Romancing the FOLK

Public Memory & American Roots Music

Benjamin Filene

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To my parents and to Rachel, Eliza, & Hazel
between folk and popular culture who re-discover performers, re-interpret their early recordings in relation to subsequent musical trends, and re-define the artists as folk forefathers and foremothers. Appropriately, then, public memory is formed by a recursive process, one that involves revisiting and reevaluating the culture of the past in the light of the present. Understanding the assumptions behind these valuations and the ways in which they are transmitted illuminates how American culture gets created and, just as important, how we come to recognize it as our own.

**SETTING THE STAGE IDENTIFYING AN AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC HERITAGE, 1900-1930**

As late as 1910, most Americans would have been surprised to hear that America had any folk music. Of course rural whites and African Americans had been playing their traditional music since long before the 1900s, but they had done so, for the most part, out of the view of the middle and upper classes: outsiders had showed little interest in their culture, and, correspondingly, the rural musicians had had no reason yet to think of themselves as “the folk” or of their music as “folk” music. In the late 1800s, though, traces began to emerge of what would eventually become almost a national obsession with America’s folk heritage.

The roots of this phenomenon stretched back to Europe. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, European intellectuals turned their attention as never before to the vernacular culture of their country’s peasants, farmers, and craftspeople, launching what historian Peter Burke has called “the discovery of the people.” Once scorned as ignorant and illiterate, ordinary people began to be glorified as the creators of cultural expression with a richness and depth lacking in elite creations. German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803),
the most influential proponent of the new cultural outlook, contrasted the Kultur des Volkes ("culture of the people") with Kultur der Gelehrten ("learned culture") and made clear which of the two he favored: "Unless our literature is founded on our Volk, we [writers] shall write eternally for the sages and disgusting critics out of whose mouths and stomachs we shall get back what we have given." To Herder, folk culture offered a way to escape the Enlightenment's stifling emphasis on reason, planning, and universalism in cultural expression. Folk forms could cleanse culture of the artificiality that, he felt, was poisoning modern life.¹

Herder's ideas inspired a generation of intellectuals that came of age in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, initiating a flurry of efforts to identify and understand folk cultures. In 1778 Herder himself published a collection of song lyrics he had gathered and transcribed in the German border region of Riga (present-day Latvia). In titling the work, Herder used a newly emerging word, Volkslieder—folk songs.²

Herder was certainly not the first to collect traditional music. In seventeenth-century England, old ballads were published in numerous collections, taping into a fad among both the middle class and aristocratic for things "country."³ Scholars believe that the first explicitly historical collection was A Collection of Old Ballads, published in 1723. The collection's anonymous editor directly stressed its antiquarian nature, emphasizing in the work's subtitle that the ballads were Corrected from the best and most Antique Copies Extant. A second volume of the collection, issued later in 1723, accentuated the point further, advertising Songs, more Antique, and upon far older Subjects than those in the previous volume. These collections had astonishing popular appeal, becoming among the most popular books of the 1720s. Eventually three volumes of Collections were published, all appearing in multiple editions. Moreover, individual songs from the collections were reprinted as broadsides and sold from printers' stalls on the streets for largely lowbrow audiences. Historian Dianne Dugaw notes that to emphasize the songs' antiquity, publishers printed the broadsides "on heavy, old-fashioned folio paper decorated with woodcuts ... of old-fashioned dress, weaponry, ship design, castles, and so on."⁴

Such antiquarian interest in songs laid the groundwork for a landmark ballad collection, Reliques of English Poetry, published in 1765 by English clergyman Thomas Percy. Percy's collection was based initially on old manuscripts he had rescued, he claimed, from a friend's maids, who were using it to light a fire, but Reliques also drew considerably on printed broadsides and on the popular Collection of Old Ballads.⁵ Ignoring these

low- and middlebrow antecedents, though, Percy depicted his ballads as works of high culture. He attributed the songs to early medieval minstrels who, he insisted, had been respected artists in medieval courts.⁶

Most contemporary readers, however, drew different lessons from Reliques. To an emerging generation of romantic poets and philosophers, including William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Herder, the ballads in Reliques were popular poetry, evidence of the tremendous creative power of the untutored folk. Increasingly, intellectuals felt that for a country to have a distinctively national cultural voice, it must understand its folk culture.⁷ In Britain and across the Continent, there was a surge of interest in documenting the range of folk cultural expression. Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm published their first collection of children's folk tales in 1812. Other enthusiasts issued books depicting the drama and rituals of popular festivals in Venice, England, and Russia. In 1819 the Austrian government ordered local authorities to collect folk songs.⁸

Even in this period, more than a century before folk revitalism truly took hold in America, the pursuit of folk culture involved a complex series of ideological decisions. First of all, not just anyone counted as "folk." Herder distinguished between the true Volk (primarily rural peasants) and the urban "rabble in the streets," who "never sing or rhyme but scream and mumble." To Herder and other early collectors, true peasants were pure and artless and, usually, exotic. "The more wild and freely acting a people is," wrote Herder, "the more wild, that is, the more lively, free, sensuous and lyrically acting its songs must be!" Cultural treasure seekers visited remote villages and shepherd's huts, seeking, as Dr. Samuel Johnson put it in 1771, "primitive customs." Historian Burke recounts a scene of cultural encounter that would be reenacted countless hundreds of times over the next two centuries: "Craftsmen and peasants were no doubt surprised to find their homes invaded by men and women with middle-class clothes and accents who insisted they sing traditional songs or tell traditional stories."⁹

As Burke's description suggests, not all the songs and stories "the folk" knew made the grade as "folk song" or "folk tale" in the eyes of the early enthusiasts. Collectors feared that pure native cultures were being corrupted as transportation improved and literacy spread. Sir Walter Scott wrote that he gathered Scottish ballads fearing that the "peculiar features of [Scotland's] manners and character are daily melting and dissolving into [England's]." He described one singer as "probably the very last instance of the proper minstrel craft." Fired by this sense of being on a last-ditch rescue mission, collectors felt authorized to take drastic steps to reclaim the "original" essences of the cultural products they sought.
Thomas Percy admitted to making "corrections and additions" to the ballads he found. Elias Lönnrot gathered Finnish songs to the point that he felt no "singer could any longer compare with me in his knowledge of songs"; then he began freely arranging and rearranging songs as he saw fit, eventually assembling the Finnish national epic _Kalevala_, published in 1835. Such editorial liberties increasingly provoked expressions of outrage among eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century collectors, but the practice continued largely unabated well into the nineteenth century.

From the start, then, "discovering" folk cultures involved reimagining them. Herder, the Grimms, and their followers romanticized and transformed the cultures they sought out. Because of these transformations, as much as in spite of them, their vision of the folk had extraordinary reach, extending well beyond their borders and exerting influence long after their deaths. The work of these early philosophers and collectors showed that the idea of "folk culture" had both power and plasticity. Scholars and intellectuals, artists, entrepreneurs, and "the folk" themselves have been shaping and reshaping the idea ever since.

The process by which American folk music eventually became defined as such and started moving into popular culture began with academics and antiquarian collectors. The progenitor of the American folk song movement was Harvard professor Francis James Child. Child seems an unlikely person to have sparked interest in American vernacular music. Born in 1825, he was a Shakespeare scholar and professor of rhetoric, known for his rigorous academic standards, his impatience with those who did not meet these standards, and his obsession with his meticulously cultivated rose garden.

Child's other passion, however, was British ballads, a subject he pursued with the persistence of a bloodhound and the precision of a detective. Like Thomas Percy and the Grimm brothers before him, Child was very much a literary folklorist, one who treated folk song as popular poetry and analyzed songs as series of texts largely divorced from their tunes. Also like the European folklorists, Child confined his interest to the ballad, which he defined as a "narrative song, a short tale in lyric verse." By no means, however, were all narrative songs anointed by Child as true ballads. Like many of his predecessors, Child felt that although in premodern times the ballad had been "a common treasure" passed on orally and enjoyed by all, it was now a long-dead art. The "sources of English and Scotch ballads," he lamented "may be regarded as sealed or dried up for ever." The culprits in this story were commercial ballads and printed music, which together, Child believed, had polluted the oral tradition.

This narrative contained considerable class bias. Ballads had once been enjoyed by all, Child felt, but they had become tainted when educated classes had turned their attention to fine-art music, leaving the ballad form to "the ignorant and unskilled mass." Ballads printed for popular audiences as broadsides, which Child noted had been a thriving business from the sixteenth century onward, were "a different genus" from the ballads he treasured: "They are products of a low kind of art, and most of them are, from a literary point of view, thoroughly despicable and worthless." To ensure the purity of his collection, Child concentrated on songs that predated the printing press, which had come to Britain in 1475.

Child's standards for the ballad's purity profoundly affected his methods of gathering songs. If no new folk songs of merit had been created in the last four centuries or so, Child saw little point in making contact with current folk communities and trying to dredge up songs from their collective memory. Certainly America, with its relatively recent traditions, held only limited interest for him. Although Child was known to encourage his students to collect (especially in European countries other than England, where "some utterly 'uneducated' poor old woman" might yet remember a delightful ballad), for the most part Child preferred archival sources as the most direct means of retrieving the songs of yesteryear. The material that could "at this late day" be obtained from contemporary sources, Child stated, was "meagre, and generally of indifferent quality." With an air of finality Child dismissed living informants, proclaiming, "The material is not at hand." Child's ideal sources, summarizes historian Jo McMurtry, were "old manuscript collections which had been written down by private antiquarian hobbyists, straight from the singers' mouths, at some point in time before the tide of cheap printing had begun to alter the songs' traditional forms."

If in his value system Child resembled the literary folklorists who had preceded him, he distinguished himself by the rigor with which he pursued his goals. Child's motto was "Do it so it shall never have to be done again," and to a great extent he achieved this goal in the course of his forty years of ballad scholarship. Despite working in Massachusetts, thousands of miles away from his source materials, Child combed the British holdings of ballads with unprecedented thoroughness. Some collections he examined on his rare trips abroad, but mostly he relied on a network of overseas friends and helpers. Following Child's written instructions, they tracked down and transcribed material for him from
archives and private collections across England and Scotland. After his friend James Russell Lowell was named American ambassador to London, Lowell coordinated some of these collecting efforts, occasionally rushing prize findings to Child via diplomatic pouch.  

Out of these efforts, Child published the most thoroughgoing works of ballad scholarship ever seen. First, between 1857 and 1858, he issued an eight-volume collection entitled *English and Scottish Ballads*. This work, based on previously printed sources, listed the words to hundreds of traditional British ballads. In later years, though, Child scorned it as hastily compiled and superficial in comparison with the magnum opus that followed.  

In 1882 Child published the first volume of his masterpiece, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. The decision to add a “the” to the title of Child’s *1857–58* book was significant, for in this series Child aimed for complete coverage of the Anglo ballad field. In a preface to the first volume, Child wrote, “It was not my wish to begin to print The English and Scottish Ballads until this unrestricted title should be justified by my having at command every valuable copy and every known ballad.” Issued in ten parts between 1882 and 1898, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* numbered 305 different titles.  

This number alone, though, hardly conveys the extent of Child’s obsession or the immensity of his achievement. Influenced by his days as a graduate student in Germany (ever after he kept a picture of the Grimms on the mantelpiece in his study), Child approached ballads with the mind-set of a scientist. His student (and eventual successor at Harvard) George Lyman Kittredge remembered, “As an investigator, Professor Child was at once the inspiration and the despair of his disciples. Nothing could surpass the scientific exactness of his methods and the unrested diligence with which he conducted his researches.” For each song in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Child printed every known variant (thirteen hundred in all), and he provided voluminous annotations explicating the songs’ historical origins, the subjects to which they alluded, and the alterations they had suffered.  

Along with this effort to be definitive, Child brought to his ballad scholarship more rigid standards of editing than his predecessors. Although he drew extensively on previous collectors, Child was unsparing in his criticism of their penchant for doctoring texts. He criticized Thomas Percy, for example, for including verses that were “undoubtedly spurious” and pointedly attributed to him numerous “alterations and additions.” At times, Child dubbed the work of other respected collectors “modernized,” “twaddling,” and “entirely worthless” because of impurities they had introduced. Child outlined his own editing prac-

tics in the 1860 edition of his *English and Scottish Ballads*: “For the texts, the rule has been to select the most authentic copies, and to reprint them as they stand in the collections, restoring readings that had been changed without grounds, and noting all deviations from the originals . . . in the margin. Interpolations acknowledged by the editors have generally been dropped.”  

For all his high-minded precision, of course, Child was by no means an unbiased analyst, even within the narrow segment of folk song that he admitted into view. In the same 1860 edition of *English and Scottish Ballads*, Child acknowledged that in two instances he had “greatly improved” the original texts. Child was also known at times to omit stanzas he found “tasteless.” Child disciple Francis B. Gummere recalled Child’s consternation when he encountered off-color material—ballads, Gummere noted, that “the Scotch call ‘high-kilted’ songs.” “Yes, he had to print them,” wrote Gummere, “but it was a poor business.” He abhorred “the wanton and outrageous,” and he “frowned on stories, phrases, allusions, which make deliberate sport of man’s best impulses.” One such offensive passage Child characterized as “brutal and shameful.” Child seems to have felt obliged to print some percentage of such material that he encountered, but he did not seek it out, and bawdy material certainly is underrepresented in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. The loftiness with which Child treated his subject sometimes buttressed against his drive to document the British ballad tradition in its entirety.  

Nonetheless, the thoroughness of Child’s exploration of British ballads and the sober air of scientism it projected carried immense power. His slice of folk song came to be seen as the touchstone against which all folk songs were judged. Although Child was in many ways a man born outside the time and, indeed, the country that held his heart, his influence extended long after his death and far beyond his Cambridge rose garden. At the turn of the twentieth century, when American scholars began to become interested in the songs *Americans* sang, their frame of reference was almost completely determined by the canon Child had established.  

Concentrated interest in America’s folk song tradition began among scholars and antiquarians who became fascinated with the culture of the Appalachian Mountains. The northern middle-class reading public had had some awareness of the Appalachian folk since the 1870s when local-color fiction writers had written stories based on “folk” characters and traditions. Into the early 1900s, however, interest in mountain folk music was largely confined to a small group of enthusiasts who collected...
songs with an eye to printing them in academic journals. The first published collection of songs from the southern mountains consisted of one ballad and two songs that Lila W. Edmonds had collected in North Carolina’s Roan Mountains. The *Journal of American Folklore* (which, along with the American Folklore Society, had been founded in 1888) printed it in 1893. A number of articles followed suit over the next two decades, mostly appearing in the *JAF*.

These early collectors, although drawing on the Appalachians, were very much in the Child tradition of British song scholarship. They overwhelmingly focused on collecting ballads and were especially thrilled when they found a mountaineer who sang one of the songs that Child had annotated as a true British folk ballad. It became habitual to note parenthetically where such finds belonged in Child’s canon of 305 ballads—as in “Lord Thomas and Fair Annet” (Child, No. 73). To these collectors, Child’s work provided a frame of reference, a set of goals, and scholarly legitimation for the songs they were gathering. Following Child’s example, the collectors published the texts but not the tunes of the songs they unearthed. Usually they made no effort to contextualize a song, to explain its importance in mountain culture, or to comment on the mountainer who sang it. In the words of George Lyman Kittredge, “The text is the thing.” Most of the early collectors traveled the mountains as much to document Child’s canon as to learn about Appalachian culture.

Although articles documenting folk songs were published steadily in the fifteen years or so after Lila Edmonds’s 1891 collection, scholars and collectors did not become fully aware of the abundance of southern mountain songs until after 1910. First to spread the word of musical riches in the South were mountain settlement schools, such as the Hindman Settlement School in Knott County, Kentucky, which had been founded in 1902; the Log Cabin Settlement in Asheville, North Carolina (founded before 1893); Berea College (1869); and the Pine Mountain Settlement (1911). Working to preserve what they saw as the mountainers’ traditional culture, these schools usually included folk song programs. Scholars and collectors who visited the schools heard the students sing and returned home talking about the musical mountainers. In December 1908, Olive Dame Campbell visited the Hindman School and heard the children sing ballad tunes “as old as the hills—the real old plaintive folk tunes handed from mother to daughter.” Inspired, Campbell began one of the most far-ranging collections up to that time, covering counties in Kentucky, Georgia, and Tennessee by early 1910.

In 1911, Transylvania University professor Hubert G. Shearin published an article in the *Sewanee Review*, entitled “British Ballads in the Cumberland Mountains,” that both signaled and helped further the growing interest in mountain songs. Shearin revealed that his collecting work had convinced him that the Appalachian region contained a vast trove of old-time British songs. “Like the belated April snows upon their shady slopes,” he writes, “the folk-lore of the British Isles yet lingers here untouched and unchanged.” Shearin goes on to list by number the nineteen Child ballads he unearthed and to make an emotional plea for collectors to hurry and track down other British ballads “before they have faded into the shadows of the past.” “In another generation or two,” Shearin warns, the ballads will be “but a memory” in the mountains: “The clank of the colliery, the roar of the locomotive, the smell of the blast-furnace, the shriek of the factory whistle, and, alas, even the music of the school-bell, are already overwhelming the thin tones of the dulcimer [sic] and the quivering voice of the Last Minstrel of the Cumberlands, who can find scant heart to sing again the lays of olden years across the seas.”

Shearin’s call to pursue the rich song heritage in the Appalachians marked the beginning of a great expansion of collecting efforts in the region. Ballad enthusiasts followed Shearin and Campbell to the mountains and issued numerous collections of their own. Most important, folk song collectors began professionalizing after 1910. State folklore societies were organized in North Carolina and Kentucky in 1912, in Virginia in 1913, and in West Virginia in 1915. These societies were founded mostly by area English professors eager to systematize collecting work that hitherto had been done in a makeshift way by them and students in their classes. In 1913 the head of the Virginia Folk-Lore Society, C. Alphonso Smith, tried to elevate ballad collecting into a national campaign. He enlisted the United States commissioner of education to issue a circular urging Americans to preserve the country’s “ballad resources” before it was too late. The circular included an essay by Smith entitled “A Great Movement in Which Everyone Can Help,” an alphabetical listing of Child ballads, and statements on the social necessity of ballad collecting. Smith quoted poet Sidney Lanier, who intoned, “I know that he who works in the way these . . . ballads point will be manful in necessary fight, fair in trade, loyal in love, generous to the poor, tender in the household, prudent in living, plain in speech, merry upon occasion, simple in behavior, and honest in all things.”

Smith wanted to galvanize ballad collectors to document the remnants of the Child canon before the songs inevitably disappeared from America. Shortly after Smith issued his circular, though, collectors began
to emerge who saw no reason for the ballads to fade into "the shadows of the past." Josephine McGill, Loraine Wyman, and Howard Brockway shared Smith's and Shearin's fascination with surviving Child ballads, but rather than preserve them in destined-to-be-dusty tomes, they worked to popularize the tunes they collected.36

McGill, Wyman, and Brockway could embrace a less esoteric purpose for their work largely because they were not academics but private collectors and enthusiasts. McGill was a ballad lover from New York whose interest in the Appalachians had been piqued by local-color writer Lucy Furman's short stories and novels about the Hindman Settlement School. In 1914, using Hindman as her base, she spent the summer collecting ballads in the Kentucky mountains. Two years later, Wyman and Brockway, both classical musicians from New York, embarked on a somewhat more extensive trip that covered three hundred miles in seven Kentucky counties, including both the Hindman and Pine Mountain settlement schools.37

McGill's, Wyman's, and Brockway's interest in popularizing the music they collected shows through in the very form of the songbooks they published after their expeditions. McGill's Folk Songs of the Kentucky Mountains: Twenty Traditional Ballads and Other English Folk-Songs (1917) and the two books jointly edited by Wyman and Brockway, Lonesome Tunes: Folk Songs from the Kentucky Mountains (1916) and Twenty Kentucky Mountain Songs (1920), plainly aspire to different goals than the more academic collections. A comparison with Child's multivolume The English and Scottish Popular Ballads illustrates the differences. Child's tomes, chock-full of footnotes and cross-references and, in many cases, with lyrics written in Old English dialect, were meant to occupy a place of honor in a scholar's library. McGill's and Wyman and Brockway's books, in contrast, suggest that their publishers intended them to be used not by scholars but by families eager to make music at home. In a striking departure from previous folklorists' work, these three books feature not just a song's text but also its tune. Most significant, the tunes are scored with a simple piano accompaniment beneath the melody line. The song's words are written between the melody and accompaniment so that pianist and singers can easily sing along together.

In keeping with the emphasis on popularization, all three authors strove for conciseness and simplicity. None of these books aspires to Child-like completeness: they give no introductory material about individual songs, provide not a single footnote, and do not bother to specify the folk sources who sang each song to the collectors (they are thanked in prefaces). For convenience and price considerations, moreover, two of the three books came in paperback editions, and all are slim volumes.38 Each contains between twenty and twenty-five songs and is roughly one hundred pages. Keeping the books short in part prevented them from looking too academic and intimidating; but doing so also allowed them to be thin, which, along with their unusually tall height, enabled them to fit easily on a piano's music stand.

A final indication that these books were made for a piano is that none of them has a title on its spine; instead they have elaborate and colorful covers, designs meant to face forward and be seen as a part of a parlor's decor. All three feature floral patterns, and, perhaps most significant, both McGill's book and Wyman and Brockway's feature images of the home. McGill's cover shows a quaint log cabin—like house in a tidy clearing by a mountain stream. The cabin has an open back porch, partly drawn curtains, and a red brick chimney from which smoke rises. Wyman and Brockway's Twenty Kentucky Mountain Songs shows a barefoot dulcimer-playing mother and five happy barefoot children sitting on a back porch overlooking verdant hills.

This move to link mountain music to the feminized realm of the home has significance on several levels. Most directly, it suggests that publishers were trying to appeal to women as consumers of songbooks.
Traditionally, middle-class women controlled cultural activities within the home, overseeing family reading, music making, and playacting in middle- and upper-class families, at least, the parlor or piano room was decidedly in the woman’s sphere. At another level, to depict a singing woman on the cover of Wyman’s book says something accurate about the actual sources of the songs in the books: the strong majority of the songs Wyman, Brockway, and McGill collected came from women. Likewise, the more extensive mountain collection that Cecil Sharp and Olive Dame Campbell published in 1917 draws on vastly more women than men. The preponderance of women in these collections may indicate that they felt more comfortable than men singing for collectors or that the collectors themselves felt more comfortable with female informants. Certainly countless Appalachian men did sing folk songs, but women may have been more likely to preserve the sorts of songs in which collectors were most interested. Scholars have noted that in American folk-singing traditions, men have tended to do more “public” singing—that is, in social gatherings involving people outside the family—while women have been more likely to sing in the “private” realm of the home, often while completing their domestic work. Folklorist Edward D. Ives speculates that the “domestic tradition” is more static and contains more old-fashioned songs, including more Child ballads.

A final element in the gendered aspects of early folk song collecting is that many of the collectors themselves were women. Aside from McGill and Wyman, Lila W. Edmonds, Katherine Pettit, Olive Dame Campbell, Maud Karpeles, Louise Pound, Louise Rand Bascam, and Dorothy Scarborough all made pioneering contributions to song collecting before the mid-1920s. Pound and Scarborough operated in the more scholarly camp of the early folk song movement, but it is perhaps significant that the first collectors to try to extend the songs they found into middle-class women’s parlor (Wyman and McGill) were women themselves.

Wyman’s and McGill’s parlor books represented the first efforts to popularize British ballads, but not until Englishman Cecil Sharp arrived in the Appalachians did Americans begin to appreciate the extent of the folk song heritage in the Appalachians. In some ways Sharp was a latecomer to the mountains. He did not make his first trip there until 1916, when he and his assistant, Maud Karpeles, accepted Olive Dame Campbell’s invitation to visit and collect in western North Carolina. By this point, the Journal of American Folklore alone had published more than a dozen articles about mountain folk song; McGill, Wyman, and Brockway had completed the expeditions that would lead to their books; and Camp-bell’s own collecting in the area had yielded seventy or eighty tunes. Sharp’s renown as a collector, though, rests not so much on his being the first to show any interest in mountain song but rather on his ability to crystallize and extend trends that had been emerging over the previous two decades.

Sharp used his status as an authority on British folk song to add weight to the notion that the mountains were rich in Child ballads. He bolstered this claim in part through the sheer numbers of traditional British songs he collected. In close to twelve months of collecting in Appalachia (spread over three expeditions between 1916 and 1918), Sharp collected more than 1,600 versions of 500 songs from 281 singers, almost all British-derived material. Like his American predecessors, Sharp most eagerly sought Child ballads. In the book he published from his first expedition, English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians, thirty-seven of the fifty-five ballads he selected belonged to Child’s canon. He privileged these thirty-seven by listing them first in the volume, adopting what folklore historian D. K. Wilgus refers to as the “Child-and-Other” organization so prevalent at the time.

In other ways, too, Sharp’s English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians reinforced trends that had been emerging in folk song scholarship since the late nineteenth century. To a great extent, it is an academic book in the Child tradition. It includes several variants of every song published, and in each case Sharp carefully notes the singer who sang the variant to him and when and where he collected it. Further, Sharp indicates for every song which mode or scale governs the tune, referring to an involved chart he gives in his introduction. For example, Variant C of “The Cruel Ship’s Carpenter” is “Hexatonic. Mode 4, b (with sharpened 7th).”

For all these academicisms, though, English Folk Songs reveals Sharp to be much more in sympathy with parlor-book popularizers like McGill and Wyman than Child would have been. The book treats folk songs not just as literature but as pieces to be sung. It includes the tunes as well as the songs’ texts. Although in keeping with academic practice Sharp does not harmonize the tunes in English Folk Songs, he advocates harmonizing in the volume’s introduction, saying that adding accompaniment would give the songs “a wider and more popular appeal.” He did add harmonic accompaniments to other of his folk song books. Sharp, then, was at the forefront of a slowly emerging group of collectors who refused, in Karpeles’s words, to see folk songs as “precious objects [that] must be protected from common usage for fear of their vulgarization.” Sharp wanted to reinsert folk songs into people’s everyday lives.
As he worked to reinvigorate folk song traditions, Sharp’s ultimate goal was to forge a national British culture. Folk songs, he felt, would help a young Englishman “know and understand his country and his countrymen far better than he does at present; and knowing and understanding them he will love them the more, realize that he is united to them by the subtle bond of blood and kinship, and become, in the highest sense of the word, a better citizen, and a truer patriot.” On the face of it, this vision of national culture was an extremely populist one. Sharp proposed uniting society around the songs (and dances) created by those whom he called “the common people.” Public-school education was the centerpiece of this plan. In *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, Sharp wrote that “the value of such songs as these as material for the general education of the young cannot be overestimated.” He felt folk songs were “the ideal musical food for very young children,” provided the songs were English—“English folk songs for English children, . . . not German, French or even Scottish or Irish.” With confidence, Sharp envisioned that when “every English child is, as a matter of course, made acquainted with the folk-songs of his country, then, from whatever class the musician of the future may spring, he will speak in the national musical idiom.”

This reference to the “musician of the future” suggests a more elitist side to Sharp’s populism. Despite his respect for the songs of the “common people,” Sharp did not believe that the commoners themselves were up to the task of creating the national music. Rather, they were to be commended for having preserved the raw materials out of which trained composers would create new music. In his introduction to *English Folk Songs*, Sharp encourages high-art composers to assimilate the tunes into their work, saying that if composers were to “master the contents of this book” they would gain training “far better suited to [their] requirements than [they] would from the ordinary conservatoire.”

Classical composers who used folk sources, such as Ralph Vaughan Williams, Percy Grainger, and Béla Bartók, were the true heirs of Sharp’s brand of nationalism.

Along with this preference for trained composers, Sharp had a strong antipathy to the music to which the “common people” of his day actually listened. In trying to establish an English folk song tradition, Sharp explicitly hoped to undermine the popular music of the day. He proposed to “flood the streets . . . with folk-tunes, and those who vulgarize themselves and others by singing coarse music-hall songs will soon drop them in favour of the equally attractive but far better tunes of the folk. This will make the streets a pleasanter place for those who have sensitive ears, and will do incalculable good in civilizing the masses.” Such hostility to contemporary popular culture was very much in step with a nostalgic reformist impulse that cut across the ideological spectrum in Britain in the early part of the century. As historian Georgina Boyes notes, “Culture had developed in ways which were widely perceived as ‘unnatural.’ Commercialism, progress, irreligion, science, capitalism or greed were variously proposed as fuelling a perverted descent into industrialisation, mass culture and urbanisation.” To Sharp and the revivalists, folk culture offered a way to knit society back together and return it to a simpler era—a peaceful time in which community bonds were held securely in place by class deference.

Like Child before him, Sharp felt that the England he cherished had disappeared several hundred years ago, leaving only fragments behind. Unlike Child, though, Sharp found a way to revisit the British past he had never known: he created it in America. The key to Sharp’s attraction to the Appalachian mountaineers’ culture was that they fit (or could be constructed to fit) his conception of old-time England. In his depictions of the mountain people he encountered, Sharp reinforced myths about the Britishness of America’s folk song heritage.

From his earliest moments in the Appalachians, Sharp linked the mountaineers he saw to his idealized image of the English folk. Sharp had done extensive song collecting in Britain, but whereas in his home country he always was grasping at fragments, in America he felt he was seeing English peasant culture in full operation. In 1916 Sharp wrote that his work among the mountaineers had convinced him that the Appalachian singers were “just English peasants in appearance, speech, and manner”; or rather, “I should say that they are just exactly what the English peasant was one hundred or more years ago.” In his introduction to *English Folk Songs*, Sharp confidently asserted that the mountaineers’ speech was “English not American,” although he offered no evidence to explain or bolster this claim. As Sharp’s companion, Karpeles, noted, Sharp had discovered the “England of his dreams in the United States of America.”

Sharp justified equating the mountaineers with old England by citing evidence to show that the mountaineers lived in a time warp—in a society still dominated by the barter system, still “talking the language of a past day” (Old English), and still beholden to the Bible and an “unrelenting” and “austere creed, charged with Calvinism.” Sharp attributed this antiquated lifestyle to geographic isolation, depicting inhabitants of “sequestered mountain valleys” who “have for a hundred years or more been completely isolated and cut off from all traffic with the rest of the
world.” Sharp saw the mountaineers’ supposed insularity as a chance to escape his era and return to a culture he had given up for dead.

Closely linked to his penchant for locating the mountaineers in the past, Sharp idealized Appalachian culture as refreshingly natural and pure. In his writings he extrapolated from the supposedly clean and unadulterated folk songs he heard to imagine that the singers had wholesome and simple lifestyles as well. He praised the mountaineers for their “elemental wisdom, abundant knowledge, and intuitive understanding which those only who live in constant touch with Nature and face to face with reality seem to be able to acquire.” Sharp contrasted this harmonious existence with what he saw as the spiritually empty routine of contemporary industrial life. The mountaineers, he felt, were “immune from that continuous, grinding, mental pressure due to the attempt to ‘make a living,’ from which all of us in the modern world suffer.” Ignoring the moonshine and feuds that so preoccupied local-color writers, Sharp continued, “Here no one is ‘on the make’; commercial competition and social rivalries are unknown. In this respect, at any rate, they have the advantage over those who spend the greater part of every day in preparing to live, in acquiring the technique of life, rather than its enjoyment.” At times Sharp made the mountaineers’ closeness to nature sound less like subsistence poverty than like an ascetic philosophy. He surmised that many people “set the standard of bodily and material comfort perilously low, in order, presumably, that they may have the more leisure and so extract the maximum enjoyment out of life.” In his excitement at having discovered Old England reincarnate, Sharp projected his antimodern bent onto the mountaineers.

Sharp’s vision of mountain culture may seem romanticized, but his views were very much in tune with the conception of mountain culture that had been forming among early folk song collectors since the turn of the century. The early collectors depicted the mountaineers as still living in a rosy distant past in which plain-speaking farmers with upstanding values occupied quaint log cabins, worked in harmony with nature to feed their families, and entertained themselves by dancing old-time steps to old-time ballads. These collectors, then, much like the contemporary Arts and Crafts and New Country Life movements, located authenticity in a rural past. Idealizing mountain culture enabled them to challenge or at least sidestep the contemporary trends toward an urban, machine-driven industrial economy and a mass commercial culture. Whereas critics said the mountains existed in a state of “arrested development,” Sharp spoke for most collectors by the 1910s when he replied, “I should prefer to call it a case of arrested degeneration.” Underlying the early collectors’ defense of old-time culture lay fear of another kind of degeneration as well: racial degeneration. Sharp’s pursuit of pure English culture had a racial component that translated powerfully in the American setting. In trying to isolate the source of the cultural richness in the mountain communities, Sharp settled on race as the deciding factor. He wrote, “The reason, I take it, why these mountain people, albeit unlettered, have acquired so many of the essentials of culture is partly to be attributed to the large amount of leisure they enjoy... but chiefly to the fact that they have one and all entered at birth into the full enjoyment of their racial heritage.” In Sharp’s view, racial inheritance in large part determines a culture’s value. He observes that the mountaineers’ “language, wisdom, manners, and the many graces of life that are theirs, are merely racial attributes which have been gradually handed down generation by generation.” Sharp meant that the mountaineers were part of the English race, but his attitudes extended easily into the black-white dichotomy familiar to Americans. In 1918 he described Winston-Salem, North Carolina, as “a noisy place and the air impregnated with tobacco, molasses and nigger!” He told his diary that when his liberal hosts challenged his “dubbing the negroes as of a lower race,” he attributed their objections to “a mere lack of education etc.”

Sharp’s emphasis on racial determinism adds a twist to the early ballad enthusiasts’ insistence that the mountaineers were 100 percent British. Mostly white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, the song collectors asserted that mountain culture was America’s authentic folk inheritance and at the same time stressed that the mountaineers were British. In effect, therefore, the collectors established their heritage as the true American culture. This racial message also gives another perspective on the educational efforts of early popularizers such as Sharp and the mountain settlement schools. In Sharp’s view, “the primary purpose of education is to place the direction of the present generation in possession of the cultural achievements of the past so that they may as quickly as possible enter into their racial inheritance.” He goes on to ask rhetorically, “What better form of music or of literature can we give them than the folk-songs and folk-ballads of the race to which they belong, or of the nation whose language they speak? To deny them these is to cut them off from the past and to rob them of that which is theirs by right of birth.” Education here begins to sound like race indoctrination.

In the late 1910s, collectors of mountain songs were working in a time in which racial boundaries in America were being tested. Eastern European immigrants had flowed into the country in overwhelming numbers, prompting growing campaigns to Americanize the newcomers and to
block further immigration; jazz was taking off in popularity in the nation's cities, signaling, as historian Kathy J. O'Gren writes, that "black culture, like black people, could not be kept on the margins of American society" and sparking intense debate among white critics; and African American artists and intellectuals were creating a black culture of new vibrancy and openness in what would become known as the Harlem Renaissance. In this context, the calls to use folk song education to pass on to WASP's "racial inheritance" sounds like a bid to preserve the centrality of Anglo-Saxon culture against outside challenges.

The point is not that, in an age of nativism, Jim Crow, and lynching, Cecil Sharp and his fellow folk song enthusiasts were strikingly or unusually racist. More significant, rather, is that there was a racial undertone beneath the earliest self-conscious efforts to define America's folk song heritage. This racial aspect was but one part, though, of a multifaceted mythology about the "true" folk that by the late 1910s was percolating slowly into American culture. This myth defined a folk song as an extremely old song, usually a ballad, that had originated from Great Britain and was currently sung by rural, isolated mountain people who were white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

To label these criteria a myth is not to dismiss them as baseless. Certainly Appalachian mountaineers sang a striking number of old British ballads; but in the early 1900s they also played fiddle tunes, sang hymns, and crooned sentimental pop songs. For every ballad Sharp collected, he ignored countless other songs offered by the mountaineers. Similarly, most mountaineers did live in relatively rural settings, and some truly were isolated from modern roads and conveniences. Many parts of the mountains, though, were rapidly modernizing, and the region as a whole was in the midst of jolting economic upheaval. The more Sharp traveled, the more this reality confronted his romantic conceptions. In a 1917 letter, Sharp recounted his disappointment in arriving to collect in a small North Carolina town. To his regret the folk seemed to have been tainted by living too close to Waynesville, a more modernized town of two thousand. "The log-cabins are primitive enough," wrote Sharp, "but their owners are clean, neat, and tidy, looking rather like maidservants in respectable suburban families. It is sad that cleanliness and good music, or good taste in music, rarely go together. Dirt and good music are the usual bedfellows, or cleanliness and ragtime! So we move further on tomorrow." The following year Sharp arrived with high hopes in a small Virginia town "twenty-five miles from the nearest station." But he found the local residents "dressed in fashionable garments, low-necked dresses, high-heels and well-powdered faces. . . . The fact is the

price of whisky has so gone up that 'moon-shining' has been exceedingly profitable and they are rolling in money. Songs were, of course, out of the question, and we retired [the] next day somewhat crestfallen." Finally, to some degree the racial component of the mountain myth was based on reality. Most of the mountain residents were white; but by no means all were. Even though Sharp and the early collectors documented only whites' songs, the 1910 census showed that 13.4 percent of the Appalachian population was black.

To suggest inaccuracies in the early collectors' conception of the folk only confirms that they were telling a story about America's folk roots that, to them, was true and useful. The picture of the mountains that the early folklorists meticulously documented and enthusiastically propounded represented a choice on their part, whether conscious or not, to define America's folk music tradition in a certain way. Whatever inconsistencies the myth may have enveloped, in its time it had coherence and, for several decades, power.

The most significant effect of the myth of the white ballad singer was to help block African American folk music from gaining a central place in the canon of America's musical heritage. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African American song enjoyed quite a widespread popularity, but the myths about the "true" American folk, coupled with raw prejudice, kept it from being anointed as America's folk music.

Interest in African American song actually predated interest in Appalachian mountain music. It was probably the first American music to be popular in communities outside of those in which it had originated. Nonblack audiences initially became interested in black song via the minstrel shows that drew enthusiastic audiences across the North in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. These shows' popularity depended on their claim that their dances, humor, and music authentically represented slave life. But since almost all the early minstrel performers were northern whites in blackface (African Americans did not begin to perform in blackface until after the Civil War), they had only very limited knowledge of actual African American traditions. Mostly, they overlaid spurious caricatures of blacks onto Anglo-American cultural forms. In fact, the melodies for two of the most popular early minstrel songs, "Jim Crow" and "Zip Coon," derived from English and Irish sources.

In the 1870s, though, northerners became fascinated by African American spirituals as sung by African Americans themselves. This surge of interest in spirituals originated with the Fisk University Jubilee Singers. The Jubilee Singers were organized by George L. White, a white north-
Fisk group did not try to skirt the association with minstrelsy but rather capitalized on it. Historian Robert C. Toll notes that groups billed themselves as “genuine slave bands” and promised to appear in “full plantation costumes” and to sing the “quaint and weird” slave songs on “crude instruments of the south.”

A few people, though, began to see spirituals not as quaint tunes in a songbook or as exotic showstoppers but as important parts of America’s heritage that needed to be preserved. Probably the first person to give African American songs serious consideration as folk music was Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a white colonel in the Union army who became fascinated with the spirituals his black troops sang. In 1867 he published the texts of several of these songs in the *Atlantic Monthly* and urged that they be preserved as part of America’s cultural legacy: “History,” he wrote, “cannot afford to lose this portion of its record.” Also in 1867, William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison published the first full-length treatment of African American song, *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867). The book was the product of abolitionist zeal. Allen and Ware, both Harvard educated, had taught during the war in freedmen’s schools in the South. Garrison, the daughter-in-law of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and sister of architect Charles McKim, had at age nineteen transcribed black songs after the Carolina Sea Islands had fallen to Union forces. The young reformers were convinced of the significance of their finds. Wrote Allen, “These relics of a state of society that has passed away should be preserved while it is still possible.” Subsequent advocates of spirituals struck a similar tone. In his introduction to Marshall W. Taylor’s *Collection of Revival Hymns and Plantation Melodies* (1885), F. S. Hoyt described the black spiritual as “an important . . . contribution to the history of mankind,” while the preface to the 1891 Hampton Institute songbook quoted Edward Everett Hale’s assertion that spirituals were “the only American music.”

Almost half a century, then, before Cecil Sharp began exploring America’s British-ballad heritage, collectors identified an American vernacular-music tradition centered on an African American form. Enthusiasts worked to preserve the spiritual as part of America’s folk heritage, and efforts to popularize the form achieved considerable success in the late nineteenth century. The Fisk singers were far better known than their contemporary Francis J. Child, and the spiritual had a currency in nineteenth-century popular culture that no American roots music had ever before enjoyed. How can one account for the respect and popu-
larity enjoyed by the music of a race so widely abused and ridiculed in nineteenth-century society?

Part of the answer lies in the spiritual as a form. In terms of cultural politics, the spiritual was a safe type of African American expression for early folk song collectors to canonize. It was, after all, a relic of slave days. Although many African Americans sang spirituals long after slavery, overall the songs went into steep and continuous decline among freedmen after the Civil War. Former slaves quite consciously rejected the form. In 1874, in the preface to *Cabin and Plantation Songs As Sung by the Hampton Students*, Thomas P. Fenner, who had trained the first Hampton singers, highlighted the need to preserve spirituals by noting that the music was “rapidly slipping away... The freedmen have an unfortunate inclination to despise it as a vestige of slavery; those who learned it in the old time when it was the natural outpouring of their sorrows and longing, are dying off.” Even the Fisk singers did not immediately embrace the spiritual. Although spirituals were sung in the school’s chapel, none appeared on their first program in 1871. Only when their first tour seemed on the verge of failing did two spirituals get added. Since audiences responded strongly to these examples, the group began to focus exclusively on religious songs. In struggling to preserve spirituals, then, nineteenth-century collectors identified African Americans with a form from which most African Americans wanted to distance themselves.

The content of spirituals also helps account for their appeal to nineteenth-century whites. On the surface at least, spirituals imply acceptance rather than direct, physical challenge to slavery. The songs suggest a decidedly otherworldly orientation, promising redemption not in the present but in the glorious world after death. “Go in the Wilderness,” to take just one example, says,

I wait upon de Lord,
I wait upon de Lord,
I wait upon de Lord, my God,
who take away de sin of the world.

Spirituals tend to describe the hardships of this life in terms of sorrow more than anger or defiance. In part, therefore, the spiritual may have appealed to whites because it told newly free but still dominated blacks not to redress current wrongs. Even as the popularity of black spirituals among whites suggested an embrace of African American culture, it also represented an effort to keep it at arm’s length.

This ambivalence about black culture infused the language even of the pioneering collectors who strove to preserve the spiritual for posterity. They do not seem to have been entirely comfortable with the songs they heard and certainly not with the culture that produced them. F. S. Hoyt heard “weird but charming melodies.” William E. Barton referred to the Fisk singers’ “quaint, weird songs,” while Robert Moton prefaced the fifth edition of the Hampton songbook with a reference to the songs’ “rude words, wild strains and curious though beautiful harmonies.” Thomas Higginson made hunting for spirituals sound like a botanist’s search for a specimen. Traveling to the South, he wrote, gave him the chance to “gather on their own soil these strange plants, which I had before seen as in museums only.” When he came across a promising song, he “carried it to [his] tent, like some captured bird or insect, and then, after examination, put it by.” Even though these nineteenth-century collectors worked to preserve the African American spiritual as an important part of America’s heritage, they tended to depict black singers as exotic beings on the margins of society.

Black vernacular music became even more marginalized in the early twentieth century as the myth of the British ballad asserted itself. As the influence of Child’s canon spread, few folklorists and ballad enthusiasts paid sustained attention to African American music. The main collector to study African American songs in the early 1900s, Howard Odum, depicted them as the manifestations of a bizarre alien culture. With doctorates in both sociology and psychology, Odum gathered songs less to preserve an American heritage than to discover what made those strange Negros tick. In “Religious Folk-Songs of the Southern Negroes” (1909), he wrote that “the songs of the most characteristic type are far from elegant. Nor are they dignified in theme or expression. They will appear to the cultured reader a bit repulsive, to say the least. They go beyond the interesting point to the trite and repulsive themes. Nor can a great many of the common songs that are too inelegant to include [in the printed collection] be given at all.” As with his nineteenth-century predecessors, Odum’s encounter with African American music did not open him up to black society: “Little need be said,” he stated, “concerning social and political equality. There is no absolute race equality in any sense of the word. Those who would assist the Negro should remember this and not exact too much of him, either in demanding his results or offering him the complete ideal of the whites.”

Early collectors exoticized African Americans in part to keep them at a distance and in part because black culture truly did differ markedly from the white middle-class life to which most collectors were accustomed. Even those early collectors who, unlike Odum, did not resort to outright racism to explain these differences could not completely recon-

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cile themselves to what, from their points of view, were the more unusual aspects of African American culture. African American spirituals achieved an astonishing degree of popularity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—up to a point, difference fascinated white Americans—but these songs could not break into the canon of America’s folk music. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, difference, especially racial difference, precluded complete acceptance. Negro spirituals could be quaint, charming, even moving, but they could not cross the barrier to become America’s folk music.

Apart from the African American spiritual, the British-centered Child canon received only one other significant challenge to its dominance before the 1920s. In the 1870s and 1880s, a young boy named John Lomax was captivated by the songs cowboys sang as they traveled past his father’s two-room house on the Chisholm Trail. His interest in the music, though, lay largely dormant through years as an undergraduate at the University of Texas, registrar at the university, and English professor at Texas A&M. In 1906 Lomax, age thirty-nine, went to Harvard to do a year of graduate work. There the successors to Francis J. Child, professors Barrett Wendell and George Lyman Kittredge, responded enthusiastically when Lomax mentioned his love of cowboy song. They helped him prepare a form letter to be sent to western newspaper editors requesting “native ballads and songs of the West” and arranged for Harvard Press to print one thousand copies, which Lomax laboriously addressed and mailed. After Lomax returned to Texas, Wendell and Kittredge helped him win a prestigious postgraduate fellowship, newly endowed at Harvard. Lomax became “Sheldon Fellow for the investigation of American ballads,” an appellation that over the next three years brought him five hundred dollars each summer to finance research and song-collecting expeditions among the cowboys.

In 1910, Lomax published Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads, a collection of more than a hundred songs, mostly drawn from scrapbooks, newspapers, and the responses he had received from the thousand circulars he had mailed. Ranging from a little-known tune called “Home on the Range” to “Root Hog or Die,” this material marked a significant departure from the “Lord Randal” and “Sweet William” ballads of the Child tradition. In canonizing cowboy songs instead of ancient ballads, Lomax changed the face of the folk, replacing the sturdy British peasant with the mythical western cowboy who “lived hard, shot quick and true, and died with his face to his foe.” He also revised Child’s and Sharp’s assumptions about the age of folk songs. Whereas Child preferred fourteenth-century ballads, cowboys did not even exist in significant numbers until after the Civil War. In contrast to Child and Sharp, then, Lomax pointed toward a recent, indigenously American vernacular-music tradition.

The relative newness of the cowboy songs led Lomax to collecting methods that differed from Child’s. Lomax found that, although declining, the cowboy song was still very much alive. This realization led him, like Sharp, to seek out songs not only from printed sources but from living informants as well. Also like Sharp, finding contemporary examples of the songs he treasured led Lomax to attempt not just to document a song tradition but to revitalize one. In Lomax’s case, though, his emphasis on popularizing songs led him to dispense with academic standards to an extent that would have galled Child. In Cowboy Songs Lomax does not identify the sources from whom he collected songs, and he edits some of the songs without indicating that he did so. Unlike Child and Sharp, moreover, Lomax dispensed with printing song variants and instead combined different versions of songs without indicating which lines came from which source. Lomax openly admits, “I have violated the ethics of ballad-gatherers, in a few instances, by selecting and putting together what seemed to be the best lines from different versions, all telling the story. Frankly the volume is meant to be popular.”

Even though Lomax challenged the boundaries of Child’s canon and disregarded his collecting methods, as a student of Wendell and Kittredge he still very much located his work within the Child tradition. In Cowboy Songs, for instance, he persistently identifies American cowboy culture with the British folk tradition. Lomax rhapsodizes, “Out in the wild, far-away place of the big and still unpeopled west ... yet survives the Anglo-Saxon ballad spirit that was active in secluded districts in England and Scotland.” He goes on to connect the cowboy to the resonant mythology surrounding medieval England: “Dauntless, reckless, without the unearthly purity of Sir Galahad though as gentle to a pure woman as King Arthur, he is truly a knight of the twentieth century.” Lomax credits the rugged cowboy with “a spirit of hospitality as primitive and hearty as that found in the mead-halls of Beowulf.”

In addition to these rhetorical homages to old England, Lomax and Child actually shared strikingly similar conceptions of the folk. Lomax’s cowboys sang in a different country and in a different era than Child’s peasants, but like Child (and Sharp), Lomax stressed that the character of the cowboys’ songs derived from their isolation from modern society: “Iliterate people, and people cut off from newspapers and books, isolated and lonely—thrown back on primal resources for entertainment...
and for the expression of emotion,—utter themselves through somewhat the same character of songs as did their forefathers perhaps a thousand years ago.” Lomax also worked to preserve the aura of murky origins that helped make Child’s ballads seem authentic. “In only a few instances,” he wrote, “have I been able to discover the authorship of any [cowboy] songs. They seem to have sprung up quietly and mysteriously as does the grass on the plains.” Lomax set out to expand more than to destabilize the Child canon.

Even in this more modest goal, Lomax had only limited success. His cowboy songs attracted some attention, but not enough to keep him from essentially giving up collecting for the fifteen years after 1916. Most of those years he spent heading the University of Texas’s alumni association (the Texas Exes) and selling bonds in a Dallas bank. Cowboy music did not truly penetrate America’s popular memory until the 1930s when “singing cowboys” became the rage in movies and a series of cowboy-styled songs became radio hits. Lomax’s work also failed to spur much activity on the part of folklorists and ballad enthusiasts. Into the twenties, then, the folk song canon shaped by Child and Sharp held sway. Despite the alternatives posed by spirituals and cowboy songs, “true” American folk song was defined as British-derived.

The first real breakthroughs in generating popular interest in indigenous American vernacular music were spurred not by folklorists or ballad enthusiasts but by commercial entrepreneurs. Commercial record companies became involved in folk music almost by accident. In the spring of 1920, recording scout Fred Hagar and his assistant, Ralph Peer, recorded for Okeh Records a young African American vaudeville singer, Mamie Smith, as she sang “Crazy Blues.” Historian Bill C. Malone notes that Smith was “neither a blues singer nor a southerner (she was from Ohio).” But sales of “Crazy Blues” unexpectedly soared, and record companies became interested in making records that targeted rural southern blacks and urban blacks who had recently migrated from the country. In the early 1920s Peer began the unprecedented practice of leading regular field trips to the South to make commercial recordings of local singers. As he accumulated recordings by African Americans, Peer labeled them “race records” and promoted them heavily. Quickly, Peer’s rivals at Columbia, Paramount, and Victor followed suit with their own “race” series. Although race records always represented a small percentage of the companies’ overall sales (perhaps 5 percent), by 1927 the companies released nearly ten race records per week. They were sold in record shops, mail-order catalogs, saloons, book stores, barber shops, drug stores, furniture stores, and cigar stands, and they quickly became important elements in African American community life.

In June 1923 Ralph Peer went to Atlanta, looking to record black talent for the Okeh company. While Peer was there, Polk Brockman, who sold Peer’s race records in the phonograph department of his grandfather’s furniture store, convinced him to record a white North Georgian performer named Fiddlin’ John Carson, who had built up something of a local following on Atlanta’s WSB radio. Peer found Carson’s rough singing distasteful, and although he agreed to send Brockman five hundred copies of the record to sell in his store, he issued the record “uncatalogued, unadvertised, unlabeled and for circulation solely in Atlanta,” says Malone. By late July, though, the first five hundred copies had sold, and Peer realized he had stumbled onto a potentially rich find. He summoned Carson to New York to record more songs and began to look for rural white as well as black musicians on his future field-recording expeditions. In 1925 Peer recorded Al Hopkins’s string band and dubbed them the “Hill Billies,” a term that eventually grew to apply to the whole genre of rural white commercial music.

As had happened with race records, Okeh’s competitors—Columbia, Paramount, Brunswick, the American Record Company, Gennett, and Victor—soon followed Peer’s lead in searching out hillbilly music. In the late 1920s, companies did fieldwork in thirteen states. When recording in an area, they would establish headquarters in the nearest large city, usually setting up a temporary recording studio at the local radio station, concert hall, or (as when Peer first recorded Jimmie Rodgers) an old warehouse. Usually, recording scouts tried to book a full recording schedule in advance, relying on local agents to gather likely prospects or, occasionally, on a timely news article or advertisement announcing their recording plans. Upon arrival, the recording team would take down as many songs as possible in a few days and then pack the fragile wax discs in dry ice, ship them back to the company factory, and move on to another town. The discs, meanwhile, were pressed into records and shipped to market. Aside from mail-order catalogs, distribution in the 1920s was largely regionalized. Whereas early books of folk songs such as the spirituals collected by Allen, Ward, and Garrison, the cowboy songs of John Lomax, or the mountain music of McGill, Wyman, and Brockway sought a diffuse middle-class market, commercial companies in the 1920s aimed hillbilly records at a distinct niche—primarily southeastern, working-class whites.

This system seems to have worked well, for sales of hillbilly music boomed in the mid- to late twenties. Historian Charles Wolfe estimates
that the Columbia hillbilly series alone sold eleven million records between 1925 and 1932, and he adds that if the other companies "did only half as well in sales in the South, probably as many as sixty-five million old-time song or tune performances flooded into the culture" in this period. Even if these figures are somewhat inflated, they show that the commercial record companies were, in a numerical sense, far more successful at popularizing their vision of American folk music than had been Cecil Sharp, Olive Dame Campbell, and the other documenters of the Child canon.\textsuperscript{93}

In addition to being more commercially viable, the record companies' canon of folk music differed in other key ways from that of the ballad enthusiasts who had explored the rural South before them. Not invested in having a British-centered canon, the commercial companies could record a wider range of contemporary vernacular music. Whereas ballad enthusiasts collected almost exclusively from the older, more static domestic singing tradition, commercial collectors recorded the relatively newer and more fluid repertoire of songs played in public gatherings.\textsuperscript{94} The commercial workers' canon also extended much more easily to include a variety of African American music. Race-record listings included not only spirituals and sermons but blues, jazz, work songs, and storytelling sessions; if it would sell, companies would record it. This economic imperative, though, did not drive the companies to treat African American and white folk music as parts of a shared or interconnecting tradition. Even though blacks' and whites' songs were often recorded by the same people on the same field trips in the same cities, every company in the twenties treated its race and hillbilly selections as completely independent series that had separate numbering systems, separate advertisements, and separate markets.

Aside from including African American music, the commercial companies also differed from the proponents of the Child canon in their orientation to white music. Early folklorists like Sharp climbed mountains searching for unaccompanied ballads, the form they considered the most authentic and pure. The first commercial record scouts, however, mostly recorded instrumentalists, especially fiddle tunes, which the companies saw as a safer sell.\textsuperscript{95} In the later 1920s, the commercial companies did begin to focus on vocal music, but for the most part they still stayed away from the unaccompanied British ballad. They did so not out of antipathy for America's British heritage but because they had no use for a conception of the past as rigidly circumscribed as that set out by the Child canon.

As the case of Peer illustrates, the record producers recognized that hillbilly music's popularity depended on its connection to a sense of tradition, but they preferred to leave this tradition murkyly defined. On his field trips, Peer portrayed himself as looking for old-time traditional singers. In a 1927 interview with a Bristol, Tennessee, reporter, for instance, Peer signaled to area performers what sort of music he and the Victor company wanted: "In no section of the South have the pre-war melodies and old mountaineer songs been better preserved than in the mountains of East Tennessee and Southwest Virginia... and it was primarily for this reason that Victor chose Bristol as its operating base."\textsuperscript{96} Peer recognized, though, that old-timey music need not actually be old, and certainly not as old as a fourteenth-century ballad. Primarily he wanted to record artists who were comfortable enough with traditional music to sing songs in the older styles that attracted hillbilly music's audiences. Rather than insisting that his performers sing specific songs from a certain period, Peer focused on getting singers who generated a certain sound that he felt would be popular. As a result, historian Nolan Porterfield notes, performers such as Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family (both of whom Peer "discovered" and frequently recorded) drew on both "old half-forgotten relics of the past" and "original songs that sounded like the old ones."\textsuperscript{97} In Peer's canon, these types were equally acceptable. His eclecticism signaled an important shift from his folk-collecting predecessors: instead of enshrining specific songs as "authentic," Peer looked for adept and appealing practitioners of certain styles and elevated them into stars.

Peer and the other record company executives were able to take this new direction because, unlike previous collectors, they were not self-consciously trying to pursue and popularize a specific canon. They simply sought profits. Peer, for instance, above all concerned himself with copyrighting material. When the Victor company tried to hire him to build up its hillbilly catalog, he wrangled with them not over salary or artistic control but over song rights. Later he recalled, "I had considered the matter very carefully and [realized] that essentially this was [a] business of recording new copyrights and that I would be willing to go to work for them for nothing with the understanding that there would be no objection if I controlled these copyrights." Victor accepted Peer's terms, so his music-publishing firm, Southern Music Company, owned the rights to all the songs he chose to record.\textsuperscript{98} Peer's financial stake in the songs he recorded led him to adopt collecting methods that would have horrified a rigorous folklorist. To draw royalties, for instance, Peer insisted that his artists copyright the arrangements of the traditional songs they sang, even if the songs themselves...
were in the public domain. Peer’s focus on copyright led him to encourage his performers to compose new songs, which drew higher royalties than traditional tunes. Peer recalled, “I always insisted on getting artists who could write their own music.” Indeed, Peer relates that when he first recorded Jimmie Rodgers, “we ran into a snag almost immediately because he was singing mostly songs originated by the New York publishers—the current hits. Actually he had only one song of his own.” Peer “told Jimmie what I needed to put him over as a recording artist,” and Rodgers promised to write a dozen new songs before their next session. Peer’s stress on original material bore fruit. In the late 1920s Rodgers became a star—a “household name” in the small-town South—not for his versions of traditional songs but for his own hits such as “T for Texas” and “My Lovin’ Gal, Lucille.”

Peer had no qualms about moving hillbilly musicians into the realm of popular music. In fact, he often tried to give a more pop-sounding accompaniment to Rodgers’s songs. In one inauspicious effort he backed him with a lush sextet from New York, what Rodgers called an “uptown ork [orchestral].” Rather than belittling popular music, as did most folklorists, Peer saw the riches of the popular field as his ultimate goal. “I was always trying,” he recalled, “to get away from the hillbilly and into the legitimate music publishing field. . . . What I was doing was to take the profits out of the hillbilly and race business and spend that money trying to get established as a pop publisher.” At the end of 1928, Peer transferred control of his Southern Music Company to Victor and included in the agreement a clause whereby Victor agreed to assign him rights to all songs “of popular nature that might be recorded.”

With their indifference to British ballads, their openness to recent and original compositions, and their emphasis on copyrighting and selling what they collected, Peer and the other recording scouts represented a significant break from Child’s academic folkloristic legacy. Even so, these commercial recorders launched trends that influenced more folkloristic song collecting. By breaking with Child’s British-ballad orientation, they opened up the world of African American music and showed the diversity and richness of indigenous white folk music traditions. Equally important, their lack of interest in canon building suggested a new purpose for recording technology. Before, recording had been treated purely as a documentary convenience. Howard Odum may have recorded Mississippi blacks as early as 1904; Charles F. Lummis had recorded almost four hundred Spanish American songs in California by 1905; John Lomax used a recorder to take down cowboy songs in 1910; and Cecil Sharp, too, experimented with (and abandoned) recording in Britain in the early 1900s. All these collectors, though, primarily used the recording machine as a tool that let them take down a song and transcribe it accurately later; it enabled them to produce finer, more precise song texts.

Commercial scouts like Peer, however, had no interest in publishing a book of texts. To them, recordings were an end, not a means. When they recorded a song, they did not see it as an incremental addition to a larger canon. They were, as Bill C. Malone says, “unwitting folklorists,” who saw recordings as products—products that could be mass-produced and marketed and pushed into popular culture.

Most of the more academic folk song collectors studiously ignored the work of the commercial recorders. But increasingly they could not afford confronting the implications of the commercializers’ work. In the late 1920s, as Al Hopkins and the Hill Billies entertained President Calvin Coolidge at a press reception (1926) and Jimmie Rodgers starred as “The Singing Brakeman” in a nationally distributed movie (1929), two folk song collectors were at work, each of whom understood better than most the possibilities and the perils involved in setting aside the Child canon and capitalizing on the vogue that “the folk” were beginning to enjoy in popular culture. One was Carl Sandburg, the poet, journalist, and biographer fresh from the rich success of Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years (1926), the first two parts of what would become a classic six-volume biography. Sandburg had collected songs since, as a restless nineteen-year-old, he had left his Galesburg, Illinois, home on a romantic hoboing journey west (he hobbed back four months later). On the trip, Sandburg had begun taking down song lyrics in a pocket notebook, using his own notation system to catch the melodies. By the 1920s he was in the habit of gathering songs from friends, labor leaders, folklorists, and the people who attended the endless series of lectures he gave at universities and civic clubs across the country. He usually closed each program with a quarter- or half-hour set of music, giving what he called “verbal footnotes with each song.” In 1926 he began work on a volume that would capture and preserve the rich variety of songs he had heard and collected. The following year he published The American Singing.

At the same time, another, less popularly renowned collector was at work. Robert Winslow Gordon had first collected folk songs as an undergraduate at Harvard, where he had been a freshman in 1906, the same year John Lomax did graduate work there. Gordon went on to pursue graduate work under Lomax’s mentors George Lyman Kittredge and Barrett Wendell, working for eight years on a folklore dissertation that
he never finished. In 1923 he became the editor of the “Old Songs That Men Have Sung” column for Adventure, a middlebrow action and adventure pulp magazine. Gordon used the column to solicit and print folk songs from readers around the country, and over the next four and a half years he received more than four thousand letters.  

Gordon’s dream, though, was to be free from any job besides song collecting. No collectors up to that point had managed to dedicate themselves so single-mindedly to the task, but in 1927, funded by his salary as an Adventure correspondent, a contract for ten articles from the New York Times, and a twelve-hundred-dollar Sheldon Fellowship from Harvard, Gordon went to Asheville, North Carolina, and began recording. Over the next three years, despite perpetual financial hardships, he made almost a thousand recordings, mostly in North Carolina and Georgia. His most significant achievement in this period, though, was to convince the head of the Library of Congress’s Music Division, Carl Engel, to raise funds for a national folk song repository. In 1928 Engel announced the founding of the Archive of American Folk-Song in the Library of Congress and named Gordon its first director.  

Both Sandburg’s and Gordon’s work suggested the possibility of combining self-conscious effort to define an American folk song heritage (a goal absent from the work of commercial collectors like Peer) with a determination to reach a broad popular audience (an aim largely foreign to Child and his followers). Sandburg’s American Songbag, for instance, clearly aims at a popular audience. In presenting its 280 songs, it completely ignores academic standards. It does not list the folk sources from whom Sandburg collected the songs, nor does it specify which songs came from other collectors. Instead Sandburg frames each piece with a homey note and occasional line drawings of galloping horses or a hangman’s noose. More than academic precision, Sandburg cared about producing a book of “sungable songs.”  

Accordingly he included piano accompaniments for every tune so that the book, as his publisher Alfred Harcourt wrote, “could be stood up on the piano in fraternity houses and homes for ordinary folk to play the accompaniment and the rest of the crowd to sing.”

Gordon shared Sandburg’s interest in popularizing and in fact spent three days with the poet contributing songs for American Songbag. After these sessions, Gordon excitedly wrote to Carl Engel about his hopes for future work with Sandburg: “What we have in mind is directly in line with my theory that scholarship can and should combine with general popularity... One of the curses of the past has been, I think, that real

contributions have been hidden away in recondite journals where they were seen only by those who needed them least.”  

Gordon certainly was not dismissing the importance of scholarship—he favored what he called a “popular-scholarly” synthesis—but he, like Sandburg, envisioned an expanded audience for folk music.

The key to broadening folk music’s appeal, both Sandburg and Gordon felt, was to spread the word that America had an indigenous musical tradition, that American music was more than British music recycled. Neither man rejected the Child canon out of hand. On the contrary, American Songbag includes “Barbara Allen,” “Lord Lovel,” and several other Child classics. In 1927 Gordon wrote an article for the New York Times Magazine entitled “The Old Ballads” in which he praises ballads as “the unquestioned aristocrats of the folk-song world. They have the most poetry, the highest literary values.” Even so, both Sandburg and Gordon stressed the need to move beyond the Child canon. In the same article, Gordon referred to ballads as songs whose remnants “linger” but have “no real life in them.” He saw them as “not fully representative” of America’s folk song heritage: “They are true folk-songs but of a limited and peculiar type,” he wrote. “They occupy one tiny corner of an immense field.” In a 1926 letter he described it as a “disgrace to our national scholarship” that American songs were accorded less respect than British examples. Gordon set out to rectify the balance in his series of New York Times Magazine articles, doing pieces on, among other forms, American banjo tunes, outlaw ballads, lumberjack songs, and fiddle tunes.

Sandburg, too, stressed the need to awaken Americans to the richness of their country’s heritage. In his introduction to American Songbag he pointedly called the book an “All-American affair” and lamented that “there are persons born and reared in this country who culturally have not yet come over from Europe.” Sandburg tried to redress these cultural expatriates by showing that America’s songbag overflowed not just with British ballads but with “Prison and Jail Songs,” “Hobo Songs,” “Mexican Border Songs,” and “Bandit Biographies.” The effort to awaken a sense of native heritage among Americans took on the tenor of a crusade for Sandburg. In 1928 he wrote to H. L. Mencken about American Songbag’s success: “My gratification about the book is merely that of a patriot who has seen his duty and done it.”

In expanding beyond the Child canon, though, the most significant move Sandburg and Gordon made was to include African American songs in their vision of America’s musical heritage. Whereas Child’s followers had ignored black music and commercial companies had segregated it in separate “race” labels, both Sandburg and Gordon treated Af-
frican American songs as central to the tradition they outlined. *American Songbag*’s exuberant text never directly addresses where exactly blacks belong in the “wide human procession [that] marches through these pages,” but the book matter-of-factly includes a section on African American “Blues, Mellops, Ballads,” and it intersperses other black songs in the categories “Railroad and Work Songs,” “Prison and Jail Songs,” and the “Road to Heaven.”

Gordon worked more explicitly to define an African American folk song tradition. He recorded hundreds of black tunes in the South, and he included articles on Negro shouts, chants, work songs, and spirituals in his *New York Times Magazine* series. Gordon treated African American music as a coherent tradition. He praised Negro spirituals, for instance, as “the most extensive and varied body of folk-song that is alive and growing in any civilized country today.” In a significant step he placed African Americans at the center of America’s folk song heritage, noting that “the negro of the South is perhaps our best folk-singer.”

Even as Gordon worked to move black folk song in from the margins of America’s folk song canon, he was not willing to depict African Americans as the progenitors of American musical forms. Although he was continually impressed by black musical expressions, he tended to depict them as having emerged out of styles that whites had originated. Of the Negro singer Gordon wrote, “Some of his [song types]—perhaps most of them—he derived in the beginning from the whites, for he is a marvelous assimilator.” To buttress this theory, Gordon focused much of his early fieldwork on looking for the “white roots to black spirituals.” In 1927 he concluded,

In their basic structure such songs are not distinctively negro, but white. In the white churches were sung “spiritual songs” of the identical type before the earliest date yet definitely ascertained for any negro spiritual. The negro adopted, assimilated, made over. But his basic technique, very many of his actual words and couplets, even in certain cases his original tunes, he undoubtedly obtained from listening at white church meetings. In fact he took the very name “spiritual” from whites.

Even though he embraced black music, there were limits to Gordon’s acceptance of racial difference.

Overall, Gordon’s and Sandburg’s more inclusive canon of American song illustrates how much had changed since Child formulated his academic, manuscript-derived, text-based canon of white, British ballads. But Gordon’s unwillingness to credit fully blacks’ creativity points to a pattern that runs through both his and Sandburg’s work: as far-reaching as Gordon and Sandburg were, each remained in some ways wedded to the traditional ways in which folk song collectors had worked since before the turn of the century. Old-fashioned aspects latent in their work in the end prevented them from moving folk song out of the insular world of academics and antiquarians and into popular culture.

In their approach to preserving American folk songs, both Gordon and Sandburg represented a complicated mixture of innovation and anachronism. Gordon, for example, was perhaps the first collector to recognize the phonograph’s potential as a tool in building a folk song canon. In a grandiose proposal to “survey the entire field” of American folk music, Gordon recognized that such a trip would be worthwhile only if he returned not with texts but with “actual phonograph recordings of the songs in the exact dialect and intonation of the singers.”

The future of collecting, he saw, lay with recordings because they were the only means by which he could secure a present-day hearing for the songs he collected and leave an accessible legacy to the future. Gordon’s ambitious plans for his field trip fell apart, undermined by both fund-raising problems and the technological limits of contemporary recording equipment, but he continued restlessly to tinker with recording technology, hoping to find “something that was capable not only of reproducing acceptably for an audience” but a form that would be “permanent.”

Within a decade, after advancements in recording technology made portable recorders more feasible, the phonograph began to realize the potential that Gordon had foresaw for it.

Technological limitations and tight wallets, though, only partly account for the failure of most of Gordon’s projects to get off the ground. Gordon had trouble winning backers for his far-reaching plans because he had not mastered the modern tools of promotion. Despite his avowed interest in popularizing folk song, Gordon showed a singular inability to publicize and rally support for his causes. Like Francis Child, Gordon remained oriented toward improving and expanding his collection. In his few interactions with popular audiences, such as his stint with *Adventures of a Ballad Singer*, Gordon tended to focus less on sparking their interest in folk song than on gathering from them material for his collection. He had not grasped what Ralph Peer, as shown by his careful handling of Jimmie Rodgers, plainly had—that in a modern media culture, for folk music to gather momentum and to take on a life of its own, it needed a star. A canon based on anonymous songs and texts was too bloodless, lacking the human element that could turn a scholarly enthusiasm into a revival. Gordon treated collecting as a private obsession instead of a popular crusade.
Gordon’s absorption in his own collection translated directly into difficulties as chief of the Library of Congress’s Archive of American Folk-Song. He arrived in Washington completely focused on using his newly found position as a salaried archivist to collect songs with the freedom for which he had yearned. As his biographer, Debora Kodish, writes, when Gordon came to the library, “he remained occupied with the same kind of research that had brought him this far. He believed he had earned the right to do things his own way” and held onto his “aims, goals, methods, and principles intact.”

Gordon, therefore, made no effort to put the library’s bureaucracy to work for him. For long stretches he pursued his own projects on his own timetable and neither updated his superiors on his progress nor tried to galvanize his small staff. Gordon felt that the importance of his work justified such independent habits, but in a bureaucratic institution like the library, these habits began to jeopardize the very work Gordon treasured.

Although under the aegis of the Library of Congress, the Archive of American Folk-Song in its early years depended entirely on private funding. When the Great Depression hit, funds began to dry up. The library was having trouble convincing new donors to fund the archive’s work, and Gordon did little to help the cause. He almost forced the archive to forfeit a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies because he ignored the ACLS’s schedule for completing a recording and photostating project. The head of the music division, out of money, frustrated with Gordon’s behavior, and under the impression, rightly or wrongly, that Gordon was doing little in the archive, informed him in March 1932 that he would not be retained at the end of the fiscal year.

Unlike Gordon, Sandburg was a master of self-promotion. He realized that in trying to popularize American folk songs, presentation was at least as important as substance. Even though 180 out of 280 songs in American Songbag had been published previously by other collectors, Sandburg gave them fresh appeal by arranging them under lively headings—“Picnic and Hayrack Follies, Close Harmony, and Darn Fool Ditties,” “Lovely People,” “Tarnished Love Tales or Colonial and Revolutionary Antiques”—and by using an evocative writing style to place each song in a setting as vivid and dramatic as a film’s. He introduced “The Midnight Train,” for instance, with an image of “railroad trains hurtling with smoke, fire, and thunder across peaceful landscapes at night, rushing remorseless as fate along the iron rail pathways.” To set up “Turkey in the Straw” he wrote, “On mornings when frost was on the pumpkin and the fodder in the shock, when nuts were ripe and winter apples ready for picking, it echoed amid the horizons of the Muskingum river of Ohio and the Ozark foothills of Missouri.”

Vibrant writing alone, though, could not deliver Sandburg’s folk tunes into mainstream popularity. Unlike Gordon, Sandburg seems to have realized that he needed a star to serve as the exemplar and expositor of folk traditions. He chose himself. In the steady stream of poetry, journalism, film reviews, biographies, children’s stories, and songbooks he produced in the 1920s, Sandburg constructed himself as the plain-
speaking common man—the “voice of the Middle West,” said British novelist Rebecca West—who “has learned his country by heart.” He traveled the country on his lecture tours, spouting homespun yarns, poems, Lincoln anecdotes, and, of course, songs. The Lincoln biography, published in 1926, propelled him to new levels of popularity for a literary figure. In its first year, the 962-page two-volume work sold forty-eight thousand copies at ten dollars each and made Sandburg a national celebrity. Instead of recoiling from this rush of fame, Sandburg employed new image-building media to capitalize on it. In 1926 he gave a half-hour radio speech in Chicago for Lincoln’s birthday. That same year he took advantage of the Lincoln book’s success and promoted the forthcoming American Songbag, by making a recording of Lincoln songs for RCA Victor. Sandburg the folk song collector helped Sandburg the folk song popularizer by being folk singer and folk hero as well. When American Songbag came out in 1927, it did not have a quaint log cabin on its cover but a picture of Sandburg.

Although he had a sure instinct for modern publicity and promotion, Sandburg remained decidedly old-fashioned in his song-collecting methods. Unlike Gordon, he failed to see that the future of collecting pointed toward new technologies. In his methods Sandburg was still fundamentally part of the old songbook tradition. In gathering songs, he either drew on published sources, solicited donations from friends, or scribbled down notes and lyrics as he heard a folk singer sing them. Then he published his collection in a book aimed at amateur pianists. Sandburg’s 1926 recording of Lincoln songs indicates that he understood that phonograph records could enable a popularizer to reach a mainstream audience, but he does not seem to have foreseen the power recordings could have when used in fieldwork. For him, collecting remained a writing-based task. He did not realize that if field collectors pursued recordings, not song transcriptions, new possibilities opened up for popularizing folk traditions. With the unprecedented sense of immediacy that field recordings provided, audiences could embrace not just specific folk songs but the folk themselves.

By the late 1920s, Ralph Peer and the commercial race and hillbilly series, Robert Gordon and the Archive of American Folk-Song, and Carl Sandburg and his best-selling American Songbag had all made some inroads into America’s popular culture. As the thirties began, though, not one of them had managed at the same time to articulate a canon of American folk music, use modern technology to document systematically and preserve this body of song, and employ the techniques of modern mass communication to popularize his vision of America’s musical roots.

CREATING THE CULT OF AUTHENTICITY THE LOMAXES AND LEAD BELLY

The winter of 1932 was bleak for John Lomax. In the past year his wife had died, and, with personal distress compounded by the strain of the depression, he had been forced to leave his bank job, telling his boss that he could no longer fulfill his duties adequately. Needing a fresh start, he resolved to return to the vocation he truly loved, collecting American folk music. He decided to do a lecture tour to reintroduce himself into folk song circles and to promote his Cowboy Songs book, which, although more than twenty years old now, had been reprinted in 1929. By the spring, after a desperate letter-writing campaign to hundreds of colleges, high schools, and clubs around the country, he had enough engagements to justify a car tour. He enlisted his son John Jr., then twenty-four, to accompany him and aid in driving, selling books, and setting up camp. In March 1932 they left from Dallas. Following the lecture schedule Lomax had arranged, and accepting whatever new engagements presented themselves along the way, they made their way by June to New England, where they picked up Lomax’s youngest son, seventeen-year-old Alan. The three Lomaxes then embarked on a cross-country tour...
that would last the rest of the summer and would lay the groundwork for an American folk music revival.

The Lomaxes' experiences on this trip are preserved in a logbook that first John Jr. and then Alan kept throughout the journey. Its frontispiece shows the handwritten title, "30,000 miles by Cowboy song." On the adjacent page, John Jr., who seems to have brought his thesaurus along for the ride, wrote, "Herein are set down the experiences of the Lomaxes who peregrinated in 1932."

Peregrination can be hard. Book sales were sluggish on the trip—three sold here; four there; only occasionally as many as six. Inevitably, there were also strains between father and son as the three spent months together in close quarters. After a day of driving and many flat tires, Alan wrote, "The tension between us grew almost too great to endure." These stresses were compounded by a current of political tension that pitted the elder Lomax, an Old South conservative, against his youngest son. The journal is dotted with references to heated debates in the car about "Alan's Communist friends" and his supposed "communistic activities."3

For all these difficulties, the Lomaxes seem never to have doubted their devotion to the music they were promoting. Indeed, for young Alan the trip was an eye-opening experience that introduced him to folk music's emotional power. A performance at the Taos Pueblo particularly moved him. In the logbook he wrote: "First we heard the tom-tom, distantly thumping, beaten by hands out of darkness. Then a strong man's voice in a wolf-shout began a tune; others took it up in harmony. They sang in perfect unison. Down the creek another group began a different tune that blended with and accentuated the first. [Through] both ran the rhythm thread of the tom-toms. The music was old and stirred one to fight, to make love violently." The Lomaxes did not have a recording machine with them on this trip, but even in his state of excitement, young Alan's thoughts turned to preserving this music for posterity. He wrote, "The rough, powerful voice of the men chanting in harmony from the gloom of the thickets on the creek hows excited men all over the pueblo. They shouted and joined in the chant. Someday Alan will come with his recording outfit and can that music."

By August the three reached Los Angeles, where they took a few days off to watch the 1932 Olympics. Pasted into the logbook are black-and-white photos, taken from the stands, of a tiny figure crossing the finish line. The handwritten caption notes Babe Didrikson winning the fifty-yard low hurdles in world record time. The underlying strains within the family surfaced briefly in the two-hundred-meter dash. Alan wrote, "Tolan and Metcalfe, black, loaf... and still break World's and Olympic records that have stood for 28 years. Father was half-chagrined, half pleased. Alan triumphant. The two negroes settled the race problem for that afternoon." As the Lomaxes turned back toward Texas, though, these tensions for the most part did not intrude. They arrived home at least as committed to folk song as when they had left. But they were not significantly more well known or better established professionally. In the logbook's last entry Alan wrote, "Father and Alan know nothing of the future, even ten days ahead. They are homeless, jobless, and have no expectations. Let the curtain fall upon this woeful last scene. So ends this log."4

This doleful ending, though, turned out to be only the beginning for what would become the most spectacularly successful and innovative folk song-collecting team of the twentieth century. Unbeknownst to the Lomaxes themselves, the summer expedition of 1932 amounted to a test run. Over the next decade, John Sr. and Alan would travel tens of thousands of miles and make thousands of recordings.5 They did so not with the detachment of academics but with the zeal of proselytizers. Eager to promote their vision of America's musical past, they recognized early on the power of enlisting living vernacular musicians—"actual folk"—to aid their cause. In a pioneering move, the Lomaxes began to promote not just the songs they gathered but the singers who sang them. In doing so they produced a web of criteria for determining what a "true" folk singer looked and sounded like and a set of assumptions about the importance of being a "true" folk singer. In short, they created a "cult of authenticity," a thicket of expectations and evaluations that American roots musicians and their audiences have been negotiating ever since.

When Alan Lomax gave his woeful assessment of his and his father's prospects in 1932, he left out one potential bright spot. In June, John Lomax had persuaded the Macmillan publishing company to contract for a book of folk songs.6 In 1933 Lomax used this contract to draw support for a collecting expedition. The American Council of Learned Societies and the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk-Song contributed funds that enabled Lomax to order one of the first portable electronic recording machines for the trip. The archive, now leaderless, having dismissed Robert Gordon, agreed to be the official repository for the materials Lomax gathered.7 Having again enlisted Alan as his assistant, in June 1933 Lomax loaded his Ford with "two army cots and bedding, a cooking outfit, provisions, [and] an infinite number of 'etceras.'" After a delay, the Lomaxes added to this miscellany the 350-
pound "portable" Dictaphone recorder, which they built into the back seat. It came with two seventy-five-pound batteries, a microphone, cables, and piles of blank aluminum and celluloid disks. Carrying this load, the Ford lumbered off, and the Lomaxes began their hunt for America's folk songs.

The Lomaxes had a complicated agenda for this expedition. Their collecting methods and attitude make the trip, from today's perspective, seem part talent search, part sociological survey, and part safari. Primarily they sought traditional folk music in the "eddies of human society," self-contained homogeneous communities cut off from the corrupting influences of popular culture. Mainstream communities, the Lomaxes feared, had lost touch with their folk roots. As historian Joe Klein writes, "Instead of listening to Grandma sing 'Barbara Allen' on the back porch, the kids—and often Grandma too—were listening to Bing Crosby on the radio." The Lomaxes hoped to find the old styles "dammed up" in America's more isolated areas. They collected from remote cotton plantations, cowboy ranches, lumber camps, and, with particular success, southern segregated prisons. John Lomax believed that prisons had inadvertently done folklorists a service by isolating groups of informants from modern society. On their 1933 trip, the Lomaxes recorded in the penitentiaries of five states, as they sought to document "the Negro who had the least contact with jazz, the radio, and with the white man. . . . The convicts heard only the idiom of their own race."

Recording in a prison was not a simple proposition. Usually Lomax would write the warden in advance, soliciting likely prospects. Upon arrival, though, the Lomaxes would audition as many singers as they could. Lomax painted a vivid picture of this process in a letter to his future second wife, Ruby Terrill. He wrote that he was listening to the prisoner nicknamed "Lifetime" sing while "over in a corner. . . . Alan is trying out a heavy-jawed negro, appropriately named Bull-dog (we test out voices and songs before recording the songs). The interested and curious men in stripes crowd around, while the guards look on condescendingly, sometimes with amused tolerance."

After selecting the best singers, the Lomaxes would set up their recording equipment and, usually with Alan manning the controls, have the prisoners sing for the machine. The recording session might take place under a shady tree or in a barn with bales of hay improving the acoustics. Sometimes, though, conditions were more difficult for both the Lomaxes and the prisoners. John Lomax recounted to Ruby Terrill their experience at the Parchman Convict Farm in Mississippi: "The men convicts work from 4 a.m. until dark. Thus our chance at them comes only during the noon hour or at night before the lights are turned out at 9 o'clock. These periods are strenuous for us, for each group is timid, suspicious, sometimes stubborn and of no help whatsoever." At the end of their day the Lomaxes often would return to their car, either to drive by night to a new recording site or to camp by the roadside.

Early on in the 1933 trip the Lomaxes were convinced of the value of their efforts. One of the first people they recorded was an African American singer and guitarist named Huddie Ledbetter, or "Lead Belly." The Lomaxes "discovered" Lead Belly, roughly forty-four years old at the time, in Louisiana's Angola prison, where he was serving out a sentence for murder. Lead Belly astonished the Lomaxes with the variety of songs he knew and the verve and virtuosity with which he played them. He seemed to be a living link to traditions that were slipping away, a storehouse of old-time songs greater than they had thought possible to find in the twentieth century. John Lomax would later write, "From Lead Belly we secured about one hundred songs that seemed 'folky,' a far greater number than from any other person." Although Lead Belly did know some popular songs, the Lomaxes felt that "his eleven years of confinement had cut him off both from the phonograph and from the radio." The Lomaxes had stumbled upon the folk song find of their dreams.
Lead Belly inspired such excitement in the Lomaxes because he confirmed their most basic assumptions about American folk song, assumptions that may now seem commonplace but that in the early thirties represented decisive blows against the still powerful Child canon. The variety of songs that Lead Belly knew, for instance, nicely illustrated for the Lomaxes that America did have a folk song heritage independent of Britain. Even more so than Carl Sandburg and Robert Gordon, the Lomaxes were determined to praise America's indigenous music, refusing to apologize for its supposed inadequacy.17 In Our Singing Country (1941), they wrote that America's artists "have created and preserved for America a heritage of folksongs and folk music equal to any in the world."18

As an exemplar of the African American song tradition, Lead Belly vividly illustrated that one need not be an English peasant to sing folk songs. On the 1933 trip, John Lomax was quite aware that in recording African American music he and Alan were displacing the Anglo-dominated folk music canon. He wrote Ruby Terrill about a "handsome mulatto woman" who sang a spiritual for them in Texas: "Soon Alan had recorded the music and, possibly, a new musical theme had been added to our small American stock; for, to me and to Alan, there was depth and grace and beauty; quick power and dignity; and a note of weird almost uncanny suggestion of turgid, slow-moving rivers in African jungles."19 Setting aside for the moment Lomax's sensationalized style, for him to
locate black songs in the center of America's folk song canon marked a significant step in the early thirties. In the book that resulted from their 1933 trip, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934), the Lomaxes stated matter-of-factly that blacks created "the most distinctive of folk songs—the most interesting, the most appealing, and the greatest in quantity."20

Beyond illustrating the richness of America's musical traditions, Lead Belly's immense repertoire lent credence to the Lomaxes' assertions that these traditions remained very much alive in contemporary America. Challenging Child and Sharp, they dismissed notions that an authentic folk song must be hundreds of years old and that only fragments of true folk culture survived in contemporary society. The Lomaxes depicted a much more robust folk tradition. They argued that traditional American music remained vibrant, creative, and essential to American life. Alan Lomax urged Americans to fight "the tendency . . . to begin to regard [folk] culture as static—to leave out of consideration its living quality (present and past)." In a lecture to the Progressive Education Association in 1940, he told the audience of his desire "to convince you and to convince you so that you could never be unconvinced that there is, was, and will be something here that is in American folk music to be looked into; and . . . that there is enough to go around for a long, long time."21 Lead Belly allowed the Lomaxes to make such statements with confidence and to illustrate them dynamically. Because he sang indigenous American songs, was rooted in the precommercial past, and yet was vibrantly connected to the present, he personified the Lomaxes' challenge to the Child canon.

The Lomaxes succeeded as canon makers, though, not just because they embraced performers with the repertoire and style of Lead Belly. At least as important as how they defined the new American folk canon were the ways in which they preserved and popularized its exemplars. First of all, the Lomaxes rejected Child's manuscript-based collecting and instead relied almost completely on fieldwork. A living oral tradition, they believed, could not be captured in a Harvard library. One must go out among the folk to find folk songs.

In an extension of this desire to collect directly from folk sources, the Lomaxes turned to the recording machine. Folklorists such as Robert Gordon and John Lomax himself had used recorders before, but in the 1930s the Lomaxes employed superior technology, recorded far more widely, and embraced the recording medium with more passion than previous collectors. No written document, the Lomaxes felt, could capture the full flavor and intricacy of a folk performance, and the process of transcription relied too much on human skill and judgment to be accurate. Even dedicated transcribers like Sharp, they concluded, could not do justice to the subtlety and emotion that a Lead Belly brought to his songs. On their trips, the Lomaxes relied exclusively on the recording machine to take down songs, always experimenting with new techniques and technologies in the hope of achieving a less distorted sound. The recorder, they believed, removed the collector as a source of bias and
captured all of a song’s nuances. Instead of a scholar’s representation of a song, the machine preserved a folk singer’s entire performance, unadulterated. As Alan Lomax recalled, using the recorder on the 1953 trip “meant that for the first time there was a way to stick a pipeline right down into the heart of the folks where they were and let them come on like they felt.”

Aside from producing more lifelike renditions of songs, then, the recording machine enabled the Lomaxes to downplay their role in the collecting process. John Lomax accentuated this point, stressing that he was “innocent of musical knowledge, entirely without musical training.” He saw his ignorance as a distinct advantage, recalling that the head of the Library of Congress’s music division had urged him, “Don’t take any musicians along with you: what the Library wants is the machine’s record of Negro singing, and not some musician’s interpretation of it.” At the end of his first summer of recording, Lomax concluded that he had successfully maintained his studied detachment from the recording process. He saw the 150 tunes he had come home with as “sound photographs of Negro songs, rendered in their own element, unrestrained, uninfluenced and undirected by anyone who had his own notions of how the songs should be rendered.”

In idealizing the recording machine, the Lomaxes tapped into what historian William Stott has called the “documentary motive” of the thirties. As George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer explain, “There was a hunger for reliable information, a widespread suspicion that newspapers were manipulating the news, . . . and a simple unavailability of public facts.” In this context, the recording machine appeared as an incontrovertible source of truth. How could a recording machine lie?

In addition to making more effective use of the recording machine, the Lomaxes began to realize the potential of the Archive of American Folk-Song. Like Gordon, the Lomaxes had secured the archive as a repository for the recordings they collected. But the Lomaxes had a much stronger sense than their predecessor of the power and possibilities that the archive offered collectors. Gordon had used his position at the archive primarily as a base from which to pursue his own private collecting work. The Lomaxes, though, realized that government backing for their enterprise could give it added credibility. They used the archive not simply as a storage place for their recordings but as a credentializing institution, a way to link their personal musical tastes to a sense of national mission. Having the Library of Congress behind them made it easier for the Lomaxes to attract folk musicians to record and to secure a hearing for the music after they recorded it. When requesting permis-

sion to collect in prisons, for example, John Lomax always emphasized his position as honorary curator at the archive. His association with the nation’s library gave him access that might otherwise have been denied.

The Lomaxes’ Washington links impressed not only prison officials but folk informants as well. In a time in which the federal government under President Roosevelt played such a visible role in Americans’ lives, any connection to the capital had considerable power. Alan Lomax later recounted the story of an African American singer in 1933 who refused to sing in advance the song he wanted the Lomaxes to record. Normally the Lomaxes tried to conserve blank cylinders by auditioning singers first, but this man said, “No sir, you are going to have to have this right from the beginning.” The Lomaxes eventually agreed, and the man sang,

Work all week
Don’t make enough
To pay my board
And buy my snuff.

After a few more stanzas, the man said, “Now, Mr. President, you just don’t know how bad they’re treating us folks down here. I’m singing to you and I’m talking to you so I hope you will come down here and do something for us poor folks here in Texas.” Harnessing the power and appeal of the recording machine and of the federal government, the Lomaxes succeeded in collecting thousands of folk songs in the thirties.

Beyond the Lomaxes’ considerable skill at collecting vernacular music, what truly separated them from their predecessors was their ingenuity at popularizing it. In the twenties, Ralph Peer and Carl Sandburg had been attentive to the possibilities of using publicity to generate interest in old-time music. But Peer, for all his influence, had not articulated a unified vision of American music—he had not tried to shape the way America remembered its musical past. And Sandburg, for all the hype he generated, had not recognized the fascination that folk figures could generate in a modern industrialized culture—he had chosen himself to be the star figure who would personify folk traditions. The Lomaxes were the first to use “actual folk” to promote a coherent vision of America’s folk music heritage. To promote their canon they relied not on a popular interpreter of folk songs but on exemplars from the folk culture itself. They enlisted the full array of mass media—newspapers, radio, movie newsreels, concerts, and records—to transform rural folk musicians into celebrities. In effect they spread their vision of American music by integrating folk into mass culture.

The Lomaxes’ efforts to popularize representatives from folk culture
added an element that became central to the folk music revival of the thirties and to every burst of interest in roots music since then—an impression of authenticity. In some ways, of course, this appeal was nothing new. The supposed purity and simplicity of the music had been what attracted the earliest collectors of roots music and what interpreters like Sandburg had capitalized on. But by dispensing with the second-hand interpreters and foregrounding the rural musicians who created the folk music, the Lomaxes added a new source of authenticity—the performers themselves. Purity now was attributed not just to specific folk songs (e.g., Child ballads) but to the folk figures who sang them. Audiences and critics began to assess roots musicians with new standards.

The Lomaxes’ handling of Lead Belly helped spur this fascination with a folk performer’s authenticity. Lead Belly was released from prison in 1934. A popular story, spread widely by the Lomaxes in the thirties and forties, says that Lead Belly was freed because the Lomaxes delivered his stirring musical appeal to Louisiana’s governor, who was moved to commute his sentence. The Lomaxes did make a second visit to Lead Belly in prison in June 1934, and they did record his “Governor O.K. Allen” song, but prison documents show that Lead Belly actually won his release for good behavior. Upon his release, Lead Belly was eager to pursue a postprison musical career, and the Lomaxes, having found a living example of the noncommercial tradition they prized, could not stand to allow their discovery to remain in the Louisiana backcountry. Early in 1935, therefore, the Lomaxes took Lead Belly to New York City. There they recorded scores of his songs for the Archive of American Folk-Song, booked appearances for him at concerts, took him on a lecture-recital tour of eastern colleges (in which John Lomax explicated the songs Lead Belly sang), and arranged commercial recording sessions for him.

Most striking, upon arriving in New York the Lomaxes launched a publicity blitz, promoting Lead Belly as the folk song find of the century. This media campaign essentially relied on two strategies to establish Lead Belly’s authenticity—strategies seemingly at odds. On one hand, the Lomaxes depicted Lead Belly as the living embodiment of America’s folk song tradition, a time capsule that had preserved the pure voice of the people. Often this strategy involved counterposing Lead Belly’s “pure” music to its inferior modern descendants. At Lead Belly’s New York debut (at a hotel luncheon for University of Texas alumni) John Lomax explained: “Northern people hear Negroes playing and singing beautiful spirituals which are too refined and unlike the true southern spirituals. Or else they hear men and women on the stage and radio, burlesquing their own songs. Lead Belly doesn’t burlesque. He

plays and sings with absolute sincerity. . . . I’ve heard his songs a hundred times, but I always get a thrill. To me his music is real music.” The press picked up on this strain of Lead Belly’s appeal. An article chronicling his March 1935 appearance at Harvard observed: “There is but slight resemblance between his singing and that of the stage and radio singers. There is a deep primitive quality to Lead Belly’s songs.” The New York Post, likewise, praised his music’s “perfect simplicity.”

Often this emphasis on Lead Belly’s musical purity extended into broader statements about his cultural authenticity. The World Telegram, for example, proclaimed that Lead Belly was “living history,” while the Post dubbed him “a new American original.” A 1935 March of Time newsreel used symbolism to make the same point. At the end of the dramatization, in which Lomax and Lead Belly reenact Lomax’s “discovery” of the singer, a heavy voice-over announces that “Hailed by the Library of Congress . . . Lead Belly’s songs go into the archives of the great national institution.” The camera shows the Archive of American Folk Song and then, as the music fades out, moves to a close-up of the Declaration of Independence.

At the same time, though, that the Lomaxes ennobled Lead Belly as an authentic folk forefather, they thoroughly exoticized him. Their publicity campaign depicted him as a savage, untamed animal and focused endlessly on his convict past. Long after Lead Belly had been freed, Lomax had him perform in his old convict clothes, “for exhibition purposes, . . . though he always hated to wear them.” At the Modern Language Association Lomax arranged for Lead Belly to sing his “raw folk songs” while “seated on the top center of the banquet table,” a performance, Lomax noted, that “shocked his hearers into attention.” The posed photograph on the frontispiece of the Lomaxes’ 1936 biography, Negro Folk Songs As Sung by Lead Belly, shows Lead Belly in overalls rolled up to reveal bare feet, with a handkerchief tied around his neck. Sitting on canvas sacks, he is playing guitar, with his head tilted back, eyes wide, and mouth open to show a tooth missing.

In describing Lead Belly, John Lomax consistently stressed his capacity. Shortly before taking Lead Belly to the North, Lomax wrote a letter previewing his coming attraction for the papers: “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.” Similarly, in Negro Folk Songs the Lomaxes stress that Lead Belly “had served time in a Texas
penitentiary for murder; ... he had thrice been a fugitive from justice; ... he was the type known as 'killer' and had a career of violence the record of which is a black epic of horrifies.” When Lomax first arrived in New York, he introduced Lead Belly to reporters by explaining that he “was a ‘natural,’ who had no idea of money, law, or ethics and who was possessed of virtually no restraint.”

Others who worked with Lead Belly in the thirties and forties dispute this portrait of him. Most people who met him commented on his gentleness. Pete Seeger remembers him as soft voiced, meticulously dressed, and “wonderful with children.” Seeger found it “hard to believe the stories we read of his violent youth.”

Producer Moses Asch recalls that
his first impression was Lead Belly’s “overall aristocratic appearance and demeanor.” Lead Belly had enough of an “idea of money,” moreover, to demand that John Lomax give him control over the revenues from his concerts. For the first eight months or so that he was with the Lomaxes, they used him as their chauffeur and house servant. He drove the car on their collecting expeditions and to and from concert engagements, and he did chores around the Lomax home in Wilton, Connecticut. The Lomaxes kept two-thirds of Lead Belly’s concert earnings and deducted room and board from the remainder. Lead Belly angrily challenged this arrangement (brandishing a knife) in March 1935, and a shaken John Lomax put him on a bus back to Shreveport, Louisiana. Lead Belly promptly hired a lawyer to press for compensation. Lomax eventually paid a lump sum to settle the matter.

Regardless of the inaccuracies in their portrayal, the Lomaxes’ emphasis on Lead Belly’s “Otherness” seems to have been strikingly effective. The New York Herald Tribune responded to the Lomaxes’ publicity campaign with the headline “Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here to Do a Few Tunes between Homicides,” prompting John Lomax to reflect that “his criminal record was securing a hearing for a Negro musician” and that “the terms ‘bad nigger’ only added to his attraction.” The next year the Tribune followed up with “Ebon, Shufflin’ Anthology of Swampland Folksong Inhales Gin, Exhales Rhyme.” Routinely the press in the thirties described Lead Belly with epithets like “two-time Dixie murderer,” “[Lomax’s] murderous protegé,” or “two-time killer, who twice sang his way out of jail.” In a typical story, the Brooklyn Eagle announced Lead Belly’s wedding (a major media event organized by the Lomaxes) by reporting, “Lead Belly, the Louisiana swamplands Negro equally proficient with knife or guitar, is happy today in the knowledge that Martha Promise . . . , who sheltered him between prison sentences, is with him again.” Such excesses were by no means confined to tabloid presses. In his 1936 ode to Lead Belly, published in the New Yorker, the poet William Rose Benét (Stephen Vincent’s older brother) marveled,

He was big and he was black
And wondrous were his wrongs
But he had a memory travelled back
Through at least five hundred songs.

In reviewing Negro Folk Songs, the Texan folklorist J. Frank Dobie offered a particularly striking description of a Lead Belly performance:

His way before an audience was to sit quiet and relaxed, this man of terrible energy, turning over in his mind God alone knows what thoughts; then at the signal, to let loose his hands and his voice. He crouched over his guitar as he played, . . . and he sang with an intensity and passion that swayed audiences who could not understand a single word of his songs. His eyes were tight-shut so that between his eyebrows there appeared deep furrows of concentration curving back like devil’s horns.

In his public persona, then, Lead Belly seems to have been cast as both archetypal ancestor and demon—and to have been convincing as the real thing in each role. These conflicting personas illustrate a dynamic that has characterized the cult of authenticity ever since. Revival audiences yearn to identify with folk figures, but that identification is premised on difference. Roots musicians are expected to be premodern, unrestrainedly emotive, and noncommercial. Singers who too closely resemble the revival’s middle-class audiences are rejected by those audiences as “inauthentic.” Generally, then, the most popular folk figures—those with whom revival audiences most identify—are those who have passed a series of tests of their “Otherness.”

The Lomaxes’ handling of Lead Belly resonated with a current of primitivism that ran through early-twentieth-century modernism. Avant-garde writers, artists, and intellectuals used “the primitive” as a source of imagery, metaphors, and behavior patterns that fulfilled personal longings and enabled cultural critiques. Picasso and the cubists incorporated the stark geometries of African sculptures in their work. Art collectors and intellectuals (including Freud) sought out these sculptures for their galleries and studies. In Heart of Darkness (1913), Joseph Conrad used a ride down the Congo to signify his exploration of the darkest depths of the human soul. Both the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis put “primitive” tributes on display. Beginning in 1912, Edgar Rice Burroughs masterfully moved the fascination with the primitive into popular culture with his wildly successful series of Tarzan novels. Often these appropriations of the primitive were based on extremely limited knowledge of non-Western societies. The modernists’ representations of the primitive said as much about their own artistic visions and personal fantasies as about the people whose culture they purported to depict. “The primitive” became a symbol that could encompass violence, sex, irrationality, and, at the same time, noble innocence and childlike naïveté.

While modernist artists tended to discover the primitive without leaving their studios, turn-of-the-century anthropologists took the search more literally. In the late 1880s, extended fieldwork became more expected within the profession, and extended sojourns with isolated peo-
In this atmosphere, middle-class Americans were drawn to people who seemed to exist outside the modern industrial world, able to survive independent of its inhumane economy and not lulled by its superficial luxuries. Figures of the outcast, the folk, the impoverished, and the dispossessed fascinated Americans. The common person was glorified in a wide variety of media in the thirties—in novels such as Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, in the Chicago School’s urban sociology, in plays such as Clifford Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty*, and in the post office murals commissioned by the Works Progress Administration. Most poignantly, perhaps, the documentary photography of the Resettlement Administration, the photojournalism of *Life* and *Look* magazines, and the “Pye-Seen-America” books of Margaret Bourke-White and James Agee and Walker Evans portrayed the strength and forthrightness of downtrodden men and women who leveled their steady gaze at the camera.

There is, of course, an oxymoronic quality inherent to “outsider populism”: how can one build populism around those outside “the people”? The outsiders appealed, though, because they reminded Americans of themselves—or of how they wanted to see themselves: independent, proud in the face of hardship, straightforward, beholden to no special interests. Images of the folk attracted Americans because they suggested sources of purity and character outside the seemingly weakened and corrupt mainstream of society. Ironically, then, to highlight a person’s marginality in relation to the mainstream helped authenticate him or her as an exemplar of American grit and character. For the Lomaxes to depict Lead Belly as an exotic animal added to his appeal. They realized that if they wanted Lead Belly to achieve mainstream popularity he very incompatibility with mainstream society was his greatest asset.

This realization led the Lomaxes to manipulate not only Lead Belly’s image but also his music. As the Lomaxes knew, Lead Belly’s commercial strength depended on the perception that his songs were “pure folk.” But they also recognized that popular audiences would not necessarily appreciate the folk style unadulterated. So, even as the Lomaxes worked to preserve Lead Belly’s “authenticity,” they encouraged him to make his singing more accessible to urban audiences. Alan Lomax recalled that white audiences found Lead Belly’s southern dialect impenetrable until he “learned to compromise with Northern ways and ‘bring his words out plain.’” The Lomaxes may also have urged Lead Belly to insert spoken comments in the middle of his songs, a technique for which he is famous. Spoken sections made a song easier for a neophyte to understand by outlining its plot, explaining obscure words and symbols, and providing transitions between verses. Folklorist John Minton cites a Library of
Congress recording of “Scottsboro Boys,” in which Alan Lomax “asks Lead Belly in mid-performance to expand on the song’s theme.” Minton speculates that “the interpolated narrative was already a part of Lead Belly’s style, but it was obviously encouraged by the Lomaxes.”

A close look at one Lead Belly song, “Mister Tom Hughes’ Town,” illustrates how Lead Belly’s musical style evolved in the years after he left prison. “Tom Hughes” was a signature piece in Lead Belly’s repertoire, one that he recorded six times between 1934 and 1940 and twice more at his final recording sessions in 1948. He first recorded the song for the Lomaxes on July 1, 1934, while still an inmate in the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola. This version is a hard-edged, sometimes bawdy tale that recounts Lead Belly’s desire as a youth to flee home and enjoy the illicit pleasures of Fannin Street, the red-light district of Shreveport, Louisiana, where Tom Hughes was sheriff. To an outsider, the song is stirring but can sound opaque, full of arcane slang and local references. Over the next six years, as Lead Belly moved from prison to freedom, from Louisiana to New York, and from field recordings to the commercial studio, he made a series of alterations to the song. Some changes were subtle and some dramatic. Some innovations surfaced just a few months after he left prison; others evolved gradually over years. Some reappeared in each subsequent version of the song, while others dropped away forever as soon as they were introduced. The changes to “Tom Hughes” do not, then, reflect a complete transformation in Lead Belly, but they do suggest a trend—a shift toward a less rough-edged style that, presumably, he hoped would attract wider audiences.

Even by the fall of 1934, only months after Lead Belly had left prison, “Tom Hughes” differed from the original field recording he had made for the Lomaxes. The second version of the song, which was recorded by John Lomax as he and Lead Belly traveled in Arkansas, makes changes that help clarify the seemingly fractured story line of the original recording. It adds a spoken narrative that guides the reader through the tale. While the original prison version of the song featured high-pitched moans without explanation, here Lead Belly sets them up by saying, “I broke Martha’s heart, and she turned around, and she started to cry... I walked away from her, and here’s what she said. [Moaning begins].” On subsequent versions of “Tom Hughes,” Lead Belly tended to start with long spoken introductions that set out the song’s premise and previewed its plot (“Here’s a song I composed about Mr. Tom Hughes’ town, better known as Shreveport, Louisiana.”). At times, he used the spoken asides to translate key terms. In his 1948 version, he sings about rambling with “Buffalo Bill” and adds parenthetically “a bad man,” so as to account for his mother’s distress at their friendship.

In addition to making more effort to explicate the song’s story, Lead Belly’s postprison versions of “Tom Hughes” considerably changed the song’s outcome. In the first field recording, the narrator leaves for Shreveport, ignoring the pleas of his mother to stay at home, and adopts a licentious lifestyle about which he is remorseless, even boastful. Subsequent versions, though, add lyrics in which the narrator falls on his knees and begs his mother to forgive him for his past behavior. Most striking, most of Lead Belly’s postprison renditions omit two suggestive verses that appear on the first field recording. In these verses Lead Belly refers to a woman who earns her living by “[workin’] up her tail,” and he exclaims that she has “somethin’ lawd / I sure would like.”

The taming of Lead Belly’s narrator is also reflected in changes in his performance style. First of all, most of Lead Belly’s subsequent versions of “Tom Hughes” are slower in tempo than the original field recording, a change that makes the narrator sound less frenzied. Lead Belly has more time to sing the words, and they come out more clearly than in his first session, in which they run many words together. Similarly, Lead Belly’s voice is more emotive on his first recording of the song. While all the versions of “Tom Hughes” feature Lead Belly humming a melody in a moaning voice, in the first version he uses a sharper attack on the moans, giving them a piercing quality that most subsequent versions lack.

These transformations appear even more dramatically in a 1940 rendition of “I’m on My Last Go-Round,” a song that uses the same tune and a variation of the Tom Hughes refrain. This recording session was Lead Belly’s first with a major record company, and Alan Lomax arranged and supervised the session. In this version Lead Belly’s singing has lost all the bite that it had on the initial field recording. The song is considerably slower than on earlier versions, and Lead Belly’s usually rough voice sounds almost mellifluous. Light, delicate strumming have replaced his once fierce guitar work.

One can suppose that the Lomaxes and the commercial producers of Lead Belly’s records played a direct role in reshaping “Tom Hughes,” but it would be a mistake to presume that Lead Belly himself resented the advice. He had a notable interest in popularizing his music and a willingness to alter his songs. The evolution of “Tom Hughes” does not necessarily chart the crass exploitation of a “pure” folk artist. More accurately, the ebb and flow of his style illustrates how contact with the Lomaxes and the world of commercial recordings affected Lead Belly’s sense of
what would appeal to white audiences. In addition, the changes give us a glimpse of the musical dilemmas Lead Belly faced as he tried to find his niche in the folk revival. How much should he adapt his style, and in what direction? What appealed to audiences as an honest-to-goodness rough-edged sound and what struck them as abrasive? What was the boundary between “mysterious” and scary? Throughout his career, Lead Belly struggled to translate his persona as a musical throwback into popular success.

The strategy of smoothing out Lead Belly’s music while promoting him as an outsider did win Lead Belly some audiences in the mid-thirties. His story generated significant publicity in popular newspapers and magazines, and his music was disseminated via radio, record, and even newsreel. This publicity blitz likely reached millions of Americans, but it generated by far the most intense response from the political Left, the core constituency for the folk revival of the thirties and forties.

Folk-style music had been a part of leftist culture since well before the thirties. In the first decades of the 1900s, both the Socialist and the Communist parties encouraged efforts to create a body of proletarian music, songs that would encourage solidarity among the workers and inspire them to challenge their oppressors. In its early efforts to create a people’s music, the Left relied on a decidedly different style of music than would the folk song enthusiasts of the late thirties. For the most part, leftist music organizations before the thirties either ignored or disparaged traditional American songs. Instead, early agitprop music, such as the Industrial Workers of the World songbooks from the early part of the century, relied either on European or original composed melodies.

In large part the Left was uninterested in American music because, before the thirties, most of its supporters were foreign-born and the vast majority did not speak English fluently. The primary musical outlets for these members were the workers choruses that the Communist Party (cp) sponsored in the 1920s and early 1930s. Drawing on a decades-old tradition of workers’ choral groups in Europe and America, the cp intended for these choruses to inspire the masses to devote themselves to the movement. Certainly they had a sizable constituency, as groups such as the American People’s Chorus, the Daily Worker Chorus, and the Jewish Freiheit (“Freedom”) Chorus proliferated on the left. But their lack of connection to American musical traditions precluded a broader influence. Since most of the singers were Eastern European immigrants, the choruses sang few of their pieces in English. The groups also assumed a degree of familiarity with high-art musical traditions that likely would have intimidated most American workers. Their songs tended to be technically difficult and to require rehearsals under a conductor’s baton to achieve an acceptable degree of precision.58

With the advent of the cp’s doctrinaire “Third Period” in the late twenties and early thirties, the party began making a more conscious effort to politicize the arts. In 1931 the Workers Music League was founded to oversee the workers choruses. It organized their efforts and provided them with appropriate revolutionary compositions, still mostly European-styled.59 The league delegated its most important compositional work to the Composers’ Collective, a subset of New York’s Pierre Degeyer music club, which had been named after the composer of the “Internationale.” The collective was made up of classically trained composers such as Charles Seeger, Ellie Siegmeister, and, occasionally, Aaron Copland. They took to heart the party’s request for politically charged music and seem to have believed that they could write songs that would spark the revolution. In the Daily Worker, Seeger wrote, “Music is propaganda—always propaganda—and of the most powerful sort.”60

Despite this hard-hitting attitude, the members of the collective proved to be singularly unsuccessful at reaching out to Americans. Making no effort to assess popular taste, they decided that music for a revolution should be musically revolutionary, and they composed songs designed to challenge listeners’ rhythmic and harmonic expectations. Many of their compositions were inspired by the German composer Hanns Eisler, a student of Arnold Schoenberg, who hoped to use dissonance and rhythmic variation to create a politically charged alternative to symphonic music. As Seeger recalled, “Everything we composed was forward-looking, progressive as hell, but completely unconnected with life, just as we were in the Collective.”61

In effect, then, the collective took a top-down approach to creating proletarian music, offering the masses the music that they, as composers, deemed most suitable. Although Seeger would go on to be an important folk music advocate, at this stage he and the collective scorned traditional songs as politically unaware and musically simple minded.62 “Many folksongs,” he wrote in the Daily Worker, “are complacent, melancholy, defeatist, intended to make slaves endure their lot—pretty but not the stuff for a militant proletariat to feed on.”63 The collective’s high-art biases were clearly revealed when a few of their meetings were attended by Aunt Molly Jackson, a renowned ballad singer and strike organizer from Kentucky. She sang some of her strike songs, which were based on traditional melodies, and the collective’s members in turn presented some of their own compositions. Each found the other’s music impenetrable. As Jackson’s bewilderment illustrates, even workers allied
with the Left rejected the music the collective wrote for them. *Daily Worker* columnist Mike Gold quoted a worker who dismissed the collective's tunes as "full of geometric bitterness and the angles and glass splinters of pure technic... written for an assortment of mechanical canaries." The Composers' Collective's music may have been intended for the populace, but it showed scant awareness of popular tastes.

The Left began to change its approach to vernacular music in 1935, when the Communist Party announced its Popular Front policy. The party's advocacy of a united front against fascism brought with it a new attitude toward American culture. Rather than preaching mass revolution, the Popular Front urged Americans to embrace cultural diversity and to bond together in common cause. Culture came to be seen less as a didactic tool for arousing class conflict than as a force for fostering community and revealing people's shared humanity. The party's composers and musicians, therefore, could stop trying to transform popular taste and could focus instead on understanding it. They became fascinated with music that seemed to speak in the voice of the people, and folk songs enjoyed party approval. In 1936 the American Music League, a Popular Front organization, included among its published goals "to collect, study, and popularize American folk music and its traditions." Historian Robbie Lieberman writes that "folk song, more than any other cultural form, expressed and reaffirmed the Popular Front spirit. It was simple and direct; it invited mass participation; it expressed the concerns of the common person."

With the party's new attitude, folk music became an established part of left-wing functions, and folk performers enjoyed quite a vogue among the white radicals and intellectuals who sustained the CP. Lead Belly, from Louisiana; Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan, and Jim Garland, from Kentucky; and (after 1940) Woody Guthrie, from Oklahoma, all became folk celebrities among the Left in a vibrant New York City-based scene. The singers were in demand for the political meetings, parties, and benefits that the Left sponsored. Henrietta Yurchenco recalls that these musicians were "the answer to left-wing prayers. Through their songs, life among poor whites of Appalachia, oppressed southern blacks, and dust storm victims came alive far better than in all the articles in the *Daily Worker* or the New Masses." With these homespun folk associated with their movement, party regulars could feel that perhaps they could be accepted by "the people" after all and that their hopes for a mass following might one day be fulfilled.

Despite their popularity among leftists, though, the urban folk revivalists had little success at attracting broader mass-culture audiences. Again Lead Belly serves as an example. Even with the adaptations he made to his style, he never enjoyed significant popularity in his lifetime. His records, even those on commercial labels, sold little, and he forever struggled with financial hardship. For much of the thirties, in fact, he and his wife depended on assistance from the New York Department of Welfare. In 1949 when he died of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease, Lead Belly was well known enough to generate an obituary in the *New York Times* but not popular enough to have achieved a broad-based following or any kind of financial security. Americans found Lead Belly fascinating, it seems, but they kept him at arm's length.

Lead Belly's commercial career sputtered because of the contradictory demands placed on him by the folk revival. The outsider populism impulse that made Lead Belly and the other folk singers so intriguing to thirties Americans trapped them between the conflicting demands of purity and commercialism. Fundamentally, these singers' appeal depended on their folkloristic purity. They faced significant pressure, therefore, to sing only timeless songs that had been passed down (but not altered) through generations of oral transmission. This notion, though, of a pristine and unchanging traditional music fundamentally misrepresented the reality of folk culture. As the Lomaxes well knew, the folk tradition had always depended on its adaptability. Lead Belly himself, for example, continually altered his songs. In concert he often varied his lyrics to the taste of the city in which he was performing, and he adjusted his repertoire to the tastes of his audience.

No roots musician, moreover, was as isolated as the entrepreneurs of the folk revival wished. Although he had spent his whole life in the rural South, much of it confined in prison, Lead Belly was quite well versed in popular culture and saw no reason to shut himself off from it. He was renowned for his openness to all kinds of music, including Tin Pan Alley. In an interview he recalled, "I learned by listening to other singers once in a while off phonograph records... I used to look at the sheet music and learn the words of a few popular songs." Similarly, Lead Belly did not share John Lomax's fears about the radio's corrupting influence on his repertoire. He so much enjoyed listening that while in New York he wrote a tribute song called "Turn Your Radio On," singing, "You listen in to tell what's goin' on in the world."

Lead Belly's receptiveness to different kinds of music led to some striking juxtapositions. He was fascinated, for instance, with singing cowboy Gene Autry. He liked to sing Autry's songs, went to his movies, and was thrilled early in his stay in New York when Autry, dressed in white, stopped by to see for himself what a twelve-string guitar was all
about. Lead Belly was also known to do a dead-on imitation of hillbilly star Jimmie Rodgers's yodeling.\textsuperscript{72} He was, in short, an old-fashioned “songster,” the term the African American community used to describe eclectic musicians able to sing practically any type of song. He performed everything from work songs to dance tunes to blues to cowboy ballads to popular hits. Literary critic Daniel Hoffman observes, “As he was a folksinger, not a folklorist, all of these [were] equally admissible to his canon.” As one might guess, the Lomaxes found Lead Belly’s attraction to ersatz cowboys and crowding balladeers disquieting, and they did their best to restrict him to his traditional repertoire. John Lomax wrote, “For his programs Lead Belly always wished to include [Auntie’s] ‘That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine’ or jazz tunes such as ‘I’m in Love with You, Baby’. . . . He could never understand why we did not care for them. We held him to the singing of the music that first attracted us to him.”\textsuperscript{73}

The revivalists, though, were not consistent in their emphasis on purity. Even as they warned folk singers not to add popular tunes to their song lists, they encouraged other changes in the singers’ repertories. In the spirit of the Popular Front, for instance, the Left was eager for Lead Belly to compose political songs. Some historians speculate that Alan Lomax helped compose “The Bourgeois Blues,” Lead Belly’s protest against segregated housing in Washington, D.C.\textsuperscript{74} Lead Belly also wrote political material like “Jim Crow Blues,” “Hitler Song,” and “Scottsboro Boys” after being discovered by the Lomaxes.\textsuperscript{75} Radicals found these songs more palatable than many of those Lead Belly chose to play if left to his own devices. In the mid-1930s, for instance, left-wing composer Earl Robinson invited Lead Belly to play at Camp Unity, the cwp’s summer retreat. The first night, Lead Belly performed songs like “Ella Speed” and “Frankie and Albert” that featured gun-toting gamblers, cheating husbands, and murderous wives. “The camp was in an uproar,” Robinson recalled. “Arguments raged over whether to censure him, me, or both of us.” Before the next performance, Robinson explained to Lead Belly that the party expected exemplars of the Negro race to express more high-minded sentiments. That night Lead Belly charmed the crowd with “Bourgeois Blues” and “Scottsboro Boys.”\textsuperscript{76}

If selecting songs to play was so complicated, choosing the style in which to play them must have seemed especially bewildering to the folk revival singers of the thirties. The singers’ appeal to the cult of authenticity depended on the notion that they had a “natural” sound—a style unsullied by the encroachments of popular culture. But, as the case of “Tom Hughes” suggests, a singer’s style often was altered in an effort to reach popular audiences. Folk performers were encouraged to moderate the pitch of their voices, enunciate clearly, and slow down their songs. Singers like Lead Belly and Josh White took these lessons to heart in an effort to broaden their music’s appeal.

Performers who did make stylistic adjustments, though, soon found that adapting their sound jeopardized their standing in the eyes of the folk revival’s core following. Purists denounced them for selling out their pure heritage. Folklorist Charles Haywood thought Lead Belly a “sad spectacle” by the end of his career, charging that he had changed to fit “night clubs and popular taste”: “In the place of strong rhythms the guitar was toying with delicate arpeggi and delightful arabesques, filling in between verses with swaying body movements, marching up and down the stage, swinging the guitar over his head, instrument upside down, or behind his back. This was a sad and tragic sight, cheap vaudeville claptrap.” Lead Belly attempted to adapt to the commercial market, and as a result, says Sven Eric Molin, “folklorists shake their heads over his recordings and distinguish between an ‘earlier’ and a ‘later’ Leadbelly, for . . . the singing techniques and the choice of materials changed, and Tin Pan Alley had its perceptible influence.”\textsuperscript{77}

The Lomaxes had encouraged Lead Belly to adjust his style, but they, too, spoke wistfully of his “purer” past. As early as January 1935, John wrote to his wife that he and Alan were “disturbed and distressed at [Lead Belly’s] beginning tendency to show off in his songs and talk, when his money value is to be natural and sincere as he was while in prison. Of course, as this tendency grows he will lose his charm and become only an ordinary, low ordinary, Harlem nigger.”\textsuperscript{78} Alan Lomax found that “Lead Belly recorded his songs for a number of companies though never so beautifully as he had first sung them for us in Louisiana.” He described Lead Belly’s 1940 recordings as “not complete authenticity, but . . . the nearest thing to it that could be achieved away from the prison farms themselves.”\textsuperscript{79}

Lead Belly did not have the same yearning for the purity of the prison farms, but he does seem to have internalized the confusing standards that the Lomaxes and folk song revivalists set for him. In a 1940 letter to Alan Lomax, Lead Belly wrote: “If your Papa come I would like for Him to Here me sing if He say I Have Change any whitch i Don’t think i have and never will But to Be [sure] to get his ideas about it i would feel good over what ever he say about it.” Lead Belly’s predicament arose from the conflicting demands the folk revival placed on him. As Joe Klein writes, folk singers who tried to make it in urban society while remaining “true to their roots” ended up like “museum pieces, priceless and rare, but not quite marketable in the mass culture.”\textsuperscript{80} The folk revival tried to use
idealized conceptions of authenticity to achieve its dreams of reaching mass audiences. But the tensions in this agenda left performers like Lead Belly caught in limbo between folk and popular culture.

Like many roots musicians, Lead Belly found his way out of this limbo only after his death. Within months of his death at the end of 1949, the Weavers, a singing quartet featuring Pete Seeger, issued their version of Lead Belly’s “Goodnight Irene.” It eliminated from the song a verse about taking morphine, changed the ominous-sounding lyric “I’ll get you in my dreams” to “I’ll see you in my dreams,” and added lush vocal harmonies. It became a number one hit.81

The Weavers’ “Irene” was only one in a series of efforts by Lead Belly’s allies in the folk revival to advance his legacy after his death. At the end of January 1950, Alan Lomax organized a tribute concert for him in New York’s Town Hall. After Lomax moved to England that year, he produced a radio series that introduced British audiences to Lead Belly’s music. (In 1956, Lonnie Donegan, a British banjo player, returned the favor by making Lead Belly’s “Rock Island Line” a top-ten hit in America.) Moses Asch, who had recorded scores of Lead Belly songs for his Folkways label between 1944 and 1948, kept all of Lead Belly’s albums in print and, in 1954, issued Lead Belly’s Last Sessions, a set of three double albums featuring more than ninety songs and stories that Lead Belly had recorded in 1948 at the home of jazz historian Frederic Ramsey, Jr. A series of books, too, helped bring Lead Belly to new audiences. In 1959 Alan Lomax published a collection of Lead Belly songs, followed in 1962 by a songbook that he issued in collaboration with Asch. In 1965 Pete Seeger issued a manual on how to play twelve-string guitar in the style of Lead Belly. Meanwhile, in concert after concert, Seeger performed Lead Belly’s music and recounted his story.82 As folk-styled music surged in popularity in the late 1950s and 1960s, a new generation found Lead Belly. His music became a staple at coffeehouses and folk festivals across the country. The 1960s folk revival did more to cement Lead Belly’s reputation than had all his own efforts while he was alive.

Recent decades have witnessed a series of affirmations of Lead Belly’s place in the canon of roots musicians. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (1988), the Blues Hall of Fame (1986), and the Nashville Songwriters Association International’s Hall of Fame (1980). In 1988 Columbia Records issued a tribute album, for which Beach Boy Brian Wilson, rock and roll pioneer Little Richard, and country legend Willie Nelson covered Lead Belly songs. In 1993, a few months before the suicide of lead singer Kurt Cobain, grunge-rock superstars Nirvana performed a Lead Belly tune for an MTV “Unplugged” album.83

On the face of it, such tributes are the stuff of tragedy. If only Lead Belly had lived long enough to see his dreams fulfilled!84 At the same time, the posthumous nature of Lead Belly’s success has an air of inevitability to it. It is questionable to what extent he could have reaped the fruits of fame even if he had lived. Lead Belly’s renown in the decades after his death certainly derived in part from his considerable artistry, but it was equally driven by the same dynamics that had frustrated and constrained him while he lived—the romanticized (and racialized) life story that had been constructed for him, the primitive emotiveness attributed to his music, the notion that he somehow existed out of time, or at least before the time in which artifice and superficiality had permeated popular culture. In his day, these myths brought Lead Belly momentary popular attention, but they hamstrung his efforts to advance within popular culture, leaving him a folk-revival darling who struggled desperately to make ends meet. The real tragedy, perhaps, is that Lead Belly could flourish in public memory—as a posthumous folk forefather—in a way that he never could have as an active performer. With the “real” Lead Belly buried in Louisiana, each generation could “discover” him for itself, much as the Lomaxes had decades before. Successive cohorts of middle-class, almost exclusively white audiences could become entranced by the Lead Belly myth, revel in the bracing foreignness of his songs, and, eventually, reinterpret the songs as their own. After his death, then, Lead Belly himself became an authenticating agent, one who could bestow legitimacy on performers and fans searching for a sense of roots in the midst of ephemeral pop culture.

In his lifetime, Lead Belly was stymied by the tensions within the cult of authenticity—between rural African American traditions and an emerging set of white cultural brokers, between field recordings and the commercial record industry, between folklore and the modern mass media, between raw naturalism and calculated promotion. In the realm of memory, though, these oppositions that had trapped him became the source of his appeal and his achievement as a roots musician. Haltingly, often painfully, Lead Belly brought together forces that his successors would deploy to powerful advantage.