

# *O Brother, What Next?*

## Making Sense of the Folk Fad

by Benjamin Filene



After *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* spurred a surge of interest in all things folk, I got calls from friends coast to coast. Since I wrote a book about folk revivalism, they assumed I'd be thrilled to see that the film and soundtrack had once again sparked interest in traditional music. I watched the movie; I listened to the soundtrack album; I read the breathless testimonials from the new folk fans. But the whole thing left me grumpy. Recently, I've been trying to figure out why.

I'm not a purist: I'm not griping about the fact that the performers benefiting from the revival are longtime commercial popularizers like Emmylou Harris or a Californian neo-billy like Gillian Welch, both prominent on the *O Brother* soundtrack. I'm not a protector: I'm not so much worried that the more traditional rural voices getting swept up in the revival—performers like Ralph Stanley—will get burned or somehow shorn of their edge as they get Hollywoodized. I'm not a hoarder: I don't have that feeling of remorse that comes as something that used to be private and precious and one's own—something that perhaps was personally transformative in one's coming-of-age period—gets commodified and spread casually across the globe. Such tinges of regret are to some extent built in to any folk revival; they are inherent in the concept of trying to bring mass popularity to a cultural form beloved for its isolation from mass popularity. Indeed, it wouldn't surprise me if the *O Brother* phenomenon made some longtime public folklorists, revivalists, and preservationists uncomfortable. There is always some shock and regret when you get what you asked for—in this case when the music that one has been protecting and pitching, praying and proselytizing for all these years suddenly, seemingly with hardly any effort at all, is all over the airwaves and in everyone's living room. But I'm not a longtime public folklorist, revivalist, or preservationist. And yet, as a cultural historian, I find that today's folk chic bugs me, too.

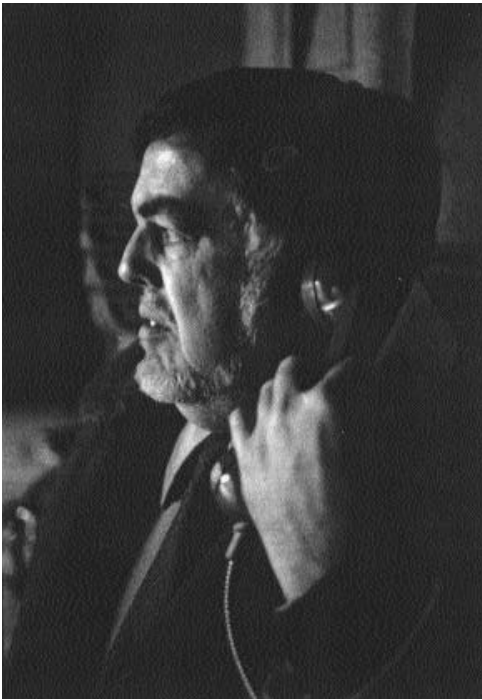
The *O Brother* revival—and my reaction to it—has deep roots. It's no coincidence that director Joel Coen, and his brother, producer Ethan Coen, chose the 1930s, sepia-toned in their filmic memory, as the backdrop for their romp



*You might expect that the author of a prize-winning book on folk revivalism would have been pleased by the new interest in folk music sparked by *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* But the whole thing left Benjamin Filene feeling a bit grumpy. CD cover of the soundtrack, courtesy of Lost Highway Records.*

through American folk culture. Of course, efforts to preserve and popularize so-called “folk” materials go much further back than the thirties, but an array of efforts to embrace vernacular American culture did coalesce powerfully during the Depression. We’re still dealing with the legacy of that intense burst of revivalism—directly in the sense that you can trace a lineage back from today’s revival artists and cultural brokers to the thirties and indirectly in that thirties revivalists shaped our assumptions about what a revival is, who gets revived, and how. As influential as the revival of the fifties and sixties was and is, it was a wave that emerged from currents set into motion in the thirties by a group of ambitious cultural brokers who set out with missionary zeal to change how Americans saw their musical heritage. Today’s revival is in many ways the fruit of this group’s work—people like John Lomax and, especially, his son Alan, Ben (B. A.) Botkin, Charles Seeger, and his son Pete. What, then, has nearly three quarters of a century of “cultural brokerism” brought us? Is the *O Brother* revival what the advocates of the thirties had in mind?

To some extent, the answer is yes. Let’s think about what the cultural brokers of the thirties were trying to do. First, as driving forces behind the revivalist movement, the Lomaxes, Botkin, and the Seegers urged that folk culture be recognized as a distinctively *American* form of culture. For over a century before, American artists and intellectuals had been struggling to create “high art” that measured up to European elite-culture standards; for two generations folklorists had been collecting remnants of British ballads, in effect treating American folk songs as diluted versions of British ones. The thirties folk advocates rejected such Eurocentric approaches. America doesn’t need to ape European arts, they said; we have our *own* forms of cultural expression, vibrant and worthy in their own right. In their 1941 songbook *Our Singing Country*, John and Alan Lomax



*The current revival has important roots in the earlier work of folklorists such as John and Alan Lomax, B. A. Botkin, and Charles and Pete Seeger. Alan Lomax (left), photographed by William R. Ferris, courtesy of the William R. Ferris Collection in Wilson Library at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Pete Seeger (right), copyright Diana Davies, courtesy of Smithsonian Folkways Archives.*

wrote that American musicians “have created and preserved for America a heritage of folk songs and folk music equal to any in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Today this American-centric cultural argument has taken hold so completely that it is hard even to recognize it as an issue. In a world economy dominated by a single superpower, American popular culture is our main export. Doubt about our cultural distinctiveness feels like an issue from another era. The confidence with which this issue is handled, though, illustrates how thoroughly ingrained the cultural outlook of the thirties revivalists has become. Indeed, the idea of studying and redeploying America’s musical heritage is at the core of the current revival. In a dynamic that the older revivalists would well recognize, the current vogue for traditional music is reinforcing for a new generation the idea that the building blocks of today’s global pop culture lie back in seemingly forgotten corners of American culture—the local, the rural, the long ago. Pop vocalist Natalie Merchant, for example, formerly the lead singer for 10,000 Maniacs, recently decided that she needed to reinvigorate her pop sound and rededicate herself to her craft. Her answer? She listened to field recordings by Alan Lomax, pored through books of folk song, and took courses on American folk music at Bard College.<sup>2</sup> The technopop star Moby took a more literal approach to his apprenticeship. On



*“A piece of folklore,” wrote Alan Lomax, “is a living, changing thing.” Photograph by William R. Ferris, courtesy of the William R. Ferris Collection in Wilson Library at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

his 1999 album, *Play*, he quotes audio samples from Alan Lomax’s 1959 *Sounds of the South* field recordings. Most pop performers, of course, don’t quote Mississippi folk songs, but the idea of returning to American roots—so central to the thirties revivalists’ mission—is again a legitimating rite of passage for younger artists and a way for older artists to reinvigorate themselves.

For the revivalists of the thirties, though, a second fundamental tenet was that American folk music was not just in the past. Inspired by functionalist anthro-

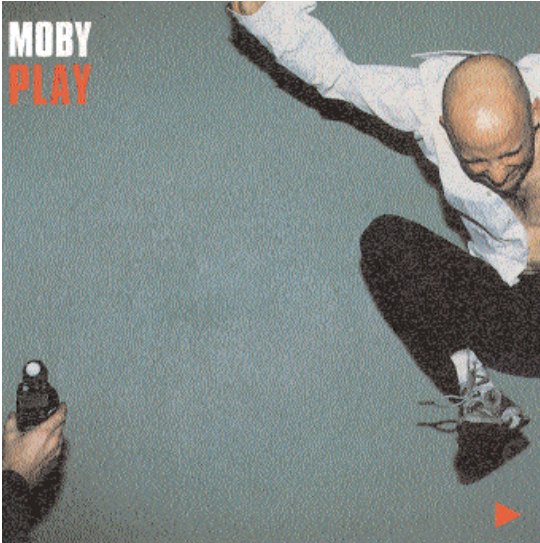
pology, they saw folk songs not as isolated relics but as vital parts of living social systems. Traditions survived because they served functions for their adherents, and there was no reason to think that folk forms would stop filling these needs for people anytime soon. Folklore was not dying but was present everywhere, and everywhere transforming and revitalizing itself. "Folklore," B. A. Botkin wrote, "is not something far away and long ago, but real and living among us." "A piece of folklore," echoed Alan Lomax in *Our Singing Country*, "is a living, changing thing."<sup>3</sup>

This more robust conception of folk culture led the thirties revivalists to challenge the older assumption that folklorists must focus their studies on the isolated backwaters to search for regions free of modern technologies. "The tendency," Botkin said, "has been to restrict the folk to the backward, ignorant, and illiterate members of society and to emphasize the anachronistic and static, the useless and so meaningless aspects of folklore to the neglect of its living and dynamic phases." Rejecting this emphasis on the vestigial, the functionalists embraced the whole world of culture around them as fair game for "folklore." Under Botkin, for example, the Federal Writers Project began collecting *urban* folklore, gathering the songs and stories of New York Jewish needleworkers, Pennsylvania steelworkers, and Connecticut clockmakers. It was this wide-open attitude, in fact, that led the young functionalists to embrace hillbilly music, which, as a contemporary genre intended for commercial audiences, would have been anathema to more purist collectors. Charles Seeger called hillbilly music a "super-hybrid form of some genuine folk elements which have intruded into the mechanism of popular music." Botkin concurred that "'hillbilly' has its place in the hierarchy of American folk styles," emphasizing that folk music as a whole "is not a pure but a hybrid activity."<sup>4</sup>

As any comp. lit. major today can tell you, the thirties folklorists were ahead of their time in embracing "hybridity," a fact apparent not only in postmodern academia but also in pop culture, including today's folk revival. The contemporary folk boom seemingly encompasses everything from bluegrass to blues, Celtic reels to Cuban rumbas, Afro-Beat to zydeco. Sometimes an acoustic guitar alone can be enough to draw the label "folk." The soundtrack to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* ranges from African American hymns to work songs to a Jimmie Rodgers pop song to a putative hobo ballad. Contemporary bluegrass queen Alison Krauss appears side by side with the gospel group the Fairfield Four and a prison field recording. To the album's producer, T-Bone Burnett, like Alan Lomax or Ben Botkin before him, the American folk tradition is elastic enough to encompass all of these genres and artists, and he freely sprinkles them across the soundtrack.

When the 1930s functionalists argued for the adaptability and vitality of folk song, though, it was not an idle demonstration of hip open-mindedness. A third core belief, emerging and in some ways enveloping the previous two in impor-





*On his 1999 album, *Play*, the technopop star Moby quotes audio samples from Alan Lomax's 1959 *Sounds of the South* field recordings. Courtesy of V2 Records, Inc., Rave New World, and BMG.*

tance, was that folk culture should be seen as an alternate source of strength in a time of crisis in America—as a counterculture, really. During the Great Depression, as the country's economic system crumbled, there was a growing sense of despair about American society—not only about its economic and political viability but about the very culture and character of its citizens. Who or what was to blame for the catastrophe the country faced? The Depression drove many middle-class Americans to reevaluate what forces in society were good, powerful, and sustaining. Many concluded that the blame lay not with ordinary Americans but with the mainstream institutions that were supposed to have been serving them. People were drawn to those who seemed to exist outside the modern industrial world, able to survive independent of its inhumane economy and not lulled by its superficial luxuries—the outcast, the folk, the impoverished and dispossessed. Think of novels such as Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, the photojournalism of *Life* and *Look* magazines, or the “I've-seen-America” books of Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell, and James Agee and Walker Evans, with downtrodden men and women standing bedraggled but proud before the camera. Outsiders appealed to Americans as symbols of how they wanted to see themselves during the Depression: independent, proud in the face of hardship, straightforward, beholden to no special interests.<sup>5</sup>

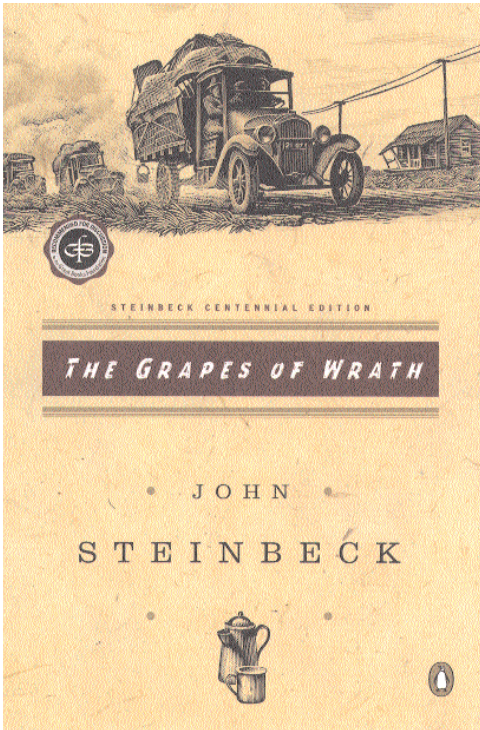
The folk revivalists of the thirties were building on this same cultural impulse. When John and Alan Lomax embarked on their famous field recording trips in the 1930s, they sought traditional folk music in the “eddies of human society,” self-contained homogeneous communities cut off from the corrupting influences of popular culture. They wanted to record people who had not been contaminated by radio—not so much to document a tradition before it faded away but to demonstrate that there *were* still cultural forms not contaminated by radio.

The notion of people making their own music from scratch, often with hand-made instruments, drawing on traditions free from commercial manipulation, suggested an independent, self-sustaining culture that could endure any crisis—an alternative, more vital American culture. The thirties revivalists, in other words, documented folk cultures in hopes of turning contemporary culture upside down. That’s what Ben Botkin meant when he said folklore should be “germinal rather than vestigial”; what Charles Seeger meant when he said the question should not be “‘is it good music’ but ‘what is the music good for?’” Folk music was to be an agent of change that carried Americans through the Depression *and beyond*, the bedrock for a new, more grounded, more vibrant, more democratic future. Folklore, as Botkin stressed, should be “not only ‘Back where I come from,’ but also ‘Where do we go from here?’”<sup>6</sup>

Does the contemporary revival share this countercultural aspect, this forward-looking vision? In some respects, certainly, it does offer an alternative to mainstream musical fare. At the 2002 Grammy Awards, the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* artists were strikingly incongruous next to their fellow album-of-the-year nominees, the Irish rockers U2, rappers OutKast, and pop-soul singer India.Arie. (Whether or not they were incongruous with the last nominee, Bob Dylan, is a debate unto itself.) In a Britney Spears bubblegum-pop landscape, the Stanley Brothers, not to mention the Carter Family or Lead Belly, do stand out. Indeed, part of what has fueled this folk revival is a restless dissatisfaction with contemporary mainstream culture. Many people, having been actively consuming pop culture since their preteen years, find that it leaves them empty. A common lament is that today’s pop music sounds prepackaged, driven by MTV and product tie-ins more than artistic expression. The music on corporate-owned radio, on quick-cut videos, and in mega-mall CD stores feels like so much junk food, more detritus in the disposable culture of our age. Many feel nostalgic for a time they never knew but that they intuitively feel must have existed—when culture, when *emotion* for that matter, came unmediated, when there was substance that transcended the packaging.

Both this feeling of emptiness and the corresponding yearning for something more substantial are legitimate and potentially powerful. And for many people, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* did bring to light music they had never heard before that became personally meaningful and enriched their understanding of American traditions. I fear, though, that this new understanding is not as deep and will not be as long-lasting or transformative as folk advocates—or even the new audiences themselves—would wish. The reasons lie embedded within the *O Brother* revival itself and in its historical antecedents.

What I think rankles me about the *O Brother* phenomenon is that even as the artists it features gain a degree of fame and fortune and a passel of awards, the revival in several key respects holds them and the music itself at a remove, depict-



*The pressures of the Great Depression caused Americans to consider alternatives to the mainstream, and many found comfort in the stories of social outsiders, like the characters of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Courtesy of Penguin Books.*

ing both as relics from another world and time. Remember B. A. Botkin's words: "Folklore is not something far away and long ago, but real and living among us"; or Alan Lomax, folklore is "a living, changing thing."

At every turn, the appeal of this music today seems to be its isolation from contemporary reality. Most directly the film and soundtrack strive for a geographic marginalization. *O Brother* depends on the songs of some wonderful commercial artists who have built careers in Nashville, Los Angeles, and New York by singing about issues with deep personal relevance in the here and now. Yet *Down from the Mountain* is the title of the live concert album that followed the soundtrack, implying that the mainstream commercial artists on the album had just trekked out of the hills down to Nashville's Ryman Auditorium. The liner notes to the soundtrack itself play into the same myth of a foreign world: "There is another Nashville, with a kind of music so distant from what the city's commercial center cranks out as to be from a different planet. It thrives in the community's nooks and crannies like a cluster of quietly smiling mountain wildflowers."<sup>77</sup>

Beyond being geographically isolated, the music in *O Brother* is frozen in time. The movie itself, set in 1937, has the look of a faded memory, like stepping back into the pages of a dusty old copy of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The Coens told director of photography Roger Deakins that they wanted the film to look "brown and dirty and golden, like a period picture book of the Depression." Deakins pointed out that the movie was being shot in lushly green Mississippi,

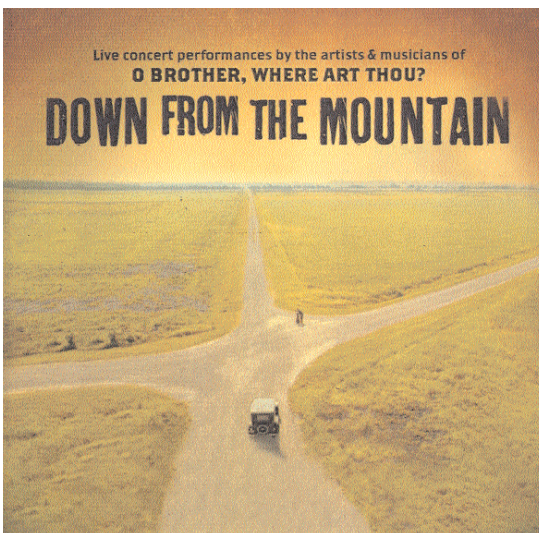


but the Coens were undeterred. To get the right look, Deakins digitized the whole film and removed the green. “We gave it an ochre feel,” Deakins recalls. “I kept having to say to them, ‘Just imagine it’ll be all yellow.’”<sup>8</sup>

The soundtrack album evokes the same mood of a bygone era. In graphic design, the liner notes have masterfully attained the look of a tattered scrapbook carried around for too long in someone’s banjo case. The graphics feature fragments of pages torn, perhaps, from a Farmer’s Almanac, FDR campaign buttons stuck through faded newspaper clippings, and photos that look to be affixed with electrical tape.

The text of the liner notes builds on this mood by depicting the music as child-like and pure. The author of the notes, Robert K. Oermann, describes the album as a celebration of “this gentle music” and offers Joel Coen’s wistful assessment that the film was “a Valentine to the music.” Oermann then constructs a historically awkward narrative of the despoiling of this delicate homegrown bloom. “The original country sound,” he declares, “first flowered during the Depression.” But Oermann goes on to say that the “innocence of this rustic, acoustic kind of country” was “drown[ed] out” by other genres, including “the razzmatazz of western swing” and “the cream crooning of singing cowboys.”<sup>9</sup> But western swing and singing cowboys themselves took hold in the late twenties and thirties, during Oermann’s supposed Golden Age. In Oermann’s nostalgic formulation, in other words, the pure sound was so delicate and innocent that it was dead practically before it started.

Yet if this music is so gentle, so innocent, so pure, so delicate, why is it so violent and disturbing? Both the film and soundtrack open with an Alan Lomax field recording from 1959 of a prison chain gang singing about a prisoner getting shot by the sheriff. Other songs deal with the pain of adultery, abandoned children,



*As O Brother fostered new interest in folk music, it also presented folk culture as far removed from our own time and place. The title of this live spin-off CD, Down from the Mountain, implies that the artists are from a much different world. Courtesy of Lost Highway Records.*

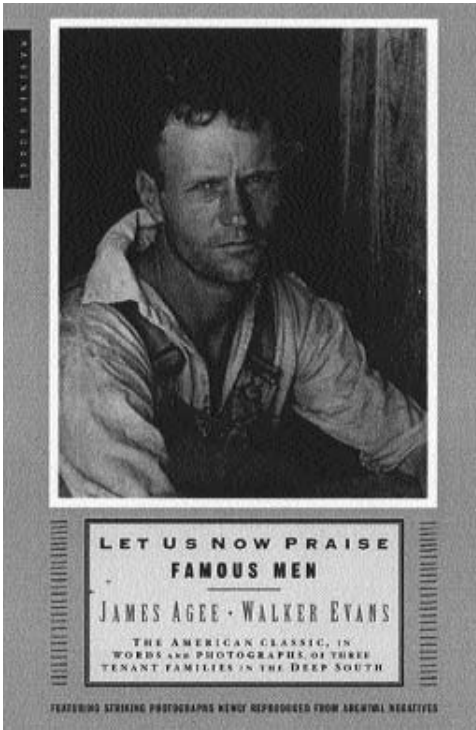
hard times on the slaughterhouse killing floor, and being grabbed by the ice-cold hands of death. Even the bouncy hit “I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow” is hardly light fare upon closer inspection, with the words “For six long years I’ve been in trouble/ . . . I never expect to see you again / For I’m bound to ride that northern railroad / Perhaps I’ll die upon this train.”

The film itself only ratchets up the pain and pathos, featuring hooded Klansmen; one-eyed Bible-selling con men; heart-of-gold, yellow-teethed gopher-eating dullards; and sold-my-soul-at-the-crossroads bluesmen. In interviews and press releases, the Coens have turned to Greek myth to account for the over-the-top aspects of the film, as if to suggest an archetypal element to the story. But stereotypes are archetypes without the timelessness. The links to *The Odyssey* strike me as superficial compared to the resonances with old-style Hollywood caricatures of the South. I suspect the Coens turn to Homer to shield themselves from the charges of having created a string of cardboard cutout depictions of the Old South. Southern actress Holly Hunter, Penny Wharvey in the movie, says that the Coens’ South “is not the one I grew up in. But . . . [w]hat are you going to do? It’s based on *The Odyssey*.”<sup>10</sup>

More than classicism, though, the Coen brothers’ most powerful shield from such p.c. criticism is ironic detachment. For all the chaos in *O Brother*, pain and pathos are *not* the mood. This is a comedy, right? Violence, disfigurement, poverty, racism are not sources of sorrow or recoil but amusement. These are just a set of literary tales, the film’s zany quality suggests. Like *Pulp Fiction*, the violence is cartoonish and is served up with a heavy dose of irony. The CD disc itself has a convict stripe on it, but we know this is a wry joke, nothing to take any more seriously than the fact that the disc is made to look like a phonograph record.

Cartoonish eccentricity is prime Coen brothers territory. From *Raising Arizona* to *Fargo* they have gloried in lampooning the misfits, the marginalized, the skewed and the skewered. It makes for enjoyable, playful movies that sit well with our postmodern sensibility, our feeling that we’re watching a series of plot elements clang against each other, not the stories of real people and their lives.

Anyone who knows anything about folk music traditions knows that gothic and gruesome images are standard fare, not something the Coen brothers dreamed up. This is the “Old, Weird America” that critic Greil Marcus has identified as a longstanding component of folk music and, indeed, folk revivals. Marcus coined the phrase to describe the alternately chilling and outlandish world that musicologist Harry Smith created out of commercial hillbilly and blues songs in his 1952 multivolume *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Marcus surveys the murderers, talking birds, train wrecks, drug addicts, drowning victims, stabbing victims, and suicides in the *Anthology* and writes, “The whole bizarre package made the familiar strange, the never known into the forgotten, and the forgotten into a collective memory that teased any single listener’s conscious mind.” Marcus



*The faded look of the O Brother film is reminiscent of a dusty copy of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men by James Agee and Walker Evans. Courtesy of Mariner Books.*

finds this alternate America to be a bracing contrast to McCarthyism and the consumption-obsessed culture of the 1950s, which prioritized sugary conformity. To Marcus and so many other listeners who encountered the *Anthology* in the fifties and sixties and in the decades since, the performers on the compilation sounded “like visitors from another world.” Sixties revival performers Jim Rooney and Eric von Schmidt recalled that when they first heard the collection they assumed that “all those guys on that Harry Smith Anthology were dead. *Had* to be.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet the *Anthology* is not really as much a world apart as Marcus and others would have it. As Marcus himself notes, when the collection came out in 1952, the artists it featured were only twenty to twenty-five years past their commercial primes, and most were still very much alive in the South. Jeff Place, archivist at the Smithsonian’s Center for Folklife Programs, has pointed out that Smith’s “rediscovery” mission would be chronologically akin to someone today unearthing a crop of songs from New Wave punk bands from circa 1980—“Look!” they might say, “Adam Ant! Blondie!”<sup>12</sup> But it’s not only chronologically that Harry Smith’s folk have been artificially pushed back into the past. As historian J. M. Mancini observes, the very performers that Marcus *et al.* have idealized as the avatars of marginalized old, weird America were actually very much *in step* with the Jazz Age consumer culture of the 1920s—listening to the radio, buying goods on credit (including factory-made instruments), migrating to cities, and taking advantage of an emerging, racially hybrid regional culture. As Mancini says, these artists

“represent not a dying past of homemade banjos, isolated rural communities, and weird murder ballads, but the integration of Appalachia into a nationalizing market and consumer culture.”<sup>13</sup>

The “reality” of the folk performer’s world, though, is not at the core of the current revival, just as it wasn’t for the revival of the fifties and sixties. The idea of folk culture as geographically isolated, chronologically removed, and socially deviant remains instrumental to the current folk vogue. People are drawn to the notion of the “old, weird America.” How can we reconcile this fascination with aberrance and deviance with the contemporary revival’s nostalgic romancing of folk culture as pure and innocent? I see them as two sides of the same distancing phenomenon. What we today are looking back on with fascination and even envy is these songs’ seeming capacity to express intense, unvarnished feeling. Our daily reality has been so co-opted by media—in everything from staged “reality TV” shows to a made-for-TV war—that we experience even the most catastrophic events as mediated. The more on-the-spot and graphic the depiction of daily reality becomes, the more it all seems like a movie of someone else’s life. So we look back on both the innocence *and* the violence of these folk songs with the intrigued, somewhat bemused air of world-weary anthropologists—or, more accurately, of world-weary consumers of other people’s experiences. Isn’t it *fascinating* that people felt the kind of pain expressed in “Killing Floor Blues” or “Po’ Lazarus” or “House Carpenter’s Daughter”? Isn’t it *fascinating* that people could sing of lemonade springs and bluebirds singing and candy mountains without a smirk? Isn’t it *fascinating* that people were confined in all-black prisons and that they worked with their legs bound by manacles? Both the idealism and the exoticism of this imagery seem from another world, and we watch them with the detached fascination we might give a carnival sideshow.

This cultural dynamic has helped spur an undeniably vigorous folk chic, but I fear that detachment of this sort is not a healthy foundation for a sustained revival. The danger is that folk culture, since it has been appropriated at such a distance, becomes just one in a series of fashion products that savvy consumers of global culture try on and discard—like hip-hop jeans, rain-forest body lotion, and Indonesian sarongs. Does anyone remember the swing-jazz revival? That was *so* mid-1990s, right? Roots becomes another brand, “authenticity” another accessory. Moreover, since its cachet depends on its marginality, as soon as mainstream culture “discovers” an example of true folk grit, its appeal is already compromised. Like vacationers looking for the next “unspoiled” vacation paradise, folk consumers are continually forced to push on toward the next outpost. The folk fad, then, becomes an ephemeral flavor *du jour*, not a deep, sustaining current in American culture.

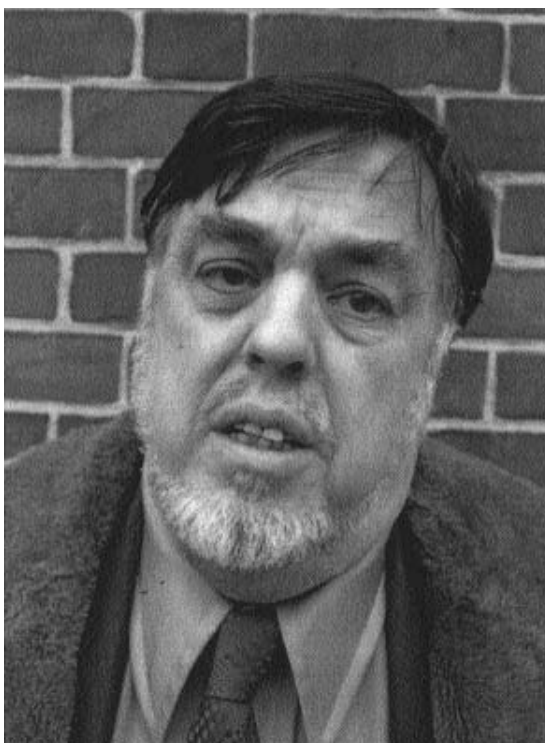
How did we get into this situation where music that so many people feel so deeply about is held at such a remove and consumed so casually? Ironically, the



roots of this dynamic lie in contradictions embedded in the same thirties revival that begat today's folk surge. Even as functionalists like Alan Lomax or the Seegers urged Americans to embrace contemporary folk cultures and argued that they could revitalize a compromised society, they, too, held the folk at a distance. They remained deeply ambivalent about where the folk belonged: past or present, urban centers or hinterlands, pop culture or subculture, middle-class mainstream or outcast deviance.

For example, even as the thirties revivalists urged that folk song be recognized as a vital, ever-adapting force and pushed to collect urban folklore, there was a strong countervailing sense in their work that folk song *can't* exist in the present and that true folk artists emerge, pristine, from nowhere. This view goes back to John Lomax, who in the Lomaxes' 1934 book *American Ballads and Folk Songs* wrote, "A life of isolation, without books or newspapers or telephone or radio, breeds songs and ballads."<sup>14</sup> Thirty years later the revivalists were still deeply ambivalent about the notion of an elastic, contemporary folk repertoire. Think of the tale of Bob Dylan going electric at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival and an enraged Alan Lomax trying to pin Dylan's manager to the ground while Pete Seeger hunted for an ax to cut the cables.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, even as revivalists urged that folk performers be treated as artists and exemplars of American cultural achievement, they marginalized them as exotic, untutored outsiders. As early as 1925, folklorist Archie Green has found, hillbilly



*O Brother opens with an unsettling Alan Lomax recording of a chain gang singing about a shooting. Alan Lomax, photographed by William R. Ferris, courtesy of the William R. Ferris Collection in Wilson Library at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

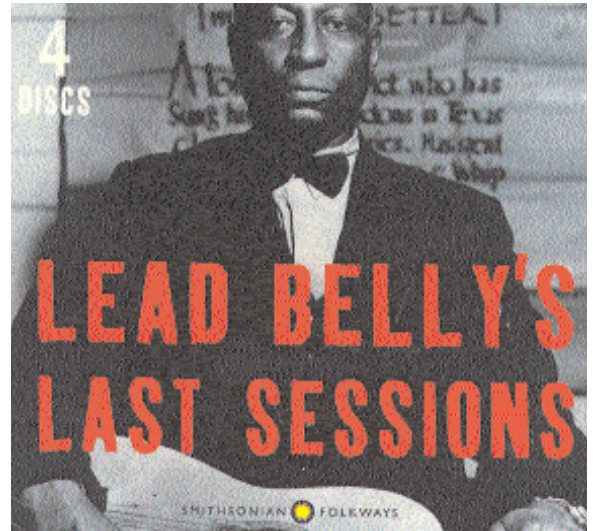
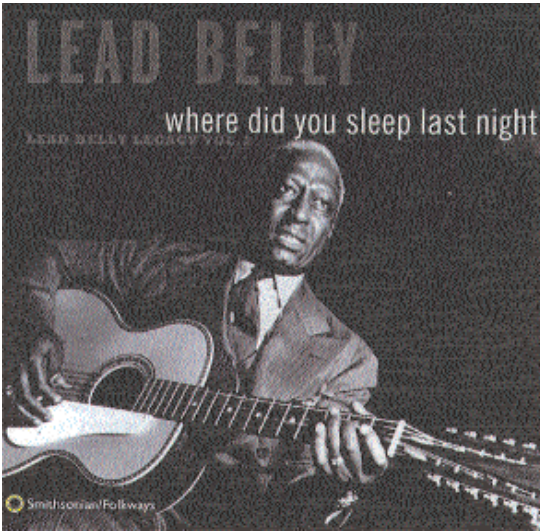
songs were being hyped as old-timey expressions of the untutored folk. The Victor catalogue for that year praised the songs as produced by “unlettered and never self-conscious chroniclers.”<sup>16</sup> Often, assumptions about the folk were touched with an edgy frisson of violence. Why, for example, was Alan Lomax *looking* for all-black prison chain-gang songs like “Po’ Lazarus” in 1959? Surely he couldn’t claim any longer, twenty-five years after his first trips south, that these men were isolated from radio? No doubt he felt some illicit thrill, a thrill I think audiences still feel today, in the pent-up force of these prisoners working against their will.

You can see all these contradictory expectations bound up in the story of Lead Belly.<sup>17</sup> “Discovered” by John and Alan Lomax in a Louisiana prison in 1933, Lead Belly came with the Lomaxes to New York City after his release in 1935, eager to earn a living through his music. There the Lomaxes promoted him as a violent, animalistic force. In a letter previewing his coming attraction to the local newspapers, John Lomax wrote,

Leadbelly is a nigger to the core of his being. In addition he is a killer. He tells the truth only accidentally. . . . He is as sensual as a goat, and when he sings to me my spine tingles and sometimes tears come. Penitentiary wardens all tell me that I set no value on my life in using him as a traveling companion. I am thinking of bringing him to New York in January.



*John Lomax wrote in 1934 that “A life of isolation, without books or newspapers or telephone or radio, breeds songs and ballads.” Others have seen folk culture as being more connected to modern life. Portrait of John Lomax by J. Anthony Wills, ca. 1964, photographed by Jim Thomas, courtesy of John Avery Lomax Family Papers (CN 10042), The Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.*



*The Lomaxes came across Lead Belly in a Louisiana prison and later brought him to New York, where they emphasized his violent past. Courtesy of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.*

The New York *Herald-Tribune* grasped the idea: “Sweet Singer from the Swamplands Here to Do a Few Tunes between Homicides” read its headline about Lead Belly’s arrival. This image brought Lead Belly attention, but it also constrained his ability to reach broad audiences. His cachet within the revival depended on having a raw, emotive sound, but he needed to smooth out some of this rawness if he hoped to garner mass appeal. He was a fan of pop songs, including singing cowboy Gene Autry, but the Lomaxes discouraged him from singing such material. And if Lead Belly did tone down his performances, he was seen as compromising what made him an “authentic” performer in the first place. Caught in this trap, Lead Belly never achieved commercial success in his lifetime. Only when he was safely in the past, dead in 1949 at age sixty, could he be “rediscovered” and elevated into a primal folk archetype.

These contradictory sets of expectations that Lead Belly faced constitute what I have called a “cult of authenticity” that the thirties revivalists erected. The folk musician was expected to be a master craftsman but raw, a powerful showman but unself-conscious and devoid of commercial attributes, an exemplar of American character but untrammelled by societal norms. As Lead Belly’s example shows, these contradictory assumptions can trap performers. It’s a dilemma that continues to this day. Jeff Tweedy was formerly the darling of the alt-country crowd during his days with the pioneering band Uncle Tupelo, but he says he felt he had to lose his alt-country “baggage” and break free from traditionalists’ rigid expectations before he could take his current band, Wilco, in new directions. Likewise, the garage-rock band the White Stripes, Jack and Meg White from Detroit, feels a strong connection to American roots traditions, but the group fears

becoming caught in the web that snared Tweedy. The band dedicated an album to bluesman Blind Willie McTell and covered Son House's classic "Death Letter" blues, but the two live in fear of having their authenticity evaluated. Says singer Jack White, "We're white people who play the blues, and our problem was how do we do that and not be fake." Likewise, the Whites feel stymied as to how to translate folk music into political change. "The blues could be very political," White says. "You know—Leadbelly sang about Hitler. But I shy away from doing anything like that because I'm scared of novelty. I'm scared of having nowhere to go with it."<sup>18</sup> Inadvertently, then, the thirties revivalists spawned an emphasis on authenticity that undercuts two of their main tenets: that folk music is a flexible, vital contemporary form and that it can be a powerful force for political change.

The cult of authenticity not only stymies performers; it tangles up listeners as well. I see some of its paralyzing effects in my own reactions to contemporary music. It helps to account, I think, for the grouchy response I have to some of today's popular folk material. If a performer is too rough-hewn, it often strikes me as scam primitivism. Come on, I feel like saying, no twenty-first-century musician can legitimately pose as an isolated, raw mouthpiece of tradition. Your music is a practiced *art* and should be portrayed that way. On the other hand, I find that if revival performers seem *too* polished, their folk allegiances start to seem like calculated put-ons, and I question their legitimacy as traditional practitioners. I admit that this double whammy is unfair, yet the revival's long preoccupation with "the real thing" invites constant reevaluation and repositioning of performers and audiences alike on an authenticity scale.

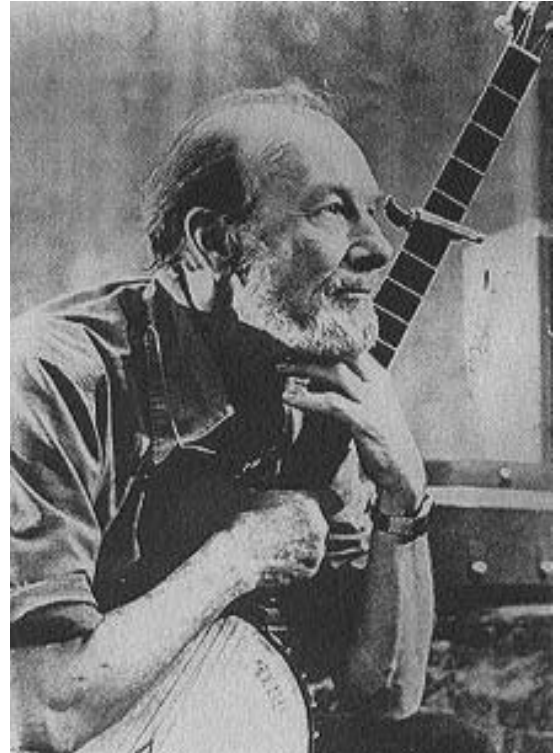
I'm not sure it had to be this way. Historian Kyle Barnett points out that we don't ask for the same degree of anticommmercial authenticity from films or television (or, I would add, theater and literature).<sup>19</sup> Moreover, while questions of "keeping it real" do to some extent dog punk and hip-hop musicians, no genre seems quite as beset by them as folk. Even jazz, romanticized and racialized by music critics for a century, seems to allow musicians more room to grow and be respectable individual artists—lionized but necessarily animalized.

Is there a way out of these dilemmas? How might folk music claim not just short-term popularity on the charts but the broader role that the thirties revivalists imagined, becoming a fluid, flexible contemporary form and an agent for societal change? In trying to tease out an answer, my thoughts turn to Pete Seeger, whom I heard live for the first time in the fall of 2002 in a memorable concert. Seeger has been performing for over sixty years, and I found it interesting to note what parts of his persona and his performance have had the most staying power. One thing seems clear: in an age of irony, earnestness is not the answer. Seeger's aw-shucks radicalism seems like a relic from another era, to the point that its oppositionality hardly registers. Once blacklisted and called before the House Un-American Activities Committee (he nobly refused to testify), Seeger hardly





*Pete Seeger has been performing for over sixty years. A young Pete Seeger (left), courtesy of Smithsonian Folkways Archives, and an older, pensive Seeger (right), photographed by Andrew de Lory.*



seems a threat to the government now. President Clinton awarded him a National Medal for the Arts and a Kennedy Center Honors award for lifetime achievement in the arts. A straightforwardly political statement from the stage nowadays seems more like a period piece than a call to action—just the sort of novelty that Jack White of the White Stripes so fears.

Indeed, the earnestness of the sixties folk revival is fodder for parody in the latest “mockumentary” written and directed by Christopher Guest, *A Mighty Wind*. In the tradition of *Waiting for Guffman*, *This Is Spinal Tap*, and *Best in Show*, the film skewers the sixties revival for its preachiness. Guest and his ensemble cast found the musical movement to be an easy target: “There is a kind of pomposity and a little bit of an arrogance about folk music and folk artists,” reflects actor Eugene Levy. “You find there’s not a lot of people with a great sense of humor about themselves and about their work. They’re just too intense; they’re trying to get out the message.”<sup>20</sup>

Surely this is a sad commentary that “trying to get out the message” sets you up for parody. Yet there is another side to the folk revival—other than message music—that Christopher Guest and crew wouldn’t think to ridicule. Some contemporary revival practitioners have managed to sidestep the strictures of authenticity and ally themselves not with a certain canon or a particular sound but to the folk process itself—the process of digging for vernacular roots, creatively combining them into new forms, and giving them fresh life through personally



*Like Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan opens up the process of creating new songs from folk material. Bob Dylan, from the collections of the Library of Congress.*

meaningful art. I think of Bob Dylan—nearly four decades after supposedly spurning the folk revival—still busily brewing up his own idiosyncratic blend of blues, hillbilly, gospel, Tin Pan Alley, and rock 'n' roll. I think of Jeff Tweedy's Wilco getting together with British political rocker Billy Bragg to write melodies for newly discovered Woody Guthrie lyrics. I think again of the White Stripes with their pounding blues rock or of bluegrass fiddler Mark O'Connor collaborating with Itzhak Perlman and Wynton Marsalis.

And I return to Pete Seeger and the remarkable performance I witnessed. Seeger is not and never was authentic. Even in his jeans and holding his banjo, he looks more like a town selectman than a hillbilly. Performing at the City University of New York's Graduate Center, he didn't pretend the auditorium was a juke joint or a barn dance. It was the here and now that mattered to him, and that's what moved me to tears that night. Seeger's own voice is so tattered he can only generate a warbly whisper, but through gesture and sheer will he led a crowd of four hundred in spirited song. *This* is the side of Seeger that has staying power—his sheer joy at the process of building, sharing, tweaking and twanging the elements of vernacular song. This approach, which once seemed so different from Dylan's, now looks very much the same, and it's their greatest legacy. Whatever form this music takes, Seeger seemed to be demonstrating, it just has to be part of the world we're making.

I believe Pete Seeger would tell the Coens not to treat the folk as spooks to be

pulled from the crypt, not to create mental maps that relegate them to the backwaters of time or geography, but rather to treat folk traditions as part of a powerful stream that is endlessly folding in new currents, breaking off into fresh new rivulets, and washing over new terrain. These have to be living, swirling traditions. For all my criticisms of the Coens, I did get a glimmer in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* that perhaps they *do* have some instinct for this more free-flowing vision. At the end of the film, the TVA floods the valley—symbolizing the rush of popular culture that would soon threaten to drown out southern distinctiveness. The destructive power of the torrent at first seems overwhelming, but in the depths, seemingly from nowhere, a banjo and a phonograph float by. Are the Coens saying that these old-timey elements are being washed away forever or, as I like to think, that they are about to surface and float along with the current? This, I would argue, should be the Coens’—and our—beginning point for a sequel to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and the musical revival it spawned, a story that starts when the sepia tones wash away and folk traditions bob up into the clear light of day.

#### NOTES

This essay is adapted from the keynote address given at the symposium “Hillbilly Music: Sources and Symbols,” held in April 2003 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

1. John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, eds., *Our Singing Country: A Second Volume of American Ballads and Folk Songs* (Macmillan, 1941), xi.

2. Jon Pareles, “Natalie Merchant, No Strings Attached,” *New York Times*, 13 March 2003, E, 1.

3. B. A. Botkin, in *Fighting Words*, ed. Donald Ogden Stewart (Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1940), 11; Lomax and Lomax, eds., *Our Singing Country*, xiv.

4. B. A. Botkin, “The Folkness of the Folk,” *English Journal* (College Edition) 26 (June 1937): 464; Federal Writers Project described in B. A. Botkin, *A Treasury of American Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of the People* (Crown Publishers, 1944), xxii, 9–10; Charles Seeger in “Conference on the Character and State of Studies in Folklore [Proceedings of April 11–12, 1942 conference],” *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (October–December 1946): 512; Botkin, *Treasury of American Folklore*, 819.

5. I discuss thirties populism in similar terms in *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 64–65. The phrase “I’ve-seen-America” is Joe Klein’s, from his *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 146.

6. B. A. Botkin, “WPA and Folklore Research: ‘Bread and Song,’” *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 3 (March 1939): 14; Charles Seeger, General Considerations for Music Directors in leading Community Programs, 1937 (unpublished), in Ann M. Pescatello, *Charles Seeger: A Life in American Music* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 142; Botkin, *A Treasury of American Folklore*, xxii.

7. Robert K. Oermann, “‘Old-Time Music Is Very Much Alive’ But You Won’t Hear It on ‘Country’ Radio,” liner notes to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack, 088 170-069-2 DGo2, UMG Recordings, 2000.

8. Ronald Bergan, “On the Run with Joel and Ethan,” *The Guardian*, 15 August 2000, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/story/0,3604,353916,00.html>.

9. Oermann, “‘Old-Time Music.’”
10. “Down the Road Apiece: *O Brother Where Art Thou*,” *Preview* 45 (May–June 2000), [www.preview-online.com/may\\_june00/feature\\_articles/obrother/index.html](http://www.preview-online.com/may_june00/feature_articles/obrother/index.html).
11. Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (Henry Holt Co., 1997), 95, 94.
12. Jeff Place in National Public Radio interview, “America’s Folk Music Anthology: 50 Years Later, Harry Smith’s Music Collection Still Rings True,” 17 July 2002.
13. J. M. Mancini, “Reviving the Folk Revival,” *Common-place* 3 (October 2002): 3.
14. John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, eds., *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (Macmillan, 1934), xxvi, xxvii.
15. What Seeger and Lomax actually did that evening in Newport remains the subject of much debate (see *Romancing the Folk*, 183–84). Regardless, their rage at Dylan’s performance was real.
16. Archie Green, *Torching the Fink Books and Other Essays on Vernacular Culture* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 30.
17. I discuss Lead Belly’s case at greater length in *Romancing the Folk*, 47–75, from which the material cited here is drawn.
18. Joshua Green, “Been There: Wilco’s Jeff Tweedy Talks about Losing His Alt-Country Baggage,” *Salon*, 17 March 1999, <http://archive.salon.com/ent/music/int/1999/03/17int.html>; Hugo Lindgren, “Questions for the White Stripes: Rock ’n’ Rules,” *New York Times Magazine*, 9 March 2003, 17.
19. Kyle Barnett, “The Lomaxes at the Gates of Culture: Authenticity and the Creation of ‘Folk Music,’” paper delivered at American Studies Association annual meeting, 16 November 2002.
20. In Greg Dean Schmitz, “*A Mighty Wind*: Greg’s Preview,” Yahoo Movies, 19 June 2002, <http://movies.yahoo.com/shop?d=hp&cf=prev&id=1808412293>, 2.