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Exploring Authenticity in Old-Time Music

Mikaela Langley

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By

Mikaela Elizabeth Langley

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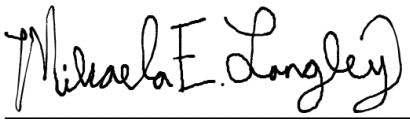

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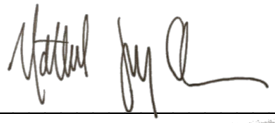

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Nathaniel Olson, Thesis Mentor Date

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Roy Andrade, Reader Date

I was born in the delta flatland of West Tennessee in January of 1998. For the first four years of my life, I lived in a grand white-washed farmhouse that was built in 1910 in the middle of an 89-acre cotton field in my hometown of Nutbush, TN. Nutbush is a small community sustained in the south fork of the Forked Deer river watershed, immortalized in the song "Nutbush City Limits" written by its most famous inhabitant, Tina Turner. In nearby Brownsville, and many other small communities in between, blues legends like Sleepy John Estes had left their legacies in record form as well, the lonesome sounds of the delta belting through the strings of a slide guitar and an elderly voice warbled with the afterthoughts of liquor.

Having parents who were extremely interested in local history and heritage, I spent much of my childhood participating in Civil War reenactments, being dressed in detailed cotton dresses made by my mother skilled in historical garment-making, listening to music by the 2nd South Carolina String Band and hammered dulcimer player Jim Taylor, and the many attendees of the reenactments who scratched out tunes on cigar box fiddles. While I have certainly been surrounded by music of many genres my entire life, this was the first encounter I ever had with old-time music, and I couldn't get enough.

Around this time the movies "Cold Mountain" and "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" had been made, and I was consuming the music from them at an insatiable pace. I started Suzuki lessons on the violin at the age of three, because no one within a hundred mile radius was giving fiddle lessons. So during my 15 years of classical, I was teaching myself fiddle by listening to the Civil War music CDs and reading fiddle tunes off of sheet music. I played old-time tunes in fiddle contests meant for Texas style fiddling, because I played what I liked and didn't really know the difference other than my dissatisfaction for the gimmicky slides and trills of the tunes I heard others play.

In my teenage years, I varied greatly with my tastes. I found an interest in old country music from the place I now lived in Camden, TN where Patsy Cline, Cowboy Copas, and Hawkshaw Hawkins perished in a plane crash in March of 1963. I took lessons from Deanie Richardson for bluegrass fiddle, clawhammer banjo from Marlin Rood, bluegrass dobro and mandolin from Garry Adams. I took Texas style fiddle lessons with Megan Lynch. I attended music camps in California run by Tristan and Tahsina Clarridge, where everything from Texas fiddle to contemporary Bluegrass to old-time music was taught. It was there that I became acquainted with John Herrmann from North Carolina, who has been involved professionally with old-time music since around the revival. I am very grateful for John's friendship and everything he has taught me through the years. He even wrote one of the recommendation letters that helped to land me in the Fine and Performing Arts Honors for which I am writing this thesis.

When I decided to come to ETSU for school, I had not originally planned to major in Bluegrass, Old-Time, and Country Music Studies. I started with a minor in BLUE and had intended to major in Nutrition or Nursing. After one semester, I couldn't resist the call to the thing I most wanted to do, and for the thing I had truly come there for. During my time in the program, I have come to think of Roy Andrade as my mentor of old-time music, hilariously and ironically so considering the track he played banjo in on the Cold Mountain soundtrack ("Like a Songbird That Has Fallen" by the Reeltime Travelers) was my favorite song for many years of my childhood, and part of the inspiration for me to want to play music at all.

During the 4 years that I have been part of the BLUE program, I have received an excellent education on matters of old-time and roots music, and I have further developed my tastes and interests past the now-shallow thoughts that my 18-year-old self once had about my place in this world. In our study of old-time music at ETSU, we tend to focus on source

recordings from long-dead people starting with the mid 1920s through 1945-1947. In a few special cases we have studied the music of Doc Watson, John Hartford, Hazel & Alice, maybe a few other revivalists. While I respected the process and the historical and anthropological significance of these studies, I found myself frustrated at times by my personal interests being nowhere to be seen. Roy was part of a successful modern stringband for several years. The Reeltime Travelers were able to blend traditional songs and tunes with originals in the same style seamlessly, and they were a successful touring band in the late 1990s and early 2000s alongside Old Crow Medicine Show and Foghorn Stringband. My younger self had a lot of trouble wrapping my head around only learning from source recordings, and I became dissatisfied with my own efforts in learning the music, and not being able to recognize my own musical cravings.

I do understand that certain parameters have to be placed in order for the old-time side of the our program to be seen as academically viable and for us to be taken seriously, but I have also experienced my fair share of frustration due to the lack of interest from fellow students for creativity and originality in the style of music I am most drawn to playing. The bluegrass side of things gets to experiment all the time with originals, arranging, and general tomfoolery because it is considered part of the tradition. I came to think of bluegrass as the younger sibling to old-time, getting away with things that the older and more responsible child could not.

In the spring semester of 2020, I intended to test this barrier with the band I was directing as part of the Band Leadership Capstone so that it might be considered an option for future students. Although we were placed in the progressive band slot, it was a fitting compromise for the experiment that was about to begin. I believe there is a way to both respect and honor the tradition of old-time music going all the way back to its origins in 18th and 19th century folk

music, as well as embracing the passing of time by creating new songs and tunes in this same tradition in such a way that they can merge on a timeline and keep the tradition alive.

My band consisted of Hannah Roper (banjo, vocals), Emily Roper (mandolin, vocals), Katelynn Lowe (clarinet, bass, guitar), and myself (fiddle, guitar, vocals). My lesson plan for the semester was to begin with songs and tunes that were familiar to us in some way, pulling from all genres of music and converting them to an old-time stringband sound. Some examples of things we worked on are “Landslide” by Stevie Nicks, “Gentle On My Mind” by John Hartford, and “1952 Vincent Black Lighting” by Richard Thompson.

Traditional songs and tunes were also allowed of course, but my intentions were to get us out of the habit of copying the exact styles of the pre-1945 source recordings that we typically used in our academic studies, and into the habit of applying those stylistic choices to newer music to make it sound old. I also intended for us to employee a significant number of original songs and possibly some tunes to finish off the cycle, leaving us with a repertoire of roughly 33.33% traditional material, 33.33% modern material, and 33.33% original material.

Of course as most things in my life tend to go, this plan fell to pieces with the introduction of COVID-19 in the middle of March of our spring semester. I believe part of leading a band is learning how to be flexible and adaptable to the changes in the environment around you, and how to successfully pull a group of people through a tough situation by being their guide. In conclusion, this was my plan for my semester of the Band Leadership Capstone from earlier this year, and while it certainly did not go as planned, I am excited to see the possibilities that could result from my plans in future situations.

When I wrote this plan, I was obviously unaware of the COVID-19 situation that was about to unfold, which has now cancelled all in-person classes and gatherings for the rest of the spring semester and for most of the fall semester in which I have been composing this thesis. This now means that I can no longer include the performance aspect that I had originally intended as part of my experiment. My bandmates and I have continued to work on some songwriting from afar, but there is truly only so much to be done electronically. I will do my best to record and interpret my findings on this subject from my sources, and from the many philosophical conversations I have had with my fellow students on this subject in the past year. I hope this study I've done is a helpful comparison, and an inspiration for further thought on the matter.

In an article by Benjamin Filene written for Project Muse, he talks about the implications of the way the film "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" chose to represent bluegrass and old-time music. Filene's main point in this article is that he is dissatisfied with the way "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" left things hanging with the world of folk music. He discusses folk revivals throughout the 20th century, during the 1930s and then again in the 1960s, and finally the modern folk revival brought on by O Brother. He is left dissatisfied mainly by the "unauthentic" presentation of the music in the context of the movie, that it is presented as a relic of a bygone era only to be viewed in sepia tone and not as a currently living, breathing art form that exists in present-day.

It seems like Filene is concerned about the way in which the film and associated soundtrack portrayed folk music attracting an "unauthentic" audience who does not fully understand the history or historical context of the music they are so eagerly consuming. I might have misunderstood this, but the general feeling I grasped from reading this article is that he is

concerned about mass audiences being attracted to the romanticized misrepresentation of what folk music actually is and that they are just mindlessly consuming Dan Tyminski's vocals because it's something slightly more substantial than the hollow and meaningless pop music to which they are accustomed. I believe that in some small way this is a valid concern, but I have a very personal argument against it as well.

As I discussed earlier, the "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" film was actually a huge part of why I ended up playing old-time music, and pursuing a degree in it here at ETSU. I was only 2 years old when the movie came out in 2000, but my parents being the history buffs and acoustic music connoisseurs they were immediately bought a copy of the movie when it became available, and it has since become a household staple. At 3 I started Suzuki lessons because I asked to play the fiddle, not knowing at the age of 3 that there was much of a difference between the fiddle music I was attracted to and the classical lessons that were available to me in my geography location.

My personal argument is this: Did loving the style and presentation of the movie and eventually pursuing old-time music because of it make me any less "authentic" just because that was the doorway that led me to the "real" folk music? I had no idea about any of these things when I first arrived at college, and I have since written countless papers and done countless hours of research on "real" folk music and its origins. Just because O Brother was part of my introduction to the music, by no means does that mean I assumed the representation of it was 100% accurate and take it for face value. I just don't personally understand the need for an authentic audience, and I don't see the harm in people just liking something for no other reason than the shallow, hollow argument that they find it pleasant to listen to.

In Chapter 9 of the book “Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity” by Richard Peterson, Peterson coins the terms “Hard-Core and Soft-Shell Expressions” as a way to describe the different ways in which country music performers of the past have presented themselves. He divides this section into the categories of speech, singing style, lyrics, songwriting, instruments, instrumental style, singer’s origin, stage presentation, personal life, clothes/hair style, and career longevity. In Chapter 13, he discusses in-depth the different types and ways of expressing authenticity, and the ways in which they individually apply to country music. Mostly by saying that it is nearly impossible to categorize country music into “authentic” and “not authentic” because there is no one authority to say what is and is not considered authentic country music. Therefore, authenticity is subjective to the audience of listeners. This thinking applies back to old-time and bluegrass music as well, because who is to say what is and is not authentic in each respective style of music?

When I was growing up learning how to play music, I could not always afford private lessons, and I lived in a geographic location far away from most people who played the type of music I sought after. The closest place I could drive to for jams and lessons was the Nashville area, which was 2 hours away from where I lived. While I did take in-person lessons for several years, it was always a bit of a hardship on myself and my family financially, paying for the lessons themselves and also the gas to get there and back.

I spent a lot of time teaching myself from CDs, recordings, YouTube videos, etc. So I have had a good mix of in-person and online learning, and I gained different skills from both. The feeling of playing with a group of people cannot be replaced by playing by yourself, copying the person on the screen in front of you. But if you were shy like I used to be, you probably didn’t want to ask your teacher to repeat a phrase over and over again until you got it, instead

lying and telling them you had it and then later being frustrated by how much you did not "have it". I taught myself a lot of tunes from the comfort of my own home, and I had a pretty good list going by the time I got to ETSU, but as soon as I was placed in a band, I felt overwhelmed by not knowing who's specific version of a tune I played, and not having had much experience playing in tangent with other people.

I think there is a lot to be gained from both ways of learning, but the community aspect of learning from other people is what really makes the music click. We are lucky to have access to online learning with Skype lessons and Zoom classes, YouTube videos and things of the like at this time of social distancing, and we would all do well to take advantage of these outlets for when we actually can come together and play music in-person again. Am I an inauthentic old-time musician because I want to write songs and I didn't learn from a family member on a fiddle that was passed down 4 generations? No, because doing the best I could with what I had is old-timier than just about anything. It's a feeling, a knowing, a product of many generations before.

Now in my senior year, I have had plenty of time to think about all of these things, to consider all the facets of this thing I love so dearly. And my conclusion is that it doesn't matter what you do as long as you love it. I am thankful for the guidance of the professors here at ETSU and how they have come to shape me both as a person, and as an artist. I hope to continue the friendships I have made after my graduation and into my adulthood, and I know that the passion for this music that burns so bright inside of me is what has, and what will continue to sustain me through this life. I have faith that whatever is meant for me will not pass me by, and so as I exit this chapter of my life and prepare for the next, I take with me the knowledge that I have gained to use for its purpose farther down the road. Thank you all, I will forever be grateful for the time

and patience you have given me, and the encouragement I have received to keep making music, no matter what dark hollow I dragged it up from.

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