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# Bluegrass Nation: A Historical and Cultural Analysis of America's Truest Music

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**Bluegrass Nation: A Historical and Cultural Analysis**

**Of America's Truest Music**

By L. Blake Price

Advisor: Sean McCollough

Chancellor's Honors Thesis

May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011

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### **NOTE TO READER**

To adequately facilitate the reader's understanding of the topic, I must first clarify *my* understanding and usage of the term 'string band music'. There are two branches or subgenres of this archetype – old-time music and bluegrass. Although there are motifs and characteristics distinctive to each, the two subgenres share enough similarities that, for the sake of simplicity, I will at times refer to old-time and bluegrass collectively as 'string band music.' Nevertheless, the respective terms may not be used interchangeably. Unless otherwise noted, however, much of what will be discussed later will hold true for both old-time and bluegrass; the nuances distinguishing these two subgenres of string band music will be examined in depth later in this study. Still, both subgenres have enough in common to be referred to collectively on occasion, such as when relating the overall musicological and cultural impacts of string band music on society. And as the title of the paper suggests, there will be a greater emphasis on bluegrass, due in part to it being the more focused of the two subgenres. It is therefore more practical to discuss bluegrass at greater length within the scope of this paper, but this cannot adequately be done without first examining the influences and characteristics of old-time.

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Enjoy.

## INTRODUCTION

The image of string band music in the United States has undergone quite an evolution over the past few decades. In many parts of the country, the genre is still associated with the “backward” and “uneducated” ways of the Southerners who helped develop it, but to those who truly know it, string music has become quite an intellectual pursuit. To them, it is not merely a form of entertainment, but a way of life. Such a fierce loyalty to a genre is uncommon in American music, as artists often view music as a job, an avenue down which to make money. In string music, however, one commonly sees an entire family involved in a band, and most string music artists love their music so strongly that it is common to see band members play into the later years of their lives. In this paper, I aim to capture that passion for a misunderstood genre, and to show that string band music, particularly bluegrass, is the embodiment of many American values; thus, bluegrass is the truest form of American music, for its development and history is a microcosm of that of the United States’. This paper will be a comprehensive survey of the “super-genre” of string music, covering everything from its influences to its future, and will explore the who’s, what’s, when’s, and why’s of string band music.

Many aspects of the string band culture must be discussed in order to arrive at an educated opinion of the genre. To be able to understand string band “attitude”, one must first be familiar with the origins of such a traditional field of music. Understanding this aspect of string band music is perhaps the most important, because it offers a great deal of insight into today’s public perception of the genre and also explains why much of the string band sound has remained relatively unchanged over the decades. Having a working knowledge of the history of old-time and bluegrass is vital to understanding the differences between the two distinct genres.

The social and political climates of the times must be considered, as well as the socio-economical and geographical settings of both genres' birthplaces. After discussing the major musicological influences on string band music, the major pioneers and artists in both old-time and bluegrass will be examined. A major feature in the history of string band music is its revivals that seem to roughly correlate with the foreign relations of the United States; this is of particular interest when considering that string music first became popular in the ashes of the American Civil War, and bluegrass itself developed shortly after World War II. Once the musicological foundation of string band music has been laid, the evolution of string music can finally be discussed. With a more liberal society has come more liberal forms of music, and string band music has always prided itself on its tradition and preservation; however, bluegrass music was considered to be quite progressive in the 1940s compared to other styles of music. Of course, no genre is immune to progress, and from old-time and bluegrass have sprouted many forms of string band music. The 1970s-era band New Grass Revival was pivotal in reinvention of traditional string music and the development of other progressive styles. The evolution of string band music is moving at lightning-fast pace today, so much so that younger audiences have taken notice due to innovative bands such as The Avett Brothers and Yonder Mountain String Band.

## **THE ROOTS OF STRING BAND MUSIC**

### *Defining String Band Music*

As with any form of music, the long and twisted path of musical influences on established genres is difficult one define and follow. As stated before, ‘string band music’ in this paper refers to old-time and bluegrass music. Though each of these genres has distinct differences, they have a great deal in common, enough to warrant the use of the umbrella term ‘string band music’. These similarities, as well as their plethora of differences, will be discussed more in depth below.

Old-time string band music refers to the banjo- and fiddle-based folk music that pre-dated the birth of bluegrass. The music usually was made by a banjo, fiddle, or guitar, and any combination thereof. Though the sociological histories and contexts of the banjo and fiddle will be discussed more at length later, suffice it to say that the two instruments were wildly popular in the South due to a number of reasons, and from this culture grew a very distinct musical style. In fact, the tradition of fiddle accompaniment can be traced as far back as the Renaissance in Europe. Despite old-time music’s origins in the ballad traditions of early folk music, it developed primarily as a type of dance music, an accompaniment to country dances, such as square dancing or contra dancing. Unlike today, the late-1800s/early-1900s South, particularly Appalachia, was not especially interested in sitting down to view and listen to concerts. Rather, Appalachian folk placed an emphasis on social functions, principally those that involved the family and community. Tempered concerts were not conducive to the Southern ideal of social mingling, and Appalachia’s impoverished conditions seemed to “encourage” wild dances and other forms of rowdy public gatherings. Out of this grew the necessity for dance music, and old-



time string band music was born. Old-time predominantly features a fast tempo and a set form, most often following the rhyming pattern of AABB. Because old-time is primarily for dancing, it is often instrumental-only music, as singing would only distract from the dancing. This, however, is not to say that old-time is without vocalization; old-time was only developed in the instrumental style, and since it is such a broadly-defined musical genre, much of old-time also features singing (the newer styles of old-time have moved away from the exclusively-dance music theme and more toward songwriting and story-telling, borrowing from the traditions of minstrelsy and early folk balladry) (1).

Old-time also features distinct instrumental styles. Because old-time was an outgrowth of the need for dance music, improvisation and individual virtuosity was limited, since dances were written and choreographed to progress with the music. If improvisation was used in old-time music as it is in bluegrass, dancers would be unable to continue the structured dances, and the musical style designed to accompany the dancing would defeat its very own purpose (1). Additionally, the clawhammer method of playing the banjo is very characteristic of old-time; this method features a down-stroking style that creates a “danceable” rhythm. Such a playing style is fundamentally different from the three-fingered bluegrass style popularized by Earl Scruggs in the 1940s (2).

Bluegrass was developed in the 1940s by Bill Monroe as an outgrowth of old-time music. Born in Kentucky, the Bluegrass State, Monroe grew up in a very musical family. Being the youngest of eight children, young Monroe was “resigned” to playing the mandolin, since his older siblings were already playing the fiddle, banjo, and guitar (1). A childhood mentor of Monroe was Arnold Schultz, an African-American fiddler who was the son of a former slave; Monroe met Schultz at one of the many dances Monroe’s family played at, and Schultz was

instrumental (pun intended) in introducing Monroe to the blues, which Monroe significantly incorporated into his eventual invention of the bluegrass sound (2).

The technical definition of bluegrass can best be described as such: bluegrass is the sound produced with particular acoustic stringed instruments to a particular timing, pitch, and vocal arrangement, with healthy doses of blues, jazz, and old-time flavors. The fiddle, banjo, guitar, and mandolin are by far the most popular bluegrass instruments, with the upright bass, dobro, and other instruments making appearances. Vocal lead parts are rendered in the high-pitched style of traditional British/Celtic balladry, with chorus harmonies added by a high tenor and low baritone; this signature singing style has become known as the “high lonesome sound”, which effectively describes bluegrass’s sometimes bleak and often bluesy tone (3). Bluegrass music is not dance music; improvisation features heavily in bluegrass performances, and every instrument often gets its own solo in each song. These solos often use blues scales and blue notes, with a substantial emphasis on individual virtuosity like that of jazz. This improvisational style can almost wholly be attributed to the influence of the blues and jazz on bluegrass, and ultimately to Arnold Schwartz’s influence on a young Bill Monroe (1).

In addition to Arnold Schwartz’s direct influence on Bill Monroe, African-American influence on bluegrass is pervasive. Slave ballads and heavy religious themes, both hallmarks of the antebellum South, have substantial places in the bluegrass musicology; after all, the iconic religious hymn “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” has been reworked countless times by string band musicians (most notably by the Carter Family) and is the name of the landmark 1972 bluegrass album by the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band (2). Additionally, the impact of the blues on the musical composition of bluegrass, and the African invention of the banjo, were two other major contributions to string band music from black culture (1).

Monroe's new sound, spread by his band The Blue Grass Boys, was at first the most popular in urban centers in the North. However, that soon changed, as radios became more affordable, and thus the music was more accessible to much of the impoverished South, the very region that was essentially responsible for bluegrass's invention. Bluegrass is a fusion of black and white music, and while that feature is not unique to bluegrass, the Celtic and Blues amalgamation was transformed into something greater when it transitioned into the South, and there it was preserved in a cultural deep freeze for years to come (1).

### *The Earliest Roots of String Band Music*

American string band music can trace its roots as far back as the plantation era in colonial America. Africans that were sold into slavery brought with them many elements of their culture, one of which being the banjo, which is a central part of string band music. The Africans' primitive version of the banjo was essentially a split gourd with animal hide stretched over it, so the banjo we know now was still far off, but the makings of genre were in place. As said before, slave songs with religious themes found their way into old-time songs, and their importation of the banjo had a major impact on the folk music of the region (4).

Another major event that contributed to the development of string band music was the immigration of the Scotch-Irish to the United States. The earliest influences on string band music, other than those rooted in African culture, can be to these immigrants that traveled to the American South to work jobs on the region's immense farms. With them they brought many string band motifs, including traditional folk tunes and a unique fiddle-playing technique. They came searching for opportunity, and many were so poor that in order to be able to afford travel expenses, they signed contracts with American plantation owners to become indentured servants

on expansive farms (1). The South was, of course, the hotbed of the American agricultural industry at the time (late 1700s into the 1800s), and it created an opportunity for the native whites to interact with the unique melting pot of Scotch-Irish and African cultures.

During the first two centuries of their existence in America, the people of the South, particularly those in Appalachia, developed their own distinct culture and their own distinct music, in large part due to the socioeconomic and geographical isolation from the rest of country. The Appalachian lifestyle, steeped in religion, ultra-conservative ideals, a family-oriented culture, and a general close-mindedness to change, offered the perfect conditions in which string band music could incubate without much outside interference (4). This fact is key, for string band music is a highly traditional folk style might have all but disappeared had Appalachia been more accessible to the outside world.

However, with the advent of the railroad in the mid-1800s, Appalachian culture, and in particular its string music, received a breath of fresh air from the North. Western Expansion was in full swing with the promise of free land and gold, but the “rediscovery” of the South and its pure forms of music, due to the relative ease with which one could now travel via rail, sparked the public’s interest (1). Non-Southerners became intensely interested in Appalachia and its old-fashioned ways, and while they now could easily travel to the South, most just waited for the South to come to them.

Minstrel shows, which were traveling companies of performers that conducted variety and musical shows across the country, borrowed heavily from the Southern culture, in particular that of slaves and Appalachian folk. The railroads greatly contributed to the popularity of these shows, for what was once a logistical nightmare to travel the country was now a matter of buying a train ticket. Minstrelsy, with its derisive humor and heavy racism, in many ways exploited the

“backwards” nature of the South and created a misguided public perception of the South that essentially exists to this day (4). But for all its downfalls, minstrelsy was pivotal in the diffusion of the Appalachian sound. Minstrel shows traveled across the country to entertain hundreds of thousands of people, and equipped with their blackface and Appalachian stereotypes, they took the nation by storm. The banjo and fiddle featured prominently in these shows, as Americans were enthralled with the otherworldly culture of Appalachia and the more isolated parts of the South. This is how these instruments and musical styles were to become known to many Americans, as most would never truly see the South; therefore, minstrel shows were all they had with which to formulate their perceptions of Appalachia. One of the most famous early string bands, Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers, relied on a variation of the minstrel show that they called “rural dramas”; in these, the band would hold fiddle and banjo breakdowns interspersed with comedy skits. These proved so popular that the Skillet Lickers actually sold more recordings of their rural dramas than records of studio sessions (1). However, for all its advantages to the American music industry, minstrel shows portrayed Appalachian residents in a very negative light, and the South became a novelty of sorts for years to come.

### ***Proliferation of the Early String Band Sound***

The American Civil War in the mid-1800s was also a major event that helped to contribute to the spread of Appalachian music (1). With the election of the abolitionist Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1860, slave states in the South began to secede from the Union, starting with South Carolina. The North and South went to war to restore order, and because of the North’s superior advantage in terms of men, industry, and funding, much of the fighting took place in or around the South. Vast numbers of Union soldiers descended upon the South and

Appalachia, and many were to experience genuine string band music for the first time. As said before, the South was like a novelty to those who had never been there, and many Northerners became intensely interested in Appalachian music. The war promoted a great deal of interaction between white and black cultures, and these relations were key in developing what we know today as string band music. When the war ended in 1865, and Union soldiers returned to their homes in the North, they brought with them the ideas and loose principles of this newfound genre. For the first time, true Appalachian music had made its way to the North en masse. The North was fascinated with the sound, and suddenly there was a demand to hear more of it (5).

The years following the Civil War were as important to the spread of string band music as the war itself. After the Union emerged victorious in 1865, slaves everywhere were free to go where they wanted. Despite the fact that the majority of former slaves were too poor to move away from plantations, a sizeable number was indeed able to. The relatively tolerant North was an obvious place to move, so blacks packed up and took their culture with them. This culture, of course, included their music, most of which featured deeply religious themes, story-telling, rhythmic syncopation, and improvisation. These elements became mixed with the newly “discovered” Appalachian music style in the North, and creative entrepreneurs began experimenting with this sudden influx of new types of music. Of course, this had been happening in the South and in Appalachia for years, but urban centers in the North took to it with an enthusiasm not seen in the casual South. Lincoln’s plans for Reconstruction following the war continued to disperse federal funds and workers across the country, further increasing the awareness to the unique style of music played in the South and in Appalachia. Reconstruction was pivotal in allowing for extensive contact with this type of music, and entrepreneurs slowly realized that such a novel genre could become marketable and rather lucrative venture (1).

Like the American Civil War, World War I was instrumental in the evolution of string band music. The Civil War had brought the isolated and unique sounds of Appalachia to the rest of the United States; in a similar fashion, World War I brought it to the world. American soldiers, having grown up amidst the new Appalachian style of music proliferated by the Civil War, took the music to all corners of the globe. In a homecoming of sorts, the Celtic-inspired music found its way back to the British Isles as American troops amassed with their British allies

(5). Music was a popular way to pass the time during war, and string band music received another cultural mash-up as it had during its inception (2). World War I had another impact on string band music, in addition to exposing the genre to foreign cultures for the first time. War often presents the unique opportunity for people from different parts of the country to come together, and the First World War was no exception; a draft was instituted by President Woodrow Wilson, and for essentially the first time in American history, men from all regions of the United States were brought together as brothers-in-arms. The United States is large enough to harbor many distinct subcultures outside of the classic American culture, and an event such as a draft, which forces men from very different backgrounds to interact with one another, can have a significant impact on each subculture's music (3). If certain groups of Americans somehow missed the influence of the Civil War and Reconstruction on the spread of Appalachian music, they were certainly exposed to it now. Soldiers live and die together, so it obviously behooves them to grow close; music is a popular tool with which to do this, and the thousands of conscripted soldiers from the South and Appalachia certainly made their presence known musically not only among the United States military, but also among the world.

### *String Band Music Becomes a Medium*

The next significant step in the evolution of string band music came in the form of sheet music. Up until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, sheet music production functioned as the only standardized form of mass-market music. Tin Pan Alley was the colloquial name given the collection of New York City-based music publishers and songwriters who dominated the popular music of the United States. Although it had no immediate or direct impact on the development of string band music (except perhaps for minstrel songs that made their way into the canon), Tin Pan Alley's indirect influence is certainly worth mentioning. The general purpose of Tin Pan Alley was to make money from music. Records and record players were either non-existent or too expensive to be popular during Tin Pan Alley's heyday, so sheet music was the most popular form of mainstream music in the late-1800s to early-1900s. The primary genres that Tin Pan Alley marketed were ragtime and pop, with blues and jazz styles supplanting them in the early-1900s. The commercialization of the blues by Tin Pan Alley was a significant factor in the development of bluegrass music after World War II, as its blue notes, syncopation, and improvisation (which would later be incorporated into bluegrass) could be accessed by nearly everyone in the United States (1).

However, sheet music still lacked a certain commercial appeal. Not only did reading sheet music require quite a bit of experience in that field, it also more-or-less required one to own musical instruments, unless 'A capella' was the desired sound. Sheet music was just that – music transcribed on sheets of paper, so those who were without adequate musical experience could not read it. Musical experience was abundant in the South and Appalachia, but the majority of that music was passed down from generation to generation, and not transcribed. This is not to say that Appalachia was without written music (shape-note singing, a simplified sight-



reading method that relied on different shapes to represent pitch), but formalized music transcriptions were relatively uncommon in the South (5). An invention was coming, however, that would revolutionize the way Americans experience music.

With Thomas Edison's invention of the phonograph in 1877, the American music industry saw an explosion in popularity (5). Those who once could not access their favorite music due to not being able to read sheet music could now relatively easily, as songs could simply be recorded and played. A few decades passed since the phonograph's invention in 1877 before it became affordable and pragmatic, when the Victor Talking Machine Company introduced the Victrola in 1906. Up until then, record players were too expensive to be popular among most Americans, and most players were aesthetically unpleasant. The Victor Talking Machine Company, however, placed an emphasis on mass-producing affordable machines, and by incorporating the players into attractive wooden cabinets, Victrolas could proudly be displayed in living rooms as simply another piece of furniture. At the time of their release, Victrolas played cylinders, which were essentially the first medium on which music was recorded in a practical manner. By the 1920s, cylinders were phased out by disc records, which are the flat, round discs that remained popular into the 1990s. Nevertheless, the Victor Talking Machine Company made it possible for tens of millions of people around the world to listen to recorded music. As said before, the previous music medium, sheet music, required its consumers to have a knowledge of how to sight-read music, thus severely limiting its pool of consumers. Cylinders and records, on the other hand, allowed those who had no such knowledge to listen to any music they wanted (5).

Recording companies first came into existence in the era of the phonograph, and the Victor Talking Machine Company, which nearly had a monopoly over record players in the early

1900s, even had its own label. In 1922, the record label of the Victor Talking Machine Company discovered a young folk talent from Arkansas named Alexander “Eck” Robertson; together with his fiddling partner Henry C. Gilliland, Robertson recorded four tunes in what was likely the first country music recording session in the United States (*keep in mind that at that time, the term “country music,” and more specifically, “hillbilly music,” referred to what we now know as Appalachian string band music, so in this context the term is interchangeable*). Several of Robertson’s recorded songs, including “Arkansas Traveler” and “Sally Gooden” (though neither were originally his), would become major string band staples years later (5). The rise of string band music’s popularity had begun.

### ***The Most Important Medium: The Radio***

Despite the myriad advances the record industry had brought to American music, buying a wide variety of this media, and the equipment with which to play it, would still prove to be too costly to many Americans. The American music industry still needed a particularly hot spark that would make mainstream music easily accessible and affordable to everyone in the United States. Enter the radio.

The development of radio, and its explosive impact on the music industry, was perhaps the single-most influential factor in the progress and proliferation of not only the string band sound, but American music in general. The early 1920s saw the first commercial radio broadcasts, primarily of world news and sports, but the long-term potential of music on radio would be recognized almost immediately. These broadcasts, of course, were free to everyone who owned a radio, and while the radio was a bit expensive early on, the price decreased as more were produced. In fact, between 1923 and 1930, over sixty percent of American families bought

radios, and even more did as the price dropped further into the 1940s and 1950s. The radio also helped not only string band music survive the Depression, but also the American music industry as a whole; the radio, of course, was free to listen to, and the music gave Americans a bit of comfortable continuity through the worst financial disaster the United States has ever seen (5).

As mentioned earlier, record companies immediately jumped into the fold and realized the immense potential of music across the airwaves. Recognizing the novelty of country music to the majority of America (most Americans lived outside the South and were thus fascinated with sounds from that region), record labels sent music scouts out in droves to find more “exploitable” talent. A fiddler from Georgia by the name of John Carson, though not a real unknown (he was nicknamed Fiddlin’ John Carson by the governor of Tennessee), was discovered by record and radio executives in 1922. Later that same year, Carson was broadcast live by WSB Radio Atlanta. Because Atlanta was the first city to publicly broadcast country music, it became a Mecca for country record labels and artists; this is simply another reason that country and hillbilly music (and thus string band music) is so intimately tied to Southern culture. Furthermore, it was reported by the Atlanta Journal that Carson’s fame quickly spread all over the country following this single broadcast, and suddenly the uniqueness and mystique of string band music could be heard by almost everyone in the United States (5).

Country music of the 1920s is a *completely* different sound than today’s country music, and in many ways early country can be described as essentially being synonymous with string band music. In fact, country music then was also called ‘hillbilly music,’ named after the unrefined mountain folk from which the sound came. This pejorative name was not appreciated by the genre’s founding artists, as ‘hillbilly’ was as derogatory a term then as it is now. However, this controversy will be discussed at greater length later when exploring the negative

connotations attached to string music. As it were, early country was a major influence on bluegrass music, and much of it today is actually considered to be old-time string band music (5). For example, the music of the Carter Family had many hallmarks of what we today consider to be string band music, including usage of the banjo and fiddle, religious-themed songs, and a family-oriented philosophy (2). Country music of the 1920s and 1930s (and somewhat into the 1940s) had an immense impact on the invention of bluegrass music; early country (and thus old-time music) could be related to the trunk of a tree, while bluegrass and later country (from the mid-1940s onward) are its branches. Many elements of early country and old-time still exist in country today, including rough-neck lyricism and the familiar twang and country accent that has been associated with these genres for years (4).

Despite its sizeable following that was slowly beginning to develop, country music needed a pioneer that would launch it into primetime. Ralph Peer was a prominent producer and talent scout on both the Victor and Okeh record labels, and he was a major believer in the value of string band music as a potentially lucrative venture. Peer had negotiated a seemingly odd contract with Victor Records that would pay him a yearly salary of one dollar; however, he was allowed to keep the publishing rights of any recordings he made, so Peer had a unique incentive to find and promote music that people wanted to hear (even if they didn't know it yet). At that time, New York was the primary center of the recording industry, and all seemed well. Peer, always trying to think outside the box, asked his friend Ernest Stoneman, who had himself recorded for Okeh, how he could find more country music talent. Stoneman convinced Peer to travel throughout Appalachia and record artists who might otherwise have been unable to travel to New York; as a result, Peer scoured the South for talented musicians, publicizing casting calls that resulted in hundreds of individuals travelling days to audition in front of the entrepreneurial

Peer. He became especially savvy in this practice and relied heavily upon local contacts to ascertain musical hotbeds in the Appalachians and other Southern regions. Peer was initially the record producer for Fiddlin' John Carson and guided him to yet-unprecedented fame, but even after moving on from Carson, Peer had yet to do what would one day make him famous. As was the practice of Peer, he selected a central location that would allow people from nearby rural areas to answer his casting calls. Bristol, Tennessee was identified as an ideal central location for this due to its proximity to the Appalachians, Virginia, and Kentucky, so Peer sent word throughout the area that anyone interested in being paid to play music should attend the event (5).

The Bristol Sessions, as this event came to be called, are considered to be the “Big Bang” of modern country music, in that the genre’s first two major icons were discovered here. Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, which today are synonymous with the inception of country music, were found by Peer in the same week; such artistic success would essentially never be duplicated again in any genre. The Bristol Sessions of course marked the commercial debuts of Rodgers and the Carter Family, but another significant fact about the Sessions was that it marked the first time that true “hillbilly” artists were recorded. Up until that point, any artist that enjoyed success in the new country/hillbilly genre had to travel to New York to be recorded; this could prove to be exceptionally costly, so most of Appalachia’s truly authentic inhabitants could not be reached by these recording practices. The Bristol Sessions, however, brought the recording studio to them, thanks to major advances in the portability of such necessary equipment (6). Rodgers and the Carter Family proved to be instrumental in the proliferation of the country brand across the country. There was something alluring to non-Southerners about the very different culture of the South, and more specifically Appalachia; country and hillbilly

music served as a sort of primer to this culture for the rest of the country, and the immense commercial success of Rodgers and the Carters exposed a growing majority of the country to the string music culture (5). Whether this perceived culture was accurate, however, is another issue all together that will be discussed later. Nonetheless, Ralph Peer and his discovery of Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family afforded the country the opportunity to gaze into the mysterious culture of Appalachia, and by doing so he discovered a veritable gold mine in revenue.

George D. Hay was another significant pioneer in the genre of country music, arguably more so than even Ralph Peer. After working at WLS Chicago as the emcee for National Barn Dance, one of the first radio shows to exclusively broadcast country music, he moved to WSM Nashville to host an old-time music show. After a show in December of 1927, Hay commented, “For the past hour, we have been listening to music taken largely from Grand Opera. From now on we will present the Grand Ole Opry.” The Grand Ole Opry, the world’s most famous country music show, was born. Country artists from all over the country flocked to Nashville to be heard on this new program, effectively making Nashville, not Atlanta, the new country music capital of the world. The Opry today is an important American icon, one that is known not only throughout the United States, but also the world. George D. Hay is largely the one to thank for truly making country music accessible to everyone with the Grand Ole Opry, and the fact that many of country music’s icons got their start here, including The Carter Family and Uncle Dave Macon, is a testament to just how influential it was (and still is) (5).

### ***The Birth of Bluegrass***

At this point, with the advent of the Second World War, country music was becoming increasingly distinct from what we know today as true string band music. Like previous wars,

World War II was immensely important in the proliferation of American music, with country music being front and center. In fact, it is even rumored that insulting American country icon Roy Acuff was a common practice of the Japanese; legend has it that one of their favorite rallying cries was “to hell with Roosevelt, to hell with Babe Ruth, and to hell with Roy Acuff” (5).

As said before, country music after World War II had grown into a completely separate genre from string band music. However, as one genre branched off, another invented itself as an entirely new branch. Kentucky native Bill Monroe fused elements of country, old-time string music, and the Blues to create another distinct genre that he termed “bluegrass” in the late-1930s and early-1940s. As Monroe himself said, “I’ve always liked the touch of blues, and I wanted to put some of that into my musical style” (3). Like many forms of American music, bluegrass was an amalgamation of many styles of music, and it represented a unique blend of white and black cultures, as well as the relatively primitive Appalachian culture. Bluegrass was an instant hit because of this, as it had elements that could be related to by nearly everyone in the United States (whites and blacks alike) (1).

Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys, as they were called, featured many elements that had truly not yet been seen in American music – the lightning-fast pace of typically slow religious songs, an emphasis on instrumental virtuosity, rhythmic syncopation (with the banjo playing the backbeat), and the frequent injection of blue notes into songs. Despite the seemingly contradictory nature of these elements, it quite simply worked somehow, to the amazement and subsequent chagrin of old-time music purists (1).

This highly unique style was further developed by the Foggy Mountain Boys, a band formed by Blue Grass Boys alumni Earl Scruggs and Lester Flatt. The first permutation of the

Blue Grass Boys featured Bill Monroe, of course, along with banjo prodigy Scruggs and guitar sensation Flatt; Scruggs and Flatt favored a more progressive style than Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys, so the two left to form their own band in 1948, the Foggy Mountain Boys. Scruggs popularized a revolutionary banjo-playing style that would become synonymous with bluegrass, and Flatt's guitar-playing and vocals would become iconic in bluegrass lore (1).



## THE SOCIOLOGY OF STRING BAND MUSIC

### *The History and Sociology of the Banjo*

The banjo is an American metaphor. Its long and difficult path to respectability, its often rough-hewn and independent image, and perhaps even its tendency to be misperceived, closely mirror that of the United States. And although many people today associate the banjo as an instrument that is exclusively American (directly because of these cultural parallels with the United States), they could not be farther from the truth. As detailed earlier, the concept of the banjo was actually brought to the United States by West African slaves. Since most farmland was in the South, most slaves were bought by Southern plantation owners. Here the banjo stayed, where its design was further refined into the instrument we know it as today. The banjo remained wildly popular within folk music, and even as the recording era rolled around, the banjo's natural twang performed very well within the narrow frequency range of the recording technology of the day. It seemed that the banjo was a perfect instrument, but misconceptions of the banjo and of string band music in general (perpetuated by a number of factors) threatened to derail the banjo's newfound niche (1,6).

In her book *That Half-Barbaric Twang*, author Karen Linn offers an interesting perspective on the sociology of the banjo in American culture. Her theories seek to explain the popularity of a traditionally African instrument in a predominantly white society; after all, its popularity has only increased since its invention, even through times of heavy racism against African-Americans. Linn posits that the banjo holds "sentimental value" to Americans, as it represents anti-modern aesthetics, musical primitivism, and a fear of over-civilization. According to Linn, it is the ultimate symbol of tradition. Linn observes that American culture

has reinforced this image, as she analyzed articles, novels, short stories, advertisements, song covers, illustrations, photographs, paintings, sheet music, lyrics, recordings, posters, films, plays, cartoons, handbills, catalogues, and eyewitness accounts to back up her theory (4).

Banjos in their earliest form were essentially modified gourds used by slaves and early minstrels, which made a living by making fun of African-Americans; ironically, however, this ridicule directly led to the banjo's popularity. As time passed, the design was changed, as Linn says, "in an attempt to cultivate the instrument for white bourgeoisie" (4). Much like how Americans would become enthralled with the "other-worldliness" of Appalachian music in the first half of the twentieth century, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century whites were fascinated in the banjo's wildness and exoticism, and its checkered past as an authentic element of slave culture – these factors were what Linn collectively called the banjo's "half-barbaric twang". She argues that although a traditionally black instrument such as the banjo was fully embraced by whites, it needed to be changed by whites to make it their own, and to distance themselves from what they thought was an inferior race (4).

The minstrel shows that so badly derided black culture were eventually reinterpreted into medicine shows, which showed theatrical and musical performances of slave life that had long since passed. Because these shows made their business by traveling around the country, they helped to spread a perception of the South and of Appalachia that was not exactly accurate, one that portrayed the South as a foreign region that had yet to adapt to modernity. While this was certainly the case in the more impoverished areas of the South, particularly in Appalachia, this image was largely romanticized by medicine shows to exploit the actual lack of knowledge most Americans had of the South's true identity. The banjo was undoubtedly the most popular and most visible instrument used during medicine shows, so it was understandably tied to the South's

misguided image as a culturally-backwards region. Additionally, handmade banjos mirrored the rough-hewn, independent nature of the mountaineers that Southerners were inaccurately understood to be. This misguided image will be discussed further in depth later in this paper, but suffice it to say that medicine shows, along with the record companies' exploitative marketing of Appalachian culture, contributed heavily to the association of the banjo and of Appalachian music with a backwards and uncivilized lifestyle (4,7).

### *The History and Sociology of the Fiddle*

The only other instrument that could equal the banjo's influence on the string band genre is the fiddle and for very good reason. The fiddle is structurally no different from the more socially-elegant violin, save for minor modifications to the bridge. Some string band musicians even inserted rattlesnake rattles into the hollow bodies of their fiddles; it is debated whether this actually alters the sound, but perhaps it was more of a superstition to old-time players. In fact, it is now thought that the practice started as a way to keep mice and other critters away from the instruments, as they could smell the rattle and think a snake is nearby; this, however, evolved into the thought that a rattled fiddle sounded better, and the legend grew from there (1).

The fiddle's popularity among Southerners and mountain folk has always lay in its portability, relatively low cost, and easy maintenance. Learning how to play the fiddle is difficult, so without formal instruction, isolated families learned very different self-taught styles of fiddle music; this, however, was not necessarily a bad thing, as such dynamic virtuosity and can-do attitude reflected the self-reliant and independent nature of string band music. Despite its commercial success and popularity today, the fiddle was not always popular, especially during string music's early days (1). Ultra-conservative traditionalists and religious church-goers,

clinging to the days of “a capella” singing and simple instrumentation, mightily opposed the fiddle, which quickly acquired the nickname of “The Devil’s Box” since it was commonly associated with dancing, drinking, and sex (6).

### *The History and Sociology of Other String Band Instruments*

In string band music, the fiddle and banjo are rarely found apart and are often accompanied by even more instrumentation. Other stringed instruments, such as the mandolin and acoustic guitar, are featured heavily in string band music. While not quite as visible as the banjo, these instruments are string band mainstays due to their histories and complementation of each other. Most of these found their way into string band culture due to the genre’s family-oriented proclivities; that is, it was common in the South (and especially in Appalachia) for a nuclear family to form a band of their own, with each member taking a different instrument. Family bands often featured at least four members, so each had to have their own musical role. The banjo, fiddle, mandolin, and acoustic guitar were four of the most popular instruments played, and this traditional style has remained over the years (1).

The mandolin was made famous by the father of bluegrass himself, Bill Monroe, and like the fiddle, its early value to musicians lay in its portability. Its high-pitched sound complements the lower-toned banjo well, and both are paced by the fiddle and acoustic guitar. The acoustic guitar is perhaps the most popular musical instrument in the world, and by being a stringed instrument, it has naturally found a role in string band music (3). We typically think of a guitar being a bit too “refined” for such a rough-hewn genre as string music, but bluegrass icon Tony Rice has recently helped to prove that the acoustic guitar rightfully deserves a permanent place in string band music (1).

### *The Perception of String Band Music*

Ever since its inception, string band music has been plagued with negative connotations that are perpetuated by unfair and inaccurate stereotypes of the South and Appalachia. When country pioneer Ernest Tubb walked onstage at Carnegie Hall in 1947 and noted, “My, but this place sure could hold a lot of hay,” the act dramatized the clash of the slow, deliberate Southern culture with the progressive urban mentality (4).

In the late-1800s and into the 1900s, urban centers grew at exponential rates, and because they had to support many millions of families, cities were often on the cutting edge of technology. Urbanites became accustomed to this advanced way of life, so when they were first exposed to the string band music of Appalachian and its culturally-backwards image (thanks to marketing by the record companies), it was a bit of a shock to them. For years, city folk had seen the development of the automobile, indoor plumbing, running water, and other forms of infrastructural sophistication, but here was a culture that was marketed to them as being primitive, without any of those technological advances. There were indeed areas that were without much technology, but not on the scale that record labels portrayed it to be. As Karen Linn described it, the seeming otherness of Southern life was “an outsider's construction of authenticity,” a mythologization of the mountain South based on the “romantic wildness” of Appalachia (4). Linn argues that string band music had essentially developed from the exploitation of slave culture through minstrelsy, so it was perhaps fitting that many record companies became rich from the portrayal of string band music as a backwards and uncivilized culture. However, one author argues that record companies should not be blamed at all for the negative image of Appalachia; rather, it is the string bands themselves that deserve the finger-pointing (4).

In his paper entitled “Bluegrass Music and Its Misguided Representation of Appalachia”, author Stephen Sweet explores the issues with the inaccurate portrayal of Appalachian culture by record labels and distributors, which were instrumental in perpetuating the image of hillbillies in string band music. The very industry that catapulted the genre to fame would ironically be the party responsible for shedding it in a pejorative light, as marketing firms incessantly played on the unfair stereotypes that were commonly associated with the South, and with Appalachia in particular. The music industry was not responsible for the initial formation of these stereotypes, but they undoubtedly helped to proliferate them by continually marketing string music as such (7).

Sweet, however, points out that it is inappropriate to place all the blame on record companies, as the actual artists would many times encourage such a practice. For example, one of the earliest country/old-time bands, The Hill Billies, were named so after the band’s leader, Al Hopkins, remarked after admitting they lacked a band name, “We’re nothing but a bunch of hillbillies from North Carolina and Virginia. Call us anything.” None other than Ralph Peer was the one to christen them with the now-derisive term, despite the fact that no one in the band actually conformed to the stereotype of a backwoods hillbilly (band members were anything from business owners to civil servants). The newly founded Hill Billies were initially unhappy with the name, remarking that in many ways it was an insult, but string music mainstay Ernest Stoneman encouraged them to keep it. They agreed, and the genre called hillbilly music was born. Such a practice was common in string band music, as other bands took on names that seem to imply that the music originates in Appalachia and is somehow authentic mountain music, meaning the hillbilly image must be accurate. Gid Tanner’s Skillet Lickers, the Possum Hunters, and the Fruit Jar Drinkers, among many others, are all guilty of this practice that has greatly

contributed to the negative connotations attached to string band music (7). In fact, Grand Ole Opry founder George Hay supposedly kept a list of such names in his desk to bestow upon bands whose names he didn't think sounded "interesting enough" (5).

There were other practices by string bands that perpetuated the backwards image of Appalachia, including lyricism and other band elements. Lyrics often portray Appalachia as a backwards place, a region frozen in time, where people sit barefoot in a front-porch rocking chair, holding a shotgun in one hand and a moonshine jug in the other. Songs tend to largely ignore political issues, and when they actually do address them, it is usually a "politically safe horizon", as Sweet says, that perhaps comes off as naïve or ignorant to outsiders. An interesting study was once conducted that analyzed 211 of the most popular bluegrass songs (as described by the International Bluegrass Music Association) in order to identify their most common themes. Many of the themes are popular in many other genres of music, but the context in which they are sung (the traditional-sounding music, the country accents, etc.) make them very characteristic of Appalachian music. Love and love lost were the two most popular topics, followed by death, mountain life, cheating, religion, and drinking (7). Contemporary country music uses many of these themes in much of the same context, and the genre in many ways functions as the modern-day equivalent to old hillbilly music due to its worldwide popularity and tendency to form misconceptions of the South.

Sweet argues that for those outside the mountain culture, music shapes their understanding of it, so if string band more accurately portrayed Appalachian life, the misconceptions of it could be somewhat mitigated. However, what Sweet leaves out is the fact that nowadays bluegrass and old-time are so steeped in tradition that the perpetuation of this image could be looked at as an homage of sorts to their past. To string band musicians, the

stereotypical image of Appalachia is so ridiculous that it has almost become kitsch, and most openly embrace the modern-day tradition of perpetuating it. The misconceptions have evolved into an art form that is ironically appreciated by many, and it has come to be understood that instead of string bands and their audiences being ignorant, only those that take the silly stereotypes for fact are (7). Sweet raises some very interesting and valid points about string band music being responsible for the misguided representation of the South, but as a professor at a New York university, he is not in an ideal setting in which to criticize such a commonly misunderstood genre.

Aside from stereotyping the image of string music as a whole, bluegrass and old-time have their own different perceptions, and an interview with old-time player Matt Morelock helped to define these distinct images. Matt is a Knoxville native, owner of a string band music store, former radio personality for Knoxville's bluegrass station, WDVX, considered by many in East Tennessee to be a reputable authority on string band music. According to Matt, bluegrass musicians are thought to be more conservative than their old-time counterparts. "Bluegrass pickers tuck their shirts in and go to church," Matt says, "while old-time players are stoner-hippie types and more a part of the nonconformist counterculture." Matt also brought up an aspect of string band culture that might merit a more extensive study in the future: "If you conducted a political survey of bluegrass and old-time musicians, you'd likely find that the majority of bluegrass pickers belong to the right side of the spectrum, while old-timers are most certainly on the left."

Building further upon the connection between political orientation and string band interest, one can begin to see the significance of folk great Pete Seeger. Seeger is certainly not considered to be a bluegrass musician, but his substantial role in the revival of folk music, and



the fact that he is a skilled practitioner of the banjo, allow me to use him as a perfect illustration of the general link between liberalism and string band music. Prior to his prominence as a political activist, Seeger authored the now-classic *How to Play the Five-String Banjo*, a book that many banjo players credit with starting them off on the instrument. Additionally, Seeger was a founding member of two highly influential folk groups in the 40s and 50s: The Almanac Singers and The Weavers. Both bands had many string band elements, and from the start, they were heavily involved in the promotion of the American labor movement. The bands' political commentaries resulted in the blacklisting of Seeger during the McCarthy Era, but such a move made Seeger even more motivated. In the 1960s, Seeger popularized the song "We Shall Overcome," which eventually became the anthem of the American Civil Rights Movement, for which Seeger was a strong proponent. Today, Seeger is remembered for being an enormously influential protest artist, and his progressive attitude and views are closely reflected in many modern string bands (5).

### ***String Band Music in Pop Culture***

As previously stated, the image of bluegrass music to those outside of Appalachia and the South has largely been shaped by the way in which record companies market it. String bands do not help to mitigate this backwards image, with band names such as the Foggy Mountain Boys and the Possum Hunters, but record executives are largely responsible for the negative light in which the South has been shed thanks to the uncivilized image they freely market. Hollywood has also helped to perpetuate this misrepresentation, due in large part to the unprecedented success of the show *The Beverly Hillbillies* and the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. However, one might argue that these two outlets actually increased the awareness of the American people

to a long-forgotten culture, which actually helped the South by producing some much-needed publicity for such a neglected region. I will seek to explore both sides of this argument, first by analyzing the implications of the 1960s sitcom *The Beverly Hillbillies*.

In *The Beverly Hillbillies*, audiences across the United States were exposed weekly to the exaggerated nature of uncivilized Appalachian folk. Each episode, the Clampett family found themselves in comical dilemmas that highlighted their lack of understanding of the civilized world. The show became wildly popular, and the legend of a backwards South lived on. However, the show did have some saving graces that made it not completely worthless to the Southern culture. The show's famous theme song was performed by bluegrass greats Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs (1), and would in many ways foreshadow the impact that the Coen brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* had on American audiences forty years later.

In the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, bluegrass is given the Hollywood treatment. Set in 1937 rural Mississippi during the Great Depression, the film's story is a modern satire loosely based on Homer's *Odyssey*. This in and of itself is significant, for instead of portraying Southerners as ignorant hillbillies, the Coen brothers chose draw parallels between their bluegrass-singing protagonist and the legendary Odysseus of Homeric fame. Rather than slander the image of the South, the *O Brother* empowers the image. In fact, the film's soundtrack is a collaboration of many string band greats, including Alison Krauss, Emmylou Harris, John Hartford, and Ralph Stanley. Incidentally, the album won a Grammy for 2001 Album of the Year, and it is credited with raising American interest in the string band genre (8).

### *The People Behind String Band Music*

As said before, the draw of bluegrass and old-time music is the tradition that surrounds it. In the first half of the twentieth century, string band music was most often associated with the poor who lived in the backwoods South. The stereotype portrayed a man with no teeth, no shoes, and no education, in a straw hat and overalls, and while today this is certainly not accurate, it was not too far from the truth during string band music's formative years. I have already outlined how the music began in such an impoverished and uneducated setting, but through the years the segment of the population with which the genre is popular has radically evolved.

In the interview with Matt, he described to me an interesting phenomenon, one that has seen an increasing number of intellectuals and academics take an interest in string band music. "I think that the shift of string band music's popularity from poor mountain people to intellectuals has a lot to do with the allure of preserving history," Matt says. "Bluegrass and old-time are two very historically significant genres, ones that are seen as two of the first truly American musical exports. To play string band music is to keep the tradition alive, and nobody can appreciate that more than intellectuals." Additionally, the banjo itself is essentially the first musical-cultural evidence of the fusion of European and African cultures; the banjo, therefore, embodies an interesting study of race relations that is immensely appealing to the educated (4). Since bluegrass's invention in the 1940s, its popularity has been an up-and-down ordeal, with revivals often beginning on college campuses. These college types, the educated population, are who Matt and I are referring to as 'intellectuals'. It's as if the appeal of string band music can now only be realized after an education, which is quite a departure from how the genre was formed. Of course, there still are people who became involved in the music through family ties, and I am not arguing that only formally-educated people are attracted to the genre nowadays;

however, the growing majority of string music fans, especially among young people, have received such an education.

Earlier in the decade, musicologist Keith Tunnell conducted an extensive survey of bluegrass musicians to explore and elucidate their lifestyles and culture. The resulting paper, entitled “The Social World of Semiprofessional Bluegrass Musicians,” gives a unique view into a often overlooked aspect of bluegrass music – the lives and philosophies of its practitioners. Tunnell reports that the bluegrass musicians he interviewed were very enthusiastic about participating in his study, as it was “their way to preserve the sound they love and teach younger generations” (3).

Out of Tunnell’s research came a realization that many bluegrass musicians hold a very strict musical code when performing. Three patterns emerged when interviewees were asked about audience “interference,” the first being a contempt for musical ignorance. Many musicians try to resist “intrusions” on their own style; for example, when playing a show and ‘Rocky Top’ is requested, band members will politely decline, as such a song has been “played to death and plumb worn out,” according to one musician. Such requesters are seen as ignorant, while more obscure song requests are looked upon much more favorably. The second pattern is that some songs are simply considered to be off-limits, no matter how “good” the song request is. As one interviewee remarked, “Musicians have a territorial ideology about songs and recognize that some are considered ‘theirs’ while others are not. It’s common etiquette.” Such a comment gives the sense that bluegrass music, and more broadly string band music, functions as a family, just as it did in its formative days. A mutual respect for one another is reciprocated through, among other things, the refusal to do someone else’s signature songs. A third pattern also emerged, one that did not seem to apply to those who did not seriously consider bluegrass to be

their careers. This pattern is an antithesis to the first and second patterns, as “recreational” bluegrass players, as Tunnell called them, would not hesitate to play anything. Says one such recreational player, “Audience members pay out of their own pockets to hear you play, so the least you can do is give them what they want.” This philosophy is fundamentally different from those who play bluegrass full-time or nearly full-time, but quite frankly it is one that I agree with. Of course, this may just be a product of the fact that I am not a student of bluegrass, but the idea that the audience deserves a voice in what bands play is one that I agree with. As one proponent of this idea relates, “This is the business of entertaining people, so you certainly owe something to the audience. After all, this is your job, and it’s thanks to them that you’re up on the stage” (3).

One thing that Tunnell’s study certainly confirmed is that bluegrass music is built upon the family unit. This family is not necessarily blood-related, but it is one that has experienced its up and downs but has stuck together through it all. This is true not only among bluegrass band members, but also between the bands and their fans. All of Tunnell’s interviewees agree with this notion, evident in the following comment: “Bluegrass fans are real different and real special. Unlike country fans, who will follow a guy for two years then forget about him, bluegrass fans will follow you till you’re dead and gone. They’re the most loyal fans out there.” Such a sentiment also echoes the bands’ loyalty to their fans, as most die-hard fans are actually musicians themselves. This duality creates a common empathy in string band circles, a feature that is perhaps not found in any other genre. One interviewee described a bluegrass audience, along with the band playing, as “one big happy family;” this image reminds us of a traditional way of life and the cohesiveness of family, friends, and community. “It’s the people’s music,” as one artist described it, and is what keeps us coming back for more (3).

Tunnell's research also hit upon a theme that is often overlooked in bluegrass sociology, perhaps due to the utter lack of it: drugs and alcohol. Bluegrass musicians acknowledge that substance abuse is common in music, so pervasive that it has almost become acceptable. The rock star lifestyle brings with it several vices, and many musicians look to drugs and alcohol as a source of inspiration. However, because bluegrass musicians identify themselves as "regular people," they do not consider such a lifestyle to be appropriate for them. Despite the fact that alcohol is a popular subject for bluegrass songs, bluegrass musicians are generally in agreement as to the negative effects of alcohol and drugs during performances and rehearsals, or as one interviewee put it, "while on the job." This is not to say that bluegrass musicians do not partake of alcohol in their free time, but because of the respect and deference many show to the genre, they think their music is an inappropriate setting in which to consume (3).

### ***The Evolution and Legacy of String Band Music***

As with any genre, string band music has seen quite an evolutionary trajectory since its beginnings in the nineteenth century. String band music has seemed to be a trend of sorts in the United States, waxing and waning in popularity over the years. This is not necessarily a bad thing, however, as this undulating pattern has helped to more or less preserve the traditional sounds of the genre. College campuses always seem to be at the heart of revivals, serving as the primary launch pads for the genre's resurgence in popularity. As was discussed before, this is most certainly due to the educated's interests in preserving history and tradition. The 1960s Hippie counterculture, spurred by the Beat Generation of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac in the 1950s, is responsible for the first true revival of string band music, and in a larger sense, traditional folk music. In 1972, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band released *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*,

an immensely influential bluegrass album that featured collaboration with many of America's iconic string band artists, including Roy Acuff, Earl Scruggs, Doc Watson, and Vassar Clements. The album bridged a generational gap between the founding fathers of the genre and its future artists, and in doing so it helped to reignite the fervor for traditional American music. The 1970s bluegrass supergroup Old & In The Way, led by Grateful Dead frontman Jerry Garcia, had a similar effect on the industry in 1975 with the release of their eponymously-titled debut album; Garcia helped to introduce bluegrass to an entirely new generation thanks to his ties to the enormously popular Grateful Dead. John Hartford was also considerably influential, collaborating with Clements and Norman Blake to further the progressive bluegrass sound (1).

Perhaps the most influential band on the resurgence of bluegrass was New Grass Revival, a group led by string music icons Sam Bush and Bela Fleck in the 1970s. From the start, New Grass Revival was different; they played with a flair that string bands did, and because bluegrass was such a tradition-bound genre, the long hair and lax wardrobe of the band immediately set them apart. New Grass Revival played what they wanted to play, ranging from conventional bluegrass staples to tunes from Bob Marley, the Beatles, and Jerry Lee Lewis. "Our reason for doing the newer-type music wasn't pretentious or irreverent or sarcastic or disrespectful," explained dobro player Curtis Burch. "We just felt like people were ready to see that you could really expand the sound, using those same instruments." Banjo virtuoso Bela Fleck took this philosophy to a level that had not yet been seen, bringing to the genre an innovative style that is best illustrated by his multiple Grammy wins in the categories of country, pop, jazz, classical, and of course bluegrass (1).

The "oscillation" in popularity of string band music is well-documented, but what is it exactly that causes this pattern? To effectively answer this, we must first look at the societal

context around which each revival occurred. The actual formation of bluegrass happened during the Second World War, when the United States was forging its national identity abroad. The first true bluegrass revival occurred in the 1960s and into the 1970s, when American involvement in Vietnam had the American public in an uproar. The latest revival of string band music, marked by the surge in mainstream popularity of the Avett Brothers, coincides with the American intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. What these resurgences have in common, therefore, is an uptick in counterculture caused by American involvement in foreign affairs. Common to these times are protest movements and often the formation of a counterculture that seeks to return society to earlier, and presumably better, times. Like string music revivals, these movements typically find their beginnings on college campuses, soon spreading like wildfire throughout the country. The highly-traditional values of string band music appeal to this feeling, and because music is such a powerful medium, string music is commonly used to try to effect a “reversion” to earlier times. New Grass Revival even went so far as to re-record the famous anti-war song “One Tin Soldier” in the early 1970s as an obvious protest to the conflict in Vietnam (1). And although he is not considered a classic string music figure, Gram Parsons was enormously influential in the genres of country and folk, even touring for a time with folk and bluegrass icon Emmylou Harris. Parsons was instrumental in popularizing this sound among college campuses, as he himself was initially a student at Harvard University (7).

Surprisingly, Knoxville, TN has emerged as an important city in the string band music landscape. Aside from the fact that Knoxville was the site of Hank Williams’ death in 1953, WDVX is a nationally-acclaimed radio station that bills itself as “Bluegrass Radio.” The studio of WDVX is curiously contained in the official Knoxville Visitors Center, which in and of itself is certainly a comment on Knoxville’s commitment to preserving string band music. In the



WDVX studio every weekday at lunch is the Blue Plate Special, a miniature Grand Ole Opry of sorts that broadcasts live the performances of the bands that day. The Blue Plate Special has broadcast anything from old-time to rock, and anything in between, but its significance to Knoxville is reinforced each time an aspiring artist takes the small stage. The Blue Plate Special itself is an American metaphor, giving up-and-comers an avenue down which they may one day find success. It is an asset to not only Knoxville, but also to the string band music community in general.

### *The Women of String Band Music*

For the majority of its history, string band music (particularly bluegrass) has been a male-dominated genre. This fact is not uncommon for any genre of music that was developed prior to the 1950s, and it is certainly no different in the sweeping history of string band music. This is somewhat to be expected, however, as the rights of women have long been suppressed throughout history. This social and political suppression has been further exacerbated by the ultra-conservative attitudes of the South, and of Appalachia in particular. The traditional and close-minded ways of the religious Appalachian region did nothing to promote the advancement of women in folk music, and the relative absence of women in bluegrass reflects this (1,3).

Very early in the history of string band music, females were actually encouraged to participate and often tied ribbons on their primitive banjos, but according to author Karen Linn, the “lusty note and barbaric twang” of a female singing in the folk style was deemed to be too primitive by music entrepreneurs. Women were fixtures in the family music setting, though still not considered as equals to men, but with the commercialization of music in the 1800s, the female element was left out. This sexist attitude was perpetuated by the male chauvinistic nature

of Southern religion. After all, religious ballads and themes were prevalent in string band music (and could be argued to be its musical cornerstone), so if women were supposedly inferior to men in Southern religious culture, they certainly would still be inferior when practicing the religious undertones of string band music (4).

But with time all things change, and so do American values and the role of women in society. Emmylou Harris was instrumental in opening the public's eyes to women in folk and string band music, but perhaps the most substantial contributor to this progressive attitude was (and still is) Alison Krauss. Actually an Illinois native, Krauss picked up the classical violin at age five but soon switched to the bluegrass style, because, according to her, "my mother tried to find interesting things for me to do" (9). Since joining the Grand Ole Opry at age twenty-one, Krauss has quickly become an international bluegrass icon. Her haunting vocals and adept fiddle prowess have certainly landed her on the "Most Important Bluegrass Artists" lists of many writers, and rightfully so, as evidenced by her unprecedented twenty-six Grammy awards. String band music may have neglected the female element for decades, but women are now slowly inching their way back into a genre that Alison Krauss has proven to be greatly enhanced by women (9).

## CONCLUSION

Remarkably, the sociological history of string band music can be used as a near-exact blueprint with which to map out the history of the United States. Both find their roots in immigrant and slave culture, and the final products are the result of centuries of cultural fusion and social strife. The development of string band music can thus serve as a perfect microcosm of the United States' own development, in that string band music represents years of tradition and culture, but also the willingness to evolve. String band music is the embodiment of many American values, such as determination, individuality, self-sufficiency, and intense personal pride; these qualities are what define us as Americans and coincidentally are very much what define string band music. However, perhaps its most important quality is that it represents the fusion of so many different cultures; the United States is itself known as a cultural melting pot, and string band music best mirrors the United States in this respect. In many other ways, string band music is a reaction against commercialism; people see the world as inherently crazy, and they take refuge in something stable and traditional like string band music. This collective attitude comes and goes, most commonly correlating with the involvement of the U.S. military in foreign conflicts. The wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq have seen corresponding revivals of the string band sound, most recently with the explosion in popularity of the Avett Brothers. But for all its anti-American sentiment reflected in its revivals, string band music is American to the bone, which is comically ironic considering many protest artists use it to object to U.S. policies abroad. Perhaps the use of string band music through political protests makes it even more American; after all, this country was founded on the principle of giving the people a voice, and I can't think of a better voice than string band music.

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## PHOTOGRAPHY

In an attempt to better illustrate the culture and attitude of string band music, I have chosen to include photographs that tell a bit about this lifestyle. Photographs were taken by me especially for this paper.



*Image 1.* The Blue Plate Special is an integral part of the Knoxville music scene, offering up-and-coming string band and Americana musicians the chance to display their skills and styles. All types of demographics are represented at the shows, from the elderly who likely grew up around this type of music, to young, intellectual-types, and even to some of the homeless that come off Knoxville's streets to take in the free music.



**Image 2.** Morelock Music is a casual hang-out for local string band musicians and those aspiring to be. The store specializes in instruments for old-time and bluegrass, ranging from banjos, fiddles, mandolins, and everything in between. Matt, the owner, once worked for WDVX and the Blue Plate Special before opening his own music store on Gay Street, in the heart of Knoxville's reemerging music scene.



*Image 3.* The illustrious Tennessee Theater on Gay Street, just a stone’s throw away from Morelock Music, is a performing venue for not only string bands, but for all types of music. However, it is one of the ultimate destinations for string band musicians, having hosted string band mainstays such as Steve Martin, Alison Krauss, and Yonder Mountain String Band.



**Image 4.** The advent of the railroad was one of the most important factors in the proliferation and development of string band music, second only to the radio. The once-inaccessible South was now relatively easy to travel to, leading to the further interaction between white and black cultures that would prove to be so influential to the string band sound.