

NOTIONS OF NATION:  
EXPLORING THE BLUEGRASS NATION AS AN IMAGINED COMMUNITY

A Thesis  
by  
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## **Abstract**

### NOTIONS OF NATIONS: EXPLORING THE BLUEGRASS NATION AS AN IMAGINED COMMUNITY

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While bluegrass music has been a topic of conversation within the discipline of Appalachian Studies, research concerning the emergence of the community in cyberspace is relatively rare. Appalachian music's role as a transnational facilitator is groundbreaking in areas of social networking, and as a member of the bluegrass community, I am fascinated by the communication that results now that members of that community can connect to friends in Europe, Japan, and France as easily as to next door neighbors. Noting that music is what brings these individuals together, this study addresses ways in which the bluegrass community embodies an imagined community and uses political language to gather in cyberspace. The study is not meant to discredit the direct ties the music has to Appalachia, but rather to applaud and understand the work of enthusiasts in the field who have found ways to mobilize the music through the Internet.

From this perspective, the bluegrass community is an imagined community as described by Benedict Anderson. The community surrounding the traditional genre has established itself as a cyber-nation; a collective political entity free from geographic

boundaries. This is done in cyberspace, where the International Bluegrass Music Association has created a user/consumer-generated website called Bluegrass Nation.

By researching the history of the bluegrass community's communication through media and the shifts in the group's lexicon with regard to its collective identity, politics, and relationship to the rest of the world, this study allows for a new understanding of music rooted in Appalachia, not in aesthetic terms, but through its community-building power and potential.

There is much to be discovered and celebrated, not only about the sounds and musical innovations that have stemmed from bluegrass, but also about the ways in which Appalachian music provides both a window into American culture and an adaptable populist identity that people all over the world can celebrate and rally around. I approach this work with hopes of understanding the "bluegrass in each of us," as Saburo Watanabe describes the feeling of belonging that surrounds and secures the bluegrass community. This research is conducted in the hopes of exploring how communities gather, the shifting relationship between music, identity, and place and to further examine the possibilities of cyberspace for traditional communities.

Keywords: *Bluegrass Music, Online Communities, Political Theory*

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Growing up backstage, I have been asked more times than I ever wish to remember, “What do you play?” Well, I don’t. Not really. But the conversation doesn’t stop there. They continue on to tell me I will learn and there is time. But I am interested in something else: When I am at the shows, I want to understand the community. There have been amazing people who have made room for me, given me my own space alongside them on stage, allowing me to experience the movement and exchange between people and music that sustains us all. Countless individuals have let me in without a wristband, let me snap pictures, record jams, begin interviews at three in the morning, eat “green room” food, and offered me recordings and kind words. This work is for them: the musicians and community members who have welcomed me time and time again, when I come to their doors bearing books instead of banjos. Thank you.

The thoughts and findings I share were found due to my experiences; however any mistakes made in the process are not to be reflections on those who have opened doors. The great Woody Guthrie said it best: “All of my words, if not well-put nor well-taken, are well-meant.”

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## Introduction and Literature Review

When we said this was space, we meant we are people.

–ANTENA

Having grown up in a family immersed in festivals and jams, I know bluegrass music as the sound of Scruggs’s style banjo, doghouse bass, and the syncopated taps of hundreds of soft-soled shoes on a dance floor. I also understand bluegrass as an identity and a community formed on long summer nights under the stars at jams and festivals. In his book *Bluegrass Breakdown*, Robert Cantwell offers a definition of bluegrass that allows for both the community and its soundscape:

Bluegrass music was and is the music of the Appalachian people... a distinct kind of “traditional” music: traditional that is, in practice, the long spans of time normally associated with tradition have been violently foreshortened by radio and phonograph. . . . Yet, while remaining essentially Appalachian, the Bluegrass style was elastic enough to attract musicians and musical influences far removed from Appalachia; the widening of those influences, combined with the evolution of a community of participants whose means of exchanging information have become ever more sophisticated. (144)

Bluegrass music continues to be—and will forever be—attached to Appalachia. The southeastern mountain ranges of the United States serve as Eden in the genre’s mythic story. The hills and hollers provide a wellspring of identity and a place to house the sound known as bluegrass music.

However, bluegrass is much more than a representation of the sonic variation of a regional stereotype. Bluegrass is a borderless, globally spanning community of fans and performers with inner conflict and triumphs that parallel the socio-cultural tensions of modern era. The progressive versus traditional paradoxes of the sounds alone provide an interesting antithesis to the assumption of authenticity. The roles of power and boundaries within a “traditional music” provide an additional layer of complexity. How does an innovative music remain rooted? Appalachian State University graduate student John Martin proposed in his 2008 thesis research that innovation is itself a bluegrass tradition. In "The Music that Belonged to Everybody: Tradition and Innovation in Western North Carolina Bluegrass," Martin ponders the possibilities of the tension between authentic and not, with influence from ideas of the Russian theorist and semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin’s understanding of identity is most clearly seen (with relevance to Martin’s research) in the following passage from Bakhtin’s 1981 book, *The Dialogic Imagination*:

I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another . . . every internal experience ends up on the boundary . . . ‘To be’ means to communicate . . . ‘To be’ means to be for the other; and through him, for oneself. Man has no internal sovereign territory; he is all and always on the boundary (287).

Bluegrass, the collective and the individual identity, survives on that boundary, thriving in a place of new/old relationships and aspirations. So how does one navigate such a place?

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, the activist and scholar bell hooks advocates internal dialogue and lived experience (knowledge of oneself through others) as a valid research approach. In the case of bluegrass and Appalachian culture in general, these individual stories are an important component of what researchers strive to understand; individuals' constant interpretation of experiences and meanings leads to an innovative discourse through bluegrass music and a more open understanding of what it means to identify with a traditional and/or Appalachian culture.

In this research I elaborate on a less-explored notion, the closing sentiment in Cantwell's bluegrass definition: "the evolution of a community of participants whose means of exchanging information have become ever more sophisticated" (144). What/who is community? How is the practice of community evolving? Does the altered form suggest altered content, or more importantly, an altered community?

Today, the Internet serves as the main source of media for global members of the community. Fans/artists/participants first found one another via MySpace, then Facebook, and now, through a site created by the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA), called Bluegrass Nation. Social media dominates the current marketing trends for bluegrass artists and fans, with many of the World of Bluegrass Educational Seminars focusing on how to better use media in the digital age. Created by the IBMA, "Bluegrass Nation" is a common ground for the globe-spanning bluegrass community organized within cyberspace. The space is user-generated and pulls together many different websites to create unity among

consumers. These open “borders” allow each member to create their own online musical persona in the same spirit as Facebook.

My methodology reflected my discernment concerning questions of participant observation. How should researchers study their own communities? That is an immediate question in fandom, as well as in regional, religious, and gender studies. This work has focused on using a political model, but it is laden with personal understandings. As many Appalachian scholars have found, academically drawing lines between home, identity, and community is problematic and mirrors the difficulty of separating oneself from these area of studies.

As a member of the community I am examining, I also face the difficulty of balancing multiple roles and peering at my own home through a wide array of frames, seeing personal traditions and rituals in new, possibly unflattering ways. But it is in the application of these theories and analyses that my personal experiences and interpretations become crucial. I must acknowledge that my findings are unique to my own experiences, along with my interpretations; while supported by various theorists and models, my knowledge of bluegrass is influenced by my position as an insider—a citizen—within the culture and over four years of conscious fieldwork on the bluegrass community and its organization.

My method of gathering data has been largely a “lurking” method: browsing online forums and listservs while remaining “invisible” to the discussants. Labeled by some as “online ethnography,” lurking, while it raises slight ethical issues, is a valid form of field work for online researchers. Janice Waldron, who studied the banjo hangout community using a lurking method, cites Amy Bruckman’s work, *Studying the Amateur Artist*, published in 2002, as a guideline for this method.

Bruckner writes, as quoted by Waldron, that lurking is possible and best facilitated this way:

(I)f the [online community] is perceived [as] public, researchers can freely quote and analyze online information if the following four criteria are met:

1. It is official and publically archived
2. No password is required for archive access
3. No site policy prohibits it, and
4. The topic is not highly sensitive” (qtd. in Waldron 37).

Therefore, in order to comply with the method I have used to gather data and analyze actions online, I refrain from citing Facebook comments or posts, or those found on the bluegrass listserv. However, those conversations that I have witnessed and my experiences as a fan and an “Appalachian native” from an “at-risk<sup>1</sup>” community have greatly affected the way(s) in which I process the information gleaned. I identify as a person from McDowell County, North Carolina, a bluegrasser, and a scholar. These three roles are the lens through which I view theory, and they cannot be ignored.

As I implemented this cyber-ethnographic approach, I also applied literature and theory from multiple disciplines; together, these multiple lenses both guided my research and raised my own awareness of my presuppositions and position within the bluegrass community as an “insider.” While I use multiple theorists which resonated (so to speak) with my own experiences and interpretations of the genre, I approached literary and political

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Appalachian Regional Commission’s website, a county is labeled “at-risk” when it is at risk of becoming economically distressed. They rank between the worst 10 percent and 25 percent of the nation’s counties. McDowell County, NC is an “at risk” county with a poverty rate of 18.5% from 2007-2011, a high school completion rate of 70% in 2010, and a college completion rate of 9% in 2010. (www.arc.gov)

theorists, historians, and folklorists hermeneutically, using their work to explore the lexicon of the community.

Literature has typically addressed the bluegrass community as a type of Appalachian music. Bluegrass has been commercial and innovative since its conception, and addressing the genre outside of the typical Appalachian aesthetic allows for the structure of the group to be seen in a new light. In later chapters, I propose a more intense analysis of the internal lexicon as well. As the poet Gary Lutz shares, "... (A) word is matter, that it exists in tactual materiality, that it has a cubic bulk. Only on the page is it flat and undensified. In the mouth and in the mind it is three-dimensional, and there are parts that shoot out from it or sink into its syntactic surroundings" (n.pag.). Words, in short, matter. They demand a presence and attention.

Words are chosen, spoken, whispered, and sung. The terms we use to identify ourselves allow for a better understanding of not only individual identities, but also collective ones. The IBMA's use of the term "nation" to gather the community at large implies many things—borders, members, creeds, and rulers to name a few—and it is the term "nation" that allowed me to access underlying trends of power within the scene.

Recent scholars have noted how the bluegrass community incorporates inter/transnational performers and encourages participation by people outside Appalachia, but the politics of identity present within the bluegrass lexicon have not been addressed, at least not in a critical manner. That is the purpose of this thesis. The very recent trend of using the term "(n)ation" to organize banjo players, fiddlers, mandolin-ists, and cloggers is a word choice that I believe matters.

This study approaches the bluegrass genre as an “imagined community,” which allows for all the constant questioning of beginnings, of power, growth, and—as postmodern poet Charles Olson would have interjected—relationships, causes, and responsibilities to become clearer through political theory. It does not end with an assessment of how the bluegrass community functions within Benedict Anderson’s definition of an imagined community, but intends to examine the surrounding political and social conventions, aiming to understand conflict in a way that sheds light on issues inherent to place, identity, and community.

The story of the bluegrass community commonly told in both academia and on festival stages is a tale of place and identity. The application of multiple political theories allows a different history of bluegrass (or many) to be told. As an Appalachian Studies scholar, I have a responsibility to work in a multidisciplinary fashion that provokes all histories of my subject matter to the surface. In an effort to understand the new space/place the bluegrass community occupies in the digital age, as well as to reveal the various aspects of discourse related to community and the politics of identity happening within the bluegrass world (which are not currently widely researched), I address an interdisciplinary selection of literature and thought concerning:

1. Space/Place
2. Appalachia as Sound/Music
4. The Bluegrass Story
5. Bluegrass as an Identity

Using political theory and cultural thought together to analyze these areas provides a new way of assessing a musical identity, not only from inside and outside, but from the spaces between as well.

### **Space/Place**

The term “place” holds complexity in even the simplest analysis. In the digital age, the terms hold a different, more plural meaning. This study addresses literature concerning both space and place in hopes of creating a cohesive conception of the function of the terms with regard to the bluegrass community, and examining how the bluegrass world’s sense of place is connected to its identity and its music.

My introduction to place as an object of study began with the work of the Black Mountain College poets, particularly the work of Charles Olson, who, from *Call Me Ishmael* to *The Maximus Poems* to *Proprioception*, searched to understand his home, his “polis,” a small fishing town called Gloucester.

“I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom Cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy,” writes Olson in *Call Me Ishmael*. His use of space on the page and as topic matter questions the relationship between form and content. He asserts that place, or even polis, isn’t bordered by what the eye can see but by the parameters of an understanding of relations, causes, and responsibilities concerning where one is rooted. As a poet, Olson viewed and created this discourse through words, and I later move to examine place with regard to relationships and musical communities through words as well.

What is gleaned from Olson is the spirit of the enormousness of polis, or identity-place, and an openness that allows for an exploration of not only Appalachia, but of physical

nations and the new places such as cyberspace. In Olson's view, an understanding of place must be all-encompassing. The borders, history, sounds, and conflicts of a place must be understood and made known.

Shifting from a poetic to a political understanding, the continuation of the idea of *polis* as place leads to the work of Max Scheler, specifically Stephen Frederick Schneck's discussion of Scheler's work in *Person and Polis: Max Scheler's Personalism as Political Theory*. According to Scheler, people create place from within the midst of others. Social interaction is necessary for place to emerge. It is from within society/groups/communities that individuals and individualism emerge. Scheler is concerned with place and person and the power/empowerment relationship from which both develop, and on which both remain dependent.

Schneck translates Scheler's work in the following passage:

*Person Community*, the highest level of sociality, envisions a transcendence not only of the self as an object of the community, but of the community and others as the objects of the self. In this instance, the community, which disappears as a separate existence at the level of society, is reformed and transformed. In one sense, accepting the personhood and inherent dignity of others eliminates the subject-object relationship between the self and others. In another sense, however, personal individuality is most deeply affirmed in the acceptance of one's own personhood in the eyes of others and in the embrace of the community. (59)

Within his framework, place and person are not only connected, but function as one. Identities form in relation to place, creating a collective person (some would call it community), which Scheler describes (as translated by Schneck) as "*the unity of*

*independent, spiritual, and individual single person 'in' an independent, spiritual, and individual collective person"* (60).

Social geographers facilitate more conservative discussions of place/space, wherein relationships and ways of constructing networks create spaces. David Harvey (an authority on Karl Marx, the director of The Center for Place, Culture and Politics, and an avid 'tweeter') writes that social space is literally created by the feelings one has about oneself in relationship to the area. People create identities of places in direct relationship to their own experiences regarding the place, in actuality or virtually.

One precursor to the discussion of geographers concerning place, French anthropologist Marc Augé, stresses that identity is created within (not in relationship to) spaces/places and borders:

Once it has become clear that it is the spatial arrangements that express the group's identity (its actual origins are often diverse, but the group is established, assembled, and united in the identity of the place). . . .Collectives (or those who direct them), like their individual members, need to think simultaneously about identity and relations; and to this end, they need to symbolize the components of a shared identity (shared by the whole group), particular identity (of a given group or individual in relation to others), and singular identity (what makes the individual or group of individuals different from any other). (119)

Social spaces can be, but are not limited to physical places. Non-physical spaces (primarily cyberspace and radio airwaves) face some of the same problems as traditional places/*polis* concerning ownership and power. The digital age has brought forums, listervs, and now social networking sites to the arena, which as of this writing is truly public, free of charge,

and vastly controlled by users/consumers (at least in North America). Physicality is shifted in not only the ability to be “social” while being in solitude, but also in the form of the space. A physical space, a screen with boxes and identifying questions, becomes a place to gather and presents a highly participatory and democratic system of “socialization.”

As many disciplines acknowledge, space/place is intrinsically connected to identity. Online spaces allow for options, choices, and self-construction. Thus, identities are also intertwined with one’s understanding of “one’s place,” commonly a home or heritage, as seen in Appalachia. Even when Appalachian natives have moved to the city, they typically self-identify as Appalachian persons. Many debates have been sparked over how long one must live in Appalachia before becoming a “local.” In an ever-mobile world, this discussion is shifting too. In the digital age, individuals connect and identify in new ways, and our current conceptions of place and identity must allow for chosen identities after years of forced migration and displacement. No longer can we assert that one must identify with the physical place he or she is from, or even with the traditional identity of their home place.

### **Appalachia as Place and Sound**

Politically and technologically conscious literature that deals with “post-place communities” is emerging at a rapid pace. Using Scheler’s “politics of the personal,” one can connect current literature to “post-place identities,” and then to the communities from which those identities emerge. Such works argue that the post-place community (or identity) is one in which the “essential characteristics of community are the social relations (solidarity or bonds) between people,” explains community development theorist Ted Bradshaw. Bradshaw writes, “Community so defined has historically shared boundaries with one’s

geography of residence (town, neighborhood, city), but the loss of place identity does not imply the loss of community since solidarity among people no longer needs to be tied to place” (6). Bradshaw’s work is common ideology among progressive developers and theorists, but does not reflect a dominant theory. Place-based community remains the dominant frame for understanding identity. Thus, works regarding cyber-nations and post-place identities are a growing fringe framework.

Regionalism is one such arm of dominant ideology concerning traditional place/community/identity understanding. For example, to Appalachian Studies scholars, the borders of Appalachia serve as defining points for the space we study. Physical space defines the terminology. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission:

The Appalachian Region, as defined in ARC's authorizing legislation, is a 205,000-square-mile region that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. It includes all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The Region's economy, once highly dependent on mining, forestry, agriculture, chemical industries, and heavy industry, has become more diversified in recent times, and now includes a variety of manufacturing and service industries. In 1965, one in three Appalachians lived in poverty. In 2008, the Region's poverty rate was 18 percent. The number of Appalachian counties considered economically distressed was 223 in 1965; in fiscal year 2013 that number is 98. ([www.arc.com](http://www.arc.com))

Appalachia occupies a specific space within the American cultural landscape. From Horace Kephart to Silas House, efforts have been made to share this culture through literature, to

reveal America's hidden "other." To address the emerging exchange between scholars regarding what is and is not Appalachian, a new discipline emerged: Appalachian Studies.

More critical assessments of Appalachia and Appalachian identities are exploring the relationship between place and relationships/conflicts forged out of traditional place based identities. Black/white, man/women, insider/outsider, old/young, progressive/traditional—even "right"/"wrong" ways to perform music—are not only examined by current literature, but also create heated arguments on discussion boards and listservs.

Conflict arises in Appalachian music discussions largely due to the fact that literature about music in Appalachia and its close relationship to identity have constructed many of the fallacy's formatting stereotypes and perpetuated the image of the isolated banjo player as the authentic Appalachian musician. Music has been crucial (according to the previous literature) in (re)creating and maintaining identities.

I have sought research that promotes a more plural outlook on the cultural exchange between musicians and place. Cultural traditions, namely the arts, create space for voices to raise—spaces equally occupied by tradition and innovation. Music has re-presented Appalachia to "outsiders" as well as to Appalachians, utilizing the place of the mountains to forge an identity or conception of inhabitants. Karl Hagstrom Miller, professor at the University of Texas at Austin, is among the most recent to publish on the insider/outsider stereotypes and place-based identity found in and attributed to the region. His work, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*, reveals the Bristol Sessions and early "southern" and "Appalachian" recordings to be on the forefront of (sonic) racial segregation or the separation of performers based on race, in the plural landscape of the pre-commercial era. His current research follows the same path of unveiling

stereotypes through the sales and marketing of instruments to specific regions and demographic groups.

Jeff Biggers, an author, playwright, and Appalachian scholar, shares in *The United States of Appalachia*:

For many of us, Appalachia first entered our lives in the form of music. Whether it is a local performance of Appalachian Spring or a country ballad on the radio, the region's ordained role as the Eden of American Music has been well chronicled for years... While it would seem easy to dismiss Copland's elegant phrasings of Shaker tunes as non-Appalachian music, the same case could be made for much of the "Down from the Mountain" bill; very few of the actual performers or songs, originate in the mountains. The Southern Appalachian simply provided the setting and the moniker with a stamp of rustic authenticity. (2)

While country and bluegrass music's ties to Appalachia are complex and may be thin, the act of making music, participation, reflects the identity and self-perception of participants—but only to an extent. Rather, music perpetuates notions of place through sound or, more broadly, culture. By researching the bluegrass community's self-perceptions and collective actions, I suspect that more can be learned about the actual ties between identity and music, even if it shatters preconceived notions. As ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl writes, "A particular role of music, as I have said, may be to symbolize in distilled and abstract form the character and values of a culture" (283).

Today, the culture being symbolized or presented by bluegrass music may not always be traceable to a physical place as much as it is connected to an identity assumed to be deeply rooted in sacred spaces, such as the mythic Appalachian Mountains. This re-presentation of a

regional identity becomes a stereotype, or a visual and sonic iconography of an interpretation or remembrance.

Raymond Williams provides very important insights into the method through which something connected can become so disconnected, or how a tradition such as music in rural mountain communities can become the soundmark of an entire region. Something associated with Appalachia can be a mere remembrance or translation of an experience into words that help the interpreter understand—the connection need not be true, as long as it is understood. Williams sees tradition as an active process writing, “the word moves again and again toward age-old and toward ceremony, duty and respect. Considering only how much has been handed down to us, and how various it actually is, this, in its own way is both betrayal and surrender. (Keywords, 269)” Tradition, with this understanding, lies in the collective and personal remembrance. Tradition lives in stories.

Traditional music and place interact in unique ways, particularly in the case of bluegrass. Known and marketed, as Robert Cantwell states, as a “music from the mountains, rooted in tradition, Bluegrass music has been innovative and entrepreneurial since the beginning” (13). Bluegrass also serves as a reflection of the plurality in mountain cultures. The “sounds of the times” were synthesized through radio with the traditional soundscapes in this highly commercial form. So while much of the genre may be disconnected through the impact of commercialization, it is also true that music serves as a facilitator of culture and space. Sound, as much as the visual world, creates places and spaces and is fundamental in creating identities.

As German sociologist, philosopher, and Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno writes, “Music, more than other forms of traditional arts, is suited for this function by several

qualities without which it is scarcely thinkable. The anthropological difference between the ear and the eye fits in with the ideology of the historic role”(50). Participation in listening is not always participatory. One can turn his or her head to/from the television screen, but it is much harder to drown out the sounds. Adorno continues, “The ear is passive...(T)he apperception of music as an esthetic context of meaning goes with relapsing into such passivity” (51). One cannot control (as easily) one’s interactions with one’s sonic surroundings—eyes can be closed, ears cannot. The “place” which cultivates identity (or vice versa) can be easily addressed as the sounds that dwell within the borders of what we can hear (and what we cannot help hearing).

Participation in musical communities is significant, especially in “at-risk” or minority communities such as Appalachia. Adorno’s findings reveal an intimate relationship between place and knowledge—knowledge of place and self. I include Adorno because he makes legitimate the place/sound connection, but also because his work has opened doors for music to be studied through the social sciences, rather than the humanities, benefiting communities regardless of disciplines.

As American ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino points out, “(A)ny general theories about artistic processes and expressive cultural practices would do well to begin with a conception of the self and individual identity, because it is in living breathing individuals that ‘cultural’ and musical meaning ultimately reside” (94-95). In other words, culture cannot be assumed to be an imposing force on a person—rather, culture, place, and identity are all based on collaboration, which reside both within and around individuals.

## The Bluegrass Story

With the understanding that place is not necessarily physical, but intrinsically connected to identity, the logical questions concerning the bluegrass community are: How is bluegrass music and the bluegrass identity connected to Appalachia and the Appalachian identity? What work has already been done to understand this relationship? Neil Rosenberg's definitive text (not-so-jokingly referred to by many Appalachian researchers as the "Bluegrass Bible") *Bluegrass: A History* begins with a tell-tale section titled "How Bluegrass Got Started—A Debate." The debate was held between a graduate student, Maynie Smith, and Bill Monroe after the publication of Smith's 1964 thesis produced at Indiana University in the folklore department. While in graduate school, Smith studied the culture and representational aspects of bluegrass music, identifying the "sound of bluegrass" with these distinguishing traits:

1. It is primarily an instrumental music consisting of musicians who play non-electrified stringed instruments, with the five-string banjo, fiddle, guitar, mandolin, and stand up string bass as the standard ensemble.
2. Vocal harmonization may be as many as four parts expressed in duets, trios, or quartets.

3. The defining criterion is the five-string banjo played in lead capacity, emphasizing melodic over rhythmic aspects, and using the three-finger roll, or “Scruggs Style,” named after Earl Scruggs, a native of western North Carolina.

Smith’s definition made no mention of Monroe. Thus, the great debate began and has continued ever since: whether bluegrass began in 1939 when Bill Monroe organized the Bluegrass Boys and they began performing on the Grand Ole Opry, or in 1945-48 when Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs performed with Monroe on the Opry.

Bluegrass literature has revolved around biographies, fandom/ethnographic exchanges, blogs, and self-published songbooks. One of the most thorough biographies of the genre’s iconic father is *Can’t You Hear Me Callin’* by Richard Smith. He writes a compelling history of Monroe’s life and places him as the foundation of the genre, with all generations resulting from his work and influence. Robert Cantwell’s literary contribution, *Bluegrass Breakdown: Making of the Southern Sound*, began this mythological treatment of Monroe, plus a literary analysis of the music through 1980. Cantwell’s treatment of the genre as a language to study through literature has been mirrored in classrooms and various publications. It tends toward a non-folkloric approach to a traditional music, which attracts and supports the mythology the community generates.

For all intents and purposes, bluegrass music, or at least the *story* of bluegrass music, begins with Bill Monroe. The three most prominent studies of bluegrass music are Rosenberg, Cantwell, and Smith’s texts, which share a similar history or re-membering of the genre that I will briefly summarize in the following chapters.

Bluegrass music’s appeal is in part its deeply rooted history, told by the people through the people. At Carlton Haney’s first bluegrass festival in the 1960s, he had the

“story” of bluegrass re-enacted by performers, with dialogue between the pioneers and fathers of the genre and a set of “standard” songs. This practice of re-creating and re-membering the history of the community is reminiscent of the Protestant church’s tradition of Easter and Christmas plays. The connection between then and now is made through the story. It is important for this understood history to be included in a literature review, because studies of the genre rely on the story as well as work to support it. Minimal work, if any, has been done to approach the history of the genre through a different framework than the one constructed by its own members.

Maintaining oral traditions, bluegrass began in the home. Labels and genres were not used to create borders, and music was openly and freely shared between communities. When the recording industry entered Appalachia (most notably in 1927 with the Bristol Sessions), terms for the genre such as “Mountain Music” and “Hillbilly” were used to market the music for profit.

In 1925, the Grand Ole Opry introduced larger fan bases to “hillbilly music” through radio programs open to public attendance. As Neil Rosenberg (1985) explains, the musicians were creating a genre while preserving the traditional ideals of “the family:”

The country show as it developed in the thirties did not ‘evolve’ directly from any single earlier form. The show is best thought of as the dramatic equivalent of an idealized ‘get-together.’ The total ensemble was symbolic of a small community or an extended family; to this day shows like ‘Hee Haw,’ the WWVA ‘World’s Jamboree,’ and the Opry allow and even encourage performers to appear casually onstage; most shows of the thirties featured everyone onstage whether they were performing or not. They constituted an audience within an audience, a kind of framing device, which

suggested that the audience was viewing an old time corn-shucking or evening of parlor entertainment. They emphasized the communal aspects of the show, projecting a feeling of onstage group solidarity. (57)

Bill Monroe's sound (which surfaced in the 1930s with his brother, Charlie, and emerged more clearly as a separate style in 1945) was transmitted into the homes of mountain-people-turned-factory-workers in all corners of the United States through radio, just like the numerous other brother duos he and Charlie accompanied. What was different, however, was Monroe's complex mandolin technique and falsetto tenor singing. Moreover, Monroe did not condone "dressing the part." Rather than wearing "hillbilly" garb, the Monroe's dressed like fine horsemen, or the aristocratic men of an earlier South, wearing jodhpurs, riding boots, white shirts, and western hats, famously tilted to the side. Monroe understood how crucial commercial appeal was to his success, equally valuing artistry and industry. His resistance to the hillbilly portrayal of entertainers from the South instilled a pride in his band, and roused an enthusiastic following.

The radio allowed listeners to identify with their region, but also exposed those with radio access to new sounds and repertoire. In his book, *Air Castle of the South: WSM and the Making of Music City (Music in American Life)*, Craig Havinghurst reports that airwaves were much stronger in the early 1930s and 1940s. People were able to pick up stations across the country before regulation laws were enacted. The Grand Ole Opry was a pivotal point in bluegrass music and gained a following after the debut of Earl Scruggs. It perpetuated a communal, barn-dance feel and privileged the values of family, solidarity, and "working-class" ideals within the genre.

Craig Havinghurst's assessment of the genre maintains the idea that bluegrass is populist in its politics, stating in a blog post encouraging the support of public radio:

I'm here as an American citizen, to tell the truth. I want bluegrass to thrive as an art form and social glue, because I believe it's good and healthy for my country. I know of no endeavor or community that more completely embodies what Bill Ivey calls the "expressive life" than bluegrass. Because bluegrass is populist AND fine, everyday AND extraordinary, free AND regimented, red state AND blue state... (Havinghurst)

The mythic place bluegrass encompasses in the American landscape and mind is a sonic representation of the nation's values and mores. To some, such as Havinghurst, bluegrass sounds like what is good about America.

Returning to the story, bluegrass has used the available market (such as public radio) since its beginnings. Music was seen as a source of revenue for many, and family bands were not created as family hobbies but out of the need for income. By 1933 sponsorships were becoming crucial to the financial stability of the genre. Neil Rosenberg reports the "Crazy Water Crystal" company beginning sponsorships at this time (31-32). Through sponsorships, "Bluegrass" was a marketable term by 1948. By 1951, over 1,400 "hillbilly" programs were on the air across the country, and in 1952, Billboard presented "territorial best seller charts."

Bluegrass was established as uniquely southern and rural by the time television began incorporating music into morning shows and commercials. Flatt and Scrugg's early morning show, sponsored by Martha White Flour, was one of the most lucrative endeavors of bluegrass bands using sponsorship to date. The music was directly marketed as clean, reminiscent of a long-forgotten past. Both the product and the sound were portrayed as wholesome and sold to the working class as their own music.

Jewly Hight's 2012 book, *Right by Their Roots*, addresses the plights and unique successes of eight different female Americana artists. However, her knowledge of the country and alternative music industries sheds light on the misperceptions of "country music," most notably the relationship between *the* country and the image/sound portrayed in country music. I find her work and assessment not only enlightening but also highly applicable to the bluegrass community and the parallel struggles between perception, representation, and identification.

Before the late 1950s, bluegrass was considered "country music." In critically assessing country music's perception of women, which can be applied to the rest of America's perception of Appalachia, Hight reaches to country scholar Bill Malone, who shares:

When I listen to Top 40 radio today, I hear almost nothing...that suggests the working class society that originally nurtured this music. ...Even when the young country entertainers sing their occasional songs about blue-collar life, they sound like what they are—suburban men and women interpreting those experiences through middle-class lenses and sensibilities. (qtd. in Hight 167)

Malone's thoughts and Hight's interpretations add to crucial literature for those critically studying gender or class in American music.

The regional representation of rural America through bluegrass music has continued on television as well. Some of the most noted "bluegrass-on-television" moments occurred when a sound was placed with images that did not necessarily match the content or source. Major examples of image and sound used to portray negative Appalachian constructs and stereotypes include the following films and television shows: *Beverly Hillbillies*, (1962)

*Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Deliverance* (1972), *Oh Brother Where Art Thou* (2000), *Justified* (2005), and *Buckwild* (2013).

*Oh Brother Where Art Thou* is an example of misused sonic presentation in film that positively affected the bluegrass community. While the songs were not from the correct historical time period to be a true representation of the “Oh Brother” soundscape, the film garnered Grammy nominations and wins “for the genre.” As a part of the larger country music market, bluegrass “resurfaced” due to the film’s acclaim.

Traditional bluegrass literature, especially Rosenberg’s and Cantwell’s texts, has noted that print media is a constant factor in bluegrass. Its most influential capacities thus far have been Long Play microgroove vinyl records (LPs), the Folk Revival, and scholarship. These three roles are intertwined; early LP’s and the establishment of *Bluegrass Unlimited* in the 1960s created a “scholarship” for young folklorists and anthropologists to pull from. (“BU” is still the primary source of current scholarship for bluegrass students.) The 1950s and 1960s Folk Music Revival caused an era of rediscovery (even though the genre was a mere 16 years old). Film crews, song collectors, and community activists swarmed the hills and hollers looking for a new, “unknown” sensation to document. Throughout this explosion of discovery, the documentation and marketing of bluegrass music revealed an international community. Fans in Japan, Czechoslovakia, and Western Europe surfaced as print circulated.

By the early 1990s, the bluegrass community was on the forefront of occupying new virtual places large enough to house their “transnational family.” The Internet, which allows for the constant “audience within an audience”<sup>2</sup> to communicate and share information and songs, provides such a platform. Fans suddenly were able to participate on heightened levels,

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<sup>2</sup> The “audience within an audience” framework refers back to Rosenberg’s discussion of the 1940s barn dances and radio jamborees. It is also relative to the discussion of hypertext as participation in online forums/communities.

creating identities and maintaining these roles through chat rooms, Facebook, and the “Bluegrass Nation” forum. The seventh website ever to be created, Cybergrass.com, was dedicated to bluegrass music and still functions today. Bluegrass has continued to be on the cutting edge of incorporating users into the creation of new communities and the organization of space.

### **Bluegrass as an Identity**

“Bluegrass” as a genre began on the radio, reaching audiences far from Appalachia since its inception; thus, the “passive ears,” referring to Adorno’s thoughts on sound and cultural construction, hear, internalize, and (in the case of many) mimic the sounds as an expansive group. Within twenty years of Monroe’s performances (beginning with his shows with Charlie Monroe in 1939 through the Bluegrass Boys’ performances in 1945), festivals began. In the beginning, performing the repertoire of the “Bluegrass Boys” was a simple method of participation within the community. Since the 1960s and the rise of bluegrass scholarship and literature, involvement has become more complex.

Owen Gardner’s work provides one of the most thoughtful assessments of the bluegrass community’s culture in regard to the lack of “place” connecting members. Gardner sees the bluegrass community as a portable community, writing:

Participants in portable communities create space for intimate and inclusive *gemeinschaft* social interaction that they find lacking in their daily lives. Participants create these communities as an alternative to geographically rooted neighborhoods and participate with varying levels of commitment. They surface in multiple locales

but take on a strikingly similar form and logic that is instantly familiar to members.

With relative ease, members can connect and bond with others without having formal contacts or institutional relationships to establish initial entrée into the setting. (3)

There are multiple ways to explore the relationships and power of such communities.

I have chosen to use Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities (introduced in his book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*) to better understand the possibilities of the bluegrass genre. (I have applied and addressed current literature concerning imagined communities and online communities in Chapter Two.) To date, political analysis of the music has not been as widely employed as the common use of an anthropological analysis, particularly the social theorist Etienne Wenger's "Communities of Practice" (CoP) theory, which is very popular among Appalachian scholars and anthropological studies of mountain music. There are gaps in the research and discourse regarding the ways in which the bluegrass identity is examined and understood, which I hope to fill.

I choose not to apply Wenger's CoP theory as a way of examining roles within the bluegrass community for various reasons. Most notably, my assessment of the bluegrass community does not support Wenger's concept that CoPs are a community of participants who move within trajectories, with no one "center" of the community. My findings (and subsequent discussions) insist that there are both creative and business "centers" to the bluegrass community, whether assessed through a Habermasian, anarchist, or ethnographic case study. It is the shared identity of the community's members that I find so enchanting in its magnetism.

Another common approach to understanding the “bluegrass identity” has been the use of a folkloric analysis created by Roger D. Abrahams, which finds that the festival communities are intimate places of (re)creation and affirmation of one’s identity. Abrahams writes in “Shouting Match at the Border:”

In addition to ethnic and immigrant communities, many ‘interest groups...hobbyists and recreationists’ also hold festivals. These individuals are deeply involved in a subject (‘from birding to caving to owning different kinds of gear—vehicles, communications equipment, hunting and fishing devices and so on’). (313)

Like the festivals of ethnic groups, those of special interest groups present the in-group or subculture by framing it in an appropriate setting, which makes it more accessible to outsiders.

Rosenburg writes that the first bluegrass festival embodied all four of Abrahams’s types: 1) A performance or set of performances; 2) A game, contest, or sporting event; 3) A calendric festive gathering, occasioned by the time of year (harvest, mid-summer celebration) or a time of marked importance in a person’s life; and 4) A commemoration of an historical event (Rosenberg, 276). By framing festivals as cultural events and establishing the music as a pastime of an “other,” Indiana University began supporting folklore studies on the topic, and soon the Smithsonian was incorporating bluegrass within their concerts and movements.

Scholars such as Ralph Rinzler and Neil Rosenberg, as well as organizers such as blogger and writer Craig Havighurst and entrepreneur Marc Henri Deschamps,<sup>3</sup> have worked to understand shifts within the bluegrass community and use the means available to organize and best support the genre. On a larger level, “academics and scholars” serve as monitors

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<sup>3</sup> Henri Deschamps is the proprietor of the Mast Farm Inn, an economic supporter of bluegrass, and the creator of “The Bluegrass Legacy,” a mega-Facebook group with over 40,000 users.

and mediators for the genre's consumers, helping them to understand change and remain informed. Using the Internet is one way that the community has attempted to maintain momentum and connections.

Understanding the bluegrass community as an imagined one does not conflict with the folklore and anthropological evaluations of the fan base or with the notion of bluegrass's ties to Appalachia. Rather, it encourages a more critical look at quantitative research regarding the bluegrass community and identity.

Such quantitative data and literature include consumer profiles gathered by the Simmons Market Research team for the IBMA, which offer a much different demographic sketch of a typical bluegrass consumer/user than stereotypes would suggest is "typical," even as other literature continues to pursue the myth of an exclusively Appalachian and rural genre identity. According to the consumer data collected and made available through the IBMA, the majority of bluegrass consumers are of retirement age, nearly 80% are married, and overall the group belongs to a much higher socio-economic class bracket than the majority of the Appalachian Region's inhabitants (as provided by the ARC).

The myth of the bluegrass community and the actuality of group demographics is where the available literature collides. Cantwell suggests, "This music [bluegrass] belongs no longer to a region.... But to an economic class, the industrial working class" (7). Conceptually, bluegrass mimics the community of the working man—a community formed through festivals, online membership, and local venues. However, the actual demographics of the fan base reveal they are a well-educated, higher-income group, posing the questions of what conclusions can be drawn (if any) about this part of the bluegrass identity.

Overall, literature has historically placed bluegrass music in Appalachia. Social scientists and ethnomusicologists have worked to define what about this music allures and captures individuals; or, in the words of country music historian Bob Artis, studies work to figure out what about this music “hits certain people a certain way that makes them fanatics” (105). Additionally, political and literary theorists provide literature on the themes and overarching trends within the communities, while media studies supplies insights into how the community functions online. Utilizing multi-disciplinary research allows for a new, more cohesive, less linear history of bluegrass to be revealed.

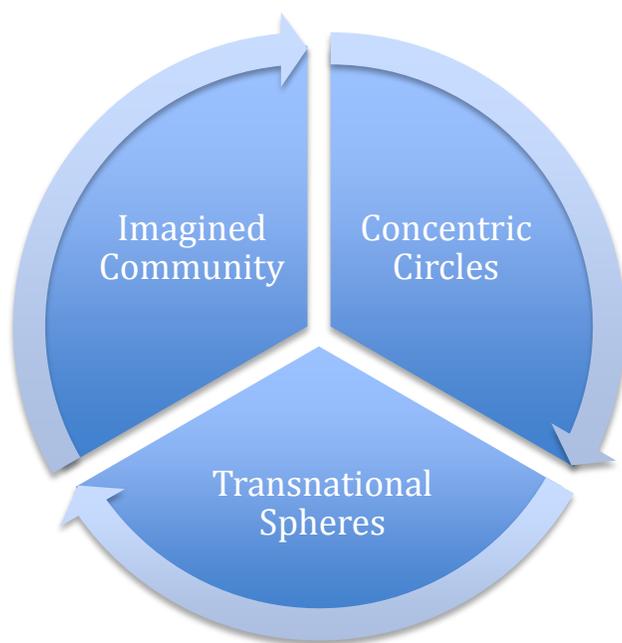


Figure 1: “The Bluegrass Kaleidoscope”

In the following chapters, I employ varying frameworks to research the bluegrass community. Using concepts of imagined community, concentric circles, and transnational spheres, these frameworks function like a kaleidoscope, allowing the bluegrass community to be seen in a new way within each chapter. My goal in using multiple lenses to address the

bluegrass identity and its nationalistic lexicon is to open dialogue between and within disciplines, with bluegrass music creating the space to do so.

My findings in the following three chapters reveal a complex internal political structure within the community, with evidence that the community has grown stronger and more aware of its transnational position in the digital age. Rather than offering a dualistic framework where one neutral home place is juxtaposed against the exceptional<sup>4</sup> or “other” identity, these frameworks allow for identities to create new spaces.

Chapter Two begins by acknowledging a history in which the bluegrass community upholds Benedict Anderson’s requirements for an imagined community to become a nation. Anderson is a political theorist who uses a Marxist approach to understand nationalism and the “unseen” threads between citizens. I also address how these criteria are performed in the digital age by expanding on how the Bluegrass Nation upholds Benedict’s crucial points concerning what an imagined community is, and how such a group forms a “nation.”

Chapter Three looks at the bluegrass community using concentric circles and addresses the magnetism of “nostalgia” or “home.” Why are people attracted to the “music of Appalachia?” With such small ties to Appalachia, why is the story defended and retold? By answering these questions utilizing a unique framework attractive to regional studies scholars as global communication increases and the transfusion of culture becomes more transparent, by understanding community as diaspora, online possibilities, and bluegrass’s tie to Appalachia.

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<sup>4</sup> I use exceptionalism here in reference to the work of John Insocoe in his edited book, *Appalachians and Race: The Mountain South from Slavery to Segregation*, where the myth of Appalachian exceptionalism was heavily critiqued.

Chapter Four, addresses the functions of network positions in the Bluegrass Nation in a manner strongly influenced by the work of G.F. Hegel and Nancy Fraser, as well as Jürgen Habermas. The Habermasian Public Sphere Theory is applied as a framework for understanding power within the community. Looking at the community through this framework, the roles of members and “negative space” are more clearly understood, encouraging further exploration.

## Chapter Two: Bluegrass Nation as an Imagined Community

How selfless this unisonance feels! If we are aware that others are singing these songs precisely when and as we are. We have no idea who they may be, or even where, out of earshot, they are singing. Nothing connects us but the imagined sound. (Benedict Anderson, 145)

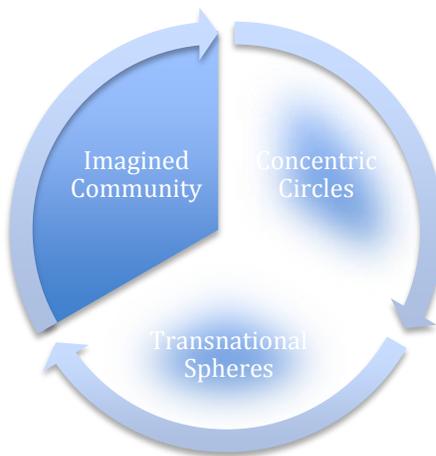


Figure 2: “The Bluegrass Kaleidoscope: Imagined Community”

Nations are not usually thought to coalesce around a genre, but that seems to be an emerging trend, especially during the digital age. The power of music to pull people together

has been seriously studied since the 2000s with the introduction of *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place (Critical Geographies)* by Connell and Gibson in 2003 and *Musical Democracy* by Nancy Love in 2006. These two texts in particular allow me to pull together the earlier work of Adorno and Habermas, applying it to current understandings of the bluegrass identity. These well-situated studies allow for an exciting new way of studying the bluegrass community.

Influential in the work of Love is Simon Frith, who published his observations of a “flow” from social identity to musical expression (and vice versa). Love pulls from Frith’s 1996 book, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, where Frith writes, “The issue is not how a particular piece of music or a performance reflects the people, but how it produces them, how it creates or constructs an experience” (109). Rather than a region or a culture creating a music, as traditional Appalachian Studies critiques would suggest, this new way of looking at identity and music suggests that music constructs identities instead of vice-versa. Thus, place is not as important as one’s sense of self and the soundscape supporting that identity. Frith expands on that idea: “Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers the body, time, and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginary cultural narratives” (124). The use of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” theory is a practical step in the direction of new ways of thinking about music and politics.

With the possibilities of identities being created by music, the case of Bluegrass Nation presents the question: Can music create nations? We use the term “nation” loosely—Woodstock Nation, Hip Hop Nation, Hokie Nation—but what does the infrastructure of the group do, if anything, to support such a lexicon? What does a post-place nation look like?

Benedict Anderson supplies some of the answers and presents the questions that prompt further discussion in this arena in his book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

Benedict Anderson writes that a colony or state becomes a nation when supported by (1) mobility, (2) bureaucracy, and (3) a modern educational system. It is important to begin an exploration of the Bluegrass Nation as an imagined community by first understanding the history of its group bureaucracy, or the “how and why” of the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA).

In this chapter, I discuss how power has moved in the genre, specifically offering a history of the IBMA. With an understanding of the organization most central to the community, I later approach the genre using Anderson’s political theory as a lens. This framework allows for a thorough discussion of conflict, which plagues the nation. I address the conflict (through Anderson’s framework) in a section of the chapter titled “The Bluegrass Nation’s Boundaries and Borders.” The final section, and a topic I find particularly interesting through Anderson’s framework, is the relationship between language and technology.

### **Collective Identity: The International Bluegrass Music Association**

The International Bluegrass Music Association is, as Si Kahn noted in the 2012 Appalachian Studies Association keynote address, a “union” of sorts for bluegrass musicians. I add that the IBMA evokes the same feelings (good and bad) and controversies among the community as textile or mining unions did in the heyday of “union wars” such as the Battle of Blair Mountain.

Bluegrass music was largely “unorganized” until the 1960s when publications like *Bluegrass Unlimited* began circulating information and serving as a “networking” tool for performers. As Carlton Haney, organizer of the first bluegrass festival (Fincastle), faced problems, Haney created “rules” to help organize events, create revenue for artists, and make the event more enjoyable for the fans.

The festivals that Haney had looked to as inspiration for his Fincastle Festival were sponsored by colleges (for example, Antioch College’s Music Festival) and large organizations, such as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Without an organization’s funding, it was very difficult for Haney to manage both the events and the publicity. Often the performers were the ones to feel the loss. In 1970, with Pete and Kyle Kuykendall making *Bluegrass Unlimited* a full time operation and Bill Monroe’s induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame, it became clear that something needed to be done to better prepare and serve performers who were increasingly competing as bluegrass musicians in the larger realm of the country music industry.

Neil Rosenberg shares that in the fall of 1970, Carlton Haney published an article in *Muleskinner News* entitled “Blue Grass Music—it’s Time to Organize,” where Haney shared what he envisioned as a list of services a “festival clearing house” would provide stating the rules as follows:

1. Clear all festival dates and sanction all festivals.
2. Clear all artist booking for 5% of the fee.
3. Provide a service to trade magazines wishing to verify [sic] adds.
4. Help festival promoters with pictures, mats, stories, and write-ups.

5. Permit only one festival in a state. If two can be run on the same weekend 400 miles apart, this is good, then all the acts can work more.
6. See that prices are advertised correctly.
7. See that everybody is treated fairly in obtaining their money.
8. Obtain booking on other shows, clubs, concerts, and college dates.
9. Help promote bluegrass music parties, organizations, records, television shows, and trade magazines.
10. Fulfill our need for organization. (qtd. in Rosenberg 289)

In 1985, a few industry leaders came together to create the IBMA as a trade organization to serve the bluegrass community. In 1988, they placed their headquarters in Louisville, Kentucky and moved to Nashville in the nineties. While the headquarters are still in “Music City,” the “World of Bluegrass” mega-festival sponsored annually by the IBMA will be in Raleigh, North Carolina beginning in 2013.

The IBMA’s current mission states: “Working together for high standards of professionalism, a greater appreciation for our music, and the success of the worldwide bluegrass community” (International Bluegrass Music Association). According to the organization’s website, their values serve as guiding principles for how affairs are conducted and reveal underlying beliefs about what is important to the organization. These values are listed on the website as follows:

**Forward Thinking & Leadership** provides us with an endless and outward-looking vision and allows us to be proactive in finding the growth critical to our future.

**Positive Working Relationships** create goodwill and a spirit of cooperation.

Participation is encouraged through personal communication and interaction in an organization that is accessible and responsive.

**Professionalism** is our mission and cornerstone of all things important to our industry.

In daily practice, we endeavor to be more resourceful, educated, creative, aware, and dedicated in order to find health and success.

**Integrity** is a respected trait we work to earn through truthfulness, honesty, fairness, and ethical conduct that fosters goodwill and more productive and humane relationships with one another.

**Honoring Tradition** is important, not only to our past, but to our future as we embrace the positive attributes and pride we have in our industry, musical, and cultural heritage. Our traditions are the source of intense and powerful resources.

**Diversity & Inclusiveness** Diverse perspectives are encouraged in the expression of bluegrass music. We embrace the participation and involvement in bluegrass by people from all cultures and backgrounds.

**Education** Foster a culture of learning and promote continuing education at all levels.  
([www.ibma.org](http://www.ibma.org))

The IBMA's website provides the following outline regarding its organizational structure: Members, Board of Directors, Staff, and Working Committees/Task Force. (For exhaustive descriptions of positions see Appendix 1)

The educational component of the IBMA is broken into five specific categories. Leadership Bluegrass is an annual training program for which the IBMA selects a group of individuals from various areas within the community to learn about the industry and the state

of the genre, a “bluegrass think tank.” My experience as a graduate of this program was profound and allowed me to better understand the “why” of the IBMA. The program brings together a cross section of entertainers, industry individuals, educators, and more to discuss the “state of the community” and ways to better help those in the genre.

IBMA White Papers and “How-to Guides” are available online and provide members with tips about recording, self-promotion, and even online media. I find such guides reminiscent of the “Do It Yourself (DIY)” movement’s momentum, ideals, and political pamphlets. The Wellness Program was initiated to help traveling artists maintain their health while on the road. A bluegrass musician often has to drive for a day, play a gig, and then drive to a hotel many hours away that is close to the next day’s show. The IBMA works to help artists be more health-conscious. And the “Bluegrass Business Conference” is held annually and features speakers and panels of interest to all different members and perspectives.

Most importantly, the organization provides a forum, or a place for those within the industry to be heard. This leads to the IBMA’s role as a global “channel” for the many cultures and individuals attracted to this music from across the world. Musicians and fans in Japan were actually “studying” bluegrass long before the USA’s folk revival led to the re-discovery of Bill Monroe. Shin Akimoto and Saburu Watanabe were two of the pioneers for getting bluegrass albums and American bluegrass acts into Japan’s many honkytonks and bluegrass bars.

The IBMA recognizes this relationship between cultures and music’s capacity to serve as a language that builds bridges where no commonalities were seen before. Thus, the IBMA works to include global members and even aired its annual awards show online for the

“global community” and “brothers and sisters around the world.”<sup>5</sup> Online communities initiated by the IBMA, such as the Bluegrass Nation project, work to create a more pluralistic meeting space for all members to join and discuss the state of the genre.

The past ten years have brought huge shifts that have reconfigured our seemingly small “World of Bluegrass” in unprecedented ways via cyberspace. This relatively new medium has allowed bluegrassers to gather together with the touch of a button. Songs are shared around the globe, lessons are given through screens, and publicity reaches its audience the fastest in the form of tweets. The cyber-age of bluegrass is here; however, bluegrass has spread through media from the beginning. A historiography of the bluegrass movement (as a collective group of people—not tracing shifts in aesthetics due to media) allows for further exploration of the bluegrass identity and the possibilities of space. The IBMA has attempted to utilize cyberspace to extend the impact of its organization through the creation of Bluegrass Nation, an initiative to “harness the power of digital media and social networking,” according to the IBMA website’s description ([www.ibma.com](http://www.ibma.com)).

As a member of the International Bluegrass Association and a graduate of the Leadership Bluegrass program, I am partial to the organization. However, as the wife and sister of struggling bluegrass musicians, I see how the domination of a particular association to control awards and many of the networking opportunities can prove problematic in a consumer-driven market.

Exploring this web of relationships begs the questions: IBMA—What is it? Why is it? And what does it mean for the globalization of bluegrass music? The IBMA is a trade organization hoping to help bluegrass musicians and fans. It has an interdependent

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<sup>5</sup> These were Laurie Lewis’s words as she welcomed fans to the award show in 2012.

relationship with the community—the organization relies on the activity of the fans as much as the performers rely on the assistance of the IBMA in making contacts and being a successful performer in the bluegrass world’s vastly “Do-It-Yourself” industry. And in terms of the globalization of music, IBMA serves as a funder, educator, and a platform for transnational discussions.

### **An Alternate History: Bluegrass Nation as an Imagined Community**

With an understanding of the structure of power/relations facilitating the creation of a “nation” and the values the IBMA hopes to uphold and promote, I apply the work of political theorist Benedict Anderson, whose thoughts allow for the conceptual leap from venue to imagined community to (n)ation. Borders/limits, sovereignty, and community, or strong horizontal relationships, define a nation, according to Anderson. Nations are not always just constructs with a capital N, but also can serve as ideological constructs or cultural artifacts, with shared cultural resources that are imagined, not fabricated.

When the bluegrass community is analyzed as an imagined or created nation, the roles performed within the community become meaningfully connected to the “deep horizontal camaraderie” found in nationalism. The roles of fan, musician/music-maker, performer, and creative core are all necessary, and without them the “imagined community” would not exist. This analysis began by placing the bluegrass community within Anderson’s framework, and then describing the histories and impact of each of the four sub-communities.

Anderson proposes that an imagined nation may arise when given the following conditions:

1. Fundamental cultural conceptions
2. The belief that society was naturally organized around and under high centres or monarchs who were persons apart from other human beings and who are ruled by some form of cosmological (divine) dispensation
3. A conception of temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable, the origins of the world and of men essentially identical
4. Fraternity, power, and time are linked meaningfully together (34-36)

The traditional “story” of the genre provided in the literature review upholds both points one and three in Anderson’s concept of nationalism. By understanding his concepts, the relationship between technology and language can be explored as well, through a discussion of the ways technology and the digital age have allowed for a deeper connection between members of the imagined community/nation. The final section of chapter two, “Borders and Boundaries” addresses the borders of the nation and how boundaries are understood within the imagined community. I use the borders to present inner-scene/nation conflict in a new way, with hopes of broadening the conversation within the bluegrass community and academia.

Anderson’s second criterion, “The belief that society was naturally organized around and under high centers/monarchs who were persons apart from other human beings and who are ruled by some form of cosmological (divine) dispensation” (36), is upheld by the authority given to the generational organization of the genre and Bill Monroe’s mythic role in the creation story of bluegrass. Monroe serves as a mythic figure, as Robert Cantwell explains:

As Monroe's childhood carried him to the farther reaches of Rosine society and to the floor of the social hierarchy, so his music symbolically thrust him to the zenith of an imagined community ambiguously situated in the "years ago" and in the emblematic 'hills of old Kentucky,' whose embodiments in Bluegrass music have by sheer emotional magnetism caused an actual community to coalesce around it (33).

Interestingly, each generation has such monarchs or "key figures" that often change the genre's sound from within. I agree with the many critics and bluegrass scholars who argue that Chris Thile serves that role today, just as Tony Rice did with the Rounder 00-44 recording. I later argue in the roles section that such monarchs emerge from what I have labeled the "creative core."

Cantwell's above statement leads into Anderson's third necessary element for the formation of a nation: "a conception of temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable, the origins of the world and of men essentially identical," or a specific historical framework. The "history" of the bluegrass community lies in the collective imagination of the community. The collective remembrance of the genre (for most) is repeated in bluegrass texts, with the "beginning of the genre" happening in 1945 as Bill Monroe stepped onto the stage of the Grand Ole Opry with North Carolina native Earl Scruggs. They were named "the first generation," and every generation since has been structured similarly, making the history read more like a genealogical web than a discography. The world of bluegrass and Bill Monroe serve in unison as the "source" of the sound and community. Just as Adam and Eve's fateful story in the Garden of Eden cannot be separately called the "creation story" or "the beginnings of wo/man," the stories of

bluegrass's origins and their individual meanings for the genre are inextricable from one another.

Here, I find conflict with the common lexicon both Anderson and the genre use. "The Daughters of Bluegrass" seem to spring from Bill Monroe with no previous Mother figure to support their presence in the genre; however, there were already many women in the genre. Current efforts to promote the gender awareness in bluegrass only deepen the competitive and comparative relationship between women and men performers within the genre, perpetuating misunderstandings and conflicts. The "Pickin' like a Girl" box set released by Dixie Hall and Murphy Henry's soon to be released book, *Pretty Good for a Girl: Women in Bluegrass* continue to judge and praise women in comparison to or in competition with men, rather than acknowledging the ways in which women have (with little appreciation) served as mothers of the bluegrass nation.

According to Fred Bartenstein's analysis, bluegrass's generational format creates a familial connection and an indistinguishable correlation between the history of performers and the evolution of the sound, just as Anderson insists necessary for the rise of a nation; a history where the origins of the world and of men are essentially identical.

Anderson's final element for nationalism is the "linking of fraternity, power, and time meaningfully together" (36). Anderson believes this was met through print capitalism, where "rapidly growing numbers of people are able to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways." I believe this rapid connectivity has only grown more intense as media shifts to cyber platforms. Social networking and user-generated sites are the ultimate examples of such print capitalism. Furthermore, time spent at festivals and local venues as well as "home jams" re-enforces that the fraternal linking taking place

online is based on experienced relationships and bonds. Fraternity is also created through participation online on user-generated websites. People become members and the music becomes more than a pastime; it becomes an identity and an organization through which values related to home are readily applied. Briefly, a discussion of the group lexicon and relation to typical politics is needed to clarify the Bluegrass Nation's positioning online and in actuality.

While leadership within the genre frequently use the words "worldwide" and "international" to describe the community, as well as to secure voting methods, forums, and create their own "laws," the scene has a staunch stance against organized political activity, especially against the partisan lines drawn in the United States. When Nashville songwriters Larry Cordle, Carl Jackson, and Jerry Salley announced they would be performing at the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida, and at a lunch for the Mississippi delegation via *Bluegrass Today*, readers responded with little enthusiasm for the choice to participate in partisan politics. One site user notes the common response in a post:

I understand the parties wanting to appeal to the regional constituency, but for me bluegrass (actually music in general) is how I relax. I would just as soon leave politics out of it completely. As much as I enjoy politics, as a nation we have become so polarized that it is not good for the country. There doesn't seem to be any compromise left in Washington and with a two party system, without compromise nothing at all happens. Off my soap box now. ("Shawn")

Another instance of bluegrass/American politics collision involved Rhonda Vincent's introduction of a political candidate onstage. *Bluegrass Today* correspondent Brance reports:

During the course of her set on Saturday, Rhonda invited Mary Glassman onto the stage to join the band on the tune *The Passing of the Train*. Glassman provided the train-whistle sound effects during the course of the song. When Glassman first stepped on stage, Rhonda introduced her as a candidate for lieutenant governor in Connecticut. During a short break between Rhonda's set and Ricky Skaggs, the Mayor of East Hartford, Melody Currey, took to the stage and apologized to the festival audience for politics having intruded into the event. Mayor Currey is a supporter of Glassman's opponent in the primaries, which are taking place today. It's unclear why Rhonda invited Glassman to join the band on this song, especially considering the poor quality of the candidate's train whistle. (Brance)

Once again, melding politics into a bluegrass environment yielded a negative response not just from an opposing candidate, but also from the online bluegrass community. One individual, identified as "hog," responds:

I thought the whistle blowing display was pretty poor, but I wonder why someone of Vincent's standing should attempt a stunt like this. I feel we get enough politics rammed down our throats on a day-to-day basis, and when I go to see bluegrass music, this is not what I want to see. Whichever side of the political divides one sits.

(n.pag.)

Ralph Stanley's political ambitions (running for Clerk of Court in his hometown of Dickenson, Virginia) and Stanley's outspoken support of President Barack Obama are an exception to the rule that bluegrass and politics do not mix. Social awareness through projects such as "Music of Coal" and patriotism at festivals seem to offer "safe" zones for political discussion inside the genre. In my opinion, the project that has most accurately

exemplified the genre's unstated political ethos (overt populism) was with the production of Del McCoury's "Moneyland" album released in 2008. In a review of the album and its surrounding politics, Craig Havighurst blogs:

What Del is saying with *Moneyland* is made bracingly clear in his liner notes to the CD, which is due for a July release. McCoury, who is 68 years old and a genuine small-town Pennsylvanian from York County, writes that years ago "anyone in York could get a good job, because there were factories everywhere. In the last few years, I've had to watch friends and family lose their jobs as factories closed, and many [including his wife] lose (their) pensions...(W)orking folks all across America are in a tough spot." Elsewhere, the album notes say "the only goal of this album is to send this message to Washington politicians: '(Y)ou have turned Rural America into a scene of devastation [that] can now best be described as Forgotten America. Not only do we believe it Un-American for Washington to be blind to the problems of small towns and rural areas, we believe it to be immoral." (n.pag.)

The "McCoury Music-Moneyland" post on *Bluegrass Today* in which John Lawless reviewed the album, noting it should be filed under "Americana," not bluegrass, was only shared four times by users (as of this writing) and elicited no responses. This is worthy of note because humor blogs and posts concerning the health or life events of an even semi-well known musician will generate up to twenty comments and hundreds of shares on multiple platforms.

The political lexicon of the Bluegrass Nation (adopted and defined from within) is seen in the following examples I recorded at the IBMA Awards show in 2012. Laurie Lewis welcomed the "global community," and "our brothers and sisters around the world" to the

show. “God bless this music,” references to the “father of our music,” and “pioneers,” “the Daughters of Bluegrass,” and many mentions of “defending or preserving bluegrass music” permeated acceptance speeches. Pride and nationalism drove the language and atmosphere while being broadcast via the Internet worldwide. Additionally, musicians who have been performing for several years are referred to as veterans and the term “army” is often used to describe large groups of jammers. Terms of endearment used when referring to “masters” within the genre include: the King of Bluegrass (Jimmy Martin), the Duke of Drive (Terry Baucom), and the Queen of Bluegrass (Rhonda Vincent). Individuals who make contributions to broadening the genre’s audience are referred to as “ambassadors.”

Rather than partake in American politics, the bluegrass community refutes such connections and instead creates its own trans-nation, with its own rules, online. In *Technology and Nationalism*, Marc Adria writes, “Nationalism becomes politically acceptable to a large population when it constitutes a route to modernization” (10). Perhaps it should also be stated that politics become “acceptable” to the bluegrass community when they are not imposed by outside definitions or Washington motivations, but when the political lexicon is introduced and defined from within. The Internet offers a new space to gather—a new space to recreate oneself and find belonging. A space to re-tell stories and allow the past as remembered to become a collective history, and as seen in the example of Bluegrass Nation, an Imagined Community.

### **The Bluegrass Nation’s Boundaries and Borders**

In the digital age, people gather and form identity (regionally, nationally, and globally) online as well as in person. Online spaces are self-actualizing in nature due to their interconnectivity and user-generated content, and allow for self-selecting membership in

chosen groups. People create space, and then, through actions— “liking” a page, adding a photo to a forum, responding to a comment—occupies the identity(s) created, adopted, or remembered.

Voicing opinions in cyberspace has become a pastime of the bluegrass community as consuming as jamming. Forums and listservs are riddled with debates about “the big tent<sup>6</sup>” versus traditional aspects of the music. One of the “loudest” contributors to this discussion to date (in terms of both his level of participation and the exposure that participation has received) has been a well-versed banjo player named Chris Pandolfi, who performs with the “new/jam-grass” group The Infamous Stringdusters.

Pandolfi recently published on his website and various other public sites his “Bluegrass Manifesto,” which also was presented at the IBMA’s 2011 Business Conference, where Pandolfi served as the keynote speaker. In his manifesto, Pandolfi openly talks about how his band grew from within the bluegrass genre, but after performing with Railroad Earth, Pandolfi’s band was introduced to the energy of jam bands and “hippie crowds.” The Railroad Earth collaboration, Pandolfi states, was his epiphany and the moment when he realized there was a much larger community outside of the bluegrass community he could benefit from, both economically and on behalf of the bluegrass movement. In his manifesto he writes the following about the boundaries of terms and the limitations of “bluegrass”:

This is where it gets a little tricky, because I think we are a bluegrass band, and we all absolutely love bluegrass. We never sat down and decided that our music would

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<sup>6</sup> “Big Tent” is a common term used to describe an all inclusive approach toward bluegrass music rather than a defining the genre by specific instrumentation, song selections, etc. An example of a “Big Tent” philosophy festival would be Telluride or ROMP, while “State” festivals such as the North Carolina State Bluegrass Festival embody a different, more conservative, approach towards the music and the community.

change in the same way that we decided our branding would change. . . . We're a bluegrass band. But then we realize the term "bluegrass" just has too much baggage to take us where we want to be. To understand this part, and to consider how things might change, you have to look at the biggest underlying question of all: what is bluegrass anyway? (Pandolfi, n.p.)

Pandolfi continues to define bluegrass as "open music," or "whatever someone says it is," but he understands that this viewpoint does not resonate with fans and the community at large. To bridge the gap, Pandolfi clarifies:

The "bluegrass" world has a small and fiercely loyal fan base, many of whom also play bluegrass instruments. This is a curse and a blessing. While we get to enjoy one of the great oral musical traditions, growing and changing faster than ever before, the fans also take increased ownership over the music. Firm opinions about what is or isn't "bluegrass" have literally come to define the core traditional community...

Bluegrass promoters, festival owners, IBMA members—their opinions about the music inform the way it is portrayed/presented. . . . Perhaps IBMA needs to lead an effort to explicitly expand the definition in a public forum such as Bluegrass Nation, to give the word [bluegrass] a [cachet] that it doesn't currently have. (Pandolfi, n.p.)

Pandolfi's words are relevant because they bring a specific perspective into the "bluegrass debate."

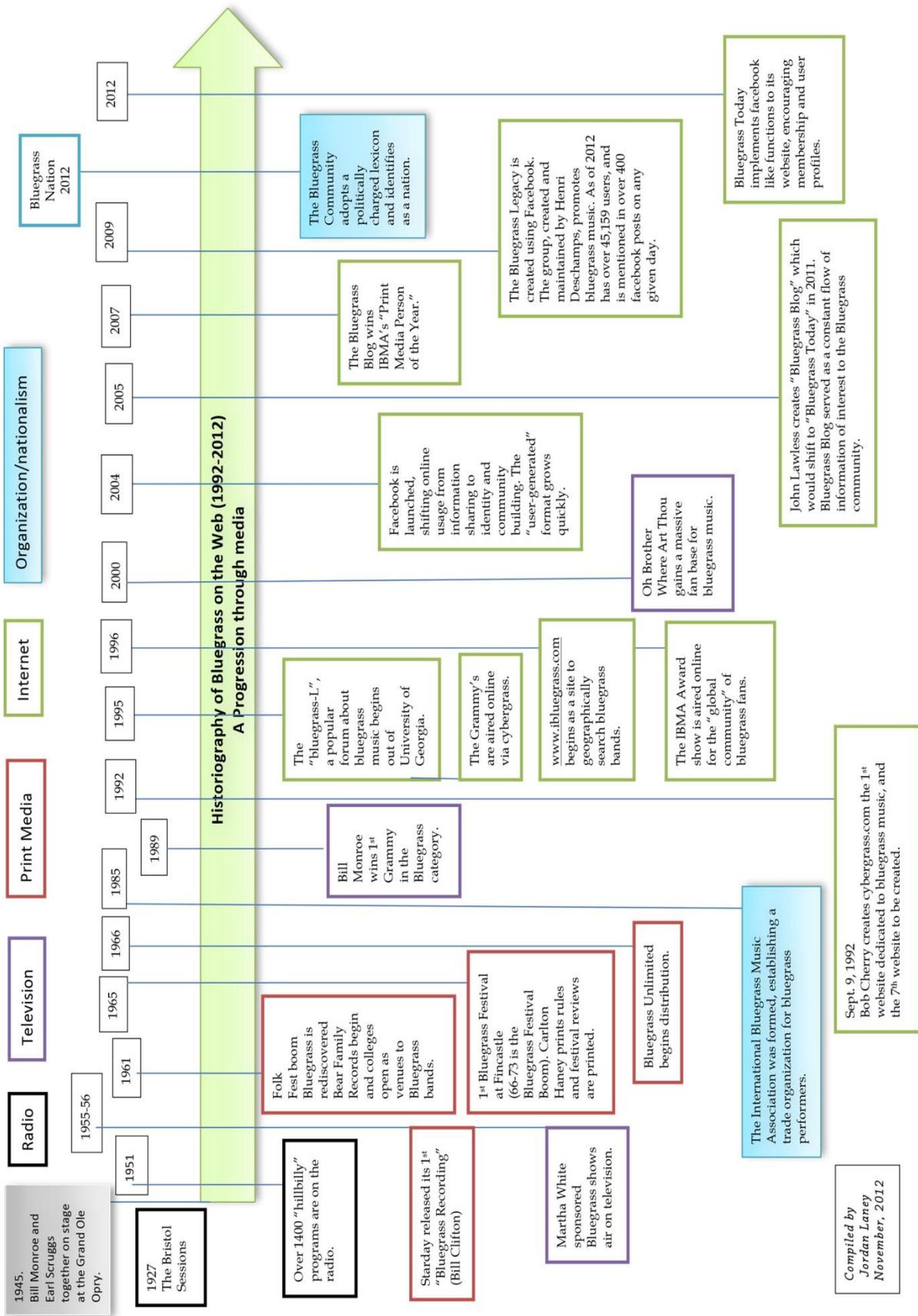
Returning to Anderson's analysis of an imagined community, power and influence are crucial for communities to organize in political ways. Anderson asserts the "colony-state" must have the support of a specific infrastructure to become a "nation-state." Mobility,

bureaucracy (as exemplified by the IBMA), and a modern education system must be in place for nationalism to occur.

Mobility is a hallmark of the Bluegrass community. The community consists of (and is marketed to) the same rural working class known for migration to and from the home place and factory towns. A “modern education,” which Anderson also deems necessary for a nation to form, also is easily located in the Bluegrass community. As early as the 1970s, universities were supporting theses and dissertations on bluegrass music, and by the 1990s East Tennessee State University had established a bluegrass music program at the collegiate level. I briefly address mobility separately, because it is the mobility allowed by technology that allows the bureaucracy and educational system to thrive.

### **Mobility: The Movement of a Nation**

Bluegrass has expanded its audience by utilizing media since 1945, when Bill Monroe and the “Bluegrass Boys,” including Earl Scruggs and Lester Flatt, performed on the grand ole Opry, and the sound of Earl’s syncopated three-finger banjo rolls and Monroe’s high lonesome vocals entered living rooms and kitchens across the southeast United States. As the media have shifted, a clearer form of the community has emerged, embodying what Benedict Anderson describes as an “imagined community.” Tracing the bluegrass community through media resulted in the construction of the timeline, as seen on the following page in Figure 3: “The Historiography of Bluegrass and Media.”



In 1925, the Grand Ole Opry introduced larger fan bases to “hillbilly music” through radio programs open to public attendance. The “audience within an audience” framing device previously attributed to Neil Rosenberg becomes more involved through consumerism and sponsorships. Later, the “audience within an audience” framework continues to be implemented in the creation of hypertext on websites. Community involvement and participation are a core part of the bluegrass experience.

What is particularly important to note from this brief transition through media is that as media shift, there is a congruent shift in terminology or in the lexicon of the group. Before radio syndication, terminology was more fluid when describing music; the onset of the radio spread ideas about classifying Appalachia and its culture and people according to location, and included often-stereotypical figures from the area, including “hillbillies” or “mountaineers.” After Bill Monroe, particularly after the 1950s, the term “bluegrass” was used in print media and in Billboard charts. As the sound became mediated through television programs, the label “bluegrass” often simply referred to music of the American South or working rural class, and was often taken out of context. However, the type of participation allowed by the cyberge has enabled the bluegrass community to name and categorize itself, and in doing so, the community has chosen to use terms such as “legacy” and “nation.”

According to Walter Ong, printed text marks a shift from an oral culture to written word and “separates the knower from the known” (43). The schism between Ong’s analyses of oral cultures and my own understanding of the bluegrass culture is that the bluegrass culture was never solely oral. Furthermore, I am not discussing how media shift, but how the Bluegrass’ lexicon shifts. The bluegrass community has never been an orally based

tradition—the genre has been mediated since the beginning (1939 or 1945, depending on the interpretation of its history). As cyberspace allows for a participatory and democratic method used to gather and organize the bluegrass community, the community becomes increasingly vocal in naming itself and constructing its identity.

Websites promoting “The Bluegrass Life” and “The Bluegrass Legacy” have seen dramatic growth and highly active members. The lexicon, in return, has shifted from an “outsider”-named genre to a community that names itself. In “Folksongs in Print: Text and Tradition,” David Atkinson states that the word “tradition” stems from the root meaning of to “give,” “entrust,” or “hand over.” Exchange between people and media is constant and a trait of tradition. It is in this exchange that the past and the present are always connected. In cyberspace, the “knower” and the “known” are one, and the text is participatory; thus, the lexicon does not belong to the ruling class or elites, but to the users.

Because Ong’s analysis does not entirely fit the always-mediated culture surrounding bluegrass music, I prefer to analyze the relationship between shifts in media and the formation of the lexicon. As the diagram below suggests, celebrating “home” and reclaiming one’s past while creating one’s own identity at the same time has been a trend since the inception of bluegrass.

Medium	Lexicon
<b>Live: Venues, concerts, barn dances, etc.</b>	<b>Lack of terms applied to the music. Most common include “mountain music,” “dance tunes” or “string band music”</b>
<b>Radio: Broadcast programs and billboard charts</b>	<b>The term “hillbilly” is used. Regional charts locate the bluegrass sound within Appalachia.</b>
<b>Print: magazines, scholarly works, liner notes on LPs, etc.</b>	<b>“Bluegrass” is used to differentiate Bill Monroe’s style from that of Old Time Bands. Bluegrass bands promote the use of “real bluegrass” and “authentic mountain music” on their records.</b>
<b>Television: including film</b>	<b>“Bluegrass” is the most common term. The music is used in varying contexts, usually referring to the American South and the rural working class.</b>
<b>Internet</b>	<b>The bluegrass community <u>chooses to define themselves</u> with the term “Bluegrass Nation.”</b>

Figure 4: “Bluegrass Lexicon Chart”

This evolving lexicon is the backbone for a larger picture and what I believe is a legitimate way to understand the growth of affinity groups and musical communities, including the bluegrass nation, as imagined communities.

### Chapter 3: The Bluegrass Nation as Concentric Circles.

High in Telluride, up on Bridal Veil/ Ten thousand feet above the sound/ The news  
came around and sent me to count all my blessings/ And to thank you for all the good  
friends that I've found/ Hey, hey, hey/ How in the world did we get this far/ Hey, hey,  
hey/ Holding tight to the tail of a shooting star/ Hey, hey, hey, you're running circles  
around me/ Circles around me now.

--"Circles Around Me," by Jeff Black and Sam Bush

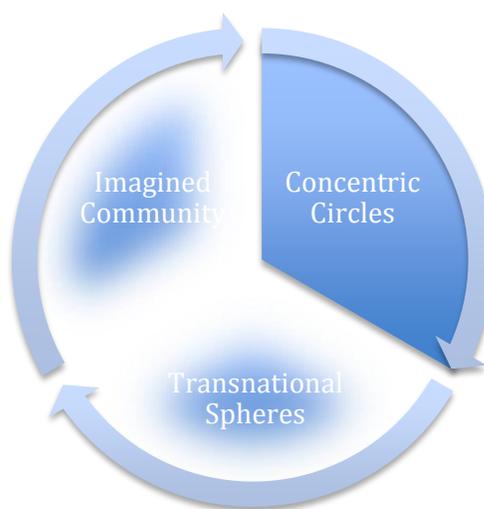


Figure 5: "The Bluegrass Kaleidoscope: Concentric Circles"

In order to understand how and why media provide such a perfect vessel for changes in the bluegrass community, I looked to Eric Hobsbawn's work *Inventing Tradition* and Marshall McLuhan's thoughts on the expansion of technology. As a result, I found a flow (or a transfer of identity and community) from the home to the cyber world. The following diagram suggests the formative process of the Bluegrass Nation in traditional terms of

movement, location, and influence with regard to such concentric development from the home outward, as well as the maintenance of plural but magnetic relationships through the term “nation.”

The diagram<sup>7</sup> also suggests how the musical community has worked as an affinity group<sup>8</sup> since it first stepped outside the home and entered lives of individuals across the United States through the radio. With this gradual growth and initiatives to “self-govern” through the creation of trade organizations, “power” in the nation has begun to reside in relationships, not products. As relationships and networks strengthen, the nation expands as allowed by technology.

I find that Anderson’s “fundamental cultural conceptions” are evident in the “traditional” nature of the music, meaning the music has a typically understood connection to one’s home and an assumed connection to Appalachia. Just as I created a linear timeline to understand the progression of media and the relationship of technology and bluegrass music’s fanbase, I propose a timeline of sorts, showing how the music was (and is) shared as the community grows concentrically.

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<sup>7</sup> When I created the diagram, I was strictly attempting to place my experiences and understanding of the “core” identity of the group and power relationships. Influenced by the work of Edward Tufte I hoped to present relations in a new, visual way. Later, it was brought to my attention that the form of my diagrams also is conceptually similar to the anarchist organizational theory developed by Mikhail Bakunin. These similarities were accidental, but raise questions regarding my own personal experiences and the “movement” and how they present the bluegrass community as an anarchist group. These conclusions may be explored in further research.

<sup>8</sup> For the purpose of this research, I rely on Iris Marion Young’s understanding of affinity groups. Young defines affinity groups as groups that involve “affinity with other persons by which they identify with one another and by which other people identify them... [they are] not defined primarily by a set of shared attributes, but by the sense of identity that people have. (Young, 272)”

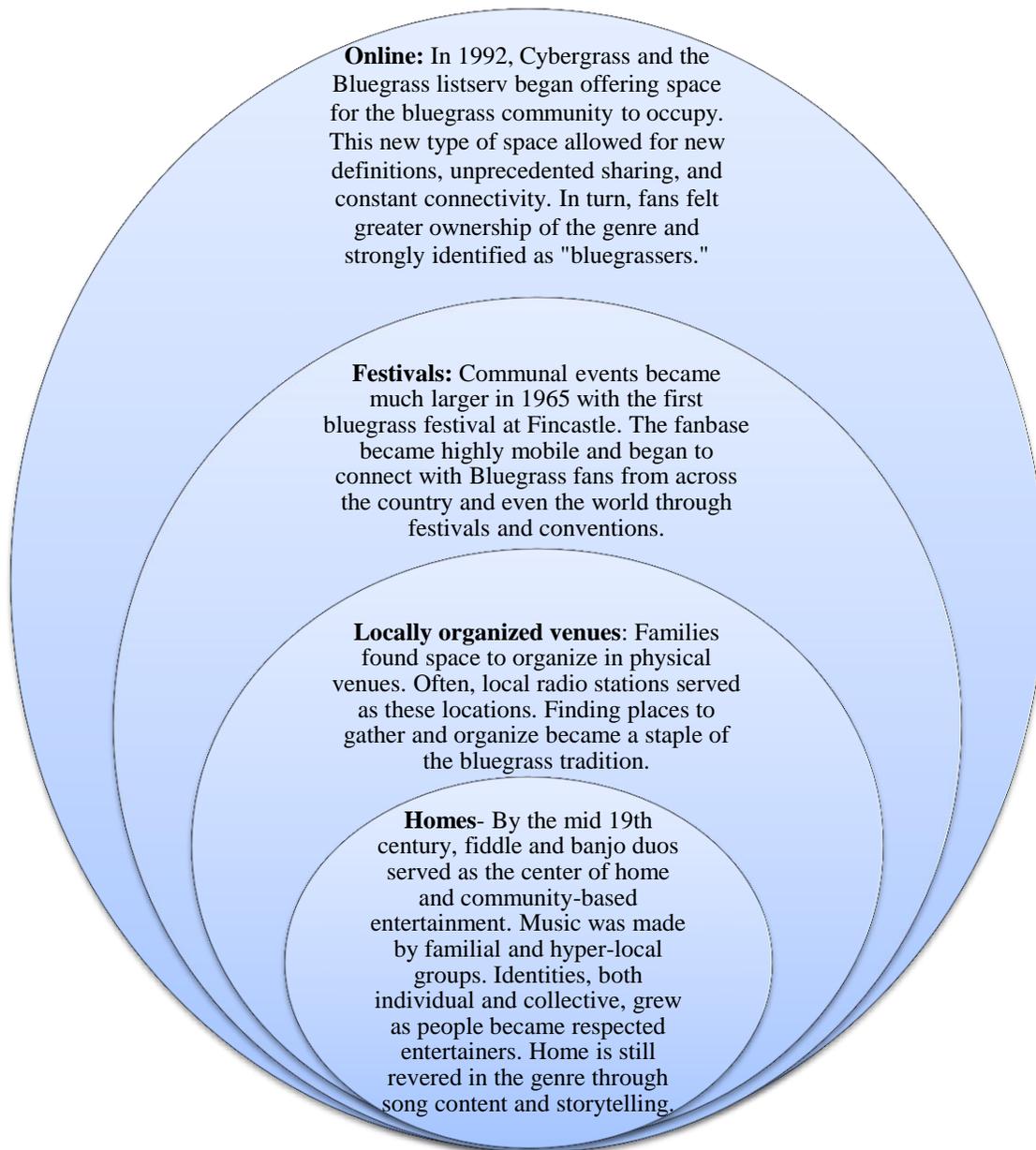


Figure 6. "The Bluegrass Kaleidoscope: Concentric Circles"

Understanding the center/core of the genre to be “home” allows one to better understand conflict and growth within the nation. While the realities and the experiences of its current members are very real and even present in the music, the nostalgic thread that connects members with their yesterdays is a product and re-construction of the past, with only minor representation in the sound (more so in the content). Exchange and evolution flow from the home or past, outward to the far reaches of mediated culture and back, traveling due to the magnetism of a forgotten, re-membered time.

Bluegrass music, while traditional in nature, can apparently be easily adopted as a soundscape of one’s own “home place” regardless of era, or even of origin. It especially serves as the imagined local soundscape for rural Americans, particularly southern Appalachian agrarians and Western North Carolinians/East Tennesseans.

George Carney, a “folk geographer” mapping sounds and sonic landscapes, found pockets of intense creativity in southern Appalachian, especially Western North Carolina. Carney writes:

The innovative bands and creative individuals from the various western North Carolina communities would have made little impact had it not been for the myriad social institutions of the region that provided performance opportunities, repertoire exchanges, and professional exposure for the musicians to gain regional prominence and national recognition. The most influential of these institutions were the homes, schools, and churches within the immediate neighborhoods of the artists involved.

(146)

Mass migrations from the mountains to the cities for jobs allowed this rural sound to become idyllic and romanticized in the minds of the workers and their children. It became a tradition;

as David Atkinson writes in *Folksongs in Print: Text and Tradition*, “The identification of tradition serves to establish the perception of a temporal connection between the present and the past” (473).

“Home” encompasses multiple meanings to different members of the community. Many believe the music is “in your blood”: that music is not just familial, but genetic. My own father, when asked why he plays bluegrass, offers the explanation that the fiddle was the trade his own father taught him, and it gives him something of which to be proud. As a member of the community, I have felt “at home” in bluegrass settings, surrounded by friends and familiar tunes. I have also noted the use of the term “family” toward members of the community, such as being introduced to performers by family nicknames, often “Sis.” Bluegrass offers a “believable” identity of sodality<sup>9</sup> to its members. For those who do not grow up in the genre, the retelling of history heightened by online forums allows for ownership of the identity through learning the history and participating in its present.

Folklorists, regional scholars, and musicologists acknowledge that traditional music or folk music is passed down from one generation to the next in a familial or communal setting. Bluegrass is considered a form of traditional Appalachian music, which began in the homes and churches of the working class. Appalachia’s working class is a specifically displaced cohort, migrating for work with only memories of home. As folklorist Cecelia Conway offers, “The constructed Appalachia becomes a vision for what the future should become” (letter to author). Home, for the purposes of this research, is understood as a manifestation of Marx’s concept of the proletariat’s need for belonging—the need for a connection to the world other than, or in addition to, the exchange of labor. This is done

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<sup>9</sup> Traditionally a term used to describe the Catholic community and its fraternal relationships, sodality is a term applied (often in Gender Queer Theory) to communities that form kinship bonds or “brother/sisterhoods.”

through traditional arts, such as bluegrass. By acknowledging this need, bluegrass is understood as a vessel for maintaining a connection to one's "authentic" identity.

### **The Bluegrass Identity as Diaspora.**

Inside, I follow the network of roads pressing toward the center, a concluding city square where languages mix and trade. I read cracks in the city walls, cobblestones pulled up. Grass, time, and water push edges apart under my feet and buildings whisper against my shoulders. (Magi, 11)

Before continuing to examine the movement from "home" to online spaces, I must address the possibilities of home further, understanding the "bluegrass home" not as Appalachia, but as the current state of a (post-place) diaspora. Through the lens of a regional studies student, I understand diaspora as a member of a displaced people group, a group uprooted. My own family was displaced by the Tennessee Valley Authority, moved from their homes and given jobs in the city while their home places were buried under water in an effort to generate power for a nuclear plant. We travel back to the Fontana area in Bryson City, North Carolina every summer, riding a boat to the island (that was once a mountain top) where family members are buried. When the dam is opened and the water drains, remnants of front porches, barns, and chimneys are found still standing and, I imagine, the music once made there. Just as poet Jill Magi describes, the efforts to remember or hear a sound now lost is mimicked in my own eager efforts to imagine the sound of my grandfather's fiddle and consequently (often unconsciously) map the history of the genre according to such imaginings and remembrances.

According to Menderes Candan and Uwe Hunger, political scientists on the cutting edge of migratory and online studies, diaspora is to be understood as “the dispersion of religious or think groups from their homelands/home region, either forced or voluntary” (1). The dispersion can recall either a group or an individual identity. Their studies regarding nation building on the Internet present a case concerning Kurdish migrants in Germany. (Candan and Hunger also rely on Anderson to validate their findings.) Interestingly, one of their assessments is that “diaspora communities without their own nation-states are not the sole ‘stakeholders’ that aspire to nation-building on the Internet” (147). Rather, older and newer states consciously cultivate online nation building within their diasporas.

As scholarship confirms, being “uprooted” is the story of the southern Appalachian Mountains rural working class’s plight. Many would argue that is the internal condition of all of America in the post 9/11 world(s) and, with the rapid pace of modernity and technology changing the ways in which people relate, being a shiftless people is a global theme, particularly among the working class. Bluegrass offers a way in which people can come together and “remember,” if not recreate, a past to hold on to and participate in through festivals, fairs, and picking parties. The Bluegrass Nation is an [pan-global/transnational] entity working from a decentralized frame. The binding factor is class and a desire for “home.” Robert Cantwell writes in *Bluegrass Breakdown*:

This music belongs no longer to a region, though the South is still the major contributor to it, but to an economic class, the industrial working class, which can appreciate both the vulgar glamour of the music and its mercurial capacity to treat subjects of immediate social and personal significance. (7)

If Cantwell's assertion is believed, and bluegrass serves a diverse class, built on "working man's" or proletariat's needs and aesthetic, the route to modernization is consistent with class desires—to rise while maintaining roots to a history and a sense of belonging. Such groups find solace in the spaces of the cyber world. Cyber ethnographer Hines (2000) remarked on how "localities become disembodied from their cultural, historical, geographic meaning and re-integrated into functional networks, or image collages, inducing a space of flows that substitutes for the space of places" (Hines, 2000, as cited in Waldron, 2009, p.98).

With what many consider to be an "Appalachian" sound, the social aspects of bluegrass are orchestrated by a collectively adopted and nostalgically remembered pseudo-Appalachian history, fulfilling a nostalgic need or longing for the idyllic past. Such a longing is a trait of the age of angst, which has been connected to the digital age. The need for identity flows from a constructed perception of Appalachia founded on memories spoken in resistance to the loss of culture/connection due to migration cycles from rural to urban space, and later, post-migration, in the assimilation of mountain and urban culture through pop culture and media.

Cyberspace offers the ideal space for such a nation, with memories rather than acres, to occupy. The Internet expands content, thus integrating the individual into the content in more ways and in less time. The social aspects of the bluegrass community foster a participatory type of democracy within the nation. This is fitting, as Burt Feintuch translates:

I would guess that people who live in the kind of social setting we idealize as functioning communities have, by and large, not been bothered to talk about community. It's likely that those of us who feel a kind of displacement or a desire to connect talk most about community. (157)

Understanding the diaspora to be the connection or magnetism to the core of the concentric circles concept, I am now exploring the bluegrass community through a closer analysis of the culture and history uniting the diaspora through tradition and the use of media in the next section.

### **Tradition in the Concentric Circles**

A tradition, or a process of remembering, for the bluegrass community in the digital age is a connecting of a selected or “usable” past with the present—with ongoing, contemporary life. In music and many other practical activities tradition can be considered a kind of grammar, or basic language, within the diaspora or concentric circles. In *Bluegrass Breakdown* Robert Cantwell writes,

A traditional fiddler recalls the melodies he has heard around him, offering his own elaborations, combinations, and variations upon them; he finds that the circle of his memory intersects others so that something independent reveals itself—the “tradition”—which compels his loyalty because it is apparently so much larger and more enduring than what he is. (16)

Cantwell’s astute observation here is that tradition is a practice, making one larger than the individual is alone, while becoming part of a sublime whole. Identity is thus a result of the practice of tradition, a practice rapidly changing in the digital age as participation is no longer dependent upon one’s physical location. Eyerman and Jamison explain:

The musician, songwriter, or composer must first learn the notation and the melodic and rhythmic procedures of the tradition in order to make music; otherwise it could not be passed on. But, at the same time, artistic creation requires that those rules be

broken, something new to it, and by becoming embedded in an individual or collective performance. It is important to recognize that there is a tension, or, better, an extremely fine line, between the dogmatic following of tradition, and, with it, the collection of the traditional and the creative embodiment of tradition, or what might be termed innovation within tradition. But no artistic expression would be possible without a tradition to inform it, or enclose it. (29)

The story of bluegrass music beginning in the home, establishing itself through the sounds of Bill Monroe and other pioneers, and then being preserved by enthusiasts is a tale that has been recreated by members of the community since the first bluegrass festival at Fincastle.<sup>10</sup> Such history with a material/print culture and a constant remembrance of its past has easily embodied a political aura in the rituals and comradeship of its members. Thus, “political” feelings are not of a bipartisan nature in this case, but belong to a different type of movement—a separate ideology of preservation fueled by ownership. This type of kinship bond (often seen in Appalachian church congregations) allows for new generations to feel a sense of belonging and purpose—a feeling I have often been overwhelmed with, as the sound of bluegrass music offers me a sense of belonging and connection to the core, or home, no matter where I am.

Online, Bluegrass Nation creates a shared history for its citizens to spread, protect, and defend. Through social networking sites, members post pictures—old and new—of themselves, their family, and friends playing music, giving lessons via video conference on the Internet, and sharing concerts as they happen. Videos are uploaded with members performing together; new shows and albums are introduced and shared online. A reunion of sorts happens daily in chat rooms and on Facebook walls as people who would once meet

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<sup>10</sup> Carlton Haney hosted the first ever weekend long bluegrass festival in Fincastle, Virginia in 1965.

only in the home, local venues, or festivals have the opportunity to meet anytime, often all the time. Because bluegrass is the idealized history of an idyllic Appalachian meta-past, often members are eager to enthusiastically participate in its construction, and in a way, their own history. Online enthusiasts upload videos and photographs, retelling stories and keeping connections alive.

Disputes arise when members feel the music is drifting too far from its “roots,” while others encourage progressive sounds. Protection “from” modernity is a sentiment expressed in forums and found in regional literature. Cycles of “progress” being equated with the stripping of mountaintops or the forced removal of tenant farmers from their homes have left rural Americans with overwhelming concern regarding change. Many of these individuals see bluegrass music as something they can defend from “progress,” when everything else has been taken away.

A new understanding of this concentric construction of bluegrass’s identity(s) and nationalism invites an exploration into the “backbone” or core of the Bluegrass Nation. Organizations/networks aid members in producing music, which upholds and recreates the shared history of the members. As Burt Fientuch, noted folklorist, expands:

We have tended to view the dense multiplex network and its conservative culture as historically prior to other kinds of networks and cultures. We might turn the problem around, however, and instead of defining this network type as the structure of the traditional community, define it as the product of a desire for tradition, a closing of ranks in the conditions of threat. Threats to network may be cultural and work in two directions of exchange. Authorities in the network may attempt to exclude innovations they consider threatening; or a group in a disadvantaged position may wish to control

the commoditization of forms that have emerged from within its ranks. In each case, network position has an influence: those who draw boundaries are those whose strength comes from their centrality. (23-24)

A self-perpetuated history of the genre creates a clear picture through the lens of concentric growth from within the home to a cyber-nation: a space where the “homeless” and uprooted reap the benefits of an established culture. These benefits include ownership of ideals, a shared history, and membership through sodality in a traditional culture. Cyberspace also offers members a voice and a place to participate in political and ideological movements and debates regarding the borders and governance of a nation. For the self-constructed diaspora, bluegrass, and in the cyberge Bluegrass Nation, offers members a homeland.

### Chapter Four: Bluegrass Nation as Transnational Spheres.

History is an open hypertext with a number of possible paths at any moment in time. In retrospect it is easy to forget those discarded routes and see history as a “natural,” linear and therefore Hegelian progress. But in order to get a better understanding of the technological choices we encounter today, previously discarded paths may prove important clues. (Munt, 54)

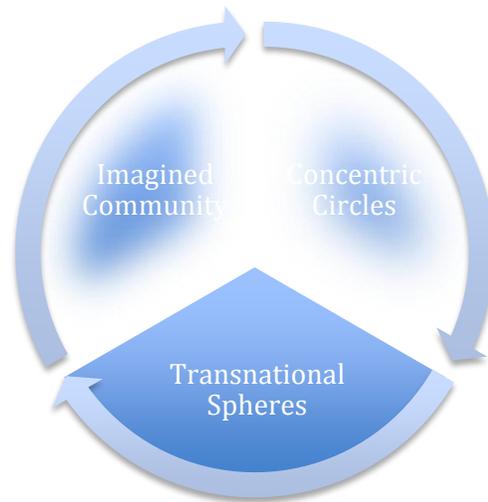


Figure 7: “The Bluegrass Kaleidoscope: Transnational Spheres”

Just as mapping traditional musical cultures is important to human geographers and song collectors, mapping places of occupancy within the Bluegrass Nation is of great importance to musicologists and cultural scholars. From back porches to chat rooms, the place/space where people gather offers, as Sally Munt, Professor of Gender and Cultural

studies at the University of Sussex suggests, a new way to understand history. Implementing Habermasian spheres of influence, Marxist concepts of productivity, and a feminist approach to transnational space, I propose that power within the Bluegrass Nation functions within interdependent spheres. By viewing the nation through transnational spheres and later through roles, complexities within the structure of the nation are seen in radically new ways.

In this chapter the Bluegrass Nation is explored using transnational spheres. This exploration illustrates that there are roles individuals perform within the structures of the spheres. Roles are more fluid and interchangeable than spheres—spheres offer boundaries of spaces and power, roles offer relations and production analysis. One particularly important role is that of the creative core. I use Chris Thile as an example of the creative core, to show how his influence sheds light on internal changes within the nation. With a better understanding of movement and ideology towards change within this structure of the nation, I address spaces of resistance in a section exploring opposition and resistance to the transnational spheres, because I believe all voices should be heard—even the voices of those who cannot or do not speak, or those who speak with hostility.

My construction of the spheres happened after a close reading of Hegel and Habermas in an effort to explore power in a new way. Later, I found Nancy Fraser's work, "Transnationalizing the Public Sphere," to explain the form my graphic had taken. Fraser writes that by "mapping the contours of such arenas and the flows of images and signs in and through them" one is able to find (if sought) "normative standards and emancipatory political possibilities precisely within the historically unfolding constellation"(n.pag.). That is, and was, in the formation of the spheres, my hope for seeing power in new ways was clarified.

Furthermore, the transnational state of the bluegrass community is not, when applying Fraser's theory, separate from politics.

Understanding the organization or "government" of the nation as a lateral and dependent relationship is as important as the bureaucracy or the vertical structure. This approach acknowledges and explores ways in which spheres are self-constructed and grew out of a persistence to survive in modern musical markets while maintaining an empowering trans-global outlook. The internal relationships of the bluegrass enthusiasts who choose to identify as the "Bluegrass Nation" are most simply understood in quasi-Hegelian terms: lordship (those with market control), citizens (enthusiasts), and the working class or proletariat. Individuals are able to move fluidly from one sphere to another, serving in multiple capacities.

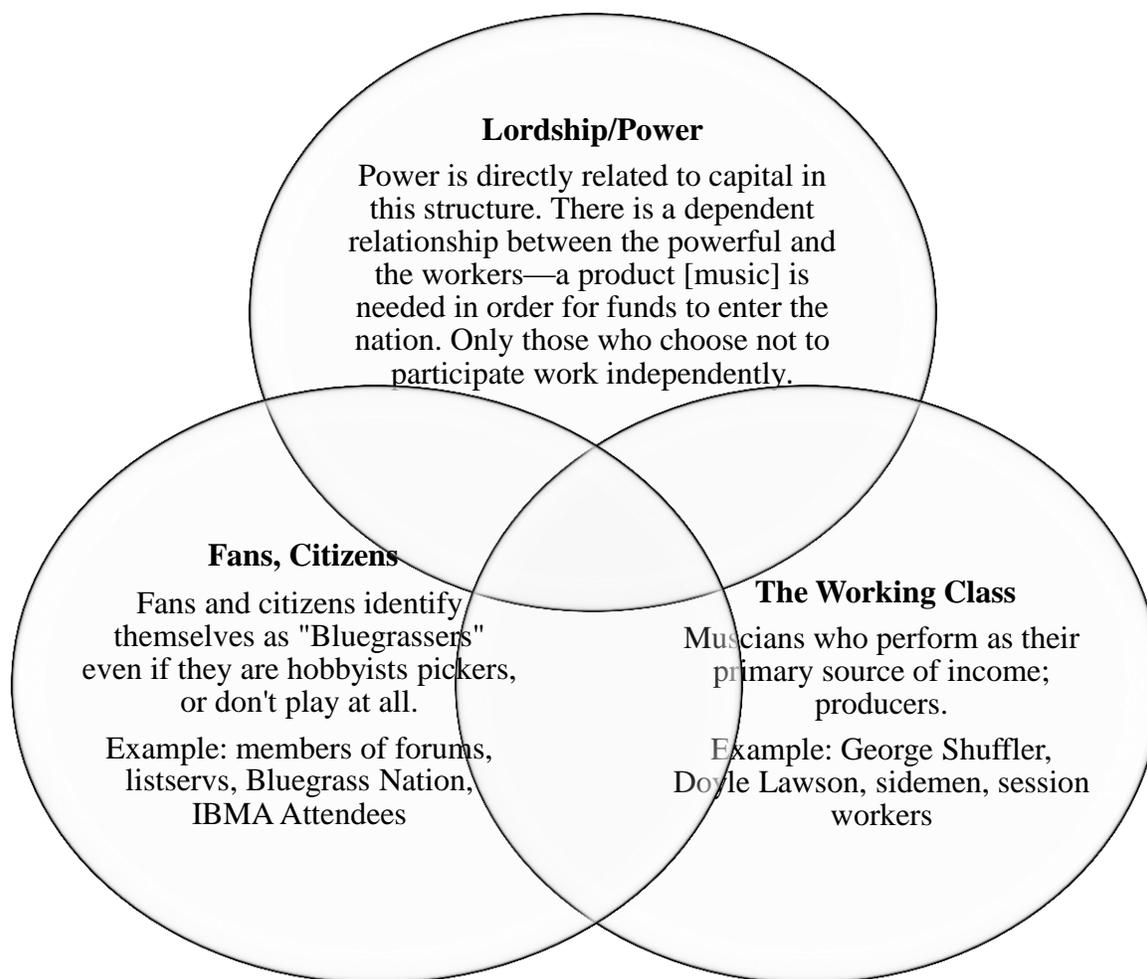


Figure 8: "Transnational Spheres of Influence in the Bluegrass Nation."

There are many benefits from analyzing the Bluegrass Nation as transnational spheres. First, it allows researchers to explore internal structures and relationships, and allows for a broader understanding of the complex role of capital and production within the community. Bluegrass, in my analysis, works in multiple modes, with a large community of producers who produce music for capital gain. Production's role in the history of the Bluegrass Nation is essential for understanding how power relations work. Tom Nairn, Scottish theorist of nationalism, writes:

The universal folklore of nationalism is not entirely wrong. If it were, it would be unable to function as myth. On the other hand, it would be equally unable to function in this way if it were true—that is, true in the sense that concerns us in this place. It is ideology. (71)

Nairn continues to argue (as quoted in Hutchinson and Smith's collection, *Nationalism*) that the origins of nations are not located in the folk as the concentric circle framework suggests, but rather in the power found through structures such as these overlapping spheres. Nairn writes:

The real origins are elsewhere. They are located not in the folk, nor in the individual's repressed passion for some sort of wholeness or identity, but in the machinery of world political economy. Not, however, in the process of that economy's development as such—not simply as an inevitable concomitant of industrialization and urbanization. They are associated with more specific features of that process. The best way of categorizing these traits is to say they represent the *uneven development* of history since the eighteenth century. (72)

Through a transnational frame, the origins of the nation appear within the dependent relationships between the powerful, the producers, and the citizens at large. In this way, they themselves present an uneven development of bluegrass history with power, citizenship, and productivity shifting in accordance with media and the capital demand outside the community.

### **Roles Within and Throughout the Transnational Spheres**

Further exploring the roles of Habermasian spheres, I conclude that the bluegrass community is comprised of four roles within the spheres. Roles are not limited to one sphere,

and individuals may perform several different roles in multiple spheres. These groupings include: (1) fans, (2) musicians, (3) performers, and (4) the creative core, in addition to the already-discussed governing body of the IBMA. The differences between the sphere diagram and the role diagram are that the first shows relationships in forms of power; the diagram below offers a visual interpretation of relationships as jobs or roles, of productivity within the nation.

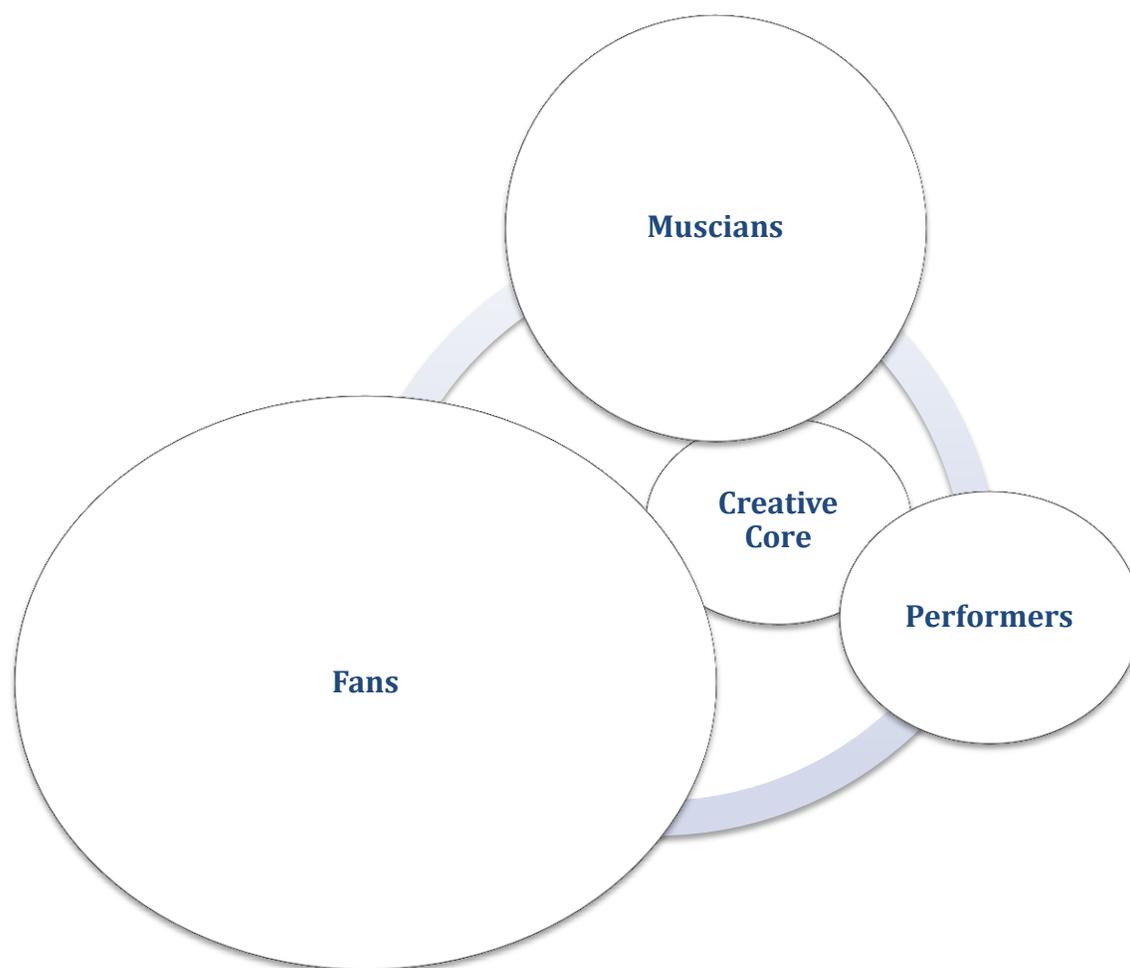


Figure 9: “Roles in Transnational Spheres”

“Fans” is a general term used to describe one of the most powerful communities within bluegrass. There are three very distinct subgroups within the fan base: the consumer

and the activist/scholar, alongside the listener and attendee. All three of these subgroups work together to support the music and create the community felt at events. The fan group consists of members of online bluegrass groups, as well as of individuals who listen to bluegrass on the radio, receive specialized magazines, communicate via listservs, and attend shows.

I am proposing that this group of dedicated and informed people has a much different role than musicians, performers, or the core, and that their participation varies within the fan base. Fans who do not play, but attend festivals due to the mystic time and place that is created there, serve as gatekeepers to the genre, because they control the majority of economic support and movement. Attracted to bluegrass due to its communal aspects, this subculture places the human connection and fellowship over the music. Robert Cantwell depicts the draw to bluegrass as a place “where a fading way of life could resurrect itself imaginatively. Hillbilly music has never been anything but entrepreneurial and commercial, prospering in the one commodity which in America is ever in short supply—the past” (13).

The fan base “moves” by serving as a wave of censorship—choosing what is heard, consumed, and what is requested on the radio—influencing what is produced. The fan base also provides much of the economic support for the entire nation and the participation and momentum needed for fandom to thrive.

The International Bluegrass Music Association started its annual “Awards Show” in 1990. This awards show, which emphasizes band recognition and reputation, fits into John Street’s understanding of a prize economy. As Street explains in *Music and Politics*:

The organizers of the prize, including the judging panel itself, have an investment in the process. They may welcome controversy, because, on the one hand, it brings

publicity, and on the other, it reinforces the idea that the prize (and the music is celebrates) matters.... How these various interests intersect is crucial to determining the character of the prize. And their interaction is a classic case of power politics in action. (129)

When the IMBA began an awards show and competition, it introduced a prize economy to the community in 1990. This allowed the fan base to more immediately interact with the performers and further established the legitimacy of bluegrass as a nation with its own history and an independently functioning genre.

The fan base truly grew in 1964, when a small group of committed musicians and fans revitalized the music. According to Rosenberg, the “infrastructure” of the genre had to be created by the immediate community as well. Bluegrass simply does not fit within the bounds of the country music industry. He states, “Just as fans had named the music, they would now have to promote it and protect it. By the end of that year [1964], the beginning of the second Roanoke Festival, the beginnings of a bluegrass consumers’ movement had appeared” (217). Bluegrass Bulletin, County Sales, The John Edwards Memorial Foundation, and Bluegrass Unlimited all served as spaces for the bluegrass consumer movement to thrive, and all still are controlled by people who occupy the “fan base” role.

The roles and sub-communities within bluegrass overlap, and my experience is that many people serve within several sub-communities. Citizens within the bluegrass nation serve as workers or family members, assuming roles, but overlapping with others and often bending the traditional structure of those roles. The “origin” of this family unit is the small, local venue, which is attached to communal aspects of the genre. At local venues, individuals

are encouraged to perform. Participation is the core of membership in the second sub-community: musicians.

Fletcher Feed and Seed, Old Fort Mountain Music, and Young's Mountain Music (all local bluegrass venues) have direct connections to the local heritage and traditions of gathering together to play music (fiddler's conventions happened as early as the 1800s); they are based almost entirely on the communal aspects of the event rather than the creation of music or need to perform for employment.

Craig Havighurst refers to this group of people as an "army of hobby musicians"—musicians who perform for the communal benefits and fit into the larger bluegrass nation as fans who enforce the rituals that connect the genre to Appalachia and its rural traditions (Havighurst, n.d.). Picking gives immediate social significance to individuals within the community and allows for stronger identification with others in the group. Neil Rosenberg considers these pickers the "leaders of the flock," saying:

For every one person of this type around the country, there were four or five more friends, neighbors, co-workers, relatives, or schoolmates sharing an interest in the music. Often these people played bluegrass together at jam sessions or in local semi-professional bands. Their audiences and musical disciples formed an outer circle around the enthusiasts and their close friends and musical partners. Most of the people who showed up at Roanoke were at the center of such circles; they were true believers, the leaders of the flock. And they returned home with reports of who was there and what it was like. (Rosenberg 208)

The music makers are the connection to tradition. Coming together on a regular basis to jam, "back-porch" picking, and the persistence of songs and styles is what grounds the nation in a

tradition, or its *own* heritage. Examples of music makers include George Gibson<sup>11</sup> of East Kentucky, who houses knowledge of Knox County and passes the songs on to the next generation through lessons. Small local venues such as Old Fort Mountain Music in McDowell County North Carolina are another example of music makers—they gather and perform for one another but their emphasis is not on the performance, but rather on the shared experience.

The role of the musician in the Bluegrass Nation is to inform and enclose the parameters of the music, ensuring the continuation of a common language, grounding the group in communal heritage. Performers, a slightly different group, play a role that feeds both the consuming fan base as well as establishing the ability of a creative core to make changes within the genre that are adopted. The Performer plays a role that blurs the lines between professional and non-professional: performers make the music consumed by the fan base and choose what acts of creativity (made by the core) are adopted.

The performer emerged in the 1930s as consumer demand increased, ignited by radio and print media. Many of the 1930s-to-1950s performers are considered the creative core; they made adjustments to the music and created styles that are still used by performers. Bill Monroe, Earl Scruggs, and the Stanley Brothers created a concrete pool of songs from which others can play and established a marketable “brand” for the genre. Performers include all those who play professionally or semi-professionally but do not have an impact on stylistic changes; rather they play the same styles as those before. Nonetheless, many “stars” are wonderful performers and are highly influential, inspiring others to play and offering stability

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<sup>11</sup> I spent the summer of 2008 working with Appalshop in Whitesburg where I became familiar with Gibson and his student John Haywood. Gibson has collected a number of songs learned from the black community in Knox County. While his music is considered “old time,” he is still an example of a music maker and exemplifies the importance of this role.

to the genre. However, they are not considered part of the creative core because they are not making changes from within the domain that are adopted on a mass level.

Performers are key to linking fraternity, power, and time because the pickers define the “generations” within bluegrass, provide a reason to gather together at festivals, offer key figures to the “nation,” and provide a steady supply of material to be consumed by the pickers (through new songs), print media (through personal and professional stories), and in recordings. It is because of performers that certain names are known throughout the group; through Bluegrass Unlimited articles and the Bluegrass Blog, all members of the nation are aware of key happenings. Being able to attend shows further establishes a physical connection to other members of the community.

Performance is a fundamental aspect of the Bluegrass community, and this role is constantly being fed by the other roles. East Tennessee State University offers a bachelor’s degree in Bluegrass Performance, with students who have previously been music makers learning how to make recordings, talk from the stage, and master their instruments. Bluegrass would not have its own storied history<sup>12</sup> if it were not for performers. However, performers would not have changes in material and aural shifts (sometimes interruptions, sometimes small uproars) if it weren’t for the creative core.

The final, necessary role in the community is the creative core. This group of people is small, and creativity is the driving force behind their connections. Bill Monroe, Sam Bush, and Tony Rice are the three widely recognized “creative core members.” “Creative Core” is a

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<sup>12</sup> In 1965 Carlton Haney hosted the first “Bluegrass Festival” mirroring much of what he had seen at the Chicago and Newport Folk Festivals. At his festival, he made a point to recreate the history of bluegrass, calling it “The Story”. This was a very important moment for members of the bluegrass community, and possibly one of the most important moments in the formation of the community as a Nation. He asserted Bill Monroe as the father and from there traced the history through the Blue Grass Boys. The history was later written by Neil Rosenberg in his definitive text, *Bluegrass: A History*.

term used by Richard Florida in his bestseller, *Rise of the Creative Class*, to describe the highly influential personnel who supposedly make up approximately 12% of the job market—those who are directly involved in the creative process. For the purposes of describing these sub-communities, I define the creative core as those who change the aesthetics/appeal of the genre from within. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's language is adopted here to explain how all art is not creative—as he defines creativity, it must not only shift the domain from within, but those changes must also be adopted by a large proportion of the community.

Looking to Fred Bartenstein's generational breakdown within the genre, the bluegrass style wasn't established until the second or third generation, thus the line between creator and performer was very blurry until the late 1950s when a style and repertoire was established. The key members of the creative core from those early generations—those who are most celebrated for their initial styles that have been adopted by most pickers—are Bill Monroe, Earl Scruggs, and the Stanley Brothers.

With each new type of “grass” being marketed on Facebook or Twitter, a new balance must be reached between respect for the genre, innovative aesthetics and technique, capital-driven commercialism, and a love for ritual; each type of “grass” is a testament to the power of the core. Among new fusion labels like jamgrass (Yonder Mountain String Band's current label), gangstergrass, rockgrass, acousticana (what many groups are naming or calling themselves for better commercial positioning), or pseudo-grass (used often in reference to Mumford and Sons and the Avett Brothers), very few have gained as much respect from *within* the bluegrass community as the work of Chris Thile. His work serves as a pure example of the current state of the genre's attachment to, and the explosion sparked

by, Bill Monroe. As explained, the four common roles within the transnational spheres keep the nation in tune, operational, and attractive. However, the magnetism of the genre is the creative core, as I demonstrate with the example of Chris Thile.

### **Chris Thile: The Creative Core or High Centre of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Until being awarded the MacArthur Genius award in 2013, Chris Thile was most noted for introducing and popularizing “chambergrass,” a type of playing highly influenced by classical music, complex arrangements, and intricate melodies. He is also one of the most aurally conscious young performers in bluegrass music today, pushing sonic as well as social boundaries. As he plays for and works alongside the fan base and performers, Thile and his movements are often met with controversy.

Changes made by Thile at first interrupted the worlds of the fanbase, music makers, and performers—these interruptions are now celebrated and even copied, a mere seven years after his debut “solo” album, “How to Grow a Woman From the Ground,” performed by Chris Thile & the How to Grow a Band. The album, released by Sugar Hill, took the “Nickel Creek” novelty sound to a new level as Thile gathered masters of their instruments and, much like the Bluegrass Album Band had done in 1980, performed old standards in a new and powerful way.

The Punch Brothers and Chris Thile perform with dissonance, considered to be “loud noise” by the traditionalists and many elderly listeners, and many have blogged their distaste for the band. However, Chris Thile has a distinctive sound, and is impersonating no one, the golden rule for followers of Bill Monroe. Like Monroe, Thile is focused on the industry as well as the artistry of his music. As their success grew, Thile and his bandmates moved to

New York to break into the bourgeois Brooklyn bluegrass scene while focusing on interpreting classical compositions through their instruments.

Thile's lyrics are also much different than the traditional pining-for-home repertoire.<sup>13</sup> The Punch Brothers' contemplative tune, "This is the Song (Good Luck)," from the album *Antifogmatic* is sung in a traditional high falsetto, more sad than lonesome,

This is the song where you speak up/This is the song where you get moving/You  
cried some trouble out into a tea cup/And to me but no-one else before you threw it/ I  
put ashore in front of our apartment/And watched you comb the stoop for shards of  
porcelain/Satisfied that there were none you broke the silence/And after this I promise  
not to interrupt again

Thile and the Punch Brothers have continued to interrupt the status quo of the bluegrass community, and their changes are being eagerly adopted by young musicians hoping to cause some sort of "interruption" on their own.

The angst of the slow "Good Luck" tune feeds into the following instrumental, "The Blind Leaving the Blind," an orchestrated piece with four movements, which musically resembles the work of Franz Ligt or his stylistic corollaries more than the work of Bill Monroe. Thile works within the conservative domain of bluegrass music, leaving the industry and others questioning how they should adopt, adapt, or reject these aesthetic changes.

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<sup>13</sup> Other song lyrics include language and cultural values (such as promiscuity) that are not found in *Bluegrass Unlimited's* top 40 songs. Many of the lyrics are easily applied to drug usage, and until recently most of the angst in Thile's songwriting was attributed to his early divorce. Closely watching the Punch Brothers and Thile, I have noticed an influx of side projects as well as new romantic relationships emerging for all of the members, and I personally think the MacArthur Genius Award Thile received this past year has led to more opportunities for band members to pursue separate paths. A wonderful article on the Punch Brothers, specifically Chris Thile's manifestation as an artist in a conservative genre, both socially and musically, is found in *Relix* magazine; the article, by Josh Baron, is titled, "Punch Brothers: The Undiscovered Country."

Thile, who has an avid online following and constantly posts Twitter updates about wine and baseball, may not seem as connected to his roots as more traditional bluegrass artists such as Junior Sisk or The Gibson Brothers. However, in a recent interview, Thile's musical partner outside of the Punch Brothers, Michael Daves, revealed some of Thile's traditional foundation that allowed for their chart-topping album, *Sleep with One Eye Open*. In a discussion with Metropulse, Daves explains:

Part of what we're doing is paying homage to the brother duet tradition, which goes back to the Monroe brothers, which was Bill Monroe before he started the Bluegrass Boys...He'd [Bill Monroe] perform with his brother Charlie, and they were big stars in the '30s throughout the South. The Monroe Brothers, the Delmore Brothers, the Stanley Brothers, the Louvin Brothers in the '50s—it's kind of a direct line from there to the Everly Brothers doing the teen-pop thing in the '50s and early '60s, and then in the rock world Lennon and McCartney were influenced by the Louvins and Everlys. So there's a whole lineage there, with a tremendous amount of music. It's just not something that people have done a lot with recently. ([www.metropulse.com](http://www.metropulse.com))

The duo's two-man harmonies with only a mandolin and guitar accompaniment are inseparable in concept to Bill and Charlie's performances in the late 1930s. It is Thile's knowledge of the genre and respect for the music that allows Thile to gain a youthful following, while maintaining a good reputation with the older bluegrass crowd.

To change and sound different while honoring tradition is the test of the creative core, and the goals of most professional artists— to be respected, but to be different, and ultimately to be heard. This stylistic tug of war feeds controversy in the competitive world of

bluegrass music. Sierra Hull in particular has voiced her feelings of frustration in recent interviews. In Steve Wildsmith's article, Sierra reflects on her own place in the genre:

I've been listening to a lot of different things, and not necessarily new albums. I love the Punch Brothers and how they're always stretching boundaries. I don't want to necessarily do what they're doing, but I really admire the fact they're always being true to who they are and always pushing the envelope. I definitely feel like I want to explore. I love different genres, and I love bluegrass, and I always want it to be a big part of what I do, but I don't want to put myself in a box and not be able to do what feels like good music for me. (Wildsmith, n.pag.)

A personal voice and space within the community is the goal of such artists and reflects a search for identity. The bluegrass community offers space for such a quest as well as a platform to sing from for such individuals. But what are the limits? What does the community need to preserve, if anything?

In 2011, Bluegrass Today published a blog by self-proclaimed "traditionalist" and "bluegrass conservative" Cliff Abbott, in which he wrote:

The bluegrass community is abuzz with discussion about the future of our beloved genre. The Internet forums are consumed with the "traditional vs. big tent" argument; with self-appointed genre-warriors on each side of the issue. . . . Watching George Shuffler's induction into the IBMA Hall of Fame drove the point home. A short film told the story of the walking bass style he became known for, even before he made his unique cross-picking style a part of bluegrass history. Shuffler isn't in the Hall because he played a long time, or because he played with some famous people... Shuffler made the hall because he's an innovator, twice over. . . . [And there's] Uncle

Josh, of course, who, Monroe's opinion notwithstanding, played such a large part of the resophonic guitar's slide into the bluegrass mainstream. Earl, who didn't play like Stringbean or Grandpa Jones. The Louvin Brothers' non-traditional harmonies. Tony Rice, who still doesn't play like Lester Flatt. Sam Bush, who doesn't play like anyone. On and on it goes, legend after legend, innovation after innovation. That's the Monroe conundrum. He was an innovator. If he had chosen to play his music the same way as his predecessors, there might be no bluegrass music today. He changed the world by changing music. And when the next change came along, he rejected it in favor of something much too young to be traditional yet. (Abbott, n.pag.)

While Thile provides an example of the creative core or, as Anderson would insist, "high centre" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he also provides an example of the hyper-exchange happening between people because of the genre's transnational organizational structure and transtraditional aesthetic and participatory processes.

This is the paradox of the genre. The music must have ties to Appalachia, or at least the proletariat, while being international in scope. Everyone must perform well, if not be great. Everyone must have his or her own sound while respecting and echoing Bill Monroe in some way. It is a question of the innovation and commercialism that built the genre on a foundation of traditional music within the boundaries set by the members of the nation.

The creative core, as exemplified so loudly by Thile, changes the genre from within. In the case of Thile, he has expanded the audience, introduced new topics and lyrical content, and advanced the level of craftsmanship expected by performers. The fans, performers, and musicians respond to these changes, either by mimicking the altered style or by resisting the new aesthetics. Others simply do not or do not need to participate. In the next section I will

explore those not represented by the transnational spheres, who may still perform a role vital to the nation. As John Cage<sup>14</sup> encouraged listeners to hear the space and sounds of “silence,” I propose offering an ear to those not (yet) represented in cyberspace.

### **Opposition and Resistance**

When exploring the bluegrass community and the transnational spheres through the lens of Habermas’s work additional areas of research arise. For example, a question of who is included in the Bluegrass Nation (and why) becomes central to the discussion. Do members participate on equal terms? Is what the bureaucracy (IBMA) declares a legitimate representation of what the people want? Fraser asserts that using Habermas reveals “class inequalities and status hierarchies in civil society” (n.pag.). I agree, and through Habermasian social sphere theory, which I translated into the transnational spheres of the bluegrass community, it becomes clear that not all people who play bluegrass music or actually participate (versus virtual participation) are represented. Those voices will be heard, as I have interpreted them, in this section, where I hope to open discussion concerning the differences in virtual/actual participation in and resistance to the bluegrass community’s manifestation in the cyberworld.

Adopting the term “nation” just made sense to many members of the International Bluegrass Organization. Just as shifting the lexicon seemed the appropriate move for the community, I find that the opposition and resistance within it are “natural” occurrences as well. Hegel offers the following ideas on the process of nationalism: “Nations may have had a long history before they finally reach their destination—that of forming themselves into

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<sup>14</sup> John Cage’s performance piece, “4’33””, is a prescribed length of silence presented in the context of a performance, during which audience members are invited by the context to listen to ambient sounds that then become the “music” of the piece.

states.” I am not making the claim that it is “natural” or “correct” for cultural groups to form nations; however, I am proposing that oppositions within groups in the process of becoming nations are an acknowledged part of a nation’s formation. Thus, these opposing groups offer interesting identities in themselves.

Resistance to such forms of power (which are driven if not controlled by a consumer-based industry) has arisen in the spirit of “independence.” There are many reasons for a member of the community to resist power and organization of a musical community, especially when the community serves as one’s identity, heritage, and history. As established, fierce preservation and even a tendency to distrust progress is a common trend among the rural working class, particularly in southern Appalachia. Others feel they are protecting themselves and their families from change, and some resist organization of their art due to their ethics of aesthetics. Independence is understood as a lack of acknowledgement towards the collective celebratory acts and rituals of the Nation. This independence is most easily broken down into three categories: outliers, outsiders, and opposers, as shown in the following diagram. The form of this diagram is less plural than the others for a reason. While movement and relationships within the genre are connected and at times interdependent, the opposition is not. People who play bluegrass music or enjoy shows, but do not participate in the genre as a nation or imagined community, may do so for a multitude of reasons, and those reasons are to be represented separately.

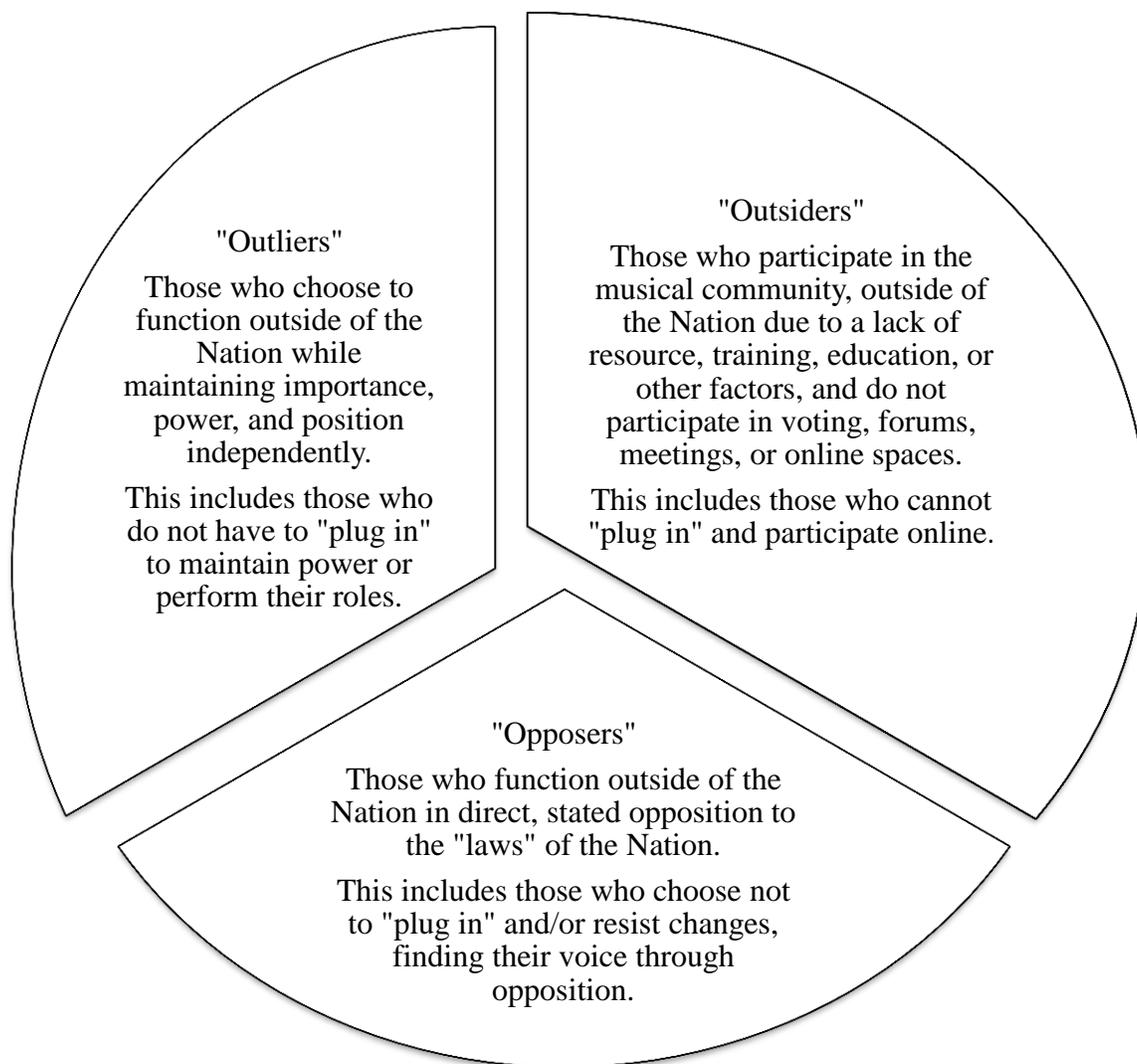


Figure 10: "Resistance in the Bluegrass Nation"

"Opposition" is most often spurred by the aesthetic differences between those who support developing sounds and those who hope to maintain "pure" musical communities—free from modern musical influence. "Opposers" endorse playing as closely to the style to the pioneers or first-generation artists as possible. Such individuals have a strong sense of ownership over the music, and feel compelled to "protect" and "defend" "real grass" online. They frequent forums to preserve Bluegrass music from becoming "no part of nothin'" a term coined by Bill Monroe and mis/used to blaspheme musicians playing "progressive"

bluegrass. (Quick readings of any one of Bill Monroe's biographies or his comments towards musical styles reveal that Monroe was a performer who appreciated above all else 'new' sounds and rhythms. He himself combined fiddle tunes he learned from the black community in Kentucky with popular songs from the radio.) This sentiment can be found in the IBMA's Song of the Year for 2012, "A Far Cry from Lester and Earl," sung by Junior Sisk.

Outliers are predominantly members of a younger generation (particularly the third and fourth generations of bluegrass pickers). Many of them are award winners, but do not attend the awards show to receive their awards. They are individuals who simply do not respond to the praise of the "citizens" or the "powerful," nor do they participate in organized gatherings. Perhaps this group is simply not as mesmerized as the older generations, or by the possibilities of cyber-participation. These individuals most likely have a voice so strong through their roles as performers (and, in a few cases, as members of the creative core) that online participation within the spheres is not needed.

The third group, Outsiders, is a combination of people who gather and act as part of the Bluegrass Nation in all ways except for their Internet participation. Outsiders often imitate, unintended, the structure of IBMA and local political organizations. With older, non-cyber oriented generations, opposing isn't a political act of independence, but rather simply a lack of knowledge about the nation. One such community is Old Fort Mountain Music.

This small venue in North Carolina is organized much like the IBMA, with officers and prescribed voting practices; however, the rural population of this group does not participate in organized bluegrass events outside of their community. Many of the members do not have Internet access or computer knowledge. Others simply do not know it exists; however, they do know that Bluegrass is an international phenomenon and keep a map noting

where their visitors travel. Because they have not incorporated online participation into their activities, Outsiders function in the same bureaucratic fashion as Bluegrass Nation, but from beyond the borders of its “cyberscape.”

On reflection, “political action” within the Bluegrass community is participatory—voting in the IBMA’s election, chatting, joining Facebook groups, attending festivals, posting pictures, and maintaining consistent contact with the global community. Marshall McLuhan foresaw such a manifestation of internal politics in *The Medium is the Message*, in which he writes, “A new form of ‘politics’ is emerging, and in ways we haven’t yet noticed. The living room has become a voting booth. Participation via television in Freedom Marches, in war, in revolution, pollution, and other events is changing everything. (22)”

Why people join Bluegrass Nation, or why they choose to “resist” or oppose such organization, is dependent on why they participate in the community in the first place. For many, it is the need for a voice in a more democratic way than the “real world” allows. Because of the digital age, transnational spheres are able to support individuals with multiple roles and even those who oppose structure or change, creating a space for individuals to be heard.

### **Chapter 5: A Closing, or, Opening a Space**

[But] Nationalism is not the awakening of an old, latent, dormant force, though that is how it does indeed present itself. It is reality the consequence of a new form of social organization, based on deeply internalized, education-dependent high cultures, each protected by its own state. (Gellner qtd. by Anderson, 48)

The words of Ernest Gellner (as quoted by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*) are strikingly appropriate for understanding the functions of a nation in cyberspace—a new form of social organization, while maintaining ties to physical experiences and traditions. While that is problematic in some ways, I find great hope in the ability of a group of people to organize roots deep enough to form a nation within a period of seventy years. It is the power of the collective, if wielded for the good of mankind, which can bring about great change within our world. I also find it fascinating that this progressive, if not subversive, attempt to organize (and to use the most modern elements of technology to do so) comes from a tiny group of fiddlers, banjo players, and enthusiasts with nothing but the imagined song to thread their seemingly distant lives together. In this study, I have explored the power people possess when they find their identity(s) and claim the space to be heard. I have found the cyberage to provide such a space and typical traditional Appalachian music such as Bluegrass to serve as a forum or platform for such explorations.

Unlike Matthew Hills<sup>15</sup> whose critique of online communities found in Sally Munt's edited book, *Technospaces*, I tend to be optimistic about the good that can come from transparency and ownership in cyberspace. Hills notes Michel de Certeau's caution concerning the panoptic surveillance of those in power, and even fears of a "watered-down" sound run counter to the ever-diversifying plurality of the digital age. While these cautionary approaches are important, I disagree with the core of statements refuting online spaces as communities. Hesitant academics and musicians alike are concerned with the specificity of online interests or focus within defined spaces. This fear seems to come from the approach that a community must be joined by more than a narrow topic or interest.

Bluegrass is more than a topic, especially to those who experience it. As Saburo Watanabe has famously stated, "I have Bluegrass in me and you have Bluegrass in you." Great power and identity are found at every level of this imagined community. Described by members as a nation, bluegrass allows for a place to participate equally, while working within their own sub-community. The fans, musicians, performers, and creative core work to keep the community alive and to support one another.

With a range of new possibilities for seeing, hearing, and being, I have sought in this work to study bluegrass with the openness of Foucault, whose words resonate: "I write a book only because I still don't exactly know what to think about this thing I want so much to think about, so that the book transforms me and transforms what I think" (239-240). In the process of studying my own community from my position, often in silence, my thoughts, assumed understandings, and interpretations have been challenged. But it is this movement of

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<sup>15</sup> Matthew Hills' chapter is entitled, "Virtually Out There: Strategies, tactics and affective spaces in on-line fandom" in Sally Munt's book, *Technospaces*.

ideas, shifting as quickly as the ever-changing form of space in the digital age, which has enabled the Bluegrass Nation. We [members of the nation] are in the middle of a process, innovative and commercial and laden with ownership and pride. The ability to explore this landscape through multiple lenses is one offering of this particular research.

Literature and findings confirm that the Bluegrass community is a self-constructed diaspora, hoping to re-live an imagined past, hoping to belong, singing songs about Appalachia, a region that physically embodies a history of tradition and displacement in the mind of America. However, Appalachia does not physically offer the space to gather—cyberspace does. Current processes and communities may not offer space for a voice to be heard—Bluegrass Nation does. For its members, Bluegrass Nation functions as an identity, a past, and a voice.

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## **Appendix 1: Organizational Structure of the IBMA**

### **Membership**

IBMA is a member-led trade organization and all current, dues-paying members have rights, privileges and responsibilities associated with the organization. Among those are a voice in determining who shall lead the organization by voting for board representatives and volunteering to serve IBMA. There are two primary types of membership, which may have categories within those types:

- Professional Members (Voting Members)
- Grass Roots Club Members (Non-Voting)

### **Board of Directors**

Elected or appointed from the active professional membership of IBMA, the board serves as a policy-making body that meets at least twice each year to consider proposals and projects to carry out the organization's mission. The board is also responsible for appointing officers of the organization and has the authority to delegate work to staff and committees. Board members may also serve and/or be a liaison to committees. Board members are volunteers and bear the full expense of attending meetings and IBMA functions.

### **Staff**

The administrative arm of IBMA is employed and serves at the will of the board. The staff manages the day-to-day operations (e.g. financial management, organizing events, publications) and serves as a liaison to most functioning committees. IBMA

staff members are the only paid working individuals within the organizational structure.

### **Working Committees/Task Forces**

Committees and task forces are organized for specific purposes to assure that various affairs of IBMA are led by volunteer members involved in making recommendations to the board, officers, and staff. Many times, the committee or task force has been delegated a specific task or it may have an ongoing mission created by the board. Most have a board and/or staff liaison that assists with many of the needs required to achieve their purpose.

## Vita

Jordan LeAnne Laney was born in Marion, North Carolina. Her parents are Barte and Sandra Shuford Laney. In 2010 she earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with a concentration in Creative Writing from Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont. In January 2011, she enrolled in the Appalachian Studies program at Appalachian State University with a concentration in Roots Music and Influence, serving as the Graduate Assistant to the Women's Studies program from Fall 2012 to Spring 2013. Her Master of Arts degree in Appalachian Studies: Roots Music and Influence was awarded in May 2013.

Ms. Laney will continue her research at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in the Alliance for Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Thought (ASPECT), an innovative interdisciplinary doctoral program, in the fall. She currently resides in North Carolina with her husband and their two dogs, three banjos, and upright bass.