



GRADUATE SCHOOL  
EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

East Tennessee State University  
Digital Commons @ East  
Tennessee State University

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Student Works

---

8-2015

## "The Great Speckled Bird"- Early Country Music and the Popularization of Non-Secular Song

Kris R. Truelsen  
*East Tennessee State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.etsu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Appalachian Studies Commons](#), and the [Ethnomusicology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Truelsen, Kris R., "'The Great Speckled Bird"- Early Country Music and the Popularization of Non-Secular Song" (2015). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 2547. <https://dc.etsu.edu/etd/2547>

This Thesis - unrestricted is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact [digilib@etsu.edu](mailto:digilib@etsu.edu).

“The Great Speckled Bird”- Early Country Music and the Popularization of Non-Secular  
Song

---

A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Appalachian Studies  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Appalachian Studies

---

by  
Kristopher Ryan Truelsen  
August 2015

---

Dr. Lee Bidgood, Chair  
Dr. Ted Olson  
Dr. Marie Tedesco  
Mr. Roy Andrade

Keywords: Twentieth Century, Country Music, Old-time, Gospel Music, Sentimentalism,  
Popular Music

## ABSTRACT

“The Great Speckled Bird”- Early Country Music and the Popularization of Non-Secular

Song

by

Kristopher Ryan Truelsen

Perhaps no melody in the country music canon has been as widely recognized and borrowed from as that of the song “The Great Speckled Bird.” This significant song has become resonant and representative of both country music culture and religious culture of the Protestant South.

Through this historiographical study, I have traced the influences that helped shape “The Great Speckled Bird” and in so doing have illustrated distinct movements that led to popularizing the non-secular song through commercial country music. The composer’s use of sentimentality, neo- traditionalism, and religious ideas made it appealing to a rural southern culture struggling with the social, racial, and economic changes of the early twentieth century. As I develop and explore the diverse influences that helped to shape “The Great Speckled Bird,” I will illustrate the interconnectedness of country music culture and the wider popular and religious cultures of the white Protestant South.

Copyright 2015 by Kristopher Truelsen

All Rights Reserved

# DEDICATION

For Grace

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first and foremost like to thank Dr. Lee Bidgood for his constant encouragement throughout my academic career. He has not only offered incredible scholastic guidance but has been a great person and ally along the way. I would also like to thank Mr. Roy Andrade for his efforts and perspectives both musically and philosophically. He has played a significant role in my advancement as a professional musician. Dr. Marie Tedesco and Dr. Ted Olson have also been of great assistance throughout my graduate career and have offered valuable insights.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	2
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	9
Methods and Sources.....	15
2. SACRED ANTECEDENTS OF “THE GREAT SPECKLED BIRD”.....	17
The Great Revival and Camp Meetings.....	18
Standardization of the Hymn-Verse/Chorus .....	20
Shape-Note Singing and Songbooks.....	21
Sol-Fa System.....	22
Singing Schools and Publishing Houses.....	23
3. POPULAR MUSIC OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SACRED SONG.....	27
Blackface Minstrelsy and the Traveling Minstrel.....	27
Sentimentalism: The Emergence of an Imagined South.....	29
Stephen Foster.....	31
Domestic Ideology.....	32
Contrafaction.....	34
The Birth of Tin Pan Alley and Transmission of the Popular Song.....	37
Standardization of the Popular Song.....	39

4. COMMERCIALISM AND RURALITY IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY.....	42
The Creation of a Popular Sacred Genre- The Birth of Gospel Music.....	42
“Sentimental Secular” and The Symbol of Freedom: “I’ll Fly Away” and “The Prisoner’s Song”.....	45
“I’ll Fly Away”.....	46
“The Prisoner’s Song”.....	48
Commercial Southern Rural Music: Inventing “Hillbilly” Fever.....	49
Ralph Peer and Neo-Traditionalism.....	51
The Carter Family and “Pre War Melodies”.....	53
“I’m Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes”.....	55
5. “THE GREAT SPECKLED BIRD”: AN ANALYSIS OF SYMBOL AND SONG.....	57
Gateway to the Grand Ole Opry: Roy Acuff and Image.....	57
Significant Lesser-Known Recordings of “The Great Speckled Bird”.....	60
Origins and Folklore of “The Great Speckled Bird”.....	63
Contextualizing Ideology, Symbol, and Form within “The Great Speckled Bird”.....	69
Fundamentalist Ideology and Modes of Function.....	69
Symbol.....	72
Melody and Memory.....	73
6. THE LEGACY OF THE GREAT SPECKLED BIRD.....	75
Bill Monroe and Sacred Performance.....	75



The Wild Side of Life.....	77
“Keep God Out of It”: Kitty Wells and Redefining the Honky Angel.....	81
7. CONCLUSION.....	86
WORKS CITED.....	88
APPENDIX: SARAH (DILLON) WORKMAN LYRICS.....	94
VITA.....	95

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

On February 5, 1938, Roy Acuff and his band the Crazy Tennesseans performed on WSM's Grand Ole Opry singing "The Great Speckled Bird" to a receptive audience. Although some accounts claim they first performed the song on the Opry stage in 1937, Acuff recalled 1938 as the seminal date: "I was nervous. I was excited. But I sang 'The Great Speckled Bird' that night and the mail came in... I went to Knoxville and in two weeks they sent my mail. It came in bushel baskets."<sup>1</sup> Acuff was certain the performance had made an impression on WSM executives, but they reportedly were unimpressed. Station announcer David Cobb recapped Acuff's performance to booker David Stone: "the sooner he (Acuff) found another way to make a living, the better it would be for him."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Stone invited Acuff to start a residency at the Opry on February 19, based on the overflow of positive mail regarding Acuff's performance.

Acuff had recorded the song two years earlier in Chicago with the American Record Corporation, after hearing fellow Knoxville radio artists Charlie Swain and the Blackshirts perform it live on WROL.<sup>3</sup> "The Great Speckled Bird" resonated deeply with the American public and became imbedded in the subconscious of popular culture. It quickly came to be one of the most recognizable and copied songs in the country music canon.

"The Great Speckled Bird" affected not only country music artists, but also diverse religious congregations of the southeastern United States, and thus illustrated the

---

<sup>1</sup>Charles K. Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press: Country Music Foundation Press, 1999), 255.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Nick Toches, *Country: The Twisted Roots of Rock and Roll* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2009), 141.

interconnectedness of both the sacred and the secular musical repertoires. Even though “The Great Speckled Bird” appealed to the religious realm, the song was not necessarily born out of it. The familiar melody was, in fact, borrowed from numerous popular commercial country songs of the 1920s, including Vernon Dalhart’s “Prisoner’s Song,” recorded in October 1924 for Victor Records, and The Carter Family’s “I’m Thinking Tonight of my Blue Eyes,” recorded for Victor in 1929.<sup>4</sup> The adoption of melody was not a rare occurrence in country or sacred music, yet “The Great Speckled Bird” was unique in its popularity and influence upon these musical genres.

Recognizing this interesting crossover and interconnectedness between musical cultures has led me to ask numerous questions regarding the transmission of this song and others like it. Was borrowing popular melody common practice among southern churches as country music began to become commercialized in the early 1920s? When did popular music come to influence sacred music or was it always a central influence upon southern religious musical culture? Similarly, did religious music influence and shape popular music? With the advent of radio and the commercial recording industry, did individuals have specific motives to convert and spread the gospel through popular song? And, did religious ideas motivate songwriters to purify content found in popular song by adopting popular melodies and rewriting texts in a non-secular format?

As a working musician, I have spent countless hours studying styles and repertoire from the early country music canon. Through this musical study, I have become interested in the transmission of song and the complexity found within the repertoire of popular country music. While searching through old recordings day in and

---

<sup>4</sup> Tony Russell, *Country Music Records: A Discography- 1921-1942* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 188, 242.

day out, always in hopes of finding a new tune to work up, I am constantly reminded of the diversity and interconnectedness of American popular music. The difficulty in defining country music, a form with such wide diversity and scope, has in part led to this study.

Initially, I was drawn to this project through my discovery of the lyrical, melodic, stylistic, rhythmic, and contextual repetition and overlap that surfaced through years of listening to early commercial country records. To me, many songs, if not all within early commercial country, seemed somehow related by much more than genre alone. The importance familiar melodies played in country music was evident, but something more subtle within the music gave me, as a listener, a sense of familiarity. It also seemed that the early recording artists I listened to were very much aware of harnessing this “familiarity” within their music. For me, hearing a new song often triggered memories of other songs I had known - songs I initially thought were worlds apart. No matter how different early “hillbilly” songs may have seemed on the surface, they all felt oddly related. As I would soon learn, my intuition was right. Though the commercial industry created racial boundaries, many artists on early country recordings were not confined by genre, culture, or race and often borrowed from and were influenced by lyrics, melodies, performances, playing and singing styles from a diverse array of musicians.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it was this described “familiarity” that led me to this project on “The Great Speckled Bird.” The song is exemplary of the diverse influences that represent country music and its

---

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Huber, “Black Hillbillies: African American Musicians on Old-Time Records, 1924-1932,” in *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 27.

culture, and arguably no song within country music culture could be considered more “familiar.”

Through this study, I intend to shed light on the influence of “The Great Speckled Bird” and the interesting tensions that lie at the center of both the song and the cultures in which it is embedded. Illustrating fundamental tensions found within country and sacred musical cultures, “The Great Speckled Bird” is representative of images and ideas ingrained in both musics. Not only does the song deal with themes of modernism through a hard-edged, fear-mongering view of contemporary culture, but it also describes a romanticized and sentimental perspective of individual faith. It is also symbolizes the far-reaching influence the church [Protestant Christian] had upon popular southern music and how the music of “plain folk” resonated deeply with the country music audience.<sup>6</sup> As country music scholar Bill Malone noted, “the country musician who has not included religious material in his or her performing repertoire ... is rare.”<sup>7</sup>

“The Great Speckled Bird” catapulted Acuff to fame, yet the text and imagery found within the song seem at odds with the social and economic force of modern capitalist culture of the twentieth century. The continued legacy of “The Great Speckled Bird,” as exemplified in songs such as “The Wild Side of Life,” “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels,” and “If That Ain’t Country” (to name just a few), illustrates contradictions commonly found in early country music, among them, the moral struggle to stay clear of earthly temptation and sin. This conflict may have been handed down and adopted largely from the music and beliefs of Protestant Christians of the South.

---

<sup>6</sup> Bill Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1993), 33.

<sup>7</sup> *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’: Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2002), 89.

Starting in the mid-nineteenth century and continuing through the turn of the twentieth century, southern religious music began to redefine itself, to expand its reach and increase converts, to make songs approachable and easy to learn, and to commercialize and financially benefit from adapting songs to meet the demands of modern listeners and the popular masses.<sup>8</sup> This study will look closely at the important changes and influences that occurred inside and outside of the southern Protestant church and the evolving practices and attributes that gave non-secular song a new modern identity. The church, morality, and conservatism were central to country music and perhaps nowhere is that illustrated better than in the success of “The Great Speckled Bird.”

Eventually in this research I discovered that a distinct category linking religious and popular music was missing in country music scholarship. Non-secular song seemed an appropriate term in marking this distinction. It is important to explain the use of the word “non-secular.” In this study, it is crucial to distinguish popular non-secular songs from songs of worship. The term non-secular song refers to religious songs that have been influenced in some way by popular movements and mass media. Being shaped in part by popular movements and the commercial recording industry, the non-secular song should be distinguished from religious songs of worship intended only for use within the church and unaffected by popular culture. The non-secular country song, sometimes written with a commercial audience in mind, fit into a formulaic structure. Non-secular songs are not confined to being solely religious in theme. They may use faith and religious doctrine within the context of song, but may also use secular themes as well.

---

<sup>8</sup> James Goff Jr., *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 40.

Non-secular songs were important in shaping early country music culture and represented a significant part of the repertoire. I plan to expand my research into non-secular song beyond the scope of “The Great Speckled Bird” in future endeavors.

Throughout this study, I refer to both popular music and commercial music as key factors in shaping the non-secular country music repertoire. For the purpose of this study, popular music is music composed and marketed for financial gain, produced and dispersed in tangible form through records and sheet music, and often used in some form of secular stage performance.<sup>9</sup>

I would also like to note that my intentions with the study of non-secular music within commercial country music, though centered on southern culture, does not imply that either non-secular song or country music has regional boundaries. Certainly, there are many cases of the transmission of song and style not limited by region and boundary. My study does, however, focus on southern Protestant culture and the birth of commercial country music. Many outside influences intersected in shaping both of these related cultures, as I will explain throughout this study. A thorough study of popular American music history expresses the many commonalities and continuities that exist beyond regional boundaries; yet southern culture, and in this case, specifically, southern culture as influenced by southern Protestantism, plays an important role in shaping the culture of American country music, and, thus is an important aspect of this study.

---

<sup>9</sup> Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song In America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), xvii.

## Methods and Sources

Throughout this study, I have cited numerous primary sources, among them, recordings, commercial advertisements, and interviews, but have relied upon and am indebted greatly to the scholarship centered upon the diversity and tensions that persist within country music history and culture. Rather than concentrating on the music making and performance aspects of country and sacred music, I have focused primarily on repertoire and the transmission of song. I use repertoire to illustrate the interconnectedness between sacred music and country music. By focusing on shared repertoire, I can effectively illustrate that these musical cultures are in fact related, not separate or entirely distinct from one another, a view that may be overstated through the study of performance and music making. I was influenced by Karl Miller's *Segregating Sounds*, a study on ethnic and racial identity in southern music, where repertoire and transmission are central to his convincing work.<sup>10</sup>

Through the study of "The Great Speckled Bird," I argue that the song became so ingrained in country music culture that it became representative of much more than the song itself. The composition, familiar melody, and multifaceted text became so resonant to a broad audience that it became a part of the collective memory of American popular culture, representative of and celebrated by various groups and cultures, many of which were connected. The study of repertoire and song makes illustrating these connections attainable.

I have illustrated these connections by using an interdisciplinary approach crossing culture studies and historical narrative studies. Intellectual historian Dominick

---

<sup>10</sup> Karl Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).



LaCapra in commentary on the tension between conventional narrative and intellectual history states: “work within a discipline, such as history or historiography, should, through immanent critique, test boundary limits and raise the problems of interdisciplinarity and cross-disciplinarity, including both the justification or transformation of established practices.”<sup>11</sup>

The influence and significant impact commercial and popular music have had in shaping country music cannot be overstated; yet, scholars often overlook connecting non-secular song to commercial and popular music. I draw from the interdisciplinary concept of merging cultures, specifically religious culture, popular culture, and country music culture. Many scholars have studied and explained relationships among popular culture, modernity, and country music culture, and have been influential to my study (Karl Miller, Bill Malone, Pamela Fox, Edward Comentale, James Goff and Charles Wolfe are just a few cited throughout this thesis). However, an in-depth study illustrating the interconnectedness of non-secular music and popular music, specifically related to commercial country music, does not exist. I shed some light on the subject in adding to country music scholarship by illustrating connections between religious culture and commercial country music culture through analysis of the “The Great Speckled Bird” that relies on cultural and musicological critique.

---

<sup>11</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), 4.

## CHAPTER 2

### SACRED ANTECEDENTS OF “THE GREAT SPECKLED BIRD”

In the mid-1920s, entertainment industry executives were surprised to discover that commercial country music had become an economic success, not only with consumers in the South, but throughout the United States. The perceived “simplicity and morality” of “Old Familiar Tunes” and “Old Time Music” seemed to resonate with the American public.<sup>1</sup> Did this perceived morality stem from southern Protestantism? Possibly, although the influences upon rural white music, later termed “country,” resulted from a combination of diverse cultural interplays. Nonetheless, religious music was important in shaping commercial country music of the 1920s and 1930s, because it added repertoire, stylistic nuances, and melodies to the “hillbilly” sound.

Through religious musical traditions of the South, white Christians were able to express themselves and share community experiences.<sup>2</sup> Popular southern religious denominations helped to establish a strong sense of community, which historian Charles Reagan Wilson argues was significant in shaping southern identity.<sup>3</sup> As Howard Odum writes, “much of the religion of the South was expressed through song,” and the music “brought forth the sweep of social heritage and individual memories but touched deep the chords of old moralities and loyalties.”<sup>4</sup> These old moralities and loyalties were central to white Southerners’ culture and subconscious and became a reoccurring theme for

---

<sup>1</sup> Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers*, 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, “The Religion of the Lost Cause: Ritual and Organization of the Southern Civil Religion, 1865-1920,” *The Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 2 (May, 1980): 220, accessed May 4, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2208359>.

<sup>4</sup> Howard Odum, *An American Epoch; Southern Portraiture in the National Picture* (New York: Holt, 1930), 180.

southern musicians throughout the nineteenth century and into the commercial age of country music. From where did these significant moralities and loyalties stem?

In this chapter, I will examine significant movements of the nineteenth century that helped popularize southern religious music and that in turn led to the creation of the popular non-secular song. Ideological and cultural shifts in the early nineteenth-century American South played a key role in spreading sacred music to wider audiences across the nation. America saw the birth of evangelical theology and religious revivalism, both of which would play a significant part in the development and appeal of sacred music. With the great success of evangelicalism, religious singing became widespread and immensely popular.<sup>5</sup>

Two important musical platforms were influential in the popularization and commercialization of the non-secular song: the religious camp meeting movement, starting with the Kentucky camp meetings in 1799-1800, and shape-note singing schools. Through these movements sacred music would become a clearly developed unique style of song by the mid to late nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

### The Great Revival and Camp Meetings

At the turn of the eighteenth century, evangelical revivalism began spreading across the South. The message was one of universal salvation, accompanied by a de-emphasis on formal theology that gave a new voice to common people and their values.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Goff Jr., *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel*, 16, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Don Cusic, *The Sound of Light: A History of Gospel Music* (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 226.

Evangelists' role during this time of rapid cultural change was to convince believers that faith would persist through a world in transition. A renewed sense of faith that focused on personal expression, stoked by evangelical success, brought religious singing to new heights in popularity. The oral tradition and transmission of song took over religious music of the period.<sup>8</sup>

Historian Nathan Hatch argues that central to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century religious revival called the Great Revival or the Second Great Awakening (1790s-1840s) was “a revolution in communications, preaching, print, and song; and these measures were instrumental in building mass popular movements.”<sup>9</sup> Hatch also proposed that “never has the Christian church been blessed with such a furious and creative outpouring of vernacular song,” implying that the simplified characteristics of songs prevalent during the Revival made the transmission of theology both rapid and effective.<sup>10</sup> Revival historian John Boles states, “The genius of revival hymns was that they reduced doctrine to melodic and easily memorized lines.”<sup>11</sup> Others observed that the simplification and standardization of song (as found in pocket hymnals of the era) gained “the best insight into the popularization of sophisticated religious concepts.”<sup>12</sup> The Great Revival brought religious music to the masses, and set the tone for the commercialization of sacred music that would become commonplace in the twentieth century.

The religious music of the Great Revival was as highly emotive as the messages delivered at southern camp meetings. As with the sacred sentiments that made

---

<sup>8</sup> Cusic, *The Sound of Light*, 56, 48.

<sup>9</sup> Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 226.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>11</sup> Boles, *The Great Revival: 1787-1805* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), 121.

<sup>12</sup> David Singer, “God and Man in Baptist Hymnals, 1784-1844,” *American Studies Journal* 9 (Fall 1968): 14, accessed May 5, 2015. <https://journals.ku.edu/index.php/amerstud/article/viewFile/2157/2116>.

conversion appealing, the music at the revivals was accessible as well. Song leaders usually chose texts familiar to the crowds. They set songs to melodies well known to a large population, a similar process to what would happen with songs like “The Great Speckled Bird” in years to come.<sup>13</sup>

Camp meetings, among them the renowned Cane Ridge, Kentucky, meeting of 1801, became extremely popular in the South. Cane Ridge became widely known for the freedom attendees demonstrated through dancing, shouting, and various other fervently-expressive rituals that became synonymous with the southern revival experience. Not a typical gathering by any means, Cane Ridge was the largest revival of its time and considered a significant movement in American religious history.<sup>14</sup>

#### Standardization of the Hymn-Verse/Chorus

Singing proved to be one of the most influential and popular activities found at camp meetings during a revival. Following sermons, often would gather together to sing hymns. Many of the hymns were simplistic, catchy melodies that members could easily pick up on and remember. As noted by historian James Goff, the choruses and songs were “constructed from popular folk melodies that were already well known to many in the audience.”<sup>15</sup> This was convenient for meeting planners. Because of the familiar content, illiteracy was not a concern. Verse chorus format encouraged participants to learn songs through the use of repetition, a technique that benefitted poor whites and blacks who might not have been able to afford musical literature or who were musically

---

<sup>13</sup> Bill Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Clark, *Bluegrass Cavalcade* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 286.

<sup>15</sup> Goff, *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel*, 18.

illiterate.<sup>16</sup> Thus, there was no need for large quantities of songbooks, which were often expensive and scarce at the time. Those who had a songbook or songsters (a small collection of song lyrics) could sing verses, while others lacking the printed materials could provide accompaniment during the choruses. The verse chorus format became influential to attendees of southern camp meetings.<sup>17</sup> With the ease of oral transmission, many of the newly-formatted songs became part of the American vernacular repertoire, as reflected in numerous commercial recordings that would follow later.<sup>18</sup>

### Shape-Note Singing and Songbooks

Like camp meetings, shape-note notation and songbooks played an integral part in the popularizing of religious tunes in the nineteenth-century South. The shape-note phenomenon celebrated in the South, was representative of the reform movement happening during the Great Revival. Goff notes, “Like so many the reform ideas of the early nineteenth century, the shape-note system brought an air of the revival spirit, launching what many considered to be, in short order, a popular music renaissance.”<sup>19</sup> Southern-based publishers of books such as *The Sacred Harp* and *The Southern Harmony* provided singing schools and teachers all over the South with songbooks and thus greatly contributed to the formation of a religious repertoire. Followers of the shape-note method believed the ease of the system would allow all, particularly the poor and common folk, the opportunity to participate in singing in an orderly way.<sup>20</sup> Rural

---

<sup>16</sup> Malone, *Southern Music/American Music*, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Cusic, *The Sound of Light: A History of Gospel Music*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Goff, *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 21.

southerners were particularly partial to this modern, simplistic style of sight-reading. *The Sacred Harp*, the most popular book using a four-note notation, became an important part of southern culture and a guide for most southern singers, and has continued to be a mainstay in a number of southern homes even today. Shape notation symbolized American vernacular music that departed from both European mainstream musical standards and American genteel culture.<sup>21</sup>

### Sol-Fa System

Most of the important publications of the period were influenced by the fa-so-la solmization (attributing a distinct syllable to each note in a musical scale) used by New England minister John Tufts.<sup>22</sup> His groundbreaking songbook *Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes*, published in 1721, was successful in promoting music in American popular culture.<sup>23</sup> The book used a notation system similar to the European method that used letters instead of notes to simplify sight-reading.

The sol-fa system, used since the seventeenth century, as noted by Buell Cobb, was considered “vogue by amateur musicians in England ... and as George Pullen Jackson says, was a truncated version of a much older form.”<sup>24</sup> Tuft substituted notes with letters representing the Fa, Sol, La, and Mi syllables commonly used to describe notes. Congregants needed only minimal assistance to participate because sacred music now had an approachable and effective system.

---

<sup>21</sup> Beverly Patterson, *The Sound of the Dove* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 182.

<sup>22</sup> Dorothy Horn, *Sing Me To Heaven: A Study of Folk and Early American Materials in Three Old Harp Books* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1970), 5.

<sup>23</sup> Goff, *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel*, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Buell Cobb. *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1978), 59.

Though widely accepted as a new form of music notation, Tuft's system was influential only for a short time; other musicians soon focused on bettering the system he had developed. *The Easy Instructor, or A New Method of Teaching Sacred Harmony*, published in 1798 by William Little and William Smith, was an instructional songbook that modified and built upon Tuft's initial notation. To many, *The Easy Instructor* was much more effective than Tuft's method. The letters used for notation in Tuft's system had noticeable shortcomings that were evident to trained singers and instructors. Little and Smith designed distinct shapes to replace the letters. The notation made it easy to discern melodies, whether read by music students or those unfamiliar with traditional methods of reading; hence, the name *The Easy Instructor*. *The Easy Instructor* method became known as the character-note or shape-note system, and quickly became popular and influential across the South.<sup>25</sup>

Between 1801 and 1861, more than thirty-five southerners compiled and published individual sacred songbooks in the shape-note style.<sup>26</sup> Still, the popularity of B.F. White's seminal collection *The Sacred Harp*, published in 1844, could not be rivaled; it remains a collection celebrated by southerners today.<sup>27</sup>

### Singing Schools and Publishing Houses

As with camp meetings, community and emphasis on participation were at the center of the singing school movement. In their early stages, singing schools were nearly as prevalent in the North as they were in the South. In the North, however, popularity

---

<sup>25</sup> Goff, *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> David Steel, *The Makers of the Sacred Harp* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Patterson, *The Sound of the Dove*, 85.



waned as cultural patterns shifted in the early nineteenth century. As Stanley Brobston states, northern musicians became “strongly partisan to European influences” and began to abandon the perceived simplistic qualities of the shape-note system and to gravitate to music that became symbolic of “progress.”<sup>28</sup> But singing schools in the South remained popular, and became interwoven into the fabric of southern musical culture and tradition.

Schools such as Ruebush-Kieffer, established in 1872 in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, played a major role not only in shaping religious repertoire, but also in popularizing sacred musical styles through the publishing of songbooks. The notion that preservation of musical literacy was urgent during a time when much of the population was illiterate is illustrated through publications from schools such as Ruebush-Kieffer.<sup>29</sup> A national campaign to improve literacy ran in tandem with the singing schools’ initiative to convince students to read music.<sup>30</sup> Advocates of the schools hoped that if more people became literate, they would find time for activities such as shape-note singing. Their vision became reality and singing schools helped to shape a body of religious repertoire “that came to be known as one of the most powerful forces in vernacular music in the country.”<sup>31</sup>

A particularly notable publisher named Joshua Leavitt used innovative methods for compiling song that later would become prominent in the devotional music realm. Leavitt borrowed tunes from popular melodies. An ordained minister, he had experienced great success with some of his already-published books and thus decided to

---

<sup>28</sup> “A Brief History of White Southern Gospel Music and a Study of Selected Amateur Family Gospel” (PhD diss., New York University, 1977), 67.

<sup>29</sup> Cusic, *The Sound of Light*, 95.

<sup>30</sup> Goff, *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel*, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Malone, *Southern Music/American Music*, 10.

put together a collection of “lighter and more song like hymns with rippling rhythms and sometimes ‘chorusses’” that were sung at revivals.<sup>32</sup> Leavitt modeled his collection after the works found in Nettleton’s *Village Hymns* and offered sixty-four appropriate melodies.<sup>33</sup> Russell Sanjek writes that Leavitt had the foresight to appreciate that members attending revivals had “a desire to use hymns and music of a different character from those ordinarily used in churches.” He borrowed melodies from popular songs such as “Home Sweet Home,” “Lowly Nancy,” and “Auld Lang Syne.” This proved a great success as his collection titled *The Christian Lyre* was printed in twenty-six editions by 1846, illustrating the excitement that was building around western revivalism.<sup>34</sup>

The music publishing industry was on the rise just as another period of revival was approaching. Prior to the Civil War, the American population increased significantly, especially in urban areas. During the Great Revival of 1857-58, evangelists, publishers, and songwriters saw a renewed interest in religion and faith and they went to urban centers equipped with a new commercial outlook, that ensured they would be able to capitalize on changing trends.<sup>35</sup> Revivalism had shifted from the rural camp meetings to urban communities, uniting religion and the Industrial Revolution.

Camp meetings and singing schools, and the publications produced by both entities, were in high demand and established the framework for the popularization of religious music in a rapidly-changing South. From the 1850s through the end of the nineteenth century, gospel music—popular melodies and forms set to religious texts—

---

<sup>32</sup> Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music and its Business, Volume III: From 1909 to 1984* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 196.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Goff, *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel*, 25.

was coming into its own.<sup>36</sup> Names such as Y.M.C.A. Songs, Soldier Songs, and Spiritual Songs were used to describe popular non-secular music.<sup>37</sup> Like the North, the South began to embrace music education and culture outside the boundaries of devotional music. New songs were written and printed in the shape-note system including novelty numbers, love songs, sentimental songs, and war songs.

As revival meetings and the evocative, highly-charged approach to conversion waned, churches became more institutionalized and so did the music. By the mid-nineteenth century, religious music of the South had established firm traditions rooted in the diversity found in the region. British hymnody, American Revivalism, camp meetings, unnamed folk composers, and gospel composers all helped make American sacred music a distinct music.

---

<sup>36</sup> Brobston, *A Brief History of Southern Gospel Music*, 77.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 3

### POPULAR MUSIC OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SACRED SONG

Many important cultural and musical changes in the mid to late nineteenth century illustrate that non-secular music was undergoing a rapid transformation in tandem with that of popular American music. The commercial music industry, coming into fruition by the mid-nineteenth century, saw value in religious and non-secular music and thus promoted it commercially. In the years immediately following the Civil War, printed music hit its stride, becoming a profitable industry and thus creating popular music and forever changing American musical culture.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter, I will look at the various ways commercialism and popular music of the nineteenth century influenced southern culture and shaped and popularized the religious music of the South, a key component of early twentieth century “hillbilly” recordings and repertoire. This chapter also will illustrate sacred music’s preexisting role within American popular culture in the years leading up to the development of the recording industry.

#### Blackface Minstrelsy and the Traveling Minstrel

A heightened sense of sentimentality and a longing for tradition was at the center of American popular culture from the mid to the end of the nineteenth century. Popular music, both secular and non-secular, expressed an exaggerated sentimentality that was pervasive in all aspects of culture. This is perhaps no better illustrated than through popular music influenced by blackface minstrelsy. Minstrelsy’s impact upon popular

---

<sup>1</sup> David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 18.

culture was far-reaching and particularly pertinent to early country music. The minstrel show, first popular in the early 1830s, was staged mostly by white middle class men clad in blackface makeup.<sup>2</sup> Minstrel music and performance combined an eclectic blend of vernacular styles associated with British, German, African, and West Indian cultures, coming together to form something distinctly American.<sup>3</sup>

Blackface minstrelsy was born in the North, a place distanced from the African-American slaves depicted within its song. Robert Toll hypothesizes that minstrelsy “provided a non threatening way for vast numbers of white Americans to work out their ambivalence about race at a time when that issue was paramount.”<sup>4</sup> The assertion of power, reflected through gross pictorial exaggerations of African Americans, illustrated the powerlessness the white middle class felt in the 1840s after the economic disasters following the 1837 panic.<sup>5</sup> As minstrel historian Eric Lott points out, minstrelsy was a response to the unease the popular classes felt, “an attempt to shore up ‘white’ class identities by targeting new enemies such as immigrants, blacks, and tipplers...[minstrelsy] served a crucial new social purpose.”<sup>6</sup> The white working class created a new perception of whiteness, in part, through minstrelsy. David Roediger argues that white working classes struggling with an industrialized world found comfort in using blackness “to embody the preindustrial past they scorned and missed.”<sup>7</sup> The

---

<sup>2</sup> Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 376.

<sup>3</sup> Malone, *Southern Music/American Music*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 272.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 141.

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

<sup>7</sup> David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), 97.

longing for the past was also accentuated through the use of sentimentalism found in popular song.

By the late nineteenth century sentimental tunes became widespread and common within the minstrel repertoire. Themes featured the “old home,” the “sweet sunny South,” and even the slave yearning to be back on the plantation. Songs such as “Oh Susanna” by Stephen Foster (1848), “Home Sweet Home” by Henry Bishop (1823), “The Little Log Cabin in the Lane” by William Hayes (1871), and “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” by James K. Bland (1878), were heard all over the country. Although not specifically attributed to minstrelsy, popular songs and parlor songs such as these were often a part of minstrels’ repertoires. The transmission to the South of popular songs (first performed in the theaters in the North) such as those mentioned, are in large part credited to the traveling minstrel show.<sup>8</sup> Popular song and melody stemming from the minstrel show became greatly influential on American popular culture. Robert Winans states that the widespread popularity and reach of minstrelsy and its variants (e.g., circuses and medicine shows) made it “virtually impossible for city or country folk in the mid-nineteenth century America to escape repeated contact” with minstrel music.<sup>9</sup>

### Sentimentalism: The Emergence of an Imagined South

In the years following the end of Reconstruction (1877), the South underwent political, social, and economic change. Conservative white Democrats took control once again of southern states, helping to redefine, and reimagine the new, industrialized South,

---

<sup>8</sup> Ben Wynne, *In Tune: Charley Patton, Jimmie Rodgers, and the Roots of American Music*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), 57.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Winans, “The Folk, the Stage, and the Five String Banjo of the Nineteenth Century,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 89, no. 354 (Oct. - Dec., 1976), 424. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/539294>.

coined the “New South” by editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, Henry Grady.<sup>10</sup> As noted by James Charles Cobb, the “New South” was in many ways contradictory, promising a dynamic economy while maintaining “a static racial and political order.”<sup>11</sup> Still, population changes, new access to transportation, and increased commodities generated significant cultural changes that would have clear influences upon the life of the region and thus upon southern popular music.<sup>12</sup> The sentimental songs that became synonymous with minstrelsy (and later, hillbilly music) can in part be attributed to a reaction against the forces of urbanization and industrialization of the late nineteenth century and thus to an anti-modern trend that idealized the rural and “traditional.”

Alongside the fascination with slave culture found in minstrelsy, came a heightened sense of nostalgia or sentimentalism of the imagined South. The idea and image of the South became a source of comfort. To many whites, it expressed simpler times, an imagined childhood, a morally sound, honest place. This illusory place and time helped rural Southerners who had migrated to the city deal with the trauma that resulted from parting, feelings of displacement, and loss of self in new urban environments. As noted by Leigh Ann Duck, this use of sentimentalism and romance attached to the southern past served “to retain white supremacist conceptions of a national people as a prominent trope in U.S. nationalism.”<sup>13</sup>

While a growing fascination with the South was perpetuated in northern cities, songwriters capitalized. An interesting dichotomy was at play—northern songwriters

---

<sup>10</sup> Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> James Charles Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 55.

<sup>13</sup> Leigh Ann Duck, *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, and U.S. Nationalism*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 20.

used musical influences from the urban industrialized North to portray the image of the romanticized South, which in turn would influence a developing southern popular culture.<sup>14</sup>

### Stephen Foster

No one capitalized on the sentimental tradition more than the prolific songwriter Stephen Foster. Tremendously popular both before and after Reconstruction, Foster's songwriting set the standard for songwriters who would follow. His songs epitomize the sentimental, emotional material of the late nineteenth century (1870s-1900), describing an imagined "Old South" that with the onset of industry, was a distant, fictionalized memory. Pieces such as "Camptown Races" and "Old Folks at Home" helped set the sentimental tone that became such a dominant theme within minstrelsy and thus American culture. Foster's songwriting, like many writers of the period, were most commonly influenced by American hymnody and "genteel popular music" of the day, as well as popular melodies from early minstrelsy.<sup>15</sup> Mathew Shaftel writes, "Stephen Foster's music became the backbone of the American minstrel show in the 1840s."<sup>16</sup> His influence upon songwriters would continue to grow in years to following his death in 1864. According to Toll, Foster's works "enjoyed greater popularity than those of any other minstrel songwriter."<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Malone, *Southern Music/American Music*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Mathew Shaftel, "Singing a New Song: Stephen Foster and the New American Minstrelsy," *Music and Politics* 1, issue 2, (Summer 2007), accessed on May 22, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0001.203>.

<sup>17</sup> Toll, *Blacking Up*, 37.



By 1850, Foster had published twelve minstrel songs, known as his “Plantation Melodies,” all of which became standards in the minstrel repertoire.<sup>18</sup> These works—including “Dolly Day,” “Angelina Baker,” and “Gwine to Run All Night”—were similar in style to some of those written by Foster’s predecessors, including Dan Emmett and “Daddy” Rice. Simple rhythmic melodic structures implied use of the pentatonic scale, and dance tempos were all characteristic of early minstrel song and had a strong influence on Foster’s early work.<sup>19</sup> Yet Foster began introducing innovative characteristics into his work, such as the use of chorus, and the expressions of a new attitude toward the minstrel image, removing negative attributes of the slave caricature through the use of nostalgia.<sup>20</sup>

Foster was able to use “the most popular emotion of the day,” nostalgia, to redefine how African Americans were depicted through song.<sup>21</sup> His emotional account of the “darkie” brought a new range of emotion to the black character depicted in minstrelsy. “The Old Folks at Home,” more commonly known as “Swanee River,” written in 1851, exemplifies these innovations. Many different strands of nostalgia are at play within this tune, including distance, memory, loss, and place, all meant to create a deep sense of homesickness through the eyes of an ex-slave.

Way down upon de Swanee ribber, Far far away  
Dere’s wha my heart is turning ebber, Dere’s where de old folks stay.  
All up and down the whole creation, sadly I roam  
Still longing for de old plantation, And for de old folks at home,  
All de world am sad and dreary, Erby where I roam  
Oh! Darkeys how my heart grows weary, Far from de old folks at home.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America*, 209.

<sup>19</sup> Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America*, 209.

<sup>20</sup> Shaftel, “Singing a New Song: Stephen Foster and the New American Minstrelsy.”

<sup>21</sup> Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America*, 217.

<sup>22</sup> William Austin, *The Songs of Stephen Foster From His Time To Ours* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 246.

## Domestic Ideology

The themes presented in “Old Folks at Home,” not at all unique within nineteenth century popular music, express a nostalgia built directly around nineteenth century domestic ideology. “Carry Me Back Songs,” or plantation songs of the 1840s, often had a central familial focus, as Lott has suggested, illustrated through the master and his slaves.<sup>23</sup> This domestic ideology also became central in non-secular song as the music became more commercialized. Lott’s analysis of the “Carry Me Back Song” is of interest when contextualizing sacred song of the period and later, and can be connected to songs such as “The Great Speckled Bird.” Lott, in referencing modes of sentimentalism found in minstrelsy, makes a number of points that parallel the sacred music that would follow in its wake. He writes, “Taking its energy from the realities and ideologies of domestic life, the mythology of plantation paternalism became a figure for the family in America. Central to this figure was the master’s strict but gentle management of the antebellum blacks who surrounded him.”<sup>24</sup>

Songs like “O Death” (also known as “Conversations with Death”), “I Heard My Mother Call My Name in Prayer” (1947), and “Rank Stranger” (1942), exemplify the use of domestic ideology in non-secular song. Although they are not hymns, they consist of non-secular content and express a clear shift towards popular music and culture using domestic modes of nostalgia found within mid-century minstrel song. Domestic ideology is also at play within the “The Great Speckled Bird” and is an important attribute in tracing the development of the song.

---

<sup>23</sup> Lott, *Love and Theft*, 201.

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

It could be argued that imagery used in specific verses of the song invokes the idea that the speckled bird is symbolic of domesticity in some capacity. The bird, described throughout the song as a female, could be interpreted as a motherly figure, and God, a father figure.

When He cometh descending from heaven  
On the clouds, as He writes in His Word  
I'll be joyfully carried to meet Him  
On the wings of the great speckled bird

Desiring to lower her standards  
They watch every move that she makes  
They long to find fault with her teachings  
But really they find no mistake<sup>25</sup>

The motherly role of the bird is illustrated through the description of her actions as that of a savior, one who carries the narrator to heaven upon her wings. She is also referred to as a teacher, a role of domesticity common to all parenting. God, as the father, is a common representation within both sacred music and scripture. The theme of sentimentalism in its varying modes (here domesticity ideology) in the nineteenth century would inform many popular songwriters who would follow. I will develop the use of sentimentalism in “Speckled Bird” further in upcoming chapters.

Though still written in slave dialect, songs such as “Old Folks at Home” are a distinct move away from the mockery of blacks that came to define early minstrelsy of the mid-1840s.<sup>26</sup> The direct use of sentimentality and nostalgia made Foster particularly resonant with the hardships and alienation many felt following the Civil War. After great

---

<sup>25</sup> Roy Acuff, “The Great Speckled Bird,” words by Rev. Guy Smith, music by Roy Acuff, recorded October 20, 1936, Youtube, accessed on November, 10, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRbfQrKcVjg>.

<sup>26</sup> Shaftel, “Singing a New Song: Stephen Foster and the New American Minstrelsy.”

national struggles and strife, it made sense that popular culture would become fixated with imagined and romantic places like the “Old South.”

### Contrafaction

As white middle-class audiences felt detached from an ever-evolving modern world, did a need for familiarity grow? Did a recognizable sentiment or melody serve as a way of comforting an uneasy audience? Even though contrafaction, a term for borrowing an existing melody and adding new text, had long been at play in American music, the desire for familiar tunes rapidly escalated in the mid to late nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps one of the most recognizable examples of contrafaction in the nineteenth century is that of Francis Scott Key’s “The Star Spangled Banner,” set to the tune of “The Anacreontic Song,” a popular British drinking song written by John Stafford Smith.<sup>28</sup> Songwriters borrowing melodies from popular compositions became common practice.

This was true in the sacred song industry as well.<sup>29</sup> For instance, Foster’s melodies were used in various popular Sunday school hymnals of the period that adapted songs such as “Massa’s in de Cold, Cold, Ground” into “Hear the Gentle Voice of Jesus,” “Swanee River” into “Our Shepard True,” “Old Black Joe” into “Long From my Heart and All its Charms,” and “Hard Times Come Again No More” into “Sorrow Shall Come

---

<sup>27</sup> Philip Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1988), 9.

<sup>28</sup> Joshua Jacobson, "Contrafaction," *Music Faculty Publications, Northeastern University* (Fall 2010): 217, accessed March 14, 2015. <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20000316>.

<sup>29</sup> Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business*, 210.

Again No More.”<sup>30</sup> A curious tension is at play with the use of melody from a popular song such as “Massa’s in de Cold, Cold, Ground.” Did the resounding sense of sentimentalism attributed to the melody and words of “Cold Cold Ground” help persuade a popular audience to appreciate sacred song?

Naomi Ledford, born August 6, 1899, performed on numerous field recordings from her home in Little Creek, Madison County, North Carolina in the early 1990s.<sup>31</sup> One song, “While Passing A Garden,” is particularly noteworthy to this project for its use of contrafaction. Old-time fiddler and song collector Bruce Greene states that the hymn, describing an encounter with Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for others’ salvation, has a melody that “is very much Rye Whiskey.”<sup>32</sup> A standard in early country repertoire, “Rye Whiskey” is an interesting choice of tune because of the secular and even sinful themes attached to the melody. Fiddlers often add a staccato part within the tune to imitate hiccups of a drunkard.<sup>33</sup> The lyrics attached to the popular melody state, “Oh drunkard, Oh drunkard, how bad I do feel.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, to use a recognizable melody attached to what could be interpreted as sinful behavior is surprising. Was the idea of transferring text from the “realm of profane to the realm of sacred” at play? This is a striking example of contrafaction that illustrates the interconnectedness of popular and non-secular song that persists even today.

---

<sup>30</sup> Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America*, 213.

<sup>31</sup> Bruce Greene, e-mail correspondence with author, song from Greene’s personal collection, February 10, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Eck Robertson, “Rye Whiskey,” recorded in Amarillo Texas, 1963, County, 1999, CD.

<sup>34</sup> The Skillet Lickers, “Corn Licker Still in Georgia Part 1,” recorded November 1, 1927, Columbia Records, JSP Records, 2002, CD.

Even though the notion of creating text to fit popular melody was shunned by many in the religious realm, perhaps to some composers the use of contrafaction in non-secular song was a way to encourage greater participation in worship service or to broaden the reach of religious ideas.<sup>35</sup> In the article “Contrafaction,” a piece about religious music of the synagogue, Rabbi Yosef notes that contrafaction of secular song for religious compositions “implies sanctification of God’s name in that something has been transferred from the realm of the profane to the realm of the sacred.”<sup>36</sup> A similar motive perhaps was central to writing the text for “The Great Speckled Bird.”

#### The Birth of Tin Pan Alley and Transmission of the Popular Song

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, mass-marketed commercial songs became prevalent across the South. The expansion of the railroad was one main contributing factor. Between 1869 and 1900, 100,000 miles of rail were laid throughout the nation; the expansion had been most rapid in the South. By 1890, ninety percent of southerners lived in counties with access to the rails.<sup>37</sup> The railroad not only connected people who lived in isolated areas with cities, but it also contributed to bringing urbanization and industrialization to previously sparsely-inhabited locations. Like never before, southerners were a part of the commercial popular culture. They were able to buy mass-marketed products and stay current with trends in the arts, including music.<sup>38</sup> With the demand of commercial products came a demand for urban entertainment, like the

---

<sup>35</sup> Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business*, 210.

<sup>36</sup> Jacobson, "Contrafaction," 226.

<sup>37</sup> Karl Miller, *Segregating Sound* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 25.

<sup>38</sup> Ayers, *The Promises of the New South*, 375.

kind featured in vaudeville theater and other venues for popular song. The railroad made this attainable, giving southern audiences access to new artistic expressions and musical sounds. As stated by Karl Miller, “in a sense, theater from New York became American theater.”<sup>39</sup>

By the turn of the nineteenth century, New York had become the popular music publishing capital in the United States. Most publishing houses in the country were located “on or near Manhattan’s 28<sup>th</sup> street,” which would later be referred to as “Tin Pan Alley.”<sup>40</sup> The publishing industry of Tin Pan Alley had a new approach for churning out popular songs. As Miller notes, the publishers and songwriters specialized in writing popular songs often using “compositional and lyrical formulas based on past hits.”<sup>41</sup> The factory-like production of countless songs from Tin Pan Alley was driven by the hopes of turning just a few of the thousands into nationally-recognizable tunes.

Popular music of the North was in high demand in the South at the end of the nineteenth century, as illustrated by the emergence of booking agencies that focused on bringing northern troupes to the South. One of the largest agencies of the period was Klaw and Erlanger. The agency advertised to northern companies that the South should become a primary destination for theater companies, because the region contained a wealth of centralized theaters and an audience yearning for contemporary sounds of the city. By 1895, the firm controlled over 200 theaters in the South.<sup>42</sup> Klaw and Erlanger soon joined two other prominent agencies to form a monopoly, the Theatrical Syndicate. Focusing largely on the South, the group would control bookings throughout the country

---

<sup>39</sup> Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 28.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

for the next fifteen years.<sup>43</sup> Through the theater and the touring shows, the South was quickly introduced to commercial music from the North. The sound was to be carried on through vernacular song and culture for generations to come.

### Standardization of the Popular Song

The surge of sentimental popular and sacred song was influenced by the growing demand for sheet music. In the late nineteenth century, it was not uncommon for songs to be printed in editions of the hundreds of thousands.<sup>44</sup> With larger quantities being produced, sheet music became an inexpensive source of popular music for the American public. Bourgeoisie subject matter, imagery, and design made sheet music appealing to all consumers; however, publishers aimed specifically at the growing middle class in the Northern United States.<sup>45</sup>

By 1910, Tin Pan Alley had helped to bring sales of sheet music to 30 million copies, including mail orders, a popular distribution medium that had begun in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>46</sup> With more access to songbooks, popular repertoire became much more far-reaching than it had been in the early part of the century. The songs written in the urban North had made an impact wherever the consumer could be found. Whether populations deep in the hills of the Missouri Ozarks, or in the bustling mining towns of Eastern Kentucky, popular culture, and along with it, music, had found a way to reach most Americans.

---

<sup>43</sup> Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 29.

<sup>44</sup> Ayers, *The Promises of the New South*, 375.

<sup>45</sup> Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers*, 56.

<sup>46</sup> Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business*, 33.



As historian Charles Hamm points out, post-Civil War American popular song became predictable in format and character due to such factors as the printing of standardized sheet music. He writes that almost all songs of the time consisted of the following:

Begin with a piano (instrumental) introduction of 4 or 8 measures, usually stating the chief melodic material of the song;  
Have a verse for a solo voice, of 16 measures subdivided into 4 phrases of 4 measures each, in such melodic patterns as AABC, ABAC, AABA, or ABCB.  
There is text for 2 to 4 verses, each sung to the same music, unfolding a brief drama or sketching a vignette usually of nostalgic, cautionary, pathetic, or tragic content.<sup>47</sup>

This general description of the later nineteenth century popular song is, as Hamm states, found in “almost all songs of the time,” including that of the twentieth century song “The Great Speckled Bird.” Constructed in the common ABAC format, “Speckled Bird” clearly reflects the popular music that preceded it. The introduction of the 1936 Roy Acuff and the Crazy Tennesseans recording begins with a four measure introduction of two phrases with dobro.<sup>48</sup> The four verses of this iconic recording not only develop a cautionary story but also one with a distinct sense of nostalgia connected to fundamentalist ideology, as I will later explore. These themes trace back to the thematic content of the nineteenth century as described by Hamm.

Both religion and music offered disenfranchised people of the New South the opportunity to be heard.<sup>49</sup> As discontented people of the South began building new churches focused on their own distinct beliefs, southern non-secular music continued to evolve to meet the needs of the modern audience. As with religion, music borrowed and

---

<sup>47</sup> Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America*, 254.

<sup>48</sup> Acuff, “The Great Speckled Bird,” Youtube.

<sup>49</sup> Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 373.

formed new ideas from outside of the region to shape a new southern sound and ideology. Thus, a large part of southern musical culture was invented and borrowed, rather than inherited.<sup>50</sup> The twentieth century would soon interpret both the evolving musical culture and the religious culture of the South as distinctly “southern,” despite the reality that much of southern culture in the New South was appropriated from outside the region.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 373.

## CHAPTER 4

### COMMERCIALISM AND RURALITY IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Despite the rise in popularity of jazz, blues, and folk music, religious music was the most widespread form of popular music in the rural South in the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The accumulation of singing schools, increased printing of sheet music and hymnals, revival of camp meetings, a rise in sentimentalism and nostalgia, and most importantly, a new commercialized mass media, continued to expand the audience for religious music. As the commercial music industry grew, and as popular culture began to redefine the general sound of sacred music, practices within religious music became less inclusive, shifting toward performance rather than participatory practice. Drawing from both the newly-penned songs and an emotive evangelical goal, a more commercialized form of sacred music, gospel music, was quickly gaining popularity. Malone notes many of these new songs had the intent of evangelizing the “nation through the power of song.”<sup>2</sup> The term gospel music, incredibly diverse and complex, can be interpreted in many different ways. For the purpose of this study I will focus primarily on white southern gospel.

#### The Creation of a Popular Sacred Genre- The Birth of Gospel Music

As Charles Wolfe notes, white gospel music emerged as a distinct form in the 1870s and 1880s, using “a rich variety of vernacular music styles, both folk and pop.”<sup>3</sup> The first common use of the term “Gospel” music appeared in 1875, in Ira Sankey and

---

<sup>1</sup> Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 396.

<sup>2</sup> Malone, *Southern Music/American Music*, 68.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Wolfe, Gospel Music, White, *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: vol. 12, music*, ed. by Bill Malone (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009): 69.

P.P. Bliss's *A Choice Collection of Hymns and Tunes*.<sup>4</sup> Sankey's songbook successfully paired religious tunes with a message of the gospel and, as noted by Goff, linked "conversion theology and millennial character of evangelicalism."<sup>5</sup> Other song collectors, such as Charles Davis Tillman and evangelist Dwight Moody, were also seminal in popularizing the gospel song. The popularity of these collectors' songbooks increased religious songwriting production, turning many songwriters into recognized celebrities within American congregations.<sup>6</sup> Tillman's popular song, "Life's Railway to Heaven," (co-written with M.E. Abbey) was inspired by "The Faithful Engineer," a poem published in 1886 by the prolific minstrel songwriter William Hays, author of the popular "Little Log Cabin in the Lane." This example illustrates the influence the secular world had upon gospel writers of the late nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most important southern gospel songwriter and publisher to help popularize the genre was James Vaughan of the Vaughan Publishing Company. A devout member of the Church of Nazarene, an important denomination in the Holiness movement, Vaughan was an innovator in commercializing gospel music, producing audio recordings to reach larger audiences and using technological advancements such as the radio.<sup>8</sup> Vaughan not only marketed his songs through the publishing of many songbooks, but he also put together traveling quartets that visited churches and singing conventions

---

<sup>4</sup> *Country Music U.S.A.*, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Goff, *Close Harmony*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>7</sup> Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers*, 63.

<sup>8</sup> *Southern Music/American Music*, 68.

to promote his songbooks. At the height of his company's success, Vaughan had sixteen different quartets traveling at a time across the nation.<sup>9</sup>

As Vaughan desired to continue to widen the audience for his songs, in 1922 he received a broadcasting license for the first radio station in the state of Tennessee and began broadcasting in January of 1923.<sup>10</sup> Following in the wake of Vaughan's success, soon white gospel quartets all over the South were using radio as a way to reach large audiences, to promote upcoming performances and to gain sponsors. James Goff hypothesizes that Vaughan's importance in the popularization of sacred song cannot be underestimated. "Had James David Vaughan not happened upon the gospel music scene in the late 19th century, the expansion of the gospel music industry in the South might well have peaked with contributions of Aldine Kieffer and Ephraim Ruebush."<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that white gospel quartets were not only influenced and inspired by the church, but many used characteristics of secular music to shape their sound. The influence of barbershop quartets and popular quartets were a part of the white gospel sound.<sup>12</sup>

The commercialization of religious music is one that long has been debated for ethical and moral merits; yet, the commercialization of the religious song has, no doubt, created a reach and audience that in prior decades would have been unfathomable. As Stanley Brobston writes, "the commercial aspects of religious music may have helped to

---

<sup>9</sup> Malone, *Southern Music/American Music*, 68.

<sup>10</sup> Jo Lee Fleming, "James D. Vaughan, Music Publisher, Lawrenceburg, Tennessee. 1912-1964" (Ph. D. Diss., Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, 1972), 59.

<sup>11</sup> Goff, *Close Harmony*, 62.

<sup>12</sup> Malone, *Southern Music/American Music*, 69.

foster the propagation of the music more so than would have a complete altruism.”<sup>13</sup>

Although southern gospel and country music would eventually develop into distinct genres, they were clearly connected in the early twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

“Sentimental Secular” and The Symbol of Freedom: “I’ll Fly Away” and “The Prisoner’s Song”

Important to the gospel movement, and for his contributions to the country music repertoire, was Albert Edward Brumley, born October 29, 1905 in Spiro, Oklahoma. Brumley is of interest because of his knack for converting the rural message found in Christian evangelicalism into one of sentimentality and nostalgia, which would become so resonant to the American Christian audiences in the early twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> That nostalgia was heightened by the well-crafted simplicity of melody and upbeat feel, which likened the songs to that of modern country music of the time and possibly accounted for the author’s great success in the gospel and country music industry. His success has also been attributed to his skillfully crafted lyrics that seem to hold on to an idyllic past, “anticipating refuge and restoration in a pastoral Heaven,” which would have been particularly resonant to an America suffering from the Depression.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Brobston, “A Brief History of Southern Gospel Music,” 175.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Wolfe, “Gospel Boogie: White Southern Gospel Music Transition 1945-55,” in *Popular Music I: Folk or Popular? Distinctions, Influences, Continuities*, edited by Richard Middleton and David Horn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>15</sup> Goff, *Close Harmony*, 95.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Kehrberg, “‘I’ll Fly Away’: The Music and Career of Albert E. Brumley,” (PhD diss., Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2010), 19, accessed January 10, 2015. [http://uknowledge.uky.edu/gradschool\\_diss/49](http://uknowledge.uky.edu/gradschool_diss/49)

## “I’ll Fly Away”

Brumley wrote a long list of songs that were to become country music and gospel standards, including the iconic song “I’ll Fly Away,” written in 1929 and published in 1932.<sup>17</sup> Well over 500 artists have recorded the song.<sup>18</sup> With its simplistic, catchy melody, it may have begun as just that—a simple gospel number—but quickly, like “The Speckled Bird,” it took on a new identity, crossing new cultural and musical boundaries. Perhaps this was in part due to the approachable melody that could be easily adapted by musicians of diverse backgrounds. As Kevin Kehrberg has pointed out in his dissertation on the career of Brumley, “I’ll Fly Away” had an “enduring ability to appeal across racial, cultural, and musical boundaries,” which, “equally rests in its symbolic connection to charismatic American Protestantism.”<sup>19</sup>

The success Brumley was to have with “I’ll Fly Away” and other songs, such as “Turn Your Radio On,” illustrates the importance and influence conservative Christian theology had upon modern Americans, especially during the great cultural change to modernism and the hardships of the Depression. This clear shift in values in the early twentieth century, illustrated by great social and economic change, gave rise to songs reflecting escapism, or desire for freedom, two messages particularly resonant to people feeling alienated by modern times.<sup>20</sup> Music historian Patrick Huber points out that hillbilly music of the 1920s would emerge out this modern world, “out of the often

---

<sup>17</sup> Kehrberg, “I’ll Fly Away,” 177.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Wolfe, “‘I’d Rather Be an Old-Time Christian’: The Music of Albert E. Brumley,” *Precious Memories* (May-June 1991): 15. Quoted in James Goff, *Close Harmony*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 95.

<sup>19</sup> Kehrberg, “I’ll Fly Away,” 216-217.

<sup>20</sup> Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 18.

wrenching working class experiences of social dislocation, mass migration, class formation, urban life industrial work, race relations, and labor strife.”<sup>21</sup> Kehrberg states the following:

Religion has affected America’s cultural—including musical—development since at least the country’s political beginnings, and its societal role became increasingly complex after 1900. Such events as the rise of Pentecostalism, feuding fundamentalists and modernists, and an interdenominational diffusion of charismatic practices sparked social reactions in America characterized variously by fervency, ambivalence, optimism, mockery, and nostalgia.<sup>22</sup>

The idyllic descriptions of heaven, along with the notion of escape found in both “I’ll Fly Away” and “The Great Speckled Bird,” express the strenuous times the American public was facing. Both make reference to the shortcomings found here on earth, creating the vision of heaven as a place supreme in morality, and free of pain and strife.

Both songs also hint at the idea of the benefits and assurances of being “saved,” “The Great Speckled Bird” being much more direct lyrically than “I’ll Fly Away.” The lyrics also reflect the common theme of Christian pilgrimage, a theme found in “The Great Speckled Bird” and countless other sacred songs as well.

When the shadows of this life have grown, I’ll fly away  
Like a bird from prison bars has flown, I’ll fly away

When He cometh descending from heaven  
On the clouds, as He writes in His Word  
I’ll be joyfully carried to meet Him  
On the wings of the great speckled bird

---

<sup>21</sup> Huber, *Linthead Stomp*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Kehrberg, “I’ll Fly Away,” 216-217.



Like “The Great Speckled Bird,” “I’ll Fly Away” is commonly found outside the “sacred realm” and is now considered a standard in American popular music, an industry that does not often promote religious content.<sup>23</sup> Thus, a fundamental tension, one between modernism and traditionalism, lies in a music appealing to both the secular world and the Christian world. This apparent tension deserves a detailed analysis that I will provide in the following chapter.

#### “The Prisoner’s Song”

Brumley reflects upon writing “I’ll Fly Away,” stating the following:

I thought of the theme and started working on it while I was picking cotton in 1928. I was out in the field by myself—or at least there wasn’t anyone close to me—and I got to humming this old song, ‘The Prisoner’s Song.’

Where it says ‘if I had the wings of an angel, over these prison walls I would fly,’ ...well, it suddenly dawned on me that I could use the world for a prison and heaven for freedom when we pass on. And I started working on that theory.

You’ll notice in one stanza of ‘I’ll Fly Away’ it says ‘when the shadows of this life have grown I’ll fly away...like a bird from prison bars has flown’ ...I paraphrased that from the old ‘Prisoner’s Song.’<sup>24</sup>

This quote illustrates that sacred songwriters such as Brumley were influenced by popular music of the time, in this case “The Prisoner’s Song,” which became Vernon Dalhart’s breakout hit. Finding a widespread national audience by 1928, it was the first recorded song using a similar melody to that which would become identified with “The Great Speckled Bird” some twelve years later. This familiar melody became

---

<sup>23</sup> Kehrberg, “I’ll Fly Away,” 216.

<sup>24</sup> Kay Hively and Albert E. Brumley, Jr., *I’ll Fly Away: The Life Story of Albert E. Brumley* (Branson: Mountaineer Books, 1990), 25-26, 34.

representative of country music tradition, illustrated through an array of recorded variations of the song.

“The Prisoner’s Song” was the B-side to the 1924 Victor release of “The Wreck of the Old 97.”<sup>25</sup> The success of the release of “The Prisoner’s Song” motivated Dalhart to record the song another twelve times on different record labels. Dalhart eventually sold over one million copies of “The Prisoner’s Song.” Dalhart, an opera singer turned hillbilly singer, became Columbia’s most prolific old-time country artist, contributing to over one-third of the “Familiar Tunes” series (the most successful old-time series) of recordings prior to 1928.<sup>26</sup>

By the time of Acuff’s release of “The Great Speckled Bird” in 1936, the melody, as introduced to the world through “The Prisoner’s Song” and numerous hit records to follow, offered the country music listener a greater sense of nostalgia and familiarity than ever before. Acuff himself became a symbol to the modern country listener, representing a time forgotten, drenched in nostalgia, during a time Malone describes as “a period of social dislocation when people thought of home and the traditional values it represented.”<sup>27</sup>

### Commercial Southern Rural Music: Inventing “Hillbilly” Fever

In 1924, a year after Fiddlin’ John Carson’s initial recordings, a Columbia advertisement stated that, “the craze for this ‘Hill Country Music’ has spread to thousands of communities north, east and west as well as in the south and the fame of

---

<sup>25</sup> Russell, *Country Music Records*, 242.

<sup>26</sup> Miller, *Segregating Sounds*, 233.

<sup>27</sup> Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers*, 100.

these artists is ever increasing.”<sup>28</sup> The ad went on to claim that the many surprising requests for Carson’s records were, “from territories which ordinarily are supposed to have no market for ‘Fiddlin’ records.”<sup>29</sup> The advertisement’s claim was not untrue; the 1920s saw a realized mass-market appeal of commercial rural southern music through the growing recording industry, radio, and music distributors.

Like the song collectors who had traveled through the South just a decade prior, recording executives were interested in recording songs that sounded “southern,” and in so doing they created a genre with clear boundaries that were not necessarily reflective of the diversity found in southern vernacular music. Thus, a somewhat fabricated southern sound was used to appeal to both urban audiences longing for simpler times and a “rural-philic” mentality and culture. It served a similar function to sentimental ballads of the late nineteenth century and also appealed to a southern audience that was excited to hear their own music projected through a new mass media, whether there were inaccuracies of authenticity or not.

It was important to the commercial recording industry to frame niche markets for specific genres such as the hillbilly genre properly to ensure national sales. In order to do so, companies reimagined their products; they romanticized the South in advertisements through imagery and word and required musicians to supply whatever products were most suited for their niche series. George D. Hay, visionary behind branding the Grand Ole Opry and its performers, was aware of the benefits of accentuating a rural South

---

<sup>28</sup> OKeh Records advertisement, *Talking Machine World*, June 15, 1924, n.p., quoted in Patrick Huber’s *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 76.

<sup>29</sup> OKeh Records advertisement from Huber.

through the use of “rusticity” on stage and within repertoire.<sup>30</sup> In *The Tennessean* in 1926, Hays stated, “There is some delightful little folk strain that brings us all back to the soil, which runs through each of the numbers.”<sup>31</sup> Hays would increase the use of nostalgia and the hillbilly stereotype in the Opry for years to come.

Though perhaps not directly related to “The Great Speckled Bird,” Hays’ use of nostalgia and the image of a simple, rustic South does play a part in widespread acceptance and commercial appeal of non-secular songs such as “The Great Speckled Bird.” Clearly, the song was written for worship; yet, through the commercial recording industry it took on a new shape. Probably unintentional to the original writer, it became a song portraying purity, rusticity, and a sense of traditionalism that was common in many of the commercial records of the era. As I will expand upon in the next chapter, “The Great Speckled Bird” is a song representing a sense of isolation, a representation very much akin to what record producers of the time were looking for in southern song. Producers desired music set in an exotic, removed region, far from modern concerns and urbanism.

### Ralph Peer and Neo-Traditionalism

One of the most widely-known record producers of the period who helped establish the niche market of hillbilly music because he recognized the commercial potential for American vernacular music was Ralph Peer. As recording companies such as the Victor Talking Machine Company sought to avoid paying artists more than they

---

<sup>30</sup> Charles Wolfe and Ted Olson, *The Bristol Sessions* (North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2005), 19.

<sup>31</sup> Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 34.

had to, they encouraged artists to record traditional or original songs to avoid royalty payments that were attached popular songs of the period.<sup>32</sup> Peer was keenly aware of this and demanded that his artists play material outside of the popular canon: “We wouldn’t let them record ‘Home Sweet Home,’ so by insisting on new material and leaning towards artists who could produce it for us, their own compositions, that created the so-called hillbilly business.”<sup>33</sup>

Peer sought out artists who were able to reconstruct and reinterpret old traditional songs, thus claiming them as original compositions; then, by purchasing or leasing the copyright of the song, Peer profited greatly. His interest in modifying the traditional song was economically driven; yet it also fit into Victor’s and other companies’ marketing strategies for appealing to consumers outside the region. Through manicuring and controlling artists’ recorded repertoires, Peer played a significant role in shaping commercial country music and perpetuating an imagined South. Peer was interested in capturing performances that emphasized artists’ “rural origins,” making the commercial product seemingly authentic.<sup>34</sup> To Peer this meant recording on site where the artists lived, which led to numerous important location recordings. The Bristol Sessions, occurring between July 25 and August 5 of 1927, were perhaps some of the most significant location recording sessions of the 1920s. Supervised by Peer, the sessions

---

<sup>32</sup> Miller, *Segregating Sounds*, 235.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Ralph Peer, 1959, Hollywood, California, by Lilian Borgeson, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, tape #FT2772C, quoted in Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 236.

<sup>34</sup> Wolfe and Olson, *The Bristol Sessions*, 19.

illustrate the neo-traditionalist sound and material Peer hoped to discover through recording southern country artists.<sup>35</sup>

Much of the material recorded in Bristol over the two-week period consisted of vocal music, with an emphasis on gospel and non-secular song. Artists such as Alfred Karnes, Ernest Phipps and his Holiness Quartet, Blind Alfred Reed, the Tennessee Mountaineers, the Alcoa Quartet, and the Dixie Mountaineers all recorded predominantly non-secular and sacred-themed songs.<sup>36</sup> Realizing a lack in the market and the commercial potential that lie in recording non-secular song, Peer desired to record what he perceived as “underrecorded sacred song singers.”<sup>37</sup> Of the 76 Bristol Sessions songs recorded over a twelve-day stretch, 31 sides were either gospel or non-secular in theme.<sup>38</sup> Clearly, Peer felt sacred and gospel song played a significant part in shaping country and rural southern music and that it had potential commercial appeal. With Peer’s vision, Victor was not attempting to record traditional southern vernacular music; instead, the company was responding to “a perceived market demand” and focusing on neo-traditional vocal music that would prove to be a commercial success.<sup>39</sup>

#### The Carter Family and “Pre War Melodies”

During the second week of recording in Bristol, in August 1927, Peer recorded a trio from Maces Springs, Virginia, the Carter Family.<sup>40</sup> Peer, knowing he had a talented group of artists, recorded six sides in two days, making the Carters one of the most

---

<sup>35</sup> Wolfe and Olson, *The Bristol Sessions*, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Barry Mazor, *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music* (Chicago Review Press, 2014), 102.

<sup>38</sup> Wolfe and Olson, *The Bristol Sessions*, 25.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

prolific groups during the sessions.<sup>41</sup> The Carter Family would go on to record hundreds of sides for Peer and Victor over the following years, and to become one of the label's highest-grossing country groups, second only in popularity to blue yodeler Jimmie Rodgers.<sup>42</sup>

The Carter Family's repertoire encapsulates Peer's objective for recording neo-traditional song, "songs that (merely) seemed old fashioned."<sup>43</sup> As Nolan Porterfield notes, though the group recorded a diverse array of songs, ranging from sentimental ballads to gospel songs, cowboy songs, blues songs and more, they felt pressure from Peer "to produce material that was new (that is, uncopyrighted) yet somehow authentic to their temperament and traditions ... music that connected with the past and extended the tradition."<sup>44</sup> As noted by Pamela Fox, the Carter Family created "a culture of nostalgia during America's Depression years" through a carefully sculpted repertoire and image that would prove influential to other hillbilly musicians.<sup>45</sup>

A.P. Carter, manager and leader of the Carter Family, went on many "song catching" trips alongside friend Leslie Riddle, in hopes of finding new and traditional songs that would fit into Peer's requirement of producing copyrightable material. Often A.P. came back from trips with lyrics learned from oral transmission or with words and music from songbooks, sheet music for old pop tunes, or hymnals, all which he then presented to Sara and Maybelle to learn. As Mark Zwonitzer, the Carter Family's biographer points out, "when A.P. brought home lyrics with no tune at all to work with,

---

<sup>41</sup> Mazor, *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music*, 101.

<sup>42</sup> Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 41.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., also cited in Fox, *Natural Acts*, 176.

<sup>44</sup> Nolan Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers: the Life and Times of America's Blue Yodeler* (University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 99.

<sup>45</sup> Fox, *Natural Acts*, 176.

Sara and Maybelle would fashion the melody by ear, drawing heavily on the old fiddle songs they'd heard Uncle Mil Nickels or Ap Harris play... or even tinkering with a melody they'd already heard on a record."<sup>46</sup> The Carter Family often used internal contrafaction as a means to deliver an emotive message through song, much like Naomi Ledford highlighted in Chapter 3.

### "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes"

In February 1929, in Camden, New Jersey, the Carters recorded one of their most popular and historically important sides, "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes," for Victor Records.<sup>47</sup> Another example of internal contrafaction, "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes" borrowed the melody of "The Prisoner's Song." As Zwonitzer points out, the success of the record could have been in part due to the choice of melody. He writes, "The melody became one of the best known and most copied in country music. It was as if the melody was so deeply ingrained in country music's double helix of performer and audience that every time a singer sneaked it under his or her own lyrics, the song hit with the reflexive thump of recognition."<sup>48</sup> As this certainly could be true, and the success of "The Prisoner's Song" and its melody was soon to be undeniably recognizable, was there more to the song's far-reaching appeal than just the appropriating of the popular melody?

Other songs released in the 1920s clearly were melodic adaptations of "The Prisoner's Song," yet they did not see same success as the Carter Family's variation. Some, such as Riley Puckett's "All Bound Down In Prison" (recorded in 1931

---

<sup>46</sup> Mark Zwonitzer, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 122.

<sup>47</sup> Russell, *Country Music Records*, 128.

<sup>48</sup> Zwonitzer, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?*, 122.



Columbia), the Weaver Brothers' "Prison Sorrows" (1929 Columbia) and Welby Toomey and Edgar Boaz' "Thrills I Can't Forget" (1925 Gennett), all used the familiar melody to express different collections of emotions; yet, none had the long-lasting commercial success of "I'm Thinking Tonight of my Blue Eyes."<sup>49</sup>

The song "Blue Eyes," is strikingly sentimental when presented through the vocals of Sara and A.P. Carter. The practice of having a male and female perform the duet makes the love sentiment that much more resonant. It is as if the two lovers could be singing the song in different places, with one far across the mentioned "sea" that separates them. Lyrically, the song borrows content from various places, arguably making the song and its sense of nostalgia and sentimentality even more potent. The use of nostalgia leads into Peer's vision of presenting the country musician as a relic, that is, an artist steeped in traditions that evoke, a sense of the past.

Regardless of intention, the Carter Family's recording of "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes" continued to build upon melodic familiarity that soon became definitively attached to country music culture. As commercial record producers focused on recording traditional songs, they played up the stereotypes of southerners and white southern culture. The image of the white rural southerner played an important part in commercialization of country music, shaping the genres repertoire into a seemingly traditional canon. The concept that neo-traditional music would appeal to the country music consumer proved successful and was used as tool for sales throughout the 1920s.

---

<sup>49</sup> Russell, *Country Music Records*, 720.

## CHAPTER 5

### “THE GREAT SPECKLED BIRD”: AN ANALYSIS OF SYMBOL AND SONG

What a beautiful thought I am thinking  
Concerning a great speckled bird  
Remember her name is recorded  
On the pages of God's Holy Word

With all the other birds flocking 'round her  
She is so despised by the squad  
The great speckled bird is the Bible  
Representing the great church of God

Desiring to lower her standard  
They watch every move that she makes  
They long to find fault with her teachings  
But really they find no mistake

I am glad I have learned of her meekness  
I am proud that my name is on her book  
For I want to be one never fearing  
The face of my Savior to look

When He cometh descending from heaven  
On the cloud that He writes in His Word  
I'll be joyfully carried to meet Him  
On the wings of that great speckled bird<sup>1</sup>

#### Gateway to the Grand Ole Opry: Roy Acuff and Image

Alton Delmore, of the famed brother duet group the Delmore Brothers, remembers an early Acuff performance in 1937 at the Opry as being unimpressive. He notes that the Crazy Tennesseans had “sounded really pitiful . . . the other bands had played better, but they didn’t seem nearly as sincere as Roy did.”<sup>2</sup> This observation, that of Acuff being a performer with sincerity, is important, as the perception and image of

---

<sup>1</sup> Acuff, “The Great Speckled Bird,” Youtube.

<sup>2</sup> Alton Delmore, *The Truth is Stranger Than Publicity* (Country Music Foundation Press, 1977), 119-120.

the popular country musician was largely defined not only by his or her style of playing and singing, but also by repertoire. In this case, it had included a sentimental conservative gospel song, “The Great Speckled Bird.”

Acuff was keenly aware of the image he was presenting to the audience. In reflecting on his initial performance at the Opry, he stated that he presented “The Great Speckled Bird” in a singing style more akin to popular crooners of the time, rather than in the old mountain folk style he had become known for. Acuff remembers, “my voice sounded to me like a whining pup’s.”<sup>3</sup> With this disappointing performance, Acuff and company doubted they would hear back from the Opry; upon his return months later, however, Acuff sang in full voice in an “emotion filled manner,” which Peterson speculates he learned during his days as a medicine show performer working without a microphone.<sup>4</sup>

Acuff soon achieved great success through his performances on the Opry. He became the Opry’s most acclaimed musician within eighteen months after joining the Opry, shifting his style to meet the commercial and managerial demands that desired rural mountain music, instead of the more refined popular music of the period.<sup>5</sup> George D. Hay, in charge of booking artists for the Opry, realized the commercial appeal to singing in the “old fashioned way.”<sup>6</sup> He often reminded Acuff to keep his music “down to earth,” which implied sticking to a more traditional sound.<sup>7</sup> Acuff complied, steering away from the slicker pop tunes that had been an aspect of the band’s early work by

---

<sup>3</sup> Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 145.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>5</sup> Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 191.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ Press - Country Music Foundation Press, 1999), 257.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

shaping much of his repertoire and stylistic approach to the sound coined in “The Great Speckled Bird.”

Following the early commercial country recording boom in the 1920s that emphasized traditional song, Acuff’s music of the late thirties returned to a similar aesthetic, sound, and style. As noted by Malone, Acuff in his early years forged a “new traditionalism,” borrowing songs from many of the previous decades’ country stars, such as Dave Macon, and the Carter Family, who initially brought a somewhat fabricated ‘traditionalism’ to the commercial platform.<sup>8</sup> By adding songs of older styles and religious song into the repertoire, the band became more commercially appealing.<sup>9</sup> Peterson aptly notes, “the Smoky Mountain Boys were not built to be a 1920s string band, but rather, within the sensibilities of the late 1930s, to seem like what by then had become a ‘traditional’ string band.”<sup>10</sup>

By laying the foundation of an imagined “traditional” string band, they were in a sense defining the framework for a traditional string band. Tradition was defined by their own devices, deleting crooner-like pop songs from their repertoire, reinterpreting the string band sound by incorporating the sentimental Hawaiian sound of the dobro, and carefully manufacturing stage personas within the band, such as “Bashful Brother Oswald,” all created the image of the traditional string band.<sup>11</sup> Malone argues that this stylistic shift was one that not only helped shape Acuff’s early career and but also added to his longevity. Malone writes, “the overall mood and symbolism associated with his music (Acuff’s) may have made him doubly appealing in a period of social dislocation

---

<sup>8</sup> Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 258.

<sup>9</sup> Peterson. *Creating Country Music*, 146.

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

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

when people thought of home and the traditional values it represented...he may have transported millions of listeners back to a symbolic source of American culture itself, the hills of home.”<sup>12</sup>

The first commercial recording of “The Great Speckled Bird,” attributed to Acuff and his Crazy Tennesseans, was cut a little under two years prior to his performance on the Opry stage in 1938. Recorded in Chicago, October 26, 1936, for ARC (American Record Company), the song sold so quickly the company invited him back for another session just five months later to record a “follow-up” to the “Speckled Bird,” “The Great Speckled Bird #2,” recorded on March 22, 1937, in Birmingham, Alabama.<sup>13</sup> Other record companies quickly took notice, getting their groups to follow suit. Entertainers who recorded the song the following two years included the Morris Brothers, Charlie Monroe, Jack & Leslie, Roy Hall, and Wade Mainer.<sup>14</sup>

#### Significant Lesser-Known Recordings of “The Great Speckled Bird”

Two recordings of “The Great Speckled Bird” (outside of Acuff’s) convincingly illustrate the impact popular music had upon sacred song as commercial country music became a mature genre. Wade Mainer’s Mountaineers’ version titled “She is Spreading Her Wings for a Journey,” recorded for Bluebird, September 26, 1938, is of interest because of the group’s use of numerous stylistic choices that presage a polished, modern sound.<sup>15</sup> The most notable of these distinctions is the use of verse/chorus. The song

---

<sup>12</sup> Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers*, 100-101.

<sup>13</sup> Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry*, 256.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>15</sup> Russell, *Country Music Records*, 584.

consists of four verses, all of which are found in Acuff's rendition, separated by a chorus surprisingly not found in Acuff's:

She is spreading her wings for a journey,  
She is going to take by and by,  
Where the trumpets shall sounds in the morning,  
She will meet her dear Lord in the sky.<sup>16</sup>

This chorus, more commonly used as a verse, does surface in other variations of the song (including Charlie Monroe's version) and was most likely found in songbooks in the twenties and thirties.<sup>17</sup> Also of note is the use of harmony. The chorus is sung as a trio with a bass, tenor and lead vocal part - a modern technique used in gospel and popular music of the period. The tempo of the tune is drastically different from Acuff's. In Mainer's recording, it moves at a rapid pace, ending in just 2 minutes and 30 seconds, while getting through 4 verses and 3 choruses: Acuff's clocks in at 2 minutes and 52 seconds and delivers only five verses. Although Mainer recorded only two years later, these distinctions make the Mountaineers' version seem much more modern in comparison to Acuff's seemingly traditional approach.

Another significant interpretation of "The Great Speckled Bird" is a recording made by John Hensley, from Pineville Kentucky, recorded January 1938, by renowned field recorder Mary Elizabeth Barnicle.<sup>18</sup> John Hensley recorded numerous songs (at least 11) with Barnicle, all of which were non-secular in theme.<sup>19</sup> Although accompanied by professional banjo player George Roark on two recordings ("You've Got to Walk that

---

<sup>16</sup> Mainer's Mountaineers, "She is Spreading Her Wings for a Journey," recorded Bluebird, 1938, JSP Records, 2010, CD.

<sup>17</sup> Al Stewart, "On The Trail of the Great Speckled Bird," *Appalachian Heritage*, vol. 6, no 1, winter 1978, 66-80, accessed January 24, 2015, <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.

<sup>18</sup> John Hensley and Two Girls, "The Great Speckled Bird," recorded January 1938, Barnicle-Cadle Collection BC-274, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN.

<sup>19</sup> Hensley, Barnicle-Cadle Collection BC-244, 251, 274, 275, 287, 318, *Ibid*.

Lonesome Valley” and “I Cannot Tell How Much I Owe”) from Barnicle’s session, Hensley never recorded commercially.<sup>20</sup>

Instead of using the familiar melody for which “The Great Speckled Bird” was so recognizable, Hensley sang the text to another secular familiar melody. He sang the song in full, nine verses total, to a tune very much resembling the traditional “Last Gold Dollar,” also known as “Gold Watch and Chain,” a popular song first released by Ephraim Woodie and the Henpecked Husbands in 1929.<sup>21</sup> This unique use of contrafaction illustrates that “The Great Speckled Bird” was already in the tradition and most likely was a song popular in country and sacred repertoire before Acuff’s commercial recording in 1936, so much so that it inherited different melodies. Hensley’s interpretation provides further support that contrafaction, specifically with popular melody, was common within the religious realm of southern vernacular music.

The origins of this non-secular country hit have been somewhat clouded, leaving Acuff himself unsure of where the tune came from or who in fact wrote it. Though Acuff never claimed to have written the song, Red Jones, an original member of the Crazy Tennesseans and Smoky Mountain Boys, did recall Acuff paid Charles Swain, the gospel singer and member of the Knoxville quartet the Black Shirts, twenty-five cents for the text.<sup>22</sup> Both played regularly on WROL and WNOX in the early thirties. Jones remembers:

---

<sup>20</sup> George Roark and John Hensley, recorded January, 1938, Barnicle-Cadle Collection BC-287, Archives of Appalachia.

<sup>21</sup> Russell, *Country Music Records*, 971.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Red Jones by Charles Wolfe, 00390, 00391, 00582, 00583, 00584, Center of Popular Music, accessed on January 27, 2015. Also in Wardlow draft notes for upcoming Acuff Box Set on Bear Family.

That song came from the Church of God...down there at Cleveland, Tenn. Chuck Swain was originally from Kentucky and he came in the studio one day and did the song for us. He said it was his song and he had written it. Roy asked: 'What do you want for the tune?' He said: 'Twenty five cents' and Roy didn't have a quarter on him. I didn't have a quarter. So we scratched up a quarter to buy it. I told Roy it was too much like (I'm Thinking Tonight Of) 'My Blues Eyes' and he'd have to change the song to copyright it.<sup>23</sup>

From Acuff's perspective, the song was a vessel for his success, later stating, "the song brought Roy Acuff to the Opry. I didn't bring it, it brought me."<sup>24</sup> In a sense the song itself shaped the style Acuff and his band were to employ for years to come – music of the old traditional mountain way, similar to Peer's vision of commercial country music.

#### Origins and Folklore of "The Great Speckled Bird"

*Mrs. Sarah. Workman.  
Hurricane, W. va.  
March 4<sup>th</sup> 1950*

*Mr. Albert. Stewart. Dear Sir,*

*In reply to Your letter concerning the song called, The Speckled Bird I must ask You to be patient with Me, and I will try to give You the Information You ask for, plus an explanation of the song, but I fear it will be a tedious job, on paper.*

*I wrote The song in 1926, It is full of a doctron preached and believed by a Religious sect who call Their church The Church of God, With Headquarters in Cleevland Tenn. I am not a member of that Church, but I wrote the song to please some Friends of Mine, who belonged, I had so many requests for Balads, thatt I had 500 printed at The church of God publishing house in Cleevland Tenn. About 2 years later I had 500 books of My own songs printed at the same place, The books also had The Speckled bird in Them, and both the books and balads were sold at dirredifferent churches throughout Several states. I suppose That is How Roy Acup got hold of the song that has made Him Famous, but I doubt if He has the slightest idea Why it was written or What It Means*

---

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Red Jones.

<sup>24</sup> Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 257.



*Now I will endeavor to Explain the Song.*

*I chose a passage of Scripture from the old bible for a theme Which reads as follows, Mine Herritage, is unto Me as a Speckled Bird, and all The Birds round about Her, are Against Her.*

*This Religious Sect Holds, That The Speckled bird Mentioned in the above passage of Scripture, Refers to Their Church, or The Church Of God, They also Hold that Their church is the only church of Today which Is called by the name that Christ and The apostle Paul called The church by, To be A Member of their church one must go to an altar and pray for The Baptism of The Holyghost and they believe that when this one receives it, He will also receive the evidence and speak In an Unknown tongue just as the apostles did on the day of Pentacost, They believe if one doesnot have the Gift of the Holyghost, and belong to Their Church of God that He cannot meet Christ when He decends from Heaven on a cloud, but must remain on earth and pass through a Period of Great Tribulations, as John saw In revelations.*

*When I learned that The song was reputed by the news to Be internationally Famous, and was refered to as a Classic by Colier,s Magazine, I tried to establish that I was the one who wrote it, but The publishing house had not kept a record of ever printing such books or Balads, and I never had them Copyrighted, because I did not think they would ever be worth anything only to sell to that Particular Church of god. So If it will give You any pleasure Mr. Stewart, You may keep it along with Your Riddles, because in My oppinion, That is Where it Properly belongs.*

*Yours Truly Mrs. Sarah Workman.*

*I was Miss Sarah. K. Dillon of the Village of Webb. W. va. When I wrote the song.<sup>25</sup>*

The letter written by Mrs. Sarah Workman to researcher Al Stewart on March 4, 1950, is provocative for a number of reasons. Workman makes fairly detailed points as to when and why she penned the song, stating she eventually published it through the Church of God (another important aspect of the Speckled Bird's lyrics found in both Workman and Acuff's versions). Workman's claim of writing the song in 1926, some

---

<sup>25</sup> Stewart, "On the Trail of the Great Speckled Bird," 71. I have retained original wording and spelling in all statements by Workman.

ten years before Acuff's popular recording, a time when "The Prisoner's Song" was rising in popularity, is also of interest.<sup>26</sup>

Many musicians, including Acuff himself, remembered hearing "The Great Speckled Bird" years before it had been recorded. Thomas Clark, who used excerpts of the song in his book *The Kentucky*, also thought he remembered the song as being very old, though he was unable to produce evidence.<sup>27</sup> The inherent sense of tradition, and familiarity, found in the essence of "The Great Speckled Bird," made it impressionable to listeners of the period, creating the sense that it had long been weaved into America's cultural fabric.

Also of interest to this study is Workman's awareness of the sacred publishing industry and its national reach. Whether from firsthand experience or not, Workman refers to the common practice of publishing one's work through congregational publishing firms, in this case The Church of God. Workman is clearly aware that songbooks were an effective mode of transmission of helping to spread a song's popularity. She does not seem at all surprised by the idea that Acuff could have acquired the song through this sort of process, stating, "I suppose That is How Roy Acup got hold of the song that has made Him Famous," referring to one of the songbooks published in 1928 through the Church of God.<sup>28</sup>

Workman expresses a sense of victimization relevant to aspects of this study. Her reaction to a lack of acknowledgment of authorship is one of clear resentment that in ways questions the morality of the industry. Regarding Acuff's perception of the song she

---

<sup>26</sup> Stewart, "On the Trail of the Great Speckled Bird," 73.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 71.

writes, “I doubt if He has the slightest idea Why it was written or What It Means.”<sup>29</sup> This perspective is one that I have often wondered about. Did religious practitioners and sacred songwriters of the period find it difficult to cope with the fact that songs, meant solely for worship, were now being played on a commercial platform, for purposes of entertainment?

Workman’s jab at Acuff perhaps implies that his (and thus the commercial industry) rendition lacks the integrity and morality songs like “The Great Speckled Bird” were intended for. The fact that she doubts Acuff, member of the aforementioned Church of God, misrepresented the symbolism and meaning found in the song, expresses a distinct difference from her initial purpose of composing the song, worship versus entertainment. Regarding the meaning and symbolism found in “the Great Speckled Bird,” Acuff did change his perspective over the years. He noted that the line referencing The Church of God, “representing the great Church of God,” in fact referred to an all-inclusive church of God.<sup>30</sup> Malone points out Acuff’s shift in interpretation could have occurred because The Church of God, in Cleveland Tennessee, did come under some public criticism. Acuff was likely aware of this and soon distanced himself from the controversial church perhaps to not alienate his fans.<sup>31</sup>

Workman states, “I am not a member of that Church, but I wrote the song to please some Friends of Mine, who belonged, I had so many requests for Balads, thatt [sic.] I had 500 printed at The church of God”<sup>32</sup> How different was the intent in this

---

<sup>29</sup> Stewart, “On the Trail of the Great Speckled Bird,” 73.

<sup>30</sup> Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 257.

<sup>31</sup> Stewart, “On the Trail of the Great Speckled Bird,” 71.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

situation from Acuff's intent to learn, and thus, perform "The Great Speckled Bird?" Workman points out that she was hired or encouraged to write the song for her friends, arguably turning the song into something of a product. This is not to question Workman's motives, or for that matter Acuff's, but instead to look at how the two interpretations and experiences might in fact be interrelated.

These two situations are not as vastly different from one another (at a fundamental basis) as Workman might believe. Both are somewhat motivated by outside parties. The intent to perform is inherently something shaped to appease (or sometimes provoke) outside parties, in the same way that writing for hire might be. There is a fundamental need to connect to the outside world whether through performance or through writing a song. Both are crafted to be products for an outside group of participants, whether for an audience of strangers or for a more insular community like the Church of God congregation. In this particular situation, both are soulful expressions with the intent of inclusiveness. By writing a song reflecting the beliefs of a particular church, the author provides a platform to express specific religious ideas, just like Acuff, though on a commercial platform, presents his version of "the Great Speckled Bird" with a similar intent, that is, to invoke sentimentality and moral strength and specific religious ideas to an outside audience.

I should point out that Workman's letter, printed in the article "On the Trail of the Great Speckled Bird," as convincing and sincere as it may be, should be taken at face value. Whether she was, in fact, the author does not need to be the primary concern. Instead, her account can be interpreted as an insightful personal perspective of sacred

song transmission in the early twentieth century. Clearly, she was practiced and versed in sacred songwriting of the period.

The clouded history of the authorship of “The Great Speckled Bird” is one that will most likely remain debated, unproven, and mysterious for years to come, only adding to the romanticism and strength the song holds. Even though Workman’s account may have been convincing and thorough, she was not alone in claiming authorship of the influential song.<sup>33</sup> As Archie Green points out, “There are many instances of song hits which give rise to rival ownership claims. This seems particularly true where linguistic formulas, performing style, and ideas are held in common by members of a given community.”<sup>34</sup> This is an especially interesting quote when put into the context of religious communities that often perform sacred music. I have included Workman’s eight verses (located in the appendix) as printed in “On The Trail of the Great Speckled Bird,” for the purpose of comparison to Acuff’s abridged recorded version of the song, as well as to highlight the eloquence of her text.

A short explanation regarding possible origins of “The Great Speckled Bird” also can be found in the collection *Ozark Folksongs* by Vance Randolph and add to strength to Workman’s claim. It reads:

This piece is very popular with the “Holy Rollers” and brush-arbor evangelists. Some backwoods singers claim that it is at least forty years old, others say that it was written about 1934 by a radio entertainer of Springfield, Mo., known as ‘Uncle George,’ whose real name is Guy Smith. One text was printed anonymously in the Aurora, Mo., Advertiser, Mar. 26, 1936. Another version was copyrighted in 1937 by the M.M. Cole Pub. Co., of Chicago, with the words credited to Rev. Guy Smith and the music to Roy Acuff.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Stewart, “On The Trail of the Great Speckled Bird,” 77.

<sup>34</sup> Archie Green, *Only A Miner* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 309.

<sup>35</sup> Vance Randolph, *Ozark Folk Songs Vol. IV* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980), 59-60.

Clearly, the song found an audience in a similar fundamentalist community, far from its potential ‘home’ of Cleveland, Tennessee; it became a recognized song in the Ozarks shortly after Acuff’s original recording in 1936. In this context, it seems the song’s reach and growth within like-minded churches can be attributed to the songbooks referred to by Workman. Randolph also notes that the verse referencing the Church of God was both dropped from versions of the song as well as changed to meet the needs of the churches in which they were sung.<sup>36</sup>

### Contextualizing Ideology, Symbol, and Form within “The Great Speckled Bird”

#### Fundamentalist Ideology and Modes of Function

As I have attempted to illustrate, the evangelical Protestant church, has been influential to southern music and to the framework of country music culture. As Malone has noted, the rural southerner “is indoctrinated with the tenets of evangelical Protestantism from the time of birth, both inside and outside the confines of an established church.”<sup>37</sup> The pervasiveness of the church and religious culture throughout the South is illustrated through the traditions and interconnectedness existing in the relationship between sacred and commercial country song. Not only was “The Great Speckled Bird” a commercial success, but it was also a commonly sung favorite within

---

<sup>36</sup> Stewart, “On The Trail of the Great Speckled Bird.” 77.

<sup>37</sup> Malone, *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’*, 91.

the Pentecostal Holiness church and heard in churches across the country.<sup>38</sup> Historian W. J. Cash noted “Speckled Bird” was the “official hymn of the Church of God.”<sup>39</sup>

An important aspect of the Pentecostal framework found in “The Great Speckled Bird” (other than the reference to the Church of God) is the sense of immediacy portrayed through the lyrics. This urgency, found in much white gospel and non-secular music of the period, is common to the devotional style and practices aligned with Pentecostalism in the 1930s. Lyrics such as, “Desiring to lower her standard, They watch every move that she makes, They long to find fault with her teachings, But really they find no mistake,” are clearly accusatory of modern belief systems that reject faith and further the notion of an “us versus them” initiative, or believers versus non-believers.<sup>40</sup> The tone found in these lyrics function as effective tools for evangelism and thus conversion to Christianity. An immediate call to action is asked of the listener. Was this tone and verbiage another means of accentuating traditionalism and sentimentalism for a forgotten past?

The betrayal of the gospel is at the center of the text. It expresses doubt towards non-believers, and salvation for followers. This focus is one particularly resonant to the times. To many, popular culture was “drifting too far from the shore,” and was concerned primarily with modern initiatives centered upon consumerism. As Charles Wilson notes, “Modern thought... raised enormous fears for people rooted in theological and social orthodoxy.”<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> *Country Music U.S.A.*, 190.

<sup>39</sup> W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 297.

<sup>40</sup> Acuff, “The Great Speckled Bird,” Youtube.

<sup>41</sup> “Religion and the U.S. South,” *Southern Spaces*, March 16, 2004, accessed on May 12, 2015. <http://southernspaces.org/2004/overview-religion-and-us-south#section4>.

Similar perspectives were used in many non-secular hillbilly songs of the time. Songs such as “Powder and Paint,” recorded by Ira and Eugene Yates in 1928, state, “You’ll never get to Heaven with your bobbed hair because they don’t have any barbershops there. All my sins are taken away, taken away.”<sup>42</sup> Clearly, the image of the “bobbed hair” is symbolic of opposition to cultural change, specifically dealing with gender roles and consumerism. The woman described in the song seems to have left behind traditional values for modern ones, which are described as being sinful and frivolous.

Pentecostals had few biases when performing religious music and, as Goff notes, “more often than not, frowned on traditional music rather than the contemporary songs that appealed to believers’ emotions.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly he writes, “Pentecostals were most receptive to the music of the masses and saw little difficulty in combining the sounds of popular music with gospel lyrics.”<sup>44</sup> This is interesting in that a distinct tension emerges: the spread of a conservative tradition-based theology in the context of a modernized, popular music. Certainly a subject of tension and debate, some denominations found it an effective means for spreading the gospel; others thought it sacrilege. “To proponents of religious recordings,” Suisman writes, “the music industry was simply another conduit for God’s word, but critics charged that forcing religious music to conform to the musical idioms and commercial channels of the music business subverted the music’s underlying message- the glorification of spiritual values that transcended the market.”<sup>45</sup> Suisman also

---

<sup>42</sup> Ira and Eugene Yates, “You’ll Never Get to Heaven with Your Powder and Paint,” recorded October 23, 1929, Columbia Records, Bear Family, 2013. CD.

<sup>43</sup> Goff, *Close Harmony*, 41.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>45</sup> Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 279.



notes that devotional music was never compatible with the new musical order, “especially music that did not fit easily into a three-minute recording.”<sup>46</sup>

A number of scholars, such as Rosenberg, have suggested religious song in commercial country music “reflects the music’s close association with Appalachian migrants in urban settings.”<sup>47</sup> Rosenberg notes, “Sociologists studying these immigrant communities reported that urban ‘hillbillies’ rarely attended church,” because of a distrust of liberal urban churches.<sup>48</sup> Music with sacred focus and theme could have served the needs of listeners dissatisfied with formal church services.<sup>49</sup> Thus, for some, there may have not been a moral dilemma of any kind. Listeners may have appreciated hearing devotional music on a popular platform. Inherently, fundamentalist doctrine, stressing individual salvation, implies that salvation may be found through “expressions of religious faith,” such as listening to and performing sacred music without boundary.<sup>50</sup>

### Symbol

The speckled bird is referenced in Jeremiah, Chapter 12, Verse 9:

Mine heritage is unto me as a speckled bird, the birds round about are  
against her;  
Come ye, assemble all the beasts of the field, come to devour.<sup>51</sup>

It is important to note that the symbol of the speckled bird represents much more than a single denomination. Clearly, this song has spoken to religious denominations of all types, as well as to people outside of organized religion. To limit the song’s symbolic

---

<sup>46</sup> Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 279.

<sup>47</sup> Neil Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 231.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>51</sup> Stewart, “On The Trail of the Great Speckled Bird,” 76. King James Bible.

strength to one group of people would in effect serve as an injustice to a song that has great emotional significance and value in American culture as a whole. Stewart comes to an interesting conclusion concerning the symbolic nature of “The Great Speckled Bird.” He writes, “the speckled bird became for me a symbol of the divine invested in nature, all nature, not just man’s,” in effect defining the song’s meaning as all-inclusive.<sup>52</sup> In a similar fashion, Roy Acuff explained, “To me, the speckled bird means the church—not A church but ALL churches—with the other birds gathering round to peck and find fault.”<sup>53</sup> Perhaps, idealistic in theory, it could be argued the initial intent of “The Great Speckled Bird” was to facilitate conversion, and thus, create an insular community, an exclusive, rather than an inclusive group. However, through various ways I would argue the song in effect is inclusive through memory and familiarity pronounced by the choice and function of melody.

### Melody and Memory

The melody of “The Great Speckled Bird” perhaps serves as one of its strongest attributes for mainstream appeal. The use of familiar melody, stemming from the commercial country hit, “The Prisoner’s Song,” was and still is an effective means of instilling familiarity and tradition, something the Pentecostal church, and crafty songwriters of the period, were certainly aware of. Zwonitzer’s statement that “every time a singer sneaked it (the familiar melody) under his or her own lyrics, the song hit with the reflexive thump of recognition,” is one that seems to ring true, as the melody

---

<sup>52</sup> Stewart, “On The Trail of the Great Speckled Bird,” 78.

<sup>53</sup> Jim Tumblin, “Fountaincityians Who Made A Difference,” 2002, accessed December 12, 2014, [Fountaincityhistory.info/people1-acuff.htm](http://Fountaincityhistory.info/people1-acuff.htm).

served as a platform for numerous hits to come and catapulted many to country music fame.<sup>54</sup> Later, using the melody became something of a rite of passage for country music musicians, realizing the legacy and strength the melody in itself carried.

The function of familiar melody used in “The Speckled Bird” shifts as country music matured. Initially attached to popular songs such as, “The Prisoner’s Song” and “I’m Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes,” the melody was representative of the sentimentality expressed in nineteenth century popular song. But, in the coming years, as the melody was attributed to “The Speckled Bird,” (due to the longevity and consistent performance of the song in Acuff’s repertoire), it became representative of a new nostalgia, attached to the church and to tradition, perhaps becoming a model for the twentieth century.

Non-secular rural music in the early twentieth century was clearly influenced by the popular music and cultural climate of a new, modernized America. Similarly, the influence of non-secular music played a key role in defining early commercial country music. “The Great Speckled Bird” is just one of many tunes that were born out this union, yet its reach within early country music is perhaps the most significant. The images and anti-modern perspectives found within the “Great Speckled Bird” illustrate tensions present within sacred music of the period and within the churches as well: the struggle to maintain traditional values in an ever-changing, modern world. “The Great Speckled Bird” resonated deeply with the American listeners, helping both to commercialize and define early country music.

---

<sup>54</sup> Zwonitzer, *Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?*, 122.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE LEGACY OF THE GREAT SPECKLED BIRD

As country music continued to grow and to become a lucrative industry into the 1940s, a larger number of styles and performers broadened the sounds and audiences of the genre, making it more popular than ever.<sup>1</sup> Through new interpretations and song, the legacy of the “The Great Speckled Bird” continued to grow as well. With artists such as Ernest Tubb and Hank Williams, the emergence of honky-tonk music took the country music world by storm. These artists effectively merged the sounds of traditional hillbilly music’s southeastern styles (as expressed by Acuff) with the images and sounds of the Southwest. By the late 1940s, honky-tonk music was in full stride, electrifying instruments and audiences nationally, and making country music an industry of continual growth. Honky-tonk song reinterpreted the images of rusticity exhibited in hillbilly music of the 1920s and 1930s, and appealed to the growing southern white population transplanted into the modern, urban world.<sup>2</sup> Although the sounds and images of country music were shifting, religion and non-secular song remained prominent within country music culture. This was largely due to influential Opry artists such as Roy Acuff and Bill Monroe, among others.

#### Bill Monroe and Sacred Performance

Monroe, visionary leader of the Bluegrass Boys, was a musician conscious of the strengths that lie in exhibiting characteristics of both modernity and tradition. Monroe skillfully crafted his band’s aesthetic and sound by juxtaposing aspects of modernity (up-

---

<sup>1</sup> Malone, *Southern Music/American Music*, 97.

<sup>2</sup> Fox, *Natural Acts*, 92.

tempo rhythms, improvisatory instrumentals, usage of many musical keys, and a vast and varied repertoire) with staunch traditionalism (gospel quartets and sacred song, conservative attire, old-time fiddle music, and stage persona and dialogue akin to an “older” time) to create a brand of music (bluegrass) that was distinctly original. As a member of the Grand Ole Opry beginning in 1939, Monroe played a single gospel number for every performance on the Opry, to instill a set of values important to not only himself, but to country music consumers as well.<sup>3</sup>

Neil Rosenberg’s analysis of Monroe’s live performances at the Brown County Jamboree during the early sixties illustrates the importance of religious culture and of how gospel material fit into the larger frame of bluegrass and country music practices. During most portions of the show, Monroe would likely point out a musician’s virtuosic instrumental break or link a song such as “Uncle Pen” to a memory from his youth, connecting with the audience directly through his dialogue. However, when it came time to sing a hymn, a distinct shift occurred. Monroe was straightforward in announcing that a religious number was about to be performed. The flashy instrumental breaks Monroe and his band were known for ceased and a stripped-down performance, usually utilizing only guitar and mandolin, set the stage for a sacred gospel hymn. Rosenberg states, “All emphasis was placed upon the total performance of the song in reverent and ritualistic way; this is the hymn, it’s treated seriously, nothing more need be said.”<sup>4</sup>

This direct approach to performing sacred song illustrates Monroe’s assessment of his audience and perhaps a musical culture that, Rosenberg states, “believe in the ideas and sentiments expressed in the songs but do not want any particular brand of religion

---

<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History*, 233.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

served up to them.”<sup>5</sup> By not framing the song with personal reflections or stories, Monroe was in effect leaving the performance open for interpretation. As noted by Rosenberg, this is in line with the individualistic doctrine found in the fundamentalist Protestantism, accepted by many in Monroe’s audiences.<sup>6</sup> If members of the audience were not followers of Christianity, they were not expected to have a personal religious response; instead they could appreciate it at face value, for the music and performance qualities presented.

This distinct style of performance illustrates the importance religion plays in country music culture. It also illustrates the care and attention to detail regarding the interaction and interconnectedness of religion and audience artists like Monroe used in shaping stage shows. The hymn or sacred song became so ingrained within country and bluegrass music culture that it often became an expected part of performers’ repertoire and stage performance. Monroe’s careful framing of a secular and non-secular balance is the kind of negotiation that “The Great Speckled Bird” embodies.

### The Wild Side of Life

In 1952, the year Hank Thompson released “The Wild Side Of Life,” a honky-tonk anthem that resurrected the melody from the now standard “The Great Speckled Bird.” By this time, country music had shifted thematically to focus on the roughhewn yet romantic night life found in dance halls and bars across the Southwest. Images of barstools, beer glasses, and broken hearts dominated country song, reflecting the energy, prosperity, and freedom of the Post World War II years. As noted by Nick Tosches,

---

<sup>5</sup> Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History*, 238.

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

“Country music would take honky-tonk to the dark obverse of that carousing spirit as well: remorse and guilt and world weariness.”<sup>7</sup> As country song accentuated the pursuit of pleasure and entertainment, the industry profited greatly; the public was thirsty for music expressing this renewed sense of freedom.

The lyrics of “The Wild Side of Life” paint an unfortunate picture of the perceived “honky-tonk angel,” expressed through the pleas of a desperate man. Nightlife, liquor, promiscuity, and love are topics found in the lyrics, and are exemplary of the culture of the general “honky-tonk” song of the era. The modern world, depicted through the voice of the alienated male in songs such as “The Wild Side of Life,” became standard honky-tonk fare. “The Wild Side of Life” proved to be a favorite, as it spent fifteen weeks at No. 1 on the Billboard charts, becoming one of country music’s most popular recordings.<sup>8</sup>

I didn't know God made honky tonk angels  
I might have known you'd never make a wife  
You gave up the only one that ever loved you  
And went back to the wild side of life

The glamour of the gay nightlife has lured you  
To the places where the wine and liquor flows  
Where you wait to be anybody's baby  
And forget the truest love you'll ever know<sup>9</sup>

Assuming the songwriters used the melody of “The Great Speckled Bird,” rather than the other country tunes sharing the melody, the tensions that lie within Thompson’s honky-tonk hit are clear. When Thompson, and later, Kitty Wells, recorded songs

---

<sup>7</sup> Nick Tosches, “Honky-tonkin’: Ernest Tubb, Hank Williams, and the Bartender’s Muse” in *Country: The Music and The Musicians*, edited by Paul Kingsbury, Alan Axelrod, and Susan Costello, (New York: Abbeville 1994) 223.

<sup>8</sup> Don Cusic, *Discovering Country Music*, (Westport: Praeger, 2001), 71.

<sup>9</sup> Hank Thompson, “The Wild Side of Life,” written by Arlie Carter, William Warrem, recorded December 11, 1951, accessed on January 2, 2015, Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4xgOAc3lZg>.

borrowing “The Speckled Bird’s” melody, listeners would have readily recognized the melody as being a gospel song. Therefore, the sentiments found within “The Wild Side of Life” and “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels” not only would have been impactful, exciting, and nostalgic, but also expressive of immorality and potentially jarring. The traditional and fundamentalist perspective found in “The Great Speckled Bird” is not found in Thompson’s song (though faith is a theme within the song). Instead, the images of leading a sinful life replace the idea of salvation and avoidance of earthly sin. Earthly sin, with promiscuity and drinking being the most prevalent themes, is unapologetically and bluntly described in the lyrics, “I didn’t know God made honky-tonk angels.”

Clearly, gender roles play a large role in the song. This multifaceted statement, “I didn’t know God made honky-tonk angels,” implies the woman in the song is lacking in morals, seduced by the glamour of the nightlife. The implication that women should be home, being the domestic provider, certainly not out on the town living a carefree life, is a dominant theme, perpetuating the nineteenth century value system of the “cult of domesticity.”<sup>10</sup> The co-writer of the song describes being inspired to write the song after meeting a woman at a bar who “found the glitter of the gay night life too hard to resist.”<sup>11</sup> By “finding the nightlife too hard to resist,” women were in effect defying tradition and moral codes, and exchanging them for frivolous, sinful delights.

Paul Kingsbury describes the song as, “a song that appealed to those who thought the world was going to hell and that the faithless women deserved a good deal of

---

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976) 21.

<sup>11</sup> Bill Malone, “Classic Country Music: A Smithsonian Collection,” included with *Classic Country Music: A Smithsonian Collection* 4-disc set (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1990).



blame.”<sup>12</sup> When interpreting the song as such, parallels between it and “The Great Speckled Bird,” do in fact exist. The implication of a “world going to hell” is similar to the mainstream cultural perspective described in “The Great Speckled Bird.” It could be argued that the central theme of both songs is the same; that is, modern times are destroying a traditional value system.

The reference to God in “The Wild Side of Life” is also of interest. The narrator questions the fact that God would have been responsible in creating someone, specifically a woman, with such a lack of ethics and morals. This perspective illustrates the loss of control the postwar male came to represent through honky-tonk song. Hearing descriptions of a woman ‘gone wrong’ to the tune of something representative of devotion and faith would certainly make lyrics that much more impactful. The prominent tension found with use of the description of a woman as being a “honky-tonk angel” serves a similar function. The dichotomy of a sinful ‘angel’ is described, painting a complex image of women. The woman in the song is breaking hearts and households, yet there is a prevalent undercurrent of lust and longing, capitalized by the use of the word “angel.”

Themes within “The Wild Side Of Life” in a sense left women without a voice, expected to obediently watch over the household. Just months later a song would be written that would challenge the misogynistic ideas and conservatism expressed in “The Wild Side of Life.” Though it would be sung by the dubbed, “Queen of Country,” it would in fact be penned by a man.

---

<sup>12</sup> Paul Kingsbury, *The Grand Ole Opry, History of Country Music* (New York: Villard Books, 1995), 96.

“Leave God Out of It”: Kitty Wells and Redefining the Honky Angel

Kitty Wells, the honky-tonk era’s first female star, was an artist of abundant contradiction. An innovator in the country music genre, Wells was the first female artist recognized on her own merits as an individual performer (rather than in a group or familial setting, such as Rose Maddux or the Carter Family). She sang about betrayal, heartbreak, and sin-common themes in honky-tonk music of the period. Yet, Wells was in fact an understated, tradition-bearing mother, described as a shy, polite, and dutiful housewife.<sup>13</sup> Though Wells may have sung about the barrooms and honky-tonks, she was able to uphold an image of domesticity and morality seldom found in the themes of her songs.<sup>14</sup> Historian Pamela Fox argues that Wells was accepted in the male-dominated world of country music “because she paradoxically signified ‘Victorian-influenced old-country culture’ and thereby posed no seeming threat to either the industry or conventional gender codes.”<sup>15</sup> Wells’ name, borrowed from the folk song “Sweet Kitty Wells,” helped to endorse the notion of tradition and thus traditional values.<sup>16</sup>

After recording numerous unsuccessful records for RCA in 1949 and 1950, including Maddux’s “Gathering Flowers for the Master’s Bouquet,” Wells was on the edge of retirement, feeling unmotivated to push further as a performer.<sup>17</sup> Persuaded to record one more time for Decca with a recommended song titled “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels,” things were quickly about to change for the artist. The song “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” was recorded May 3, 1952, as a rebuttal

---

<sup>13</sup> Mary Bufwack and Robert Oermann. *Finding Her Voice, The Saga of Women in Country Music*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1993) 176.

<sup>14</sup> Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 224.

<sup>15</sup> Fox, *Natural Acts*. 94.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>17</sup> Bufwack, *Finding Her Voice*, 178.

to Thompson's provoking message in "The Wild Side of Life." The recording launched Wells to fame, bringing a long-needed voice to women in a male-dominated country music culture.

Wells was surprised by the success of "Honky Tonk Angels" and did not initially think much of the recording: "It was just a song to me at the time... I said 'Well, it probably won't make a hit, but we will at least get a session fee out of it.'" <sup>18</sup> Three weeks after the session, Wells had hit. Reaching *Billboard* on June 18, and continuing to climb the charts, the song became a bonafide hit by the end of the year. By August, it had sold a half million copies, and knocked "The Wild Side of Life" out of the number one best seller position, becoming the first No. 1 record by a female artist since *Billboard* began tracking country artists in 1944. <sup>19</sup> Wells recalls years later, "I was shocked. Women never had hit records in those days. Very few of them even recorded." <sup>20</sup>

The song, turning the roles upside down by casting the role of blame upon the male, was initially controversial to a conservative industry. For a short time, the Grand Ole Opry would not allow performance of the song and NBC radio quickly banned it, defining it as "suggestive." <sup>21</sup> Yet, the song was resonant to a postwar American audience, particularly women, who perhaps heard a song reinforcing a new perspective, that redefined the role of women in contemporary culture. The song became a hit solely based upon live audience response and jukebox plays. <sup>22</sup> Minnie Pearl, comedienne on the Opry, recalls the song's effect, stating, "After World War II things began to change.

---

<sup>18</sup> Bufwack, *Finding Her Voice*, 178.

<sup>19</sup> Kingsbury, *The Grand Ole Opry, History of Country Music*, 96.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Bufwack, *Finding Her Voice*, 178.

<sup>22</sup> Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to be an Okie* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 174.

Women began getting fed up with their way of life. They started to push against it, and when they heard songs that reinforced their feelings, or songs of love from a woman's point of view, they identified with it and they went out and bought records."<sup>23</sup>

An analysis of the text in "Honky Tonk Angels" reveals the subtly combative, empowered female voice, effectively captured by Wells' performance. She sings, "From the start most every heart that's ever broken, Was because there always was a man to blame." This statement is much more than "suggestive," bluntly pointing the finger of blame at men, a perspective rarely seen or heard at the time especially in the conservative world of country music. It comes as no surprise, then, that the industry was reluctant to play the song for a national audience, possibly for fear of being too radical or, for a male dominated industry, for fear of promoting ideology they did not find suitable.

In stating "it wasn't God who made honky tonk angels," Wells effectively says to keep God and faith out of the argument. This candid statement takes Thompson's rather chauvinistic remark, "I didn't know God made honky tonk angels," and chews it up and spits it out, making it purposefully inflammatory and combative, an approach much more radical (because of gendered perspective) than that of "The Wild Side of Life." In "The Wild Side of Life" sin is implied as an inherent characteristic of the modern woman. However, Wells dispels this stereotype by illustrating that the narrator is "both a traditional and modern woman," affected but not controlled by men's actions of immorality.<sup>24</sup> By reassessing power and gender roles, Wells illustrates the falsities and "ideological construct" of the honky-tonk "angel."<sup>25</sup> By stating that faith and God have

---

<sup>23</sup> Bufwack, *Finding Her Voice*, 179.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Fox. *Natural Acts*. 95.

nothing to do with the matter, Wells makes a clear departure from that of “The Wild Side of Life.”

As Wells states, “it wasn’t God who made honky tonk angels,” but rather men, she reminds the listener of the importance of God and faith, and the weak tendencies of humankind, specifically pointing to male immorality. So, while Wells removes the notion of God from the argument, at the same time she infuses faith into the song, sculpting an interesting tension and dynamic, making “Honky Tonk Angels” multifaceted through non-secular “traditional” ideology. With a subtle message of faith and morality at the center of Wells’ argument, a reemergence of themes found in “The Great Speckled Bird” are present. The tension between an old and new value system is clear; however, traditional ideology is expressed and carried by the melody of the “Speckled Bird.” Again, as with “The Wild Side of Life” the use of contrafaction of “The Speckled Bird” helps to drive home the issues of morality and infidelity, calling attention to the “real” sinner through a recognizable melody.

As I sit here tonight the jukebox playin'  
The tune about the wild side of life  
As I listen to the words you are sayin'  
It brings memories when I was a trusting wife

It wasn't God who made Honky Tonk angels  
As you said in the words of your song  
Too many times married men think they're still single  
That has caused many a good girl to go wrong

It's a shame that all the blame is on us women  
It's not true that only you men feel the same  
From the start most every heart that's ever broken  
Was because there always was a man to blame<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Kitty Wells, “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels,” recorded May 3, 1952, Decca Records, RCA 2002, CD.

As groundbreaking and popular as “Honky Tonk Angels” was, “the country music industry was developing a set of business practices that would keep female performers down for decades to come.”<sup>27</sup> Females would not see the success of Wells for many years, as women’s liberation in country music was a painfully slow movement.<sup>28</sup>

During the Cold War years, country music continued to perpetuate the cult of domesticity and traditional values found in early commercial country, yet the juxtaposition between old and new values found in honky-tonk took on a greater importance than ever before. Songs such as “Honky-tonk Angels” expressed a gradually-shifting country music culture. As many country songs reflected the “wild side of life” during the post war era, sacred song was still an important characteristic in commercial country music. Country artists such as the Louvin Brothers and the Bailes Brothers continued bringing gospel and sacred song to popular masses, illustrating the ever-present desire for traditional, sentimental, conservative ideology found within country music culture.

---

<sup>27</sup> Bufwack, *Finding Her Voice*, 180.

<sup>28</sup> Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 224.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Through tracing the many varying influences that helped to shape “The Great Speckled Bird,” it becomes clear that sacred song and popular song are interconnected. By studying the interconnectedness of religious music and hillbilly music, a distinct convergence of cultures surfaces. As popular music developed and became more accessible to a national audience, so, too, did religious music. As illustrated throughout this study, religious music movements often occurred in tandem with American popular music movements. Thus, popular music informed sacred music, influencing structures, melodies, themes, and inevitably the commercialization of the genre; sacred music was equally informative, influencing image, cultural values, and ideology. As the distinct non-secular country song has surfaced through this study, it has become clear that focused scholarship can build and expand upon this classification.

Examination of faith and religion provides just one perspective on the rich cultures that have gone into the construction of country music. Yet, this one characteristic seems to be particularly central to country music culture and in various ways (directly and indirectly) makes up large part of the country music repertoire. Southern Protestant religion is at the foundation of a vast number of country music songs, both non-secular and secular and has become an important characteristic of what defines American country music.

With the guidance and vision of commercial entrepreneurs such as Vaughan, Hay, and Peer, the popular non-secular song became representative of tradition (though often fabricated), offering a voice and comfort to a culture struggling with modern values and

change. A carefully manufactured use of sentimentality, neo-traditionalism, and southern religious ideology and image helped bring sacred music into the commercial realm, becoming both a vessel for profit and an effective means of spreading religious ideology.

Country music's non-secular song was created through a combination of cultural diversity and popular movements that can be no more effectively illustrated than through "The Great Speckled Bird." Through a diverse array of variations and interpretations "Speckled Bird" not only has become representative of traditional country music, but also of American culture as a whole. When Acuff performed "The Great Speckled Bird" on the stage of the Opry in 1938, forever solidifying his place in country music history, Ralph Peer's commercial vision not only came to life, but also reached its full potential. Through a most convincing vessel, "The Great Speckled Bird," Acuff embodied the distinctions Peer felt an American audience would be responsive to— nostalgia, neo-traditionalism, religious ideology, and familiarity. The song and meanings attached to "The Great Speckled Bird" continue to grow, evolve, and develop still today; adding to the relevance and historical significance that just one song has had upon country music culture and the cultural fabric of America.



## WORKS CITED

- Acuff, Roy. "The Great Speckled Bird," words by Rev. Guy Smith, music by Roy Acuff. Recorded October 20, 1936. ARC 7-01-59. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRbfQrKcVjg>.
- Austin, William. *The Songs of Stephen Foster From His Time To Ours*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Ayers, Edward. *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*. Oxford University Press, New York. 1992.
- Bohlman, Philip. *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1988.
- Boles, John. *The Great Revival: 1787-1805*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972.
- Brobston, Stanley. "A Brief History of White Southern Gospel Music and a Study of Selected Amateur Family Gospel" PhD diss. New York University, 1977.
- Bufwack, Mary, and Robert Oermann. *Finding Her Voice, The Saga of Women in Country Music*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1993.
- Cash, W.J. *The Mind of the South*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941.
- Clark, Thomas. *Bluegrass Cavalcade*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015. Accessed March 20, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt130jb0d>.
- Cobb, Buell. *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music*. Athens: University of Georgia, 1978.
- Cobb, James Charles. *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999.
- Cohen, Norm. "The Skillet Lickers: A Study of a Hillbilly Band and Its Repertoire" *The Journal of American Folklore*, 78, no. 309 (July-Sept., 1965).
- Cusic, Don. *The Sound of Light: A History of Gospel Music*. Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990.
- . *Discovering Country Music*. Westport: Praeger, 2001.
- Delmore, Alton. *The Truth is Stranger Than Publicity*. Country Music Foundation

- Press, 1977.
- Duck, Leigh Ann. *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009.
- Fleming, Jo Lee. *James D. Vaughan, Music Publisher, Lawrenceburg, Tennessee. 1912-1964*. New York: Union Theological Seminary, 1972.
- Fox, Pamela. *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009.
- Goff, James. *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel*, Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Green, Archie. *Only A Miner*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972.
- Hamm, Charles. *Yesterdays: Popular Song In America*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983.
- Hatch, Nathan. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- Hensley, John and Two Girls. "The Great Speckled Bird." Recorded January, 1938. BC-274, Barnicle- Cadle Collection, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN.
- Horn, Dorothy. *Sing Me To Heaven: A Study of Folk and Early American Materials in Three Old Harp Books*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1970.
- Huber, Patrick. *Linthead Stomp*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.
- . "Black Hillbillies: African American Musicians on Old-Time Records, 1924-1932." In *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*. Edited by Diane Pecknold, 19-82. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.
- Jacobson, Joshua. "Contrafaction." *Music Faculty Publications, Northeastern University* (Fall 2010): 211-228. Accessed March 14, 2015.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20000316>.
- Kay Hively and Albert E. Brumley, Jr., *I'll Fly Away: The Life Story of Albert E. Brumley*, Branson, MO: Mountaineer Books, 1990.
- Kehrberg, Kevin. "'I'll Fly Away': The Music and Career of Albert E. Brumley." PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2010. Accessed January 4, 2015.  
[http://uknowledge.uky.edu/gradschool\\_diss/49](http://uknowledge.uky.edu/gradschool_diss/49).

- Kingsbury, Paul. *The Grand Ole Opry, History of Country Music*. New York: Villard Books, 1995.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009.
- La Chapelle, Peter. *Proud to be an Okie*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2007.
- Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Mainer's Mountaineers. "She is Spreading Her Wings for a Journey." Recorded September 29, 1938 Bluebird, JSP Records, 2010, CD.
- Malone, Bill. "Classic Country Music: A Smithsonian Collection," included with *Classic Country Music: A Smithsonian Collection* 4-disc set. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1990.
- . *Country Music U.S.A.*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985.
- . *Don't Get Above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class*. Champaign: University of Illinois, 2002.
- . *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers*. Athens: University of Georgia, 1993.
- . *Southern Music/American Music*. Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1979.
- Mazor, Barry. *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music*. Chicago Review Press, 2014.
- Middleton, Richard. "In the Groove or Blowing Your Mind? The Pleasures of Musical Reception." In *Popular and Social Relations*, edited by Tony Bennett. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986.
- Miller, Karl. *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Nathan, Hans. *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977.
- Odum, Howard. *An American Epoch; Southern Portraiture in the National Picture*. New York: Holt, 1930.
- OKeh Records advertisement, *Talking Machine World*, June 15, 1924, n.p. Quoted in Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,

2008.

- Patterson, Beverly. *The Sound of the Dove*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995.
- Pecknold, Diane. *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.
- Peer, Ralph. Interview by Lilian Borgeson. Hollywood, California, 1959. Southern Folklife Collection, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina. Quoted in David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Peterson, Richard. *Creating Country Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Porterfield, Nolan. *Jimmie Rodgers: the Life and Times of America's Blue Yodeler*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992.
- Randolph, Vance. *Ozark Folk Songs Vol. IV*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980.
- Robertson, Eck. "Rye Whiskey." Recorded in Amarillo Texas, 1963. County, 1999. CD.
- Roediger, David. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Rosenberg, Neil. *Bluegrass, A History*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005.
- Russell, Tony. *Country Music Records: A Discography- 1921-1942*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- . *Country Music Records*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Sanjek, Russell. *American Popular Music and its Business, Volume III*. Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Shaftel, Mathew. "Singing a New Song: Stephen Foster and the New American Minstrelsy," *Music and Politics II* (Summer 2007). Accessed on May 22, 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0001.203>.
- Singer, David. "God and Man in Baptist Hymnals, 1784-1844," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 9, (Fall 1968): 14-26. Accessed May 5, 2015. <https://journals.ku.edu/index.php/amerstud/article/viewFile/2157/2116>.
- Steel, David. *The Makers of the Sacred Harp*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

- Stewart, Al. "On The Trail of the Great Speckled Bird." *Appalachian Heritage* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 66-80. Accessed January 24, 2015. <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.
- Suisman, David. *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- The Skillet Lickers, "Corn Licker Still in Georgia Part 1," recorded November 1, 1927. Columbia Records. JSP Records, 2012. CD.
- Thompson, Hank. "Wild Side of Life," by Arlie Carter, William Warrem. Recorded December 11, 1951. Accessed on January 2, 2015. Mp3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4xgOAc3lZg>.
- Toches, Nick. *Country: The Twisted Roots of Rock and Roll*. New York: Da Capo Press, 2009.
- . "Honky-tonkin': Ernest Tubb, Hank Williams, and the Bartender's Muse." In *Country: The Music and The Musicians*, edited by Paul Kingsbury, Alan Axelrod, and Susan Costello, 152-176. New York: Abbeville, 1994.
- Toll, Robert. *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Tumblin, Jim. "Fountaincitiations Who Made A Difference." 2002. Accessed December 12, 2014. [fountaincityhistory.info/people1-acuff.htm](http://fountaincityhistory.info/people1-acuff.htm).
- Wells, Kitty. "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels." Recorded May 3, 1952, Decca Records, RCA 2002, CD.
- Welter, Barbara. *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976.
- Wilson, Charles Reagan. "The Religion of the Lost Cause: Ritual and Organization of the Southern Civil Religion, 1865-1920." *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 46, no. 2 (May, 1980): 219-238. Accessed May 4, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2208359>.
- . "Religion and the US South." *Southern Spaces*. March 16, 2004. Accessed on May 12, 2015. <http://southernspaces.org/2004/overview-religion-and-us-south#section4>.
- Winans, Robert. "The Folk, the Stage, and the Five String Banjo of the Nineteenth Century." *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 89, no. 354 (Oct. - Dec., 1976): 407-437. Accessed November 4, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/539294>.

- Wolfe, Charles. "Gospel Boogie: White Southern Gospel Music Transition 1945-55." In *Popular Music I: Folk or Popular? Distinctions, Influences, Continuities*, edited by Richard Middleton and David Horn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- . "'I'd Rather Be an Old-Time Christian': The Music of Albert E. Brumley," *Precious Memories* (May-June 1991): 15-18. Quoted in James Goff, *Close Harmony*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- . *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, Country Music Foundation Press, 1999.
- . "Gospel Music, White." *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 12, Music*. Chapel Hill University of North Carolina Press, 2009, 69-74.
- . Interview with Red Jones, 00390, 00391, 00582, 00583, 00584, The Charles Wolfe Audio Collection, Center of Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, accessed on January 27, 2015. Also referenced in Wardlow draft notes for forthcoming Acuff Box Set on Bear Family in 2016.
- Wolfe, Charles and Ted Olson. *The Bristol Sessions*. North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2005.
- Wynne, Ben. *In Tune: Charley Patton, Jimmie Rodgers, and the Roots of American Music*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State university Press, 2014.
- Yates, Ira and Eugene. "You'll Never Get to Heaven with Your Powder and Paint," Recorded October 23, 1929. Columbia Records. Bear Family, 2013. CD.
- Zwonitzer, Mark. *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002.

## APPENDIX

### SARAH (DILLON) WORKMAN LYRICS

#### The Speckled Bird

1. What a Beautiful though I am thinking concerning The Great Speckled bird.  
You remember Her name is recorded on the pages of Gods, holy word.
2. All the Other birds flocking around her, and She is despised by The Squad,  
And This Great Speckled bird in the Bible,s representing the Great Church of  
God.
3. With all Other Churches against Her, They envy Her glory and Fame, They  
hate Her because She is Chosen, and because She is called by His name.
4. Desiring to lower Her standards, They watch every move that She makes,  
They long to find Fault with Her teachings, but truly they find No Mistakes.
5. She is spreading Her wings for a Journey, She is going to take By and By, For  
when The Trump sounds in The morning, She shall meet Her dear Lord in the  
Sky,
6. In the presence of All Her Despisers, with a song never uttered before, She  
will Rise, and be gone in a moment, Till the Great Tribulations are o,er.
7. I am glad I have learned of Her meakness, I am Proud That My Name,s on  
Her book,  
For I want to be One never fearing, on the face of My Savior, to look
8. And When He comes, decending from Heaven, On a Cloud, as He writes in  
His Word,  
We shall Joyfully be Caught up to meet Him, On the wings of The Great  
Speckled Bird.

Sarah. K. Dillon. <sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Stewart, "On The Trail of the Great Speckled Bird," 72.

## VITA

KRISTOPHER TRUELSEN

Education: M.A. Appalachian Studies, East Tennessee State University  
Johnson City, Tennessee 2015

B.A. Liberal Arts, Bluegrass, Old-time, and Country Music  
Studies, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City,  
Tennessee 2013

Professional Experience: Producer and Creative Assistant, WBCM, The Birthplace  
of Country Music, Bristol, Virginia 2013-2015

Tuition Scholar/Research Assistant, East Tennessee  
University, Johnson City Tennessee 2013-2015