixed-race gathering of mourners. The choice of repertory—cowboy song rather than Indian music—is significant. By the time of his heroic death, Jeff is respected and admired by the white community, and he is eulogized according to white customs and repertoires.



Figure 4.4: Jeff's burial scene in *The Last Round-Up*, with Autry pictured center singing "The Last Round-Up." Indian characters are to the left, white characters to the right. Note also the cross marking the grave in foreground.

The analogous character in *The Cowboy and the Indians* is Lakohna, the Navajo chief's son, played by the Indian actor Jay Silverheels. Lakohna is a college-educated engineer who chooses to live on the reservation out of a sense of duty to his people. He is revealed as a



decorated World War II veteran who served at Iwo Jima, likely recalling for moviegoers the heavily publicized contributions of U.S. Marine and Pima Indian Ira Hayes. The brief allusion to Iwo Jima served as subtle affirmation of Indian patriotism and obedience, and thus became part of the argument in favor of Indian assimilation and government-backed aid to Indian communities. Later in the film, Lakohna is instrumental in bringing the villainous Martin to justice, after which he takes his rightful place as leader of the tribe. The implicit hope is that Lakohna, with his college smarts, distinguished military service, and the help of U.S. government largess, will be able to lead his people to greater economic prosperity.

Along with depicting the apotheosis of heroic, redemptive Americanized Indian figures, both films emphasize public education as the central means for achieving Indian cultural assimilation. Although tangential to their central plots, both films include a dramatically-isolated scene of student instruction and music-making at a reservation school, and those scenes are staged in a remarkably similar fashion. In *The Last Round-Up*, we enter the scene as Indian students are reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, hands over hearts, facing in the direction of the U.S. flag, which is prominently foregrounded in the camera angle. As Autry walks into the classroom, the white teacher, Carol Taylor (played by Jean Heather), sits down at the piano and begins a class sing-along of “She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain.” During the ensuing performance, we see Autry and various Indian children in close-up, smiling happily and performing various arm gestures to illustrate and accompany the lyrics.

Yet this idyllic image of carefree, participatory music-making is disturbed by the musical and choreographic struggles of one of the schoolchildren. Intercut with shots of other students, this unnamed child is just slightly off-pitch, often a half-measure behind the piano accompaniment, with accompanying arm gestures never quite synchronized with those of his

classmates.<sup>110</sup> The effect is intended as comedy, but it is also bizarre. The child's inability cries out for narrative explanation—perhaps Autry could teach him the song so he could participate more fully. Yet no such resolution occurs; once the song is over, the teacher simply resumes with the lesson. So what is going on here? The uncredited role was played by child actor Don Kay Reynolds (b. 1937), who years later recalled that the scene “was in the script, it wasn't improvised.”<sup>111</sup> By emphasizing the deliberateness of the scene, Reynolds here implicitly asserts his own musical talents, distancing himself from the musical incompetence portrayed in the scene and marking such musical disability as shameful. Although perhaps unintentional, the child's failure to assimilate musically can be read as a metaphor for the larger project of Indian sociocultural assimilation: those that learn how to behave according to the dictates of the hegemonic society, represented here by the song, can participate in its benefits, while those who fail to assimilate will be excluded and earn contempt.

The schoolhouse scenes in *The Cowboy and the Indians* likewise promote assimilationist behavior. Instead of the Pledge of Allegiance, Autry and the children sing the patriotic hymn “America (My Country, 'Tis of Thee)” in perfect unison, hands over hearts, facing the flag in the foreground of the camera shot (Figure 4.5). The framing of this shot is remarkably similar to that of *The Last Round-Up*, and it packs the same visual punch; in fact, the two films appear to be using the same set for the schoolhouse scenes. After the song is over, Autry convinces the

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<sup>110</sup> It is worth noting here, however, that all of the children in this and other scenes were likely lip-syncing to a recorded track, probably one which used the voices of a different children's choir. Lip-syncing was a standard practice in Autry's films, and sometimes even adult performers would mime to another singer's voice. Marvin Montgomery, a member of the Light Crust Doughboys who appeared in several Autry films, discusses this practice in Marvin Montgomery, interview by John W. Rumble (transcript), June 17, 1988, OHC198-LC, 30-1, FLACMHOF.

<sup>111</sup> Magers, 245; quoted from Don Kay Reynolds on panel discussion, Memphis Film Festival, June 2006. Reynolds appeared in roughly a dozen films from 1944 to 1951, including Autry films *The Last Round-Up* and *Beyond the Purple Hills*, usually cast as an Indian child. He later went on to work in film and television as an animal trainer and is credited as a horse trainer for the three *The Lord of the Rings* films (2001-2003), directed by Peter Jackson. “Don Reynolds,” IMDb, [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0721690/?ref\\_=fn\\_al\\_nm\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0721690/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1) (accessed May 6, 2017).

reluctant children to submit to necessary vaccinations, administered by the reservation's doctor in the adjacent room. Corporate song performance, especially of a patriotic hymn, is intended to build national community and to inculcate civic pride in both the schoolchildren and the film audience, while the vaccinations, although certainly beneficial to the health of the children, also require a literal transformation of the Indian child's blood on the road to becoming an American.



Figure 4.5: Indian schoolchildren singing "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" in *The Cowboy and the Indians*.

The closing moments of *The Cowboy and the Indians* also occur at the schoolhouse. After Autry successfully secures federal aid for the starving Indians, he returns to the reservation riding on horseback, accompanied by fellow cowboys and a supply convoy. A supply truck sign proclaims "Gifts from America to the First Americans." As the convoy nears the schoolhouse,

Autry begins singing “Here Comes Santa Claus (Right Down Santa Claus Lane),” while a fellow rancher dressed in Santa Claus hat and fluffy beard rides alongside him making silly faces.<sup>112</sup>

The schoolchildren hear Autry approaching, and they rush outside to greet him by singing the next verse of the song:

*Here comes Santa Claus! Here comes Santa Claus!  
Right down Santa Claus Lane!  
He doesn't care if you're rich or poor  
For he loves you [us] just the same.*

*Santa knows that we're God's children,  
That makes ev'rything right.  
Fill your hearts with a Christmas cheer,  
'Cause Santa Claus comes tonight.*<sup>113</sup>

The children's high voices and lax diction render the lyrics difficult to decipher upon first listening. But deliberate or not, the decision to have the Indian children sing this particular verse seems freighted with meaning. Proclaiming that Santa “doesn't care if you're rich or poor” and that “Santa knows that we're God's children,” the verse quietly promotes a message of equality and inclusivity consistent with the film's pro-Indian aims.

The song completed, the children rush forward to gather their presents inside the supply convoy. The Indian parents offer their thanks, and the film closes inside the schoolhouse, where Autry and the children sing an angelic rendition of “Silent Night.” The camera pans across the classroom, revealing a “Merry Christmas” sign, Christmas tree and tinsel, a Santa Claus cowboy, cherubic Indian faces, and the omnipresent Stars and Stripes (Figure 4.6). These final scenes are

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<sup>112</sup> “Here Comes Santa Claus” was a hit for Autry in late 1949, when *The Cowboy and the Indians* was released. Although incongruous for a western, inclusion of this song reveals again the synergy between Autry's recording and film careers.

<sup>113</sup> Gene Autry and Oakley Haldeman, “Here Comes Santa Claus (Right Down Santa Claus Lane)” (Hollywood: Western Music, 1947), Sheet Music Collection, CPM.

a staggering visual and musical matrix of white American culture, emphasizing Christianity and patriotic fervor as central to U.S. assimilationist politics.



Figure 4.6: Indian schoolchildren singing “Silent Night” at the conclusion of *The Cowboy and the Indians*. Note again the presence of the American flag in the right of the shot.

Through its foregrounding of these schoolhouse scenes, the films echoed the assimilationist logic of U.S. government-backed Indian boarding schools of the early twentieth century. The aim of such schools, which were always located off-reservation, was the cultural reorientation of Indians towards white American values, which would also allow the federal government to more easily reclaim sovereignty over Indian-held lands; in the words of one

boarding school headmaster, the school sought to “kill the Indian...and save the man.”<sup>114</sup> As John W. Troutman has observed of musical instruction in the boarding schools, “Music served American Indians and non-Indians alike as a unique way to negotiate, challenge, or fortify the lines of citizenship, Indianness, and whiteness drawn over the scope of U.S. culture and politics.”<sup>115</sup> Thus, “musical performance was implicated in the design and execution of the citizenship agenda, which through the 1920s mandated the assimilation of Native peoples into the body politic of the United States along with the allotment and liquidation of tribally controlled lands.”<sup>116</sup> Although they came decades later, Autry’s pro-Indian westerns used musical performances to the same end, telling us what it meant for their white creators and audiences to be American, and what nonwhites must do to be accepted as such.

The notion of cultural reorientation towards white American values in these films also mirrored the more recent assimilationist goals of Japanese American detention. During World War II, thousands of Japanese Americans endured government-sanctioned forced migration, primarily from the West Coast to inland internment camps which were often located on or near Indian reservations.<sup>117</sup> Ostensibly undertaken to counter potential political subversion and inculcate loyalty to the United States, the camps were sites of involuntary relocation, containment, and reeducation. Viewed in this light, the parallels with the American Indian experience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are striking.

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<sup>114</sup> John W. Troutman, *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music, 1879-1934* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 7.

<sup>115</sup> Troutman, 5-6.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> These included the Colorado River (Poston) and Gila River Relocation Centers in Arizona. The Army and Bureau of Indian Affairs selected these sites, ignoring the opposition of local Indian communities. See Jeffery F. Burton et al., *Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 38-9.

In Autry's films, the schoolhouse scenes are particularly resonant with the internment camp experience due to the involvement of Paul F. DeVine, who was hired as a consultant for those scenes.<sup>118</sup> As assistant superintendent of the Los Angeles city school system in the 1940s, DeVine by no means held a large profile in Hollywood. He was, however, charged with ensuring the safety and security of city schools during the war, and he was a staunch public advocate of Japanese internment and reeducation.<sup>119</sup> He was a signatory, along with other local Los Angeles business, civic, and religious leaders, of a "Statement Regarding the Enemy Alien Situation on the Pacific Coast," submitted to area newspapers in support of a limited but mandatory Japanese relocation effort.<sup>120</sup> The statement assured readers that their support for relocation was motivated by concerns over subversive activities carried out by Japanese "enemy aliens," clarifying that "any evacuation proposed is not prompted by race hatred, prejudice or selfish business interests, but is contemplated only for military protection." The statement did, however, explain that "Those related to the enemy countries by ties of blood should constantly remember that whatever action is taken here is due to the tragic and often brutal activities of the leaders now in control of the countries with which we are at war." The racial nationalism and Americanization project advocated by this statement were echoed in the schoolhouse scenes DeVine helped to develop in Autry's films.

Publicity for *The Last Round-Up* and *The Cowboy and the Indians* was once again mixed, sometimes highlighting the films' progressive angles but just as often falling back upon stereotypical attitudes towards American Indians. A press kit for *The Cowboy and the Indians*

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<sup>118</sup> Magers, 244.

<sup>119</sup> "City Schools Prepare Air Raid Defenses," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1942.

<sup>120</sup> This information is quoted in the newsroom journal of Togo Tanaka, editor for the *Los Angeles Japanese Daily News*, typescript, 45 pages, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, BANC MSS 67/14 c, Box 15, Folder A17.07 (4/4), Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Document available online at [http://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/jarda/ucb/text/cubanc6714\\_b015a17\\_0007\\_4.pdf](http://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/jarda/ucb/text/cubanc6714_b015a17_0007_4.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2017).

claimed the Indian was represented “just as another human being with unique problems of his own, and not as a menacing savage,” with problems that included “paleface raiders who would rob them of their birthright”<sup>121</sup> and “the depredations of evil white men.”<sup>122</sup> But misleading taglines for the films emphasized more generic sensationalism, such as “War Whoops Ring”<sup>123</sup> and “Navajos make last stand in modern Indian war!”<sup>124</sup> Similar taglines for *The Last Round-Up* included “Cowboys can’t top him... Indians can’t stop him!” and “Modern Indians don their forefathers’ warpaint to rock the West with thrilling adventure!”<sup>125</sup> Suggested promotional strategies for *The Cowboy and the Indians* likewise played up notions of Indian racial and cultural difference. Film exhibitors were encouraged to stage Indian costume contests, display “Indian relics” from local museums or private collectors, and organize a street fair in which “your bally ‘Indians’ might be unmounted, beating Indian war drums if any are obtainable.” The only suggestion to move beyond this kind of blatant exoticism involved soliciting local schools to teach about the “position of the Indian in American life today,” although it also proposed “art class contests for Indian blanket designs” and training on how to make moccasins and necklaces.<sup>126</sup> This approach was echoed in a film review which claimed “The presence and

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<sup>121</sup> “Autry Defends Indians in New Western Drama.”

<sup>122</sup> “Indians Ride High in New Autry Film.”

<sup>123</sup> Film poster, 1. Press book, *The Cowboy and the Indians* (1949), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.

<sup>124</sup> Film poster, 5. Press book, *The Cowboy and the Indians* (1949), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.

<sup>125</sup> Film posters, 4-5. Press book, *The Last Round-Up* (1947), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.

<sup>126</sup> “In Costume!,” “Indian Relics,” “Street Bally,” and “School Stuff,” 11. Press book, *The Cowboy and the Indians* (1949), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.



activities of some Indian children will arouse juvenile interest and a display of Indian handicraft and jewelry shown throughout should appeal to adults.”<sup>127</sup>

Reviews generally responded positively to the pro-Indian rhetoric, sometimes commenting specifically on the shift in racial attitudes. As one industry reviewer for *Boxoffice* wrote of *The Cowboy and the Indians*:

If exhibitors buy this under the impression it is an action picture along the lines of the pioneer settler versus the Indians on the warpath, they are due for a surprise. Actually, however, this one will please many that the other type wouldn't. It shows Gene Autry as the humanitarian trying to help the Indians of the present southwest who are the victims of certain white men's greed—and of some white men who will not stop at crime. [...The film] can be exploited through the schools and socially conscious organizations. Autry does little singing but there is enough action to satisfy the average Autry fan—and the Indians are authentic.<sup>128</sup>

*The Last Round-Up* also fared well with reviewers, who found that Autry's recent switch to big-budget Columbia from Republic Pictures greatly improved the overall quality of Autry's films: “The production looks big, the cast is excellent and the scripts and direction are far above usual western standards.” However, the pro-Indian elements were not specifically praised, and the reviewer found the funeral scene for the murdered Indian hero to be one of the weaker moments, suggesting its slow pace detracted from an otherwise action-packed film.<sup>129</sup> Reviewers and audiences ultimately seem to have applied the same critical standards to the pro-Indian films as they did the rest of Autry's work, judging them more by their musical performances and action sequences than by any social messages they carried.

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<sup>127</sup> Review of *The Cowboy and the Indians*, *Motion Picture Daily*, November 9, 1949, file on *The Cowboy and the Indians*, PCAR.

<sup>128</sup> “Feature Reviews: *The Cowboy and the Indians*,” *Boxoffice*, December 17, 1949.

<sup>129</sup> “High Standard Set for Western Series” (review of *The Last Round-Up*), [Hollywood?] *Reporter*, October 3, 1947, file on *The Last Round-Up*, PCAR.

## Conclusion

Looking back on his career, Autry declared that *The Last Round-Up* was his best film.<sup>130</sup> This is probably because it was the first to be released by Columbia, produced under Autry's own production company. But its social consciousness, motivated by Autry's personal engagement with American Indian advocacy, likely factored into his proud assessment as well.

Autry's pro-Indian films proved prescient. *The Last Round-Up*, *The Cowboy and the Indians*, and *Apache Country* ultimately belong to a repertory of racially-progressive westerns that emerged during the early postwar era. Canonical films like John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) would soon join Autry's in addressing the crises facing American Indian communities and the racial unrest exposed by the Civil Rights Movement. But while more obscure today, Autry's films were actually more successful than their high-budget counterparts in raising awareness about the plight of Indians at midcentury. At the same time, the films' persistent racial essentialism, their narratives of Indian assimilation, and the centrality of the white perspective dimmed their progressive outlook. The films did, however, serve to further conflate whiteness, fervent nationalism, country music, and its working-class audience together beneath the banner of the American cowboy—a seductive fantasy to deny the exigencies of class, and a troubling legacy that persists into country music today.

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<sup>130</sup> Magers, 244, and Rothel, 163.

## Epilogue

If country music today seems inescapably bound to a white identity, it is worth remembering that this whiteness was by no means inevitable. Rather than inherent, country music's whiteness has required constant reinforcement and renegotiation throughout its long history. In focusing in this dissertation on country music's early period, stretching from 1915 to the early 1950s, I contribute to the growing scholarship about the music's undeniable multiracial origins—and I advocate for extending historical perspectives beyond the musical exchanges of black and white performers. The question that emerges out of this multiracial story is how and why country music nevertheless became white.

Although the answer is multifaceted, the influence of class politics is undeniable. As working-class audiences fought against class prejudice on the road to country music's mainstream commercial acceptance, whiteness became a sword and shield. Popular media asserted a narrative of purely white origins for the music, often accompanied by celebratory nationalist rhetoric. At the same time, the nascent country music industry used new technologies like radio and audio recording to obscure the role of performers of color, who presented a potential liability and inconsistency in a world of Jim Crow segregation. In rallying around a singular white American identity, country performers and entrepreneurs engaged in a politics of respectability that shifted emphasis away from the music's working-class status. This image played a crucial part in country music's upward commercial trajectory.

The figures appearing in these pages—Sol Ho'opi'i, DeFord Bailey, Carson Robison, and Gene Autry—are just four among the many hundreds whose lives helped to define the stylistic and ideological contours of country music. Yet the particulars of their stories elucidate important trends in the genre's early history, and they stand out for different reasons, whether the

excellence of their art or the depth of their popularity. The careers of Ho‘opi‘i and Bailey reveal how performers of color made distinctive contributions to country music yet were susceptible to musical and racial misrepresentation, with white entrepreneurs using new technologies and marketing strategies to recast their music as white. Ho‘opi‘i’s absence from most histories of country music attests to how powerfully the racialized genres developed by recording companies in the 1920s continue to guide popular music historiography. Likewise, radio helped to render Bailey’s race invisible to audiences, allowing narratives of country music’s whiteness to continue largely unimpeded.

These stories of misrepresentation and exploitation should not obscure the agency and creative freedom of the performers, however. Eschewing racialized expectations, Ho‘opi‘i embraced a wide variety of different styles—a singular eclecticism and musical daring that remain key to his legacy. In the end, Bailey also played what he wanted to on his own terms. After leaving the Opry in 1941, he found a modicum of justice by refusing performance opportunities from a music industry that had exploited him. Through opening up to biographer David Morton, he participated in shaping his own history and instigated the ongoing conversation around race in country music.

But as nonwhite performers, Ho‘opi‘i and Bailey ultimately received less credit and exercised less influence over their careers than did white performers like Robison and Autry. Working within a commercial frame underwritten by white supremacy, these men achieved significant financial and social recognition by projecting an overtly American persona that was coded as undeniably white. Although they promoted divergent messages of racial exclusion and racial assimilation, both Robison and Autry sought to uplift country music by placing it at the center of American cultural identity.

My hope is that this dissertation will continue to spur dialogue around the roles that whiteness plays in shaping country music—and much other music besides. To be sure, the kind of upwardly mobile, aspirational whiteness discussed here does not apply uniformly to all of country music throughout its long history. Racial politics have continued to evolve over the past seventy years, as have the different meanings of whiteness. Class allegiances are likewise in constant flux. Disdaining middle-class values, some country performers and sometimes entire subgenres deliberately foreground their working-class status as a rebuke to what they perceive as an arrogant bourgeoisie—although these performers also often perform a kind of whiteness.<sup>1</sup> Issues of class mobility, race, and nationalism continue to intersect in contemporary country music, and musical racialism and racial nationalism thus remain effective lenses for assessing the music’s meaning. This is especially true for moments in which whiteness seems an unremarkable, normative identity, and the repertory involved seems far removed from questions of race. These are the moments when racial politics are at their most explosive, because the boundaries of and privileges conferred by whiteness are so buried as to appear natural. As this dissertation suggests, whiteness is always unnatural and ideologically loaded.

I close then with two brief examples exploring how musical racialism and racial nationalism live on in the contemporary era. The first is the outpouring of country songs released in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.<sup>2</sup> Appearing in the weeks and months after the attacks, many songs shared uncomfortable parallels with the nationalist rhetoric that followed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor sixty years earlier. If most 9/11 songs lacked the

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<sup>1</sup> One particularly notable example is the category of “hard country,” including such performers as David Allan Coe, Merle Haggard, Hank Williams, Jr., and Dwight Yoakam. This notion of hard country, as well as these and other performers, are discussed in Barbara Ching, *Wrong’s What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> One of the many articles to discuss this phenomenon and its sociocultural implications is Aaron A. Fox, “‘Alternative’ to What? *O Brother*, September 11, and the Politics of Country Music,” in *Country Music Goes to War*, ed. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson, 164-91 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005).

overt racial language of Carson Robison's anti-Japanese material, they easily equaled his patriotic zeal. Pro-American songs like Darryl Worley's "Have You Forgotten?" (March 2003) and Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)" (May 2002) threatened violent revenge against America's foreign enemies; among the most popular 9/11 anthems, Keith's song memorably taunted, "You'll be sorry that you messed with / The U.S. of A. / 'Cause we'll put a boot in your ass, / It's the American way." Charlie Daniels's "This Ain't No Rag, It's a Flag" (November 2001) tapped into a rising tide of Islamophobia by mocking Muslim turbans and comparing Middle Eastern terrorists to "a dirty little mole." These images reinforced notions of American cultural supremacy; Daniels's song described Americans as "faithful, loyal, and tough," and "good as the best and better than the rest."

Without explicitly saying so, this proliferation of pro-American topical songs served to forge a link between country music, its (white) audiences, and American identity, much as Robison's songs had done during World War II. This yielded greater symbolic capital and political power for country music audiences during the presidential administration of George W. Bush. The country music audience was regarded as a powerful Republican voting bloc throughout the early 2000s, although this political and cultural cachet did not necessarily translate into economic gains for the white working-class, as it had during World War II.<sup>3</sup> Bush's conspicuous adoption of the cowboy image during this time attested to the continued appeal of a rugged, masculinist American individualism, which of course also remained coded as white.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The failure of this working-class constituency to transform their domination of Republican politics into economic gains continues to be studied by sociologists. During the Bush years, the tendency for working-class whites to vote against their economic self-interest was explored memorably in Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> For more on the political culture of country music during this period, see Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: New Press, 2005).

Even as the patriotic thrust of these 9/11 songs seemed to assert country music's enduring whiteness, the country music industry also sought to project a more multiracial image. This was seen not only in the latter-day celebrations of DeFord Bailey, but also in the canonization of Charley Pride (b. 1934), another African American country performer whose peak popularity came in the 1970s. The resonances between the careers and recent reception of Bailey and Pride are striking. As with Bailey, there was a concerted effort to conceal Charley Pride's race from audiences, at least until his music caught on. Contrary to standard practice, early album covers and publicity did not include photographs of Pride, lest his race alienate white buyers.<sup>5</sup> Pride was aware of the anxieties surrounding his race, and he tried to reassure audiences by joking that he merely had "a permanent tan."<sup>6</sup> Pride was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2000, five years before Bailey. In fact, in 2002, as Bailey's advocates accused the Hall of anti-black prejudice, representatives for the Hall cited Pride as a counterexample. Scott Stern, a media relations director for the Country Music Association, pleaded, "No one is excluded because of their race, as evidenced by Charley Pride's induction into the Hall of Fame in 2000."<sup>7</sup>

Later in his career, Pride expressed frustration at being pigeonholed as a *black* country singer rather than simply a country singer. Around the time of his Hall of Fame induction, he told an interviewer,

When I first started out reporters were asking, "Now Charley, how does it feel to be the first colored country singer? How does it feel to be the first Negro country singer? How

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<sup>5</sup> Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 133-4.

<sup>6</sup> Pride discusses moments like these in his autobiography: Charley Pride with Jim Henderson, *Pride: The Charley Pride Story* (New York: William Morrow, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Gwendolyn C. Young, "Family, others still fighting to get Opry pioneer into Hall of Fame," *Tennessean*, December 5, 2002, DBC B3-F5.

does it feel to be the first black country singer?” Now it’s “How does it feel to be the first Afro-American country singer?” I say, “The same way [as] when I was colored.”<sup>8</sup>

Pride here demonstrates a cynicism towards superficial rhetorical gestures that do little to change political realities. The Hall of Fame inductions of figures like Pride and Bailey exist in this ambivalent space. Viewed uncharitably, their inductions can come across as moments of discrete tokenism, falsely redeeming country music with a sunny multiracialism. To be clear, I think that efforts to diversify the musical canon are long overdue and absolutely necessary to desegregating popular music and culture—indeed, in spotlighting figures like Sol Ho‘opi‘i and DeFord Bailey, my dissertation participates in this kind of advocacy. But just as important is a deeper reckoning with the ways in which country music—as well as many other genres—have been shaped by the hidden histories of white supremacy.

Charley Pride’s livelihood depended upon deftly navigating this history and reconciling it with his own racial identity. His preferred strategy was to adopt the rhetoric of melting-pot nationalism. Later in this same interview, Pride speculated:

The basis of American music is country, gospel, and blues. [...] Maybe this is how you sum it all up: Maybe in Charley Pride, not only singing, but hearing and being, you’re hearing the epitome of American music, the American that’s singing the American music.<sup>9</sup>

Pride here hopes to transcend any racialized expectations by invoking his American identity, but he still defines Americanness by relying on a matrix of racialized genres. And, as my dissertation argues, the language of nationalism can just as easily be hijacked in service of assimilationist or exclusionary narratives that valorize certain kinds of identities while marginalizing others.

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Streissguth, “Charley Pride: American,” in *Voices of the Country: Interviews with Classic Country Performers* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 130.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.



Invocations of country music's "American" identity, however progressive-minded, must contend with a history in which the label "American" was deployed as a proxy for whiteness. In the early twentieth century, country music's claims to white American identity brought it new levels of commercial and critical success. Today musicologists work towards a more open and inclusive musical world than previously imagined. Even so, as scholars, teachers, artists, consumers, and citizens, we should remain ever self-critical about the influence of racial and national narratives upon our histories.

## Appendix 1: Dating the Origins of the “Grand Ole Opry” Name

An accurate history of the first Grand Ole Opry broadcast, of which DeFord Bailey was a part, has been difficult to come by. The primary source for most historians is the account given by George D. Hay in his informally-published memoir of 1945, *A Story of the Grand Ole Opry*:

It so happened that on Saturday nights, from seven until eight o’clock WSM carried The Music Appreciation Hour, under the direction of the eminent conductor and composer, Dr. Walter Damrosh [*sic*]. Dr. Damrosh [*sic*] always signed off his concert a minute or so before eight o’clock, just before we hit the air with our mountain minstrels and vocal trapeze performers. [...]

The monitor in our Studio “B” was turned on, so that we would have a rough idea of the time which was fast approaching. At about five minutes before eight, your reporter called for silence in the studio. Out of the loudspeaker came the very correct, but accented voice of Dr. Damrosh [*sic*] and his words were something like this:

“While most artists realize that there is no place in the classics for realism, nevertheless I am going to break one of my rules and present a composition by a young composer from ‘Ioway’, who sent us his latest number, which depicts the onrush of a locomotive...”

After which announcement the good doctor directed his symphony orchestra through the number which carried many “shoooses” [*sic*] depicting an engine trying to come to a full stop. Then he closed his programme with his usual sign-off.

Our control operator gave us the signal which indicated that we were on the air. [...] We paid our respects to Dr. Damrosh [*sic*] and said on the air something like this:

“Friends, the programme which just came to a close was devoted to the classics. Dr. Damrosh [*sic*] told us that it was generally agreed that there is no place in the classics for realism. However, from here on out for the next three hours we will present nothing but realism. It will be down to earth for the ‘earthy.’ In respectful contrast to Dr. Damrosh’s [*sic*] presentation of the number which depicts the onrush of the locomotive we will call on one of our performers, Deford [*sic*] Bailey, with his harmonica, to give us the country version of his “Pan American Blues.”

Whereupon, Deford [*sic*] Bailey, a wizard with the harmonica, played the number. At the close of it, your reporter said: “For the past hour we have been listening to music taken largely from Grand Opera, but from now on we will present ‘The Grand Ole Opry.’” The name has stuck for almost twenty years. It seems to fit our shindig, hoedown, barn dance or rookus, which has become known throughout America and in some foreign lands.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> George D. Hay, *A Story of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville, TN[?]: self-published, 1945), 17-9, GOOC B4-F8.

This version, with various alterations, embellishments, and omissions, has before and since 1945 been retold in official Opry publicity material as well as in the scholarly and popular press, to the extent that it is now the accepted version of events.<sup>2</sup>

Yet as Hay himself has conceded, his account is based solely on memory rather than archival documentation, committing several minor errors while simultaneously omitting such basic information as the date of this first broadcast. Unfortunately, several of these errors have proliferated in subsequent histories of the Opry. However, Hay does provide enough information to retrieve a more accurate, fuller history of the first Opry broadcast. In a 1968 pamphlet, *Etiology of the Grand Old [sic] Opry*, Don Cummings has shown that the first appearance in print of the name “Grand Old Op’ry” is in a radio programming announcement in a Nashville newspaper on December 11, 1927, and he provides a photocopy of the announcement to lend credence to his claim.<sup>3</sup> In terms of dating the initial broadcast, this narrows the window to a Saturday evening in November or early December 1927, when Walter Damrosch began his stint as conductor of the New York Symphony Orchestra on a nationally-syndicated NBC program called the *RCA Hour*. WSM was among the twenty-two stations nationwide to carry the program, which had its first broadcast on Saturday, November 5, 1927.<sup>4</sup> (Damrosch’s *Music Appreciation Hour* was developed primarily for weekdays, when schoolchildren would listen as part of their

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<sup>2</sup> For WSM press releases with this story (from c.1935, c.1940, and 1958) see typescripts in GOOC B1-F5.; as well Anne Walker, “Presenting: ‘The Grand Ole Opry!’,” January 1963, GOOC B4-F1. For a scholarly account of the first Opry broadcast that cites Hay’s version, see Charles K. Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville, TN: Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 1999), 21-2.

<sup>3</sup> Don Cummings, *Etiology of the Grand Old [sic] Opry* (self-published pamphlet), 1968, Grand Ole Opry Ephemera Subject Files, Folder 1, Special Collections Division, Nashville Public Library. In the radio announcement, Bailey is billed simply as “DeFord Bailey, the harmonica wizard.” Cummings unfortunately does not provide the name of the newspaper.

<sup>4</sup> See “Walter Damrosch on Air Again: Noted Conductor in New Series of Concerts,” *Boston Daily Globe*, October 31, 1927, and “Radio Program Notes,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 8, 1927.

music curriculum; although it too was carried by NBC, it did not have its initial broadcast until 1928.)<sup>5</sup>

It is probably impossible to say with certainty on which Saturday evening Hay made his famous ad-libbed “Opry” introduction. But an undated WSM press release in Vanderbilt University’s Special Collections offers a tantalizing clue. In providing yet another account of the Opry’s history, the release suggests that just prior to Hay going on the air, Damrosch was conducting “the famous realistic symphonic piece, ‘Pacific 231’, reproducing the noises made by a trans-continental steam engine then in use.”<sup>6</sup> French composer Arthur Honegger’s *Pacific 231* (1923) does indeed take as inspiration the sounds of a locomotive, lending some credibility to Hay’s story (although his mention of “a young composer from ‘Ioway’” remains a puzzle—perhaps Hay is mixing memories of two broadcasts). Another radio programming announcement, this time in *The Washington Post*, mentions that Honegger’s *Pacific 231* was scheduled for broadcast on the *RCA Hour* on Saturday, November 12, 1927.<sup>7</sup> This date, in all likelihood, is when Hay coined the name “Grand Ole Opry.”

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<sup>5</sup> *Grove Music Online*, s.v. “Walter (Johannes) Damrosch,” [http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/07137pg3?q=walter+damrosch&search=quick&pos=1&\\_start=1#firsthit](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/07137pg3?q=walter+damrosch&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit) (accessed May 7, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Press release on history of the Grand Ole Opry (photocopy), 7pp., [c. 1935?], WSMRTC B12-F11.

<sup>7</sup> “WRC Will Broadcast New York Orchestra,” *Washington Post*, November 12, 1927.

## Appendix 2: Robison's Wartime Recordings and Published Sheet Music

### Commercial Recordings<sup>8</sup>

Recorded December 18, 1941:

- "Remember Pearl Harbor," Bluebird B-11414
- "Get Your Gun and Come Along (We're Fixin' to Kill a Skunk)," Bluebird B-11415
- "I'm in the Army Now," Bluebird B-11415
- "We're Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap (And Uncle Sam's the Guy Who Can Do It)," Bluebird B-11414

Recorded January 26, 1942:

- "Mussolini's Letter to Hitler," Bluebird B-11459
- "Hitler's Reply to Mussolini," Bluebird B-11459
- "1942 Turkey in the Straw," Bluebird B-11460
- "'Here I Go to Tokio,' Said Barnacle Bill, the Sailor," Bluebird B-11460

Recorded April 16, 1942:

- "Don't Let My Spurs Get Rusty While I'm Gone," Bluebird B-11546
- "Plain Talk," Bluebird B-11546
- "It's Just a Matter of Time," Bluebird B-11527
- "The Story of Jitterbug Joe," Bluebird B-11527

Recorded July 17, 1942:

- "The Old Gray Mare Is Back Where She Used to Be," Bluebird 33-0808

Released 1945:

- "Hirohito's Letter to Hitler," RCA Victor 20-1665-A
- "Hitler's Last Letter to Hirohito," RCA Victor 20-1665-B
- "A Hundred Years from Now," RCA Victor 20-1694-A
- "1945 Mother Goose Rhymes" ["1945 Nursery Rhymes"], Bluebird 33-0518-A
- "That Dame I Left Behind Me," Bluebird 33-0518-B
- "There's No More Feudin' in the Mountains," RCA Victor 20-1694-B

Released 1947:

- "Predictions for a Hundred Years from Now," MGM 10012

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<sup>8</sup> These are listed by date of recording session, when available. For complete discographic information on several of these pieces, see Tony Russell, *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). For songs released in 1945, see liner notes to Robison, *A Real Hillbilly Legend*, which includes recording numbers, as well as [www.discogs.com](http://www.discogs.com). For 1947, "4 More Great Releases!" (advertisement), *Billboard*, April 5, 1947.

## Unreleased Recordings/Demos

Recorded July 17, 1942 for Bluebird:

- “I’m a Pris’ner of War”

Recorded January 11, 1944 for RCA:<sup>9</sup>

- “1944 Nursery Rhymes”
- “That Dame I Left Behind Me”

n.d.:

- “That’s What We Mean by American”<sup>10</sup>

## Published Sheet Music<sup>11</sup>

- Carson J. Robison and Frank Luther, “‘Here I Go to Tokio’ Said Barnacle Bill, the Sailor,” New York: Southern Music, 1929 (new lyrics: copyright assigned 1941 to Peer International). (B1:F58)
- Frank Luther, “I’m in the Army Now,” New York: Broadcast Music, 1941. (B1:F60)
- Carson J. Robison, “Don’t Let My Spurs Get Rusty While I’m Gone,” New York: Bob Miller, 1942. (B1:F56)
- Carson J. Robison, “Get Your Gun and Come Along (We’re Fixin’ to Kill a Skunk),” New York: Robbins Music, 1942. (B1:F58)
- Carson J. Robison, “Hitler’s Reply to Mussolini,” New York: Robbins Music, 1942. (B1:F59)
- Harry Pease, Ed. G. Nelson, and Dick Sanford, “I’m a Pris’ner of War,” New York: Shapiro, Bernstein and Co., 1942. (B4:F118)
- Carson Robison, “It’s Just a Matter of Time,” New York: Bob Miller, 1942. (B1:F60)
- Carson J. Robison, “Mussolini’s Letter to Hitler,” New York: Robbins Music, 1942. (B2:F63)
- Carson J. Robison, “1942 Turkey in the Straw,” New York: Robbins Music, 1942. (B2:F63)
- Carson J. Robison, “The Old Gray Mare Is Back Where She Used to Be,” New York: Bob Miller, 1942. (B2:F64)
- Carson J. Robison, “Plain Talk,” New York: Bob Miller, 1942. (B2:F64)
- Carson Robison, “The Story of Jitterbug Joe,” New York: Bob Miller, 1942. (B2:F67)
- Bob Miller, “We’re Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap (And Uncle Sam’s the Guy Who Can Do It),” New York: Bob Miller, 1942.
- John T. Mitchell, “That Dame I Left Behind Me,” New York: Peer International, 1943. (B2:F67)

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<sup>9</sup> CRC F315 and F339.

<sup>10</sup> “That’s What We Mean by American,” test disk with “nola recording studios” imprint, New York, CRC F316.

<sup>11</sup> Box and folder numbers from the Carson Robison Collection are included in parentheses where applicable.

- John T. Mitchell, "There's No More Feudin' in the Mountains," New York: Peer International, 1943. (B5:F142)
- Carson J. Robison, "In Answer to Yours of December Seventh," New York: Bob Miller, 1944. (B1:F60)
- Carson J. Robison, "Who's Gonna Bury Hitler When the Onery Cuss Is Dead?," New York: Bob Miller, 1944. (B2:F68)
- Carson J. Robison, "Hirohito's Letter to Hitler," New York: Bob Miller, 1945. (B1:F58)
- Carson J. Robison, "Hitler's Last Letter to Hirohito," New York: Bob Miller, 1945. (B1:F58)
- Carson J. Robison, "A Hundred Years from Now," New York: Bob Miller, 1945. (B1:F59)
- Carson J. Robison, "1945 Nursery Rhymes," New York: Bob Miller, 1945. (B2:F63)
- Carson J. Robison, "Predictions for a Hundred Years from Now," New York: Bob Miller, 1947. (B2:F64)

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Mischa Bakaleinikoff Collection, Special Collections, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California.

Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

Press book [photocopy], *Apache Country* (1952), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.

Press book, *The Cowboy and the Indians* (1949), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.

Press book, *Indian Territory* (1950), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.



Press book, *The Last Round-Up* (1947), © Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation. Courtesy of Gene Autry Entertainment.

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