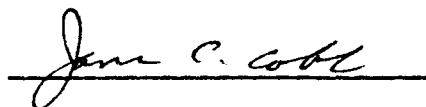


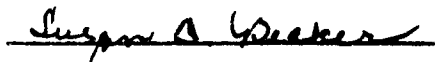
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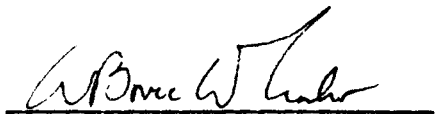


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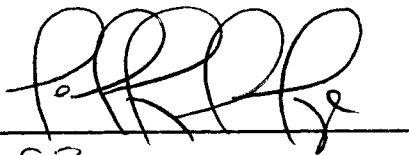
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RUMBLINGS FROM THE COUNTRYSIDE:
MANIFESTATIONS OF PROTEST IN THE MUSIC
OF RURAL SOUTHERNERS,
1925-1941

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jeffrey J. Lange

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ABSTRACT

This study demonstrates how rural southern protest against social and economic conditions was reflected in hillbilly and blues music of the 1920s and 1930s, a period when the first commercial recordings of southern music were issued by major record labels and a time when the audience for these two musical forms remained predominantly regional. The "South" in this article is defined as the eleven former Confederate States and Oklahoma, a state with close cultural ties to the Southeast encumbered by many of the region's socio-economic problems. An examination of this rural-oriented music reveals a growing class awareness on the part of rural southerners precipitated by the hard times of the Depression and hastened by federal and local authorities' response to it. The examples presented herein also indicate how many small landowners and tenants in the South interpreted their predicament.

In concentrating on the two dominant commercial musical forms in the South popular among rural folk during this period, this thesis examines gospel, jazz, Cajun, and other contemporary southern music only in instances when hillbilly and blues musicians incorporated these musical forms into their songs. The majority of lyrics selected for inclusion in this study were

transcribed from original recordings deposited in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and the Archives of Recorded Sound and American Folksong in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.. Song titles were acquired from library indexes, published discographies, and secondary sources. The absence of a complete discography of blues and country recordings released in the 1920s and 1930s precludes a complete survey of rural-oriented southern protest music of the period. The purpose of this study is to present examples of social commentary in early blues and country music in an effort to explore the manner in which southern music functioned as a form of protest during the Depression era.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. "THEY CAN ONLY FILL ONE GRAVE": SOCIAL COMMENTARY IN COUNTRY MUSIC OF THE DEPRESSION ERA.....	11
III. BEHIND THE MULE: EARLY RECORDED BLUES MUSIC AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN THE SOUTH.....	46
IV. EPILOGUE.....	81
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	88
VITA.....	97

INTRODUCTION

In the 1930s the United States experienced a decade of traumatic crises, beginning with an economic depression and ending with the threat of involvement in the second global conflict of the century. While the nation as a whole struggled through turbulent times, the American South endured a social revolution that dramatically altered the region's physical and human landscape. In the 1930s southern agriculture underwent a transformation from an isolated system based on tenant labor and non-mechanized farming to one dependent on federal intervention and technology. The upheaval that occurred proved particularly devastating to tenants and sharecroppers who ultimately faced displacement, the loss of their livelihood, and the prospect of being forced to leave their homeland in search of better economic opportunities.

While much has been written about the collapse of southern tenancy, no article or monograph can capture the devastating effects of the reconfiguration of southern agriculture as vividly as the words of the tenants and sharecroppers themselves. With few mediums open to them for expressing their discontent, members of the lower strata of southern society often produced songs for themselves and their neighbors to voice their opinions. Preserved in the documents of tenant unions and on commer-

cial and private recordings, these songs accurately capture an oppressed group's response to uncontrollable change. Two relatively new means of communication, the radio and the phonograph, allowed a singer's message to be disseminated throughout the South; as a result, hundreds of thousands of poor southerners came to realize that their suffering was not isolated. The recordings they made provide for the modern listener a legacy of rural southern commentary on the Depression and the transformation of southern agriculture that followed. Additionally, songs produced in the Depression era by lower-class southerners often reflected an increasing awareness and outspoken criticism of the deepening chasm between the region's economic despots and the dispossessed.

Throughout the 1930s, musical forms in the South remained as segregated as the society itself; while whites listened to an early form of county music termed "hill-billy" by the recording industry, blacks favored the musical genre known as the "blues." Both musical forms have roots in the nineteenth century, country emerging from folksongs and ballads in the Anglo-Celtic tradition and blues evolving out of black field-hollers and work songs. The commercialization of country music initially involved the recording of material indigenous to the rural culture of the audience. In 1923, for example,

Fiddlin' John Carson recorded an agrarian protest song familiar to many tenants:

Farmer is a man; farmer is a man--
Buys on credit till the fall--
Then they take him by the hand, and they lead
him through the land,¹
And the merchant is the man that gets it all.

With commercialization, original lyrics supplanted traditional material and opened up avenues for social commentary; the musical boundaries were expanded as well when performers such as Jimmie Rodgers incorporated other genres (i.e., the blues) into the Anglo-Celtic tradition. Nevertheless, the lyrical components of country music in the 1930s remained a distinct reflection of issues profoundly affecting rural whites in the South. While the majority of "hillbilly" recordings produced in the late 1920s and 1930s did not deal directly with political matters, enough examples exist to support the thesis that many rural white southerners were alienated by the transformation of southern agriculture and discontent with federal and local authorities' response to difficult economic times. These examples demonstrate

1

Bill C. Malone, Southern Music, American Music (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1979) ix, 2-3; Fiddlin' John Carson, "The Farmer is the Man that Feeds Them All," quoted in Gene Wiggins, Fiddlin' Georgia Crazy: Fiddlin' John Carson, His Real World, and the World of His Songs (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 233.

their occasional contempt for politicians and their frequent hostility toward the economic powers that be in the South. Prior to America's entrance into World War II, some white songwriters in the South exhibited a class awareness undoubtedly shared by members of their audience but often overlooked by southern social historians.

In the early recordings of blues performers, protest themes were clearly discernible in the 1920s and 1930s. An examination of blues lyrics written between the World Wars reveals to outsiders the African American experience in the South during the period; moreover, the blues reflects the manner in which rural blacks interpreted their situation. Collectively, the blues represents the ideology of a generation of African Americans born after the period of Reconstruction facing the three dominant components of southern life directly affecting their lives: political privilege, that is constitutional rights determined by the color of one's skin; an economic system constructed to insure white economic omnipotence; and social separation on the bases of caste and class. Born of circumstances brought about by political disfranchisement and economic subordination, the blues developed into a communal art form as a result of social isolation; the product was a folk art expression concerned with the effects of oppression and alienation.

Despite their shared poverty, blacks and whites experienced different types of repression and discrimination; moreover, the peculiarity of the African American experience in the South resulted in a wider range of protest themes than in the music of rural white southerners. As a result, social commentary in the blues appeared more frequently and at an earlier date; in fact, remonstrance in black music can be traced back to the antebellum period, when slaves composed ambiguous work songs that indirectly commented on their plight through the use of innuendo, metaphor, and circumlocution. The use of such double-entendre continued after emancipation. The story of how a black railroad worksong came about illustrates the point:

Spoken: You want to say something (and you know how we was situated so we couldn't say or do a lot of things we wanted to), and so you sing it. A friend of mine...was workin' down on a railroad section gang [and] looked at the boss lyin' in the shade sleepin'...He wanted to say something about it, but he couldn't you know. So that give him the blues and he sung a little number about--

Ratty [lazy, idle], ratty section,
Ratty, ratty crew,
The captain's gettin' ratty, boys,
I believe I'm gonna rat some, too.

By World War I, however, black southerners began to infuse the blues with more assertive phraseology. The advent of regional and national radio broadcasting in the 1920s coupled with the recording industry's interest in the southern market provided for the unprecedented

dispersal of a singer's message throughout the South. After centuries of oppression, it is not surprising that protest themes appeared in the first commercial recordings of southern African Americans in the 1920s.²

Social commentary in the music of rural white southerners did not become widespread until the onset of the Great Depression. Prior to 1930, most white performers in the South sang folk tunes and hymns. Some, however, such as Fiddlin' John Carson and Vernon Dalhart, did address political issues like the John T. Scopes trial and the Leo Frank case; their response, though, was less protest than an affirmation of religious fundamentalism and ethnic superiority. Social commentary in early country music began to appear with more frequency in the early 1930s, when an increasing number of rural whites found themselves slipping into a permanent state of tenancy as a result of international economic depression. The federal government's response to the economic crisis facilitated changes in southern agriculture that deepened the struggling farmers' plight and heightened their class

²
Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Thought From Slavery to Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 8-11, 214-215, 217-239; William Barlow, Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) 3.

awareness. The popularity of country music among rural whites furnished many politically weak southerners with a forum by which to express their discontent.³

The individual examinations of rural white and black music that follow reflect the complexity of each group's plight. The section on blues music, for example, will include a discussion of the convict-lease system and other aspects of the southern experience that predominantly affected African Americans in the region. Similarly, the story of the migratory Okies will expand the discussion of country music to unique aspects of the experience of southern whites.

Nevertheless, many aspects of the southern agrarian predicament during the Depression era cross over racial lines. Facing a dismal future on the farm, many members of both racial groups moved to the city or migrated to other regions of the country in search of employment; others stayed behind believing that Franklin Roosevelt would save them from economic ruin. The national recovery program that emerged in 1933, however, proved more beneficial to politically powerful planters and did little to assist the small landowners, tenants,

3

James C. Cobb, "From Muskogee to Luckenbach: Country Music and the 'Southernization' of America," Journal of Popular Culture: 81-89.

and sharecroppers. Struggling black and white farmers in the Arkansas Delta joined the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union in a concerted effort to stave off economic catastrophe. Other rural southerners in more remote areas listened to the radios and phonographs that they had purchased in more prosperous times and occasionally heard songs that seemed to capture their feelings regarding their plight. Through these mediums, they came to realize that others shared in their tribulations; in this way, they too felt a sense of group cohesion, evidenced by the enormous popularity of country and blues musicians who addressed social and political themes. Singing about subject matter familiar to rural-oriented folk, these musicians helped to form a group identity by transforming individual experiences into a collective enterprise.⁴

Prior to the nationalization of southern music in the 1940s, commercialization did not dilute the southern folk tradition; rather, it served as a cinema for the southern rural experience. As Lawrence Levine suggests, blues

⁴
Bill C. Malone, Country Music, U.S.A. 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985) 91; Barry Lee Pearson, Sounds So Good to Me: The Bluesman's Story (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984) 128, 192; Jeff Todd Titon, Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989) 35; Barlow, Looking Up at Down, 227-228.

and country songwriters remained dependent on the folk experience as a lyrical source: "In this sense records can be seen as bearers and preservers rather than primarily destroyers of the folk tradition." As times got worse, class awareness soared among the destitute; for the migrants, the unionists, and the desolate, music served as a source of strength and pride to an
5
oppressed and abandoned people.

The number of blues and country songs exhibiting critical social commentary decreased considerably after America's entrance into World War II. Much of the force of rural protest had begun to ebb by this time; meanwhile, a consensus mood swept over the country in response to the attack on Pearl Harbor. The war also resulted in a mass exodus from the region, a shift in the foci of blues music from the Delta to Chicago, and the nationalization of country music. In northern urban areas, the blues became electrified and the lyrics more suited to urban dwellers; meanwhile, the national popularity of country music resulted in a reduction of songs scrutinizing
6
southern society.

5

Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 229-231.

6

David Evans, Big Road Blues: Tradition and

The changes in southern society and southern music that occurred during and after World War II make the examination of their relationship before the war all the more important. In the late 1920s and early 1930s southern society remained much the same as it was fifty years prior; recordings produced by rural southerners during the period provide a valuable insight into the lives of struggling southerners and their perceptions of their economic and political predicaments. The merging of the recording industry's interest in southern music and the onset of the Depression resulted in a situation conducive to social commentary through music that could be shared with a large, regional audience; such an isolated, pure form of commentary through music is unlikely to occur in America again. The study of protest themes in southern music prior to World War II is a long-neglected field that deserves the recognition and attention of southern historians. This thesis will contribute to the study of southern history with respect to this oversight.

Creativity in the Folk Blues (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 86; Malone, Country Music, U.S.A., 35, 177.

7
Jack Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987) xiv; Paul Oliver, The Story of the Blues (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1969), 99.

CHAPTER ONE

"THEY CAN ONLY FILL ONE GRAVE"

Social Commentary In Country Music of the Depression Era

Since its inception in the late nineteenth century, the recording industry tended to concentrate on profitable urban markets; for this reason, scant attention was paid to contemporary white music produced in the South. In the 1920s, however, the industry recognized the profitability of a southern market; this inevitably led to the commercialization of southern folk music. The popular "barn dances" of the mid-1920s, broadcast across the region, circulated what became known as "old-time music," a blend of folk-traditional and contemporary musical forms. The economic hard times of the Depression, however, coupled with the popularity of radio, brought tough times to the recording industry as well; as a result, country music labels became much more discriminatory in their selection of music worth recording.¹

¹
Bill C. Malone, Southern Music, American Music (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1979) 37, 58-59; Bob Coltman, "Across the Chasm: How the Depression Changed Country Music," Old Time Music 23 (Winter 1976-1977): 6-9; Bill C. Malone, Country Music, U.S.A. 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985) 3, 31, 93-94; Jack Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987) 229.

In the 1930s, folk singers gave way to new musicians who built upon the "old-time" tradition by incorporating into it various southern musical forms (such as blues) and original lyrics. The subject matter chosen by the emerging songwriters of the decade reflected the ambivalence many southerners felt toward the Depression. As Bill Malone points out, "there has been no clear-cut, consistent ideology in country music, just as there has been none in southern rural culture." The country music audience of the 1930s, like the rest of the nation, often sought escape through songs about love and morality, cowboys, or religion. Some songwriters, however, beginning in the late 1920s and into the 1930s, examined the political situation and the southern human landscape and addressed the social and cultural consequences of the Depression. Thousands of displaced small landowners and tenants reeling from the devastating effects of the economic hard times related to these songs that reflected their anger and increasing class awareness.²

The economic plight of the rural white southerner in the 1930s has its roots in the tenancy sys-

²
Coltman, "Across the Chasm," 6-13; Malone, Country Music, U.S.A., 130-131.

tem that developed in the region after the Civil War. In 1880, ninety-three percent of the South's population lived in rural areas; between 1880 and 1930, the percentage of farm operators classified as tenants steadily increased from 36.1 to 55.5. This dramatic rise can be attributed to several factors, mainly the lack of capital in the South after the Civil War, an inadequate transportation system that forced small farmers to rely on local stores for supplies, credit, and the means to marketing crops, and land-owners' fear of a labor shortage that led to the creation of a system that discouraged upward mobility.³

The most obvious roadblock to land ownership for tenants was lack of capital. After the Civil War, yeomen and tenants alike turned to a cash-crop, in most cases cotton, as a means to retaining land ownership or moving up the agricultural ladder. In many cases they had no choice; merchants often in-

3

George B. Tindall, The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967) 409; J. Wayne Flint, Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979) 38-39, 44-46; Charles S. Johnson, Edwin R. Embree, and W.W. Alexander, The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy: Summary of Field Studies and Statistical Surveys, 1933-1935 (Chapel Hill, 1935) 22-23.

sisted that debtors grow a cash-crop as a condition to receiving credit. Constantly falling cotton prices in the last three decades of the nineteenth century led to foreclosures; as a result, land ownership became more centralized. Merchants, landlords, banks, and life insurance companies increasingly gained control of the most fertile lands. One tenant summed up his class's plight: "Can't borrow a dime, not a damn cent. If this ain't hell, I'll eat you. We work our damn heads off and git nothing. The harder we work, the deeper in debt we gits."⁴

The tenancy system persisted in this manner well into the twentieth century. When record companies and government field recorders came to the South in the 1920s and 1930s, they found rural southerners often singing about the sharecropping and tenancy systems in their own unique way. In "Cotton Farmer Blues," Samson Pittman captured the pernicious nature of southern tenancy:

Now you go to the commissary

4

Gavin Wright, Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986) 107-110; Pete Daniel, Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures Since 1880 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985) 4-6; Johnson, et. al., Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 18.

Texas; by 1913, the cotton-eating insects were half-way across Alabama and by 1933 blanketed the South. In 1922, they damaged thirty percent of the cotton crop in the region. The presence of the boll weevil further undermined the tenants' economic position; it not only destroyed their crop, but also increased the cost of production by forcing them to buy pesticides (from merchants and landlords). Tenants already experiencing downward mobility spiraled from cash tenant to share tenant, share tenant to sharecropper, or sharecropper to wage hand status (the difference involving the percentage of crop paid to the landlord/merchant). According to one study, the South recorded a sixty-nine percent increase in the number of white sharecroppers between 1920 and 1930.⁶

The First World War also contributed to the disruption of southern agriculture and the downward slide of farm operators. The war initially brought prosperity in the form of higher agricultural prices. Many farmers expanded their acreage and bought implements to increase their crop yield. When cotton

6

Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost, 53; Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 121; David Eugene Conrad, The Forgotten Farmers: The Story of the Sharecroppers in the New Deal (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965) 6-7; Daniel, Breaking the Land, 163.

dropped from 41.75¢ a pound in April of 1920 to 13.5¢ in December of that year, small farmers found themselves overextended; as a result, many of them⁷ slipped into tenancy.

Undoubtedly, larger farmers suffered as well during the erratic twenties; they, however, had allies in Washington. Three years prior to America's entry into World War I, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act which created the United States Department of Agriculture Extension Service to foster the utilization of scientific farming methods. Representatives of the Extension Service soon became agents of the politically powerful planters; consequently, very few marginal farmers profited from Service programs. Moreover, a coalition of western Republicans and southern Democrats in Congress (the Farm Bloc) concentrated on enacting programs to assist large commercial agriculturalists. With few friends in Washington and little if any capital, middle and lower class farmers in the South faced hard times years before the Stock Market crash in October, 1929:

⁷ Pete Daniel, "The Crossroads of Change: Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures in the Twentieth-Century South," Journal of Southern History L (August, 1984): 434; Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 111.

I went to the bank to borrow some money,
I tell you right now, didn't find it funny;
Banker said I got none to loan,
Get you hat and pull out a home.

Country dudes a-riding in cars,
Tailor-made suits and a-smokin' cigars;
Running to the barber shop
a-powderin' and a-rubbin',
I bet you right now 8
they're a-plowin' and a-grubbin'.

By 1930, tenants operated 55.5 percent of farms in the South; half of all farms in the region at that time centered around cotton production (seventy-five percent tenant operated). Between 1927 and 1930, cotton dropped from 20.19¢ a pound to 9.46¢. Many rural southerners, like the Allen Brothers, complained about an international system they did not understand:

Early in the mornin', late at night,
Just another poor farmer
tryin' to make my livin' right.
I don't want to rob, I don't want to steal;
They cut my cotton, that's the way I feel.

Worked all summer, since early last spring
Raised [plenty] cotton,
but I ain't got a thing.
All you farmers with your heads hung low;
Just cotton paupers, ain't got no dough.

Been buyin' so much, got [dirty] in my shoes,

8

Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost, 21; Daniel, "Cross-roads of Change," 433-434; Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 141-142; Uncle Dave Macon, "All in Down and Out Blues," quoted in Sheldon Brown, "The Depression and World War II as Seen Through Country Music," Social Education 49 (October, 1985): 589.

Guess I'll just die
with the Price of Cotton Blues.

Lower prices encouraged increased production in an effort to maximize profits. By the early 1930s cotton production soared to fifteen million bales; meanwhile, worldwide consumption sagged to twelve million. As a result of the surplus, the price of cotton plummeted to 4.6¢ a pound in June, 1932, the lowest price since 1894.⁹

Other commodities did not fare much better; the price of tobacco, for example, fell from 21.1¢ a pound in 1920 to 12.8¢ in 1930 down to 8.2¢ in 1931. In North Carolina, a major tobacco-producing state, fifteen hundred forced sales of farm property occurred in 1930. That same year, ninety-three banks closed in the state, leaving landlords unable to finance their tenants until the fall crop auction. In 1933, landlords cut twenty-five percent, or fifteen thousand of their tobacco tenants. Harry McClintock examined the world situation and sarcastically advised struggling tenants to tell their creditors that they would pay off their debts in "Fifty years from Now":

9

Flint, Dixie's Forgotten People, 66; Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 354; Allen Brothers, "Price of Cotton Blues," Country Ragtime, Bear Family, 1501, n.d.

Now over there in Europe,
they're having lots of fun,
Their taxes and their big war debt
have got them on the run.
We have to lend them money,
to keep them on their feet,
While a million good Americans
are sleeping in the streets.

Our domestic situation
is certainly hard to beat;
We have to go 'round hungry
because we've raised too much to eat.
We cannot ride our railroad
'cause we haven't got the fare;
And we've piled up stacks of clothing
'til there's nothing much to wear.

Fifty years from now, fifty years from now;
Just tell the grocery man
you'll pay him fifty years from now.
When the landlord and the gasman
come with both hands full of bills,
Just point the way towards the west 10
and say, "There's gold in thare hills."

Country musicians' responses to the Depression
ranged from activism to indifference. Some, like the
Carter Family, looked to the day when hard times would
be no more:

I'm going where there's no depression,
To the lovely land that's free from care.
I'll leave this world of toil and trouble,
My home's in heaven, I'm going there.

In the bright land there'll be no hunger,
No orphan children cryin' for bread.
No weeping widows, toil or struggle,
No shrouds, no coffins and no death!

10

Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 354;
Daniel, Breaking the Land, 37; Harry McClintock,
"Fifty Years From Now," quoted in liner notes to Rich
Man, Poor Man, orig. rec. 1931.

Others, like Buddy Starcher and Uncle Dave Macon, actively campaigned against President Herbert Hoover in songs like "Hoover Blues" and "Governor Al Smith." In "Farm Relief," Macon criticized Hoover's feeble efforts at providing aid to struggling farmers:

Spoken: Well folks, you've heard about the farm relief. You've read about it and talked about it. Well, it's finally here--they've just about relieved the farmer of everything he's got and I'm tellin' you right!...

Hoover was elected president,
Al Smith went down in defeat.
Majority voted for the high chief,
But show me a farmer who got relief.

What farmer has to buy is too high yet,
And what he has to sell [sic] too low
to make a hit.
Bust up your corporations and your trusts,
For if you don't, ¹¹
there's a farmer gonna bust.

Hoover's refusal to support a Bonus Bill for World War I veterans (which would have provided temporary relief) made him even more unpopular among southern tenants. Hoover believed that it was not the federal government's role to provide relief to its citizens; he insisted that local resources be exhausted before any national relief be given. Using Hoover's response to the 1930 drought as an example,

11

Malone, Country Music, U.S.A., 120-121; Carter Family, "No Depression in Heaven," Decca, 5242, n.d.; Uncle Dave Macon, "Farm Relief," Uncle Dave Macon, Decca, 4760, orig. rec. 1929.

Pete Daniel notes the shortcomings of the President's relief policy:

Neither planters, local leaders, nor state or federal governments were willing to take responsibility for unprecedented problems caused by depression and drought...The remedy was beyond the means of local efforts, a strain on state governments, and ideologically repugnant to the Republican-dominated federal government. 12

Several country music performers addressed the bonus issue, including Roy Acuff and Buddy Starcher. "The Forgotten Soldier Boy," recorded by the Monroe Brothers in 1937, focused on the veterans' plight:

They promised gold and silver,
and bid us all adieu;
They said they'd welcome us back home,
when the terrible war was through
We fought until the war was over,
they say we won the fight,
But we have no job, no money,
no place to sleep at night.

Southerners anxious to lose the "Breadline Blues" lined up to vote Hoover out of office:

The latest news
has struck me funny.
Say you have no friends
if you haven't got money.
And all of us good folks in distress.
But I'm gonna get
something off a chest.
1932 won't be long
And when you place your vote
please don't vote wrong.

12

Daniel, Breaking the Land, 69-70, 72.

Vote away those blues, 13
those breadline blues.

Many rural southerners viewed Franklin D. Roosevelt's victory over Hoover in 1932 as the first step back to economic recovery; few could have anticipated the dramatic changes that would occur in southern agriculture in the next decade and a half. In 1932, the southern landscape remained relatively the same as it was half a century earlier, with tenant houses spread across the countryside and scarcely any agricultural machinery. The New Deal period witnessed the breakdown of the old plantation system and the emergence of more mechanized, business-like farming. In short, New Deal programs provided the incentive and the means for planters to reduce their labor costs, mechanize the cultivation process, and further expand their acreage to create neo-plantations with little if any use for tenants. Pete Daniel observes the impact of these changes:

More thoroughly than Sherman's army, the New Deal troops marched through the southern countryside and reconfigured it; the old order declined, and in its place emerged a rural South modeled on the

13

Monroe Brothers, "The Forgotten Soldier Boy," quoted in liner notes to Rich Man, Poor Man, orig. rec. 1936; Slim Smith, "Breadline Blues," Victor, 21406, 1931.

long-held dream of the United States
Department of Agriculture of large farms, 14
plentiful implements, and scientific farming.

Several factors combined to provide the impetus
for these changes: the agricultural depression of
the 1920s, the international financial collapse in
1929, and southern farmers' inability to act in con-
cert to control production. In the New Deal period,
a region plagued by pestilence and over-supply broke
a tradition of hostility toward outside interposition
and ushered in a new era of government intervention
that would change the nature of the southern agricul-
tural system drastically in the years to come. Ten-
ants' hopes for upward mobility vanished in the pro-
cess. Before the end of the period, however, their
predicament would gain national attention. 15

Roosevelt took office well aware of the politi-
cal power southern congressmen possessed and pro-
ceeded with the intention of courting that power,
not alienating it. The single party system in the

14

Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost, 54; Pete Daniel,
"The New Deal, Southern Agriculture, and Economic
Change," The New Deal and the South, eds. James C.
Cobb and Michael V. Namorato (Jackson: University
Press of Mississippi, 1984) 41-42, 52-52.

15

Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost, 348; Daniel, Break-
ing the Land, xiv; Wright, Old South, New South, 199.

South that emerged after Reconstruction enabled southern representatives to build up congressional seniority, thereby gaining control of key committees. By 1933, southerners headed nine of fourteen Senate committees and twelve of seventeen in the House of Representatives. With Democrats now in control of the White House and Congress, the stage was set to implement programs that had been obstructed by Republicans in the 1920s, particularly those designed to raise farm prices by restricting supply.¹⁶

While the basis of New Deal policy towards the South centered around recovery, several programs initiated in Washington did provide immediate relief to the dispossessed. Many, like the Allen Brothers, expressed their gratitude:

The Depression was bad,
it had me worried all the time [repeat];
Now I've got money in my pocket,
I'll leave the Depression [sic] behind.¹⁷

The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA, 1933-1934) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA, 1935-1939), however, furnished only limited and

16

Daniel, "The Crossroads of Change," 437; Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 389; Conrad, Forgotten Farmers, 25.

17

Allen Brothers, "New Deal Blues," Allen Brothers, Old Timey, 115, 1934.

temporary aid. Moreover, as one FERA agent pointed out in 1935, "landlords [used] the relief rolls as a means of escaping the necessity of providing for tenants during the off season, a practice which the relief authorities of the locality [found] impossible to resist." Planters accepted the government's new paternalistic role in caring for their valuable labor so long as relief policies did not diffuse their seasonal work force; control of local committees assured them that relief rolls would be cleared at harvest time. Other administrative agencies (i.e., Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration) designed to uplift tenants to land-owning status were hampered by a lack of sufficient funds. The Rural Rehabilitation program, for instance, provided loan-assistance to only 3.9 percent of tenants in the southeastern cotton-belt. Above all, though, the major shortcoming of New Deal relief lay in the fact that it attempted to bolster an agricultural system that recovery programs undercut.¹⁸

New Deal recovery programs for the South focused on restricting agricultural production as a

18

Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost, 56-57; Daniel, "The Crossroads of Change," 444; Flint, Dixie's Forgotten People, 79-80.

means to raising crop prices above the parity level. Soon after Roosevelt took office, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) was created in part to formulate acreage reduction programs. With the 1933 cotton crop already planted, federal administrators decided to have farmers plow up one-fourth of their crop (ten million acres of cotton) so that the market would not be glutted; those participating in the plow-up would receive an attractive benefit payment to be shared with tenants in accordance to the percentage each held in the crop. Sharecroppers, for instance, would receive half the benefit payment while cash tenants were entitled to 100 percent. The plan temporarily raised cotton prices to 11¢ in July; with the help of a drought, the price rose above 12¢ in 1935. Those accustomed to single-digit cotton prices celebrated what they believed to be the first step back to land ownership:

Twelve-cent cotton and we're rollin' in wealth,
All of the family's got pretty good health.
Things looked bad for quite some time,
The cotton got so low
 that we couldn't make a dime.
The meat was too high and the flour was too,
We went barefooted 'cause we couldn't buy shoes.
We feel better now than for some time we felt,
'Cause with twelve-cent cotton,
 well we're rollin' in wealth

Twelve-cent cotton makes us all feel swell,
If the weevils don't get us,
 we'll do right well.

And things turn out like we most all planned,
In three years time,
 we'll pay the mortgage on the land.
We won't need credit, we'll all have dough,
We'll all be a-smilin' and not feelin' low.
Just no use talkin', it's the best we've felt,
With twelve-cent cotton, 19
 we're a rollin' in wealth.

Unfortunately for cotton tenants, AAA subsidies set in motion a series of events that eventually transformed the cotton production system from one dependent on tenant labor to one reliant on state of the art machinery. The trouble for tenants began with the arrangements devised for the dispersal of benefit payments. In an effort to appease southern politicians dependent on planter support, payments were distributed to landowners and creditors instead of directly to producers/tenants. Additionally, no effective means of federal enforcement were created to insure proper apportionment of subsidies. In its adherence to local custom, AAA left the door open for widespread graft. In 1936, Gardner Jackson, one of the tenants' few political allies in Washington, poignantly summarized the situation:

19

Christiana M. Campbell, The Farm Bureau and the New Deal: A Study in the Making of National Farm Policy, 1933-1940 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962), 55; Conrad, Forgotten Farmers, 42-45, 52; Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 394, 406; Buck Nation, "Twelve-Cent Cotton, Rollin' in Wealth," Decca, 5081, 1935.

In darn near half the cases, the [tenants] don't get a nickel of the benefit payments. The landlords pocketed it all, but actually politics is in back of it. It would be political suicide to go against the planters. They are the 20 Democrats who have the real power in the South.

Between 1935 and 1939, the government's new policy of negotiating contracts with producers before the planting of the crop further hastened the ultimate demise of the tenant. The continued policy of proportional payments encouraged landlords to reduce a tenant's status in order to legally receive a greater percentage of the benefit payment. As the price of cotton rose, so too did the price of keeping a tenant. David Conrad points out the ultimate temptation for the landlord:

If he kept the same number of tenants his operating expenses would be as great [as years before]. If he evicted tenants, he would not have to support them...and he could use the rented acres for his own purposes. AAA rental checks, coming early in the season as they did, gave him money with which to hire day workers or wage hands to cultivate and harvest the crop.

A planter replacing a share tenant with a wage hand could improve his average benefit payment per acre by

20

Conrad, Forgotten Farmers, 47; Wright, Old South, New South, 227-228; Gardner Jackson quoted in H.L. Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in this Land: The Life and Times of H.L. Mitchell, Co-Founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (Montclair: Allanheld, Osmun, and Co. Publishers, Inc., 1979) 102.

137 percent; the absolute return per acre resulting from this displacement rose from \$3.29 in 1935 to²¹ \$19.16 in 1939.

Withholding of AAA benefits, reductions in acreage allotments, and outright eviction officially violated government policy. Unfortunately, the administration referred most tenants' complaints back to county agents and local committees controlled by landlords. In Washington, the planters retained Cully Cobb, head of the AAA cotton section, as their chief comrade; FDR, meanwhile, continued to avoid the estrangement of southern Democrats. A tenant farmer's wife expressed the hopelessness of many rural southerners: "Tenants ain't got no chance. I don't know who gets the money, but it ain't the poor. It gets worse every year--the land gets more wore out, the prices for tobacco gets lower, and everything you buy gets higher." In 1935, hard times continued on the farm:

You move out to Mr. Roberts' farm,
Plant a big crop o' cotton
and a little crop o' corn,
He'll come round to plan and to plot,
Till he gets a chattel mortgage
on everything you got.

21

Wright, Old South, New South, 228; Conrad, Forgotten Farmers, 76-77; Warren C. Whatley, "Labor for the Picking: The New Deal in the South," Journal of Economic History 43 (December, 1983): 915-916, 920.

It's hard times,
in the country down on Roberts' farm...

Roberts' renters, they'll go down town
With their hands in their pockets,
and their head hung down.
We'll go in the store
and the merchant will say,
"Your mortgage is due
and I'm lookin' for my pay."
It's hard times, 22
in the country down on Roberts' farm.

As tenants watched their creditors profit from their distress, the flames of rebellion began to burn within them. The prospect of being forced on relief heightened class awareness among many rural southerners. In Missouri, a government field worker recorded this vindictive chant aimed at local relief administrators in specific and the affluent in general:

We are businessmen's, bankers',
and judges' fat wives,
We don't give a damn
for so-called workers lives.
Our husbands exploit them
and then send them to jail.
When they ask us for something to eat.

These sponges, these cadgers,
these chisellers, these fleas,
They ask us for food and don't even say please.
Thank God for the judges,
the police, and the jails,

22

Conrad, Forgotten Farmers, 70-80; Daniel, "The New Deal, Southern Agriculture, and Economic Change," 50; Margaret Hagood, Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farmer Woman (New York: Greenwood Press, 1939) 24; Claude Reeves, "Down on Roberts' Farm," quoted in Greenway, American Folk-songs of Protest, 216-217, orig. rec. 1935.

To keep the rabble in their place.

In "The Worker's Answer," the singer openly expresses direct hostility:

We made all the food,
all the clothes, all the homes,
You made not a thing, you lazy fat drones.
When we ask you for food, we ask for our own,
And that's why we do not say please.

Like fleas on a dog, you ride on our back,
And when we are hungry,
say you haven't no jack.
We know happiness
will be ours only when, 23
We are shed of you parasites fat.

Some of the most overt agrarian protest songs of the 1930s originated from the Delta region, where thousands of whites from the hills had flocked in the prosperous 1920s in search of employment on large plantations and sawmills. By 1935, tenants operated six of ten Arkansas farms. Significantly, twenty-five percent of all tenant complaints concerning violations of AAA policies came from Arkansas. Socialists in the region recognized the extent of discontent and worked to help organize the farmers into a viable union. The catalyst for organization occurred in Tyronza in late 1934 when Hiram Norcross evicted forty tenant fami-

23

Mattie Crouch, "Welfare Supervisor's Chant," and "The Worker's Answer," rec. 1936, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Archive of American Folksong, 3196A1 and 3196A2.

lies from his plantation. Within a few months, the newly formed Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) consisted of fourteen hundred black and white members
24
from five Arkansas counties.

Organizers soon recognized the importance of song in solidifying the bi-racial union. STFU leaders utilized black spirituals, blues songs, folk songs, and country songs in an effort to create a sense of unity and sanctity of the cause. Members rejected radical, Communist songs, however; according to H.L. Mitchell, one of the STFU's founding members, "[The "Internationale"] just didn't go over with the sharecroppers." Members reacted more positively to songs familiar to them; many wrote new lyrics to old tunes substituting militant themes. An old Civil War melody, for instance, became "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp":

In our poverty and toil,
 looking out upon the world;
We can see the gathering armies of the poor;
And we feel ourselves a part
 of the new resistless power
That shall sweep away oppression and its laws.

Tramp, Tramp, Tramp, you hear us marching
Millions now are on the way

24

Donald H. Grubbs, Cry From the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1971) 4-8; Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 421; Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in this Land, 22-177; Conrad, Forgotten Farmers, 85-93.

And our army ne'er shall pause
'Til the right to live is ours
And the sun has risen on a fairer day.

Similarly, another member infused "Hand Me Down My Walking Cane" with a new, militant theme to create the "Hunger Blues":

Oh, write me out a union card [repeat twice]
We'll organize and all work hard
Trying to chase those hunger blues away.

Come with me on the picket line [repeat twice]
We'll stay there till the bosses sign;
Trying to chase those hunger blues away

Oh, the government cut our crop [repeat twice]
We asked for bread, they gave us cops, 25
For trying to chase those hunger blues away.

Many other examples exist, including a version of "Casey Jones" that has the famous engineer damned for eternity for scabbing during a strike. In direct response to "Twelve Cent Cotton, Rollin' in Wealth," one composer exposed the hardships that tenants continued to endure into the late 1930s:

Seven cent cotton, forty cent meat
How in the world can a poor man eat?
Flour up high, cotton down low,
How in the world can we raise the dough?

25

Flint, Dixie's Forgotten People, 81-82; R. Serge Denisoff, Sing a Song of Social Significance (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1983) 56-57; R. Serge Denisoff, Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971) 27; "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp," and "Hunger Blues," 1940, The STFU Songbook, Folder 541, Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Papers, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Our clothes worn out, shoes run down,
Old slouch hat with a hole in the crown.
Back nearly broken,
 fingers all sore, 26
Cotton gone down to rise no more.

In the mid-to-late 1930s, the STFU spread to eastern Oklahoma, Texas, and parts of Mississippi, claiming a membership of 25,000 black, white, and Indian members at its zenith. The union staged several cotton pickers' strikes in an effort to gain wage concessions from landlords. Beset by planter violence and outmigration of tenants, however, the union virtually ceased to exist by 1941. Nonetheless, the union was instrumental in focusing national attention on the plight of the tenant and proved a major contributing factor in Roosevelt's decision to appoint the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy in late 1936.

In addition to STFU agitation, the appearance of books and films exposing the plight of southern tenants awakened millions of Americans to the problem of southern rural poverty. A Gallup Poll taken at the end of 1936 revealed that eighty-three percent of Ameri-

"Seven-Cent Cotton," The STFU Songbook.

Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 21;
Grubbs, Cry From the Cotton, 144; Mitchell, Mean
Things Happening in this Land, 102.

cans favored government loans to tenants to assist them in the acquisition of land. In February, 1937, the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy's report confirmed the break in the agricultural ladder to ownership:

The land policy adopted by this country, under which title to practically all of the agricultural land of the Nation passed to private owners in fee simple absolute, has proved defective as a means of keeping the land in the ownership of those who work it.

The cold facts substantiated the conclusion: the number of tenants in the South had reached an all-time high (1.8 million, two-thirds white); three of four cotton farmers were tenants. With southern rural poverty out of control, radio-listening audiences took solace in Roy Acuff's subtle but stinging message:

The rich man has the advantage on earth,
And money he does praise.
But there's one thing
 he can't do,
Take it with him beyond the grave.

No matter how high in society they go,
Or how much money they save.
When they close
 their eyes in death, 28
They can only fill one grave.

28

Daniel, "Crossroads of Change," 447; Grubbs, Cry From the Cotton, 136; Campbell, The Farm Bureau and the New Deal, 166; Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 409; Conrad, Forgotten Farmers, 3; Roy Acuff, "They Can Only Fill One Grave," Columbia, 37943, n.d.

Unfortunately, all the attention that the tenants received could not stop the wheels of change. By 1937, landlords rapidly moving towards mechanization of their operations exhibited no signs of co-operating with the government to save the tenant system. Earlier in the decade, they had used government checks to purchase tractors and begin the transition to wage labor; by 1937, off-plantation labor picked thirty-six percent of owner-operated cotton acreage. In 1940, there were 400,000 fewer tenants and 270,000 more wage laborers than five years before. In the 1930s, a total of 689,000 whites left the region in search of economic opportunities elsewhere. The perfection of the cotton-picker in the mid-1940s would hasten the exodus. Rural southerners ushered off the land in the 1930s related to songs like "Keep Moving":

How can you keep on moving,
 unless you migrate too;
They tell you to keep on moving,
 but migrate you must not do.
The only reason for moving,
 the reason why I roam;
Is to go to a new location,
 and find myself a home.

I can't go back to the homestead,
 my shack no longer stands;
They said I wasn't needed,
 and had no claim to the land.
They said, "You better keep moving,
 it's the only thing for you;
But how can you keep moving,

unless you migrate too.

More than any other white musician, country music star and former railroad worker Jimmie Rodgers captured the essence of the migrant experience. Bill Malone explains the reasons for his enormous popularity among rural southerners:

The image of 'the singing brakeman' was irresistibly appealing, particularly during the Great Depression, to millions of Americans, who could identify with an allegedly liberated and rambling life that they personally could not enjoy.

In the years that he recorded (1927-1933), Rodgers became a household name among southerners. In songs like "Mule Skinner Blues," he sang of the migrant's search for work:

Good morning Captain, good morning [shine];
Do you need another mule-skinner,
out on your new mud line

In "Brakeman's Blues (Yodeling the Blues Away)," he wrote about the rambling life in general:

Portland, Maine is just the same
as sunny Tennessee;
Any place I hang my hat is
'home sweet home' to me.

Daniel, "The New Deal, Southern Agriculture, and Economic Change," 55, Wright, Old South, New South, 235; Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 431; Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost, 312; Daniel, Breaking the Land, 182; singer unidentified, "Keep Moving," quoted in liner notes to New Lost City Ramblers, Songs From the Depression, Folkways, FH 5264, 1959.

I'll eat my breakfast here,
get my dinner in New Orleans
(Right on down to Birmingham);
I'm going to get a mama,
Lord I ain't ever seen.

Tenants weary from hard times in the South easily identified with the theme in "Blue Yodel #1 ('T' for Texas)":

I'm going where the water
tastes like cherry wine [repeat];
'Cause the Georgia water tastes like Turpentine.

I'd rather drink muddy water
and sleep in a hollow log [repeat]; 30
Than to be in Atlanta, treated like a dog.

While the prospect of a better life out West appealed to many struggling farmers, many were hesitant to make the long journey away from friends and family. Many highlanders opted instead to move to nearby Ohio, where they encountered less contempt than those that traveled to Chicago or Detroit. Other southerners displaced by mechanization or natural disaster, particularly those in the southwest, left in search of employment in California:

That old landlord got my homestead,
Can't get me, Lord, can't get me.

30

Malone, Country Music, U.S.A., 78-81; Jimmie Rodgers, "Blue Yodel #8 (Muleskinner Blues)," rec. 1931, "Brakeman's Blues (Yodeling the Blues Away)," rec. 1928, and "Blue Yodel #1 ('T' for Texas)," rec. 1928, all on This is Jimmie Rodgers, RCA, VPS 6091, n.d.

That old dry spell
killed my crops, boys,
Can't kill me, no, it can't kill me.

That old tractor got my home, boys,
Can't get me, Lord, can't get me.
That old tractor
run my house down, 31
Can't run me down, can't get me.

Lured by labor recruiters, about 300,000 southerners from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri (collectively known as "Okies") migrated west in search of a better life. Families from the Dust Bowl of Texas and Oklahoma were pushed out by a government program in the 1930s that aimed at transforming the region into grasslands suitable for cattle raising. In a study of the Dust Bowl, Paul Bonnifield notes:

The federal government meant to return the region primarily to grass, and landholdings were to be doubled in size. But the government provided no meaningful alternative for the people who were displaced from the soil. The small farmers forced from the land 32 would simply have to migrate somewhere else.

The migrants found their poet in Woody Guthrie,

31

Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost, 327-328; Woody Guthrie, "Dust Can't Kill Me," rec. 1940, Dust Bowl Ballads, Folkways, FH 5212, 1964.

32

Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost, 327; Paul Bonnifield, The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979) 119-137.

a musician from Oklahoma who arrived in California in 1937. Acquiring a job at a radio station in Los Angeles, Guthrie began his career in the mold of the typical country musician. Bill Malone explains:

His guitar playing was a modification of that of Maybelle Carter, and his songs came from the Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers, and other hill-billy singers. And when he wrote his own songs, they were invariably set to older melodies of commercial and non-commercial origins.

Guthrie's original compositions, however, seethed with a political consciousness more reminiscent of STFU labor songs than the commercial recordings of country music legends. In combining the music of the people with political concerns, Guthrie attracted a substantial following among migrants subjected to
33
bigotry and exploitation in California.

In response to the "bum blockades" set up on highways and railroad yards intended to keep Dust Bowl refugees out of the Golden State, Guthrie penned "Do Re Mi." The Okie balladeer later claimed that he wrote the song in direct response to Jimmie Rodgers' "California Blues," a song which portrayed the West as a haven for migrants. Guthrie accurately

33

Malone, Country Music, U.S.A., 132-133; Joe Klein, Woody Guthrie: A Life (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1980) 72-115; Woody Guthrie, Bound For Glory (New York: Dutton Publishing, Inc., 1943) 210-331.

captured the disappointment that many southerners
felt when they reached the "sugar bowl":

Lots of folks back east
they say is leavin' home everyday,
And beatin' the hot old dusty way
to the California line.
'Cross the desert sands they roll,
headin' out of that old dust bowl,
They think they're goin' to the Sugar Bowl,
but here's what they find:
The police at the point of entry say,
"You're number fifteen thousand
for today."

If you ain't got the Do Re Mi, folks,
if you ain't got the Do Re Mi,
Why, you better go back to beautiful Texas,
Oklahoma, Kansas, Georgia, Tennessee.
California's the Garden of Eden,
a paradise to live in or to see,
But believe it or not,
You won't find it so hot, 34
if you ain't got the Do Re Mi.

Most migrants in California lived in tent
colonies under poor sanitary conditions; others set
up shack-like houses built out of cardboard and
corrugated iron. The plight of the homeless inspired
Guthrie to write a protest song set to the tune of
the Baptist hymn, "The World is Not My Home":

I ain't got no home,
I'm just a-ramblin' 'round;
Just a wandering worker,
I go from town to town.
The police make it hard wherever I do go,

34

Klein, Woody Guthrie, 81; Woody Guthrie, "Do
Re Mi," rec. 1940, Library of Congress Recordings,
Rounder, 1041/2/3, 1988.

And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.

Was a-farming on the shares,
and always I was poor,
My crops I lay into the banker's store,
My wife took down and died,
upon the cabin floor.
And I ain't got no home in this world any more.

In 1940, Guthrie left California for New York city where he would go on to become one of the most renowned protest singers of the twentieth century. Guthrie's reciprocal association with the South diminished soon after his arrival in the East; nonetheless, his early recordings exemplify the extent to which hillbilly music could be used for the
35
purpose of social commentary.

As the United States entered the 1940s, commercial country music remained distinctively "southern." During World War II, however, the music of the rural South became nationalized, mainly due to outward migration and the intermingling of people from different backgrounds in the armed services. The nation's entrance into the war discredited protest singers and their songs in the interest of national unity. Many

35

Richard Lowitt and Maurine Beasley, eds., One Third of a Nation: Lorena Hickok Reports on the Great Depression (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 309-310; Woody Guthrie, "I Ain't Got No Home," rec. 1940, Library of Congress Recordings of Protest, 298.

commercial country music recordings released during the war reflected the new consensus. Zeke Clements' "Smoke on the Water" became one of the more popular country songs in this vein:

There'll be smoke on the water,
on the land and in the sea,
When our army and navy overtakes the enemy.
There'll be smoke on the mountains,
where the heathens God (say),
And the sun that is shinin' 36
will go down on that day.

Even Woody Guthrie's musical group in New York (The Almanac Singers) released an album of songs supporting Roosevelt's declaration of war. By the end of the decade, protest themes in country music largely became a thing of the past; additionally, regional subject matter began to lose its commercial appeal as the genre gained a wider audience. Migration due to the war, jukebox expansion, movie exposure, and cultural interaction among military personnel all contributed to the national popularity of country music in the 1940s.³⁷

Around the same time, the South's other major musical genre, the blues, underwent a similar trans-

36

Malone, Southern Music, American Music, 86-89; Malone, Country Music, U.S.A., 177-182, 194, 211-212; Bob Wills, "Smoke on the Water," Okeh, 6736, 1942.

37

Malone, Country Music, U.S.A., 177-182.

formation. By the advent of World War II, black exodus from the region coupled with the war itself resulted in a fundamental change in the themes addressed by blues performers as well as an alteration of the genre's musical form. Before these changes occurred, however, blues music served the same function for black southerners as country music had for their white counterparts. Like the country music audience, listeners to the blues endured the same hardships spurred by the Depression and hastened by federal agricultural policies; they too looked to music as a source of strength through group cohesion. The spectrum of subject matter in the blues, however, reflected the even more oppressive nature of the African American experience in the South; the result was a broader, more critical examination of the region's socio-political system.

CHAPTER TWO

BEHIND THE MULE

Early Recorded Blues Music and the African American Experience in the South

That's where the blues start from, back across them fields, you know, under them old log houses, you know. Guys will sit there all night--the moon was shining--and drink, you know...It didn't start in the city now. Don't never get that wrong. It started right behind one of them mules or one of them log houses, one of them log camps or levee camps. That's where the blues sprung from. I know what I'm talking about.

1

-Booker White

Long before the musical genre known as "the blues" gained widespread popularity with a white audience in the 1960s, it was purely the music of African Americans. Most white Americans in the first half of the twentieth century demonstrated little appreciation for the blues and fewer still understood its historical roots or its function in the black community. The lyrics of blues songs appeared crude and the music differed drastically from the popular songs of the time. To members of the African American community, however, the blues reflected their everyday experiences and, perhaps more importantly, symbolized their desire to come to terms with adversities and emotional

1

David Evans, Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 43.

traumas.

At the end of World War I, the majority of African Americans in the South found themselves under the thumb of white economic and political dominance; culturally, however, black southerners maintained their independence primarily through religious and musical means. Within the black community there was often conflict between the church and the "juke joints" where the working class gathered to hear the blues. Nonetheless, black minister and musician labored in similar ways to strengthen group solidarity by providing an alternative to white middle-class beliefs. The similarities, though, end there; for while black preachers stressed the importance of religion as an outlet to prejudice and discrimination, the rural blues singers promoted individual rebellion and resistance to the various manifestations of white tyranny. Thus, the function of the blues was to provide focus and promote racial solidarity, to unify an audience² entangled in oppressive circumstance.

In Anthropology of Music, Alan Merriam defines

2

Bruce Bastin, Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the South-East (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986) 36; William Barlow, Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) 325.

music as "a rallying point around which members of a society gather to engage in activities which requires the co-operation and co-ordination of the group... which...reminds them of their unity." In both its musical form and lyrical content the blues remained distinguished from popular music in the 1920s and 1930s. In this, blues music recorded throughout the period symbolized African American cultural resistance to
3
mainstream southern society.

When recording companies came South in the 1920s they found blues musicians often singing about oppressive conditions that had been plaguing black southerners since emancipation. Blues singers recorded in the 1920s addressed the effects of political disfranchisement, white economic hegemony, and racial segregation and discrimination. In the 1930s, blues songwriters expanded their critical view of southern society to include observations on the effects of mechanization and the trauma of the migratory experience.

Essentially, the roots of the blues lay in jump-ups, field hollers, ballads, church music, and African-

3
Paul Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues, Second Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 275; Barry Lee Pearson, Sounds So Good to Me: The Bluesman's Story (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984) 128.

derived percussive music. Lawrence Levine notes:

From the time of slavery until well into the twentieth century, black laborers wielded axes, sledge hammers, spades, and hoes, unloaded ships, rowed boats, dug ditches, husked grain, picked crops, and lined tracks to the accompaniment of song...Music was everywhere--in the fields, the towns, and in the cities.

As Levine suggests, the blues developed in rural areas of the Deep South where African Americans labored.

Different areas of the South evolved different musical styles, but the thematic content of the blues remained similar throughout the region during the period. Blues musicians found an audience for their performances at house parties, roadhouses, picnics, etc.; the genre's popularity spread across the region in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Record companies hesitated in seeking out blues musicians due to a belief that rural blacks lacked purchasing power. Recording of urban blues musicians finally began around 1920 with the transcription of fifty blues and gospel titles; by the mid-20s major northeastern companies extended their recording efforts to rural areas in Texas and the Mississippi Delta. Their initial fears were dismissed by 1927; in that year, according to one estimation, blacks purchased 10,000,000 "race" records.⁴

4

Lawrence Levine, Black Culture and Black

The quantity of blues recordings procured by blacks in the South prior to 1945 substantiates the genre's importance to the African American community. As Jeff Todd Titon notes: "Considering the scarcity of money, it is significant that blacks [in the South] chose to purchase phonographs and race records instead of spending their money in other ways...surely music was an essential part of their lives." Pete Daniel's comment that blacks in the Delta during the devastating 1927 flood rescued their victrolas before any other worldly possession complements this observation.⁵

Blues lyrics employed the language of everyday speech, often using rural imagery to produce a series of images to convey a certain feeling/mood. In doing so, the blues singer created a poetry for the working class. James Cobb points out that the blues lyricists concentrated on the everyday life experiences of blacks:

Consciousness: Afro-American Thought From Slavery to Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 204,208; David Evans, "Blues," Encyclopedia of Southern Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989) 995-996; Robert Palmer, Deep Blues (New York: Viking-Penguin Inc., 1981) 43; Jeff Todd Titon, Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977) 203-205.

⁵
Titon, Early Downhome Blues, 19,35,59;
Barlow, Looking Up at Down, 5-6.

Blues singers told their listeners what they already knew, but could not articulate. The blues, in short, focused on the lyricist's interpretation of his condition/the experience of African Americans in the South. Their songs were meant for a black audience and often used phraseology that only in-group listeners could understand. Leadbelly's explanation of the slave worksong "Gwine Dig a Hole" suggests the roots of this African American practice:

Gwine dig a hole, gwine dig a hole
Gwine dig a hole, to put the devil in

Help me dig a hole, to put the devil in
help me to dig a hole,
help me dig a hole 6
to put the devil in, to put the devil in.

51

Slave hollers, while influencing blues musicians, did not suit their current needs; essentially, they no longer sufficed as a means of expressing the plight of a new generation of blacks who had never experienced slavery. The failure of Reconstruction and the eventual aftermath awakened blacks to the fact that the goals of emancipation would not be attained; the acceptance of this reality in many ways led to the development of new forms of cultural expression. In the presence of agrarian poverty, political disfranchisement, and racial segregation, work songs, hollers, and ballads of the nineteenth century evolved⁷ into the more militant blues.

The economic plight of the African American farmer in the South in the period between the World Wars has roots in the sharecropping system that developed in the region after the Civil War. Lacking capital to purchase farms, blacks rented land on yearly contract. The contract system soon evolved into the sharecropping system, whereby a farmer agreed to work the land for a "share" of the profits in return for farm equipment, animals, housing, and food. Sharecropping resolved the planter's desire for a labor force having a stake

⁷ Bastin, Red River Blues, 4; Barlow, Looking Up at Down, 7.

in the system with the sharecropper's desire for autonomy until the sharecropper came to the realization that he was actually drifting further away from land ownership and closer to economic servitude. Planter control of written records inevitably led to widespread shortchanging of the laborers; Hortense Powdermaker's estimate that seventy percent of sharecroppers were cheated is probably fairly accurate. The results of such widespread fraud showed on the South's cultural and physical landscape as the rural countryside became a panorama of destitution and want. Pete Daniel notes that "poverty, illiteracy, and low cotton prices combined with traditional racism and violence to enervate the southern masses...The seeds of peonage grew well in social and economic soil so fecund with oppression."⁸

By the time the record companies began seeking out the rural blues singers, there were approximately one and a half million sharecroppers throughout the South. Not surprisingly, the contempt for plantation

⁸
Paul Oliver, The Story of the Blues (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1969) 15; Titon, Early Downhome Blues, 15; C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 206; George B. Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973) 411-412; Pete Daniel, The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 20-21.

owners so prevalent in slave songs like "Gwine Dig a Hole" inevitably found its way into rural blues lyrics, as evident in Sleepy John Estes' mock ode to "Mr. Tom":

Tom ain't so tall, know he's kinda low,
everybody in Brown[sville] say
he got plenty of dough

He rides over his fields,
givin' his hands a rule,
Ask him for a lil' money,
he says, "Boy, shed a mule."

Now tell me how's about it?
Yes tell me, how's about it?

Tell me how's about it,
Mr. Tom's all right with me.

Others, like Josh White, expressed their discontent in more explicit terms:

Work all day in the blazing sun [repeat twice];
Can't buy my shoes, lord, when my payday come

I ain't treated no better than a mountain goat
[repeat twice];
The boss takes my crop and
the poll tax takes my vote.

I'm leavin' here 'cause I just can't stay
[repeat twice];
I'm goin' where I'll get some decent pay.

As C. Vann Woodward observes, African Americans who stayed in the South searching for better employ-

9

Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 16; Sleepy John Estes, "Tell Me How's About It," Decca, 7766B, 1940; Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 254; Josh White, "Southern Exposure," quoted in Barlow, Looking Up at Down, 100.

ment soon discovered that their choices were limited:
"Caste sanctioned a division of labor into white men's jobs and black men's jobs...white labor kept up an unremitting pressure to drive [blacks] out of better paid, more attractive work, and further down in job hierarchy." Woodward goes on to point out that of the 3,400 blacks in trades in the period of Reconstruction, not ten percent remained in 1904. By the late 1920s, then, black economic subordination in the South became an inescapable fact; African Americans found themselves excluded from expanding areas of the southern economy except at the most ignoble level. In most areas of the deep South, black employment was restricted mainly to logging, turpentine production, menial jobs in steel and oil industries, levee-grading and ditch digging, railroad maintenance, and cotton cultivation.¹⁰

Work in the logging industries was dirty and dangerous with a casualty rate five times that of workers in iron and steel industry; meanwhile, workers in turpentine camps toiled in unbearable heat using hazardous materials and often lived under deplorable conditions in fenced-in camps, virtually in a state of peonage. Harsh working conditions extended

10

Woodward, Origins of the New South, 355-361;
Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 161-162.

into the railroad camps, as evidenced in the irate verses of Mississippi John Hurt:

Take this hammer and carry it to the captain,
tell him I'm gone, tell him I'm gone,
you can tell him I'm gone.
Take this hammer and carry it to the captain,
and tell him I'm gone,
Jesus, tell him I'm gone, I'm sure is goin'.

This is the hammer that killed John Henry,
but it won't kill me,
But it won't kill me, but it won't kill me.
This is the hammer that killed John Henry,
but it won't kill me,
but it won't kill me, ain't gonna kill me.

Others, like Josh White, worked in coal mines exposing their lungs to an ever-present dirty dust:

I was diggin' that tunnel for six bits a day;
Didn't know I was diggin' my grave, 11
silicosis eatin' my lungs away.

Conditions similar to these persisted in black occupational fields well into the twentieth century mainly because African Americans had little recourse to the law by which to demand change. Disfranchisement effectively denied blacks the main vehicle for protest against economic and social conditions. After the Civil War, blacks were allowed to participate in elections as a result of passage of the 15th Amendment

11

Oliver, Story of the Blues, 79; Daniel, Shadow of Slavery, 21; Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 21; Mississippi John Hurt, "Spike Driver Blues," Okeh, 8692, 1928; Josh White, "Silicosis is Killin' Me," Conqueror, 18733-2, 1936.

to the United States Constitution; the removal of federal troops from the South in 1877, however, sealed the fate of African Americans living there. In 1890, the state of Mississippi proclaimed the right to disfranchise blacks; Louisiana and South Carolina soon followed suit in 1895. The rising tide of southern populism raised the fears of many southern whites to what they perceived to be the danger of black political power; with the collapse of the Populist party in 1896 blacks vanished from rural southern politics. In 1898, the Supreme Court declared the so-called "Mississippi Plan" constitutional; as a result, by 1910 twelve southern states were blatantly restricting black voting. As Woodward has astutely noted, "southern progressivism generally was 'progressivism for whites only.'¹²"

Laws segregating blacks from white facilities also began appearing in the South following the Reconstruction period; in 1896, the Supreme Court upheld the right of states to pass these laws on the condition that "separate but equal" facilities be made available to blacks. The upshot of this ruling was the passage

12

Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 239; Oliver, Story of the Blues, 14; Bastin, Red River Blues, 19; Woodward, Origins of the New South, 321-343, 373.

of laws requiring segregated facilities in fourteen states by 1900. Despite the "separate but equal" provision, the annual expenditure per black child in a county or state was usually only about a tenth that of the expenditure per capita on white children. Bluesman Robert Johnson's "Stones in My Passway" captured the feelings of the black masses toward the segregation system that came to be known as "Jim
13
Crow."

The blame for the political disfranchisement, economic exploitation, and social segregation of African Americans in the South must be shared by contemporary northern politicians. John W. Roberts observes that "the eventual abandonment by the federal government allowed [the blacks'] former enslavers, both through violence and the creation of new laws, to virtually destroy black collective efforts to resist white domination." With northern politicians turning their attention to international and urban problems and President Woodrow Wilson acquiescing to southern racial policy, African Americans in the South faced a bleak future. In "High Sheriff Blues," Charley Patton's character Mr. Purvis symbolized the white

13

Oliver, Story of the Blues, 14-15; Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 105.

American's indifference to the problems of southern blacks:

I was in trouble, ain't no use
to scream and cryin';
Mr. Purvis in his mansion, 14
he just don't pay no mind.

The African American experience in and after World War I confirmed to blacks the permanence of their subordinate position in American society and shattered their remaining hopes for the future. Serving in segregated units (mostly labor battalions), blacks soon discovered that this was a "white man's war"; incidents of discrimination and racial conflict led to frequent protest but rare remediation. Those returning with hopes that their wartime service would help to lower racial barriers encountered more vivid prejudice and racism. Not surprisingly, twenty five race riots took place in the United States between the armistice and the end of 1919. In the first three years following the end of the war, forty blacks were lynched; by 1927, the total number of post-war lynchings rose to 416. As Levine points out, "blacks

14

John W. Roberts, From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 193; Daniel, Shadow of Slavery, 65; Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 143; Charley Patton, "High Sheriff Blues," Vocalion, 02680, 1934.

had played the game by the rules and discovered that the rules simply did not apply to them." Big Bill Broonzy poignantly captured the essence of the immediate post-war African American experience:

When I got back from overseas,
that night we had a ball;
I met the boss the next day,
he told me, "Boy, get you some overall."

I wonder when will I be called a man, ¹⁵
or do I have to wait until I get ninety-three?

With the suppression of black insurgency throughout the South in the early 1920s, the African American condition there became fixed. Tindall expounds on the predicament of southern blacks:

The new peculiar institution of [Black] subordination had reached its apogee as an established reality in law, politics, [and] economics--under attack from certain minorities in the North, to be sure, but not effectively menaced and indeed virtually taboo among respectable whites as a subject for serious discussion. The question was settled.

In April of 1921, the New Republic dryly noted that the "essentials of slavery" still persisted in the South. ¹⁶

¹⁵

Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 240; Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 151-152, 172; Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 269, Big Bill Broonzy, "When Will I Get to Be Called A Man?," quoted in Barlow, Looking Up At Down, 302.

¹⁶

Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 160; Daniel, Shadow of Slavery, 127.

By the mid-1920s, the blues became the primary means of conveying African American discontent and protest; folk blues emerged as a collective response to the persistence of racism and oppression. Blacks in the South flocked to the juke joints on Saturday nights to escape the reminders of discrimination in all its forms. Blues musicians throughout the South sang of their condition and the results of white oppression; some singers straightforwardly spoke their minds while others used subtlety to express their discontent, but those who addressed social issues sang in response to the post-war southern black experience in all of its manifestations.¹⁷

The African Americans' relationship to the law was one aspect of the southern experience that often found its way into the blues lyric. For several reasons, blacks born in the years after emancipation viewed the law as an instrument of white oppression. After the Civil War, the convict-lease system emerged as the principal means of keeping blacks in a position of forced labor. The system worked in this way: the court would fine a prisoner an exorbitant amount while

17

Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 246; Barlow, Looking Up at Down, 80; Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 163; Evans, Big Road Blues, 29.

debasing the value of his labor to a rate that would secure his/her detainment for an inordinate period; the prisoner was then released to the contractor to perform agricultural work or to labor in coal mines. Despite the fact that the United States Congress outlawed the system in 1887, convict-lease persisted in the South well into the twentieth century.¹⁸

The contract-labor system appeared around 1900 as a legal alternative to convict lease. Under this system, a businessman secured the bail of a prisoner unable to pay his fines in exchange for his labor; the value of his labor rested in the discretion of the former. The success of the system, of course, depended on the number of prisoners in the jails; for this reason, officials often manipulated the law to keep the prisons full. As a result, many African Americans found themselves in the same predicament as Texas Alexander:

Lord they accused me of murder;
I haven't harmed a man [repeat];
Oh they accused me of forgery,
I can't write my name.

Paul Oliver notes:

Playing cards on a train, being found in the

18

Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 190-191; Barlow, Looking Up at Down, 5; Daniel, Shadow of Slavery, 26.

street without means of support, being under the influence of drink--these were sufficient grounds for committing a man for months to the chain gang, to work in a forced-labor logging camp, to build a bridge while working waist-deep in swamp water, to break rocks in a boiling sun.

In "Midnight Special," Huddie Ledbetter (a.k.a. "Leadbelly") delivers a first-hand account of how the system functioned:

If you ever get to Houston,
boy you better walk right,
and you better not squabble,
and you better not fight;
Bason and Brock will arrest you,
Peyton and Boon will take you down,
and the judge will 19
sentence you, penitentiary bound.

An apathetic federal government and a corrupt southern legal system combined to sustain the various forms of peonage that existed in the South in the early twentieth century. Pete Daniel observes that in the 1920s "forced labor with its inevitable brutality persisted as it had a generation earlier [as did] the corruption of local law officials, their false arrests, and their pursuit of fugitives." African Americans in the South, meanwhile, developed a deep-seeded resentment for a system beyond their control

19

Texas Alexander, "Levee Camp Moan Blues," Okeh, 8498, 1927; Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 195; Huddie Ledbetter, "Midnight Special," Library of Congress Recordings.

that continually found new ways to exploit their
20
labor.

No single event more vividly demonstrated the extent of African American exploitation in the South than the 1927 flood of the Mississippi Delta. Despite assurances that the recently built levees would hold the muddy waters of the Mississippi, the river broke through the levee at Mound Landing on April 27. Between April and June, millions of tons of water formed a three hundred mile lake in the Delta, flooding the homes of 750,000 people and leaving 600,000 completely destitute. As a result of planters' concern with the return of their sharecroppers, African Americans who had taken refuge in hastily-constructed tent cities soon found themselves confined to segregated camps surrounded by barbed wire, prevented from leaving by National Guardsmen. At Vicksburg, twenty-five blacks attempting to leave were whipped by National Guardsmen, while at Greenville one black was killed during a "recruiting drive" for workers to unload Red Cross food supplies. Charley Patton captured the confusion and tension of the tragedy in the haunting "High Water Everywhere":

20

Daniel, Shadow of Slavery, 138, 148.

Lord, the whole round country,
 lord, river is overflowed.
 Lord, the whole round country,
 man it's overflowed
 (You know I can't stay here;
 I'm bound to go where it's high, boy)
 I would go to the hilly country,
 but they got me barred...

The water at Greenville and Leland,
 Lord, it done rose everywhere,
 (Boy you can't never stay here)
 I would go down to Rosedale, 21
 but they tell me there's water there.

In the distribution of Red Cross supplies, the
 planters discovered a means of insuring the return of
 their workers by forcing blacks who had lost everything
 they owned to pay in cash for relief services and food
 that was officially provided free by the government.
 White landlords willingly assumed the debts incurred
 by African Americans in return for their labor; in
 this manner, victims of the flood were constrained
 into sharecropping peonage. Not surprisingly, blacks
 displayed reluctance in going to the Red Cross stores:

But you know the government is takin' charge
 now, say they're gonna treat everybody
 right;
 Say they give 'em two cans of beans now,
 and a little can of tripe.
 And I told 'em, "No-o, Great Lord,
 woman I sure don't want to go;

21

Palmer, Deep Blues, 72-74; Barlow, Looking Up
 At Down, 39; Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 282;
 Daniel, Shadow of Slavery. 149-158; Charley Patton,
 "High Water Everywhere," Paramount, 12909, 1929.

Do I have to go to the hills, 22
'cause I got to go to the Red Cross store."

African Americans who entered Red Cross stores were often pressed into work gangs for the maintenance of white camps and the construction of new levees:

I want to go back to Helena,
but the high water's got me barred [repeat];
I woke up early in the mornin',
I wandered all in my back yard.

They want me to work on the levee,
I had to leave my home [repeat]
I was so scared the levee might break,
Lord and I might drown.

Paid only ten cents an hour and forced to purchase goods at the commissaries that kept a running tab of their bill, blacks plunged deeper into debt. Reflecting on the African American flood experience, Daniel comments that "more was done to contain ²³ the river than to end peonage."

Short crops in the year of the flood certainly did not help the economic condition of African Americans in the South; falling market prices as a result of the stock market crash in 1929 and a devastating dry spell in the early 1930s aggravated their dismal

22

Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 222; Walter Roland, "Red Cross Blues," Melotone, 12753, 1933.

23

Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 224; Lonnie Johnson, "Helena Blues," quoted in Oliver, Story of the Blues, 99; Daniel, Shadow of Slavery, 168.

quandary. By the summer of 1932, a substantial portion of the twelve million people unemployed nationwide were black. While blacks suffered during the Depression as much as anyone, they were, perhaps, more accustomed to the hard times; as Lonnie Johnson put it:

Friends it could be worser,
you don't seem to understand [repeat];
Some is crying with a sack of gold under each
arm, a loaf of bread in every hand.

People raving about hard times,
I don't know why they should [repeat];
If some people was like me, they didn't have
no money when times were good.

The situation for blacks, however, was indeed getting worse: the North-South wage differential for farm labor, 20¢ a day in 1880, increased to 50¢ in 1900, up to 80¢ in 1935; moreover, the real wage rate for blacks in the South was no higher than it had been
24
in 1880.

Blues songs recorded during the Depression became even more poignant lyrically because of their more immediate social relevance. Bessie Smith's "Poor Man Blues" illustrates the point:

Mr. Richman, open up your heart and mind
[repeat];

24

Oliver, Story of the Blues, 102; Lonnie Johnson, "Hard Times Ain't Gettin' Nowhere," Decca, 7888, 1937; Gavin Wright, Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986) 66.

Give the poor man a chance,
help stop these hard, hard times.

When you're livin' in your mansion,
you don't know what hard times
mean [repeat];
Poor man is starvin',
your wife is livin' like a queen.

Others, like Buster Bennett, sang of their unnerving
search for work:

Now I'm roamin' the highway and pickin' up
cigarette butts and everything I can find;
[repeat];
I mean I'm broken down and disgusted,
I sure got evil on my mind.

Now I'm eatin' wild berries and
I'm sleepin' on the ground [repeat];
I'm broke down and disgusted 25
and I'm tired of trampin' around.

Many times the unemployed searched in vain as
work was nowhere to be found. Realizing the extent of
the situation, the Roosevelt administration created the
Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) in 1933
and allotted \$500 million in grants to state agencies
to be dispensed for relief. Many southern states
demonstrated a reluctance to give unemployed blacks
money for not working; as a result, blacks in the
South received only forty-five percent of government
aid funds despite the fact that African American relief

25

Oliver, Story of the Blues, 102; Bessie Smith,
"Poor Man Blues," Columbia, 14399-D, 1928; Buster
Bennett, "Broken Down Man," Columbia, 37560, 1945.

families outnumbered the white three to one.

The Works Project Administration (WPA) and the Public Works Administration (PWA) provided some work for blacks on municipal construction undertakings, but again the percentage of work reserved for blacks was disproportional to the number of unemployed. The prospect of African Americans earning more on relief projects than on the farms obviously did not appeal to the planters. Robert Hicks lamented the results of the discriminatory practices that inevitably accompanied southerners' aversion to federally funded black employment:

You hear about a job,
 now you is on your way [repeat];
 Twenty men after the same job,
 all the same old day.

Hard times, hard times,
 we [sure] got hard times now [repeat];
 Just drink and think about it,
 we sure got hard times now.

Lard and bacon--come a dollar a pound [repeat];
 Cotton have started to selling, 27
 but it keeps going down and down.

26

Oliver, Story of the Blues, 103; Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 547.

27

Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 36-37; Robert Hicks, "We Sure Got Hard Times Now," Columbia, 14558-D, 1930.

Black agricultural workers who remained on the farm during the New Deal period encountered further setbacks as a result of abuses of Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) policies by southern planters. Despite the fact that it violated AAA policies, planters usually plowed up the cotton land of their tenants and sharecroppers before tearing up their own. Of the \$200 million paid out to planters to make up for the losses incurred by crop reduction, African Americans often received nothing. Meanwhile, higher cotton prices encouraged a wage labor system as a profitable alternative to sharecropping. Gavin Wright remarked that "the South was a planter's heaven by the late 1930s, with generous subsidies, protection against risk, ready financing for new machinery, and cheap harvest labor to make it all possible."²⁸

Before the 1940s, agricultural work in the South was done primarily by hand; by the advent of World War II, however, planters found the low-cost combination of mechanization and wage labor preferable to the sharecropping system. The drive toward mechanization further alienated southern agricultural workers like John Estes:

28

Wright, Old South, New South, 226-236, Oliver, Story of the Blues, 216-217.

Now you ought to cut off so many trucks and
tractors, white folks,
You ought to work more mules and men [repeat];
Then you know that would make,
ohh babe, money get thick again.

The alienation and displacement prompted by mechanization left blacks with few reasons to remain in the the South. Tindall observes that "depression, AAA, and mechanization created an extreme instability of
29
tenure."

African American movement actually began immediately after emancipation. Testing their new-found freedom, many blacks at the time rambled throughout the South searching for better economic and social conditions. Many blacks entrenched in sharecropping soon discovered that the only way to get out of debt was to walk out in the dark of night; others moved about simply out of protest. Neil McMillen notes that "the desire to vote with one's feet, to leave in search of fuller participation in American life, was perhaps the clearest and most frequently exercised expression of black discontent." As the dream of emancipation turned into the nightmare of Jim Crow, northern newspapers advocating migration to the North gained popularity among southern blacks; the

29

Evans, Big Road Blues, 170; Sleepy John Estes, "Working Man Blues," Bluebird, 138950, 1941. Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 417.

Chicago Defender, the most popular of these newspapers had approximately 188,475 readers living outside Chicago by 1920.³⁰

The Defender often suggested that "to die from the bite of frost is far more glorious than at the hands of the mob." "Peg Leg" Howell agreed:

I'd rather drink muddy water,
sleep in a hollow log [repeat];
Than to be in Atlanta treated like a dog.

Many African Americans in the South free from economic/legal restrictions, however, often displayed a reluctance to leave the land they grew up in. Jeff Titon explains the reason for this hesitation:

It is impossible for a people to leave a culture behind. The land of Jim Crow and lynch law was also the land of fish fries and barbecue, good music and getting religion, long talks and deep loves, the feel and smell of soil and farm.

Movement, therefore, between 1880 and 1930 was generally confined to travel within the South, from plantation to plantation, or from rural county to town. In 1890, eighty percent of southern blacks lived in rural districts; by 1910, fifteen per cent of them had moved to towns; by 1940, 37.3 per cent of southern blacks were living in towns while floating wage-earners

30

Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 262-263; Barlow, Looking Up at Down, 54, 288; Neil McMillen quoted in Cobb, Most Southern Place on Earth, 284.

in the region numbered 842,525. Ramblin' Thomas was one such drifter:

I'm going to Texas,
have to ride the blinds [repeat];
Just show me the train, 31
left out of that Mobile yard.

The appeal of the railroads to southern blacks has its roots in the slavery period. Whether it be the "Glorious Gospel Train" or the "Underground Railroad," the railways in African American folklore persisted in symbolizing transcendence from oppression. African Americans in the South often "caught the first thing smokin'" as a means of escaping from their condition.
32

Two railroad lines in the Deep South, the Illinois Central and the Gulf, Mobile, and Ohio, placed the southern black within twenty-four hours of Chicago. Through the Defender and the appeals of agents of northern businessmen came the promise of

31
Bastin, Red River Blues, 22; Peg Leg Howell, "Fo' Day Blues," Columbia, 14177-D, 1929; Titon, Early Downhome Blues, 1; Woodward, Origins of the New South, 208; Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 42; Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 412, 500; Ramblin' Thomas, "Cottonfield Blues," Vocalion, 1094, 1927.

32
Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 64; Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 262; Cobb, Most Southern Place on Earth, 291-292.

better opportunities for blacks in northern cities; by 1917, war industries and industries hurt by restrictions in foreign immigration needed workers as badly as some southern blacks needed a change of venue. As a result, during the 1910's the Southeast lost 323,000 (4.9 percent) of its black population; in the 1920's, an additional 615,000 left for the North; by 1930, 26.3 percent of all African Americans born in the Southeast lived elsewhere, a total of 1,840,000. In the decade of the Depression, the migration dropped to 424,924; but, in the 1940s, with the reappearance of war industries in the North, one and a half million blacks left the South. As William Barlow points out, blues singers captured the spirit of the flight throughout the migratory period:

Blues texts, sung in the vernacular of the black masses, were the 'true songs' or the 'reals' of hope, despair, and struggle, which documented from within the epic the African American exodus out of the rural South and into the industrial centers of urban America 33 during the first half of the twentieth century.

Those who left flocked to cities like Chicago and Detroit where industrial work beckoned; most came

33

Palmer, Deep Blues, 138-139; Cobb, Most Southern Place on Earth, 283; Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 27; Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 147, 570; Oliver, Story of the Blues, 152; Barlow, Looking Up at Down, 326.

with an attitude similar to Blind Blake's:

I'm going to get a job up there
in Mr. Ford's place [repeat];
Stop these endless days
from starin' me in the face.

Many blacks, however, soon found out that employment in the North more often than not meant back-breaking labor; they also learned quickly that they were the last to be hired and the first to be fired. White workers in the North fearing competition often demonstrated hostility towards African Americans; in some cases, the tension between whites and blacks escalated into riot, as in East St. Louis in July, 1917. Many, like Josh White, considered going back to the South:

I believe I'll go back South,
cotton'll be a good price next year [repeat];
I believe I'll go back South,
raise everything I need.

Robert Palmer notes that others enjoyed the freedom in the North and the promise of a steady paycheck: "[They] didn't have to wait until the cotton harvest every year to find out how much his crop was worth...Nor did [they] have to worry about being arrested, beaten, and fined...
34
for having a good time on a Saturday night."

34

Oliver, Story of the Blues, 40; Blind Blake, "Detroit Bound Blues," Paramount, 12657, 1929; Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 150; Josh White, "Welfare Blues," Banner, 33024, 1934; Palmer, Deep Blues, 11.

Many black families that decided to stay in the North, however, lived in run-down kitchenettes and over-crowded "hot-bed" apartments; by 1935, one half of them were living on relief. The prospect of the North as the promised land was rarely fulfilled; a ride to the North did not always free African Americans from the "Mason-Dixon Blues":

This northern country,
it makes you choose [repeat]; 35
but it never will cure the Mason-Dixon blues.

Blues musicians in the North soon realized that they needed to alter their musical styles and lyrical content if they were going to continue making a living playing the blues. As the market became increasingly monopolized by Chicago-based artists in the 1940s and 1950s, minor artists from the South found themselves out of work. Just as rural blacks in the South deemed older slave songs irrelevant to early twentieth century conditions, blacks migrating to northern cities found the themes of country blues songs inapplicable to their circumstances. Southern blues performers who did not change their ways met with hostility from young audiences: Tommy McClennen was thrown out of a Chicago

35

Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 166; Oliver, Story of the Blues, 105; Mattie Hite, "Mason-Dixon Blues," Pathe-Actualle, 032014, 1933.

house party with his guitar broken over his head for singing about "niggers"; Big Bill Broonzy encountered a similar reaction from the younger urban black populace: "This ain't slavery no more, so why don't you learn to play something else? The way you sing about mules, cotton, corn, levee camps, and chain gangs. Them days, Big Bill, is gone forever."³⁶

The music that young urban audiences did find appealing came to be known as "Rhythm and Blues." Distinguished from rural blues by the use of electric instruments and the incorporation of other musicians, this new form of black cultural expression emphasized a louder, more danceable sound. Lyrically, there was a gradual decrease in rural imagery and traditional southern themes. Nevertheless, the southern roots of rhythm and blues could not be denied. Two of the most successful urban blues performers, Muddy Waters (McKinley Morganfield) and Howlin' Wolf (Chester Burnett), both grew up in the Mississippi Delta; Howlin' Wolf, in fact, learned to play guitar personally from Charley Patton. Unfortunately, the vast majority of country blues performers failed to experience the success enjoyed by men like Morganfield and

Burnett.

For several reasons, the appeal of southern (rural country) blues declined after 1945. As suggested above, young blacks found the lyrical content of rural blues an unwelcome reminder of earlier times of hardship and suffering. Bruce Bastin concludes that "[Southern] blues was a socially-based music which could not thrive healthily outside its natural environment." Robert Palmer views a waning of in-group solidarity resulting from northern migration as the principal reason for the country blues' loss of appeal. Others point out that militant blacks seeking civil rights looked to alternative musical forms to express their dissatisfaction with the status quo; Paul Oliver observes that "the South meant nothing to them...They wanted a brash, confident music that suggested that change might be fought for."³⁸

Although the impact of the blues as a folk art expression of agrarian blacks abated in the post-

37

Cobb, Most Southern Place on Earth, 299; Palmer, Deep Blues; 161; "Howlin' Wolf Talks #1," Howlin' Wolf: The Chess Box, MCA, CH-D39332, 1991.

38

Evans, Big Road Blues, 89; Bastin, Red River Blues, 347; Palmer, Deep Blues, 253; Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 281; Cobb, Most Southern Place on Earth, 305; Oliver, Story of the Blues, 6, 158.

World War II years, the blues as a musical form increased in popularity among a white audience in the 1950s and 1960s. Country blues musicians like Charley Patton and Robert Johnson could have scarcely imagined the impact of their music on white musicians; certainly, though, they would have questioned the white bluesman's comprehension of the genre's lyrical roots. Bastin points out that the blues was "grass roots music, ephemeral and transitory, never intended to be caught, let alone assessed by whites who lived too late to hope to understand fully the ramifications of the social pressures that gave it birth." The southern bluesmen, according to Barlow, were "folk iconoclasts [standing] in sharp contrast to the one-dimensional, docile black stereotypes created by and for white culture." The country blues singer symbolized black cultural resistance to white domination; his/her songs disseminated their message of recalcitrance to every southern black who cared to³⁹ listen.

The injustices against African Americans in the South came to fruition in the period between the World

39

Cobb, Most Southern Place on Earth, 303-304; Bastin, Red River Blues, 146; Barlow, Looking Up at Down, 427-428.

Wars. Throughout the period, blues songs helped in awakening blacks to the fact that their suffering was common; in doing so, the blues gave African Americans in all occupations a sense of communal identity. The hardships of the nineteenth century continued on well into the 1900s, until international events and technological advancement together with increasing black intolerance worked against regional isolationism to bring the plight of the southern black to the forefront of national politics. The roots of twentieth century African American militancy are deep and complex; however, an examination of the blues as a collective reflection of the African American experience and a study of its impact on black culture provides an understanding of how blacks came to be unified against white domination.

EPILOGUE

In addition to contributing to the nationalization of rural southern music, World War II brought to fruition the changes facilitated by New Deal agricultural policies of the 1930s. After 1940, government intervention in the South took the form of multi-billion dollar investment in defense industries and military facilities. Pete Daniel summarized the impact of the war on rural southerners:

In the 1940s, rural exiles found work in defense industries and in the army, and thus World War II, not the New Deal, rescued many victims of government programs and mechanization. The war gave them a job, a purpose.

The war accelerated agricultural displacement: between 1940 and 1945, the South's farm population decreased by 3,347,000, or 20.4 percent; the number of tenants in the same period dropped from 1,449,293 to 1,165,279.¹

Those who remained on the farm and were able to retain their tenancy status enjoyed a return to relative prosperity when cotton rose from 9.89¢ a pound in

¹ J. Wayne Flint, Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979) 94; Daniel, "The New Deal, Southern Agriculture, and Economic Change," The New Deal and the South, eds. James C. Cobb and Michael V. Namorato (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984) 61; George B. Tindall, The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967) 703.

1939 to 22.52¢ in 1945. Moreover, an exodus of 600,000 hired workers left remaining tenants with the bargaining power to negotiate more favorable contracts with their landlords. Unfortunately, the labor shortage also encouraged planters who had not yet mechanized to buy tractors and combines and focused technological energies on breaking the harvest bottleneck. Soon after the International Harvester mechanical cotton picker made its appearance in the South's cotton belt in 1943, man-hours required to produce a bale of cotton decreased by eighty-two percent. Farmers without the capital to maximize commercial production fell by the wayside while Extension Service agents instructed larger planters on newer, sophisticated ways of decreasing labor costs and increasing productivity. In 1941, W.J. Cash accurately predicted the ultimate outcome of the cotton-picking machine's arrival in the cotton belt:

It is likely to mean the mechanization of southern farming as a whole and the absorption of most of the good cotton lands into vast mass-production plantations...[it] means the elimination, not only of the sharecroppers and most tenants but also of a big part of the southern yeomen farmers. 2

2

Tindall, Emergence of the New South, 704; Jack Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987) 67; Warren C. Whatley, "Labor for the

The advent of expensive machinery extinguished tenants' hopes of profitable land ownership. In the age of agribusiness, lower and middle class farm operators flocked to the cities in search of employment. Being a region with a vast number of unskilled workers, however, the South tended to attract fewer high-wage jobs and more economic opportunities in the lower-wage category. Consequently, rural depopulation, the expansion of northern enterprises southward, and urban boosterism did not combine to improve the lot of most southerners after the war. Meanwhile, poverty persisted in the countryside. In 1960, a commission found that rural poor in the South outnumbered their urban counterparts by nearly half a million families. Of 829,000 rural families in the South living below the poverty level, two-thirds were white. As James C. Cobb and Michael V. Namorato point out, "uneven growth, lingering poverty and discrimination, educational deficiencies, and persistent regional wage differentials are but a few of the problems of the New Deal era that still exist in the age of the

Picking," Journal of Economic History 43 (December, 1983): 928; Gavin Wright, Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986) 236; Flint, Dixie's Forgotten People, 97; W. J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1941) 411.

3
Sunbelt."

Between 1935 and 1970, more than 13,000,000 people left southern farms in search of a better life. By the mid-1940s, agricultural unions like the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union vanished from the countryside as quickly as the tenants themselves; by the late-1940s, industrial production workers outnumbered farm operators in the South. Meanwhile, the music of rural southerners entered into the national consciousness, first through the dissemination of country music and later by means of the amalgamation of the blues and country genres into the creation of the "rock and roll" idiom. While social commentary in rural southern music reached its apogee in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the messages of Woody Guthrie, Jimmy Rodgers, and Charley Patton could still be heard in the songs of the blues and folk-revival movements of the 1960s, and they continue to find a national audience today. In 1991, the Rounder recording label released an

3
Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost, 76, 104, 153, 276, 309, 352; Pete Daniel, Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures Since 1880 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985) 239, 249; Flint, Dixie's Forgotten People, 94-95; Numan V. Bartley, "The New Deal as a Turning Point in Southern History," New Deal and the South, 141-146; James C. Cobb and Michael V. Namorato, "Introduction," The New Deal and the South, 14-15.

eight-disc series that made available virtually all of Jimmie Rodgers' recordings. With the advent of the compact disc age, the recordings of Guthrie and Patton have also been re-issued by major labels in recent
4
years.

Meanwhile, several scholarly monographs on the blues and a number of biographies of major early country performers have appeared in the last two decades. The importance of music in the lives of struggling southerners in the period between the World Wars continues to capture the interest of southern historians dissecting the components of regional culture and the perceptions of the South's marginalized citizens. The recordings of early blues and country musicians provide invaluable insights into the lives of a rural-oriented folk enduring the hardships associated with economic hard times, governmental indifference to their plight, and the coming of agricultural modernization. For struggling whites, the prospect of land ownership faded further from view in the late 1920s and 1930s; in the process, tenancy came to be viewed as a fixed condition.

4

Bartley, "New Deal as a Turning Point in Southern History," 139; Donald H. Grubbs, Cry From the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971) 188, Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost, xiv; The Rolling Stone Album Guide, 1992.

The mechanization of southern farming indirectly subsidized by the federal government diminished what little hope they had of upward mobility. For blacks, the period witnessed the continuation of policies designed to restrict African American voting rights, land ownership, and social mobility. A generation of blacks born after the period of Reconstruction grew increasingly impatient with the status quo. Many left the region after World War I; many others endured another generation of second-class citizenry.

These marginalized southerners, however, left behind a record of their suffering and discontent in the lyrics of early recorded country and blues songs. While it would be inaccurate to claim that these songs capture a rebellious spirit among struggling southerners, at the least they demonstrate a dissatisfaction and sense of alienation among an exploited, bi-racial group. Above all, they provide an insight into how southern protest manifested itself in the two dominant commercial musical forms of the period.

The legacy of social commentary preserved in the early recordings of blues and country musicians remains as testimony of rural southerners' discontent with local and federal authorities' response to their economic plight and an indication of their awareness of the regional social order that perpetuated their subordinate

condition. Poor southerners during the Depression era enjoyed few avenues by which to express their dissatisfaction; music was in fact, one of the few such outlets open to them. On the radio, in the union hall, and at small gatherings of family and friends, the songs of the displaced and discarded people of the South could be heard throughout the 1920s and 1930s. For rural southerners, the songs provided strength in the face of overwhelming adversity by reminding them that their suffering was not isolated; for the modern listener, they serve as a monument to the trials and tribulations of an oppressed group and its will to survive amid enormous hardship.

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