

DEFINING THE MUSIC OF AMERICA'S WHITE RURAL WORKING CLASS  
FROM THE 1920s THROUGH THE 1950s

by

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## Abstract

This thesis discusses the recordings of hillbilly and folk music cut by record company agents and folklorists from the 1920s through the 1940s. These years saw the rise of recorded music as mass entertainment in the United States, and therefore are of importance as a watershed moment in the development of American music. The similarities and differences between the group of Artist and Repertoire men that recorded hillbilly music (along with many other varieties of American music) and the group of folklorists who recorded folk music are important in understanding the different ways that Americans have thought about the music of the white working class.

This thesis argues that both the hillbilly and folk recordings were parallel attempts to synthesize music of and for the white working class. This paper focuses on the ideas of Alan Lomax, and accesses his letters and documents created for the Library of Congress to discuss his vision for “white folk music” as a cohesive and ongoing musical tradition produced and consumed by white Americans. This vision resembles the place in American society that hillbilly and later country music came to occupy.

Given that the two genres were both intended as products of and for the white, rural working class, the most important difference between the recordings is in the reason that they were made. While Lomax had lofty ambitions for his music as a top-down movement propagated by public programs such as the Archive of American Folk Song, the record company agents simply did their best to exploit what they saw as a business opportunity. Although they did not necessarily see some cultural value in their version of the music of the white working class, the record company A&R men laid the groundwork for something similar to Lomax’ vision for “white folk music.”

On February 22, 1941, Alan Lomax, the 26 year old assistant-in-charge of the Archive of American Folk Song, wrote to Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish with recommendations for an “Army Music Program” of his design. After visiting various army camps, Lomax conceived of a program which would “follow the desires of the men” to teach white American soldiers how to play stringed instruments in “folk” styles and provide them with lyrics and background information on a number of American folk songs. This program would catch on, Alan Lomax argued, because “there is an enormous and basic interest among the white soldiers, the youngsters, in ‘hillbilly music,’ that is, contemporary American folk song.”<sup>1</sup>

Before this moment, on the eve of World War II, even the idea that there was such a thing as “contemporary American folk song” was controversial in the conservative study of American folk music. “Hillbilly music” of the sort that Alan Lomax referred to in his letter was a catchall term for the various rural, southern and predominately white recordings that had found remarkable commercial success since the mid 1920s. Lomax’ vision of folk music as a dynamic genre, taught to and practiced by ordinary Americans never got the support he hoped for. The post-war academic folklorists would shun Lomax’s work and his view of folk music as a living genre and hillbilly, which had by then become known as country music, as a part of it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Lomax to Archibald MacLeish, February 22, 1941, in *Alan Lomax, Assistant in Charge: The Library of Congress Letters, 1935-1945*, ed. Ronald Cohen. Jackson, United States. Press of Mississippi, 2007. 210.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008, 169.

The differences between what is “folk music” and what is “hillbilly” or country music often center on questions of authenticity and mass consumption. When Alan Lomax wrote this letter, however, such distinctions did not make sense for his conception of what folk music was and what its place in society should be. The “white folk music” category as Alan Lomax envisioned it and the genre of commercial hillbilly music were both attempts to isolate and popularize a dynamic, expressive cultural product of and for the white working class South. The important difference between these two undertakings with a similar goal, however, was that the hillbilly crowd saw their creation as a business opportunity and the folk crowd saw theirs as way to elevate American culture.

Alan Lomax, along with his father John Lomax and various other song collectors who can broadly be referred to as “folklorists,” had been enjoying a newfound role in American society. During the Great Depression, he and his contemporaries were commissioned by the Roosevelt Administration to record and promote American folk music. Naturally, exactly what recordings qualified as “folk” was up to them. By recording what they thought was culturally important, and then organizing it using their own preconceived notions about the relationship between musical styles and race, the folklorists created their own far reaching conception of white, rural, working-class music.

The record industry also tried to synthesize a genre of white, rural, working class music. Since the mid-1920s, the record company’s “Artist and Repertoire” agents or “A&R men” had found and recorded southern (or at least southern sounding) singers and string bands performing ballads, blues and dance tunes for most of the major labels. These recordings were released in a series that distinguished them from other contemporary categories; especially “race” records and marketed them to the white

working class. The hillbilly genre that they created is often credited as the basis for the dominant modern musical expression of the southern white working class; country music.<sup>3</sup>

In his letter, Lomax recognized the obvious similarities between “white folk” and hillbilly music and used them as an argument for the viability of his program to teach white American soldiers “American folk music.” Both musical categories drew on idealized, and often derogatory, stereotypes about the rural whites who performed the music. Both genres drew from a similar pool of musical material that had existed before the era of commercial recording. Crucially, both forms of music were obsessively defined along cultural and racial lines. Hillbilly music was the commercial music of white rural southerners. The folklorists defined white folk music as a category of vernacular music that was separate from black folk music.

Despite these similarities, hillbilly and folk were principally different because the individuals and groups who worked to popularize these two genres had different goals in mind. The folklorists, like Lomax and other collectors of folk songs, recorded what they thought was valuable material because they wanted to popularize their own conception of what was authentically “America’s music.” The A&R men of the record companies, on the other hand, generally cared very little for the music that they recorded, and simply made an educated guess about what might sell based on past experience. This distinction between the desire to shape America’s rural white music to a certain aesthetic and the intention to simply let Americans’ money elect their desired representation of rural white

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<sup>3</sup> Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014) and Richard Peterson. *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

southern culture was the consistent difference between folk and hillbilly at the time of Alan Lomax's letter.

Recent scholarship has focused mainly on either folk or hillbilly music with little mention of the other except as part of a wider description of American music and popular culture during this period. Recent works such as Patrick Huber and Brian Ward's *A&R Pioneers: Architects of American Roots Music on Record* and Richard Peterson's *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* have dealt with the motivations and mythmaking tactics of early commercial hillbilly recording salesmen, hillbilly event and radio promoters, and individual A&R men, coming to the conclusion that the rustic image of the hillbilly performer was mainly a construction to entice nostalgic listeners.<sup>4</sup> In his thoroughly researched history of the study of folk music of the United States, Benjamin Filene finds that the images folklorists like Alan Lomax, his father John, and others used to entice listeners and gain public support for their folk music collecting also intentionally misrepresented folk singers and their music as isolated relics of the preindustrial United States.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, while acknowledging "folk roots" of hillbilly music, these works fall short of calling the professional, commercialized hillbilly genre a form of contemporary folk music. That is to say, these modern scholars would not agree with Alan Lomax's view that hillbilly music was both "commercial" and "folk."

This paper will deal primarily with the history of hillbilly and white folk music and divide it into three sections. The first section will deal with the study of American folk music and culture from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the great depression

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<sup>4</sup> Ward, Brian, and Patrick Huber. *A & R Pioneers: Architects of American Roots Music on Record*, 2018. and Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music*

<sup>5</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 17.

and compare the image American folk that folklorists tried to create with the fanciful depictions of hillbilly artists that record companies created and perpetuated. This section will also emphasize the ways that both groups were attempting to frame their recordings as white, rural, working class music.

The second section of this paper will deal with the Great Depression era, from 1929 to 1941, when the study of folk music became, in the minds of folklorists employed by the United States government, a state sponsored endeavor to document and canonize American folk music. From their viewpoint, folk music was a representative cultural product and an artistic tradition that would be analogous to the mythologized sources of European high art. At the end of this moment, Alan Lomax wrote his letter to MacLeish because he felt that this lofty ambition for the music he so loved was within reach. This section will also discuss the developments in hillbilly and folk music that arose from the record companies' policy of selecting talent based on what they believed would be popular among the white working class.

The third section will discuss how the onset of World War II dried up public funding for folk programs such as the Library of Congress' Archive of the American Folk Song and placed the academic study of folk music back into a more conservative vision of what folk music was and what use it could be to the American people. As political reality made the Depression era folklorists' vision of a federally supported and promoted folk tradition seem less and less feasible, prominent folklorists began to assert that the work of Lomax and his colleagues was, as one post-war academic folklorist put it, "fakelore."<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, what soon became known as country music was both a symbol

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<sup>6</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 169.

of rural white identity, and the music of choice for many of those whom Alan Lomax would have referred to as the “folk.” In this way, country music came to hold the position that Alan Lomax had envisioned folk music holding in American culture.

It is important to note that, while this paper is primarily focused on the music of the white working class, the A&R men and folklorists of this time period also recorded a great deal of roots music performed by other American groups. This paper will only discuss the music of nonwhite Americans as a source of information on how record companies and folklorists defined what white rural music was and was not, but these recordings of Blues, Jazz, Gospel music and other genres were of great interest to both groups.<sup>7</sup> The records of nonwhite Americans cut by A&R men and folklorists also had lasting impacts on the development of American music and are invaluable as subjects of Academic study.

### **Rural White Music**

Folk and hillbilly promoters used similar images of a rustic, white performer to depict rural white southerners. Folklorists envisioned white folk music as a part of an ancient tradition brought to America from the British Isles. To them, the folk who preserved this music lived idyllic, self-sufficient lives in remote parts of the country devoid of commercial intrusions. Folk collectors believed that the musicians they recorded represented ideal aspects of an American rural past that should form the basis of American cultural products. Hillbilly music promoters, such as radio hosts, A&R men

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<sup>7</sup> Ward, Brian, and Patrick Huber. *A & R Pioneers: Architects of American Roots Music on Record*, 2018, 11.



and the performers themselves tended to play up these same tropes about southern rural music.

Early advocates of American folk music described the folk in ways that varied from paternalistic to outright hostile. While appreciating the “mountaineers” for their preservation of British ballad music, one 1893 article on Appalachian folk music described them as “too ignorant to read” and describes their musicianship as “monotonous” and “nasal.”<sup>8</sup> This description, while particularly derisive, is emblematic of folklorist’s simultaneous condescension toward the folk that they studied and admiration for the music that they played and their highly emphasized Anglo origin.

The first comprehensive work on Appalachian folk music was Cecil Sharp’s exhaustive 1917 *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians, Comprising 122 Songs and Ballads, and 323 Tunes*. Sharp was actively searching for a sort of “Anglo” origin in the music of the American south, and treated the ballad singers with somewhat more sympathy, but also took pains to emphasize how removed the culture was from the outside world. He wrote that in the areas he studied “no one is ‘on the make’; commercial competition and social rivalries are unknown” and the small settlements he found were “more secluded than any English village.”<sup>9</sup> Sharp took care to emphasize the remoteness and non-commercial bent of the culture of the Appalachians. He presented the Appalachian musician as an embodiment of rural tradition that he believed was fast disappearing.

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<sup>8</sup> Lila W Edmands, “Songs from the Mountains of North Carolina” *The Journal of American Folklore* 6, no. 21 (1893), 131–34.

<sup>9</sup>Cecil J Sharp, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians, Comprising 122 Songs and Ballads, and 323 Tunes*, (New York and London, “:G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1917), ix.

Sharp also articulated what he sees as the folk music collector's mission. Despite his belief that education in the mountains is the "sworn enemy of the song collector,"<sup>10</sup> Sharp wrote about an "ideal society" where "every child in his earliest years would ... develop this inborn capacity and learn to sing the songs of his forefathers."<sup>11</sup> Sharp also separated Appalachians from the rest of America by suggesting that their culture should be preserved at the expense of their education, even though he believed that American culture at large could benefit from an introduction to cultural products that may not be already familiar to them. Such a system would "place the children of the present generation in possession of the cultural achievements of the past so that they may as quickly as possible enter into their racial inheritance."<sup>12</sup> Ideas of "racial inheritance" and "nationalism in art" were central to Sharp's view of southern white folk music. He imagined that the Appalachian ballad singer was a part of the same cohesive "race" that he believed existed in England. Sharp promoted the image of the folk musician as not just a rural American, but also a culturally and racially pure enclave that acts as a wellspring for American music and should be preserved from outside influences.

This idea of a national spirit embedded in a nation's folk music was also present in European writing and compositions. Before turning his attention to American folk music, Cecil Sharp had collected folk songs in England and founded the English Folk Dance Society in 1911.<sup>13</sup> He, and other advocates of English folk music argued that a country achieved its own distinctive national style through folk music. Influential

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, xii

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, viii

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, xx

<sup>13</sup> Niall O'Loughlin, "What is English Music? The Twentieth Century Experience." *Musicological Annual* 43 (2007): 147-166.

composer and fellow folk music collector Ralph Vaughan Williams argued, in a set of lectures printed under the name *National Music*, that folk music “evolves and becomes the voice of the people.”<sup>14</sup> Making extensive use of Cecil Sharp’s collections as well as his own, Vaughan Williams composed music meant to build upon folk traditions to create a distinctly “English” music.<sup>15</sup>

In other parts of Europe, too, composers sought to base their compositions on folk traditions of their country in order to frame their compositions as part of the creation of a national musical style. The Hungarian composers Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, for instance, incorporated traditional Hungarian dance styles into their compositions.<sup>16</sup> Bartók, like Vaughn Williams, worked not just as a composer of folk-inspired classical music but also as a field researcher for his own compositions. Armed with an Edison wax cylinder phonograph-recording machine, a precursor to the aluminum disks Alan Lomax would record with during the Great Depression, Bartók searched for Hungarian folk music in the early 1920s.<sup>17</sup> Calling what he recorded “peasant music,” Bartók compiled over 10,000 folksongs in this manner.<sup>18</sup>

In the American context especially, questions about national identity were pressing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the time that these folk and hillbilly recordings were cut, the United States was going through a period of demographic and societal change. Southerners, both white and black, were moving from rural backwaters to industrializing southern cities and to the great cities of the North from the turn of the

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<sup>14</sup> Ralph Vaughan Williams, “National Music.” Lecture, Mary Flexner Lectures on the Humanities, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, 1932

<sup>15</sup> Vaughan Williams, “National Music”.

<sup>16</sup> O’Loughlin, “What is English Music?” 148.

<sup>17</sup> Greg Cahill, “How Béla Bartók Redefined Classical Music.” *Strings*, 06, 2018, 32-37.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

century to the beginning of the Great Depression.<sup>19</sup> The influx of non-protestant Europeans created tensions between American-born and immigrant whites, and the Ku Klux Klan rapidly regained power as it purported to defend white working class America from racial inclusion and Catholicism.<sup>20</sup> American folk recordings in this period were often made to reinforce cultural images traditional Americanism such as the white protestant farmer in the face of these changes.

Like his European counterparts, American musicologist John Lomax projected his notions about the ability of folk traditions to describe national character onto the musicians that he recorded. Growing up on a Texas farm, John Lomax considered himself “directly sprung” from an “unlettered” folk tradition.<sup>21</sup> After studying the old-English language in college, he began to believe in a direct link between the cowboy songs that he had heard growing up and the Anglo-Saxon epics he was studying. Armed with a supposed link between modern working class whites and their European ancestors, the elder Lomax went so far as to suggest that American cowboys were analogous to the British “peasant.”<sup>22</sup> He also saw the music that he collected as a reflection of American national character. Early in his career as a “ballad hunter,” John Lomax wrote to various newspapers, asking the editors to direct anyone with useful information about folksongs to his project. His gushing letter extolled the virtues of American folk songs, claiming

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<sup>19</sup> William J Collins, and Marianne H Wanamaker, *The Great Migration in Black and White New Evidence on the Selection and Sorting of Southern Migrants*. Cambridge, Mass: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas R. Pegram, “The Ku Klux Klan, Labor, and The White Working Class During the 1920s.” *Journal Of The Gilded Age And Progressive Era*, (2018) 17.

<sup>21</sup> John Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, reprint ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), xx.

<sup>22</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 32.

that they “epitomize and particularize” the American pioneer spirit.<sup>23</sup> Lomax’ conception of an American folk tradition, however, had to be different from the European ideas of national forms springing from a supposedly culturally and racially homogenous group because of the obvious diversity of American backgrounds.

John Lomax showed a great interest in the folk music of Americans of other races, although he divided them categorically and promoted different images for black and white folk musicians. While he compared the Appalachian and cowboy folksingers he recorded to pastoral Europeans, Lomax promoted the most famous artist he recorded, Huddie Ledbetter or “Leadbelly,” as a dangerous criminal. John Lomax insisted that he perform wearing his convict clothes from his time in Angola prison and once described him as a “N\*\*\*\*\* to the very core of his being.”<sup>24</sup> By saying this, he was asserting that Leadbelly, was an ideal cultural representative for black Americans. Though John Lomax may have been interested in finding and documented African American folk music, he took care to separate the images of supposedly racially pure inheritors of English folk tradition from other members of American society. In doing so, he maintained an image of racial and cultural cohesion amongst the creators of folk music by insisting that there were multiple distinct and isolated folk traditions in the United States.

John Lomax’ son Alan did not tend to use such derogatory and extreme language to describe the differences between white and black music. The younger Lomax certainly believed in such a divide, however, and categorized his collections accordingly. In a 1940

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<sup>23</sup> John Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 29.

<sup>24</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk* 59. The asterisks are my own addition. I do not wish to alter the historical record with censorship, but I feel that this word in particular can draw focus away from a reasoned analysis of the sources.

report for the Library of Congress, Alan Lomax divided the “American Folk Music on Commercial Records” that he found into both musical and racial categories.<sup>25</sup> He placed songs into categories of “White Blues” and “Negro Blues,” “White Ballad” and “Negro Ballad,” and “White Hobo Song” and “Negro Hobo Song.”<sup>26</sup> His categories show that he believed that race was fundamental to the folk music he recorded, and that the music of the white working class was necessarily not the music of the black working class in America.

Alan Lomax’ notation also shows us that the categories he was most concerned with were “white,” “black.”<sup>27</sup> Oddly enough, Lomax includes a couple of songs specifically labeled “Cajun,” but beyond that he considers the white folk music he recorded to be part of a homogenous tradition.<sup>28</sup> Lomax called one category “white ballads” instead of “Anglo-American ballads” for instance, departing from the characterizations that his father and Cecil Sharp had applied. Alan Lomax’ view that this music was fundamentally a product for white Americans to enjoy and create influenced his vision of the place of folk music in American culture. He believed that the future of what he called “white folk music” would be as an art form performed and enjoyed by all white Americans, and so he did away with labels beyond “black” and “white.” In his letter to Archibald Macleish, Lomax advocates for a program to teach specifically white folk music to young white soldiers, who came from different regions of the United States

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<sup>25</sup> Alan Lomax, *American Folk Songs on Commercial Records*, 1940. Lomax Collection Library of Congress, Alan Lomax Collection, [https://archive.org/details/lomax\\_201706/page/n5](https://archive.org/details/lomax_201706/page/n5).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

and whose ancestors doubtlessly came from various musical traditions of Europe.<sup>29</sup> He went on to suggest a similar program in the segregated African American army camps “with appropriate changes.”<sup>30</sup> Here, Lomax advocated for governmental policy to maintain a cohesive version of “white folk music” and a separation between that music and “black folk music.” Lomax’ vision of the future of the music of the white working class specified that it belong to all white Americans, other than perhaps Cajun white Americans, and white Americans alone.

Record companies, too, formed notions about who would be consuming the music that their agents recorded. As they discovered the potential market for hillbilly records in the industrializing South, the A&R men of the record companies that marketed hillbilly music took pains to create an image of white working class music that would appeal to white southerners. Song titles such as “Pass Around the Bottle” and “It’s a Shame to Beat Your Wife on Sunday” and comedy skits such as “Taking the Census” and “Prohibition, Yes or No” evoke nostalgic images of a backward but independent and wily hillbilly musician who distrusts the government and has a penchant for homemade liquor.<sup>31</sup> The song lyrics, the speaker’s exaggerated southern drawls and feigned ignorance of city life reflect the musicians’ and the promoters’ intention to create a commercially popular caricature of the hillbilly musician that was in some ways different from, but in many ways similar to, the image of the southern white folk that was cultivated by folklorists of the day.

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<sup>29</sup> Alan Lomax to Archibald MacLeish, February 22, 1941, in *Alan Lomax, Assistant in Charge: The Library of Congress Letters, 1935-1945*, ed. Ronald Cohen. Jackson, United States. Press of Mississippi, 2007. 210

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Tony Russell and Bob Pinson, *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921-1942*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press), 2008.

Race was also an ever-present part of the record companies and performer's presentation of hillbilly music as a product for white southerners. Songs with blatantly racist names "Run N\*\*\*\*\* Run," and "N\*\*\*\*\* Loves a Watermelon," were commonplace.<sup>32</sup> One of the very first successful hillbilly recording artists and radio stars, Fiddlin' John Carson, was a member of the Ku Klux Klan and performed at Klan sponsored events.<sup>33</sup> He was also known for composing a song directing the blame for an infamous murder toward Leo Frank, a Jewish factory superintendent who was most likely innocent.<sup>34</sup> Carson went on to play this composition, "Little Mary Phagen" for the crowds present at Frank's lynching, and the song was famous among working class whites in the area for decades afterward.<sup>35</sup> These decisions to antagonize other groups reinforced the image of hillbilly music as a distinctly white, protestant category.

This attempt at racialization was so pervasive and deliberate that Ralph Peer, the most famous of the genre's A&R men later gloated that he had "invented the hillbilly and the n\*\*\*\*\* stuff."<sup>36</sup> Dubious as this claim may be, it is reflective of the industry's overall attempt to separate hillbilly music from other sorts of commercial music, particularly the predominately African-American genre marketed as "race music." As folklorists such as Sharp and John Lomax had done, musicians and promoters of hillbilly music took pains to frame their recordings as a product of specifically white, southern culture.

It is clear that the intended market for these recordings was not just all southern white people, but particularly members of the southern white working class. A&R man

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<sup>32</sup> Tony Russel, Bob Pinson, *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921-1942*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Huber, *Linthead Stomp*, 61

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 59

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

<sup>36</sup> Anthony Harkins, *Cultural History of an American Icon*, 74



Harold Soulé complained that the executives of Gennett Records would often reject his hillbilly recordings because they did not to work well when played on a cheap phonograph machine. The company did this because the intended market for these records consisted of, in Soulé's words, "hillbillies and farmers and people who just had an ordinary old crank machine."<sup>37</sup> The record company's primary interest, then, was not the creation of a record that accurately documented the intricacies of white rural music. Rather, it was to create a product that would appeal to the intended customer, at the cost of subtleties that the folklorist group would have likely considered vital.

Record companies tried to avoid the appearance of outright ridicule toward their growing consumer base among the southern working class, even as they marketed a sometimes wildly exaggerated caricature of the white working class southerner. It is important to note that while "hillbilly" was a label widely applied to the commercialized music of the southern white working class, record companies generally did not utilize it as a marketing term, for fear of alienating their intended customers.<sup>38</sup> Instead they marketed hillbilly music on its own particular series, which would usually have a somewhat less derogatory title. For instance, Columbia records released the early hillbilly string band "Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers" on a series of releases that was titled "Old Familiar Tunes" or "Familiar Tunes - Old and New."<sup>39</sup> The physical printed record label in the middle of one of these 78-rpm records would contain a catalog number that the company would use to keep track of each individual recording. These catalog

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Brian Ward and Patrick Huber, *A & R Pioneers: Architects of American Roots Music on Record* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press and the Country Music Hall of Fame), 2018), 210

<sup>38</sup> Huber and Ward, *A&R Pioneers*, 222

<sup>39</sup> Huber, *Linthead Stomp*, 129

numbers would correspond with their marketing series, usually identifiable by the first two numbers. Record companies often assigned recordings to different series in order to distinguish between the recordings they characterized as black rural music and white rural music. Certain series contained music that was meant to sound “white” and be marketed to white audiences, and other series contained music meant for black audiences.<sup>40</sup>

This clerical system shows us how A&R men made decisions about what was marketable as white working class music. For example, the RCA Victor Company issued the white string band The Carolina Tarheels’ 1928 recording “I Don’t Like the Blues No How” with catalog number V-40053.<sup>41</sup> Since this catalog number began with 40, we know this recording was a part of Victor’s V-40000 “Old Familiar Tunes & Novelties” series.<sup>42</sup> Victor released Blind Willie McTell’s 1928 “Love Talking Blues,” catalog number V-38032, on it’s 38000 “Double-Faced Hot Dance Tunes” music series, however.<sup>43</sup> The former is a hillbilly series, the latter a “race” music series. Both of these tracks were recorded in Atlanta, and both feature a bluesy chord progression with rhythmic guitar accompaniment and a single vocalist. These tracks and others appeared in different series because the A&R men who recorded them and the executives who catalogued them wanted to isolate a distinctly white southern rural music.

Sometimes these marketing decisions were a source of controversy for musicians who felt that they were unfairly excluded from a “hillbilly” record series. *In A&R*

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<sup>40</sup> Huber and Ward, *A&R Pioneers*, 202

<sup>41</sup> Tony Russel, Bob Pinson, *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921-1942*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 173

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

<sup>43</sup> “Victor Matrix BVE-47188. Loving Talking Blues / Blind Willie McTell - Discography of American Historical Recordings.” Accessed February 19, 2019.

*Pioneers: Architects of American Roots Music on Record*, the authors discuss The Allen Brothers, a white string band, and the Columbia Phonograph Company's release of one of their singles on their 14000-D "race" series instead of their 15000-D hillbilly series.<sup>44</sup> This was an odd decision, so much so that the band sued Columbia for \$250,000 over fears that this label might endanger their future career prospects.<sup>45</sup> This example illustrates the importance of the racial branding of rural southern music. Not only did the record companies apply these segregating labels to distinguish between white and black performers, they also did so to distinguish between white and black sounding performers in order to sell records in a market where consumers had incorporated a concept of what constituted black and white string band music into their purchasing decision.

The younger Lomax' report for the Library of Congress Division of Music in 1940 titled "American Folk Songs on Commercial Records" included various commercial recordings that had been labeled hillbilly or "race" records.<sup>46</sup> In his report, Alan Lomax labeled each recording with abbreviations such as "WB" meaning "White Ballad" and "NB" meaning "Negro Ballad." His categories include differentiation between white and black hobo songs, dance tunes, blues, and religious songs. Not surprisingly, his categories largely match up with the "race" and "hillbilly" distinctions made by record company agents. Lomax listed several tracks that came from Vocalion's 1000 "race" series, and all of these were labeled "negro blues" or "negro religious song."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Huber and Ward, *A&R Pioneers*, 201

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

<sup>46</sup> Alan Lomax, *American Folk Songs on Commercial Records*, 1940. Accessed via the Lomax Collection in the Library of Congress.

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

Interestingly, of three different recordings Lomax included of the song “Careless Love Blues,” two belong to the “white love song” category and one to the “negro blues” category. The version by black bluesman Blind Boy Fuller, reissued by Vocalion, is listed as a “white love song,” while Lomax listed the version by black blues singer Lulu Jackson, also issued by Vocalion as “negro blues.” It is difficult to understand why Lomax made this decision based on sonic considerations alone; the Blind Boy Fuller version labeled a “white love song” features slide guitar, long considered a classic hallmark of African American blues.<sup>48</sup> It is perhaps an error that Alan Lomax made when he was compiling this list, but it is more likely that Lomax used the recording industry’s decision on what was and wasn’t rural white music when his ears failed to justify one.

The version Lomax called “negro blues” was issued in Vocalion’s 1000 “race” series, while the version Lomax called a “white love song” was rereleased in Vocalion’s integrated 3000 series.<sup>49</sup> Although the latter record may have been originally released on the American Records Corporation Melotone and Perfect labels,<sup>50</sup> Lomax specifically listed Vo-03457 as the catalogue number for the Blind Boy Fuller version, suggesting that this particular release, and series classification, was relevant to his compilation. His choice illustrates how the record companies’ and the folklorists’ conceptions of southern white music were intertwined. Whether or not he did so consciously, Lomax applied the

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<sup>48</sup> J. W. Troutman, “Steelin’ the Slide: Hawai’i and the Birth of the Blues Guitar.” *South. Cult. Southern Cultures* 19, no. 1 (2013): 26–52.

<sup>49</sup> “Brunswick Catalog Series - Discography of American Historical Recordings.” Accessed March 20, 2019. <https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/resources/detail/204>. Because of the difficulty of dating these records, it is difficult to tell which was released first. The one Lomax referenced in his *American Folk Songs on Commercial Records*, however, was Vocalion catalogue number 03457

<sup>50</sup> Robert M. W. Dixon, John Godrich, and Howard Rye, *Blues and Gospel Records 1890-1943*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 430.

commercial recording industry's definition of rural white music. This decision reveals another instance where the Folklorist's conception of rural white music and the A&R man's hillbilly music were alike during this period immediately before World War Two. Alan Lomax created a category of rural white music to teach it to white Americans and enrich a national tradition, however, while the A&R men created one in order to market it to the southern white working class.

### **Alan Lomax' Evolving Concept of "Folk"**

As Depression-era public programs gave folklorists greater access to public funds and political support, a new generation of song collectors and categorizers sought to canonize and in some sense create a broadly defined "American folk music" genre. They adapted their goals and conceptions of what folk music and folk culture were and what its place in American society was to fit their ambition to develop a repository of music that could inform the cultural products of America. Folklorists of the Depression-era diverged from their predecessors in that they saw folk music as a dynamic tradition that could develop and survive despite, or even in cooperation with, the waves of industrialization and mass media that characterized early 20<sup>th</sup> century America.

Interest in American folklore at the national level reached a peak in the 1930s. The Roosevelts held a series of concerts at the White House featuring American folk acts, including Appalachian fiddlers, ballad singers, and square dancers and Eleanor Roosevelt, along with some twenty thousand others, attended the Whitetop Mountain

Folk Festival in southwest Virginia in 1933.<sup>51</sup> This interest in American folk music was also reflected in the Roosevelt administration's commitment to provide funding for folk music programs such as the Music Division of the newly created Works Progress Administration and the Library of Congress' "Archive of the American Folk Song," which first received public funding in 1937.<sup>52</sup>

Riding this wave of public interest in American folk music, John Lomax and his son Alan established networks of correspondence with other folklorists and government administrators. Like Cecil Sharp and other folklorists that predated him, Alan Lomax argued that it was imperative to preserve the folk music of Appalachia because it was in danger of disappearing in the industrializing south. In his official report on his collecting trip to eastern Kentucky, for instance, Alan Lomax lamented, "commercial music via the radio, the movies and the slot phonograph is usurping the place of traditional and homemade music."<sup>53</sup> To some extent, the Lomaxes and their contemporaries relied on the same tropes of the isolated, simple mountaineer who had preserved his or her culture through their separation from the outside world.

Alan Lomax represented a new generation of folklorist, however. On his collecting trips with his father, the two frequently argued over politics and Alan's connections with the Communist movement.<sup>54</sup> Among Alan's radical ideas was that the newly industrial economy could prompt the development of new folk music. Lomax wrote to Harold Spivacke, head of the Music Division of the Library of Congress, that in

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<sup>51</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 134

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 135

<sup>53</sup> Ronald Cohen, *Alan Lomax, Assistant in Charge: The Library of Congress Letters, 1935-1945*. University Press of Mississippi, 2007. 48

<sup>54</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk* 48

Kentucky he could find two distinct types of folk-singer, which he called “the mountaineer... and the miner.”<sup>55</sup> Alan Lomax went on to write that in Kentucky a folklorist could find “the music of the American pioneer, in all degrees of purity, in some isolated spots little affected by nearly a hundred years of change in the ‘outland’” and in other places that same music could be found “acquiring new vitality in the mouths of the miners.”<sup>56</sup>

Other folklorists came to similar conclusions to the effect that folk music could be a contemporary and dynamic art form. B. A. Botkin, a prominent folklorist and future head of the Archive of American Folk Song, wrote in 1937 that folk music should be viewed as “living and dynamic” and not, as some in his field would argue, a “backward and static” art limited to the realm of fast-disappearing tradition.<sup>57</sup> This new view of folk music as modern, functional, and still evolving art contrasted with older ideas that emphasized traditional forms and preservation and began to blur the line between what was folk and what was commercial, popular music.

Their new conception of folk music corresponded with a developing ambition to shape American music via a canonized base of American folk music. Folklorists of the New-Deal era began to see their work of “discovering” and recording the vernacular music of America as a way to inform American culture and music for the future. Like the European composers who had earlier begun to purposefully adopt elements of their countries folk tradition into their music, American folklorists could imagine their work as part of a search for American identity. Alan Lomax wrote to Francis McFarland, Director

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 42

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 138

of Music Projects for the Works Progress Administration, that it was his aim to aid in the creation of “an American music, which should be based on our extensive and beautiful folk traditions.” In another letter, Lomax argued that the Archive of American Folk Song could provide new composers with authentic recordings of folk music that could “supply their needs in a way that will be fruitful for American civilization.”<sup>58</sup> As Sharp imagined in the introduction to *English Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians*, the folklorists of the 1930s believed that their collecting would ground American composers in a supposed folk heritage.

Given this new conception of what folk music was and what its ultimate place in society should be, it would be unthinkable for Alan Lomax and his contemporaries to ignore the similarities between folk and commercially successful hillbilly music. Hillbilly music was a living, dynamic genre that had developed out of traditional playing styles and promoted images of a rural, preindustrial American past. Ignoring his belief that popular forms of art were in part to blame for the disappearance of folk music, Lomax wrote of his experience in Kentucky; “the ‘hillbilly’ musicians on the air have furnished another outlet for the homemade music of the mountains. Many of them come from rural backgrounds and their hopeful imitators in the hills of Kentucky are legion.”<sup>59</sup> Despite his apparent dislike of the outside influences that he felt was replacing the folk traditions of southern Appalachia, Alan Lomax’ beliefs in folk music as a living art form, rooted in an idyllic rural past led him to acknowledge the similarities between “hillbilly” music and what he was calling “folk” music.

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<sup>58</sup> Cohen, *Assistant in Charge*, 14

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 49



Alan Lomax went on to discard any sort of distinction at all between folk music and hillbilly music when he urged Archibald MacLeish to support his proposed initiative to train American soldiers in the playing of folk music in 1941. In part, he equated the two musical genres in order to sell MacLeish on the idea that there really was “an enormous and basic interest among the white soldiers in ... contemporary American folk music.”<sup>60</sup> This interest would make Lomax’ proposal to teach folk music to the soldiers seem more practical and beneficial. If they were already interested, it would be easier for them to learn and such a program would encourage unity and raise their morale. Lomax also wrote that hillbilly was “contemporary American folk music” because of the obvious parallels between hillbilly music and his conception of “folk.”

In referring to “hillbilly” as “folk” music, however, Lomax ignored the difference between his folklorist peers and the record company agents who recorded and promoted hillbilly music. Lomax wanted to expose Americans to the music that he felt was culturally significant and could inspire them to embrace the folk tradition. The hillbilly records that Lomax referenced as “contemporary American folk music” were not recorded by anyone with such lofty ambitions. For Lomax the popularity of hillbilly music was a means to educate Americans in the appreciation and performance of their culture’s music. In the minds of A&R men like Ralph Peer and Polk Brockman, popularity, and therefore monetary gain, was the end in itself.

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<sup>60</sup> Cohen, *Assistant in Charge*. 210

## Public Support Falls Short; Commercial Music Wins the Day

Following the Second World War, members of the folklorist group found themselves largely without the government support that had made their ambitions to create a national American music feel possible. While the Library of Congress' Archive of American Folk Song survived after the war, and still exists as the Archive of Folk Culture, most other federal programs in support of Folk Music disappeared. The resettlement Administration's Music Program, the radio broadcasting work done by the Office of War Information, and the Federal Writers,' Music, and Theater projects were all abandoned by the late 1940s.<sup>61</sup> Alan Lomax, after failed attempts to use new folk music to create support for Henry Wallace's presidential bid, was soon ousted as a communist by the right wing journal *Counterattack* and fled to England in 1950 where he remained for eight years.<sup>62</sup>

As WPA-era folk music advocates such as Mike Seeger, Alan Lomax and Benjamin Botkin felt the prospects of public folk programs grow dimmer, a new group of folklorists sought to integrate folk music into academia. Indiana University established the first American PhD. Program in folklore.<sup>63</sup> The Archive of American Folksong, which was once headed by Alan Lomax and then his fellow like-minded WPA era folklorist Benjamin Botkin, became less an institution meant to foster the growth of new folk music and culture and more a collection of sources for folk scholarship.<sup>64</sup> Duncan Emerich, the new head of the Archive, led an effort to reclassify and reorganize the

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<sup>61</sup> Filene *Romancing the Folk* 161

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 163

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 166

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 173

collection and develop connections with research Universities.<sup>65</sup> These changes cemented publicly funded folk music performance and scholarship's less utilitarian role.

At this time, the role of rural southern music in popular culture was contained to an ever-greater extent within the emerging hillbilly music industry. In 1941, *Billboard* magazine began publishing a "Hillbilly and Foreign Record Hits of the Month" column, signaling that the authors now considered hillbilly music a significant element in American popular music.<sup>66</sup> The popularity of this sort of music quickly became more evident to the music industry at large through the 1940s, as *Billboard* began publishing popularity charts in 1943, basing them first off of jukebox play, and then on retail record sales.<sup>67</sup>

The discussion of one hit in particular, Al Dexter's "Pistol Packin' Mama," illustrates the extent to which the music industry at large was coming to appreciate the position of hillbilly tunes as a major part of American popular culture. It became the first chart topping hillbilly record in the July 31, 1943 issue of *Billboard* as the top song of the weekly "Going Strong" record sales chart.<sup>68</sup> The author jokingly implied that the popularity of "Pistol Packin' Mama" and other hillbilly tunes was correlated with a supposed increase in the consumption of the sort of music he called "corn" that year. He wrote, "this week (record buyers') appetite was bigger than ever, and the flavor of ("Pistol Packin' Mama") seemed to suit their taste best."<sup>69</sup> The author's use of "corn" as

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 59

<sup>68</sup> "Record Buying, Going Strong." *Billboard*, July 31, 1943.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

slang for commercial hillbilly music perhaps also reflects the understanding that such music was, like corn, a commercial produced and consumed by the rural working class.

Hillbilly music on the radio, too, was becoming an ever more powerful force in American culture. As the National Life and Accident Insurance Company realized the advertising potential of their hillbilly radio program, *The Grand Ol' Opry*, they successfully lobbied for the right to broadcast via a 50,000-watt radio transmitter in October of 1931.<sup>70</sup> The station owners proceeded to construct the tallest manmade structure in Tennessee, a nearly nine hundred foot tall state-of-the-art radio tower which made it's first broadcast in July of 1932.<sup>71</sup> Audience feedback after this initial transmission indicated that their new station was capable of reaching listeners as far away as Oregon and Canada.<sup>72</sup> The station not only survived the great depression, but was even able to claim a profit independently of the National Life and Accident Insurance Company by 1936.<sup>73</sup> In 1943, WSM would rent Nashville's ornate Ryman Auditorium to hold live performances of *The Grand Ol' Opry*, providing country music with one of its most famous and enduring venues.<sup>74</sup> WSM in Nashville was far from the only station that broadcast a hillbilly music program in the 1930s, of course. Chicago had WLS' *National Barn Dance*, West Virginia had WWVA's *Wheeling Jamboree* and WBT in Charlotte had its own *Crazy Barn Dance*.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Craig Havighurst, *Air Castle of the South: WSM and the Making of Music City*. (Baltimore, United States: University of Illinois Press, 2011.) 53

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 56

<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 78

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 122

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 86

The rising power of radio broadcasters guaranteed a future for their commercialized version of rural white music by protecting the potential profitability of hillbilly songwriting and performance, as well. In 1940, a coalition of radio broadcasters demonstrated their influence and dissatisfaction with the then-monopolist performance rights organization, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), by creating the rival Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI).<sup>76</sup> ASCAP had systematically excluded hillbilly songwriters, among others, and so hillbilly musicians found themselves with no way to collect royalty payments on their compositions without going through exploitative publishing firms.<sup>77</sup> As ASCAP tried to double the blanket fee for radio play on songs they licensed, broadcasters responded by boycotting ASCAP compositions entirely, and creating a performance rights organization that would give hillbilly musicians a long awaited avenue through which to collect royalties on their compositions.<sup>78</sup>

In a 1958 congressional session convened to discuss the marketing practices of Broadcast Music, Inc., veteran hillbilly performer and entertainer Gene Autry described listening to and performing the type of records he had cut since 1928 as “a duty... to encourage the creation and dissemination of American music... in order to keep our great American heritage alive.”<sup>79</sup> Autry submitted that his genre of music “directly stem(med)

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 101

<sup>77</sup> Huber and Ward, *A&R Pioneers*, 90 and 268.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> United States. Congress. Senate Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce. Subcommittee on Communications. (1958). *Amendment to Communications act of 1934 (prohibiting radio and television stations from engaging in music publishing or recording business): Hearings, Eighty-fifth Congress, second session, on S. 2834. March 11-13, 19-20, April 15-17, May 6, 7, 20, 21, July 15, and 23, 1958*. Washington: U. S. Govt. Printing Office.

from the experience of that very large group of Americans who do not live in New York or Beverly Hills.”<sup>80</sup> Just as the folklorists who were gathering material for their genre of rural white music had argued near the end of the Great Depression, Autry felt that the music of the white working class captured the very spirit of American culture.

Although this hearing raised questions about the United States Government’s role in protecting American culture through the music of the white working class, it was ostensibly held to discuss whether or not the performance rights organization that catered to almost all hillbilly musicians and composers was guilty of anticompetitive business practices.<sup>81</sup> Much of Autry’s defense of BMI was based on the argument that without it, ASCAP had “reduced the economic aspirations of the so-called hillbilly writers to a point where most of them received no economic benefits at all from their music.”<sup>82</sup> Gene Autry also freely admitted in his defense of BMI that his radiobroadcasting corporation owned a large number of shares in BMI’s stock.

Autry’s discussion of the country music industry attests to the core similarities and differences between the efforts of Alan Lomax and company to record what they called “white folk music” and what was then popularly called “hillbilly” music. He frames hillbilly recordings as an essential element of American culture and an important way to understand the lives of ordinary Americans, just as the folklorists did. What makes his conception of this music, developed over a 30-year career that began in the studio with an A&R man from the Victor Talking Machine Company, different, was that in his mind it was chiefly a commercial enterprise. Autry does not argue for the United

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 450

States Government to simply record and promote the music of the white working class; he argues for them to protect the rights of performers and creators to make money off of it.

Despite the increasing relevance of Country music in American music, Alan Lomax' and his colleagues' work during the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century left lasting impacts on American music. The commercial folk music boom of the 1950s and 60s, though not a grassroots movement among ordinary Americans as Lomax envisioned for his programs, did gather a great deal of their material from the work of Depression-Era folklorists.<sup>83</sup> Many of the songs that he and his contemporaries collected for the Library of Congress over these years are now well known to the American public. "Home on The Range," transcribed by John Lomax in 1910, for instance, went on to become the state song of Kansas.<sup>84</sup>

The songs that the depression era folklorists recorded and the notions they developed about rural, working class whites also endured in the other genre of rural white music that developed in America at the beginning of the era of field-recorded music. Gene Autry referenced cowboy song "Oh, Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie," which was recorded by various hillbilly musicians in the 1920s and 1930s, as an example of hillbilly music's connection with Anglo-American tradition during his testimony before congress.<sup>85</sup> Autry stated that, "from what (he) picked up from various history books, it

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<sup>83</sup> Eyerman, Ron, and Scott Barretta. "From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States." *Theory and Society* 25, no. 4 (1996): 501–43. 508

<sup>84</sup> John Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Frontier Ballads*, Sturgis and Walton Company, New York, 1911.

<sup>85</sup> United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce. Subcommittee on Communications, 450.

was originally an old English song.”<sup>86</sup> This piece, under the title “The Dying Cowboy,” is the first song listed in John Lomax’ “Cowboy Songs and Frontier Ballads.”<sup>87</sup> If the “history books” that Autry was referring to weren’t by John Lomax, they were by someone who agreed with him and other folklorists about the essential character and importance of the music of the American white working class.

The trope of racial categorization has informed the study of American vernacular music long after the folk and hillbilly genres drifted apart. In his 1994 discography titled “Traditional Anglo-American Folk Music,” researcher Norm Cohen wrote that he excluded almost all African-American performers “on the grounds that they represent other than Anglo-American traditions.”<sup>88</sup> Cohen went on to reassure readers that his decision is not based on any feeling of superiority or inferiority of musical traditions, he simply believed African-American traditional music should get, in his badly chosen words, “separate but equal treatment elsewhere.”<sup>89</sup>

He did not, however, mention that the performers of this “Anglo-American” music had to be descendants of immigrants from the British Isles, as the title might imply. In this way, Cohen’s discography resembles the “white” category of Alan Lomax’ “List of American Folk Songs on Commercial Records.” His massive collection includes recordings cut by both the commercial A&R men and the folklorist crowd.<sup>90</sup> Like Alan Lomax, Cohen saw both sets of recordings as representatives of the same cohesive genre of white American rural music, despite the different objectives the A&R men and

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<sup>86</sup> *ibid*

<sup>87</sup> John Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Frontier Ballads*, 3.

<sup>88</sup> Norm Cohen. *Traditional Anglo-American Folk Music: An Annotated Discography of Published Sound Recordings*. New York: Garland Pub. 1994. xii

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*



folklorists had for the music. Also like Alan Lomax, Cohen was unable to consider the music he wrote about as anything but particularly white rural music.

## **Conclusion**

Both folk and hillbilly music promoters cultivated an image of southern, white, rural musicians and culture that exaggerated common tropes. Though the musicians did not necessarily come from rural areas, play music that was distinctly white, or hold stereotypical working class identities, both images relied on a similar conception of the white working class performer. Hillbilly promoters and folklorists alike racialized their genres and marketed their recordings to emphasize the whiteness of the rural music they promoted.

The period just before the Second World War was a climactic moment for the position of this rural working class music in the American consciousness. Enterprising folklorists such as Alan Lomax sought to capitalize on national support for the arts in order to synthesize a national American music out of the music that they recorded in various parts of rural America. Lomax and others drew an obvious connection between the music that they recorded among rural whites in Appalachia and the commercial genre called “hillbilly” music. Lomax used the popularity of this hillbilly music as proof of the relevancy of rural white music to the American popular imagination.

What Lomax ignored, however, was the promoters’ philosophy toward their mission as disseminators of this music. While WPA era folklorists sought to create a

national music that fit their prescribed notions of what was valuable as art, record company agents simply allowed the market to determine what music would grow to symbolized the American white working class. As public support for folk initiatives waned, southern, white, rural music in the American popular imagination was confined more and more to its presence in the form of commercialized hillbilly music.

This paper focuses on conceptions of rural white music and only touches on other categories of American music that were of interest to the folklorists and record company agents of this period. These other recordings of music such as blues, jazz, and traditional music in the languages and styles of various indigenous and immigrant groups in the United States are also important in understanding the development of recorded music as mass media in America. It is worth noting that, despite their own beliefs about the importance of race in musical tradition, the folklorists from the Depression Era tenaciously recorded the music of other Americans. Their recordings and reports give us an invaluable window into the lives and art of people who otherwise might have been largely absent from the historical record. Likewise, the A&R men of this period created a musical apparatus that allowed many Americans of differing backgrounds a voice in mainstream American musical culture as consumers and performers. While both groups developed their version of the music of the white working class, neither was wholly dismissive of the music they felt should be put in a different category.

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