

THE RECORDING INDUSTRY'S INFLUENCE ON VERNACULAR TRADITIONS  
1920-1960: ILLUSTRATED CASE STUDIES OF MAMIE SMITH, THE CARTER  
FAMILY, AND LEADBELLY

by

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ABSTRACT  
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In this study, the Kingston Trio's 1958 recording of "Tom Dooley" is used as a starting point to explore the recording industry's commercialization of folk music in the first half of the twentieth century. Three case studies – Mamie Smith, the Carter Family, and Leadbelly – address trends in academic folk music scholarship that juxtaposed an initial rise in a commercial music culture that began with early 1920s race recordings and culminates in the folk-revival in the post-WWII period. These trends trace back into the nineteenth century, and include African American performance traditions that were incorporated into pre-civil war minstrelsy and late century vaudeville, and include African American theater, ragtime, "coon singing," and popular blues. This discussion highlights times in the early 1920s, the late 1920s, and the early 1930s, that were crucial to changing the sound and performance practice of traditional folk and vernacular traditions into more commercial products. This thesis culminates in a discussion of the direction taken by folk music in the early 1960s with the appearance of commercial groups associated with the folk revival movement and the emergence of folk rock.

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For Grandpa

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

In 1958, the Kingston Trio – a group of young white men from Hawaii – recorded the historical Appalachian murder ballad “Tom Dooley,” with Capitol Records.<sup>1</sup> When the album was released, it sold over three million copies and won a Grammy for “Best Country and Western Vocal Performance.”<sup>2</sup> This raises the question of how did three young university educated men from Hawaii, all of whom were in their early 20s, come into the commercial success of singing and playing traditional folk tunes? “Tom Dooley” had been recorded at least two times earlier in 1929, 1939, so why was their recording so popular?<sup>3</sup> These questions are answered by understanding the nature of folk music in the 1950s, and in knowing the paths that traditional American vernacular traditions had taken since the popular dissemination of sound recordings.

The purpose of this study is to show how vernacular traditions such as folk songs made their way into mainstream popular culture by addressing the ways in which the recording industry worked to shape the aesthetic of folk music in the twentieth century. By focusing on recording practice, Artist & Repertoire influence, and artist reception within three case studies, I will highlight the ways in which the recording industry incorporated vernacular music into mainstream popular music culture. Currently, the amount of scholarship done on this topic is limited. Writing about it is a process of

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<sup>1</sup> The Kingston Trio, 1958, “Tom Dooley,” by Dave Guard, Bob Shane, and Nick Reynolds, recorded February 2, released September 8, Capitol 4049, On *The Kingston Trio: The Capitol Collector’s Series*, CDP 7927102, 1990, compact disc.

<sup>2</sup> Callot, Robin, and Paul Surratt. Notes to *The Kingston Trio: The Capitol Collector’s Series*, CDP 7927102, 1990, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Marty McGee, *Traditional Musicians of the Central Blue Ridge: Old Time, Early Country, Folk, and Bluegrass Label Recording Artists, with Discographies* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2000), 69; Grayson, G.B., and Henry Whitter, 1929, “Tom Dooley,” by G.B. Grayson and Henry Whitter, recorded September 30, on *The Recordings of Grayson & Whitter*, County Records County CD 3517, 1998, compact disc; Joe Wilson, notes to *The Recordings of Grayson & Whitter*, County Records County CD 3517, 1998, linear notes, 8.

piecing together fragments of research from related fields of study, creating a foundation on which this argument is based.

First, chapter two focuses on the reception of African American popular blues singer Mamie Smith in the 1920 recording of “Crazy Blues.” Smith was the first artist to carry vernacular traditions into the commercial recording industry and receive phenomenal popularity, causing the industry to create “race records” and market to African American audiences.<sup>4</sup> “Race marketing” changed the course of the industry and opened doors to diversifying recordings geared toward specific audiences. African American theater, blues, “coon song,” ragtime, and even minstrelsy were formative in the creation of popular blues and in the life of Smith.

Literature surrounding the rise of popular blues is very date specific. I limited the time frame that I would consider in order to keep my topic focused. Two books that gave a good general overview of the history of recording were Tim Brooks’s *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919*, and Michael Chanan’s book, *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and the Effects on Music*. Brooks further helped to develop my discussion of the first black commercial recordings based on three time periods: before the turn of the twentieth century, 1900-1910, and after 1910. Peter Muir’s book *Long Lost Blues: Popular Blues in America, 1850-1920* focuses on the early growth of popular blues, and for my research, was helpful for the time period after 1910. Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, in *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music 1889-1895*, attribute part of the rise in African American popular music to ragtime. I define ragtime and examine the importance of its contribution to later popular blues

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<sup>4</sup> Robert M.W. Dixon and John Godrich, *Recording the Blues* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), 6.

music. Muir was also important in finding vernacular traditions in ragtime and popular blues, identifying lyric and harmonic qualities that transcend from African American vernacular culture. Additionally, Samuel B. Charters book *The Country Blues* helped to identify forms and characteristics of delta blues, so that attributes are more easily recognized and understood in the context of popular blues. Robert Palmer's book *Deep Blues* added to the discussion of blues.

*From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America 1830-1910*, edited by Robert M. Lewis, is a compiled anthology important to explaining the presence of African American vernacular traditions in vaudeville. Gillian Rodger's book, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima: Variety Theater in the Nineteenth Century* emphasized vaudeville's growth from variety, which was present before the Civil War. Muir was also important in examining African American theater at the turn of the twentieth century. African American theater in this form brought the roots of blues into urban areas as black entertainers traveled to perform in shows. "Coon songs" and "coon shouters" were best described using Janet Brown's article "The 'Coon-singer' and the 'coon-song': a case study of the performer – character relationship." Her source highlighted the transcendence of "coon songs" through ragtime, made popular by black and white female vaudeville singers around the turn of the twentieth century. Moreover, Abbott and Seroff's book *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, "Coon Shows" and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz*, highlights the first "coon songs" to emerge during 1880s vaudeville.

In my discussion of Smith, I show that her recording introduced the practice of regularly recording black artists effectively launching “race” records.<sup>5</sup> I examine how the recording of “Crazy Blues” incorporated vernacular music into the recording industry. Daphne Duval Harrison examined the life of Mamie Smith in *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*. Harrison’s book strengthened my narrative of Smith’s move from being the star of the African American show, *Maid of Harlem*, to being a commercial recording success, carrying with her vernacular African American traditions. Additionally, Perry Bradford’s self publication *Born With the Blues: Perry Bradford’s Own Story*, was important for describing Smith’s first few recording sessions, including her most famous break with Okeh studios in 1920 singing “Crazy Blues.”

This chapter asks what was popular blues, and how did it develop? What vernacular traditions circulated in popular entertainment and in recordings prior to Smith’s recording? In constructing a narrative of Smith’s first recording sessions, I consider the music climates of the North and the South and the acceptance of race recordings. Perry Bradford, Smith’s promoter, was an important influence on Smith, and I demonstrate the influence he had on her career. I also use Bradford’s position as an early Artist & Repertoire career man, to form a link of industry personnel that worked to create artist’s success through the decades. Finally, I consider the lasting effects of Smith’s recording, and the ways in which it changed the recording industry.

The lasting influences of Smith’s success are best documented in Robert M.W. Dixon and John Godrich’s small book *Recording the Blues*, which explains the emergence of “race” records. Harrison’s book was helpful for its discussion of the importance of stage presence and how it impacted record sales. Harrison also best

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6.

describes the racial implications that resulted because of Smith's records; the industry began marketing to African Americans and Southern whites. Finally, Harrison emphasizes the manipulation of the recording industry; after the popularity of popular blues, the images used in marketing changed to depict stereotypical caricatured images, and sales continued to boom. Harrison also describes the beginning of record company scouts, sent out to find marketable talent.

Chapter three focuses on the career of Artist & Repertoire businessman Ralph Peer, and his promotion of the southern Appalachian folk group the Carter Family, beginning in 1927. I discuss the gap the Carter Family filled in the formation of an American musical marketplace. Particularly, the Carter Family bridged a gap from traditional folk to commercial, by copyrighting versions of their songs.<sup>6</sup> John Atkins' chapter titled "Biography," in *The Carter Family*, by John Atkins, Bob Coltman, Alec Davidson, and Kip Lornell, was essential in providing a biography of each of the Carter Family members – A.P., Sara, and Maybelle.

Peer sought out a specific sound when he first signed the Carter Family.<sup>7</sup> I discuss the Carter Family's first recording sessions in Bristol, on the Tennessee and Virginia borders. Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg's book, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?: The Carter Family and Their Legacy in American Music*, addresses what role Ralph Peer played in building their success, and how he changed the bigger picture of popular music by playing into audience tastes, thus shaping the greater

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<sup>6</sup> Katie Doman, "Something Old, Something New: The Carter Family's Bristol Sessions Recordings," in *The Bristol Sessions: Writings About the Big Bang of Country Music*, edited by Charles K. Wolfe, and Ted Olson (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2005), 67.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?: The Carter Family and Their Legacy in American Music* (New York: Simon & Schuster: 2002), 94-95.

industry. Charles K. Wolfe, in “The Legend that Peer Built: Reappraising the Bristol Sessions,” within *The Bristol Sessions: Writings About The Big Bang of Country Music*, focuses on Peer’s life and his early career and the artists he worked with including Mamie Smith and Fiddlin’ John Carson. Additionally, Atkins’ “Biography” provided some history of their first Bristol recording sessions as told by the Carter Family members themselves. Another of Wolfe’s writings, “The Bristol Sessions: The Cast of Characters,” also in *The Bristol Sessions: Writings About the Big Bang of Country Music*, describes in depth what songs the Carter Family recorded in Bristol, and it highlights some of the subtleties of the relationship between the Carter Family and Peer.

Last, I highlight the unique playing techniques the Carter Family members used, and discuss ways they kept up with old traditions, while making new music. Katie Doman’s chapter, “Something Old, Something New: The Carter Family’s Bristol Sessions Recordings,” in *The Bristol Sessions: Writings About the Big Bang of Country Music*, discusses the sound of the Carter Family, and why they were influential in changing the traditional sound of folk into a commercial endeavor. Their ability to rearrange and then copyright traditional folk songs made them unique and important to the discussion of an evolving folk sound.<sup>8</sup>

Chapter four is concerned with the reception and performance practice of Huddie (Leadbelly) Ledbetter, the 1930s African American folk musician, and ex-convict. Leadbelly was an important figure in representing rural traditions that were brought to the popular scene by way of folk collectors.<sup>9</sup> He depicted an “authentic” image that was used

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<sup>8</sup> Doman, “Something Old, Something New,” 67.

<sup>9</sup> John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), ix.

as a marketing tool.<sup>10</sup> In this chapter, I begin with a history of a folk heritage in the United States, discussing the importance of folk collectors in the US and Europe, particularly Johann Gottfried von Herden, Francis James Child, and Cecil Sharp. I highlight what the definition of “folk” meant to each collector and how these ideas shaped their work. This discussion leads towards a brief examination of blackface minstrelsy, highlighting the ways in which African Americans were stereotyped, and their portrayal in popular entertainment. I then consider the role of vaudeville and ragtime in perpetuating these stereotypes before considering early folk collecting, like the work of John A. Lomax.

Benjamin Filene’s book *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*, was important to documenting the first attempts by European and American intellectuals identifying an American folk heritage, focusing on the importance of Johann Gottfried von Herden, Francis James Child, and Cecil Sharp. Filene’s work further enhanced my discussion about what constituted “pure” folk, explaining some of the reasons why collectors in twentieth century America collected certain songs and genres and not others. James Porter’s article, “Convergence, Divergence, and Dialectic in Folksong Paradigms: Critical Directions for Transatlantic Scholarship,” in *The Journal of American Folklore* explores the life of Cecil Sharp, and the ways in which his socialist ideals shaped his views about collecting folk music in contrast to folk collectors, like Child, who came before. Robert C. Toll’s book, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*, helped in discussing early nineteenth century minstrel traditions.

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<sup>10</sup> Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs*, 52-53.

John A. Lomax, and his work with his son Alan Lomax on their southern folk song expeditions, led to the discovery of Leadbelly in a Louisiana penitentiary in the early 1930s.<sup>11</sup> John and Alan traveled with Leadbelly all the way to New York City.<sup>12</sup> I focus on Leadbelly's reception in New York City in 1934 under the influence and care of John and Alan Lomax. I examine Leadbelly's musical repertoire and the influences of his music. Who was Leadbelly's audience in the North? Was his audience different from the audience for hillbilly and race records? What were the musical climates of the North and the South and their acceptance of folk music like that of Leadbelly's? I also discuss stereotyping and social stigmas surrounding Leadbelly and the Lomaxes. How did stereotyping influence the way John Lomax dressed and presented Leadbelly to audiences? Did the Lomaxes change his repertoire?

Several sources were important to discussing the narrative and history of Leadbelly. First, John Szwed's book, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World*, recounts the biography of Alan Lomax, which is important in further discussing the relationship he shared with Leadbelly. Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell's book *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, brings awareness to issues of race and stereotype seen in Leadbelly's on-stage image as a Southern convict. It also gives insight into the relationship between Leadbelly and his promoters, John and Alan Lomax. Additionally, Wolfe and Lornell help provide an understanding of the demographics of Leadbelly's audience.

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<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 51.

<sup>12</sup> Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs*, x.

John and Alan Lomax's writing, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, is helpful because it describes ethnographies of the United States in the early twentieth century, as well as preserving some of the musical repertoire of Leadbelly. Additionally, J. and A. Lomax narrate the history of Leadbelly's life, often interspersed with Leadbelly's own words describing his life growing up in the years before the influence of blues and jazz. Wolfe and Lornell are again important in providing an overview of Leadbelly's first trip to New York City in the winter of 1934, and a meeting with the New York City based group The Texas-Exes, made up of University of Texas Alumni. Hugh Baker and Yuval Taylor's book, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* also helps explain where Leadbelly acquired his repertoire.

Chapter five focuses on the Kingston Trio's 1958 recording of "Tom Dooley" and evaluates its history as a southern Appalachian murder ballad. This chapter represents the conclusion of my thesis, demonstrating how the recording industry shaped the aesthetic of folk music. The ballad is based on a murder that took place in Western North Carolina in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> I begin with a narrative of the murder, which is the basis for the lyric content of "Tom Dooley." I then address how the Kingston Trio came to know the song. By tracing earlier recordings and versions of the song I illustrate ways in which the Kingston Trio's performance departs from earlier traditional versions. Drawing strands from previous chapters that emphasize the transcendence of American vernacular culture through history, I describe historical recording industry practices that influenced the success of "Tom Dooley" when the Kingston Trio recorded it in 1958.

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<sup>13</sup> John Foster West, *The Ballad of Tom Dula: The Documented Story Behind the Murder of Laura Foster and the Trials and Execution of Tom Dula* (Durham, North Carolina: Moore Publishing, 1970-1976).

Most of my research on “Tom Dooley” centers on reviewing multiple recordings and transcriptions. My research began with the Kingston Trio’s album, *The Capitol Collector’s Series* (1990), which includes the 1958 recording of “Tom Dooley.” I noted that the Kingston Trio used lyrics that are identical to those published in Alan Lomax’s publication, *Folk Song USA: 111 Best Ballads*. Furthermore, I found the 1927 recording of “Tom Dooley” on *The Recordings of Grayson & Henry Whitter* (1998), which is also the earliest known recording of the song.

Marty McGee’s book, *Traditional Musicians of the Central Blue Ridge: Old Time, Early Country, Folk, and Bluegrass Label Recording Artists*, was helpful in filling in some of the history between 1927 and 1958. McGee further documents an early recording by Frank Warner in 1952, and recounts some of the history in how Warner obtained the ballad on a folk collecting expedition to the Western North Carolina Mountains. Additionally, John Foster West’s book, *The Ballad of Tom Dula: The Documented Story Behind the Murder of Laura Foster and the Trials and Execution of Tom Dula*, provides a narrative history of characters lives that are mentioned in the ballad “Tom Dooley.” Based on primary research of court documents and interviews, West’s work has been useful when discussing regional lyric differences in the numerous ballad versions that exist. Robert Cantwell’s book *When We Were Good* helps tie the Kingston Trio to the impending folk revival of the late 1950s and early ‘60s. His writing helps support the argument that the Kingston Trio changed the direction or enhanced the popularity of folk music in the commercial market. I also use the artist Doc Watson as an example of the reclaimed traditional folk sound that grew out of the 1960s, and I support my discussion using his *Legacy* recording with David Holt.

By studying the influences of Mamie Smith, the Carter Family, and Leadbelly, on the 1950s/60s folk revival, this study approaches folk scholarship in a new way by highlighting the strikingly commercial aspect of the folk movement, instead of focusing on “authenticity.” The Kingston Trio’s recording of “Tom Dooley” acts as a thread through the recording industry from 1920 to 1960, by having multiple recorded versions of the song in 1927, around 1938, 1952, and 1958. By using this song as an example, it is feasible to establish specific dates where the nature the folk music and vernacular traditions were influenced by the commercial market; usually such times resulted in folk music becoming more marketable in order to bring in a higher profit.

## CHAPTER 2 – MAMIE SMITH AND “CRAZY BLUES”

It was my humble belief that the people were craving for something to lift them up so they could forget about the war and those same mothers, sweethearts and war-songs weren't any relief. That's why I was busy knocking myself out in 1918 and facing many insults and wise-cracking from recording managers (what we call today those "Artists 'N' Repertoire guys") for our folks had a story to tell and it could be told only in vocal – not instrumental – recordings.<sup>14</sup>

On August 10, 1920, Okeh studios recorded African American variety show star Mamie Smith singing the popular blues song "Crazy Blues."<sup>15</sup> Smith's extraordinary record sales led the recording industry to advertise African American recordings as "race" records.<sup>16</sup> Smith performed the genre of popular blues, which was influenced by African American theater, vaudeville, "coon songs," ragtime, and even minstrelsy. In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which Smith's recording of "Crazy Blues" first incorporated vernacular music traditions into the recording industry.

### **The beginning of recording**

Thomas A. Edison invented the phonograph in 1877, seeing the device as a means of recording diction for office or home use.<sup>17</sup> While Edison stopped working on the phonograph for nearly ten years, the phonograph continued to improve with advances made by various individuals, including inventor of the telephone Alexander Graham Bell. In 1886 Edison changed the phonograph, replacing the tinfoil strips he had originally

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<sup>14</sup> Perry Bradford, *Born With the Blues: Perry Bradford's Own Story: the True Story of the Pioneering Blues Singers and Musicians in the Early Days of Jazz* (New York: Oak Publications, 1965), 114.

<sup>15</sup> Mamie Smith, 1920, "Crazy Blues," by Mamie Smith, Johnny Dunn, Dope Andrews, Ernest Elliot, Leroy Parker, Willie (The Lion) Smith, recorded August 10, 7529-C-OK 4169, on *Mamie Smith: Complete Recorded Works In Chronological Order* vol. 1, Document Records DOCD-5357, 1995, compact disc.

<sup>16</sup> Robert M.W. Dixon, and John Godrich, *Recording the Blues* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970) 6.

<sup>17</sup> Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2004) 4.

used with wax cylinders.<sup>18</sup> By 1888, home recordings of singers and other miscellaneous vocal and speaking recordings were widespread in American homes.<sup>19</sup>

George W. Johnson, a panhandler on the streets of New York City, became the first African American to record commercially.<sup>20</sup> The catalog for the New York Metropolitan Phonograph Company indicates that Johnson's wax cylinders sold in May 1890. The company's 1890 winter catalog, presumably released in January, does not list Johnson's recording, so it is assumed he recorded between January and May 1890. The recording of African American performers continued before the turn of the century.<sup>21</sup> These included lesser-known performers active in African American run tent-show circuits and African American vaudeville, such as the Unique Quartette who traveled America's Northeast, and the Standard Quartet from the "South before the War" traveling show; popular New Orleans minstrel performer Louis "Bebe" Vanier recorded with the Louisiana Phonograph Company.

After the turn of the twentieth century, Victor Talking Machine Company recorded Broadway stars George Walker, and Bert Williams in 1901.<sup>22</sup> In 1909, Edison recorded Polk Miller with his group, Old South Quartette. Additionally in 1909, the internationally famous Fisk University Jubilee Singers recorded with Victor. In 1913, James Reese Europe was the first black bandleader to make an orchestra recording.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Brooks, *Lost Sounds*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 215.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 215.

Bandleader Dan Kildar, composer Will Marion Cook, and the Tuskegee Institute Singers started recording in 1914. Jazz became popular in America in 1917 prompting more black artists to record. The popular music historian Tim Brooks names “Wilbur C. Sweatman, Ford T. Dabney’s Broadway orchestra, and W.C. Handy’s Memphis musicians” as some of the first recording jazz artists.<sup>24</sup> Ragtime proliferated because of artists like Noble Sissle. In 1918, black concert music was popularized through recordings by tenor Roland Haye. Black concert music further proliferated after the Broome Special Phonograph, a black-owned record label, was founded in 1919.

### **Popular Blues begins**

Popular blues was an early twentieth century genre of African American mainstream popular music. It grew in popularity during the period 1912-1920.<sup>25</sup> Popular blues is divided into two categories, purely instrumental, and vocal.<sup>26</sup> A 1912 song titled “The Blues,” by black songwriters Tim Brymn and Chris Smith is believed to have “officially” started the genre of popular blues, although popular blues works did not originate overnight. Around 1910, the first mainstream popular blues music appeared as printed sheet music.<sup>27</sup> This popular blues music has harmonic and lyric qualities distinct from other music during that time period.

The rise in African American popular music is due in part to ragtime. “Ragtime” is a term that first appeared in mainstream popular culture in 1897, and is a term often

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>25</sup> Peter C. Muir, *Long Lost Blues: Popular Blues in America, 1850-1920* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2010) 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 11.

associated with African American parties where music and dancing were popular.<sup>28</sup> “Breakdown” was a similar term used before “ragtime” that generally held the same meaning. Both were slang terms referring to a dance and/or a certain style of dance music. Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff dispute claims that St. Louis and Chicago were the first growth places of urban ragtime music.<sup>29</sup> Using newspapers that served the black community, Abbot and Serroff identify eastern Kansas as the main region for the growth of ragtime in the period around 1894-1895. Kansas was a “free-state” that did not enact the harshest of Jim Crow laws in this period. This allowed ragtime to develop in saloons where large numbers of black and white patrons gathered together.<sup>30</sup> In turn, saloons increased the popularity of ragtime music. Ragtime became commercially successful through male piano players, often called “professors” in various press reports. Over time “professor” came to be a derogatory term used for a skilled local musician, though it was a common phrase among African Americans.<sup>31</sup>

Popular blues first emerged in mainstream popular culture as sheet music. A 1909 piano rag, “I’m Alabama Bound” subtitled “The Alabama Blues,” contains the first published reference to blues in its subtitle.<sup>32</sup> However, “The Alabama Blues,” subtitle was only used on the first edition. As a result, Brymn and Smith’s “The Blues,” published by Robert Ebberman of New Orleans, is recognized as the first popular blues song. Shapiro Music of New York filed “The Blues,” for copyright on January 12,

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<sup>28</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi), 443.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 447.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 451.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 452.

<sup>32</sup> Muir, *Long Lost Blues.*, 9.

1912.<sup>33</sup> Popular blues was a new genre with distinct lyric and harmonic qualities that separated it from other music. It incorporated aspects of the blues found in the Mississippi Delta and Southern United States. Samuel Charters notes that the Delta Blues:

. . . is a personal song, with intensely personal emotional characteristics. The blues became the emotional outlet for Negro singers in every part of the South, and as the rich confusion of music from the fields began to fall into loose patterns, the blues became a part of the fabric of Negro life itself.<sup>34</sup>

Harmonically, “I’m Alabama Bound” contained melodies from African American folk songs.<sup>35</sup> Brymn and Smith’s “The Blues,” was largely a ragtime piece. However, the lyrics of “The Blues” describe a woman who yearns for a lover that left her.<sup>36</sup> The opening statement is “I’ve got the blues, but I’m too blamed mean to cry.” Peter Muir connects this line of musical lyrics, to ones found in folk field recordings that were made in 1911. A second characteristic of the new developing blues genre was the inclusion of blue notes. Harmonic qualities like the slightly lowered sounds of blue notes were not found in popular music at that time, but rather were characteristic of rural folk traditions. Muir makes the connection that blue notes, like the vernacular inspired lyrics of “The Blues,” originated in African American vernacular folk cultures, and were brought in mainstream popular music by popular blues songs.<sup>37</sup> Singers of popular blues, writers, and musicians of the genre also played a role in the dispersal of folk traditions.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>34</sup> Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 19.

<sup>35</sup> Muir, *Long Lost Blues*, 9.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 8.

It is important to note that even though the Delta Blues was an African American tradition, it was not familiar to urban black entertainers like vaudeville singer “Ma” Rainey.<sup>38</sup> Rainey is one of the earliest professional entertainers known to have encountered blues, along with W.C. Handy. Robert Palmer recalls that Rainey first heard blues at a tent show in Missouri in 1902 from a girl who was not a performer, but was singing near the tent; the song was about losing her man. Palmer states that the new sound of blues was “strange” and “weird” to the urban stage, but Rainey used some of its aspects in her upcoming acts. The rural audiences she sang to were overwhelmingly receptive, so Rainey continued to pick up more repertoire of blues material as she traveled.

### **Popular blues in Vaudeville**

Vaudeville was a stage entertainment that was among the most popular genres in America between 1880-1910.<sup>39</sup> Recent scholarship has shown that vaudeville emerged from Variety, which had been an independent form since before the Civil War.<sup>40</sup> Vaudeville also contained elements of early nineteenth century minstrelsy. Vaudeville is important to this study in revealing African American folk traditions that spread into popular culture. African American vaudeville performers bantered in African American vernacular language. Near the turn of the twentieth century African Americans

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues*. New York: Penguin Group, 1981, 44.

<sup>39</sup> Robert M. Lewis, *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America, 1830-1910* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 315.

<sup>40</sup> Gillian M. Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima: Variety Theater in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 7, 149.

increasingly performed in theaters catering exclusively to black audiences.<sup>41</sup> Peter Muir calls these theaters “black vaudeville,” or “African American vaudeville.” Black theaters were found all over the United States.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the entertainment in white vaudeville and black vaudeville was essentially the same, meaning the types of variety acts were similar. An abundance of African American entertainers emerged as the result of black vaudeville.

Vernacular traditions were present in both vaudeville and black vaudeville.<sup>43</sup> In black vaudeville, Muir notes that, “Many of their [black vaudeville entertainers] acts focused specifically on materials drawn from the musical subculture.”<sup>44</sup> The rural roots of blues were urbanized in the acts of early black vaudeville entertainers. Black vaudeville entertainers traveled widely, which “created an ideal situation for the rapid dissemination of the new genre [blues] within the black community.”<sup>45</sup>

“Coon songs,” which were made popular by black and white female vaudeville singers around the turn of the twentieth century, arose with the popularity of ragtime. “Coon” is a derogatory term that has long been used by white Americans to describe African Americans.<sup>46</sup> In the early twentieth century the term “coon” moved into mainstream popular culture with the rise in ragtime music. “Coon songs” were first

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<sup>41</sup> Muir, *Long Lost Blues*, 9-10.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Janet Brown, “The ‘Coon-Singer’ and the ‘Coon-Song’: A Case Study of the Performer-Character Relationship,” *The Journal of American Culture* 7 (1984): 2.

popularized with ragtime's syncopated rhythm accompaniment.<sup>47</sup> In the 1880s, tunes like "The Alabama Coon," and other songs with "coon" in the title, emerged on vaudeville stages.<sup>48</sup> Performers known as "coon shouters," were popular on the vaudeville stage singing "coon songs."<sup>49</sup> "All Coons Look Alike to Me" (1896), is often cited as being one of the earliest coon songs, and was written by African American Ernest Hogan.<sup>50</sup> Coon song lyrics were based on the presumed vernacular dialect of African Americans. In performance, coon song lyrics were racially offensive. Sophie Tucker (1888-1966) was one famous white "coon shouter."<sup>51</sup> She started her professional career appearing first as a "coon shouter" in 1908. Tucker dressed up in burnt cork, not unlike early nineteenth century minstrel performers. Ragtime music and coon song lyrics combined in the performances of coon shouters, carrying vernacular traditions into mainstream popular culture.

### **Mamie's break**

I can't sleep at night  
 I can't eat a bit  
 'Cause the one I love  
 He don't treat me right<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>48</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, "Coon Songs," and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz*. Jackson (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 11.

<sup>49</sup> Brown, "The 'Coon-Singer' and the 'Coon-Song,'" 1.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>52</sup> Perry Bradford, *Crazy Blues*, vocals by Mamie Smith, Okeh Record No. 4169 (New York: Perry Bradford Publishing Company, 1920).

Some of the best-known classic blues singers such as Bessie Smith had their start in the traveling minstrel show.<sup>53</sup> As black theaters continued to flourish just after the turn of the twentieth century, they began to produce musical revues showcasing various types of songs including blues.<sup>54</sup>

Mamie Smith was a performer in black theater. She was the star of the musical revue *Maid of Harlem*.<sup>55</sup> Perry Bradford, a music writer and recording industry hustler, initiated Smith's recording career.<sup>56</sup> In 1919, Bradford was pushing companies to record African American women who were popular blues artists, but recording companies were reluctant to record black women, in part because managers thought there were diction differences between white and black women, and because they also considered their voices unsuitable.<sup>57</sup>

Bradford had experience in the music business, writing and publishing sheet music and piano rolls.<sup>58</sup> His relationship with music business personnel secured him a trial recording session with Smith on January 10, 1920. Smith recorded with RCA Victor Records singing "That Thing Called Love," a vaudeville song written by Bradford. Victor never released the recording.

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<sup>53</sup> Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 43.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>56</sup> Bradford, *Born With the Blues*, 114.

<sup>57</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 45.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Bradford continued to hustle record companies. He met Bill Tracy, a white songwriter who had written “Play That Barbershop Chord” at the C.V.B.A. nightclub.<sup>59</sup> Fred Hager’s publishing firm Helf & Hager had published Tracy’s tune. At one point in the evening, Tracy told Bradford, “Next time you talk with Fred Hager, tell him I asked that he give you an audition for your colored girl singer.”<sup>60</sup> Bradford went to Hager’s office, and managed to get a word with Hager. Bradford writes,

After telling him [Fred Hager] that Chris Smith and Bill Tracy had given him a big build-up by saying he’s a regular guy and would always give a struggling songwriter a break, then I spread this new approach. “There’s fourteen million Negroes in our great country and they will buy records if recorded by one of their own, because we are the only folk that can interpret hot jazz songs just off the griddle correctly.”

Then I reminded him not to expect any fast sales up here in the North, but that Southern whites will buy them like nobody’s business. They understand blues and jazz songs, for they’ve heard blind-men on street-corners in the South playing guitars and singing ‘em for nickels and dimes since their childhood days.

What really got the butter and sold Mr. Hager was the big surprise of hearing about that big Southern market that no one up North had ever thought of. So he asked, “What songs have you got in mind?”<sup>61</sup>

Hager agreed to record Bradford’s songs, but wanted “coon shouter” Sophie Tucker to sing them.<sup>62</sup> After speaking with Hager, Bradford went to Tucker’s New York hotel room to ask her to record “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down” and “That Thing Called Love.” Tucker agreed, and even gave Bradford a photograph to be placed on the cover of

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<sup>59</sup> Bradford, *Born With the Blues*, 119.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

the expected sheet music release.<sup>63</sup> However, Hager represented Okeh records, and Tucker was bound by a Vocalion company contract at the time. Bradford went back to Hager and suggested that Smith record his music instead of Tucker. Hager agreed that Smith should replace Tucker despite his fear that Okeh records would be boycotted for recording an African American woman.

Smith recorded with Okeh studios on February 14, 1920, singing “That Thing Called Love,” and “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down.”<sup>64</sup> The recording was released during the summer of 1920 by General Phonograph, and won much success.<sup>65</sup> While the impending release was highly praised by the black press, Okeh did not advertise Smith.<sup>66</sup> Her record was released under the same label as other popular titles within in the company’s regular series, and no distinction was made on racial grounds. Smith’s recording sold an estimated 100,000 records to an African American audience, and the recording industry realized they were about to strike gold.

Okeh Records recorded Smith singing “Crazy Blues” a few months later, on August 10.<sup>67</sup> This time, the company changed the way it promoted Smith and her record. Smith’s backup orchestra expanded from only one trumpet/cornet player, Johnny Dunn,

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>64</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 46; Bradford, *Born With the Blues*, 118.

<sup>65</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 46. ; Mamie Smith, “That Thing Called Love,” and “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down,” by Mamie Smith, Ed Cox, Dope Andrews, Ernest Elliot, Leroy Parker, and Willie (The Lion) Smith, recorded February 14, 7275-E-OK 4113, on *Mamie Smith: Complete Recorded Works In Chronological Order* vol. 1, Document Records DOCD-5357, 1995, compact disc.

<sup>66</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 46.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 46; Mamie Smith, 1920, “Crazy Blues,” by Mamie Smith, Johnny Dunn, Dope Andrews, Ernest Elliot, Leroy Parker, Willie (The Lion) Smith, recorded August 10, 7529-C-OK 4169, on *Mamie Smith: Complete Recorded Works In Chronological Order* vol. 1, Document Records DOCD-5357, 1995, compact disc.

and piano player Willie, “The Lion” Smith, to also include violinist, Leroy Parker, and trombonist, Dope Andrews. The ensemble was also given a name, “Mamie Smith’s Jazz Hound’s.”<sup>68</sup> Sheet music was printed for the new single, including a catalog number allocated by Okeh. The printed music featured a photo of Smith on the front with her band. There was a lot of publicity for “Crazy Blues,” and it was highly successful after its release. “Crazy Blues,” sent record companies scrambling to record for a new audience. By 1921, Smith was touring across the entire United States, and she had recorded twenty-nine songs. Smith set the standard to be followed by later popular blues artists, and she continued to attract the attention of the black press for being the first black artist to make popular music recordings.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 46.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

# CRAZY BLUES

By PERRY BRADFORD

*Bernice Bentley*



MAMIE SMITH AND HER JAZZ HOUNDS

Get this number for your phonograph on Okeh Record No. 4169

PUBLISHED BY  
PERRY BRADFORD  
MUSIC PUB. CO.  
1547 BROADWAY, N. Y. C.

Figure 1<sup>70</sup>

<sup>70</sup>Perry Bradford, *Crazy Blues*, vocals by Mamie Smith, Okeh Record No. 4169 (New York: Perry Bradford Publishing Company, 1920).

### **Lasting influences, and the shaping of an industry**

Smith's extraordinary record sales proved to the recording industry there was a viable market for African American records.<sup>71</sup> Ralph Peer, who was a recording manager with Okeh at the time, is said to have coined the term "race market" for the new genre of African American recordings.<sup>72</sup> These recordings were first marketed as "Race series" records, and were identified by the sequence of numbers on the discs.<sup>73</sup> The term "race records," was widely used in the late twenties. Because of Smith's success, other companies followed Okeh's lead and went in search of black artists. As a result, 1921 was an active year for "race" recordings.<sup>74</sup> Columbia signed Mary Stafford, who recorded a version of "Crazy Blues," released in January 1921.<sup>75</sup> Within the year artists Edith Wilson, Ethel Waters, Lillyn Brown, and Lucille Hegamin were all signed to various labels.<sup>76</sup>

Smith's success as a recording artist resulted in her winning greater success as stage performer. Smith's live performances were a way to promote her records.<sup>77</sup> In the reverse, her live performances also benefitted from the successful sale of her records. Harrison writes,

Because she understood that her record success was related to that of her stage appearances, and that her public had certain expectations with regard to their

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<sup>71</sup> Dixon, and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 6.

<sup>72</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 46.

<sup>73</sup> Dixon, and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 6.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>75</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 48.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

newly-made star, she set a standard for the blues queens who followed her with her lavish costumes and scenery.<sup>78</sup>

Harrison quotes Smith in a 1921 article printed in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*,

...thousands of people who come to hear me...expect much, and I do not intend that they shall be disappointed. They have heard my phonograph records and they want to hear me sing these songs the same as I do in my own studio in New York... Another thing. I believe my audiences want to see me becomingly gowned, and I have spared no expense or pains... for I feel that the best is none to good for the public that pays to hear a singer.<sup>79</sup>

Smith's success also had wider racial implications. Ronald Foreman considers vaudeville coon shouters and headliners like Sophie Tucker as having provided white vaudeville audiences with a type of song performance not unlike the blues, and thus allowing these recordings to cross racial lines.<sup>80</sup> In the first year of marketing their race records the Emerson Phonograph Company noted that Lillyn Brown was popular among both white and African American audiences.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 48; this quote from the *Norfolk Journal Quarterly* in 1921 was quoted directly in Harrison's book, who notes that for her work it was quoted from Ronald Foreman, "Jazz and Race Records, 1920-1932: Their Origins and Their Significance for the Record Industry and Society," Ph. D diss., University of Illinois, 1968, 59.

<sup>80</sup> Foreman, "Jazz and Race Records," 72-73, as cited in Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 46.

<sup>81</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 49.

THE BEST BET YET



LILLYN BROWN

*In A LA DIXIE*

*Premier Male Impersonator of Her Race*

With RUDOLPH DAWSON

NAT SOBEL, *Pilot*

Figure 2<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Advertising insert in a Variety Annual for Lillian Brown, belonging to the collection of Gillian Rodger, n.d.

After the popularity of popular blues records sales, marketing images of African Americans changed to depict stereotypical caricature images, while sales continued to boom. Small recording labels did not survive long with the competition from larger labels such as Paramount, Columbia, and Okeh, and these companies drove the change in advertising imagery. Harrison writes,

. . . big labels such as Okeh, Columbia, and Paramount shifted the nature of their ads from dignified, attractive photos of the featured singer to caricatures with pickaninnies, big-mouthed ‘Sapphires,’ men with bulging eyes and oversized lips, and heavy dialect. Record sales continued to soar.<sup>83</sup>

The success of popular blues also resulted in the emergence of field scouts. Within the first four years of popular blues success, New York emerged as the center for recording new music, followed by Chicago.<sup>84</sup> Cities such as New Orleans and Atlanta joined the list as companies set up temporary studio locations to accommodate the demand of buyers. Records were found in furniture stores, available by mail order, at five-and-dime stores, and of course at music stores. The idea of scouting for artists was introduced to produce more new music for this market. Companies advertised in stores for up-coming field-recording sessions to attract new talent, and they began to shape a performance aesthetic based on audience preference. Record sales determined the kinds of songs field recorders sought to find.<sup>85</sup> Smith was a first for her generation, but in more ways than one she was repeating a trend of carrying vernacular sound into mainstream popular culture. Her uniqueness was grounded in the presence of the recording industry, which came to shape the opinions of popular culture. Smith was

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<sup>83</sup> Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 50.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51.

important for her race, gender, and importantly her implausible ability to shape the rest of recording history.

CHAPTER 3 – RALPH PEER AND THE CARTER FAMILY

Hillbilly and race recordings were influential to one another's success. Following the emergence of race recordings in the early 1920s, recorded country/hillbilly music attracted listeners. Artist and Repertoire employee Ralph Peer marketed artists to fulfill audience's tastes, and he started the careers of many influential artists such as Fiddlin' John Carson, Jimmie Rodgers, and the Carter Family. Ralph Peer played an important role in building the success of the Carter Family by catering to audience tastes, thus shaping the aesthetic of the greater industry as a result. Peer became a key figure in bridging a gap between a traditional folk sound and the needs of a commercial market.

### **Ralph Peer**

Ralph Peer was born in 1892 in Independence, Missouri.<sup>86</sup> By 1927 Peer was a recording industry employee who was highly influential in the careers of the artists he signed. He had worked previously with Fiddlin' John Carson in 1923, and for Okeh records during Smith's famous "Crazy Blues" session in 1920.<sup>87</sup> Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg write:

Peer rarely talked of himself or his accomplishments. When he did, he could be surprisingly seductive: thoughtful, matter-of-fact, and modest. And then suddenly, wildly, egotistical. In 1958, during a two-day interview, he claimed credit for launching the careers of Jimmie Rodgers (true) and the Carter Family (true), coining the genre terms *race* and *hillbilly* for records (true), helping Gene Autry into the saddle (partially true), setting the foundation of the modern music-publishing business (glancingly true), and "inventing" Louis Armstrong (a whopper).<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?: The Carter Family and Their Legacy in American Music* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 85.

<sup>87</sup> Charles K. Wolfe, "The Legend that Peer Built: Reappraising the Bristol Sessions," *The Bristol Sessions: Writings About The Big Bang of Country Music*, 19.

<sup>88</sup> Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?*, 83.

Despite these claims, Peer's main concern was the business. In other words, Peer wanted to make money.<sup>89</sup> He did not always speak kindly about some of the early race and hillbilly stars he helped create, and he seemed to have little regard for their intelligence. Despite this, his undeniable influence in creating opportunities for scores of such people cannot be ignored.

In 1925, Victor Records hired Ralph Peer to promote hillbilly records in order to gain more business for the company.<sup>90</sup> Peer did not get a salary from Victor, rather, he secured all copyrights, allowing him to collect copyright royalties.<sup>91</sup> Peer did not officially begin working for Victor until 1926.<sup>92</sup> This was the same year electric recording replaced acoustic recording, and Victor produced its new Victor Orthophonic in place of the old phonograph.

In 1926, Peer decided to go on the road to find new artists.<sup>93</sup> He traveled to Galax, Virginia, because he could visit his father and set up a recording studio in nearby Bristol, Virginia. He also planned to record Earnest Stoneman, with whom he had already procured a contract, while he was there. Peer relied on his father to make arrangements with local artists to record.<sup>94</sup> Soon after arriving, however, Peer realized his father had not secured any promising talent. Fearing the worst, Peer used Stoneman's recording session as an opportunity to invite the editor of *News Bulletin*, a local

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 92-93.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 93.

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

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

newspaper, to try and interest local musicians and singers to come record. The newspaper report on Stoneman worked, as did the mention of Stoneman's \$3,600 salary from royalties.

In Bristol, Peer was looking for something he could sell.<sup>95</sup> He only made money if the acts he signed were profitable. People were familiar with traditional popular songs, but he knew that something had to be different about these songs in order for him to copyright them. He needed artists who could play standards, but had variety in their repertoire to meet the expectations of what audiences would perceive as good music.

Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg write,

Many of the mountain acts Peer saw repeated the same songs: hymns, centuries-old ballads, or popular standards that had been recorded already. Peer needed materials he could copyright and cash in on, so he needed musicians who could write their own songs, or at least restitch the traditional songs enough that he could "put them over as new." Down in Bristol in those last few days of July 1927, Peer was holding musicians to a tougher standard than he had while at Okeh. As always, he'd let the groups do the song of their choice first – and it was usually a well-known song. Then he'd ask if they had any songs of their own. "If they did another popular song," Peer remembered, "I never bothered with them."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

### Who are the Carter's?

The Carter Family originally comprised of three family members, A.P. Carter, Sara Carter, and Maybelle Carter.<sup>97</sup> Alvin Pleasant Delaney Carter (December 15, 1891 – November 7, 1960), better known as A.P. or Doc, was born to a family of nine children.<sup>98</sup> His parents, Robert and Mollie Bayes Carter, owned a farm in Maces Springs, located in Scotts County, Virginia. At a very young age, A.P. sang in a church quartet with relatives, and he also played the fiddle.

Sara Dougherty (July 21, 1898 – January 8, 1979) was from Wise County, Virginia.<sup>99</sup> She moved to an area known as Cooper Creek, after her mother died. Cooper Creek was a short distance over the mountain range from Scotts County, where A.P. lived. While A.P. was visiting Cooper Creek selling fruit trees from his family's farm, he met Sara. The pair wed on June 18, 1915, and returned to live in Scotts County.

Sara had learned autoharp, guitar, and banjo when young, and after A.P. and Sara's marriage, the two began playing and singing together.<sup>100</sup> They auditioned with the Brunswick Record Company, and sang "Poor Orphan Boy," and "Log Cabin by The Sea." A.P. also played some softer solo fiddle music. Brunswick offered them a recoding contract. A.P. ultimately refused Brunswick because of the religious views of his family; they were ambivalent about music outside the church. Brunswick wanted

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<sup>97</sup> John Atkins, "Biography," in *The Carter Family*, by John Atkins, Bob Coltman, Alec Davidson, Kip Lornell, (London: Old Time Music, 1973, booklet 1), 5-6.

<sup>98</sup> Atkins, "Biography," in *The Carter Family*, 5, 20. Atkins states that A.P. was born April 15, 1891, on page 5. However, the Carter Family article in *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online* suggests December 15, 1891.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

A.P. and Sara to sing and play square dance tunes, and they wanted A.P. to go by the name “Fiddlin’ Doc.”<sup>101</sup> A.P. felt his family would have disapproved of this.

Maybelle Addington (May 10, 1909 – October 23, 1978) was a cousin of Sara.<sup>102</sup> She married Ezra J. Carter, A.P.’s brother, on March 23, 1926. Like Sara, Maybelle played the autoharp, guitar, and banjo. Soon after Maybelle and Ezra’s marriage, Sara, A.P., and Maybelle began playing together, and formed what became known as the Carter Family. A.P., Sara, and Maybelle saw a newspaper advertisement placed by Ralph S. Peer, noting that he was looking for new music talent to record. The three family members drove to Bristol on July 31, 1927, along with Sara’s seven-month-old son Joe and eight-year-old daughter Gladys. At the time Maybelle was seven months pregnant with Helen Carter.

### **The Bristol Sessions**

The Carter Family’s first recording sessions with Peer took place on August 1-2, 1927.<sup>103</sup> The Carter Family recorded six songs. Their first song “Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow,” became a standard in the repertoire of later musicians; the title is sometimes given as “Bury Me *Beneath* the Weeping Willow.” It was also a song that had been recorded by other artists before the Carter’s Bristol sessions. “Little Cabin by the Sea” is a song that can be traced back to writer W.C. Hafley from Tennessee. Hafley’s original song was titled “The Bible in the Cabin by the Sea.” “Little Cabin by the Sea”

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>103</sup> Charles K. Wolfe, “The Bristol Sessions: The Cast of Characters,” in *The Bristol Sessions: Writings About the Big Bang of Country Music*, edited by Charles K. Wolfe, and Ted Olson (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2005), 43.

was also a song featured in shape note hymnals, which is how A.P. learned it.<sup>104</sup> Their third song, “The Poor Orphan Child,” dated from 1899, when it was copyrighted by H.W. Elliot. A.P. arranged the song as a duet with Sara. They also recorded the tunes, “The Storms Are on the Ocean,” “Single Girl, Married Girl,” and “The Wandering Boy.”

Peer was intrigued with Sara’s voice.<sup>105</sup> On the second day of recording, August 2, only Sara and Maybelle went to Peer’s studio.<sup>106</sup> The Carter Family were paid fifty dollars for each song they recorded, and returned to Scotts County with three hundred dollars. The fame of The Carter Family is interesting. Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg write:

The family’s music sprang mainly from the narrow traditions of white southern gospel and the balladry that had floated for generations in the thin mountain air of Appalachia. Over the years, the trio would seek out new forms, including coal-camp blues and black gospel, but they never added Dixieland, jazz or pop instruments to fill out their pared-down auto-harp-and-guitar arrangements. Adding frets on substituting a second guitar for Sara’s autoharp was as radical as they got.<sup>107</sup>

Zwonitzer and Hirshberg believe that the traditional sound of the Carter Family was what Peer struggled to truly understand.<sup>108</sup> They note that the Carter Family members “were at their best when they were plying the sharper edges of private and personal pain.”<sup>109</sup> In October 1927, recordings were released of some of the groups Peer discovered in the

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>105</sup> Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?*, 99.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 101-103.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 101.

South. There were eleven groups in all that made their way onto records, but the Carter Family was not one of them.<sup>110</sup>

Victor finally released a recording of The Carter Family in November 1927.<sup>111</sup> The 78 recording was is the “New Orthophonic Victor Southern Series.” The double-sided disc contained “Poor Orphan Child” and “Wandering Boy.” In 1928, The Carter Family had a second record released that included “Single Girl, Married Girl,” and “The Storms Are on the Ocean.”<sup>112</sup> The Carter Family began to receive royalty checks after the success of their second record. They also began a more consistent recording career at which point Peer summoned the Carter Family to travel to Camden, New Jersey and record.

### **The Carter Family sound**

The Bristol Sessions became a pivotal point in recording history partly because of the Carter Family’s sessions. Jimmie Rodgers also recorded in Bristol during the same time, which launched his career.<sup>113</sup> Charles Wolfe states, “The six songs they [the Carter Family] recorded . . . not only launched their own career as the most important singing group in country music history, but went a long way toward defining the sound of modern country music.”<sup>114</sup> An important aspect of the Carter’s repertoire was its

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>113</sup> Katie Doman, “Something Old, Something New: The Carter Family’s Bristol Sessions Recordings,” in *The Bristol Sessions: Writings About the Big Bang of Country Music*, edited by Charles K. Wolfe, and Ted Olson (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2005), 66.

foundation on traditional tunes. However, the Carter Family did something new to the sound of folk.

First, The Carter Family had a unique sound. Katie Doman writes, “It was their distinctive Carter sound – based firmly on Sara and Maybelle’s lead vocals, A.P.’s bass harmony, and Maybelle’s guitar work – that appealed to audiences.”<sup>115</sup> Second, A.P. rearranged many of the tunes and wrote his own songs, and this repertory evolved into a canon of its own in the world of country music. Most of the Carter Family’s repertoire was not new, but many of the tunes were new arrangements. Peer could copyright a song if it was new or “modified” from an earlier source. The Carter Family records sold because they appealed to popular taste. It is also plausible that many people knew the songs that the Carter Family recorded as traditional songs they had heard before the Carter Family recorded them. Their songs carried the allure of a romanticized past, but Peer and the recording industry were able to make made money because the songs were “new.”<sup>116</sup> Importantly, Doman writes,

An examination of the Carter Family’s Bristol sessions recordings, which managed to be simultaneously old-fashioned and innovative, reveals how the Carters served as a bridge between folk music and a newly developing commercial “hillbilly music” business.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Wolfe, “The Bristol Sessions: The Cast of Characters,” 43.

<sup>115</sup> Doman, “Something Old, Something New: The Carter Family’s Bristol Sessions Recordings,” 66.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

### **The Carter Family's lasting legacy**

As The Carter Family's success grew, A.P. went out on expeditions to find new songs.<sup>118</sup> Peer copyrighted the songs the Carter Family recorded, even when A.P. did not write the songs himself. A.P. often left the family, and Sara and the children – Gladys, Jannette, and Joe – were left to take care of everything.<sup>119</sup> Sara eventually had an affair with Coy Bays, who was A.P.'s cousin because of A.P.'s frequent absences as well as his quick temper.<sup>120</sup> A.P. had hired Bays to drive Sara around when he was out of town collecting new songs for recordings. As a result of this dalliance, Coy and Sara were unable to make a life together at that time; the Bays family moved out of Poor Valley and they took Coy with them.<sup>121</sup> She left A.P. and the children soon after and returned to her childhood home in Cooper Creek. Sara initially refused to continue recording after splitting with A.P., but Peer wanted Sara for her voice; he knew Sara's voice was essential to making their records profitable. Peer used his wife, Anita, to coax Sara into returning to the studio. The first recording following the split between Sara and A.P. was the 1933 record containing the song "Will the Circle Be Unbroken." This song is a classic in hillbilly/country music history.<sup>122</sup> 1933 was in the middle of the Great Depression, and besides people being familiar with the Carter Family's songs before they were recorded, the voice of Sara – worried and lonesome – quite possibly sounded even more familiar to listeners.

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<sup>118</sup> Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?*, 145.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-146.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

## CHAPTER 4 – LEADBELLY AND THE LOMAXES

Interest in African American song actually predated interest in Appalachian mountain music. It was probably the first American music to be popular in communities outside of those in which it had originated.<sup>123</sup>

In the early twentieth century before the commercialization of recorded music, a folk heritage movement emerged in the United States. Folk song collectors in the US and Europe, particularly Johann Gottfried von Herden, Francis James Child, and Cecil Sharp created what was considered the American folk music canon. The link between what began as an academic endeavor, and what became a prominent commercial folk music industry, was largely due to the early success of race recordings. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, Child's canon was challenged by John A. Lomax. Following 1920, and the rise in commercial race recordings, African American vernacular traditions were important to American culture; importantly African American vernacular traditions had been a part of America's popular culture since at least the early nineteenth century.

### **A European folk heritage**

The search for a folk heritage in Europe began around the turn of the nineteenth century as European intellectuals searched for a culture that stemmed from the lives of "ordinary" people.<sup>124</sup> Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), a philosopher from Germany, is the best known of these scholars of folk culture from the late 1700s.<sup>125</sup> Herder was the inspiration for a generation of intellectual folk collectors that emerged about a century later.<sup>126</sup> Herder published *Volkslieder* in 1778, which was a collection of

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<sup>123</sup> Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 27.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

song lyrics from an area known as Ragia, located in present day Latvia. Herder and other early collectors of songs and literature had their own definition of what real “folk” meant.<sup>127</sup> He viewed “pure” folk culture as existing in the cultures that maintained a rural, peasant life. In Herder’s opinion, the urban street singers who performed folk tunes represented a corruption of a “pure” culture and thus created noise. Early folk collectors were even wary of songs or stories they collected in “pure” cultures because they feared they had been corrupted by improved literacy and modern modes of transportation.

### **A United States folk heritage**

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, America also began to search for a folk heritage.<sup>128</sup> Francis James Child (1825-1896), a professor from Harvard University, initiated the collection of vernacular traditions in America when he began collecting British Ballads that continued to be performed in the United States.<sup>129</sup> He was focused on the literary aspects of vernacular culture more than the music.<sup>130</sup> Filene writes,

Like Thomas Percy and the Grimm brothers before him, Child was very much a literary folklorist, one who treated folk song as popular poetry and analyzed songs as series of texts largely divorced from their tunes.<sup>131</sup>

Child was particular about his collection process.<sup>132</sup> First, he believed that popular culture – printed music and commercial folk ballads – had polluted a once “pure”

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 12.

art form. Child largely blamed this on the educated classes, believing that an interest in Western Art music left the ballad ignored. Child believed the traditional ballad had survived in the poor, uneducated masses. Because the commercial production of ballads started shortly after the rise of the printing press around 1500 C.E., Child focused on finding British ballads from 1475 C.E., before their mass distribution. It is important to note that Child did not conduct fieldwork, but relied on manuscripts found in archives to establish his “pure” canon. He worked from Massachusetts using American archives, and relied on the generosity of friends who lived or traveled abroad to find sources in Scottish and English libraries and archives.<sup>133</sup> Two of Child’s best-known publications are *English and Scottish Ballads*, issued in eight volumes between 1857-1858, and *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, published in 1882.

Cecil Sharp made his first trip to the Appalachian Mountains in 1916, which initiated a more widespread interest in a folk heritage.<sup>134</sup> Sharp joined the Fabian Society in England in 1900, and shared their social idealists beliefs; the goal of this organization was to ultimately break down the distinction between social classes.<sup>135</sup> The Fabian Society saw education as the way to improve society, and Sharp himself believed folk songs had the power to cleanse social ills, meaning if folk songs were taken up by those who engaged in vulgar endeavors – like performing in music halls – the goodness of the folk music would become more popular and be preferred by their audience; eventually

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>135</sup> James Porter, “Convergence, Divergence, and Dialectic in Folksong Paradigms: Critical Directions for Transatlantic Scholarship,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 106, no. 419 (1993): 63.

“corrupt” popular music would pass out of popularity and be replaced with wholesome folk tunes. Musicologist James Porter notes that Sharp said: “Good music purifies... just as bad music vulgarizes.”<sup>136</sup>

When Sharp traveled through America’s Southern states, he favored collecting Childs’ ballads. Porter contends that Sharp’s approach to understanding folk songs was Darwinian. Sharp viewed folk songs in an evolutionary way, seeing them as having developed over the years through variation, selection, and continuity.<sup>137</sup> Sharp collected songs with multiple variations, and noted when and where he gathered the song, and from whom he took his transcription.<sup>138</sup> In this way, Sharp collected songs with the understanding that they were performance pieces, instead of collecting songs as if they were literature like Child. He did not believe folk songs should be preserved in a protective sleeve, but instead, “wanted to reintegrate folk song’s into people’s everyday lives.”<sup>139</sup>

### **Expanding Child’s folk music canon: the first American popular music**

Northern minstrel shows first introduced white audiences to African American vernacular traditions.<sup>140</sup> Minstrel shows purported to authentically represent African American slave life. The first minstrel shows appeared before the Civil War; when white performers from the north dressed in blackface. The representation of African American

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>138</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 21.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 27.

slave life was performed with very little understanding of actual African American culture. The Virginia Minstrels formed in 1843, which marked the beginning of American minstrelsy as a popular culture genre.<sup>141</sup> Previously, solo acts had circulated through America performing in theaters, often between acts in a dramatic performance.

The Fisk University Jubilee Singers popularized the African American spiritual during the 1870s.<sup>142</sup> Beginning in the late 1860s, collectors and spiritual enthusiasts had helped transcribe and publish African American spiritual collections. Filene names a few important preservers of spirituals, including “Thomas Wentworth Higginson . . . William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison.”<sup>143</sup> However, race played a large part in excluding African American culture from America’s folk music canon. Filene states,

African American spirituals achieved an astonishing degree of popularity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – to a point, difference fascinated white Americans – but these songs could not break into the canon of America’s folk music. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, difference, especially racial difference, precluded complete acceptance. Negro spirituals could be quaint, charming, even moving, by they could not cross the barrier to become America’s folk music.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 30-31.

<sup>142</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 28.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

### **John Lomax**

The work of John Avery Lomax also served to expand Child's British-ballad canon.<sup>145</sup> Growing up in Texas in the 1870s and '80s, J. Lomax developed an interest in cowboy songs. In 1906, following a stint at Harvard, J. Lomax returned to Texas. Shortly thereafter he received an award from Harvard to collect American ballads, which for him meant cowboy songs. J. Lomax published *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* in 1910 as a result of his fieldwork.

J. Lomax's work was significant to the music-collecting world.<sup>146</sup> Essentially, J. Lomax completely changed what was considered American folk music by juxtaposing cowboy songs against Child's British ballads. J. Lomax also challenged Child's, as well as Sharp's, ideas that folk songs had to be old. Child's work focused on ballads from the fourteenth century, whereas the objects of Lomax's work had been created in the recent past.<sup>147</sup> J. Lomax paved the way for a new American folk heritage.

### **Alan Lomax**

Alan Lomax was born in Texas on January 31, 1915, the third child and second son to John and Bess Lomax.<sup>148</sup> Growing up in Texas, close to J. Lomax's workplace as a professor at the University of Texas, Alan attended the best schools, even as a young child. John and Bess regarded education very highly.<sup>149</sup> In 1929-1930, John sent Alan to

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>148</sup> John Szwed. *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Viking, 2010), 13.

Choate School in Connecticut, a highly prestigious boarding school that would ensure Alan's acceptance to Harvard.

Alan's time at Choate introduced him to cultural experiences he did not have access to in Texas.<sup>150</sup> He took outings to Boston and New York City, saw the NY Philharmonic, watched plays, visited museums, but all at the expense of John and Bess who grew annoyed with Alan's frivolous spending. Against his father's wishes, Alan moved back home to Dallas to be near his ailing mother instead of attending Harvard in fall 1930, or staying on as a post-graduate at Choate.<sup>151</sup> Appeasing his father, Alan began studies at the University of Texas – Austin, with plans to transfer to Harvard the following year. Alan's previous life experiences in New York, combined with his surrounding environment in Texas would prove important to Alan's future work with music and folk collecting.

Alan Lomax is important to the study of American vernacular music, especially in the way his work bridged a gap between black and white cultures in a period in which segregation was mandated by law. During Alan's first year after returning to Texas, he started visiting record shops owned by African Americans in Austin.<sup>152</sup> He bought religious and blues records, and was particularly fond of recordings by Blind Willie Johnson. John Szwed quotes Alan discussing the first Johnson record he owned, "It wasn't a matter of folklore, it was the way I felt."<sup>153</sup> Alan also started visiting a local

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 20.

blues guitarist Ruby, and her husband a blues pianist, at their home “across the tracks.”<sup>154</sup> Alan took dates to Ruby’s during his first year of college, stating “we drank bootleg beer, and listened to the music with the blinds drawn.”<sup>155</sup> Race and segregation were a large part of life in the Southern states, and Alan noted:

In visiting Ruby’s place, of course, I was risking expulsion, but in that I was no different from a whole generation of southerners who have gone across the tracks for adventure and for friendly contact with the race they do not wish at all to shun. I was part of a generation of college students who furtively called at Ruby’s little unpainted three room house, and heard real blues.<sup>156</sup>

### **The Lomaxes, Leadbelly, and New York**

Huddie (Leadbelly) Ledbetter (ca. 1885 - December 6, 1949) grew up near Mooringsport, Louisiana, a region rich in French, Cajun, Louisiana influence.<sup>157</sup> His mother was the leader of their church choir, and his father enjoyed amateur singing.<sup>158</sup> Encouraged by his “songster” uncles Terrell and Bob Ledbetter, Leadbelly took up music early in life. Terrell gave young Leadbelly an accordion at an early age.

The guitar grew in popularity among African American musicians as Leadbelly was reaching his mid-teens.<sup>159</sup> After following local musicians Bud Coleman and Jim

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>157</sup> John A. Lomax, and Alan Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 3, 5.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 5.

Fagin around town, Leadbelly soon replaced his accordion with a guitar his father bought him.<sup>160</sup>

As a child, Ledbetter listened to his parents fight, and at times, saw his father hit his mother.<sup>161</sup> As he grew older, Leadbelly learned to intercede their arguments.

Leadbelly was prone to violence from an early age. He began playing for dances and parties when he was fifteen.<sup>162</sup> Such places were not always safe, with frequent fights. Leadbelly's father bought him a pistol to carry for protection. Leadbelly tried to use his gun once when another young man attempted to take home a girl he was with. Luckily the gun had a bad cartridge and did not fire, or he could have been facing his first murder offense.<sup>163</sup>

Leadbelly had also fathered a child with his childhood friend and neighbor, Margaret, and within a year the couple were pregnant again, though he would try and deny it; as a result by the age of fifteen Mooringsport people began to shun him.<sup>164</sup> Leadbelly always sought out female companionship and more often than not, women were his downfall, getting him into violent situations with other men. However, his desire for women, and his emotions about life, richly enhanced his musical expression.

Leadbelly said the first song he ever learned on guitar was "'Po' Howard," learned from Fagin.<sup>165</sup> Colman taught him "Green Corn," which was a tune he played all

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 5.

the time. Leadbelly said he woke in the night to play if music was stuck in his head. J. and A. Lomax stated, “Certainly young Mozart was no more absorbed in music than young, black Huddie Ledbetter.”<sup>166</sup>

After he left Mooringsport at the age of sixteen, very little is known about Leadbelly’s life.<sup>167</sup> At some point before his incarceration he met Blind Lemon Jefferson, a famous blues musician. The two met one night near Dallas while Leadbelly was out playing music to earn a few extra dollars. The two are known to have played together in the Dallas area, Jefferson playing Hawaiian guitar, and Leadbelly on mandolin. Leadbelly also roamed residential Dallas, playing with a group of fellow musicians for who said were “the rich white folks.”<sup>168</sup> At some point in his travels he picked up the twelve-string guitar when he saw a man playing one in a traveling circus.

During Leadbelly’s incarceration he learned most of his wide and diverse vernacular music repertoire from black and white prisoners alike.<sup>169</sup> He was born before the influences of ragtime and jazz, but lived through their popularity at the turn of the twentieth century. Leadbelly’s musical influences came from simpler melodies that were carried through popular culture by minstrelsy. His experience playing for dances, and growing up in the rural areas of the South were the foundation for the repertoire he developed.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>169</sup> Hugh Baker, and Yuval Taylor, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 8-9.

When J. Lomax entered Leadbelly's life in 1933, Leadbelly was around 44 years old and in prison for murder and assault at the State Penitentiary in Angola, Louisiana.<sup>171</sup> He was sentenced to thirty years in confinement in 1918. J. Lomax visited Angola in search of African American labor songs.<sup>172</sup> J. Lomax was at that time supported by the Library of Congress.<sup>173</sup> All of the recordings gathered went into the Archive of American Folk-Song. J. Lomax published *American Ballads and Folk Songs* in 1934 at the culmination of his southern trip.<sup>174</sup>

Around the camp, prisoners and workers knew Leadbelly as a singer and 12-string guitar player; Leadbelly gave himself the nickname "King of the 12-string guitar."<sup>175</sup> Leadbelly was made a laundryman so he could be on-call to play guitar and sing anytime. After J. Lomax paid three visits to Angola over several months, Leadbelly was eventually let free early from what had been his second time in prison. He was released for good behavior.<sup>176</sup> Six weeks following Leadbelly's release he and J. Lomax were on the road together.<sup>177</sup> J. Lomax continued to search the South for folk songs.<sup>178</sup> Just after this time, Alan joined, and all three went to New York City.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs*, xi.

<sup>171</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 51.

<sup>172</sup> Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs*, ix.

<sup>173</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 56.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>175</sup> Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs*, ix.

<sup>176</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 58.

<sup>177</sup> Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs*, ix.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, ix-x.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

On January 4, 1935, John A. Lomax organized a meeting with the New York City group The Texas-Exes, a group of transplanted University of Texas alumni.<sup>180</sup> J. Lomax intended to show off his newest musical investment, Leadbelly. Leadbelly appeared to the crowd wearing a blue work-shirt, bibbed overalls, a small hat with a brim, and a red bandana tied around his neck.

When Leadbelly arrived in New York City with J. and A. Lomax, in the first week of January 1935, some of his first admirers were from Columbia and New York University.<sup>181</sup> These academics attended a New Years Party hosted by the Lomaxes, held four days before Leadbelly was scheduled to play for the Texas Exes. It is not clear from the Lomaxes recollection of events whether these university affiliates were students or faculty. However, it is important to note that people associated with college campuses noticed Leadbelly; this fact is something to keep in mind when thinking of the impending folk blues revival of the late 1950s.

Reporters, editors, publishers, and other like-minded people were in attendance at the Lomaxes New Years Eve gathering as well, and soon enough, Leadbelly was making headlines.<sup>182</sup> Before Leadbelly even met with a publisher, his notoriety prepared him for later success, and his dangerous prison-laden past only added to his allure. J. Lomax had

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<sup>180</sup> Charles Wolfe, and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 1.

<sup>181</sup> Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs.*, 48.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

numerous offers to sign Leadbelly, including people involved with vaudeville and theater.<sup>183</sup> Leadbelly's audience was largely white.<sup>184</sup>

### **Lasting Influence**

Leadbelly contributed greatly to America's tradition of folk music. His repertoire preserved an old tradition of American vernacular music.<sup>185</sup> The Weaver's 1950s hit, "Goodnight Irene," was a song from Leadbelly's repertoire.<sup>186</sup> The Lomaxes believed that prison kept Leadbelly quarantined from popular culture influence, making his repertoire "authentic."<sup>187</sup> Filene believes the Lomaxes were successful at creating a "new" American music canon for two reasons: 1) The Lomaxes conducted fieldwork instead of relying on archival documents; 2) they relied on a recording machine, believing it would eliminate a possibly biased approach of transcribing melodies and notation from rote.<sup>188</sup> Moreover, the Lomaxes stood apart in their work of discovering folk songs, as other folk collectors before had done, because of their ability to popularize it.<sup>189</sup> While Ralph Peer had worked to popularize American folk music, Filene notes that he "had not tried to shape the way America remembered its music past."<sup>190</sup> On the other hand, John and Alan Lomax used a variety of sources to get folk into mainstream culture,

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>184</sup> Baker and Taylor, *Faking It*, 9.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>187</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 52.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 57.

such as movie newsreels and concerts, in addition to records, radio, and newspapers.

Folk musicians were viewed as celebrities.

Folk artists were molded into something that the industry wanted. J. Lomax makes this very clear when he states,

Alan and I were looking particularly for the song of the Negro laborer, the words of which sometimes reflect the tragedies of imprisonment, cold, hunger, heat, the injustice of the white man. Fortunately for us and, as it turned out, fortunately for him, Lead Belly had been fond of this type of songs.<sup>191</sup>

For his programs Lead Belly always wished to include “That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine” or jazz tunes such as “I’m in Love with You, Baby.” But in these he was only a poor imitator, though he could never understand why we did not care for them. We held him to the singing of music that first attracted us to him in Louisiana, so of which he had “composed at least partly. The lines of many, picked hither and yon, are jumbled together with but little original material, while the melodies he tricked out with musical ornaments of his own. Moreover, these were the songs he had practiced most while in and out of the penitentiary, since they were the money-getters from his white hearers. Their simple, direct appeal his fellow convicts and his barrel-house audiences also could enjoy. Intellectual people and the most lowly loved best his folk tunes and his manner of rendering them.<sup>192</sup>

Furthermore, J. and A. Lomax played into the vision of authenticity by making Leadbelly dress in his old prison garb. J. Lomax states,

As a part of these programs, and as a prelude to his playing, either Alan or I would tell the audience how and when and where we found him, while Lead Belly sat on the stage impassive, self-contained, seemingly uninterested... To add to the dramatic interest he would wear his old Louisiana convict clothes (not stripes) with a big red bandanna about his neck to hide the knife scar... Many people could not understand his Negro vernacular, so that we usually explained each song before he played it, sometimes repeating in advance the principal stanzas.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs*, ix. Note that the Lomaxes spell “Lead Belly” in two words.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

What I find most intriguing about J. Lomax's statements is the phrase, "To add to the dramatic interest..." There was a purposeful attempt to convey a certain image for the sake of popularity, whether it was truly "authentic" or not.

CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION: THE KINGSTON TRIO AND “TOM DOOLEY”

The Impression of a lost history is not entirely illusory. The machine that turned the intangible sound of music into a material object was also to register huge changes in interpretation and performance styles, for which it is largely itself responsible.<sup>194</sup>

The Kingston Trio recorded the ballad “Tom Dooley” in 1958; this rendition was performed strikingly out of context from recordings and transcriptions of regional versions dating from close to its origins.<sup>195</sup>

Hang down your head Tom Dooley,  
 Hang down your head and cry,  
 Hang down you head, Tom Dooley,  
 Poor Boy, you’re bound to die.<sup>196</sup>

“Tom Dooley” is based on a series of events surrounding the hanging of Tom Dula on May 1, 1868.<sup>197</sup> The tune was first recorded in 1929 by the North Carolina duo Grayson and Whitter.<sup>198</sup> It was further documented when folk collectors Anne and Frank Warner collected the ballad from North Carolina resident Frank Proffitt in 1938.<sup>199</sup> The song later appeared in Alan Lomax’s publication, *Folk Song USA: The 111 Best*

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<sup>194</sup> Michael Chanan, *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and Its Effects on Music*. New York: Verso, 1995, 6-7.

<sup>195</sup> The Kingston Trio, 1958, “Tom Dooley,” by Dave Guard, Bob Shane, and Nick Reynolds, recorded February 2, released September 8, Capitol 4049, on *The Kingston Trio: The Capitol Collector’s Series*, CDP 7927102, 1990, compact disc.

<sup>196</sup> John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax. *Folk Song USA: The 111 Best American Ballads* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1947), 300-301. These are the same lyrics sung by The Kingston Trio 1958.

<sup>197</sup> John Foster West, *The Ballad of Tom Dula: The Documented Story Behind the Murder of Laura Foster and the Trials and Execution of Tom Dula* (Durham, North Carolina: Moore Publishing, 1970-1976), 202.

<sup>198</sup> Marty McGee, *Traditional Musicians of the Central Blue Ridge: Old Time, Early Country, Folk, and Bluegrass Label Recording Artists, with Discographies* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2000), 69; Grayson, G.B., and Henry Whitter, 1929, “Tom Dooley,” by G.B. Grayson and Henry Whitter, recorded September 30, on *The Recordings of Grayson & Whitter*, County Records County CD 3517, 1998, compact disc.

<sup>199</sup> McGee, *Traditional Musicians of the Central Blue Ridge*, 135-137.

*American Ballads*, in 1947.<sup>200</sup> Frank Warner also released his own recording of the tune with Elektra in 1952 prior to the Kingston Trio's release.<sup>201</sup>

The lyrics of "Tom Dooley" describe a murder that occurred in Wilkes County, North Carolina, in Southern Appalachia, on Friday May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1866.<sup>202</sup>

Chorus:

Hand down you head Tom Dooley,  
Hang down your head and cry,  
Hang down you head, Tom Dooley,  
Poor boy, you're bound to die.

1. I met her on the mountain  
And there I tuck her life,  
I met her on the mountain  
And stobbed her with my knife.

(Chorus)

2. This time tomorrer,  
Reckon where I'll be? –  
If it hadn't been for Grayson  
I'd-a been in Tennessee.

(Chorus)

3. This time tomorrer,  
Reckon where I'll be?  
In some lonesome valley  
A-hangin' on a white oak tree.

(Chorus)<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Lomax, *Folk Song USA*, 300-301.

<sup>201</sup> McGee, *Traditional Musicians of the Central Blue Ridge*, 136.

<sup>202</sup> West, *The Ballad of Tom Dula*, 60.

<sup>203</sup> Lomax, *Folk Song USA*, 300-301; The Kingston Trio 1958.

## The Legend

In spring 1866, Laura Foster was found in a shallow grave in the woods of Wilkes County, North Carolina.<sup>204</sup> She had been stabbed, and is believed she died on May 25, 1866, although her body was discovered approximately three months later.<sup>205</sup> The primary murder suspects were Tom Dula, Ann Melton, and Pauline Foster, who was a distant cousin to Ann.<sup>206</sup> The historical facts are complicated, and much is now a legend. It is known that Tom Dula had been romantically involved with all three women mentioned. The following summary of historical events that lay the foundation for the ballad lyrics are based on the work of Historian, John Foster West.<sup>207</sup>

Tom Dula was born around 1844.<sup>208</sup> When Dula was fourteen years old or fifteen, Ann's mother Lotty (Carlotta) Foster found Tom and Ann in bed together.<sup>209</sup> At the time, Ann, who was Tom's age, was already married to James Melton. Carlotta described Dula jumping out of the bed naked, and then hiding underneath it, and it was assumed at the time that Dula and Melton were young lovers.

Dula enlisted in the 42<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of the North Carolina Infantry American Civil War on March 15, 1862.<sup>210</sup> He remained with this regiment for the entire three years of the Civil War. Before the war, Dula played the fiddle, and during the war, he was a

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<sup>204</sup> West, *The Ballad of Tom Dula*, 120-121.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 60, 87.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 61-104.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 173. West went to primary sources such as public records and court transcripts. He also relied on documentation from the *New York Herald*. A New York reporter covered the trial of Tom Dula. The newspaper ran an article about the events of the trial May 2, 1868, the day after Dula's hanging.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 62.

drummer in the infantry.<sup>211</sup> Dula returned home in the summer of 1865.<sup>212</sup> West documents that Melton and Dula were lovers once again even though Ann was still married to James Melton.<sup>213</sup>

Laura Foster lived with her father in Caldwell County, five miles away from Dula's home in Reedy Branch, Wilkes County, North Carolina.<sup>214</sup> Court testimony from Laura Foster's trial states that Laura Foster's father saw Dula and Foster in bed together beginning in 1866.<sup>215</sup> Another key figure in the legend of "Tom Dooley" is Pauline Foster who was a distant cousin to Ann Melton.<sup>216</sup> She was approximately a year younger than Ann Melton and Dula, at around twenty-one years old at the time of Laura Foster's murder trial. She was from Watauga County, which is located west of Wilkes County. An arrangement was made for Pauline to work for her cousin Ann in Reedy Branch for the summer and receive twenty-one dollars throughout her stay, which began in March, 1866. Pauline's payment helped pay for medical bills resulting from her treatment for a venereal disease, most likely Syphilis. This fact, and her treatment for this disease, is important to more fully understand the events that took place between the suspects and Laura Foster.

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 77.

Tom Dula, Ann Melton, Ann's husband James Melton, and Pauline all had confirmed cases of Syphilis after Dula returned from the war.<sup>217</sup> It is speculated that Laura Foster also had the disease, though there are no medical records indicating she was treated for it. West's research indicates that Dula believed Foster had given him Syphilis. After Ann contracted the disease, Dula revealed to her that he believed Laura Foster had given Syphilis to him.<sup>218</sup> It is now legend, but it is believed that Syphilis was the central reason Foster was murdered. It is also believed that Ann Melton killed Laura Foster to get revenge for contracting the disease. She may also have simply been jealous of Laura Foster's relationship with Dula.

Court testimony indicted Dula for murdering Laura Foster.<sup>219</sup> Pauline's testimony that Ann had admitted to stabbing Laura with Tom's help was instrumental in winning Dula's conviction.<sup>220</sup> Ann was also held in jail for some time before the trial, but she was never charged with murder.<sup>221</sup> In an interview with David Holt, Doc Watson provides a likely reason when he imitates Ann saying, "They'll never put a rope around her pretty white neck."<sup>222</sup> In this case it was true; Tom Dula was hanged for the murder of Laura Foster on May 1, 1868.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>222</sup> Doc Watson and David Holt, 2002, *Legacy*, High Windy Audio HW1258, compact disc.

<sup>223</sup> West, *The Ballad of Tom Dula*, 173.

## History of the ballad

The historical events of the legend help to formulate a better understanding of the ballad. Variations and versions of this ballad are numerous. West estimates that over 200 different publications and aural stories may exist, many of which are largely fiction.<sup>224</sup>

Before the Kingston Trio's recording of "Tom Dooley" in 1958, the ballad was connected to a man named Frank Proffitt. Frank Proffitt (June 1, 1913 – November 24, 1965) was from Laurel Bloomery, Tennessee.<sup>225</sup> At a young age he moved to Watauga County, North Carolina to an area called Pick Britches. His father taught him to make banjos, and taught him how to play and sing traditional folk songs. In 1938, a couple named Anne and Frank Warner traveled to the Southern Appalachian Mountains to visit Proffitt's father-in-law, Nathan Hicks who was a dulcimer maker in Beech Mountain, North Carolina.<sup>226</sup> During that visit, Proffitt taught "Tom Dooley" to the Warners. In 1939 a field recording of Proffitt was deposited into the Library of Congress's collection.<sup>227</sup> In 1952, Elektra Records recorded Frank Warner playing "Tom Dooley." Frank Warner never copyrighted his recording, and as a result a copyright dispute broke out after the Kingston Trio's record sold over three million copies in 1958. Moreover, Proffitt released a version of "Tom Dooley" in 1962.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> West, *The Ballad of Tom Dula*, 35.

<sup>225</sup> McGee, *Traditional Musicians of the Central Blue Ridge*, 135-136.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>227</sup> Joe Wilson, notes to *The Recordings of Grayson & Whitter* (County Records County CD 3517, 1998), 8.

<sup>228</sup> McGee, *Traditional Musicians of the Central Blue Ridge*, 136-137. McGee states, "Frank Proffitt (Folk-Legacy 1; recorded by Sandy Paton at Proffitt's home in January 1962; edited and annotated [22-page booklet] by Paton; released March 1962 [reissued in 1967 in England as Topic 12T162]; includes lyrics and Proffitt's version of 'Tom Dooley,' the first song he heard his father pick on the banjo."

Not all versions of “Tom Dooley” are the same. In an article in *Sing Out* magazine in October-November 1963, Frank Warner describes the history of how certain stanzas were lost throughout the years, and furthermore, his words reveal how the industry impacted the preservation of folksongs.<sup>229</sup>

From 1939 to 1959 I used “Tom Dooley” in every lecture and program, telling the story of Tom – and of Frank Profitt – and singing my own modification of Frank’s version, having taken the essence of the story and reduced it from six stanzas to four, and – over many years – having reshaped the melody line to fit my own feelings about the song. It was this precise version that I taught to Alan Lomax and which he included, minus the second stanza, in *Folk Song, USA* in 1947. It was this precise version, all four stanzas, that I sang in my Elektra album, EKL 3, in 1952, with Frank Profitt’s story in the jacket notes. It was this precise version, minus the second stanza, that the Kingston Trio, several years later, recorded on their Capitol record. How they got the song is their story.<sup>230</sup>

In episode twenty-six of the 1965-1966 television show *Rainbow Quest*, Frank Warner and Pete Seeger end the show playing and singing “Tom Dooley.”<sup>231</sup> Warner and Seeger follow the same stanza chorus pattern of Alan Lomax 1947 *Folk Song USA* publication. In order to fill up some time at the end of the show, Warner and Seeger add an additional chorus and then repeat the third stanza and chorus again.

In 1929, an even earlier recording of “Tom Dooley” was made. Gilliam Banmon Grayson, born November 11, 1888, was from Ashe County, North Carolina, specifically from an area known as Grayson.<sup>232</sup> He was blind from early infancy. Grayson met Henry Whitter (April 6, 1892 – November 10, 1941) in the summer of 1927 at a fiddler’s

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<sup>229</sup> West, *The Ballad of Tom Dula*, 15. West spells “Profitt” differently than all of the other sources I have consulted, which spell his name “Proffitt.”

<sup>230</sup> Frank Warner, *Sing Out*, 1963, as cited in West, *The Ballad Of Tom Dula*, 15.

<sup>231</sup> “Frank Warner & Pete Seeger – Tom Dooley,” Elektra, accessed March 24, 2013, <http://www.elektra.com/video/frank-warner-pete-seeger-tom-dooley-26481>.

<sup>232</sup> McGee, *Traditional Musicians of the Central Blue Ridge*, 67.

convention in Johnson City, Tennessee.<sup>233</sup> Marty McGee writes, “Whitter was the area’s first musician to record when the textile worker traveled uninvited to New York in March 1923 to record ‘The Wreck on the Southern Old 97’ and ‘Lonesome Road Blues’ for General Phonograph Corporation.”<sup>234</sup> In 1929, Grayson and Whitter were the first people to ever record the ballad of “Tom Dooley.”<sup>235</sup> Grayson died in an auto accident in Abington, Virginia on August 16, 1930. The following is a transcription from a remastered compact disc of Grayson & Whitter’s original 1929 recording.

Chorus:

Hang your head Tom Dooley,  
hang your head and cry.  
Killed poor Laura Foster,  
you know your bound to die.

1. You took her on the hillside,  
as God Almighty knows.  
You took her on the hillside,  
and there you hid her clothes.

2. You took her by the roadside,  
where you begged to be excused.  
You took her by the roadside,  
where there you hid her shoes.

3. You took her on the hillside,  
to make her your wife.  
You took her on the hillside,  
where there you took her life.

(Chorus)

4. Take down my old violin,  
play it all you please.  
This time tomorrow,

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 69.

it'll be no use to me.

(Chorus)

5. I dug a grave four feet long,  
I dug it three feet deep.  
Put on the cold clay over her,  
and tromped it with my feet.

(Chorus)

6. If this world had one more,  
then where you reckon where I'd be.  
If it hadn't been for Grayson,  
I'd been in Tennessee.

(Chorus)<sup>236</sup>

It is evident that Lomax's version omitted half of the verses in Grayson and Whitter's version. The lyrical content of Grayson and Whitter's version gives a historical recollection to the events surrounding the murder. It refers to Laura Foster by name; she becomes a real person, thus making this ballad more than mere legend. Moreover, Grayson and Whitter's version carries fragments of evidence from the murder investigation. Their version mentions clothes and shoes that were hidden, "You took her on the hillside, where there you hid her shoes . . . You took her on the hillside, where there you hid her clothes." Laura Foster was found with her shoes on, but her shoes played a prominent part in the evidence provided by various witnesses in the trials. One shoe had a hole in it next to one of her toes.<sup>237</sup> Based on court documents, witnesses were able to recognize Laura Foster because they remember her shoes. Laura's clothing was also a large part of the witness identification process because many individuals

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<sup>236</sup> Grayson and Whitter 1929.

<sup>237</sup> West, *The Ballad Of Tom Dula*, 126.

recognized her dress.<sup>238</sup> It was also documented that Laura Foster was last seen leaving her home with a bundle of clothing. Moreover, a bundle of clothing was found in the grave with her.<sup>239</sup> The last stanza of Grayson and Whitter’s version, and the second stanza of Lomax’s and the Kingston Trio’s version are basically the same. The line, “If this world had one more, then you reckon where I’d be,” is Dula’s excuse for saying if he only had one more day, he would have escaped into Tennessee instead of being captured. The briefly mentioned “Grayson” was a former military colonel with whom Dula had been staying and working for as a farm hand when he fled again into Tennessee.<sup>240</sup> When Dula realized the sheriff was looking for him he fled from Colonel Grayson’s house, but Grayson caught him and took him to the Sherriff and he was then locked in jail. Colonel Grayson was the uncle of the 1929 recording musician G.B. Grayson.<sup>241</sup>

The ballad may have its origins in a poem written by Thomas Land shortly after the trial.<sup>242</sup> Most of this poem is fiction, but it could have provided the beginning of the song. John Foster West’s book provides numerous transcriptions people gave as early as 1921 and 1925.<sup>243</sup> Some of these mention a banjo, while others do not; Grayson and Whitter’s version mentions a violin.<sup>244</sup> Some of the early transcriptions name the specific

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 83-86.

<sup>241</sup> Wilson, notes to *Grayson & Whitter*, 4-5.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 31-34.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 17-34.

<sup>244</sup> Grayson and Whitter 1929.

cities where the trials took place while others do not.<sup>245</sup> This ballad of “Tom Dooley” can be seen as an element of folklore.

### **The Kingston Trio’s story**

The Kingston Trio members in 1958 were Bob Shane, Dave Guard, and Nick Reynolds.<sup>246</sup> Bob and Dave went to junior high school together in Honolulu, Hawaii where they met in 1947. They performed together for the first time in 1950 at a canteen; Dave sang vocals and Bob played 4-string guitar. Dave learned guitar within a year of their first performance in anticipation of playing together again at their “Junior Carnival.” Their repertoire and playing techniques were acquired by hanging around the Honolulu Navy pier, Fort De Russy; their fathers were reserve members. They also hung out in nightclubs along Waikiki Beach. By the time they were in the final year of school, Dave played five and six-string guitar, and Bob played four and six-string guitar.

Both Dave and Bob came to the mainland United States to California for college in the early 1950s; Dave went to Stanford, and Bob went to nearby Menlo College.<sup>247</sup> They played around the surrounding area in clubs. Bob met Nick at Menlo College during their second year, and introduced him to Dave. By senior year, the three were playing for fraternity parties. Nick added to the band by playing four-string guitar and the congas. Dave and Bob graduated in 1956, while Nick still had another semester of school left. Bob went back to Honolulu as an Elvis impersonator, Dave went on to

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<sup>245</sup> West, *The Ballad Of Tom Dula*, 17-34.

<sup>246</sup> Robin Callot and Paul Surratt, notes to *The Kingston Trio: The Capitol Collector’s Series*, CDP 7927102, 1990, 4.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

graduate school, and Nick continued with his studies. Dave kept the band going by seeking replacements for Bob, including Willie Gage and Barbara Bougue, but eventually they reverted to the original three members in 1957, when press agent Frank Weber offered to promote the band; Bob returned to California from Hawaii.<sup>248</sup>

Weber worked with the band securing them playing opportunities at the California club, the Purple Onion.<sup>249</sup> Dave, Bob, and Nick dressed in Ivy League attire because folk music was popular with the Ivy schools. Furthermore, they named themselves, the Kingston Trio, because Kingston was a common name for towns in the Northeast, where the college folk circuit was growing. Kingston was also the name of a town in Jamaica where calypso music came from, and a lot of their music was calypso inspired because of the present success of Harry Belafonte. Weber worked to make the Kingston Trio marketable. Robin Callot and Paul Surratt state,

He sat in the audience during the Trio's performances, recording the sessions on a reel-to-reel Wollensak tape recorder and taking notes on the audience's reactions to their different routines. Frank and the guys would then analyze all this information at the following day's rehearsal and determine what changes were needed to further hone their act.<sup>250</sup>

Voyle Gilmore, a representative of Capitol Records saw the band performing at the Purple Onion, and ultimately had them signed with the company.<sup>251</sup> The Kingston Trio came to know "Tom Dooley" while at the Purple Onion. Callot and Surratt state "a man named Tom performed it at a Wednesday afternoon audition." It was a song that was recorded for their first studio album in 1958. Paul Colburn who was a DJ in Salt

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 6-7

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 7.

Lake City, Utah for KLUB radio station, played the song on-air and raised the attention of listeners. It generated so many requests from listeners to be played that Capitol decided to make “Tom Dooley,” into a single. Most people, however, did not wait for the single and instead purchased the whole album. “Tom Dooley” reached #1 on the music charts just before Christmas in 1958, and won a Grammy for “Best Country and Western Vocal Performance” for the year.

### **Lasting legacy of “Tom Dooley”**

The ballad of “Tom Dooley” as recorded by the Kingston Trio helped initiate nostalgia for a folk culture among the wider population by metaphorically adding fuel to the fire of the rising popularity in folk music.<sup>252</sup> Robert Cantwell contributes the cause of the folk/blues rival to the initial release of the Kingston’s Trio’s “Tom Dooley.”<sup>253</sup> Joe Wilson credits Frank Profitt’s Library of Congress field recording in 1939 as the source of the ballad’s popularity, even though Grayson and Whitter were the first to record the song.<sup>254</sup> In an interview with Doc Watson, David Holt asks, “Was that surprising to you to hear a folk song that you knew, you actually had a family version of . . . on the radio?”<sup>255</sup> Watson’s response was that it was not surprising because by 1958, people had started to play songs that were reminiscent of a past folk music heritage. Watson called the new sounding folk “contemporary folk music.”

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<sup>252</sup> Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>253</sup> Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, 2.

<sup>254</sup> Wilson, notes to *Grayson & Whitter*, 8.

<sup>255</sup> Watson 2002.

The Kingston Trio's obscure version of "Tom Dooley" demonstrated that the recording industry had changed the sound of folk. The first "contemporary folk song" Watson recalled have heard played was "Goodnight Irene," a song first recorded by Leadbelly, performed by the Weavers.<sup>256</sup> The opposite side of the Weaver's record contained "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine." This was an early encounter with "contemporary folk," which Holt says must have been in the 1940s. It is more likely that Watson first heard the new folk sound ca. 1950, when the Weaver's first recorded "Goodnight Irene."<sup>257</sup> The Weavers were first organized in 1948, and were known as the No-Name Quartet. Charles Wolfe alleges that they were the "most influential modern-day folksinging group." The original members were Pete Seeger – son of Charles Seeger, influential forefather of ethnomusicology – Fred Hellerman, Lee Hays, and Ronnie Gilbert.<sup>258</sup> Pete Seeger is an example a generation of children that grew up immersed in a folk-interested group of academics and folklorists in the 1920s and '30s. It is highly plausible that by the 1950s and '60s the wave of folk enthusiasts were the younger generation of such groups that were coming-of-age.

In the 1960s Doc Watson became an example of reclaimed traditional sound that was also exploited by interest in the revival of folk music. Arthel Lane (Doc) Watson (March 3, 1923 - May 29, 2012) was from Deep Gap, North Carolina.<sup>259</sup> Ralph Rinzler discovered Watson in Union Grove, North Carolina while he was looking for Tom

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid.; Lead Belly, 1943, "Goodnight Irene," on *American Roots Music* disc three, Palm Pictures PALMCD 2075-2/3, 2001, compact disc.

<sup>257</sup> Charles Wolfe, notes to "The Weavers: So Long It's Been Good to Know Yuh," on *American Roots Music* disc three (Palm Pictures PALMCD 2075-2/3, 2001), 42.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>259</sup> McGee, *Traditional Musician's of the Central Blue Ridge*, 184.

Clarence Ashley. He encouraged Watson to pursue a career in playing folk music after he heard Watson play; Watson did not believe he could make a living playing and singing traditional American folk.<sup>260</sup> Rinzler set up tours for him in America's Northeast. The folk revival grew feverishly among the crowds of people that hung out in coffeehouses. The coffeehouse circuit was the first kind of performance venue in which Watson performed. He took non-stop bus trips, starting in Boone, North Carolina, all the way to New York City. Among the first places he performed were a coffee house at Brandise University, and Club 47 in Cambridge. In 1963, while booked to play at a place called the Second Fret in Center City downtown Philadelphia, Watson met Jerry Ricks, a bluesman. The amount of money that Watson made during his two weeks of scheduled playing was not going to be enough to pay for the hotel and return home with any profit. Jerry Ricks asked Watson to come stay at his home for those two weeks; during this time Watson recollects the two splitting the cost of groceries and playing together, each learning from the other.

Doc Watson's version of "Tom Dooley" is available on the 2002 recording titled *Legacy*, with David Holt.<sup>261</sup> This three CD collection is unique because most of the tracks that are of played material are interspersed with interviews by Doc Watson, conducted by Holt. Watson shares many fond memories from his childhood in the interview, as well as interesting facts about his music and his influences.

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>261</sup> Watson 2002.

The ballad of “Tom Dooley” was in Watson’s family for generations.<sup>262</sup> In the interview material about “Tom Dooley,” Watson revealed he learned most of “Tom Dooley” from his grandmother. Watson’s great-grandmother and great-grandfather knew the Dula family. Watson discredits the Kingston Trio’s version, in which their opening remarks before playing “Tom Dooley” state that it is a song about an “eternal triangle” between Grayson, Dula, and “a beautiful women,” presumably meaning Laura Foster.<sup>263</sup> Watson says there were two women, Laura Foster and Ann Melton, and actually two men, Dula and Grayson, who Watson says were all involved with one another. West’s research involving the use of court documents reveals there were even more people involved, but in this case, Watson was certainly more correct than the Kingston Trio.

Watson further confirms local beliefs that Ann Melton was the murderer of Laura Foster.<sup>264</sup> Watson’s great-grandmother was with Ann Melton on her deathbed. Watson discusses the scene his great-grandmother had told him, describing all of the women that were present in the room had heard the flames of hell roaring, and the sounds of hot coals being thrown into cold water. Watson says, “It was a scary time.”<sup>265</sup> Watson also tells us that while on her deathbed, Ann called her husband into the room because she needed to tell him something before she died. No one knew what Ann said, and Watson said her husband, “never breathed neither, but he almost lost his mind.”

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<sup>262</sup> Watson 2002.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid; The Kingston Trio 1958.

<sup>264</sup> Watson 2002.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

The following is a transcription of the lyrics sung in Watson's version of "Tom Dooley."<sup>266</sup> It has quite a few more verses than the sources that have been examined so far. Watson is very thorough in his lyrical content, and most of his verses tell the entire historical story that can be gotten from examining the research of West. It is interesting to see the most detail is in a version that is most near to the ballad's historical origins.

Chorus:

Hang your head Tom Dooley,  
hang you head and cry.  
You killed little Laura Foster,  
and you know you're bound to die.

1. You took her on the hillside,  
for to make her your wife.  
You took her on the hillside,  
and there you took her life.

(Chorus)

2. You left her by the roadside,  
you begged to be excused.  
You left her by the roadside,  
then you hid her clothes and shoes.

(Chorus)

3. Trouble, oh there's trouble,  
rollin' ore my breast.  
As long as I'm a living boy's,  
they ain't gonna let me rest.

4. I know they're going to hang me,  
tomorrow I'll be dead.  
Though I never even harmed a hair  
on poor little Laura's head.

(Chorus)

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

5. In this world and (unknown lyrics here)  
then reckon where I'll be.  
If hadn't been for Grayson boy's,  
I'd been in Tennessee.

6. You can take down my old violin,  
and play it all you please.  
At this tomorrow,  
it'll be no use to me.

(Chorus)

7. At this time tomorrow,  
where do you reckon I'll be?  
Down in a lonesome hollow,  
hangin' on a white oak tree.

(Chorus)<sup>267</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

The purpose of this study was to begin to recognize where new-sounding folk music of the late 1950s and early 1960s came from, and how that music was altered from earlier forms of folk music because of influences from the recording industry. Mamie Smith, the Carter Family, Leadbelly, Ralph Peer, John and Alan Lomax, and the Kingston Trio, serve as significant examples in vernacular music's journey into popular music culture by way of the recording industry and commercial entertainment.

Francis James Child laid a foundation for America's folk music heritage, but it was not inclusive of African American traditions. African American music had been in popular culture since at least the early nineteenth century evident in pre-civil war northern minstrelsy. The Virginia Minstrels furthered the spread of African American traditions when they formed in 1843. In the 1870s, Americans became fascinated with the black spiritual. The Fisk University Jubilee Singers popularized the genre in northern

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

cities. Minstrelsy and vaudeville show that vernacular song and music were already in mainstream popular culture. Black theaters emerged in the late nineteenth century, along with ragtime, and coon songs had previously been visible in vaudeville. Coon shouters, who found work in early twentieth century vaudeville, became the first singers of popular blues. America's folk music canon was expanded in the early twentieth century, beginning with folk collector John A. Lomax who became fascinated with cowboy songs at a young age. He published many collections of folk songs collected throughout America's South and Southwest.

In 1920, Smith's initial success singing "Crazy Blues" made the recording industry seek out artists for African American audiences. Music promoters like Perry Bradford helped start the business of blues and "race" recordings because they knew there was a market for that music. Companies began to find talent through field scouts who were hired to travel across the United States to find artists. The recording industries purpose in finding new talent was to make money. John Lomax conducted fieldwork in the early part of the twentieth century not unlike the recording industry, but his work was for academics.

After the increase in "race records" and hillbilly recordings expanded, Ralph Peer helped shape the recording industry's aesthetic values by promoting performers like the Carter Family. He influenced American's need to find a national identity through "authentic" music. Furthermore, the idea that one could take pre-existing songs and slightly change them lyrically or harmonically and make money from copyright royalties was introduced.

As the trend to find new artists was set by the recording industry, folk collectors too searched for artists and made money off their playing. Jazz and blues continued to grow throughout the 1930s and 40s, and began to incorporate the electric guitar.<sup>268</sup> Alan Lomax, the second son to John, followed in his fathers footsteps by further taking interest in African American blues and spirituals in the 1930s. John and Alan worked collaboratively to introduce a new folk sound to the upper and middle classes. John Lomax discovered twelve-string guitarist, Leadbelly, in a southern penitentiary, and with Alan's help, they took him to New York City and introduced him to the folk crowd and academics they knew.

Leadbelly had a repertoire of varied musical influences. He grew up in 1870s and 1880s following the rise in minstrelsy. He predated the influences of blues and ragtime, but lived through the turn of the century, and no doubt experienced them. He played with Blind Lemon Jefferson sometime before his incarceration. Leadbelly's repertoire preserved some of America's oldest vernacular music. The Lomaxes themselves stood apart from earlier folk collectors and music promoters because they popularized "actual folk" music by taking vernacular traditions as they were – in the appearance and playing of Leadbelly – straight into the commercial market. It can be argued, however, that the "folk" sound the Lomaxes popularized, was their own vision of what "folk" was or had been. Leadbelly's repertoire was more varied than the music the Lomaxes had him to play. He was made to dress in clothing that was deemed most "authentic," and presented to a middle class, refined, white audience. Despite the shortcomings, Leadbelly and his

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<sup>268</sup> Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Penguin Group, 1981), 15.

music would be a source of inspiration for many people seeking some small bit of authenticity amidst the recording industry in the later twentieth century.

“Tom Dooley,” ties all the above case studies together by tracing a historical folk ballad through recording industry’s history. Each of the case studies represents isolated examples of vernacular music recording. When pop music group the Kingston Trio recorded “Tom Dooley” in 1958, it became a national sensation. The Kingston Trio was not aiming for authenticity. Their version was a crude example of the ballad’s earliest versions, and yet fragments of the lyrics and harmonies of the nineteenth century music came through radios and LP turntables across the nation. Hidden behind the gloss of pop music, their performance built on a tradition of vernacular sound that was already firmly embedded in recording history. In the wake of this recording, artists and musicians would carry on the tradition of looking backwards thereafter.

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