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Male Control and Female Resistance in
American Roots Music Recordings of the
Interwar Period

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PhD, History: American Studies
2018

Male Control and Female Resistance in
American Roots Music Recordings of the
Interwar Period

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of the requirements of the
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Sciences

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Abstract

This thesis examines themes of male control and female resistance in commercially recorded American roots music of the interwar period, focusing primarily on recordings made in the years 1920-1940. It argues that much of the roots music recorded during this period communicated powerful messages about gendered and racial hierarchies to consumers. Rooted in close textual analysis of song lyrics and visual marketing materials for a plethora of commercially available roots music, the thesis deploys methodologies drawn from history, literary, cultural studies, and musicology. It questions why scholars have understudied themes of gendered power contestations and social control in commercially recorded roots music and the accompanying marketing materials during the interwar period.

Although scholars have acknowledged intersections of race, class, gender, and the construction of segregated roots music markets during the nascent stages of a rapidly-developing fledgling industry, this thesis contends that lyrical content and marketing materials also intersected with white supremacist and eugenic ideologies, reflecting ideas about social control of women during the interwar period. It advances extant scholarship on black and white female roots music artists active during the interwar period, underscoring and illuminating themes of female resistance to male control, inside and outside of the worlds created on commercial recordings.

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My supervisors, the dynamic duo that are Professor Brian Ward and Dr. Randall Stephens, deserve at the very least, full recognition, perhaps even medals, for their unerring patience, boundless enthusiasm, and invaluable scholarly input as they helped the thesis come together, whilst I nearly came apart at the seams. I owe them more than these few simple words could ever adequately express. If Brian needs counselling, it's on me! I'll try my best to make amends over refreshments one day very soon.

Gratitude is also due to the staff at the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University for tending to my research needs when visiting in 2015. On a related note, special thanks are due to Dr. Kristine McCusker for her hospitality, inspiration, and interest in my project whilst visiting. Again, special thanks are due to Charlie Dahan, also of MTSU, for patiently listening to me witter on about Old Time artists, for being genuinely interested and last but by no means least for providing me with some astonishing primary source material out of sheer generosity, good will, and belief in the cause. Finally, I should also take this opportunity to express my gratitude, and love for MTSU grad student Michael Fletcher, a man who had never met me, and yet very trustingly took me into his own house in Murfreesboro, Tennessee; providing me with a place I could call home whilst I carried out my research. We have since gone way beyond the realm of casual acquaintances and I cherish his friendship and warmth. He is a credit to MTSU, and Murfreesboro.

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I'm indebted to both of my parents for their love, support and constant assistance in every area of my life. I express the same sentiments to my three children and extended family. Olly, my faithful four-legged companion, knows more about my project than any Labrador should. His walks have never been the same since I started. On a more personal note, I'm sure many PhD students feel that it can

be a tough journey at times, and I'm no exception. However, during the first year of this study, my wife and mother faced much tougher physical and mental trials than the hardship of simply having to research and write for hours on end. Not only did both of these astonishing ladies endure, and overcome very serious illnesses; they also continued to provide unwavering encouragement whilst they fought their own battles. I'm exceptionally lucky to have them around and humbled by their presence. This study has enabled me to grow as a scholar, and more generally as a human being. That process has been made possible and all the more fulfilling because of the people mentioned above; and others that I haven't accounted for. If there has been one main spiritual takeaway worth sharing from this experience, it is this: keep on keeping on, no matter what.

Candidate Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee on February 25, 2014.

I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 83, 869.

Name: Allan Andrew Symons

Signature:

Date: 31/01/2018

Introduction

This thesis came to fruition after extensive research into the production, consumption, and cultural significance of American roots recordings in the interwar period. For the purposes of the thesis the term roots music encompasses Blues, Gospel, spirituals, Old Time—and its 1930s offspring Hillbilly—music. This is, in many respects, a very well-studied field, attracting important work by a wide range of historians, musicologists, folklorists and journalists.¹ Yet on examining this vibrant research field it is apparent that there is a hitherto unexplored, or at least under-explored gap in scholarship regarding the drive for male control and female resistance to that drive that characterised much of the recorded roots music of this period. Of course, a number of scholars have produced significant and substantial works on themes of misogyny in Blues recordings and performance. This thesis recognises the validity and importance of the work in this area of, among many others, Hazel Carby, Angela Y. Davis, and Daphne Duvall Harrison. Collectively, they have produced rich studies of black female Classic Blues singers,

¹ A plethora of excellent studies of the cultural significance of roots music exist. A short but by no means exhaustive list of important works would include, David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), Bill C. Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers: Southern Culture and the Roots of Country Music* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), Barry Mazor, *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2015), 31-154, Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, second edition), Diane Pecknold, *That Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 13-52, Allan Sutton, *Race Records and the American Recording Industry: An Illustrated History* (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2016), Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994, second edition), Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (London: UCL, 1998), Gayle Dean Wardlow, *Chasin' That Devil Music: Searching for the Blues* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 1998)

acknowledging their contributions to black women's political discourse, as well as to the development of African American, indeed, American, musical culture during the 1920s and 1930s. Similarly, scholars of early country music, among them Kristine McCusker and Charles Wolfe, have made engaging, incisive and important contributions to our understandings of the role of female artists and their formation of resistant identities on record and in the real worlds in which they operated between the World Wars.² Although these studies necessarily examine women's empowerment through musical performances in a racialized context, thus far there has been no substantial work that has brought together black and white roots performers, many of whom had their origins and enjoyed a good deal of popularity in the US South, and explored how gendered battles for various kinds of dominance, respect and freedom played out in their music against the backdrop of important social, economic, political and cultural developments in the region and across the US. This thesis seeks to extend the current scholarship by exploring in tandem, and with sensitivity to the main currents in southern and US history, the themes of male control and female resistance in roots music recordings made by both black and white artists during the 1920s and 1930s.

² See for instance, Hazel Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues" in eds. Robin R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), pp. 746 – 758. Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1999), Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988). Kristine McCusker, "'Bury Me Beneath the Willow': Linda Parker and Definitions of Tradition on the National Barn Dance", in eds. Kristine M. McCusker and Diane Pecknold, *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), pp. 3-23. Charles Wolfe, "'And No Man Shall Control Me': The Strange Case of Roba Stanley, Country's First Woman Recording Star" in eds. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson, *The Women of Country Music: A Reader* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2003), pp. 18-29.

As deep context, it is imperative to acknowledge the history of African American enslavement, the failures of Reconstruction and the rise and encrustation, in law and practice of the segregation, disenfranchisement and terror which characterised Jim Crow in the South; a particularly intense and vicious manifestation of the racism which oppressed African Americans throughout the nation. Profoundly unequal distributions of social, economic, political power and opportunities between the races provide an inescapable context for the musical history explored in this thesis. Consequently, although this thesis evaluates both black and white gendered power struggles and the recorded music that reflected and, perhaps, also helped to shape and define those tensions, it does not underestimate or trivialise the differences between black and white gendered experiences in a world where whites generally enjoyed far more power and privileges than blacks. Prevailing ideas about white supremacy and myriad examples of discrimination against African Americans did not, however, go unchallenged. The years covered by this thesis saw black Americans engaged in a variety of desperate struggles to gain equal civil and political rights and to improve the basic circumstances of black economic and social lives in an often unforgiving and largely intolerant environment. Indeed, much of the analysis of gendered tensions in the recorded roots music at the heart of the thesis explores how that material engages and intersects with the story of black protest and significant, if limited, racial progress during this period – a history that has its own gendered dynamic. As the seminal works of eminent scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, Glenda Gilmore, bell hooks, and Chanequa Walker-Barnes show, African American women were members of two subordinate groups, held back because of both their gender and their race.³ The history of the black female struggle in the US

³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics*

then, is arguably one of more intense and unforgiving hardship. Not only were women of colour forced to endure discrimination as females, they were also subjected to racial prejudices. Conversely, although they were nominally members of a privileged racial group, this thesis also acknowledges and explores the struggles of white women. Even after securing the suffrage in 1920, many white women found themselves seeking more freedoms, opportunities and personal expression in the midst of what remained a fundamentally patriarchal and sexist culture. Although black and white women had often fought for expanded rights and opportunities as separate racial groups, the nature of their struggles were sometimes quite similar and had occasionally intertwined, as they continued to do in the years following the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. The broadly shared concerns and preoccupations of many black and white women, though never wholly aligned or synonymous in a world of deep racial division and inequality, were apparent in the roots music of the interwar years. Recordings often offer rich social commentary, allowing the opportunity to explore the interplay of race and gender, or at least its rendering in recorded musical performances, during this period. Moreover, while the segregated nature of recorded roots music markets of this period often obscured both the shared anxieties and collective struggles that black and white women sometimes faced, and the dynamic interplay between black and white musical cultures, the thesis reveals important points of cross-racial contact, dialogue and influence during an era of intense racial and gendered tensions.

If race relations and changing gender roles provide two important contexts for this work, a third vital context comes in the form of important developments within

of Empowerment (New York: Routledge, 2000, 2nd edition). bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 2015, 2nd edition). Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014).

the nascent recording industry. After 1920, American record labels increasingly turned their attentions to the musical fruits of the southern states. Comprising myriad styles and flavours, the rich musical heritage of this region provided these labels with a wealth of black and white talent from a plethora of cities, towns, and hamlets. The intense activity began in earnest in 1920 with Classic Blues singer Mamie Smith's recording of "Crazy Blues," the success of which spawned a period of frenzied activity on the part of record labels eager to build and capitalise upon a market for this music. The female black American Classic Blues singers who followed in Cincinnati-born Smith's footsteps were predominantly southern, but recorded in northern centres, usually accompanied by small jazz combos playing orchestrated arrangements. While songs of rather conventional romance and longing formed a significant part of their repertoire, they also sang far more forthrightly than female singers in other idioms about their own sexuality, spousal abuse, and the failings of the judicial system regarding the rights and welfare of African Americans. Encouraged, labels made frequent trips to the South to find new talent as the market for commercial Blues music began to flourish. Towards the middle of the decade, labels began to record Country Blues, a more rustic-sounding Blues form, a genre occupied predominantly, although not exclusively by male musicians, who invariably accompanied themselves on guitar.⁴ The phenomenal success of Texan

⁴For seminal works on Country Blues, derivatives and also performers, see for instance Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), Stephen Calt, *I'd Rather be the Devil : Skip James and the Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), David Evans, *Tommy Johnson* (London: November Books, 1971), David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1982), Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: The New Press, 1993), Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994, second edition), Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997), Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, second edition), *Chasin' That Devil Music: Searching for the Blues* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 1998).

bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson confirmed the market for male solo performers of this music, and legions of Country Blues artists followed—if not as successfully—in his footsteps. This period also marked the beginning of the market for a “new” genre that would come to be known as Old Time music, which would later diversify and become known as Hillbilly music by the 1930s. In 1924, record mogul Ralph Peer recorded a white Georgian fiddler named (Fiddlin’) John Carson. Carson’s music sold well almost immediately. Enthused by this, labels began searching for similar-sounding artists, quickly finding a diverse succession of predominantly male talent from the southern states.⁵ There were very few females who recorded Old Time, or early Hillbilly music. While the relative dearth of women in this genre has been noted before, surprisingly little attention has been paid to what those women who did cut Old Time and early Hillbilly tracks actually sang about. As Chapter Five shows, it is striking that some of the few women who recorded, notably Rosa Lee Carson, Roba Stanley, and later in the 1920s, Sara and Mother Maybelle Carter, offered extremely pointed observations on male control, masculine inadequacies, and unfair expectations of women in the home. Collectively they voiced proud, unequivocal expressions of female need and agency.

As the roots recording industry gathered momentum, record labels created two new musical markets and segregated them into distinct racial categories; Race

⁵ For important works on Old Time and Hillbilly, see for instance, Gene Wiggins, *Fiddlin’ Georgia Crazy: Fiddlin’ John Carson, His Real World, and the World of His Songs* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), Barry Mazor, *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2015), Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), Mark Zwonitzer with Charles Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?: The Carter Family & Their Legacy in American Music*, (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2002), Bill C. Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers: Southern Culture and the Roots of Country Music* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), Allan Sutton, *Recording the ‘Twenties: The Evolution of the American Recording Industry, 1920-29* (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2008), 77-89, 227-239.

Records and Old Time music. Race Records comprised Blues, Spirituals, Gospel, Jazz and Rag pieces. Old Time music comprised traditional, but also new songs. This music often, but not exclusively, had its origins in Anglo-Celtic traditions. The race music lineage, in reality and as a marketing strategy, was rather different, but the emphasis on heritage and rootedness was common across the increasingly, if never absolutely, racially segmented markets for various kinds of vernacular, often southern-derived, musical forms. The “birth” of commercially recorded “roots” music during this period was a time of great musical and marketing innovation, providing some of the most enduring, culturally rich expressions of American musicianship and artistry. However, rather than acknowledge that they envisioned and, to some extent, worked with musicians, some old, some new, to re-craft vernacular musical forms with the demands of a new market of consumers in the modern age in mind, record labels went to great lengths to construct and promote recorded roots music as old, steeped in tradition and, by extension, in some kind of opposition to the forces of modernity. The thesis adds to the growing literature of revisionist scholarship on roots recordings of this period, arguing that much of the recorded Blues, Old Time, and Hillbilly music of this period was a product of modernity, of capitalism and therefore commercial by its very inception. It reveals that, under the guise of “tradition,” industry executives helped to shape modern consumers’ ideas about racial and gendered hierarchies, and their relationship with regionalism through the lyrical content of recordings and the marketing materials that accompanied them. Commenting on the segregated nature of musical markets and the promotion of commercially recorded Blues and Old Time music as pure expressions of the folk, Karl Hagstrom Miller stresses,

The musical color line emerged as the new notions of authenticity developing in folklore studies collided with one that had long been

proffered by minstrelsy. Folkloric authenticity maintained that truthful music came from outside the marketplace. Music primarily was a form of expression, not only of individual feelings or collective culture but also of essential racial characteristics, capacities, and stages of evolution. Folklore located authenticity in isolation from modern life and modern media.⁶

This thesis fully accepts Hagstrom Miller's assertions. Moreover, it builds upon this interpretation of commercially recorded roots music as a mass-produced, popularly oriented cultural product. This does not invalidate the idea that performers and performances of tremendous originality and enduring power and artistry were captured on shellac during this period or that the success of certain styles or artists reflected important contemporary social, economic and cultural issues; rather, it serves as a reminder to keep in focus the fact that these recordings were part of a fledgling industry keen to court the biggest markets that the record labels and the Artists & Repertoire and promotional staff who helped to shape and distribute their outputs, could reach.⁷ The following work argues that the popularity of this music reflected, in part, the commercial ambitions of the recording industry and, in part, the ways in which roots music articulated important fears about the changing sociocultural landscape of America throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In particular, the argument here is that much of this music spoke to and of gendered tensions that were inextricably tied to the social anxieties and transformations that accompanied the uneven, yet irresistible, arrival of modernity in America. For purposes of clarity, the term modernity, used here, encompasses the emergence of mass-culture, consumerism and mass-production, technological advances, urbanization, and

⁶ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 5-6.

⁷ Brian Ward and Patrick Huber, *A&R Pioneers: Architects of American Roots Music on Record* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, forthcoming). See also William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 65-157.

changing sexual mores; developments that were “new” to the modern way of life in the 1920s, and to a lesser extent, the 1930s.⁸

Although the lyrics in Blues and Old Time records conveyed a wide range of themes, a substantial proportion of recordings focused on gender politics and offered observations on perceptions of waning male authority over women and in society at-large. As this thesis shows, at various times, depending on the artists involved, these songs could celebrate, denounce, or seek to rectify, at least in song, the erosion of male authority. Certainly, many male roots recording artists of both races were responsible for disseminating overtly misogynist messages, as if compensating on record for the loss of power they – and their audiences – sometimes felt in their “real” lives. A sizeable proportion of Blues recordings featured vengeful males, threatening transgressive women for their conduct. In the Blues tradition, women were routinely labelled as cheaters, “mistreaters,” the harbingers of male ruin, untrustworthy, conniving and, at times in ways that echoed the worst kind of racial stereotyping about black hypersexuality and promiscuousness, inherently loose with their sexual favours. Old Time music also had its fair share of paranoid male characters who sought to exercise an enviable and gratifying measure of physical or psychological control over women’s ways. Some figures in these Old Time and Hillbilly songs may, like the protagonist in Fiddlin’ John Carson’s “It’s A Shame To Whip Your Wife On Sunday” have bemoaned having to beat their wives on a traditional day of rest, but they did so nonetheless in order to re-establish their authority. Others boasted that they could murder their wives in a bid to show male

⁸ See for instance, Susan Currell, *American Culture in the 1920s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), Paul V. Murphy, *The New Era: American Thought and Culture in the 1920s* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), Mark Robert Schneider, *African Americans in the Jazz Age: A Decade of Struggle and Promise* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), David Welky, *America Between the Wars, 1919-1941: A Documentary Reader* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

unwillingness to conform to or be controlled by judicial measures that restricted physical punishment of a female partner. Recorded Blues also had its share of gunmen, of knife-wielding males who would disfigure their partners as punishment for disobeying them, or abandoning them for another male. Gendered violence was a major, if by no means ubiquitous, element in the recorded roots music of this era. Old Time music even had as part of its transatlantic heritage a tradition of “murdered-sweetheart” ballads imported from Britain in which male characters killed young women with whom they had enjoyed forbidden “pleasures” in deserted spots but who threatened to become problematic by falling inconveniently pregnant or pestering the men for marriage. Again, the claim here is not that these kinds of songs of violence and misogyny were preeminent in the recorded repertoires of roots musicians between the wars; it is, however, to suggest that the volume of such recordings is significant enough to merit more thorough scholarly attention.

That said, the reinforcement of traditional models of gender and gendered power did not always assume the guise of overt misogyny. The thesis also considers a wealth of Old Time recordings that paid sentimental homage to traditional mother figures, depicting them as bastions of nominally “correct” gender roles and relationships. Gospel recordings and sacred sermons also reinforced the importance of motherhood as an ideal concept of black femininity, but here there was a somewhat different resonance and political context, in so far as it fed into a concern with “respectability” that was itself presented as an important path to racial uplift.⁹

This thesis reveals clear linkages among commercially recorded roots music, themes

⁹ See for instance, Erin D. Chapman, *Prove it on Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), Jayne Morris-Crowther, *The Political Activities of Detroit Clubwomen in the 1920s: A Challenge and a Promise* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

of male control and female resistance, and the changing nature of and attitudes towards traditional gender roles in the interwar period.

Before turning to the structure of the thesis, there are a couple of additional introductory remarks to be made regarding historiographical contexts, methods and sources. There is a vast literature on US society, politics, culture and business between the wars and the thesis, to a great extent, engages with that literature to contextualise the readings of how gender relations played out in the commercially roots music of the interwar years. Indeed, one over-arching aim of the thesis is to explore how this music, in particularly its lyrical content and marketing strategies, interacted with the broader themes of US history between the two World Wars. In the 1920s, anxieties over modernity, secularisation, mass culture, urbanisation and suburbanisation, real estate and stock market speculation, immigration – and immigration restriction – the rise of the Flapper and “New Woman,” as well as the significances of the Great Migration of African Americans and many whites out of the heavily rural South to the cities of the North, of myriad campaigns for black rights associated with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Marcus Garvey among many others, and the rise of nativism, the Ku Klux Klan and the eugenics movement, are all topics with their own major literatures.¹⁰ Similarly, the Wall Street Crash and the ensuing years

¹⁰ For a good overview of the many aspects of US culture in the 1920s, see Susan Currell, *American culture in the 1920s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009). See also Lynn Dumenil, *Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995), Kathleen Morgan Drowne and Patrick Huber, *The 1920's* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004). For fairly recent, comprehensive scholarship on the black freedom struggle in the 1920s, see Mark Robert Schneider, *“We Return Fighting”: The Civil Rights Movement in the Jazz Age* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002). For recent scholarship on the Ku Klux Klan, see Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York: Liveright, 2017). For recent work on eugenics in southern literature (and culture more broadly), see J. E. L. Riley, 'Idiot-Brained South': Intellectual Disability and Eugenics in Southern Modernism, PhD Thesis, Northumbria University, 2015. For a definitive account of

of the Great Depression have generated a vast scholarship, covering all manner of political, economic, cultural and social developments, including those connected to the slow and uneven transformations of southern politics and society, the gathering African American freedom struggle that would find full expression after World War Two, and important developments in US family and gender history amid enormous want and deprivation for many Americans. This scholarship has shaped the thesis in important ways. In particular, it helps to plot against the history of interwar America the changing emphases and recurring themes concerning gender that are evident within the large body of recordings that, supplemented by advertisements, press reports, particularly in the record industry trade press, and testimony from artists and recording executives, form the main primary source material for the thesis.

However, following pioneering scholars and theorists of US popular musical culture such as Adam Gussow, Patrick Huber, Elijah Wald, Lawrence Levine, Paul Oliver, Archie Green, David Evans, Gayle Dean Wardlow, and Brian Ward, among others, the argument here is that these recordings did not merely reflect a pre-existing, if constantly changing, social reality, but that they actually helped to create that social reality. More specifically, the ideas about masculinity and femininity, about appropriate gender roles and correct sexual behaviour and how to regulate those things that are apparent in these recordings and associated promotional

eugenics in the 1920s and a landmark legal case, see Paul Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck V. Bell*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008). For a comprehensive volume on southern women's political leverage post-suffrage, see Lorraine Gates Schuyler, *The Weight of Their Votes: Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). For black women and the politics of respectability see, Virginia Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). For further reading on black migratory patterns and modernity in Chicago, see Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). For commentary on impoverished Americans and class-distinctions, see Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Viking, 2016).

materials fed back into society, variously confirming and critiquing conventional wisdoms. This kind of framework risks flattening differences within gender and racial groups and across regions. Class, religion, sexuality and location intersected with race and gender and many other forms of identity in ways that are important to understand the making, marketing and consumption of a wide array of recorded roots music. The thesis has tried to be attentive to these distinctions. This is especially important, and vexing, with regard to the southern origins of much that is included in the designation of roots music, even though a great deal of it was actually recorded outside the region. Throughout, I follow scholars such as Karen Cox and Leigh Ann Duck in arguing that the South, real and imagined, played an important role in the creation of US popular culture and that the ways roots music worked, for southerners and non-southerners, and ex-southerners alike, depended heavily on stock ideas of what the region was about.¹¹ In so far as it was largely held to be, and indeed, often was, a place characterised by white supremacy and patriarchy, with important traditions of black and female resistance to both, the South had an important role to play in the expression of racial and gender relations in recorded roots music.

Owing to the segregated nature of musical categories during this period, the thesis is structured in a way that reflects these commercially circumscribed racial categorisations, each chapter dealing separately with either Race Records or Old Time and Hillbilly music. Moreover, the work extends Jeff Todd Titon's excellent and as yet unparalleled study of roots music advertising during the boom period of

¹¹ See Martyn Bone, William A. Link and Brian Ward, *Creating and Consuming the American South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015), Karen L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014). For music-specific commentary, see John Bush Jones, *Reinventing Dixie: Tin Pan Alley Songs and the Creation of the Mythic South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015).

the 1920s and 1930s. Titon notes the differences in approach to advertising materials from a racial perspective. Advancing his arguments, this thesis considers the representation – often the romanticized reimagining —of healthy, white, mountain folk in Old Time music marketing materials in the context of eugenics debates that raged throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, often depicting deracinated, in-bred southerners in a rather different light.¹² It argues that labels restructured the image of the mountaineer during this time, thereby capitalising on the appeal of a putatively white Anglo-American heritage to anxious consumers who may have been preoccupied with fears of black advancement, unsettled by the rising numbers of non-WASP immigrants to the US, and alarmed by the apparent shift in sexual behaviour that were sometimes connected in the public imagination to urbanisation, non-white social and cultural influences, the growing power of mass popular culture. The depiction of blacks as plantation stereotypes in Blues advertising materials held them as a comical, lowly people, often emphasising their supposed innate criminality and deviancy, thereby pacifying white consumers’ fears of racial equality. However, the construction of these musical markets as archaic and traditional, potentially relegated themes of misogyny and domestic abuse in recordings to a bygone age, perhaps negating their seriousness and validity in the modern age.

Chapter One, “You’ll Never Miss Your Mother Until She’s Gone,” examines Old Time recordings in the 1920s in the context of white supremacy and notions of traditional gender roles. Whilst it does not argue that Old Time music was always a conduit for overt expressions of white supremacy, it nevertheless shows clear

¹²For an account of negative depictions of dysgenic mountain folk in popular culture see Brooks Blevins, *Arkansas/Arkansaw: How Bear Hunters, Hillbillies, and Good Ol’ Boys Defined a State* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009), 71-118. For more on the sanitization of the Hillbilly image, see Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, 218-260.

parallels and occasional linkages between Klan ideology and Old Time recordings that celebrated the sentimental mother figure. The sheer number and subject matter of these recordings reflected regional and national anxieties about the changing nature of gender roles, intersecting with themes evident in the sheet music produced for right-wing populist organisations. Chapter Two, “That Notoriety Woman is Known All Over the South” considers Blues, Gospel, sacred sermons and spirituals in the context of black political ideologies and activism centred upon the importance of race motherhood as a means of attaining racial uplift in the 1920s. Chapter Three, “By You I Am with Child” examines commercial recordings of “murdered-sweetheart” ballads in the context of eugenic theories about the social damage being wrought by sexually transgressive white women, the perils of interracial marriage, and even more widespread anxieties about racial purity amid the immigration debates and nativism of the 1920s. Chapter Four, “Wild Women are the Only Kind That Get By” looks at Blues recordings that feature black female resistance to spousal abuse and, in a related move, denigrate the all-male, if largely white, police force for its failure to provide adequate protection to African American women and men in the 1920s. Many of these recordings reflect a kind of grass roots political engagement and resistance by working-class black women, the kind of infra-politics of community activism that Robin Kelley has theorised, but that has often been overlooked in studies of Classic Blues singers.¹³ These women publicly challenged the police force, at times threatening violence towards law enforcement officers for their conduct; a measure that most black male entertainers could not have taken without sparking white fears of impending black insurgency, perhaps influenced and

¹³Robin D. G. Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem”: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *The Journal of American History*, 80, 1, (June, 1993), pp. 75-112. See also Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, throughout.

encouraged by song lyrics. Chapter Five, “Single White Girls,” is briefer than the others due to the under-representation of female Old Time artists on record in the 1920s. However, it reveals that at least two of those women who did record, Roba Stanley and Sara Carter, often exhibited a good deal of gender non-conformity, resisting prescriptive gender roles by their refusal to marry, or publicly decrying the unfair demands placed upon married women. Chapter Six, “Guns, Knives, Streetwalkers, and Wives,” looks at male control and female resistance in Depression-era Blues recordings. The chapter examines these recordings in the context of scant employment opportunities for African Americans during the 1930s. It evaluates the significance of themes of violence, prostitution, the representation of negative violent and sexual stereotypes (and the role that record executives played in creating or perpetuating these black representations) at times of intense economic hardship for black communities. Chapter Seven, “I Want Her Tailor Made,” explores Hillbilly recordings of the 1930s, focusing on multiple, and often contradictory constructions of feminine propriety in that genre. The chapter reveals how the imagined sexual impulses of non-whites were perceived as both threatening, yet attractive to white male characters on record. Whilst these male characters chastised sexually transgressive women on record, white female artists sometimes sung in character as women who openly flaunted their own sexuality, at times challenging male power, authority and even physical, especially sexual, prowess.

Chapter One

“You’ll Never Miss Your Mother Until She’s Gone”: 1920s Old Time Music, Modernity, and Sexism

Commenting on the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, and its emphasis on social conservatism and traditional family values, Glenn Feldman argues that southern women had a dual function as the co-authors but also as the victims of a “kind of misogynistic terror” that held them in “the most narrow and traditional of roles outlined for them by the South’s patriarchal society.”¹⁴ During this period, Old Time music—a newly “discovered” genre, featured many songs that venerated women in the form of mother figures. Paradoxically, however, a number of other songs depicted the verbal demonization and physical brutalisation of women who deviated from traditional gender roles, of which the saintly mother figure was exemplary. Thus, the representation of women in many early commercial Old Time records simultaneously mirrored and reinforced the narrow and traditional roles prescribed by patriarchal conservatism and offered cautionary tales of the punishments that might befall those who deviated, transgressed or failed to measure up to those gender norms. Historical context was important to these cultural developments. The birth of

¹⁴ Glenn Feldman, “Home and Hearth: Women, the Klan, Conservative Religion, and Traditional Family Values” in ed. Glenn Feldman, *Politics and Religion in the White South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 59. This ideological stance prohibited and worked against to some extent, the political aims of many women during this period. Kathleen M. Blee, a scholar of women in the KKK argues: “Like their male counterparts, Klanswomen held reactionary political views on race, nationality, and religion. But their views of gender roles were neither uniformly reactionary nor progressive.” See Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, reissued with a new preface, 2009), 3. See also Jackie Hill, “Progressive Values in the Women’s Ku Klux Klan,” *Constructing the Past*, 9, 1 (2008), pp. 21-29.

the “new woman” in the 1920s increased anxieties over the waning importance of the traditional mother figure amid a whole host of other concerns about errant or non-conformist women and the challenges they posed to established, highly gendered, social norms. The traditional mother was tied to home and hearth, conceived as morally righteous, and pure of mind and body. Moreover, at a moment when eugenic theories had considerable purchase, mothers were crucial to notions of racial integrity and both physical and mental well-being in southern society and beyond. Much of the marketing artwork for Old Time music reflected ideas of racial purity, depicting perfectly healthy, southern white folk. Not only was this a departure from stereotypical images of mountain “rubens,” who, at a moment when eugenics was popular, were sometimes considered of questionable racial provenance, intellectually deficient, not to mention of dubious morality, but it also suggested the importance of family, good breeding and chaste womanhood, often personified by idealised mother figures. This chapter argues that whilst much of this music and its attendant publicity campaigns were a product of modernity, they intersected with nostalgic ideas about traditional notions of motherhood, homeliness, saintliness and the mutually reinforcing structures of patriarchy and white supremacy. In this respect, the traditionalist elements so conspicuous in advertising materials and in the music itself were often at odds with some many of the same modern social, economic and technological forces which shaped them. Moreover, although recordings of Old Time music were made in studios around the nation, primarily in New York, as well as on location at southern field recording sessions, the form was notable for projecting powerful messages about white southerners and their conservative ideas relating to class, gender, and race. Indeed, during this period of intense, gendered social and technological change and their consequent regional and

national uncertainties, the South in US popular culture, including popular music, often served as a national repository of old-fashioned, traditional, largely male-defined values.¹⁵ The fact that almost all of the Old Time music recorded in the 1920s was written and recorded by male performers and songwriters testifies to its alignment with notions of tradition in which the preservation of white male authority was a central driving force. As such, nominally southern Old Time music reflected and embodied complex relationships between modernity and conservatism that were especially fraught in the South, where increasing secularization threatened the tight grip that religion and staunchly patriarchal values had traditionally held over sexuality and proper conduct, but which were also apparent to some extent across the United States. The chapter argues that when newer models of womanhood emerged and empowered women, albeit modestly, and by extension, challenged the status quo of patriarchal power, Old Time music reflected, particularly in its various depictions of motherhood and fatherhood, competing notions of correct gender roles.¹⁶

¹⁵ Karen Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 1-8. See also John Bush Jones' answer to the question "why Dixie?" in John Bush Jones, *Reinventing Dixie: Tin Pan Alley's Songs and the Creation of the Mythic South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 1-16. For commentary on how the South served this role internationally, see also Brian Ward, "Music, Musical Theater and the Imagined South in Interwar Britain," *Journal of Southern History*, 80, 1, pp. 39-72.

¹⁶ Modernity posed a significant threat to many long-standing ideals and practices in the South. As Richard Carr and Bradley Hart show, not only were many southerners church members during this period, a large number of these people were "fundamentalist Christians who believed in the literal world of the Bible, leading to an inevitable culture clash with the rest of the country and the modern world itself." See Richard Carr and Bradley W. Hart, *The Global 1920s: Politics, Economics and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 52. See also Andrew M. Koch and Paul Henry Gates who observe that many religious circles felt compelled to identify "all social evils" with the "modern trappings of civilization." Koch and gates also note that during the 1920s in the southern states "these sentiments spawned legislation that sought to reject the scientific methodology that was now associated with modernity itself." Andrew M. Koch and Paul Henry Gates Jr., *Medieval America: Cultural Influences of Christianity in the Law and Public Policy* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012), 11. However, whilst these scholars show the deep-rooted anxieties that modernity brought in its wake, the fact that new technology allowed the dissemination of traditionalist ideals, including commercially recorded religious diatribes against the perils of the modern world reflects a tension between the old and new worlds.

The “new woman” of the early 1900s represented the opposite of the traditional mother in a world in which male control and authority had generally reigned supreme. Of course, the term “new woman” is both complex and potentially reductive. Indeed, the characteristics that “new women” displayed were manifold and sometimes less “new” than imagined or claimed by supporters and detractors alike. However, as Richard Carr and Bradley Hart argue, one of the most profound developments in the culture of the “new woman” was that she “cast off family demands with all the marginalisation that brought and became more of an individual in her own right.”¹⁷ Whilst the birth of the “new woman” coincided with challenges to the traditional mother figure, the mother figure did not simply fade away. Indeed, as Victoria Sturtevant argues, in death and memory, the mother “bursts out of the household into the public world.”¹⁸ This was especially true within Old Time music during the 1920s and its later incarnation as “Hillbilly” music in the 1930s. Between 1920 and 1942, a formidable array of artists recorded no less than fifty-nine Old Time or Hillbilly songs whose titles simply began with the word mother. For illustrative purposes, during the 1920s the following songs enjoyed popularity: “M-O-T-H-E-R,” “Mother’s Advice,” “Mother and Home,” “Mother Dear is Waiting,” “Mother’s Dying Wish,” “Mother’s Face I Long to See,” “Mother’s Farewell,” “Mother’s Grave,” “Mother, Now Your Savior is My Savior Too,” “Mother Oft I Think of

¹⁷ Carr and Hart, *The Global 1920s*, 132. In a more complex, nuanced and thorough analysis of the new woman, Martha H. Patterson shows that the new woman represented many “contradictory positions and more: suffragist, prohibitionist, clubwoman, college girl, American girl, socialist, capitalist, anarchist, pickpocket, bicyclist, barren spinster, mannish woman, outdoor girl, birth-control advocate, modern girl, eugenicist, flapper, blues woman, lesbian, and vamp.” See *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930*, edited by Martha H. Patterson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 1. For an evaluation of the “new woman” in a southern state, see Judith N. McArthur, *Creating the New Woman: The Rise of Southern Women’s Progressive Culture in Texas, 1893-1918* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

Thee,” “Mother, Oh My Mother,” “Mother’s Old Red Shawl,” “Mother’s Plea For Her Son,” and “Mother, Tell Me of the Angels.”¹⁹ Of course, there were also other songs that dealt with “mothers” in some way. In his recording of “The Days Of My Childhood Plays” Kentuckian Alfred Karnes sang of a golden era of morality and virtue, which also happened to include his happy mother:

Could I only find the way back to the yesterdays,
 To the golden days of my childhood plays,
 My life would be different, my enemies would be friends,
 My leisures not wasted, my life so full of sin...

Could I only find the days as they were then,
 The golden days to live all over again,
 My paths would not be empty, I’d make a mark in life,
 My mother so happy, her hair not near so white.²⁰

Charles Nabell’s “Letter From Home Sweet Home” featured lyrics that impressed the importance of the warmth of the family unit:

Out on a western range one night I met a reckless crew,
 One cowboy said to another, “Jack, there’s a letter here for you,”
 “I suppose it’s from a sweetheart, boys,” came a rough voice from out in the crowd,
 With a laugh and a jeer they gathered around while Jack replied aloud:

“It’s only a message from home sweet home, from loved ones down on the farm,
 From wife, from mother, from sister and brother, praying to guard you from harm,

¹⁸ Victoria Sturtevant, *A Great Big Girl Like Me: The Films of Marie Dressler* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 72.

¹⁹ Riley Puckett, “M-O-T-H-E-R,” Co 15250-D, 1927, Kentucky Thoroughbreds, “Mother’s Advice” Pm 3011, 1927, [E.R.] Nance Family, “Mother’s Advice,” Br 542, 1931, Holland Puckett, “A Mother’s Advice,” Ge 6163, 1927, C. A. West, “A Mother’s Advice Ge 7098, 1929, Vernon Dalhart, “Mother and Home,” Co 334-D, 1925, Vaughan Quartet, “Mother and Home,” Vaughan 650, 1923, Bush Family, “Mother Dear Is Waiting,” Co unissued, 1927, Arthur Fields and Fred Hall, “A Mother’s Dying Wish,” Ed 52426, 1928, Walter Morris, “Mother’s Face I Long To See,” Co 15186-D, 1927, “Delma Lachney, L’Aurevoir D’Une Mere (Mother’s Farewell),” Vo 5347, 1929, Loy Bodine, “A Mother’s Farewell,” Ch S-16402, 1931, Vernon Dalhart, “Mother’s Grave,” Vi 19812, 1925, John B. Evans, “Mother’s Grave,” Br 276, 1928, E. Arthur Lewis, “Mother Now Your Savior Is My Savior Too,” [Lewis] 10, 1923, Simmons Sacred Singers, “Mother, Oft I Think Of Thee,” OK 45238, 1927, Vaughan Quartet, “Mother, Oh My Mother,” Vaughan 1200, 1925, Arthur Fields and Fred hall, “Mother’s Old Red Shawl,” GG/Rad 4205, 1928, Charlie Poole, “Mother’s Plea For Her Son,” Co 15509-D, 1929

The baby is lisping a prayer tonight to bless you wherever you roam,
We'll welcome you, Jack if you'll only come back, 'tis a message from
home."²¹

In a similar, if not identical tradition, was the tragic ballad "The Letter Edged In Black." Recordings by Cotton Butterfield, Fiddlin' John Carson, Vernon Dalhart, and George Reneau, all related a tearful tale of a letter that told of a mother's passing:

With trembling hand I took the letter from him,
I broke the seal and this is what it said:
"Come home, my boy, your dear old father wants you!
Come home, my boy, your dear old mother's dead."²²

It is difficult to ignore the volume of records that venerated and nostalgically praised motherhood or to see their roots in Victorian sentimentality. In other songs ("Mother's In Heaven Tonight" and "Mother is With the Angels") in which the mother figure is dead, she becomes a figure to be both cherished and immortalised. In this respect, the volume and nature of these songs suggests longing for a more traditional female role model amidst the insecurities associated with modernity. These idealised visions of motherhood – and appropriate female behaviour more generally – were clung to intensely during a period when women were afforded increasing, if humble opportunities for personal, political and economic empowerment.

The much-mythologised South in which the social landscape, including its gender hierarchy was more fixed and stable was not unique to commercially-recorded music of the 1920s. In the 1910s, a plethora of songs that extolled and celebrated the "virtues" of Dixie had been very popular. As Karen Cox stresses, the

²⁰ Alfred G. Karnes, "The Days Of My Childhood Plays," Vi V-40076, 1928.

²¹ Charles Nabell, "The Letter From Home Sweet Home," OK 40252, 1924.

²² Cotton Butterfield, "The Letter Edged In Black," OK unissued, 1929, Fiddlin' John Carson, "The Letter Edged In Black," OK 7008, 1924, Vernon Dalhart, "The Letter Edged

In Black,” Br 2900, 1925, George Reneau, “The Letter Edged In Black,” Vo 14998, 1925.

South that was conceived in the minds of music composers, publishers, and American audiences was that of a region “still wedded to its agrarian past.”²³ Central to that idyllic and romanticised agrarian world was, of course, the mother figure. However, given the rapid developments in technology during the 1920s it is little wonder that part of the American public sought a temporary escape in music that nostalgically transported them to an idealised pastoral world in which women stayed at home and fulfilled their familial duties. Women’s slowly-increasing advances, both politically and socially, were of no small concern to many American males, not least in the South, where the prospect of the “new woman” terrified those who, as Glenn Feldmann writes, were “more comfortable with the old roles and confinement to separate spheres of the sexes.”²⁴

The coexistence of misogynist and sentimental mother songs reflected deep-rooted gender anxieties that had begun to take root before the onset of the 1920s. For instance, industrialisation had a profound impact upon masculine identity during this exciting, but turbulent period. As Michael Kimmel argues, by the last few decades of the nineteenth century:

The realm of production had been so transformed that men could no longer anchor their identity in their position in the market. Now, new symbols were created, the consumption of which reminded men of that secure past, before identity crises, before crises of masculinity. Manhood had earlier meant economic autonomy—control over one’s own labor, cooperative control over the labor process, ownership of the labor process, ownership of the products of one’s own labour. It had meant political patriarchy...²⁵

As the early decades of the twentieth-century unfolded, women’s increased participation in the workforce and, by extension, consumerist culture exacerbated

²³ Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie*, 32.

²⁴ Feldman, “Hearth and Home,” 61.

²⁵ Michael S. Kimmel “The Feminization of American Culture and the Recreation of the Male Body, 1832-1920” in ed. Michael S. Kimmel, *The History of Men: Essays on the History of American and British Masculinities* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005) pp. 37-61, 42-43.

male fears over their waning power as providers, perhaps compromising their masculine identity. As Rita Felski argues, the “individualization of desire promoted by capitalist consumerism” had created the opportunity for women to “articulate needs and wants in defiance of traditional patriarchal prohibitions.”²⁶ With traditional notions of masculinity already compromised, these developments encouraged many men to find solace in masculine cultures previously associated with the frontier. In a volume on modernity, Greg Forter stresses that white male identification with the “racial primitive thus worked paradoxically to bolster white manhood by providing it with a barbarous physicality” that functioned as a salve to the imagined feminising dangers of modernity that other scholars, Forter included, note.²⁷ The performance and appeal of hypermasculine characters in commercially recorded roots music, including Old Time, during this period certainly support Forter’s argument.

During this period, employment opportunities for females greatly affected gendered power-relations within the home. As Amanda S. Barusch notes, throughout the 1920s, the movement of married women into the work force emerged as a “significant trend” in the United States. This altered the structural dynamics of the household and was facilitated by the changing nature of the “home” and what it

²⁶ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1995), 90. See also Janet Lyon, “Gender and Sexuality” in ed. Walter Kalaidjian, *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) pp. 221-242.

²⁷ Greg Forter, *Gender, Race, and Mourning in American Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3. See also Seth Moglen, who argues: “While some (especially women) greeted emergent models of femininity with hopefulness, others were deeply fearful, and many (of both sexes) perceived a related crisis in masculinity that seemed to doom heterosexual connection.” Seth Moglen, *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 6. See also Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, 117, Carol Smith-Rosenburg, “The republican gentleman: the race to rhetorical stability in the new United States” in eds. Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann, Josh Tosh, *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 61-76, 66.

represented during this period of flux. Mass culture and consumerism altered the household. As Barusch argues, the home was “transformed from a unit of production to a unit of consumption.” Because of this, “women who needed productive roles sought them outside the home.”²⁸ Many southern women worked in the textile industry during this period, greatly outnumbering male workers in this field. For instance, by the late 1920s, Tennessee-based company the Kingsport Hosiery Mills employed “417 workers, 296 of whom were females.” As Tom Lee shows, patterns of segregation made textile work the “almost exclusive province of white workers and especially white women.”²⁹

The burgeoning textile industry itself was a product of modern times and benefitted from new technology. That females were gainfully employed within this industry also signifies some of the modest advances women made at the time. The inception of commercial Old Time music—music that reinforced traditional models of gender and family values in particular—as a saleable product, began in the midst of advances that saw women’s increasing participation in the workforce, thus compromising traditional, idealised notions of male authority and perhaps power. These socio-political conditions were perfect to record, market, and sell music that reflected age-old ideals and romantic notions of America’s halcyon days. However, whilst this may be largely true, those in charge of record labels, of artists and their repertoires were initially unsure about investing precious cash into recording and distributing such music. After recording a white southern fiddle player named Fiddlin’ John Carson in 1923, Okeh Records executive Ralph Peer expected little public interest in more music of this kind. The enormous commercial success of the

²⁸ Amanda S. Barusch, *Foundations of Social Policy: Social Justice in Human Perspective* (Stamford: Cengage Learning, 2015, 5th edition), 453.

²⁹ Tom Lee, *The Tennessee-Virginia Tri-cities: Urbanization in Appalachia, 1900-1950* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 126.

singer's first recordings, "The Little Old Log Cabin In The Lane," and "The Old Hen Cackled And The Rooster's Going To Crow" took the industry by surprise, but it quickly responded. Encouraged by this, many labels sought to record white rural mountain musicians. These artists appeared to represent old-fashioned values. Record labels purposely cultivated this impression in advertising copy and illustrations.³⁰ The Old Time genre blossomed *because* of the rapid change in American culture. In this respect, and given the advances that many white women managed to make during this period, Fiddlin' John Carson's recording of "You'll Never Miss Your Mother Until She's Gone" (OK 4994, 1923) cast a nostalgic male eye back to the tenderness of the mother figure—a woman who was pure, loving, and crucially, in her natural habitat: the home.

On one of two recording sessions that took place between Wednesday, November 7 and Thursday, November 8, 1923, Carson stood in a New York recording studio and sang into a large recording horn:

Years ago when but a boy,
Singing songs was mother's joy,
When our father dear would leave us all alone,
I can hear her voice so sweet,
As she sang, "When shall we meet?"
You'll never miss your mother until she's gone.

My mother she was true,
To her children and her home,
She was kind and true and loved us all,
Was her hand that touched my brow,
I can almost feel it now,
You'll never miss your mother until she's gone.

The song conflated themes of motherhood, sweetness, and godliness. This reinforced age-old conceptions of gender roles and idealised female behaviour. Moreover, these

³⁰ Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1-42. Bill C. Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003 edition). Allan Sutton, *Recording the 'Twenties* (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2008), 77-90.

ideals were further mediated through yet another male voice, that of the father figure within the song:

Father he was good and kind,
Told us we would never find,
One who would cheer our ails and all,
I praise God for her sweet name,
'Cause she's always just the same,
You'll never miss your mother until she's gone.

With his rough, unmistakably masculine voice, Carson's character continued to praise the mother for her steadfast devotion to prescribed gender roles throughout the chorus and in all subsequent stanzas. Crucially, the recording invited listeners to look to such figures as exemplars of appropriate female, not just maternal, behaviour,

My mother she was true,
To her children and her home,
She was kind and true and loved us all,
Was her hand that touched my brow,
I can almost feel it now,
You'll never miss your mother until she's gone.

Now I'm so far away,
From my home I've gone astray,
My mother's often prayed for me at home,
Troubles, trials to endure,
I ought to live a life that's pure,
And meet my mother in her home.

'Cause my mother she was true,
To her children and her home,
She was kind and true and loved us all,
Was her hand that touched my brow,
I can almost feel it now,
You'll never miss your mother until she's gone.³¹

³¹ Fiddlin' John Carson "You Will Never Miss Your Mother Until She Is Gone," OK 4994, 1923.

The simple act of repetition on each chorus reinforced the concept of purity, piety, and homeliness, elevating the mother figure to a status that was saintly. This was bolstered by an antiquated melody and traditional sound that seemed to resist the modern age and the shifting social and cultural landscape, including its newer models of gender. However, in “Be Kind To A Man When He’s Down,”(OK 40050, 1923) another track that the singer cut at the same session, his male character sang of a young man’s alcoholism, and rambling ways, whilst asking for implicit acceptance and understanding of these male traits:

When a boy goes wrong and leaves his home,
He’ll pass by the good of his town,
Oh go lend him your hand and help him to stand,
Be kind to a man when he’s down.

Forgive and forget, there’s good in him yet,
He’ll drink his sorrow to drown,
Oh go lend him your hand, and hep him to stand,
Be kind to a man when he’s down.³²

The disjuncture between these songs is clear. In one, the mother figure is an exemplary female and thus venerated as the centre of all that is good—provided she is in her rightful place, the home. Men however, are expected to “go wrong” - especially when they leave the safety and sanctity of the kinds of “home” that dutiful mothers help to create. Sympathy for and implicit understanding of the errant male’s condition are expected. Four years later, the singer cut these tracks again, but with his own daughter accompanying him. The addition of a female harmonising voice, particularly the voice of a dutiful daughter, on the later recordings seemed to legitimise the ideological messages: women belong at home and men deserved to be better understood. Indeed, the harmonies suggest tacit agreement between male and female on such matters. However, this interpretation is not without problem.

³² Fiddlin’ John Carson “Be Kind To A Man When He’s Down,” OK 40050, 1923.

Carson's daughter, Rosa Lee, was also known as Moonshine Kate. While Kate recorded plenty of tunes with her father that fell into line and reified traditional gender roles, her very nom de disque hinted at possible fault-lines, or at least tensions, within the dominant gender typology. "Moonshine Kate" suggested a sort of rebelliousness, with its invocation of the bootlegging rampant during the period of national prohibition – an illegal way of making money that became widely, if not uniquely, associated with the rural South – the putative source of much Old Time music. As an itinerant musician, Moonshine Kate worked and travelled and was in the business of recording popular music for money: again, the opposite of the stay-at-home mother that she helped to venerate in her father's song. That Moonshine Kate's first solo recordings were authorised by Ralph Peer testifies to the claim by Barry Mazor, a leading biographer of Peer, that the record executive preferred "feisty, self-defining women on record, as he clearly did in life."³³ Although Moonshine Kate harmonised on some of her father's songs that reinforced gender stereotypes, her public persona stood in contrast to the same prescriptive roles. Indeed, shortly after, Carson and his daughter appeared together sitting on the back of a Model T Ford with their names on it. This revealed that the two fully embraced the luxuries that modernity afforded them—new technology, and by extension, mobility. Whilst the music and the messages embedded within it may have celebrated tradition, the fact that it enabled artists and labels to make money and enjoy the benefits of modernity was at odds with the traditional values it espoused.³⁴ Like many other early Hillbilly artists, Fiddlin John and Moonshine Kate were part of a fledgling industry that flourished because of new technology.

³³ Barry Mazor, *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, Incorporated, 2015), 60.

³⁴ Photograph of Fiddlin' John and Moonshine Kate with Model T Ford, circa early 1930s, Country Music Hall of Fame and Archive photographic collections.

The visual presentation of these Old Time musicians, purveyors of a largely rural, often southern-inflected, nostalgia, was sometimes in tension with how they appeared in advertising campaigns. Promotional shots often presented artists as “citified.” For instance, on the cover of Okeh records’ April 1925 catalogue of “Olde Time Tunes,” Fiddlin’ John Carson is dressed immaculately in a shirt, tie, and waistcoat. Situated just underneath Carson is Virginian guitarist and prominent recording artist Ernest V. Stoneman—also wearing a suit.³⁵ A promotional photograph for blind guitarist and singing sensation Riley Puckett showed him dressed in a suit holding his guitar—in front of a car with his name on it.³⁶ These images reveal the paradox of the nostalgia for “old-time” music and rural culture. The labels invested in the image of the quaint, agrarian South, an image that the public apparently bought wholesale. Whilst some of the promotional shots of these musicians show that they actively participated in a culture of consumerism, modernity, and urbanity, the lyrical content and sound of much of this music did not reflect the rapid technological advancements that thrilled the nation. In order to appreciate this paradox, one need only consider Carson’s actual background and the constructed nature of his public persona.

John Carson’s birthplace was the hamlet of Blue Ridge, a mountainous area of Fannin County Georgia. Carson and the Labels were fully aware of the potential commercial appeal of the image of the rural, especially mountain musician, who occupied a particular place in the American imagination as a repository of cultural

³⁵ “Copy of Okeh Records Catalog Page,” UNC Libraries, stable url <http://exhibits.lib.unc.edu/items/show/2852>. Accessed: 02/05/2014.

³⁶ “Unattributed Photo of Riley Puckett”, Georgia State University Library, Popular Music Collections, Special Collections, Riley Puckett Papers (MSS#MO47). Details proved by Brian Ward.

authenticity and robust, frontier-style manhood.³⁷ Country music expert Patrick Huber likens him to P.T Barnum, labelling the singer a “consummate opportunist who was prone to recasting the facts of his life to his advantage.”³⁸ Crucially, Carson’s background as a textile worker was simply edited out of his public image. Indeed, none of the advertising copy alluded to a working background that could connect the singer to an urban environment or modern life in America. Moreover, at times, musicians such as the Georgian fiddling sensation were complicit in the public *performance* of a rural identity.

In the first half of the 1910s a number of musicians, Carson included, took part in fiddling contests in Atlanta. As Karl Hagstrom Miller notes, these contests were an “important site for the construction of regional identity based on rural life.” Many of the contestants and participants lived and worked in urban centres, but like Carson, these people performed as “hayseeds humorously unacquainted with modern urban ways.” Among the audience at the fiddling contests were many members of Atlanta’s upper-class citizens for whom the “images and music of “plain folk” served as rollicking entertainment for all who attended.”³⁹

The appeal and marketable potential of nostalgic, rural authenticity and traditional values did not escape those in charge of marketing old-time and hillbilly music. Not only were fiddling contests important for creating notions of regional identity, some record label personnel viewed them as crucial components in

³⁷ Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6. See also Bill C. Malone, who argues that some spectators “may have gravitated toward exotic rustic types through a reaction against the massive social alterations that were changing the face of a once-familiar America. Mountaineers and cowboys were not simply colorful and exotic; they were vivid reminders of frontier America and of the allegedly individualistic traits that had once characterized American life.” Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers*, 73.

³⁸ Huber, *Linthead Stomp*, 47.

³⁹ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 203.

advertising old-time music. For instance, in *Talking Machine World*, June 1924, an advert for Okeh Records artists Fiddlin' John Carson and Henry Whitter read:

These two mountaineers were discovered by Okeh! Seeing the recording possibilities in their quaint style and their "Old Time Pieces" Okeh recorded some of their selections and at the same time uncovered a brand new field for record sales.

It is noteworthy that in the annual "Fiddlin' Contests" held in the South, and against the best there was, Fiddlin' John Carson was seven times awarded the championship. Another mountain star is Henry Whitter. Throughout his native hills he is acclaimed as the most novel entertainer for he plays a harmonica and a guitar at the same time and never misses a note and in between accompanies himself when he sings those quaint "Old Time Pieces." The Craze for this "Hill Country Music" has spread to thousands of communities, north, east, and west as well as in the south and the fame of these artists is ever increasing.⁴⁰

The oxymoronic nature of the marketing is striking. Old Time music was also brand new. This reveals much about the way marketing personnel such as John A. "Jack" Sieber and Okeh Records' female promotional campaign overseer Arbutus M. "A. M." Kennard helped to construct this music in the public imagination.⁴¹ Karl Miller argues that those responsible for marketing materials had introduced the records as "upstanding and serious folklore."⁴² This kind of advertising, however, most surely reflected, and possibly helped to enable ways of thinking about notions of gendered propriety. Under the guise of upstanding folklore and traditional mountain culture, white musicians singing "traditional" mountain music could sing songs of motherhood and familial bliss, alongside songs that detailed the brutal murders of young, mobile women. As Chapter Three shows in more detail, murder ballads

⁴⁰ Copy of *Talking Machine World* advertisement, Okeh Discographical Files, Southern Folklife Collection, UNC Libraries, stable url <http://exhibits.lib.unc.edu/items/show/2833>, accessed: 02/05, 2014.

⁴¹ The literature on these characters and their roles is by no means extensive. However, a forthcoming publication on A & R men, authored by Brian Ward and Patrick Huber fills in some of the gaps in the scholarship. This particular reference is informed by said publication. See Brian Ward and Patrick Huber, *A & R Pioneers: Architects of American Roots Music on Record* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, forthcoming), 236.

⁴² Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 210.

contained a strong moralizing element: they conjured up images of order and stability that were built on long-standing shared, socially and divinely sanctioned ideas about appropriate gender roles and hierarchies. Thus, they also seemed to be representative of tradition, connected to a distant, secure, shared history. When viewed collectively with mother songs, there are latent, and at times, overtly sexist, at times explicitly misogynist messages embedded within the lyrics of Old Time recordings, whether newly composed songs or recast from ancient ballads. These messages spoke to and of the cultures in which they enjoyed popularity, reflecting the need to cling onto erstwhile patriarchal values, at least in the world of musical culture.

The cultural milieu within which these artists and songs existed helped to create the imperative to celebrate conventional gender roles, shaping how certain groups viewed traditional models of female identity and responded to music that promoted those models. For example, at one extreme end of the spectrum of a social conservatism that encompassed deeply reactionary attitudes on gender, as well as on race and religion, the Ku Klux Klan placed a premium on old-fashioned values and traditional models of gendered and racial hierarchies. John Carson is known to have been a member of the Klan. Carson publicly supported a Klan candidate in 1923, and played at Klan-sponsored fiddling contests.⁴³ Fellow fiddler, Virginian Alfred Reed, born in Floyd County, Virginia in 1880 was also involved with Klan-sponsored events in Princeton. Reed also sang songs that advocated control of female

⁴³ See for instance, Gene Wiggins' discussion of Carson and Ku Klux Klan candidate Cliff Walker. Carson reputedly showered musical praise on the gubernatorial candidate. The *Atlanta Journal* reported that Fiddlin' John walked the streets and sang: "I'm a Walker man from the soles of my shoes to the top of my hat, /And one of those candidates was arrested in Columbus for that." *Atlanta Journal*, June 17, 1923, sec. A, P.11, reproduced with the kind permission of Charles Wolfe in Gene Wiggins, *Fiddlin' Georgia Crazy: Fiddlin' John Carson, His Real World, and the World of His Songs* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 114. See also Huber, *Linthead Stomp*, 61, 84, 85, 91-92, 94.

behaviour. The fact that Reed and Carson performed at these events reveals the extent to which white southern masculine ideals were linked to the Old Time genre and the preservation of traditional southern gender mores.⁴⁴ In Reed's "Woman's Been After Man Ever Since," (Vi V-40196, 1929) his male character began by admonishing women's innate consumerism and inability to resist their impulses. Blaming them for the decline of the human race from its inception, his male character sang,

God made man in his own image,
And all things were going right,
But it seems that man was doomed to sin and fall,
Eve she tasted of the apple,
Begged till Adam took a bite,
And that put the human family to the wall.

In a following stanza, he warned of newly-empowered women and their changing position in the private and public spheres,

What a shame it is that women,
Try to be so much like men
They will run for office if they get a chance
Men had just as well stop calling his dear precious wife 'old hen'
For the time has come when she should wear the pants.⁴⁵

In another song Reed warned women to stay clear of men with dishonourable intentions whilst also chastising them for rejecting traditional notions of femininity.

In this respect, songs such as "Beware" (Vi 23550, 1929) functioned in a similar manner to moralizing ballads that were intended to instruct listeners in how to behave properly. "Beware" featured a chorus that advised: "Beware young ladies they're fooling you,/ Trust them not they're fooling you,/ Beware young ladies

⁴⁴ John F. Lilly, "Blind Alfred Reed" *Goldenseal Magazine*, Winter, 2008, digitized version available at stable url: <http://nativeground.com/the-blind-mans-song/>, accessed: 22/11/2017. W. K. McNeil "Blind Alfred Reed" in ed. W. K. McNeil, *Encyclopaedia of American Gospel Music* (New York; Routledge, 2005) 311.

⁴⁵ Blind Alfred Reed "Woman's Been After Man Ever Since," Vi V-40196, 1929.

they're fooling you,/ Beware, oh take care."⁴⁶ In "Why Do You Bob Your Hair Girls?" (Vi 21360, 1927) Reed's narrator explicitly denounced the "new woman," telling females who embraced newer models of gender that they were unfeminine, unholy, and profligate:

Why do you bob your hair girls? You're doing mighty wrong,
God says it is a glory, and you should wear it long,
You spoil your lovely hair girls, to keep yourself in style,
Before you bob your hair girls, just stop and think a while.

Why do you bob your hair girls? It is an awful shame,
You rob the head God gave you, and bear the Flapper's name,
You're taking off your covering, it is an awful sin,
Don't ever bob your hair girls, short hair belongs to men.⁴⁷

Songs such as these provide compelling social commentary on fears surrounding the growing tendency for some young women to reject conventional notions of feminine propriety. Short hair symbolised an affinity with masculinity, or at least a flight from traditional femininity. By extension, sexual promiscuity, long held as a masculine trait and foible no longer seemed confined to the male domain. Unfeminine behaviour was therefore potentially dangerous. These songs simultaneously acknowledged and admonished empowered women in both private and public spheres. Such women marked a departure from the domesticated saints that had traditionally been subservient to white patriarchs within the home and the masculinist body politic of southern culture. Accordingly, many white supremacists, fearful of the changing nature of gender models used the perceived vulnerability of white southern women as justification for controlling their behaviour.

The Klan frequently and fervently declared its mission to protect white womanhood. Quite often, these public declarations involved lawlessness and

⁴⁶ Blind Alfred Reed, "Beware" New York, Vi V-23550, 1929.

⁴⁷ Blind Alfred Reed, "Why Do You Bob Your Hair Girls?" Vi V-21360, 1927.

intimidation. Journalist for the *New York World* Henry P. Fry infiltrated the Klan and exposed such tactics in his publication *The Modern Ku Klux Klan*. In an entry dated May 20, 1921, Fry recalled:

One thousand men marched through the streets of Dallas, Texas, at night, mounted and unmounted, all of them attired in the Ku Klux regalia. They carried a fiery cross, and several banners bearing these words: "The Invisible Empire," "White Supremacy," "Pure Womanhood," "Dallas Must Be Clean," "Our Little Girls Must Be Protected," "All Native Born," "The Guilty Must Pay." They rode and marched through the streets silently and without interference from the authorities. Announcements of the purposes and objects of the Klan had previously been accepted and printed by the Dallas papers.⁴⁸

Casting a retrospective eye to the "good old days," the Klan, which had amassed membership of five million Americans (a million of which were women) by the middle of the decade, placed a premium upon traditional values that were imagined to be rock-solid, unwavering, and more favourable to white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant men.⁴⁹ The emphasis on pure womanhood, the protection of "little girls," (a phrase that in this context carries its own formidable patriarchal subtexts) and "native-born" all underscore the anxieties of this period. In many respects, the popularity of Old Time music also nodded to a more stable past in which ideals, morals, and the status of race and gender within the social structure were more fixed. Moreover, the mother figure also stood as the holy idol in residence in much of the music that right-wing populist groups cultivated, wrote, and promoted. Klan sheet music of the day reflected these ideals, suggesting that Old Time music and right-wing populist music articulated similar sentiments. However, the argument presented here is not that

⁴⁸ Henry P. Fry, *The Modern Ku Klux Klan* (Boston: Small, Maynard and Company, 1922), pp. 186-187.

⁴⁹ For details on membership numbers, see Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 30. Jessie Daniels, *White Lies: Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality in White Supremacist Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 15. Thomas R. Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s* (Maryland: Ivan R. Dee, 2011), 26.

consumers of Old Time music were predisposed to right-wing populist ideological sentiments. Rather, there were shared projections of the importance of traditional family values and models of gender in Old Time recordings and Klan sheet music. For instance, Noah F. Tillery and Harry F. Windle's "Our Mother's of Liberty" (1924) contained the following chorus:

Woman of the Ku-Klux-Klan Pilgrims cherished dream
Things that brought them cross the sea It's your noble theme
Mothers of the nation 'Twas freedom gave you birth
Fairest sweetest flower ever bloomed on earth
Daughters of America protecting Liberty
Chastity of woman and the white supremacy.⁵⁰

The chorus, repeated throughout the song, conflated notions of womanhood and somewhat paradoxically, motherhood—with chastity. These concepts are foregrounded as matters of national pride. Klan ideology insisted that women be modest, sexually pure, and that traditional concepts of motherhood were held as sacred and precious. Previous imperfections were fine to a degree—providing that the mothers performed their duty as home-makers and carers of their offspring. Popular movies of the day also had to negotiate this disjuncture. But, as Victoria Sturtevant argues, "Whether or not their past lives contain some stain of sin, these mothers are defined by passivity, sacrifice, and intense identification" with their children.⁵¹ These endearing feminine attributes were also favoured by right-wing extremist groups. Indeed, Klanswomen gestured to a rosy future in which motherhood, pure womanhood, and familial commitments reigned supreme.

⁵⁰ "Our Mother's of Liberty" Words by Noah F. Tillery. Music by Harry F. Windle. Published by H. F. Windle, Box 272, Kansas City, Missouri. Copyright: 1924 by H. F. Windle, Kansas City, Missouri. Source: Eckhart Public Library, The Willennar Genealogy Center, John Martin Smith Ku Klux Klan Collection, item number: 2013.07.14.D1-27.033, stable url <http://willennar.pastperfectonline.com/library/C4A2BD35-BD5C-4CCC-B8B1-804372471380>, accessed: 03/04/2015.

⁵¹ Sturtevant, *A Great Big Girl Like Me*, 70-71.

In 1920, Klan leader William J. Simmons secured the services of Edward Young Clarke and Mary Elizabeth Tyler, joint-owners of the Southern Publicity Association, a company whose main function was fund-raising. Arguably the first female leader of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan, Tyler's role involved launching and organizing propaganda aimed at encouraging others to increase the organization's paltry ranks. She was a pioneer in using modern mass marketing techniques and new technologies, including the radio and orchestrated publicity campaigns to promote the Klan and disseminate traditional values.⁵² In 1921, Tyler stated in the *New York Times*: "women ought to join us and when they know the real purpose of this organization they will want to become members... The Klan stands for the things that women hold dear."⁵³ Of the things that Klanswomen held dear, motherhood and female saintliness were especially important. However, these values also reified white male authority and control, and continued to prescribe narrow gender roles for white women. Moreover, in the 1920s, Klanswomen stressed that they "believe in the American home as the foundation upon which rests secure the American Republic, the future of its institutions, and the liberties of its citizens."⁵⁴ Ideas of motherhood, homeliness and saintliness were inseparable for the organisation and

⁵² David Mark Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, eighth edition), 31. Marty Gitlin, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Guide to an American Subculture* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 13-14. Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5-6.

⁵³ As Kathleen Blee notes, Elizabeth Tyler and Edward Clarke "built the Klan with the modern marketing and advertising techniques of twentieth-century capitalism." See Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 21. For more on Tyler and Clarke's fervent use of marketing techniques and their roles as "seasoned promoters," see also MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, pp. 5-7.

Tyler quoted in article entitled "Says Women Here Flock To Join Klan," *New York Times*, September 13, 1921, cited in Hill, "Progressive Values in the Woman's Ku Klux Klan" *Constructing the Past*, 9, 1, article 6, 2008, pp. 21-32, 24.

⁵⁴ Women of the Ku Klux Klan, *America for Americans: Creed of Klanswomen / As Interpreted By the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, 5. Digitised version available at Yale University Library, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, stable url, http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3577012?image_id=1332079, accessed: 20/05/2016

the bedrock of wider notions of appropriate female behaviour. A 1925 article entitled “Klansmen Honor American Mothers,” also printed in the *New York Times*, a subsidiary of the Klan known as the “Tri K Club” asserted that through such organisations “many of the moral uplift problems of the present could be solved.” The successes of this organisation, and others like it, read the article, would “bring the young women of today who will become the mothers of tomorrow into a sense of responsibility of their duties.”⁵⁵

Although motherhood was an exceptionally popular topic in Old Time music, the explicit promotion of Klan ideology on commercial recordings was not. However, on Tuesday, April 30, 1923, the Vaughan Quartet entered the Gennett recording studio in Richmond, Indiana and cut the track “Mother and Home” (also recorded by Vernon Dalhart at a later date), a year later they would stand in the same studio and record the Klan’s musical call to arms “Wake Up, America and Kluck, Kluck Kluck” (Vaughan 825, 1924). Whilst Klan records of this kind were relatively rare, the fact that the quartet recorded mother songs and songs that communicated the Klan’s ideology dramatizes the close alignment between the messages in a good deal of Old Time music and right-wing populist rhetoric. Moreover, this casts a different light on female subjects in some of Fiddlin’ John Carson’s other output. The negative representation of women who did not fit the sentimental mother mould—and Chapter Three shows, the lethal violence that sometimes resulted from their (mis)behaviour in murder ballads—stood in stark opposition to the glorification of the stay-at-home mother. Carson’s 1927 recording of “It’s A Shame To Whip Your Wife On Sunday” presented a negative model of womanhood, suggesting that even women who settled into a married life of domesticity had little hope. Indeed,

⁵⁵ “Klansmen Honor American Mothers,” *New York Times*, May 11, 1925, cited in Hill, “Progressive Values,” 25.

the treatment of female subjects in his songs suggests how they fitted into a broader pattern of sexism, misogyny, and gendered violence in early hillbilly music.

Although “You’ll Never Miss Your Mother Until She’s Gone” was awash with maternal admiration and romantic love –these themes also carried their own patriarchal subtexts. Carson’s invocation of the much-sentimentalised matriarch of the Old South in “You’ll Never Miss Your Mother” glorified motherhood and suggested that women should follow suit. Potentially, the lyrics to “It’s a Shame To Whip Your Wife On A Sunday” (OK 45122, 1927) figuratively reinforced traditional notions of gendered-hierarchy in a much more troubling manner. The lyrics to this song suggested that hard-drinking and brutal control of women by men was a fact of everyday life but, in a highly ambiguous, and perhaps darkly humorous nod to the traditional religion that was a key pillar of social conservatism, also intimated that on a holy day, men should have a rest from such activities:

Well, it’s a shame to whip your wife on Sunday,
Yes, it’s a shame to whip your wife on Sunday,
When you’ve got Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday
Friday, Saturday,
It’s a shame to whip your wife on Sunday.

It’s a shame to get drunk on Sunday,
Yes, it’s a shame to get drunk on Sunday,
When you’ve got Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday,
Friday, Saturday,
It’s a shame to get drunk on Sunday.⁵⁶

There is little in the way of moralising in Carson’s song, unlike the proliferation of murdered-sweetheart ballads and event songs that also enjoyed popularity during this period. Such songs communicated important moral warnings—one of which was that

⁵⁶ Fiddlin’ John Carson, “It’s A Shame To Whip Your Wife On Sunday,” OK 45122, 1927.

it was an unforgiveable sin to take a fellow human's life.⁵⁷ And yet, in the world of recorded Old-Time music as in the "real world," even women who accepted their lot as home-makers did not always fare well. In commercial songs such as "It's a Shame to Whip Your Wife on Sunday," violence was not only forgivable, it was par for the course. Indeed, domestic violence may have been the unfortunate, deeply traumatic, and potentially life-threatening outcome for women once they had been "domesticated." In this respect, these recordings suggested that women had little hope.

Commenting on nineteenth-century southern folk music, C. Kirk Hutson stresses that the more frequent the violence in song lyrics, the "less violent and less degrading the acts probably seemed to most southern males." Carson's male character in "It's a Shame" stops short of detailing murder as an effective method of male control, but the threat of physical abuse is unmistakable in the lyrics. Saturating males with images and celebrations of misogynist violence in song, whether or not intended as comic, will, over time, Hutson argues, have "violent repercussions for women." Whilst this may be a reasonable conjecture, it is difficult to substantiate, for as Hutson also acknowledges: "no historian can prove that a particular nineteenth-century southern male who listened to a singer glorify his abuse of his nagging wife immediately went home and beat his own wife."⁵⁸ This is also true of Old Time music of the early Twentieth Century. However, whilst there are no accounts of American males beating their women from Monday to Saturday at Fiddlin' John

⁵⁷ Ballads, specifically "murdered-sweetheart" ballads and their moralizing purposes are covered extensively in Chapter Three.

⁵⁸ C. Kirk Hutson, "Whackety Whack, Don't Talk Back": The Glorification of Violence Against Females and the Subjugation of Women in Nineteenth-Century Southern Folk Music", *Journal of Women's History*, 8, 3 (Fall 1996), pp. 114-142, 117. For further reading on male-on-female violence in country music see also Teresa Goddu, "Bloody Daggers and Lonesome Graveyards: The Gothic and Country Music" in ed. Cecelia Tichi, *Reading Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars, and Honky Tonk Bars* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998) pp. 45-65.

Carson's behest during the 1920s, the prolonged psychological effects of this music should not be dismissed. In 2003, the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* published the results of a study on violent song lyrics and their effect on listeners. The study carried out by social psychologists Craig A. Anderson, Nicholas Carnagey and Janie Eubanks "demonstrated that such songs increase aggressive thoughts and feelings."⁵⁹ In a similar vein, pitching Old Time music, violent lyrics included, as part of a venerable historic tradition helped to somewhat legitimise acts to criticise or correct allegedly improper female behaviour. It may also have created a kind of historical gulf that undermined the importance of themes of domestic abuse to contemporary listeners, relegating spousal violence to a bygone age. And yet, the brutalisation of women in intimate relationships simply did not belong to a bygone, barbaric past that bore little relation to contemporary American society at the time.

On August 6, 1913, an article debating the pros and cons of wife-beating appeared in the Indiana-based *Bluffton Chronicle* on August 6. In the article Dr William F. Waugh urged: "When you find your mate, rule her! She expects you to be the head of the house. When she awakens your jealousy, beat her; she needs it." Accompanying this text was an illustration of a well-dressed man towering over his mate, whip in hand.⁶⁰ Wife-beating was officially decreed illegal in every state by 1920. However, deep-rooted misogyny nevertheless remained present in many areas of American society. In a Newark, New Jersey court in 1923, Vice Chancellor Backes tacitly encouraged the brutal male control of transgressive women. Paying no regard to legislation that was by then years old, Backes decreed that "three beatings,

⁵⁹ Craig A. Anderson, Nicholas L. Carnagey, Janie Eubanks, "Violent Media: The Effects of Songs with Violent Lyrics on Aggressive Thoughts and Feelings," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 5, (2003), 960-971, 969.

⁶⁰ "Votes for Women Put Temporarily in Background", *Bluffton Chronicle*, August 6, 1913, 3, stable url, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2331&dat=19130806&id=684nAAAIBAJ&sjid=wwQGAAAIBAJ&pg=4747,308295>, accessed: 10/08/2014.

each three years apart, did not constitute extreme cruelty on the part of the husband.”⁶¹

Many men, professionals such as doctors and representatives of the legal system included, found the early decades of the twentieth-century challenging regarding gendered-power struggles. Backes’ publicly steadfast stance on domestic violence could have set an appalling example to anxious men as they struggled with the shifting cultural landscape and the changing nature of gender hierarchies. Whilst it would be a gross misrepresentation to suggest that Dr Waugh and Vice Chancellor Backes mirrored the sentiments of all American males, they nevertheless indicate a sustained belief in the brutal physical treatment of women as a means of control. However, these men stated their points of view from northern and Midwestern centres. In the South, white supremacists, the men (and women) tied to the Klan and many others broadly sympathetic to at least some of their entwined social, racial and gender values, laboured to uphold traditional ideals of female propriety and with it, of racial stability. At times, they employed violence to ensure that “traditional” American values remained intact. Glenn Feldman argues that these people “worked to ensure that the clock would be turned back” to what they imagined was “a simpler time, a purer time—a time when women “knew their place.”” This was also a time when “darkies were obedient, religion was orthodox, immigrants were Nordic, and Yankees stayed at home.”⁶² Transgressive women, including the new woman, flappers, and “unruly” wives, did not sit favourably within this ideology.

Sentimental mother songs restored traditional gender roles to a level of stability, if not necessarily in the real world in a less overt and forceful manner. These

⁶¹ “Beating Wife Every 3 Years Is Not Cruelty, Says Court,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1923, 21.

⁶² Feldman, “Hearth and Home,” 61.

recordings may have partially resolved, at least in the realm of entertainment, some of the anxieties unleashed by the changing nature of male and female power-relations in a figurative sense. Whilst Fiddlin John Carson's recording of "It's a Shame To Whip Your Wife On A Sunday" is an extreme example of misogynist lyricism, it was one of a number of songs that detailed the physical abuse of a female spouse. Indeed, other male artists recorded material that reinforced similar messages. For instance, (George) Riley Puckett's recording of "Nobody's Business If I Do" (Co unissued, 1924) openly defied any intervention in unruly and brutal male behaviour.

Born in Alpharetta, Georgia, blind musical virtuoso Puckett was a very successful solo artist and also part of the legendary Gid Tanner's Skilletlickers. He possessed "a warm, friendly baritone that could take on anything... and make it beautiful" as Tony Russell observed. And yet, whilst Puckett did indeed sing beautifully, the lyrics to "Nobody's Business If I Do" were anything but beautiful: they describe the central narrator's intention to murder his wife *and* a possible other love interest, or perhaps even his own child: "Sunday mornin' gonna wake up crazy/Kill my wife and slay my baby/ Ain't nobody's business if I do."⁶³ There is a sweetness and nonchalance in Puckett's delivery of these lyrics, rendering them all the more unsettling. Although this recording was unissued, it is indicative of a trend of sexist, and at times misogynist lyrics during the 1920s. Moreover, the projection of a devil-may-care kind of masculinity within this song functions as a defiant male statement amid concerns about waning morality. However, Puckett also recorded "You'll Never Miss Your Mother 'Til She's Gone" the same year. As in the case of John Carson, these songs, when viewed collectively reinforce narrow, prescriptive

⁶³ Riley Puckett, "Nobody's business If I Do" Co unissued, 1924.

roles for women and show that Old Time music actually reflected many modern concerns regarding male authority and female propriety.

A year later in another session for Columbia, Riley Puckett waxed the sentimental tear-jerker “Just Break the News to Mother” (Co 15035-D, 1925). He also recorded a meditation on the pitfalls of marriage entitled “I Wish I was Single Again,” (C0 15036-D, 1925) in which his male character berated his wife for embracing consumerist culture and gold-digging tendencies. Whilst songs of spendthrifts, gold-digging wives, and wife-slaying communicated explicitly overt messages of misogyny, songs such as Puckett’s recording of “Just Break the News to Mother” reinforced gender roles in a slightly more nuanced manner, combining sentimental views of maternal love with praise for military action against foreign aggressors.

The song relates a tale in which a young boy runs away to fight in a war and is fatally wounded. His father, a general, stumbles upon him and sheds a tear as the dying boy appeals to all to send his eternal love to his mother at home. That father and son are together away fighting a foreign enemy whilst declaring their undying love for this lady reinforced the concept of woman as the bedrock of the family unit. Moreover, it simultaneously reinforced the traditional concept of men as protectors at a macro, in this case national (since the soldier is fighting for the Union), scale, as well as at a related micro, family, level. Age-old notions of gendered propriety and hierarchy may well prevail throughout the song here. The young man is immortalised as a hero because of his death in battle, whilst the father will return, albeit heartbroken, to an equally distraught, yet loving, housebound wife and mother. Singing in character as the young, dying soldier, Puckett lamented:

While the shot and shell were screaming,
Upon the battlefield,
The boys in blue were fighting,
Their noble flag to shield.

Came a cry from their brave captain,
“Look boys, our flag is down
Who'll volunteer to save it from disgrace?”
“I will,” a young voice shouted,
“I'll bring it back or die”
Then sprang into the thickest of the fray,
Saved the flag, but gave his young life
All for his country's sake
They brought him back and softly heard him say

“Just break the news to mother,
She knows how dear I love her,
And tell her not to wait for me,
For I'm not coming home.

Just say there is no other,
Can take the place of mother,
Then kiss her dear sweet lips for me,
And break the news to her.”

From afar a noted general
Had witnessed this brave deed
“Who saved our flag? Speak up lads
T'was noble, brave, indeed!”
“There he lies , Sir” said the captain,
“He's sinking very fast”
Then slowly turned away to hide a tear
The general in a moment
Knelt down beside the boy
Then gave a cry that touched all hearts that day
“It's my son, my brave young hero
I thought you safe at home.”
“Forgive me, Father, for I ran away.”⁶⁴

Although the lyrics sentimentalise the mother figure, and are in keeping with the concept of mothers as saintly and imperative to the family unit, the dramatization of dialogue between the distraught father and his dying son also reflected relatively new ideas about fatherhood and masculinity. In the period between World War I and

⁶⁴ Riley Puckett, “Just Break The News To Mother,” Co 15035-D, 1925.

World War II, fatherhood, argues Laurence R. Samuel, essentially became “another job for men, with the same kind of effort expected as in one’s career.”⁶⁵ Given this context, the wartime exchange between the two whilst at war thus provides the distraught father with an opportunity to instruct and provide comfort to his dying son. The labelling of the young man wounded in battle as a “brave young hero” reinforces the concept of male-as-warrior, fighting the evils that threaten national safety. The death of a young man capturing his side’s flag in the song’s narrative may well have appealed to white nationalist sensibilities. Whilst the tale is one of tragedy, it nevertheless allows such a death to be lionised, to a degree. In a volume on America in the 1920s, George Mowry notes that it was a decade in which there was an “an obvious need for heroes.”⁶⁶ That the label is given by the boy’s father—a “noted general,” further cements the notion that warfare and idealised masculinity are inextricably linked. However, this is tempered in the narrative, as the father suggests that the boy would be “safe at home” with mother. The song presents a more complex, multifaceted image of fatherhood and the American man.

The multi-dimensional father in “Break The News To Mother” is caring, instructive, and, crucially; a decorated war hero. Indeed, as Ralph LaRossa writes, the “modernization of fatherhood—as a transformational process—was clearly operative at the level of popular culture during the Machine Age.”⁶⁷ And yet, fathers as multi-dimensional as the General are scarce in the lyrics of Old Time recordings of the 1920s. The favoured and oft-praised model of fatherhood can be readily found in Jimmie Rodgers’ recording of “Daddy and Home” (Vi 21757, 1929) in which his male character lamented:

⁶⁵ Laurence R. Samuel, *American Fatherhood: A Cultural History* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 12.

⁶⁶ Mowry, *The Twenties*, 75.

⁶⁷ Ralph LaRossa, *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 198.

I am dreaming tonight of an old southern town,
And the best friend that I ever had,
For I've grown so weary of roaming around,
I'm going back home to my dad.
Your hair has turned to silver,
I know you're fading too,
Daddy, dear ol' Daddy,
I'm coming back to you.⁶⁸

Situating the father figure squarely in a southern location, Rodgers' beautiful voice heartbreakingly described the effects of old-age and infirmity on his ultimate male role-model. And yet, whilst the song explicitly links the concepts of father and home, the overarching impression is that "home" is identified with a generic southern locale rather than a particular four walls and a roof. In this respect, the song appears to say more about the importance of the father in a regional sense, as part of a broader community, rather than in terms of a specific domicile. If a mother's place is in the home, a father's home and the arena in which he could exercise power and authority could be any "old southern town."

Old Time music in the 1920s emphasised family, and not just the importance of the mother figure within that social unit. For instance, the following songs were recorded during this time, "The Daddy Song," "Daddy Won't Have No Easy Rider Here," and "Daddy's Getting Fuzzy."⁶⁹ However, the number of "Daddy" songs recorded during this period falls far short of those that venerated motherhood. Obviously, father figures were also present in many songs that did not mention them in their title. For example, the Andrew Jenkins composition "The Death of Floyd Collins," recorded individually by both Fiddlin' John Carson (OK 40363, 1925) and Vernon Dalhart (Co 15031-D, 1925) featured a "broken-hearted father." Another

⁶⁸ Jimmie Rodgers, "Daddy And Home," Vi 21757, 1928.

⁶⁹ Uncle Bud Landress, "The Daddy Song," Vi 23606, 1929, Dutch Coleman, "Dad's Getting Fuzzy," V0 5414, 1929, Tom Darby and Jimmie Tarlton, "Daddy Won't Have No easy Rider Here," Co unissued, 1928.

Jenkins composition, Vernon Dalhart's "The Dream Of The Miner's Child" (OK 40498, 1925) featured a little girl emotionally pleading with her father "I could never live without you."⁷⁰ Grayson and Whitter's recording of "He Is Coming To Us Dead" (Vi 21139, 1927) told of a father waiting for the return of his dead child. Still, it is broadly suggestive of a bigger trend that there were approximately half the number of songs beginning with the word "Dad" or "Daddy" issued during the 1920s as featured "Mother" or an equivalent in their titles. Commenting on the remarkable sudden presence of the sentimental mother type in American popular culture in the 1920s and 1930s, Victoria Sturtevant argues that:

The overstated deference to mothers and the institution of motherhood is clearly rooted in a sense of nostalgia, the connection of the idealized memory of life in mother's care with the idealized memory of a cultural past that never was. Melodramatic mother-love reaches into notions of the personal and social past, of conservative attachment to traditional familial arrangements. A Victorian characterization of the mother as the angel in the household, the woman on the pedestal, was at the center of patriarchal social thought... The ideology of separate spheres necessary to underscore this affection for the domestic mother figure was being challenged by the "New Woman" of the 1920s and the ways in which middle-class women were increasingly participating in the public sphere as workers, consumers, and political reformers. The saintly "mother" being celebrated in the sentimental rhetoric of popular film and music was a reference to a previous generation.⁷¹

Themes of sentimentalised motherhood within Old Time music often projected a mythologised cultural past that never was. Moreover, those in charge of the marketing of old-time music emphasised that its existence was a natural product of southern heritage. Whilst it is important to remember that many of the mother songs of the 1920s were recorded by southern artists, it is equally important to acknowledge that many of the performers and composers of Old Time music did not,

⁷⁰ Vernon Dalhart, "The Dream Of The Miner's Child," OK 40498, 1925.

⁷¹ Victoria Sturtevant, *A Great Big Girl Like Me: The Films of Marie Dressler* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 71.

and never had, resided in the region. And yet, even in the case of non-southern musicians, marketing personnel operating within the music industry went to great lengths to construct a rural and distinctly southern image for many of these artists. For instance, M. M. Cole Publishing Co. published *Carson J. Robison's World's Collections of Mountain Ballads and Old Time Songs* in 1930 and in doing so reinforced the mid-westerner's importance as a mediator and exemplar of southern mountain culture. As Travis D. Stimeling notes, Carson Robison was a "master of the topical ballad, contributing new songs about shipwrecks and railroad accidents, as well as the author of numerous western standards."⁷² No mention was made that Robison was born in Kansas and had lived and worked as a songwriter in New York in the 1920s. Marketing personnel wanted consumers to view collections such as this as traditional southern mountain music and representative of the region's historic culture. Included in the collection were the songs "Mother," and the murdered-sweetheart ballad "Pearl Bryan."⁷³

The juxtaposition of songs that contain misogynist lyrics with sentimental mother pieces reflected male responses to the complex, vexed, sometimes contradictory nature of southern womanhood. Robison recorded a number of songs that sentimentalised the mother figure, including "Since Mother's Gone" (Ca 8284,

⁷² Travis D. Stimeling, introduction to Paul Hobson "Radio's Hillbilly King, Carson Robison, who is, with his Pioneers, a regular attraction for Oxydol every Sunday from Luxembourg, Lyons, and Normandy, tells us in this interview how he writes his world-famous songs" (1938) interview from unknown magazine reproduced in ed. Travis D. Stimeling, *The Country Music Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) pp. 51-54, 51.

⁷³ This practice was commonplace. Robison was one of a number of New York-based musicians who regularly wrote and recorded "southern" hillbilly music. Other songwriters and performers including Frank Luther, Frankie Marvin, Arthur Fields, and Bob Miller made significant contributions to the creation of a southern hillbilly aesthetic from northern centres. See Patrick Huber, "The New York Sound: Citybilly Recording Artists and the Creation of Hillbilly Music, 1924-1932," *Journal of American Folklore*, 127, 504, (Spring 2014), pp. 140-158, 142. See also *Carson J. Robison's World's Collections of Mountain Ballads and Old Time Songs* (Chicago, IL: M. M. Cole Publishing Co. 1930) Source, MTSU Center For Popular Music, Collection: Rare Books and Scores, Item ID: SP-040830a.

1928), “A Mother’s Plea” (Ca, 8288, 1928), and “Mother Was a Lady Or (If Jack Were Only Here)” (Ed 52483, 1928) with frequent musical collaborative partner and fellow Kansan Frank Luther. And yet, like the work of many other artists, the radiance and wholesome purity of the mother figure in Old Time recordings jarred with the less-than-angelic and barely tolerable women in other songs that formed part of the artists’ collective repertoire. It would, be reductive to brand Robison a misogynist. However, he was a man of his time. The songwriter revealed in an interview that he wanted his son to follow in his footsteps as a musician but would rather his daughter settled for “a general education and marriage,” thereby demonstrating narrow, prescriptive expectations of women at the time.⁷⁴

Old Time music’s appeal reflected, in part, a desire to return to the once-solid foundations of white patriarchy, under the pretence of romantic notions of purity, innocence, and wholesome family values. Advertising materials for the music reinforced these ideals. However, before the Old Time boom, historic representations of mountain inhabitants in American popular culture were largely negative. In order to fully appreciate the cultural implications of the change in representation of southern mountain people in Old Time music advertising, it is important to consider early stereotypes of the region, and the implications they had upon the American imagination.

Currier and Ives’ lithograph entitled *Arkansas Traveller: Scene in the Back Woods of Arkansas* (1870) depicts a traveller’s encounter with rural folk. The traveller, whose origin is unclear, is dressed in finery and mounted on horseback, and is engaged in dialogue with the rural inhabitants—who are dressed in comparatively shabby attire. The man of the house sits, playing fiddle, whilst a lady stares out from

⁷⁴ Stimeling, Introduction to Hobson’s “Radio Hillbilly King,” *The Country Music Reader*, 53.

a rural shack with many children around her. Above the property hangs a plaque that simply reads “whisky,” whilst a shotgun rests against an open door. In the background a mountain scene looms.⁷⁵ This image trades on many stereotypical ideas of rural southern life. The whisky and gun suggest the centrality of hard-drinking and violence to mountain culture. However, that the lady is pictured with her brood whilst her man sits and plays fiddle also reflects historic ideas about traditional gender roles. Other stereotypical and often quite fallacious notions of racially pure, white mountain folk (such as the characters in the lithograph) most likely derived from local “color literature” of the nineteenth century.⁷⁶ Indeed, folklorist Archie Green argues that to “search for the hillbilly musician’s ambivalent roots” will inevitably lead back to “squaw men, renegades, and half-breeds” – his language reflecting his appreciation of the racial indeterminacy of putative white mountain culture.⁷⁷ And yet, in 1920s Old Time music advertising, negative physical representations of southern mountain folk were conspicuous by their absence.

During the Nineteenth Century some Appalachian musicians were drawn “in unusual clothing in antique costumes to symbolize their quaintness.” This kind of representation, Green argues, projected mountain musicians as inheritors of “Anglo-

⁷⁵ Cutler & Ives, *Arkansas Traveller: Scene in the Back Woods of Arkansas*, 1870. Image available to view in Library of Congress’s Prints and Photographs Online Catalog PPOC, image stable url, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b49821>. Also, for more on the cultural impact of this painting (and others of a similar nature), see, Sarah Brown, “The Arkansas Traveller: Southwest Humor on Canvas” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 46, Winter 1987, 348-375.

⁷⁶ For more on this literary genre and its impact on national perceptions of mountain inhabitants, see Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 3-32. For detailed analysis of the Hillbilly stereotype in American popular culture from 1700-1920, see Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13-70. For further reading on the exchange between southern mountain culture (real and fallacious) and the American imagination, see also Jerry Wayne Williamson, *Hillbilly Land: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁷⁷ Archie Green “Portraits of Appalachian Musicians: Graphics #49” *JEMF Quarterly*, Vol. 15, 1979, 102.

Saxon or Elizabethan “racial” memory’ and at times the Appalachian songster or instrumentalist was depicted as a “grotesque buffoon.””⁷⁸ The mountain folk depicted on the cover of Old Time music catalogues certainly did not look like grotesque buffoons. However, the illustrations on the covers of these catalogues did show subjects dressed in old-fashioned clothing. Given the rapidly changing cultural landscape of 1920s America, the depiction of hill people in old-fashioned clothing communicated the message that the music represented tradition, and was the product of a past age that was in some way favourable or noble. The men and women in Old Time artwork were dancing and smiling, thus projecting a harmonious view of gender-relations. The characters, much like the musicians who sometimes graced the catalogues were not “characterized by marked peculiarities of the anatomical frame” as essayist William Wallace Harney once wrote of mountain inhabitants.⁷⁹

Significant efforts were made to ensure that many white rural mountain musicians looked different from the image of the rube or hillbilly stereotype that featured in earlier literary and pictorial accounts and had a steady grip on popular imaginations. These images of well-kempt stars in staged promotional shots and the illustrations that adorned Old Time record catalogues and song folios of the 1920s offered a huge contrast to early depictions of mountain folk as primitive, racially suspect and genetically imperfect undesirables.

Showing mountain people, real, contrived, or illustrated, as healthy folk during this period coincided with an era in which scientific racism and eugenics flourished. Briefly defined, eugenics was a programme that sought to create genetically sound, all-American- White Anglo-Saxon citizens and often focussed on the backwoods and

⁷⁸ Green, “Portraits,” 103-104.

⁷⁹ Will Wallace Harney “A Strange Land and Peculiar People” *Lippincott’s Magazine*, No. 12, October 1873, 30-31.

mountain South as a place where dysgenic communities, riddled with intellectual, physical and moral problems, were commonplace. Old Time music promoters were eager to counter these stereotypes by creating positive images of their performers and their potential audiences that emphasised a kind of down-home respectability that was rooted in healthy rural living and a fierce commitment to family, community, faith and traditional social, including racial and gender, values.⁸⁰ Eugenists promoted the engineering of genetically sound, white, all-American citizenry by selecting only those deemed fit enough, morally, racially as well as physically, to reproduce. In the midst of the uncertainty and angst of the 1920s, eugenics potentially appealed, as Paul Lombardo points out, “to anyone who lived with fears of a country in decline, facing a death spiral of impending degeneration.”⁸¹ In this context, advertising materials functioned as a kind of salve to anxieties over racial purity and the perceived loss of white American identity.

In 1924, the cover artwork on Victor’s catalogue for “Olde Time Fiddlin’ Tunes” embodied the promotion of old-fashioned values and the pursuit of wholesome, white Americanism, depicting a scene very similar to barn-dance paintings that were popular in the nineteenth century.⁸² A fiddler sits upon a makeshift podium whilst perfectly fit and healthy-looking people in old-fashioned attire dance. A gleeful expression adorns the face of one particular reveller whilst a young couple in the centre of the image gaze into each other’s eyes. The scene is one

⁸⁰ In some respects, this tact reflected fears held by eugenists who placed a premium on family and wholesome Americanism. Gregory Michael Dorr contends that Virginians “used eugenics to navigate between the extremes of New South “modernism” and Old South “traditionalism.” By maintaining traditional race, class, and gender hierarchies, eugenics facilitated the southern embrace of positivist science and industrial economics in a state otherwise opposed to such innovation.” Gregory Michael Dorr, *Segregation's Science: Eugenics and Society in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 7.

⁸¹ Paul A. Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck V. Bell* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), xiii.

⁸² “Copy of Victor Talking Machine Company Catalog,” UNC Libraries, stable url, <http://exhibits.lib.unc.edu/items/show/2841>, accessed: 02/05/2014.

of salubrity. In his analysis of the image, Jeff Titon observes that “the rosy cheeks, the outdated clothes, and the pleasant, healthy-looking people were the pure products of the natural environment which produced hillbilly music.”⁸³ Though not as lavish, Paramount’s 1927 catalogue of “Olde Time Tunes” also depicted a scene that drew upon the same imagery.⁸⁴ These images of Old Time music contributed to its status as a product of bygone tradition and folk-people, and arguably allowed misogyny, amongst other issues, to be preserved and sustained amid the social anxieties of the 1920s. Indeed, much of the artwork and music intersects with notions of perfectly healthy mountain folk, ideas of racial purity and the South during the 1920s. Of course, the images of rosy-cheeked hill people suggested that they were the product of impeccable, pure genetic bloodlines. In this respect, the emphasis on familial values, allusions to correct parenting (prescriptive gender roles) and proper sexual behaviour in Old Time music lyrics and marketing, therefore become central to the idea of a more fixed and stable past.

It should not be inferred however, that Old Time music functioned as a simple conduit for eugenic and white supremacist ideologies. Nevertheless, the characters depicted in this artwork most likely appealed to the sensibilities of those who hankered after a time and place seemingly unthreatened by the advances of modernity. Indeed, as Laura Lovett stresses, the “inextricable mixture of nostalgia and modernism helped mask the scale of modernizing changes and lessened their impact by clothing them in the familiarity of the past.”⁸⁵ Although Lovett’s allusion to clothing the new in the old is metaphorical, the characters in Old Time artwork are actually depicted in the old, antiquated garments of yesteryear. The popularity of this

⁸³ Titon, *Early Downhome*, 238.

⁸⁴ Paramount 1927 catalogue cover as reproduced in Titon, *Early Downhome*, 244.

⁸⁵ Laura L. Lovett, *Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890-1938* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 11.

music and the use of such character types in Old Time advertising are certainly not solely and inextricably linked to the growth of eugenic and white supremacist ideologies, nor vice versa. And yet, the emphasis on traditional concepts of motherhood and healthy white Americanism is clearly a common feature of Old Time music lyrics and advertising, Klan rhetoric, and eugenic propaganda. Indeed, as Lovett contends:

In the hands of eugenicists and other would-be reformers...nostalgia did more than reinforce existing forms of white patriarchal privilege. Using nostalgia made significant social, institutional, and political reforms possible by wrapping them in a vision of a past social order. Nostalgic ideology thus became a powerful tool for early twentieth-century reformers, especially with regard to reforms involving the family and reproduction.⁸⁶

That Old Time fiddling catalogues presented white, healthy rosy-cheeked folk may well have been influenced, in part, by the presence of eugenic ideology in southern society (and America more broadly) during this period. As Thomas C. Leonard notes, “eugenics and race science recast spiritual or moral failure as biological inferiority and offered scientific legitimacy to established American hierarchies of race, gender, class, and intellect.”⁸⁷ During the 1920s, eugenicists organised “Fitter Family Contests” in the southern and eastern states. Such contests generally took place at state fairs. Their function was to promote the importance of good breeding, awarding those who had an impeccable blood lineage. These contests were “designed to confirm that the best blood is to be found in the United States, has North European origins and translates into the beauty and “fitness” of the Anglo-Saxon descendants.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 12.

⁸⁷ Thomas C. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics & American Economics in the Progressive Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), xii.

⁸⁸ Ewa Barbara Luczak, *Breeding and Eugenics in the American Literary Imagination: Heredity Rules in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 25.

An archival image of the 1924 Georgia State Fair held in Savannah shows seemingly perfectly healthy and happy white people of varying age and sex posing in front of a barn with the slogan “Fitter Families for Georgia” emblazoned across the top.⁸⁹ Winners of such contests were awarded medals that bore the slogan “Yea, I have a goodly heritage” above an engraving of two parents and a child.⁹⁰ The emphasis on established, nominally pure bloodlines could not be clearer in these materials. The differences between the idealised folk in the eugenics photograph and the characters shown on the covers of old-time music catalogues are minimal. Indeed, apart from the specific musical marketing devices that accompanied the announcements of new recordings in the press, they are strikingly similar, suggesting one dynamic behind the promotion and popularity of the Old Time genre, which depended heavily on the projection of wholesome public image.

The perfectly healthy figures that graced the many catalogue covers suggest that those responsible for publicising and marketing the music worked hard to revise what mountain folk stood for and represented in the popular imagination, purifying them of prejudicial intimations of mental, moral, and physical imperfections. As Karen Cox notes, advertising companies “tended to see consumers as in a class beneath them—people who needed advertisers to show them how to raise their own standards of consumption.”⁹¹ It is likely that this strategy served to increase sales figures by appealing to a broader demographic. Almost certainly, it was intended to appeal to those who saw the nobility of a romanticised old agrarian South as an

⁸⁹ Photographic image of Fitter Families Contestants at Georgia State Fair, Savannah, 1924, source: American Philosophical Society, Image #190, digitised by Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory and viewable at stable url,

<http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/index2.html?tag=190>, accessed 17/03/2016.

⁹⁰ Photographic image of “Yea, I have a Goodly Heritage” medal awarded to Fitness Family Contest Winners, circa 1925, source: American philosophical Society, Image #1564 digitised by Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory and viewable at stable url,

<http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/index2.html?tag=1564>, accessed 17/03/2016.

⁹¹ Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie*, 39.

alluring ideal in times of regional and national uncertainty.⁹² For many, the region served less as a repository of backwardness and ignorance, but as a reassuringly stable counterpoint to the frantic, urban, industrial, highly commercial and increasingly diverse tenor of American society with all its attendant social upheaval. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one group that fervently believed in the righteousness of the traditions of the Old-South was the Ku Klux Klan.

Anxieties regarding women, racial purity and the future health of American citizens and American values loomed large and were intricately interconnected within the ideologies of eugenicists and right-wing populists who often shared similar beliefs and at times stood for the same causes. Moreover, these themes are present in the lyrics to a number of Old Time recordings, and advertising materials. Like eugenicists, the Klan was also anxious about racial integrity, which dovetailed with fears concerning improper feminine conduct, especially sexual conduct. High-ranking Klan officials latched onto eugenics as a means of scientifically justifying their views. For instance, Grand Dragon, Hiram Wesley Evans, told *The Forum* in 1925:

It is rather curious that science recently has been finding good grounds for supporting these very intolerances of ours. It has found, for example, that racial mixtures are unstable, and that the mongrel offspring of such mixtures is below the standard of either parent. It has shown, in addition, the great fundamental differences between races, and that the resistance to change in those fundamentals is very strong. It has emphasized the importance of heredity and inborn characteristics as against education. All this disproves the old hope that education could be depended upon to make Americans overnight of the most diverse people. It proves that the alien's ideas, which are so contradictory to

⁹²In an interview with Douglas Green in 1974, Satherley stated: "All I was I interested in was, can I get this to the American public in general, and can I make a song that will suit especially the southerners to get this thing started?" Country Music Foundation Oral History Project, Interview with Arthur Satherley, Interviewer: Douglas B. Green, Nashville, Tennessee, October 17, 1974, item number, OH165.

ours, are a part of him and will remain a persistent danger to us. It justifies our racial exclusiveness.⁹³

Not only were “the alien’s ideas” a persistent danger, but transgressive female behaviour (which was itself an alien idea in the minds of white, conservative, patriarchs) also threatened male authority and racial stability. In many ways, women’s modest advances and rapidly-changing social mores were equally damaging to a mentality that vehemently defended the importance of tradition to the moral fabric of the South, and America at large. “Racial mixtures” would spell doom for both right-wing populists and eugenicists alike. In this respect, the sentimentalising of exemplary stay-at-home mothers and the punishment of transgressive women in Old Time recordings of the 1920s suggested that the genre mirrored deep-rooted fears regarding gendered and racial issues on a national scale.

To conclude, the proliferation of sentimental mother and sexist and also misogynist songs during the 1920s mirrored anxieties regarding gendered-power struggles on a national level. The fact that non-southern professionals such as doctors and Vice-chancellors publicly advocated brutal control of women between the 1910s-1920s demonstrates reactionary resistance to the shifting dynamics of gendered power-relations during this period. And yet, record label executives and marketing personnel pitched Old Time music as a distinctly southern musical idiom, rich in historic tradition, thereby suggesting that recurring lyrical themes and tropes were the exclusive and acceptable cultural property of a region and time somehow dislocated from mainstream American society. However, these themes were also pervasive in the rhetoric and lyrics to the music of right-wing populist groups like the Klan that staunchly defended the traditions of the Old South in which white,

⁹³ Hiram Wesley Evans, “The Klan: Defender of Americanism,” *The Forum*, December, 1925, pp. 801-814, 810.

male patriarchal rule was more fixed and stable. The importance of familial values within Old Time music intersected with Klan ideas about motherhood and feminine propriety. Moreover, the illustrations of perfectly healthy mountain folk on the covers of old-time fiddling music catalogues, although dressed in quaint attire, nevertheless gesture towards a salubrious, rural southern culture that held appeal because of its apparent link to white Anglo-Saxon heritage.

Whilst not communicating identical messages to the photographs taken in support of eugenicists, the similarities and linkages among them are not entirely tenuous. Interest in Anglo-Saxon blood lineage greatly intensified during this period. That southern mountain musicians and non-southern artists appeared alike in publicity materials as well-groomed, smartly-dressed purveyors of a distinctly southern (and at times, constructed so) musical idiom is revealing. Record label executives and marketing personnel 1920s sanitised, to an extent, the image of the mountaineer for financial gain. The mountain musicians did not resemble the grotesque physical subjects of Will Wallace Harney's essay. Nor did they appear to resemble the half-breeds detailed by Archie Green in his exploration of the origin of mountain stereotypes. The popularity of this music reflected many Americans' nostalgic desire to return to a mythologised rural past and place during periods of intense social and cultural upheaval. Central to much of the music, and certainly to the real world, was the importance of respectable women who dutifully and quite healthily tended to family obligations and prescribed gender-roles. Those who deviated; "domesticated" wives included; paid the price. The sanctified mothers and, by extension, the chastised transgressive females of the 1920s that many of these songs describe were representative of the victims of the sort of deep-rooted misogynistic terror and sometimes violence that historians such as Glenn Feldman

have found central to many examples of right-wing populism. The industry was disproportionately populated by men. Although the general absence of women on Old Time recordings suggests that the industry was accidentally or maybe even consciously complicit in silencing women's perspectives, as Chapter Five reveals, a small number of female artists created public voices of female resistance to themes of male control and gender profiling.

Chapter Two

“That Notoriety Woman Is Known All Over the South”: Saints, Sinners, and Female Transgression in “Race Records” of the 1920s

Historian Erin Chapman argues that in the 1920s a collective of New Negro progressives “worked diligently to disseminate a modern, rational analysis of the race problem and its solution.” For many of the leading intellectuals involved in the New Negro movement, the subject of “race motherhood” took on a special urgency. Whilst the overarching thrust of race motherhood was to attain respectability and acceptance for African Americans in broader American society, it was nevertheless problematic. As Chapman notes, “professional racial advocates, sociologists, psychologists, ministers, teachers, and a rising army of social workers,” associated with the New Negro movement “placed a premium on women’s maternal roles in ideally patriarchal black families and communities and obfuscated the need for the redress of black women’s particular oppression.”⁹⁴ A number of commercially recorded sacred songs of this time reinforced this sexism and dominant patriarchal

⁹⁴ Erin Chapman, *Prove It on Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 55. See also Eileen Boris’s chapter “The Power of Motherhood: Black and White Activist Women Redefine the “Political”” in which she argues “Because black women stood outside the boundaries of “true womanhood” as defined by the dominant culture, by being black and descended from slaves (even if their actual ancestors were sometimes free and often white), black activists references to “highest womanhood,” to “true motherhood,” appeared to subvert a social script written for them by the larger culture that sought to deny them the possibility of fulfilling conventional female roles such as nurturing, motherhood, and family maintenance. That is, words that seem to reflect the hegemonic culture, that seemed to suggest a consciousness steeped in a limited domesticity, in fact, challenged that culture.” Eileen Boris, “The Power of Motherhood: Black and White Activist Women Redefine the “Political”” in eds. Seth Koven and Sonya Michael, *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 213-239, 217. See also Jayne Morris-Crowther, *The Political Activities of Detroit Clubwomen in the 1920s: A Challenge and a Promise* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 64.

ideology. Labels recorded and sold sermons in which African American preachers lambasted transgressive women for various aspects of their personal conduct, including their avid and sometimes risqué consumerism, implying that such women were dangerous and a hindrance to black progress. Similarly, in recorded Blues, many bluesmen regularly attacked transgressive female counterparts with vitriol. If historians and other commentators have regularly stressed, perhaps even to the point of exaggeration, the historic separation of sacred and secular facets of black culture, the shared sexism of many male Blues and religious recordings revealed significant common ground.⁹⁵ These recordings reflected to some extent, a disjuncture between the more conservative ideologies of race leaders for whom a politics of respectability was often central to their plans for racial advance, and the attitudes, preferences and habits of many lower-class African Americans lower economic status and class, who, though often attracted to ideas of racial uplift and the doctrines of respectability preached in their churches and by community leaders, sometimes found themselves living lives on the moral as well as the economic margins of both black and American society. And yet, both race leaders—especially male leaders—and popular African American recording artists—again, especially male performers—and their mass audiences had in common a tendency to prescribe extremely narrow, conservative, highly traditional roles to African American women. This chapter argues that whilst the policing of black female sexuality in “race record” lyrics, sacred and secular, did not necessarily always mirror the agenda of New Negroes

⁹⁵ Whilst some scholars create rigid divisions between the sacred and the secular, others note the interpolation of these cultures and their interplay in recorded music. See for instance Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 15. Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (London: UCL Press, 1998), 184-185. For commentary on the creation of false stylistic divisions between African American sacred and secular music, see Horace Clarence Boyer, *The Golden Age of Gospel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 193-194.

and their pursuit of respectability through race motherhood, the records nevertheless reflected gendered tensions in black communities (of all classes) in the uplift movement that were often exacerbated by the forces of legal and habitual racism.⁹⁶

Race motherhood served to devalue some aspects of black women's identities that did not meet with the specific criteria laid out by nominal progressives attempting to uplift the race. These progressives thought that black women who did not achieve or even attempt to achieve the mothering ideal were irresponsible.

Whilst New Negro Progressives generally took great care not to openly criticise African American women, their emphasis on the importance of African American women's roles as mothers and teachers provided the foundations for a prescriptive model of ideal womanhood within black American communities. In the long struggle for equal status and respectability, many prominent African American thinkers and intellectuals, male and female, stressed the importance of motherhood and home-making as a collective ideal through which African Americans could elevate the status of the race. Writing in 1920, leading race reformer and intellectual W. E. B. Dubois opined:

As I look about me today in this veiled world of mine, despite the noisier and more spectacular advance of my brothers, I instinctively feel and know that it is the five million women of my race who really count. Black women (and women whose grandmothers were black) are today furnishing our teachers; they are the main pillars of those social settlements which we call churches; and they have with small doubt raised three-fourths of our church property. If we have today, as seems likely, over a billion dollars of accumulated goods, who shall say how much of it has been wrung from the hearts of servant girls

⁹⁶ For a seminal account of the uplift movement and dimensions of class, see Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1-18. For added context see also Natanya Duncan's PhD thesis on women of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in which she shows how "UNIA women sought to have men stand in the forefront of the quest for self-empowerment, and believed in the value of the contributions of all people of color regardless of socio-economic status and engaged in a public battle to accomplish their aims." Natanya Duncan, *The 'Efficient Womanhood' of the Universal Negro Improvement Association: 1919-1930*, PhD thesis, University of Florida, 2009, 11.

and washerwomen and women toilers in the fields? As makers of two million homes these women are today seeking in marvellous ways to show forth our strength and beauty and our conception of the truth.⁹⁷

DuBois' reverence for black womanhood is evident enough and was shared by many contemporaries who acknowledged the significance of the relentless work of black women in sustaining the early NAACP.⁹⁸ Moreover, his emphasis on education, the Church and home-making in relation to African American women is indicative and typical of attempts by many respected black scholars and leaders, particularly those who subscribed to DuBois's belief in the role of an elite black vanguard, the talented-tenth, to improve the status of the race during the early twentieth-century. However, it was black women who would shoulder this burden of responsibility. DuBois's contemporary and leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) Marcus Garvey approached black women's political issues in an entirely different manner. As Manning Marable observes, Garvey's approach was a "curious mixture of romanticism, sexism and race nationalism."⁹⁹ On the subject of women,

⁹⁷ W. E. Burghardt DuBois, *Darkwater: Voices From Within The Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 179, digitised version available at stable url: <https://archive.org/stream/darkwatervoicesf00duborich#page/n5/mode/2up>, accessed: 20/01/2017. For more on DuBois and his attitudes towards women and social change, see Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The Margin as the Center of a Theory of History: African American Women, Social Change, and the Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois" in eds. Bernard W. Bell, Emily Grosholz, and James B. Stewart, *W.E.B. Du Bois on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 111-140. See also Amy Helene Kirschke, "DuBois and "The Crisis" Magazine: Imaging Women and Family," *Notes in the History of Art*, 24, 4, (Summer 2005), pp. 35-45.

⁹⁸ Nikki Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women's Activism from World War I to the New Deal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 120 Peter F. Lau, *Democracy Rising: South Carolina and the Fight for Black Equality since 1865* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 98. Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 149.

⁹⁹ Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy and Society* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), 73. As Lisa G. Materson notes, although Garveyite men promised protection of and respect towards poor black women, these promises often "turned into paternalistic privileges." See Lisa G. Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race: Black Women and Electoral Politics in Illinois, 1877-1932* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 143. For more on male privilege in the UNIA, see also Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American*

Garvey offered the following, “She makes one happy, then miserable. You are to her kind, then unkind. Constant yet inconstant. Thus we have WOMAN. No real man can do without her.”¹⁰⁰ Whilst Garvey appeared to stress the importance of black womanhood, his final words essentially made clear that women’s importance hinged on their ability to make “real men.”¹⁰¹

Although W. E. B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey’s discourse on black womanhood and racial advancement differed greatly, both placed an emphasis on motherhood as central to their agenda for black progress. As Martin Summers notes, Garveyites “discursively deployed the image of domestic femininity against which to construct an individual and collective gender identity that was rooted in ideas of production and patriarchy.”¹⁰² However, attempts at racial progress through black women as idealised mothers were not voiced solely by prominent black men. The

Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 39-41.

¹⁰⁰ Marcus Garvey, “Woman,” in ed. Amy Jacques Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey* (1923) (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 7.

¹⁰¹ A case that Duncan argues in *The Efficient Womanhood* throughout.

¹⁰² Martin Summers, *Manliness and its Discontents: The Black Middle Class & the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 112. Summers also contends that for Garveyites, “the representations of manhood within the frameworks of militarism and production and womanhood within the paradigm of domesticity and motherhood were motivated by the imperatives of nation and empire building. Of course women in the UNIA were not completely reduced to the role of healers and nurturers, evident in the militarized Universal African Motor Corps, which was commanded and staffed mainly by women”, 138. See also Barbara Bair’s comments that although “the preamble Garvey wrote for the UNIA Constitution spoke of the fatherhood of God, the movement had an attraction to Marianism that was in accordance with Garvey’s Catholicism. The UNIA’s veneration for Black womanhood, the strong spiritual and political meanings attached to mothering and motherhood, and the frequent rhetorical association of both Mary, the Mother of God and the crucified Jesus with suffering and self-sacrifice were all manifested in the 1924 UNIA convention in New York.” Barbara Bair, ““Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Her Hands Unto God”: Laura Kofey and the Vision of Redemption in the Garvey Movement” in eds. Susan Juster and Lisa MacFarlane, *A Mighty Baptism: Race, Gender, and the Creation of American Protestantism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 38-64, 42. See also N. Natanya Duncan, “Princess Laura Kofey and the Reverse Atlantic Experience,” in eds. Brian Ward, Martyn Bone and William A. Link, *The American South and the Atlantic World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013), pp. 218-238; Michele Mitchell, “What a Pure, Healthy, Unified Race Can Accomplish”: Collective Reproduction and the Sexual Politics of Black Nationalism” in eds. Adolph Reed and Kenneth W. Warren, *Renewing Black Intellectual History: The Ideological and Material Foundations of African American Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 158-183.

notion that black motherhood was the route to respectability had been championed by several notable black female reformers for decades. In 1892, Anna Julia Cooper wrote in her monograph *A Voice From the South*:

Woman, Mother, your responsibility is one that might make angels tremble and fear to take hold! To trifle with it, to ignore or misuse it, is to treat lightly the most sacred and solemn trust ever confided by God to human kind. The training of children is a task on which an infinity of weal or woe depends.¹⁰³

Although Cooper “eschewed mastery as an ideal” as Vivian M. May notes, she nevertheless engaged with ““master narratives,” such as prevailing notions of civilization, gender roles, or racial uplift.”¹⁰⁴ She believed, like others, that women should bear the responsibility as providers of moral edification. This ideology remained firmly entrenched in discourse concerning racial uplift and African American women’s duties throughout the 1920s and later. In 1920, black women’s activist and social visionary Mary McLeod Bethune wrote the following:

The education of the Negro girl must embrace a larger appreciation for god citizenship in the home. Our girls must be taught cleanliness, beauty and thoughtfulness and their application in making home life possible. For proper home life provides the proper atmosphere for life everywhere else. The ideals of home must not forever be talked about, they must be living factors built into the everyday educational experiences of our girls.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice From the South* (Xenia: The Aldine Printing House, 1892), 22, digitised copy available at North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, stable url, www.docsouth.unc.edu, accessed: 20/01/2017. See also Mary Church Terrell’s speech “The Progress of Colored Women” in which Terrell stated “Believing that it is only through the home that a people can become really good and truly great, The National Association of Colored Women has entered that domain. Homes, more homes, better homes, purer homes is the text upon which our have been and will be preached. Through mother’s meetings, which are a special feature of the work planned by the Association, much useful information in everything pertaining to the home will be disseminated...And so throughout the country we are working vigorously and conscientiously to establish Mother’ Congress in every community in which our women may be found.” Mary Church Terrell, “The Progress of Colored Women” (Washington: Smith Brothers, 1898), 10, digitized version available at stable url, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/lcrbmrp.t0a13>, accessed: 20/07/2017.

¹⁰⁴ Vivian M. May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 4.

¹⁰⁵ Mary McLeod Bethune, “A Philosophy of Education For Negro Girls” (1920) in eds. Audrey Thomas McCluskey and Elaine M. Smith, *Mary Mcleod Bethune: Building A Better World, Essays and Selected Documents* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 85.

Whilst the education of African American women was of primary importance to Bethune, she, like others, also emphasised the importance of women's role as mothers and teachers as a means of attaining respectability in American society.

Educator and activist Elise Johnson McDougald also praised black women whilst acknowledging the importance of their roles as mothers,

One cannot resist the temptation to pause for a moment and pay tribute to these Negro mothers. And to call attention to the service she is rendering to the nation, in her struggle against great odds to educate and care for one group of the country's children. If the mothers of the race should ever be honoured by the state or federal legislation, the artist's imagination will find a more inspiring subject in the modern Negro mother—self-directed but as loyal and tender as the much extolled, yet pitiable black mammy of slavery days.¹⁰⁶

Indeed, whilst these women fought for equal status on behalf of their communities, firmly embedded within much of the discourse on black women and respectability was a patriarchal subtext. If these themes were frequent in discourse about racial uplift during the 1920s, they could also be found readily in many recordings made by black males at the time, reflecting at times the relationship among popular music, the politics of racial uplift, male power, and female propriety. In sacred music, motherhood reigned supreme, whilst transgressions were chastised. In secular music like Country Blues, transgressive women were at times simultaneously chastised and praised.

In black publications of the period, many other leaders fervently championed the importance of women as respectable mothers and teachers within their communities. As Anne Stavney argues, frequent tributes to black womanhood were “intended to foster a sense of black communal pride and unity during a period of cultural humiliation. That is, to celebrate the black woman's virtues and to praise her

¹⁰⁶ Elise Johnson McDougald, “The Task of Negro Womanhood” in ed. Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (1925) (New York: Touchstone edition, 1997), pp. 369-384, 371-372.

as a model of True Womanhood served to counter-act prevailing stereotypes of the immoral black woman.”¹⁰⁷

This idealised concept of black womanhood built on earlier models that yoked racial advance to notions of respectability for which black women were largely responsible. In a December 1912 editorial for *The Crisis* magazine entitled “The Black Mother,” DuBois appealed: “let the colored mother of today build her own statue, and let it be the four walls of her own unsullied home.”¹⁰⁸ Although DuBois and other prominent African American men highlighted the “unique qualities black women have developed while surviving in a hostile environment,” it is equally true and highly significant, that they also praised them for more feminine characteristics. As Anne Stavney notes, the characteristics in question included “purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity”—in other words, traditional roles in which women were expected not only to live chastely, but ensured that they also remained subservient to men and fulfilled their duties in the home.¹⁰⁹

Crucially, the perceived ideal role for race mothers was to attain respectability through prescribed roles that adhered to pervasive mainstream American values and standards of propriety. Indeed, as Reiland Rabaka notes, the emphasis on “conceptions of womanhood, wifehood, and motherhood, closely mirrored the views and values (i.e., the elitism, genteelism, and Victorianism) of upper-class and middle class white women at the turn of the century.”¹¹⁰ This placed a tremendous amount of pressure on African American women. Erika Baldt stresses that black American

¹⁰⁷ Anne Stavney, ““Mothers of Tomorrow”: The New Negro Renaissance and the Politics of Maternal Representation,” *African American Review*, 32, 4 (Winter, 1998), pp. 533-561, 536.

¹⁰⁸ W. E. B. DuBois’ “The Black Mother” *The Crisis*, Vol. 5, No.2, December, 1912, digitised version available at stable url: <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/civil-rights/crisis/1200-crisis-v05n02-w026.pdf>, accessed: 20/01/2017.

¹⁰⁹ Stavney, “Mothers of Tomorrow” 537

¹¹⁰ Reiland Rabaka, *Hip Hop’s Amnesia: From Blues and the Black Women’s Club Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Movement* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 24.

women were expected to bear the burden of racial advancement “by creating a stable environment from which husbands and children could go forth to change America’s perceptions of those it had formerly enslaved.” As Baldt shows, in the wake of abolition, motherhood “became a tool with which African Americans sought to change their fate.”¹¹¹

Given the prevalence of this ideology, it was almost inevitable that the songs exalting the diligently caring matriarch would resonate throughout the homes of phonograph owners during the 1920s. In 1923, an ensemble known as The Kentucky Trio recorded “Mother’s Religion” as well as “Lord I Want To Be A Christian” for the OKeh label at a session held in Chicago. Others followed. A. C Forehand and Blind Mamie Forehand recorded “Mother’s Prayer” for Victor in Memphis, Tennessee in 1927 and the following year Blind Joe Taggart recorded “Mother’s Love” alongside “Religion Is Something Within You” at a session for Paramount in Chicago. As with some of the old-time recordings covered in Chapter One, the link between motherhood and domesticated saintliness is clear enough in the titles, although on occasion Blues recordings such as Lottie Beaman’s “Wayward Girl Blues” reinforced these values through the female voice:

I’ve got the blues, on my mother’s knee,
And I know, she’s got the blues for me,
I’ve been thinking all day, thinking of the past,
And I’m thinking of my mother last.

I received a letter, what do you suppose it read?
Said come home, your poor mother’s dead,
Said I grabbed a train, I went home a-flying,
She wasn’t dead, but she was slowly dying.

¹¹¹ Erika Baldt “Jesse Fauset’s *Comedy: American Style*” in eds. Verena Theile and Mary Drews, *Reclaiming Home, Remembering Motherhood, Rewriting History: African American and Afro-Caribbean Women’s Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 93. See also Stavney, who argues that “Special feminine qualities suited black women for motherhood, and by becoming good mothers and creating a good home life, they advanced the race. As woman uplifts herself, she uplifts her people.” Stavney, “Mothers of Tomorrow,” 539.

Said run here daughter, fall down on your knees,
Won't you sing "Nearer My God to Thee,"
Fell down on my knees, I begin to moan,
Yes dear mother, I'll try to sing that song.¹¹²

As was also the case in many white American communities of the early twentieth-century, the mother figure held a special place in African American religious life. Moreover, as with many old-time recordings of white southern roots music, black sacred music of the era regularly promoted these ideals. This is very apparent in the early Gospel offerings from artists such as Blind Willie Johnson, Blind Joe Taggart, and Washington Phillips. Johnson and Phillips hailed from Texas, and Taggart is thought to be a native of South Carolina.¹¹³ A number of their recordings reflect the significance of black motherhood in sacred life during the period in which they initially enjoyed commercial success. During the 1910s and 1920s, African American evangelists working on behalf of The Church Of God In Christ, (COGIC) established congregations in Dallas, Houston, and Fort Worth.¹¹⁴ Capitalising on traditional conceptions of motherhood, COGIC women, argues Anthea Butler, "carved a niche of spiritual and temporal power for themselves within a black patriarchy."¹¹⁵ This negotiation of power and purity created tension "among the women, their men and outsiders."¹¹⁶ The recordings of Blind Willie Johnson, Blind Joe Taggart, and Washington Phillips constitute important social texts which

¹¹² Lottie Beaman, "Wayward Girl Blues," Ge-6607, 1928.

¹¹³ Little is known about Taggart's birthplace or early life. However, see Luigi Monge "Blind Joe Taggart" in ed. W. K. McNeil, *Encyclopaedia of American Gospel Music* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 391. Blues expert Elijah Wald notes that Taggart is first listed in the City Directory in Greenville, SC in 1923, see Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 22. See also Alan Young, *Woke Me Up This Morning: Black Gospel Singers and the Gospel Life*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 5.

¹¹⁴ Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African American Religion: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 159.

¹¹⁵ Anthea D. Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 2.

¹¹⁶ Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ*, 5.

mirror and reinforce discourses around gender and power within many African American communities of the early twentieth-century. Indeed, that record labels, always on the look-out for profit, actively sought, recorded and sold music of this nature, indicates a keen awareness of a consumer market for songs that reinforced these traditional gender roles.

Joe Taggart recorded at least thirty sides for the Vocalion, Paramount and Decca labels during the 1920s and 1930s. In his first session for Okeh in 1926, Taggart sang an acapella song by the name of “I Wish My Mother Was On That Train (Vo 1063, 1928),

Lord, I wonder, will my Mother be on that train?
Wonder will my Mother be on that train?
The train I'm a-talkin' about, she's a-moving through the land
Good Lord, I wonder, will my Mother be on that train?

Some of us have mothers, Lord, they left us here below
They gone to live with Jesus, and they rest forever more
Expect to meet her there in the home beyond the sky.¹¹⁷

In December 1928, he entered a recording studio in Chicago and cut two sides for Paramount: “Religion Is Something Within You” (Pm 12744) and “Mother’s Love” (Pm 12744). Although only one of the titles alludes to the sacred life, in “Mother’s Love” Taggart’s male narrator conflated themes of motherhood and saintliness:

So many days and nights so far,
Lord, my Mother watched over me,
But now she's gone to live with Jesus,
And I know she'll know me there.

Throughout the refrain, a second voice (belonging to Blues and folk artists Josh White) accompanies. The pair sang:

Ah, yes I know (Oh, yes I know) that she will know me,
Lord, in the mansion beyond the sky,
Our Mother's love can never forget me.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Blind Joe Taggart, “I Wish My Mother Was On That Train,” V0 1063, 1926.

¹¹⁸ Blind Joe Taggart, “Mother’s Love-1,” Pm 12744, 1928.

In both recordings, Taggart suggests that the mother will take her rightful place in a home beyond the sky. Whilst the home beyond the sky often signified a place of communal belonging, deliverance from earthly oppression, and spiritual redemption for African Americans in their spiritual music, it is made explicit in “Mother’s Love” that home is not only a “great mansion”—it is where the mother is expected to reside for eternity. These lyrics suggest that the saintly black woman should also be motherly.¹¹⁹ Moreover, those who conformed to this ideal would reside in the confines of the house in the spiritual home, blessed for evermore.¹²⁰

On a recording trip to Dallas in December, 1927, Columbia Records recorded both Johnson and Phillips. Johnson, born in Independence, Texas, January 1897 had a gruff, powerful voice that at times sounded much like a “Hell and Damnation” Baptist preacher in the full throes of an impassioned sermon. He accompanied himself on guitar and used a slide or knife on his guitar strings, often playing masterful runs at a frenetic pace, whilst on a number of other recordings he used a flat picking style.¹²¹ Johnson delivered his own exquisite brand of Gospel with intensity, singing to and of the salient realities of life for many African Americans.

In Willie Johnson’s recording of “Mother’s Children Have a Hard Time” (Co 14343-D, 1927) Johnson’s guitar slide skilfully leapt and swept across his strings whilst he roared and moaned:

¹¹⁹ For more on this, see Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008), 20-67.

¹²⁰ Lucinda H. MacKethan notes that in slavery, spirituals reflected “their suffering and mourning because of the loss of home and kin.” See Lucinda H. MacKethan “African American Spirituals” in eds. Joseph M. Flora, Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan, *The Companion To Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motives* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), pp. 19-21, 19.

¹²¹ Mark Makin’s liner notes for *Blind Willie Johnson: Complete Recorded Titles, Volume 1 (1927 to 10th December 1929)* DOCD-5690, 2011. See also D. N Blakey, *Blind Willie Johnson: the Biography Revelation the Man the Words the Music* (Raleigh: Lulu Press, 2016).

Nobody on earth can take a mother's place when, when mother is dead, Lord
Nobody on earth takes mother's place when, mother's dead
Nobody on earth takes mother's place, when you were startin', paved the way
Nobody treats you like mother will when...
Your wife or husband may be good to you, when mother is dead, Lord
They'll be good to you, mother's dead
A wife or a husband may be good to you, but, better than nothing has proved
untrue
Nobody treats you like mother will when, when mother is dead, Lord
Lord, Lord, Lord

Well, some people say that sister will do, when mother is dead
That sister will do when mother's dead
Some people say that sister will do, but, as soon as she's married, she turn her
back on you,
Nobody treats you like mother will
And father will do the best he can, when mother is dead, Lord
Well, the best he can when mother is dead
Father will do the best he can, so many things a father can't understand
Nobody treats you like mother will.¹²²

Johnson's lyrics underscore realities faced by many African Americans in the "Blacklands" of Texas and beyond during this period. As Rebecca Sharpless shows in her study *Fertile Ground: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940*, single fathers of varying races, African Americans among them "relied heavily on female relatives...to care for their children." Indeed, when a mother died, "sisters, grandmothers and aunts all took motherless offspring into their own homes as well as helping widowed fathers with childcare."¹²³

Johnson's lyrics reflected these themes. Significantly, "mothering" was a role that was widely believed to be the duty of African American females, regardless of whether they had their own children or not. Women were often at the heart of the "fictive kin" networks that many historians and sociologists have observed were important elements within black society; those shared "mothering" responsibilities

¹²² Blind Willie Johnson, "Mother's Children Have A Hard Time," Co 14343-D, 1927.

¹²³ Rebecca Sharpless, *Fertile Ground: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 56, 57.

were intensified when there were blood ties involved.¹²⁴ Detailing the hardships faced by young children after the death of their mother, Johnson's lyrics imply a collective or even communal belief that there may be hope of finding a suitable surrogate role model (if not replacement) for the mother. In this case it is the sister of the newly motherless siblings. However, as the stanza continues, Johnson's character warns that this source of comfort and dependability will abandon them when she marries. The lyrics here seem to suggest that marriage will somehow "spoil" the sister as an unconditional provider of maternal comfort and moral edification for her siblings. In this sense, the sister is chastised for not remaining at home to mother them. And yet, by entering into marriage, she would most likely have had to fulfil her female responsibilities as homemaker and dutiful wife in order to be viewed with respect. In both cases, it is implied that she will perform motherly duties, or at least tasks that are associated with mothering, such as homemaking, child-rearing, and teaching. In some Gospel songs, when the mother passes over to the afterlife, her role as a homemaker and teacher becomes crystalized as the embodiment of saintly womanhood. Similar themes are present in the work of Johnson's contemporary Washington Phillips.

Phillips, born in Freestone County, Texas sometime in 1891, had a beautifully clear, yet also "scratchy" voice that Gospel music historian Horace Clarence Boyer argues "could nonetheless melt the heart of the meanest man."¹²⁵ He accompanied himself on a home-made instrument that he called a Manzarene, a strange-sounding contraption that Columbia executives did not understand, leading them to describe it

¹²⁴ For more on the importance of kinship and the network of "mamas" in the black community, see Carol Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 46-50.

¹²⁵ Horace Clarence Boyer, *The Golden Age of Gospel* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 38.

as a “novelty” in their recording ledgers.¹²⁶ Although his career was bereft of longevity; he recorded eighteen wonderful sides for Columbia between 1927 and 1929. On Friday, 2 December, 1927 Phillips entered a recording studio in Dallas, Texas, and cut four sides at his first session for Columbia. Alongside “Take Your Burden To The Lord And Leave It There” (Co 14277-D), “Paul And Silas In Jail” (Co 14369-D), and “Lift Him Up That’s All” (Co 14277-D). He also cut a song entitled “Mother’s Last Word To Her Son”—a song that broached themes of motherhood, teaching, and holiness:

I never can forget the day,
When my dear Mother did sweetly say,
“You are leavin', my darling boy,
You always have been your mother's joy.

Now as you leave in this world to roam,
You may not be able to get back home,
But remember Jesus, who lives on high,
And is watchin' over you with a mighty eye.

Within the first two stanzas, the mother is notable as a source of moral and spiritual edification for her soon-to-be-mobile son. Thus, while the male is destined to leave the constraints of home, the mother remains there throughout the song, restricted to and charged with giving advice to the would-be traveller. Taking great care to

¹²⁶W. K. McNeil, “Washington Phillips” in ed. W.K. McNeil, *Encyclopedia of American Gospel Music* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 296-297. For quite some time, many researchers and scholars have stressed that Phillips played a dulcicola. However, new research by Michael Corcoran shows these claims to be erroneous. In an article in Texas newspaper the *Teague Chronicle* dated November 8, 1907, the copy informed readers that “There is a negro in town, named George Washington PHILLIPS, who has manufactured one of the most unique musical instrument (reproduced as originally printed) we ever saw. It is a box about 2 X 3 feet, 6 inches deep, on which he has strung violin strings, something on the order of an autoharp. He is as black as the ace of spades, but the music he gets out of that roughly made box is certainly surprising. He uses both hands and plays all sorts of airs. He calls it a “Manzarene.” The tricks which nature plays are stranger than fiction.” For more, see “Proof That Washington Phillips Didn’t Play The Dolceola,” stable url, www.michaelcorcoran.net, accessed: 20/01/2017.

remind listeners, and her son, of the temptations and perils of modern life, the mother is quoted:

“The world is so full of old sin and woe,
And many sorrows everywhere you go,
But remember Jesus, who's everywhere,
You get in trouble now, he'll meet you there.

If you'll bow down before his face,
And trust in him for his saving grace now,
And you have a burden, he'll make them light,
And he sure will guide you all in the right.”

Throughout the song, the mother provides moral instruction for her son, although the female voice is mediated through Phillips—the male singer-narrator. Whilst it is not made explicit, the final stanza suggests that the mother has passed away, leaving the listener to ponder her final words of wisdom and faith,

Now when I think of my Mother dear,
How often she did, and try to cheer,
My wandering mind, whilst going astray,
By saying, “Son, accept the way.”¹²⁷

The role of the mother in this song is to keep her son on the straight and narrow path of righteousness. Given the socio-historic context, Phillips male character presents the mother as an exemplar to her young son and, by extension, the community in which African American men are, according to the standards and assumptions of the day, expected to take a preeminent role. In this respect she fulfils her responsibilities as a race mother.

“A Mother’s Last Word To Her Son” does not explicitly highlight female propriety in a religious dimension. This, however, is not the case in another recording by Phillips. In “A Mother’s Last Word To Her Daughter,” a side that Phillips cut on December 2, 1929, the singer related the exchange between a dying mother and daughter, impressing upon the listener that the sacred life was only way

¹²⁷ Washington Phillips, “A Mother’s Last Word To Her Son,” Co 14369-D, 1927.

to salvation. Whilst this song initially appears to communicate a similar moral message of faith as “A Mother’s Last Words To Her Son,” there are clear differences between the two songs. In channelling a mother’s advice to her daughter, Phillips sang:

“Oh daughter, you may do things that you can consider no harm,
But God in Heaven do know that you are wrong.
You better let dances, card parties, all go by
So that you can be able to gain your home on high.”

Oh, daughter, she was standing, with tears rolling down her cheeks
She's trembling in her voice, whenever she did speak
Saying, “No more dancin', Mother, and no more playin' cards.
From this day on, I shall serve my God.”¹²⁸

Again, the dying mother in these verses exemplifies the concept of woman as provider of moral and righteous instruction. By extension, the daughter to whom she imparts these pearls of wisdom exemplifies the kind of unruly women who, because they seemed to play into racist stereotypes of black immorality, were thought to pose a danger to racial advancement and ultimately jeopardise the struggle for racial equality and respect in the broader society. It is perhaps somewhat unsurprising that the mother makes certain sins explicit in the exchange. Not only is the daughter told God knows she sins, those sins are itemized: dancing, card parties, and in a wider sense, the forms of leisure and social mobility that increasingly allowed a new generation of young women to engage in such activities away from the constraints of the home. The exchange between mother and son in the other example gives no such details. The dramatization between the mother and daughter reflects tensions that were prevalent during this period. As Emily Westkaemper notes with regard to feminism during the 1920s, African American clubwomen “increasingly emphasized motherhood” and “sought to repudiate a new model popularized by consumer

¹²⁸ Washington Phillips, “A Mother’s Last Words To Her Daughter,” Co 14511-D, 1929.

culture: an image of assertive sexuality expressed by African American women who gained renown as commercial Blues singers.”¹²⁹ Whilst the young woman in this example is not characterised as a blueswoman *per se*, she nevertheless participates in activities that were deemed to be at odds with the sacred life: hers has been a life of gambling and dancing—traits not only commonly thought of as undesirable amongst those who wished to elevate the race, but also often associated with the lower-classes—and the worlds in which bluesmen and women operated.

As Georgina Hickey notes, transgressive working-class women greatly unsettled the social order. Hickey’s study of an increasingly-urbanising Atlanta in the early decades of the twentieth century stresses that black and white working-class women often served as scapegoats for the many perceived social ills of the time.

Commenting on the potential danger allegedly posed by such women, Hickey argues:

Women were often equated with social order, morality, family, purity, innocence, and fragility. Thus, women could also be associated with anything that might undermine virtue. Working-class women posed a special threat to moral order and social hierarchies because such women often frequented the newest parts of the city, the spaces that had fewer traditions and rules to give them order—the streets, the dance halls, and many new shop floors. At a time when Atlanta’s overwhelming desire to project a positive reputation made the city uncomfortable with directly confronting divisive or confrontational issues, working-class women made an easy scapegoat since they, unlike their middle-class counterparts during the Progressive era, had no sustained organized voice in the city.¹³⁰

Those who did not conform to traditional ideals of feminine propriety and expected community standards were imagined—and subsequently labelled—as dangerous by advocates of racial respectability. Such women nevertheless held appeal in Blues

¹²⁹ Emily Westkaemper, *Selling Women’s History: Packaging Feminism in Twentieth-Century American Popular Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 29.

¹³⁰ Georgina Hickey, *Hope and Danger in the New South City: Working-class Women and Urban Development in Atlanta, 1890-1940* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 5.

recordings. Male Blues singers often simultaneously chastised and celebrated women who tested the boundaries of propriety, particularly in terms of their sexual precociousness, but also in terms of materialism, avarice and deference to male authority. For instance, in Blind Blake's recording of "That'll Never Happen No More" (Pm 14297, 1927) his male character suggested that women who attended or performed at dances and cabarets could be fun but, were inevitably dangerous,

I met a girl at the cabaret, said pretty papa I'm goin' your way,
Her man know what it all about, waiting at home just to throw me out,
Broke my nose split my chin, don't let me catch you here again,
He whipped me from the kitchen back to the door, he beat me with a chair till
my head got sore.

The wind in Chicago Winter and Fall, it caused me to wear my overalls,
Flat broke it was my fault, been used to eating porkchops I'm eating salt,
I met a woman in a big mink fur, big fat mouth me followed her,
She pulled a gun and she take my dough, I didn't eat my heart out and I didn't
get sore.¹³¹

The significance of the cabaret in this recording is worth further comment. During the 1920s, cabarets were often imagined as evidence of American society's dangerous social disintegration. Commenting on Harlem cabarets in the 1920s, Shane Vogel argues:

With their intimate interaction between performer and spectators, illicit alcohol consumption, social dancing, potential for interracial contact, public displays of sexuality, and underworld connotations, Harlem's cabarets provided a powerful symbol of the pleasures and dangers of urban life.¹³²

Although Vogel's comments pertain explicitly to the shadier side of Harlem's nightlife, cabarets were by no means exclusive to New York. Most cities with a sizable black population had similar areas. The Bronzeville area of Chicago, the city in which Blake made most of his recordings, had its own theatre and club scene "almost as energetic and disreputable as Harlem." These cabarets often attracted

¹³¹ Blind Blake "That Will Never Happen No More," Pm 12497, 1927.

¹³² Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 2.

urban blacks and “slumming” whites, eager to sample the thrill of nominally authentic black nightlife.¹³³ Whilst the equality and respectability many race leaders sought for African Americans generally adhered to white prescriptive ideals, the mixing of black and white Americans in such clubs was sometimes frowned upon, certainly by many whites. Moreover, black women who engaged in more base forms of entertainment were often thought of as pariahs. Such women were the antithesis and nemesis of the respectable “race mother” that progressives championed.

The spendthrift, avaricious, less-modestly dressed, and sexually promiscuous modern black women of the 1920s routinely occupied an ambiguous space within Blues lyrics, regularly reviled or rebuked in song for behaviour which was sometimes simultaneously titillating and beguiling. By contrast, sacred recordings seldom equivocated: they offered a relentless stream of stern warnings against the threat to social stability and male authority posed by such women. Unruly females earned a label of notoriety among sacred communities, where they were lambasted for their ungodly behaviour. In these relatively early days of “race records,” recordings of sermons proved to be very popular with the record-buying public. One of the most famous clergymen to “preach on wax” at this time was the Rev J. M. Gates of Atlanta’s Mount Calvary Church. Gates was “discovered” by Frank Walker and his team at Columbia records.¹³⁴ Gates recording career began with the five sides he cut for Columbia in April, 1926. Throughout the 1920s, he also recorded sides for the Bluebird, Gennett, Pathé Actuelle, Victor, and Vocalion labels, among others. In

¹³³ James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How The Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 138. David Grazian, *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 34.

¹³⁴ Allan Sutton, *Race Records and the American Recording Industry, 1919-1945* (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2016), 217. See also Lerone A. Martin, *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), pp. 62-90.

sessions in Atlanta in 1928 and 1929, the OKeh label recorded Gates's sermons "Women Spend Too Much Money" (OK 8606, 1928) and "Manish Women" (OK 8779, 1929). Both of these sermons admonished black females for engaging in lifestyles that did not meet with the strict codes of female propriety set out by religious denominations. In "Manish Women" Rev. Gates began his sermon:

Oh, I want to talk about manish women. And the world is full of these kind of women. They are trying to do everything, that they see or hear other men doing...oh they're manish women!! And they're wearing pants! Cutting their hair like a man...So manish, until they stay out as late at night as any man...So manish, until they won't raise their children.¹³⁵

Gates' emphasis on a refusal or inability to rear children revealed community expectations of black women, whilst also suggesting that late nights out were the domain of men. In "Women Spend Too Much Money," he conflated themes of consumerism, sexuality and sin, revealing much about prevailing attitudes towards feminine propriety during this period:

Ah you women spend too much money. Ah, you spend too much money on shoes. Ah, from five, ten, fifteen, twenty dollars—that's too much money. Ah, spend too much money on hose! A fine hose, they get 'em from a dollar, all the way up to five and ten dollars for a pair of hose: too much money. And then underwear! Spend too much money. Sometimes I've seen five hundred dollars! ...Women spend too much money. I saw a woman coming down the street the other day with a fine dress on. Too short below and too low above! And she had children. And I don't know what that dress cost her, but she could've got those children a nice, little garment. They wa'nt presentable.¹³⁶

The woman in Gates' sermon was expected to dress modestly and, rather than pandering to her own vanity and avarice, ensure her children were provided with nice clothing instead. Doing so would meet the criteria of good motherhood and help to project an image of respectability for African Americans. There were many censures for dress styles in the 1920s, not least from churches, including black

¹³⁵ Rev. J. M. Gates, "Manish Women," OK 8779, 1924.

¹³⁶ Rev J. M. Gates "Women Spend Too Much Money," OK 8606, 1928.

denominations. As Randall Stephens notes, women who wore make-up or jewellery were condemned as “modern-day harlots” in church manuals and sermons.¹³⁷ Failure to meet expectations of respectability would doubtless provide justification for conformists and the champions of male authority to denigrate alternative models of black womanhood. Whilst Gates’ sermon indicated his own *public* views on such matters, sermons such as “Women Spend Too Much Money” were not anomalous. A contemporary of Gates, Rev. F. W. McGee from Winston, Tennessee recorded extensively during this period. Like Gates, McGee also lambasted women who did not project an image of respectable feminine propriety. In his sermon entitled “Women’s Clothes: You Can’t Hide,” (Vi 23296, 1929) McGee shared the following thoughts with a congregation much expanded thanks to the workings of the recording and record sales industry:

Is your dress too short you can’t hide? Of course, it’s somewhat awkward to preach on the subject of how the sisters dress, ‘cause seems like all of them dress alike. And ain’t none of ‘em left to criticise ever. And two, since the preacher gets the biggest end of his bread from the sisters: it makes it worse still. And to tell the truth about it, there’s such a few men in the church, so you have to stay on the good side of the women. Say amen sisters. Now the men kind of boss over the sisters, and don’t want them to lead out in the church. But I’ll tell you right now, you can’t get along without the sisters. I’ll tell you, I thought the women had done bad enough when they hacked their dresses off up to well above their knees. But after raising them from the bottom, they lower them from the top! Still, it’s a disgrace to some of the men. And, of course, it’s a pleasure to others, ain’t that right brothers? And not only that, they have discontinued them altogether along the arm line. I tell you, it’s hard for me in this day’s age with women dressing as they do. All kinds of fine underwear, and I tell you they don’t buy it to hide it either. Ah, their dresses so short they can’t hide!! I hope none of you folks won’t go the devil on account of this dresses affair. Of course, you see, it’s the preacher’s business to tell ya about it.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 248.

¹³⁸ Rev F. W. McGee, “Women’s Clothes (You Can’t Hide),” Vi 23296, 1929.

McGee admonished women who lacked modesty in both dress and behaviour, scrutinising their choice of clothing and calling into question their reasons, presumed to be rooted in sin and lasciviousness, for buying attractive dresses and fine underwear. When he addressed the fact that “men kind of boss over the sisters,” he also acknowledged the authority that men attempted to assert over the community’s women within the church and outside. Both McGee and Gates display a knowledge and appreciation of the lure of fine dresses and undergarments, even hinting that their personal interest in such matters extended beyond the opportunity to express distaste and moral censure. Indeed, McGee openly admitted that it was hard for him “with women dressing as they do.” By acknowledging that men in the congregation may well succumb to “the devil” when faced with women who wore revealing dresses, he in turn acknowledged the power of basic, and in the minds of some, base human sexual impulses – a dynamic that gave attractively dressed, notionally sexually available women, a measure of potential power over the men who lusted after them. Strikingly, however, in this rendering, black women shouldered the blame for stirring unbridled male desire. In these songs, black men were rendered unable to resist the sinful temptations offered up by provocatively dressed, sexually alluring women; it was a scenario that inadvertently reinforced racist stereotypes of both preternaturally promiscuous black women and helplessly, innately predatory black men.

The conflation of themes of sexuality, female dress, and social peril were not unique to the sacred recordings of Gates and McGee and their ilk, they were ubiquitous in the Blues too. These themes are exemplified in the work of a mysterious bluesman by the name of Blind Joe Reynolds. In 1929, Reynolds, a possible native of Louisiana, cut four tracks for the Paramount label in Grafton

Wisconsin. Reynolds (real name, Joe Sheppard) was known to be less-than-angelic in real life. Blues scholars Gayle Dean Wardlow and Stephen Calt argue that Reynolds “flouted social taboos with positive relish,” opting to “make a living by being unacceptable to respectable people.”¹³⁹ One of the tracks that the singer recorded at the session for Paramount was a track named “Nehi Blues” (Pm 12927, 1929) in which his male character admonished women for their dress length. As with the sermons delivered by Gates and McGee, this recording addressed important themes pertinent to female respectability and male governance of black womanhood. It is, therefore, a compelling example of secular lyrical content that was often provocative, and even titillating whilst also reflecting the struggle to exert control over female sexuality.

The title and opening stanzas of “Nehi Blues” suggest that Reynolds’ male character either endorsed the dress code during the 1920s, or that he was mocking zealous preachers who decried unfeminine behaviour. The strict dress code stipulated that wearing short dresses or any clothing that may be considered “exotic,” fell outside the boundaries of sanctified behaviour. Given that Reynolds’ penchant for courting controversy, it is doubtful that he endorsed the dress codes.¹⁴⁰ Regardless, he seized this recording opportunity to create a male character who blamed women for all wrongdoings. In “Nehi Blues,” the combination of women in revealing attire (“Nehi” meaning knee-high skirts or dresses) and male sexuality was potentially lethal. Murder—another sin—could result if men were unable to control their libido. However, the male character exonerates himself and other men from blame. The male protagonist’s inability (or refusal) to differentiate between married

¹³⁹ Michael Taft, *Talkin’ To Myself: Blues Lyrics, 1921-1942*, (New York: Routledge, 2005) 499 Gayle Dean Wardlow, *Chasin’ That Devil Music: Searching for the Blues* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 1998), 171.

¹⁴⁰ Gayle Dean Wardlow, *Chasin’ That Devil Music: Searching for the Blues* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 1998), 170-180.

women and underage girls as potential sexual partners is blamed on the woman.

Indeed, it is implied that men simply cannot help themselves. Perhaps the inability to overcome such urges may even have been a sign of “red-blooded” manhood.

Accompanying a frenetic series of guitar runs with an impassioned vocal, Reynolds male character sang:

Some girls wear short dresses, some of these married women wear them too,
Some girls wear short dresses, some of these married women wear them too,
That’s the reason, we single men Lord don’t know what we wants to do.

Wish the proper judge would make these women let their dresses down,
Wish the proper judge would make these women let their dresses down,
So there’d quit being so doggone much murdering in town.¹⁴¹

The type of scapegoating in this example also mirrors common representations of black women in some of the white and black literature of the 1920s. Writing on Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* and Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*, critic Hazel Carby asserts that in each text, representations of black women:

are used as both the means by which male protagonists will achieve or will fail to achieve social mobility and as signs of various possible threats to the emergence of the wholesome black masculinity necessary for the establishment of an acceptable black male citizenship in the American social order.¹⁴²

In the final stanzas of “Nehi Blues” the male character cannot resist bolstering the notion that exotically dressed black women were essentially licentious. Absolving men of any wrongdoing, Reynolds’ narrator implied that women not only exploited male sexual desire: they enslaved them whilst draining their finances, and were therefore culpable for any wrongdoing on the part of the male,

All you women, sure Lord ought to be ashamed,
All you young women, sure Lord ought to be ashamed,
Taking these old men’s money, when they walking on walking canes.

An old man ain’t nothing, but a young girl’s slave,
An old man ain’t nothing, but a young girl’s slave,

¹⁴¹ Blind Willie Reynolds, “Nehi Blues,” Pm 12927, 1929.

¹⁴² Carby, “Policing the Black Woman’s Body,” 747.

They work hard all the time, trying to stay in these young men's ways.¹⁴³

These lyrics demonstrate the centrality of women as imagined harbingers of male ruin. In this example, inappropriate dress serves as the catalyst for the collapse of male inhibitions and ultimately control, leading to a new kind of gendered enslavement, this time to female sexual power and thirst for money. Given African American history, there can be few more stinging rebukes to the materialistic, sexually predatory black woman who stalked many Blues and Gospel songs than that she is rhetorically aligned in the lyrics of "Nehi Blues" with those who once owned slaves.

Reynolds' recording of "Nehi Blues" was not simply an orphaned Blues critique of exotically dressed women. Rather, it fits into a much broader vogue for Blues songs that reprimanded women for adopting risqué clothing and, by extension, for flaunting their sexuality in ways that simultaneously threatened to entrap, and therefore reduce the power of black men, while potentially damaging the reputation and prospects of the entire race. Tennessean Frank Stokes also cut a track entitled "Nehi Mama Blues" (Vi 21738, 1928). A skilled guitar player, Stokes was one of the originators of the delicate Memphis style. His powerful vocal and extrovert personality, coupled with his musical prowess ensured he was very popular in and around Memphis. Popular enough in fact, that he was able to leave his job as a blacksmith.¹⁴⁴ In "Nehi Mama" Stokes' male character sung,

Now it's East and West, North and South
Why the Nehi women have done turned me out,
So they can eagle rock me they can talk me,
About the things I used to do,
I got the Nehi blues mama, don't know what in the world to do.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Reynolds, "Nehi Blues."

¹⁴⁴ Gerard Herzhaft, *Encyclopedia of the Blues* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), 196.

¹⁴⁵ Frank Stokes, "Nehi Mama Blues" Vi 21738, 1928.

Whilst Stokes' recording is not as accusatory as Blind Joe's, it nevertheless conflates themes of desire, exotic dress, and feminine impropriety. In these recordings, and doubtless in the real world for many, such women were as much a source of arousal and desire as they were a perceived source of shame.

In a similar vein, Blind Blake's recording of "Notoriety Woman Blues" (Pm 12754, 1928) exemplifies the complex interplay between male desire and simultaneous revulsion for sexually voracious black women. In a Chicago recording studio sometime during September, 1928, Blake cut nine tracks for the Paramount label. Among these recordings was his composition "Notoriety Woman Blues" in which his male character sang:

I got a notoriety woman, she about to drive me wild,
I got a notoriety woman, she about to drive me wild,
Besides that woman, the devil's meek and mild.

When used as a prefix, as in Blake's song, the term notoriety, within the context of the Blues lexicon at least, is, as Stephen Calt notes, an "obsolete black colloquialism for a person with a reputation for being dangerous."¹⁴⁶ Dangerous behaviour is often ascribed to those who defy the dominant hegemony. This is certainly true of the gendered-power struggles evident in many interwar Blues lyrics. And yet, this dangerous behaviour clearly held appeal for males both inside and outside of the world of Blues lyrics of the period. Female sexual transgressions, as defined according to the prevailing moral standards of the day, provided evidence that women were striving to be sexually autonomous and seeking pleasure for themselves, a reality that variously thrilled and scared their male admirers or partners. Asides from declaring that his woman could make the devil seem angelic,

¹⁴⁶ Stephen Calt, *Barrelhouse Words: A Blues Dialect Dictionary* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 173.

Blake's male character continues with his efforts to dehumanise her in the following stanza. The comparison with highly-skilled, predatory animals indicates that the male character is keenly aware, at times admiring, and perhaps envious of this lady's intellect, survival skills, mobility, and ultimately her sexual liberation. Indeed, in the unforgiving environment of the Jim Crow South, surviving, let alone thriving, was a task in itself:

That woman is like a tiger, got ways like a bear,
That woman is like a tiger, got ways just like a bear,
Carries a gun in her pocket, a dagger in her hair.

That the female subject is armed in Blake's song is especially significant since it marked another form of female transgression and, though women in rural areas, in particular, were hardly strangers to firearms, of at least partial deviation from conventionally perceived gender-specific notions of respectable behaviour. In her study of women and guns in America, Laura Browder argues:

Throughout much of American history, the gun has served as a recurrent symbol that links violence and masculinity. For over two centuries, there have been women who have escaped conventional gender roles by picking up guns. In doing so, they became armed icons. Paradoxically, to succeed with the public, these famous armed women have had to embrace female stereotypes and expectations. Iconic women with guns have challenged and yet reinforced the masculinist ideal of America—that guns are inextricably tied to both masculinity and American identity.¹⁴⁷

Blake's male character is both besotted with and very wary of this woman because of the complexity of her character. She does not fit the feminine ideal, displaying a sexual voracity, toughness and potential for violence that would match many male counterparts. However, this woman is nevertheless alluring.

¹⁴⁷ Laura Browder, *Her Best Shot: Women and Guns in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 1.

In stark contrast to the “respectable women” who were expected to shoulder the burden of racial uplift, the female in “Notoriety Woman Blues” seems to hold appeal precisely because she has chosen a different pathway. Mere assimilation and adherence to social ideals of propriety are not present at all in this case. Indeed, the image of a gun-toting, sexually voracious black woman transcends multiple boundaries of gender, class, and race. And yet, however appealing this woman may be, she is subjected to physical and verbal brutality because of her transgressions. The response to such behaviour, and the threat it appears to contain to male identity, power and authority, is extreme physical violence and the verbal assassination of her character:

To keep her quiet, I knocked her teeth out her mouth,
To keep her quiet, I knocked her teeth out her mouth,
That notoriety woman, is known all over the South.

I can't get along with her, and I can't leave her alone,
I can't get along with her, and I can't leave her alone,
Because she knows just how to make me, come back home.¹⁴⁸

Blake is somewhat of an enigma, and little is known about his early life. In his research on the Paramount record label, Blues historian Alex van der Tuuk found that the singer was born Arthur Blake in Newport News, Virginia sometime around 1892 and ended up northbound for Chicago from Jacksonville, Florida in 1923. Blake was a regular performer in Chicago by the mid-1920s and gained further popularity after the release of his first sides on the Paramount label.¹⁴⁹ Blake benefitted from Paramount's search for a male Country Blues artist to match the enormous success the label had enjoyed with one of the pioneers of commercially

¹⁴⁸ Blind Blake “Notoriety Woman Blues,” Pm 12754, 1928.

¹⁴⁹ Alex van der Tuuk, *Paramount's Rise and Fall* (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2012), 124.

recorded Country Blues, Texan Blind Lemon Jefferson.¹⁵⁰ Paramount introduced the record-buying public to Blake in 1926. His first released side, “Early Morning Blues” (Pm 12387, 1926) featured a jealous, suspicious male openly issuing murderous threat to his partner, who he suspects of infidelity:

Early this morning, my baby made me sore
Early this morning, my baby made me sore
I’m going away to leave you, ain’t coming back no more

Tell me pretty mama, where did you stay last night
Tell me pretty mama, where did you stay last night
It ain’t none of your business, daddy since I treat you right

When you see me sleeping, baby don’t you think I’m drunk
When you see me sleeping, baby don’t you think I’m drunk
I got one eye on my pistol, and the other on your trunk

Love you pretty mama, believe me it ain’t no lie
Spoken: (I mean it ain’t no lie)
I love you pretty mama, believe me it ain’t no lie
The day you try to quit me, baby that’s the day you die.¹⁵¹

The fact that this song was released suggests that the labels believed that the record-buying public in the southern states and beyond found musical tales of gendered-strife appealing. Ultimately, it is difficult to state with absolute certainty who bought Country Blues recordings, though the audiences do appear to have been overwhelmingly black and, if by no means wholly located in the South, then often comprised migrant black southerners dealing with the new challenges of the urban North. At the same time, African Americans migrating from the land were helping to swell the populations of many southern towns and cities. What is certain, however, is that the vast majority of the male Country Blues singers—and much of their repertoire—were of southern origin and that they made their recordings for a quintessentially modern commercial industry at a time when many Americans, black

¹⁵⁰ Rick Kennedy and Randy McNutt, *Little Labels—Big Sound: Small Record Companies and the Rise of American Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 31.

¹⁵¹ Blind Blake, “Early Morning Blues,” Pm 12387, 1926.

and white, were trying to deal with the social upheavals associated with urbanization, including changing gender norms. As Jeff Titon notes, Blake's open declaration of murderous intent in "Early Morning Blues" would introduce him to the "national audience for race records."¹⁵² Whilst the female in "Early Morning Blues" is not the same as the wild and dangerous "Notoriety Woman," she nevertheless poses a threat to male authority. Moreover, the solution to unruly behaviour, as in "Notoriety Woman" is violence.

Almost from its inception, commercial Country Blues communicated powerful messages about black gendered power struggles in the southern states and beyond. New Orleans-born Papa Charlie Jackson was another pioneering black male rural singer who favoured such material. Jackson first recorded for Paramount in 1924 having been picked up by Mayo Williams in a mixed-race area in New Orleans labelled "Jew-town". Williams had been looking for a novelty act, an act that was a little different to the Vaudeville, Classic Blues style exemplified by his previous discovery, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey. As an avid tap-dancer, Williams felt that there was something in Jackson's rhythmic style of playing.¹⁵³ Bob Riesman argues that the danceable rhythms that Papa Charlie (real name William Henry Jackson) plucked on his banjo, combined with sexually suggestive lyrics on "Salty Dog Blues" (Pm 12236, 1924) ensured his success. Indeed, Williams, a black Paramount A & R man commented: "I could just see myself dancing to Papa Charlie...if you follow Papa Charlie, you find that he had good rhythm—you could dance by nearly every song Papa Charlie made. He was a one man band."¹⁵⁴ Jackson's recording of "Take Me

¹⁵² Titon, *Early Downhome*, 74.

¹⁵³ Stephen Calt, "The Anatomy of a "Race" Music Label: Mayo Williams and Paramount Records", in ed. Norman Kelley, *R & B, Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music* (New York: Akashic Books, 2005), 109.

¹⁵⁴ Bob Riesman, *I feel So Good: The Life and Times of Big Bill Broonzy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 46, 48.

Back Blues” (Pm 12296, 1925) serves as an early celebration of male control in commercially recorded Country Blues.

In the opening stanzas, Jackson’s male character admits to his own questionable behaviour:

Take me back baby, you know I don’t know my own mind,
I said take me back baby, you know I don’t know my own mind,
For when I’m mistreating you, I’m loving you all the time.

Having admitted to mistreating his woman, Jackson’s male character appeals to her for understanding, implying that ill-treatment is acceptable within the parameters of a “loving” relationship. However, he quickly resorts to the threat of murder:

There’s one thing honey, I want you to understand,
There’s one thing honey, I want you to understand,
That your time ain’t long, if I catch you with another man.

Whilst his woman may have made the decision to leave, she is nevertheless still perceived as the property of the male character. This woman is mobile, resistant and refuses to be confined to the house or her ex-partner. This functions as a catalyst for murderous threats. Of course, the threat of murder here is a figurative one. And yet, the jealous, spurned male in this recording and many others, attempts to – destroy/obliterate the woman’s self-confidence by denigrating her cosmetic appearance:

You ain’t good looking, and you don’t dress fine,
I said you ain’t good looking, and you don’t dress fine,
But there ain’t no reason, let some other man read my sign.¹⁵⁵

The public derision of African American women in popular cultural forms of the time, as in this song, likely hindered their struggle to attain equal status in broader society. Embedded within many Blues lyrics of this time are the tensions felt by many African Americans. Writing on middle-class black women, the 1920s, and

¹⁵⁵ Papa Charlie Jackson, “Take Me Back Blues,” Pm 12296, 1925.

racial uplift, Nikki Brown observes that “the pressures of race and gender in black women’s politics came not just from within, as in battling two forms of oppression, but also from without, as in having to choose one form of politics over the other.”¹⁵⁶ However, unlike the middle-class black women that Brown refers to, the women that many male Blues recordings of this period describe would not have been the clubwomen who engaged in uplift politics on behalf of the community.

As they strove to gain a modicum of control over their own personal lives in a land that did not afford them the privileges that many white Americans enjoyed, black power struggles between the sexes and classes took on added significance. In the world of recorded Blues, rejection from a love interest therefore merited careful management. The male characters performed by bluesmen could switch from heartfelt appeals to outright threats of brutality in a single stanza. Again this is easily identifiable in Jackson’s “Take Me Back Blues”:

If you don’t want me, why don’t you tell me why?
If you don’t want me, why don’t you tell me why?
Because you flirting with the undertaker, I mean it ain’t no lie.¹⁵⁷

The real paradox here, of course, is that by exercising control over his woman in the framework of the song, the male character is, by extension, demonstrating anxiety over his own lack of authority over his woman in the broader social, political and economic world of the United States that generally looked upon white masculinity as omnipotent.¹⁵⁸ Whilst the male characters in Blues songs, and also the artists that

¹⁵⁶ Nikki Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women's Activism from World War I to the New Deal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 116.

¹⁵⁷ Papa Charlie Jackson, “Take Me Back Blues,” Pm 12296, 1925.

¹⁵⁸ For extended reading on sexual politics in the male blues tradition and beyond, see Brian Ward’s essay “Sex Machines and Prisoners of Love: Male Rhythm and Blues, Sexual Politics, and the Black Freedom Struggle,” in eds. P.J. Ling and S. Monteith, *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1999), pp.41-67. For a discussion of male control in early blues see also Matthew B. White’s essay “‘The Blues Ain’t Nothin’ But A Woman Want To Be A Man’: Male Control in Early Twentieth Century Blues Music,” *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 24. No. 1 (Winter 1994) pp. 19-40.

performed them were of a different economic background from New Negro intellectuals, broadly speaking, there are some commonalities in their objectives. And yet, it is crucial to acknowledge that they did not have identical agendas. As Anastasia Carol Curwood notes, although many male African American intellectuals were seeking to improve their status, some “denigrated women’s growing political and economic power.”¹⁵⁹ That the woman in Jackson’s song is able to walk away from a relationship indicates a departure from dependency on a male spouse. Lyrics such as these therefore alluded to the politics of female sexuality and economics and the threat that black female independence posed to male authority and empowerment. These lyrics do not explicitly denigrate independent women for the danger they posed to the uplift of the race. However, if New Negro thinkers of the period articulated concerns over female transgression in elevated discourse, bluesmen, at times, belittled women of lower classes (that they often belonged to themselves) for similar transgressions. Whilst their goals may not have been identical, the overwhelming imperative seems to have been the reification of masculine authority.

The class-based differentiation between New Negro progressives and the artists who performed and recorded Blues during this period is significant. New Negro men projected an image of respectability. This was due in no small part to their powerful use of eloquent and articulate rhetoric as they rallied against the forces of systemic racism. Blues artists, on the other hand, employed street vernacular in their lyrics. They sung of the grittier side of life, and quite often many of the economically based hardships of which they sang reflected issues that would have been exacerbated by

See also Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 110.

¹⁵⁹Anastasia Carol Curwood, *Stormy Weather: Middle-Class African American Marriages Between the Two World Wars* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 85.

institutional, legal and habitual racism on a national level. Moreover, their public personas were often at the mercy of marketing strategists working for the labels. For instance, in the 1927 edition of the *Paramount Book of Blues*, a photo of Papa Charlie Jackson appeared accompanied by the following text:

When he first contracted to sing and play for Paramount—many pessimistic persons laughed, and said they were certain no one wanted to hear comedy songs sung by a man strumming a banjo. But it wasn't long before they realized how wrong they were. Charlie and his records took the entire country by storm, and now—people like nothing better than to come home after a tiring and busy day and play his records. His hearty voice and gay, harmonious strumming on the banjo, causes their cares and worries to dwindle away, and gives them a careful frame of mind, and makes life one sweet song.¹⁶⁰

Whilst Jackson's music may have been a source of huge pleasure to many consumers, it would be more than a little naïve to believe that life for black Americans could be made into “one sweet song” simply by listening to his artistry. Perhaps males who felt the sting of waning power could take solace in recorded music in which men exacted revenge over transgressive women. Still, it is doubtful that the music alone transformed a life of hardship into one of sweet song. The excerpt from the *Paramount Book of Blues* reveals that those responsible for marketing Jackson simply saw him as another humorously entertaining black singer.

Mayo Williams discovered and assisted in marketing Jackson's ““comedy” musical persona. Stephen Calt stresses that Williams felt that his artists were all unique and that Williams believed the labelling and categorisation of music was only of great significance to white consumers. Instead, he believed that the consumers he was trying to target, and by extension, whose tastes he was attempting to predict, were far more interested in the lyrical content of a record.¹⁶¹ This complicates matters somewhat. If Williams believed that lyrical content was of particular interest

¹⁶⁰ *Paramount Book of Blues*, 1927, reproduced in Alex van der Tuuk, *Paramount's Rise and Fall: The Roots and History of Paramount Records* (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2012), 92.

¹⁶¹ Calt, “Anatomy,” 105.

to the consumer, the issuing of “Take Me Back Blues” suggests that the A&R man believed that there was a commercial market for murderous threats on shellac. Consequently, the sale of such music may have helped to reinforce how black Blues artists (and non-musicians) were viewed in the main. Indeed, Williams’ own associates had at some point around this time, already drawn their own conclusions about his involvement with such artists.

Williams’ association with black Blues artists had earned the scorn of his friends, who had branded the A&R man and his musical cohorts as “Mayo Williams and his dogs,” thereby suggesting that lower-class blacks were animalistic and, quite possibly: the product of bad breeding. Williams promptly countered the ridicule and jibing by replying: “My dogs are thoroughbreds.”¹⁶² The disdain held by Williams’ associates towards Blues artists was quite common. The often sexually-lewd content of Blues songs, and no doubt the violent imagery in the same works became contentious issues for powerful whites involved in the American recording industry who would also have had a keen interest in the advertising of records. In February 1924, a writer working for *Talking Machine World* opined:

Hundreds of 'race' singers have flooded the market with what is generally regarded as the worst contribution to the cause of good music ever inflicted on the public. The lyrics of a great many of these 'blues' are worse than the lowest sort of doggerel.¹⁶³

Given the fact that these comments appeared before Jackson’s first recording session, it cannot be argued that they refer to the singer’s work. And yet, the timing of such openly bitter, public derision of the Blues reflects at least a portion of the public’s attitudes to blacks, their activities, and their music. Indeed, the extract from

¹⁶² Stephen Calt, “The Anatomy of A Race Label Part II” 78 *Quarterly*, 1, 4, 1989, 13, digitised version available at stable url, <https://ia601005.us.archive.org/19/items/78QuarterlyNo4/78%20Quarterly%20No%204.pdf> accessed: 20/04/2014.

¹⁶³ *Talking Machine Journal Feb*, 1924, reproduced in Calt, “The Anatomy of A Race Label Part II” 78 *Quarterly*, 1, 4, 11.

Talking Machine Journal signifies two things. That the word doggerel was used to describe Afro-American lyric poetry in the Blues is a clear indication that many powerful white American critics saw little artistic merit in black music such as the Blues. Much of this music reflected tensions that were often born from the status of African Americans in general. And yet, this clearly made no difference to the writer of the piece in *Talking Machine Journal*. The word doggerel has unmistakable animalistic connotations and reflects the attitudes of some whites towards African Americans in the 1920s. It is plausible to suggest that commercially recorded Blues may have simply reinforced extant white attitudes towards blacks. Moreover, this disgust towards black music was not new, let alone restricted to the 1920s.

Ragtime, a black musical style had become very popular from the late 1890s into the early part of the twentieth-century. In 1900, the *Etude*, a magazine dedicated to publishing articles on music and musical performance, attacked what they called “the insane craze for “rag-time’ music” that swept the nation. The following excerpt featured as an editorial:

The counters of the music stores are loaded with this virulent poison which, in the form of a malarious epidemic, is finding its way into the homes and brains of the youth to such an extent as to arouse one’s suspicion of their sanity... Some of these songs are so maudlin in sentiment and rhythm as to make the themes they express fairly stagger in the drunkenness of their exaggerations. They are a plague to both music and musicians and a stench to refinement.¹⁶⁴

As Susan Curtis notes, the “intensity of the opposition to and critique of ragtime music is telling and historically significant. Its alarmist language of epidemic, insanity, vulgarity, and outright evil alerts us a century later to a powerful sense of

¹⁶⁴“Musical Impurity,” *Etude* January, 1900, 18

urgency felt by these critics.”¹⁶⁵ Curtis’ argument holds up equally well when applied to the comments made in *Talking Machine Journal* article regarding blues music. If powerful whites were worried about the effect that a black music such as ragtime would have upon conventional notions of propriety at the turn of the century, similar fears were echoed two decades later with the emergence of the “race records” boom of the 1920s.

Whilst the writer of the derisory article featured in *Talking Machine Journal* may not have employed precisely the same alarmist terms as the *Etude*, there is nevertheless a similar sense of urgency present, not least in the reduction of African Americans to the status of diseased low-lives, capable of contaminating the very fabric of American society. The characterization of black American citizens as primitive and crude was by no means exclusive to these two publications. Marketing materials for Blues records serve as important reminders of the way many viewed black citizens of the United States.

During the 1920s, almost all of the labels advertised their records in many publications, but perhaps most notably in the black newspaper the *Chicago Defender*. Marketing materials for Country Blues records featured a diverse array of imagery, but drew largely on black stereotypes, often characterising blacks as dysfunctional. When it came to representations of black masculinity, often relied on familiar stereotypes of predatory and violent male behaviour. For instance, the advert that ran for Blind Blake’s recording of “Bad Feeling Blues” (Pm 12497, 1927) depicted a female chasing her sharp-dressed man from her house with a sweeping brush in her hand, suggesting that any attempts at domestication had failed and that

¹⁶⁵ Susan Curtis, “Black Creativity and Black Stereotype: Rethinking Twentieth-Century Popular Music in America” in ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 125.

dominant masculinity had been compromised. The advertising copy that accompanied this image reads “He’s all broken up—somehow he can’t keep his sweetie interested in him, and he finds himself out in the cold, cruel outside. And so Blind Blake sings a deep blue Blues—“Bad Feeling Blues” he calls it, and it’s a wonder.” There is no room in this advert for the “snappy-dresser.” Advertising personnel working for the labels were forced to confront the existence of stylish, black masculinity visually. But the existence of such a concept proved difficult to accept. Jeff Titon argues that when it was absolutely necessary to depict well-dressed black men, they were often cast as an “emasculated inhabitant of the imaginary Darktown.”¹⁶⁶ The image of female dominance and authority in the advert trades on notions of impotency and female empowerment, giving credence to Titon’s claim.

Similar imagery can be seen in adverts for Texan Blues maestro Blind Lemon Jefferson’s work. Jefferson, a highly skilled guitarist cut his first sides under the auspices of Arthur Laibly for the Paramount label in 1926 and quickly became one of the most popular Country Blues stars of his day. Lemon worshipped and lambasted women in many of his recordings. In “Easy Rider Blues” (Pm 12474, 1927) his male character sang: “Now tell me where my easy rider’s gone, / Now easy riding woman, always in the wrong.”¹⁶⁷ In “Match Box Blues” (Pm 12474, 1927) recorded at the same session he sang: “Well I got up this morning with my sure enough, same thing on my mind, /The woman I love, she keeps a good man worried all the time.”¹⁶⁸ Both songs allude to themes of female sexuality and infidelity, and the destructive potential they posed upon the male psyche. However, such women are clearly appealing to the male characters in these examples. Many adverts for

¹⁶⁶ Titon, *Early Downhome*, 234

¹⁶⁷ Blind Lemon Jefferson, “Easy Rider Blues,” Pm 12474, 1927.

¹⁶⁸ Blind Lemon Jefferson, “Match Box Blues,” Pm 12474, 1927.

Jefferson's recordings featured a character that bore an uncanny resemblance to the singer himself. These advertisements recast Jefferson as a comical buffoon. The advert for his recording of "Lemon's Cannonball Blues" (Pm 12639, 1928) depicted the lookalike being fired from a cannon. The image of the lookalike placed astride the cannonball, essentially ridiculed the black masculine subject, giving the impression that he had a particularly large scrotum. Such tactics both undercut and reinforced long-held white fears and fascination with black male hypersexual stereotypes.¹⁶⁹ In the context of male control, such images ridiculed the black masculine subject as laughable and dysgenic. Accordingly, in other marketing materials, Paramount advertising personnel suggested that the singer was in one way or another, an oddity.

In the 1927 Paramount Book of Blues, the advertising copy for Jefferson read:

Can anyone imagine a fate more horrible than to find that one is blind? To realize that the beautiful things one hears about—one will never see? Such was the heart-rending fate of Lemon Jefferson, who was born blind and realized, as a small child, that life had withheld one glorious joy from him—sight. Then—environment began to play its important part in his destiny. He could hear—and he heard the sad hearted, weary people of his homeland, Dallas—singing weird, sad melodies at their work and play, and unconsciously began to imitate them—lamenting his fate in song. He learned to play a guitar, and for years he entertained his friends freely—moaning his weird songs as a means of forgetting his affliction. Some friends who saw great possibilities in him,

¹⁶⁹ Aimé J. Ellis comments that "for white readers, the voyeuristic compulsion to venture into that mythological place of black male sexuality is informed by and inextricably tied to a historical legacy of colonial desire—of simultaneous repulsion and fascination, fear and desire—and reinforced through the contemporaneous policing and surveillance of black male bodies." Aimé J. Ellis, *If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015), 159. See also Brad Erickson, "Evil Folklore: Practices of Prejudice" in ed. Margaret Sönsner Breen, *Truth, Reconciliation, and Evil* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 115-134. See also George Yancy, who argues that the black body "is the monstrous, it is that which is to be feared and yet desired, sought out in forbidden white sexual adventures; it is constructed as a source of white despair and anguish, an anomaly of nature, the essence of vulgarity and immorality." George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), xxx.

suggested that he commercialize his talent—and as a result of following their advice—he is now heard exclusively on Paramount.¹⁷⁰

Not only did Paramount advertising executives pitch the singer and his songs as weird, in other advertisements the copy referred to Jefferson's music as "old-time," suggesting that he and his music were relics of a distant past. A 1926 advert for Jefferson's first side for Paramount featured the following text: "Here's real, old-fashioned Blues singer—Blind Lemon Jefferson from Dallas. This "Booster Blues" and "Dry Southern Blues" on the reverse side are two of Blind Lemon's old-time tunes."¹⁷¹ As with the marketing for white southern "old-time" music, the text suggested that these records were a salve to the uncertainty of modern times. As Karl Hagstrom Miller argues, the use of minstrel imagery such as comic buffoons, allowed the labels to signal that the relatively new trade in black music "would not upset previous marketing strategies or the conventions of segregation."¹⁷²

Unlike the perfectly healthy individuals that graced the cover of Old Time white fiddling music catalogues, the minstrel stereotypes in adverts for male Blues served to belittle African Americans, not least in their treatment of black masculinity. These cartoon figures did not look like the natural products of good breeding; instead, they denigrated African Americans and portrayed them as laughable low-lives. The term "old time" coupled with comical cartoon images of blacks continued to hold held them as plantation stereotypes. Such marketing strategies would have therefore undermined any meaningful attempts at understanding the implications of African American gendered power struggles that Blues lyricism detailed. Indeed, misogynist

¹⁷⁰ Paramount Book Of Blues, (1927 edition) as reproduced in Allan Sutton, *Race Records and the American Recording Industry, 1919-1945: An Illustrated History* (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2016), 147.

¹⁷¹ 1926 advert for Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Booster Blues" as reproduced in Sutton, *Race Records*, 148

¹⁷² Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 207.

lyrics coupled with blatantly derisory depictions of black males tended to trivialise, or invalidate, obscure, or draw attention from any meaningful messages about the black experience in 1920s.

If some advertisements denigrated African American masculinity by presenting plantation stereotypes, other depicted vicious black men dominating women with accompanying text that served to either trivialize, or perhaps even legitimize the severity of abuse. An advert for Ida Cox's "Mean Loving Man Blues" (Pm 12094, 1924) featured the following copy:

You want to hear IDA COX cry for her mean, lovin' man in her latest Paramount Record "Mean Loving Man Blues." "My Man Drinks His Whiskey, and is as mean as can be—but when he starts loving, oh, he's so good to me!" A Lonely girl's plea for her wayward man. Such an appealing, touching wail, you're bound to like it. There's an original, sparkling banjo and guitar accompaniment by Pruit Twins of Kansas City, that's different and catchy.¹⁷³

The copy stated that the accompaniment to lyrics that dealt with themes of abuse was sparkling. Moreover, it assumed that consumers were "bound to like" bubbly music that detailed male-on-female brutality and sex. Regardless of the popularity of the recording, the advertising copy and images in adverts like this not only made light of violent intimate relationships, it projected a stereotypical image of African Americans. Marketing materials like these perpetuated racial stereotypes of drunken, brutish black men who were also skilled, highly desirable lovers and lustful black women who could forget about the violence if given the right sexual satisfaction. The implications of Blues adverts were not lost on some black writers. In 1925, a writer for the black publication *Half-Century Magazine* angrily commented that

¹⁷³ Paramount's advert for Ida Cox's "Mean Loving Man Blues" *Chicago Defender*, April 5, 1924, reproduced in Rolf von Arx, "A Glimpse At the Golden Years of Ida Cox" 78 *Quarterly*, Volume 1, No. 11, pp.109-122, 113. Digitised version available at stable url <https://s3.amazonaws.com/DinosaurDiscs/78+Quarterly+No+11.pdf>, accessed: 28/04/2015.

Blues records “and their highly descriptive ads do much to increase hatred and widen the breach between the races.”¹⁷⁴

The transgressive females that appeared in commercially recorded Blues lyrics clearly stood in stark contrast to the race mothers that New Negro progressives championed. These hazardous transgressive women were often punished for their “sins.” And yet, whilst many male Blues recordings of this period certainly provide evidence of gendered power struggles, the importance of motherhood was generally absent in secular offerings. However, songs such as Texan Ben Norsingle’s “Motherless Blues” (Br 7043, 1928), and Robert “Barbecue Bob” Hicks’ “Motherless Chile Blues” (Co 14299-D, 1927) nevertheless allude to the importance of mother, not just as an individual, but also as a concept, a repository of virtue, wisdom and succour. In Norsingle’s jazz-inflected “Motherless Blues,” the singer’s male character opined: “I’m motherless and fatherless, / Lord, and I’m friendless too,” before detailing failed intimate relationships with love interests. He eventually finishes the song by focusing on the loss of the mother, and not the father: “Baby, baby, why should I stay here by myself? / I’ve lost my mother, and I haven’t got nobody else.”¹⁷⁵ In Barbecue Bob’s “Motherless Chile Blues,” his male character blamed his wrongdoings on the lack of a mother figure: “If I mistreats you girl, I sure don’t mean no harm, / I’m a motherless child and I don’t know right from wrong.”¹⁷⁶ Steven Tracy argues that the significance of the motherless child in songs such as these “likely emerged from the conditions of slavery, where family ties were frequently suppressed or broken by the selling of family members.”¹⁷⁷ However, in Hicks’ recording, the importance of the mother as educator is made clear, thereby

¹⁷⁴ “Widening the Breach,” *Half-Century Magazine*, January-February 1925, 21.

¹⁷⁵ Ben Norsingle, “Motherless Blues,” Br 7043, 1928.

¹⁷⁶ Barbecue Bob, “Motherless Chile Blues,” Co 14299-D, 1927.

¹⁷⁷ Steven C. Tracy, *Hot Music, Ragmentation, and the Bluing Of American Literature* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015), 122.

suggesting the significance of this theme at the time the record was initially issued. The paucity of the mother figure in secular music reveals much about the communities in which Blues thrived and enjoyed success. Whilst women and houses are frequently mentioned in Blues recordings, the manner in which these topics are broached differs greatly from the idealistic model of motherhood, domesticity and saintliness that is inherent in sacred music.

Angela Davis contends that the lack of the mother figure in Blues “does not imply a rejection of motherhood as such, but rather suggests that blueswomen found the mainstream cult of motherhood irrelevant to the realities of their lives.”¹⁷⁸ Although Davis’ comments pertain to female Blues singers of the 1920s, her observation is also true of the many male blues performers who recorded in the latter part of the decade and into the 1930s. Whilst many male Blues of this period did not directly communicate the ideologies foregrounded by race leaders, the emphasis on the denigration and punishment of transgressive black women in Blues suggests to some extent, a shared vision of patriarchal stability and male empowerment, albeit expressed in markedly oppositional discourse. Recorded sermons also communicated powerful messages about black feminine propriety, and whilst not always stressing the importance of motherhood, they nevertheless vilified women who dressed exotically, or otherwise flaunted codes of decency. In this respect, these recordings articulate anxieties around black female sexuality and fears about how it might compromise the impediment of black respectability, and with it racial progress, in the US. Gospel offerings, although praising motherhood, often placed her in the confines of the home in the afterlife. Advertising materials for Blues records often used plantation stereotypes to depict African Americans. Whilst much of the secular

¹⁷⁸ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 13.

music reflected gendered power-struggles exacerbated by systemic racism, the cartoon caricatures in such marketing materials reduced these salient issues to the level of comedy.

Chapter Three

“By You I Am With Child”: Rewriting Tradition, Feeble-Mindedness, and Eugenic Ideology in Commercially Recorded Murder Ballads of the 1920s

During the 1920s, a number of “murdered-sweetheart” ballads became popular recording choices for male Old Time artists. These ballads follow a relatively standard pattern: a young lady walks with an amorous male only to be brutally murdered for doing so, perhaps for any nefarious activities she may indulge in on her leisurely stroll. Two of these ballads, “Knoxville Girl” and “Pretty Polly” principally derive from British broadsides ballads. Never stable texts; over time these ballads had regularly been revised, what is of principle interest here, however, is how these ballads were further edited for commercial recording and release, often according to a fairly fixed formula. The original, lengthy broadside ballads invariably describe a false promise of marriage, illicit sexual relations, and finally, the brutal murder of a pregnant female. Almost all of the commercial recordings made from the 1920s onwards stripped away most of the preamble of the British ballads, retaining only the climatic murder as their central narrative. One reason for these edits was doubtless the technological constraints that limited the time available on recording.¹⁷⁹ Such technical demands, however, tell only part of the story of how and why many old “murdered-sweetheart” ballads became fixed in narrative structure and theme, and

¹⁷⁹ Recordings had to be around three minutes in length, and, elisions and omissions had to be made to allow the ballads to fit onto a ten-inch shellac 78rpm disc. By the mid-1920s, ten-inch discs had become the standard format for short commercial recordings. This standardization followed a period of experimentation with running speeds and disc sizes. For a detailed historical account of the evolution of the phonograph record, disc sizes and speeds, see Allan Sutton, *A Phonograph in Every Home*, (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2010).

the peculiar nature of their popularity during this period. This chapter puts these developments into the critical context of eugenics ideology in the early Twentieth Century and the perceived threat that “feeble-minded” women posed to the social structure. It also considers how factors such as the proliferation of yellow journalism in sensational murder trial and sex scandal reportage of the 1920s may have helped to create an appetite for this kind of lurid tales. Above all, the chapter argues that commercial recordings of adapted British broadsides flourished during this period because they were able to express conflicting attitudes towards what were often considered acts of sexual transgression. Appealing, for rather different reasons, to both the guardians of traditional moral and gender ideals and those who dared to defy long-held notions of sexual propriety, these ballads embodied some of the key cultural and social tensions during an era when changes in sexual mores and values threatened the stability of gendered, racial, and class hierarchies.

The murder of young women in so many commercially popular ballads of this era intersected with growing fears over female sexuality and perceived threats to the racial purity and mental health of the white South that were often informed by eugenic thought.¹⁸⁰ Commenting on so-called “feeble-minded” women during the early Twentieth Century, Steven Noll explains how these women were viewed by reformers as “cauldrons of erotic energy waiting to boil over,” as “transmitters of feebleminded genes to succeeding generations” who had an “inability to ward off the

¹⁸⁰ For further reading on the eugenics movement, see Jonathan Spiro, *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant*, (New Hampshire: University of Vermont Press, 2006). See also Edward Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995). See also J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 75, 81-82, 99-100, 103. Also, Gregory Michael Dorr, “Defective or Disabled?: Race, Medicine, and Eugenics in Progressive Era Virginia and Alabama,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 5, 4 (Oct., 2006), pp. 359-392.

advances of unscrupulous males.”¹⁸¹ As ever, racial anxieties were never too far from the surface of southern white male concerns about the health of the region’s women. During this period, leading southern eugenicists implemented legislation that forbade mixed race marriage and miscegenation. These issues had been a source of grave concern for many southerners who were anxious about the stability of racial purity and the social and physical health of the region. In March 1924, the *Virginia Health Bulletin* reported on “The New Virginia Law to Preserve Racial Integrity. Quoting from Senate Bill 219, Virginian physician and leading eugenicist Walter Ashby Plecker stated:

It shall hereafter be unlawful for any white person in this State to marry any save a white person, or a person with no other admixture of blood than white and American Indian. For the purpose of this act, the term “white person” shall apply only to the person who has not trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian; but persons who have one-sixteenth or less of the blood of the American Indian shall be deemed to be white persons.¹⁸²

Applications for marriage insisted that both parties were “free from any contagious venereal disease” and that neither were “a habitual criminal, idiot, imbecile, hereditary epileptic or insane person.”¹⁸³ As this chapter will demonstrate, the

¹⁸¹ Steven Noll, ““A Far Greater Menace”: Feeble-minded Females in the South, 1900-1940” in eds. Virginia Bernhard, Betty Brandon, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Theda Perdue, and Elizabeth Hayes Turner, *Hidden Histories of Women in the New South* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994) pp 31-51, 34, 35 See also Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 93. James W. Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Intellectual Disability in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 2nd edition), 180.

¹⁸² “The New Virginia Law To Preserve Racial Integrity,” from *Virginia Health Bulletin*, vol. XVI, March 1924. Pamphlet. Rockbridge County Clerk’s Correspondence, 1912–943. Local Government Records Collection. The Library of Virginia. 12—1245—005. Digitized version available at stable url, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/omeka-net/3933/archive/files/a21dd53f2a098fca5199e481433b4eb2.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAI3ATG3OSQLO5HGKA&Expires=1500780867&Signature=HQV5X%2BPU5kW96BTRklUuJvIaCi8%3D>, accessed: 20/07/2017.

¹⁸³ Application for Marriage License. Ca. 1924. Printed form. Rockbridge County Clerk’s Correspondence. 1912-1943. Local Government Records Collection. The Library of Virginia. 12—1245—002. Digitized version available at stable url, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/omeka->

perceived heredity of sexual deviance was cited as justification for the labelling, and times, the forced sterilisation of “feeble-minded” women during this period. Indeed, the absence of pregnant female victims in most of the murder ballads recorded in the 1920s may have reflected southern fears about abortion, which were themselves connected to broader concerns about how to ensure the future of healthy, white Anglo Saxon Americanism.

As the popularity of Old Time music gained momentum in the 1920s, many labels searching for southern talent became increasingly attracted to old ballads, not least because they were not bound by copyright – a major source of income for the A&R men and music publishing companies at the heart of the burgeoning recording industry.¹⁸⁴ A number of the most popular recorded versions of these songs dramatized scenes of male-on-female murder, among them, grisly ballads such as “Knoxville Girl,” and “Pretty Polly.” In these songs, young women are killed while venturing unchaperoned to deserted spots with an admiring male charge. In a number of instances, the narratives of “murdered-sweetheart” ballads chiefly derived directly from older British broadsides. Although pregnancy is often the catalyst for the brutal murder of women in the original broadsides, the recorded American derivatives retain only the central theme of murder. A number of recordings of indigenous American ballads, including the tales of Naomi Wise and Pearl Bryan, also omitted pregnancy tropes found in early musical accounts of their deaths. Whilst there may be many reasons for these narrative omissions, these recordings enjoyed popularity

net/3933/archive/files/689384730b07054c63694eff2691340f.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAI3ATG3OSQLO5HGKA&Expires=1500783076&Signature=8NbZ9WGbHkAeSzkhnRQFhT83V%2BM%3D, accessed: 20/07/2017.

¹⁸⁴ For a thorough, detailed breakdown of industry practices concerning royalties, see Brian Ward and Patrick Huber, *A&R Pioneers: Architects of American Roots Music on Record* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, forthcoming), 85-116. See also Barry Mazor, *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2015), 7, 23, 74-77, 79, 81, 127, 283.

during a period of intense anxiety about female sexuality and the threat it posed in the southern states and nationally. This period was, as Pippa Holloway summarizes, a time when white elites used the ideology of eugenics “to produce sexual regulations that reinscribed and maintained traditional relations of race and class while also building on social constructions of gender.”¹⁸⁵ Ballads often had moralizing elements woven into the narratives: some warned of the perils of committing the heinous crime of murder, whilst others alluded to the perils of premarital sex. Often these ballads contained an elusive, ambiguous mixture of both; they simultaneously reaffirmed the mortal sin and legal consequences of committing murder, while also emphasising how inappropriate sexual activity was both sinful and likely to cause physical and moral tragedy. In the context of eugenics and fears over racial purity and healthy, white Americanism, these moralizing ballads may well have taken on even greater significance.

In conversation with Mike Seeger in 1962, Frank Buckley Walker, a record scout for Columbia Records in the 1920s, eulogised about the moralizing qualities of the event songs and murdered-sweetheart ballads that he did much to commission and promote:

You had sad ones, the stories of Jesse James and all kinds of bandits and convicts and everything you could think of. Yes, and a murder here and there. *Naomi Wise* is a story of a little girl who lived. *Marion Parker* was married unfortunately, in Atlanta. But there was always a moral so what was done wrong should not be done by the person who was listening. It did a tremendous amount of good; I can't emphasise that enough.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Pippa Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia, 1920-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 22.

¹⁸⁶ Mike Seeger, “Frank Buckley Walker: Columbia Records Old Time Music Talent Scout,” stable url, http://www.johnsonsdepot.com/oldtime/frankwalker_interview1.pdf, accessed: 20/03/2014.

Walker's comments signify his understanding of the function of event songs and murder ballads in American popular culture during the 1920s. However, whilst the talent scout stressed the importance of a moralizing element, he did not reflect upon how such messages also reinforced male governance over women. The singers of these songs were, after all, predominantly male. The young women who walked unchaperoned with men in these songs were at danger and, in the logic of the songs and American society, in order to stay safe, needed to adhere to guidance from men who advised them to stay at home or only to venture out under the watchful eyes of savvy "protectors." In this sense, these messages were characteristic of patriarchal sentiments of the age in America, including the South. In the hands of many white supremacists and supporters of eugenics, these messages functioned as powerful forces of social control at a time when fears were mounting over female sexual conduct.

During the 1920s, many eugenicists voiced their fears about the threat that unmarried mothers posed to the social structure of American society. Women who bore children outside of wedlock were often imagined to be "feeble-minded" and a hazard to national progress. As Gail Reekie stresses, the "feeble-minded" unmarried mother "presented a monstrous spectacle: immoral, undeveloped, uncontrolled and unthinking." Such women were the antithesis to the "bourgeois notion that motherhood was a naturally virtuous, beautiful and sensible state."¹⁸⁷ Early Twentieth Century accounts of "feeble-minded" women stressed their innate criminality and lack of moral fibre. Writing in 1916, educational psychologist and prominent eugenicist, Lewis Terman argued:

¹⁸⁷ Gail Reekie, *Measuring Immorality: Social Inquiry and the Problem of Illegitimacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 121.

Not all criminals are feeble-minded, but all feeble-minded persons are at least potential criminals. That every feeble-minded woman is a potential prostitute would hardly be disputed by anyone. Moral judgment, like business judgment, social judgment, or any other kind of higher thought process, is a function of intelligence. Morality cannot flower and fruit if intelligence remains infantile.¹⁸⁸

Terman's view that all "feeble-minded" women were potential prostitutes was not anomalous. Eugenicist Walter E. Fernald went even further than Terman, dehumanising the "feeble-minded" and lambasting them for their financial burden on society, and their allegedly innate criminality:

The feeble-minded are a parasitic, predatory class, never capable of self-support or of managing their own affairs. The great majority ultimately become public charges in some form. They cause unutterable sorrow at home and are a menace and danger to the community. Feeble-minded women are almost invariably immoral, and if at large usually become carriers of venereal disease or give birth to children who are as defective as themselves. The feeble-minded woman...is twice as prolific as the normal woman.¹⁸⁹

This view remained commonplace among eugenic supporters during the 1920s. It shaped both national debates around the nature of American character and the need to control immigration from "inferior" non-WASP parts of the world, as well as more regionally specific debates around the need to bolster Jim Crow laws to protect white southerners from contamination by non-white blood – a fear that, as Jude Riley shows, dovetailed with entwined concerns about the threat of a dysgenic class of poor whites and about new patterns of white female sexuality.¹⁹⁰ Sexual promiscuity on the part of a female could be conveniently accredited to a state of "feeble-mindedness." Such labelling enabled anxious Americans to justify legislation that

¹⁸⁸ Lewis Terman, *The Measurement of Intelligence: An Explanation of and a Complete Guide for the Use of the Stanford Revision and Extension of the Binet-Simon Intelligence Scale* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1916), 11.

¹⁸⁹ Walter E. Fernald, "The Burden of Feeble-Mindedness" *Journal of Psycho-Asthenics* 17, 3, (March 1912), pp. 87-111, 90-91.

¹⁹⁰ For a seminal work on American nativism and anti-immigration, see John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 158-193. For recent work on the importance of eugenic ideology in the South, see J. E. L. Riley, *'Idiot-Brained South': Intellectual Disability and Eugenics in Southern Modernism*, PhD thesis, Northumbria University, 2015, 6-47.

forced the sterilization of “undesirables” who threatened the social structure.¹⁹¹

Whilst the popular murdered-sweetheart ballads of the 1920s do not describe the sterilization of females, the dramatic murders of young women who venture off with young men for unknown “pleasures” enact a figurative sterilization. These problematic, often immoral women and any potential off-spring from their wanton sexual behaviour are simply removed from society and from white bloodstock, permanently. Thus, these lyrical murders helped to enable and explain the frequent omission of pregnancy tropes from recorded versions of songs such as “Knoxville Girl,” “Pretty Polly” and the indigenous American ballad “Naomi Wise” at a time of widespread interest in eugenic theories and unease about the changing racial and ethnic character of the United States.

In 1926, most likely adhering to advice from Frank Walker, Texan singer Vernon Dalhart cut “Naomi Wise” (Co 15053-D) for the Columbia label. Dalhart had achieved great success after recording the reputed million-seller “The Wreck of the Old ‘97” (Vi 19427) in 1924 for the Victor label.¹⁹² Although vernacular variants of the ballad had existed for quite some time before it enjoyed success in the 1920s, Dalhart’s version was a fresh rewrite by New York-based songwriter, Carson Robison. “Naomi Wise” recounted the story of an ill-fated young female, murdered by her lover. Whilst unrecorded folk versions revealed that Naomi was pregnant, these details were not included in Robison’s lyrics. Although Robison’s lyrics do not

¹⁹¹ See Martin S. Pernick, *The Black Stork: The Death of “Defective” Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures Since 1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 68. Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 96. See also Mary S. Melcher, *Pregnancy, Motherhood, and Choice in Twentieth-Century Arizona* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), 62.

¹⁹² David Dicaire, *The First Generation of Country Music Stars: Biographies of 50 Artists Born Before 1940* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2007), 21. Paolo Prato and David Horn “Railroad Songs” in eds. John Shepherd and David Horn, *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World Volume 8: Genres: North America* (New York: Continuum, 2012), pp. 382-385, 384.

explicitly describe sexual activity before marriage, the promise of marriage often precipitated carnal relations, and the allusions are fairly clear:

They say she had a lover, John Lewis was his name,
Each evening he would have her by his side,
She learned to love and trust him, and she believed his words,
He told her she was built to be his bride.

A later stanza describes Lewis taking Naomi away. Listeners are then told:

She begged him just to spare her, the villain only laughed,
They say that he was heartless to the core,
And in the stream he threw her, below the old mill dam,
And sweet Naomi's smile was seen no more.

In 1927, partially-blind G. B. Grayson recorded a stripped-down version of the tale of Naomi Wise. Aesthetically, Grayson's version, entitled "Ommie Wise" (Vi 21625) differed greatly from Dalhart's smooth citified vocal sound and delivery. G. B. Grayson was born in Ashe County in north-western North Carolina, spent most of his life in Laurel Bloomery in Tennessee and paired up with guitarist and singer Henry Whitter. The pair became a successful duo and recorded sessions for the Victor and Gennett labels in 1928. Unlike many of his contemporary old-time musicians, Grayson was not a dance fiddler and actually specialised in murder ballads, recording versions of "Banks of the Ohio", which he entitled "I'll Never Be Yours" (Ge 6373, 1927) "Rose Conley" (Vi 21625, 1927), "Tom Dooley" (Vi V-40235, 1929), and of course, "Ommie Wise."¹⁹³ In Grayson's recording, Naomi is lured to water and drowned,

He told her to meet him at Adams's Spring,
He'd bring her some money and some other fine things,
He brought her no money, nor no other fine things,
But get up behind me Ommie to s'where else we'll go.

She got up behind him "so caref'ly we'll go",
They rode 'til they came where deep waters did flow,

¹⁹³ Tony Russell, *Country Music Originals: The Legends and the Lost*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 105-106.

John Lewis, he concluded to tell her his mind,
John Lewis, he concluded to leave her behind.

She threw her arms around him “John spare me my life,
And I’ll go distracted and never be your wife,”
He threw her arms from ‘round him and into the water she plunged,
John Lewis he turned ‘round and rode back to Adams’s home.¹⁹⁴

Both versions follow the formulaic structure of most recorded “murdered-sweetheart” ballads by eliding Naomi’s pregnancy. Here, however, the departure from well-known versions of Naomi’s tale was especially marked. In the mid-nineteenth-century, North Carolinian Braxton Craven had written an early account of the story and also a ballad that featured details of an unborn child, which proved to be the motive for murder. Craven was a prolific educator and highly respected preacher who regularly delivered sermons that, according to his biographer Jerome Dowd, “bore upon daily life” and that were “morally, industrially and spiritually—of the people.”¹⁹⁵ Braxton Craven also wrote under the pen-name Charlie Vernon and crafted a highly romanticised prose variant of the Naomi Wise tale. It was published as a mini-book and was also serialised over a three-week period in North Carolina’s *Greensboro Patriot* in April 1874. At the end of the story was a ballad entitled the “Song of Naomi Wise.” Craven’s version featured the following stanzas:

Still nothing he gave, but flattered the case,
He said: “We will marry and have no disgrace;
Come, get up behind me, we will go to town,
And there be married, in union be bound.”

She got up behind him: he straightway did go
To the banks of Deep River where the waters flow;
He said: “Now, Naomi, I’ll tell you my mind;
I intend to drown you and leave you behind.”

“O! pity your infant, and spare me my life!
Let me be rejected, and not be your wife!”
“No pity, no pity,” the monster did cry;

¹⁹⁴ G. B. Grayson & Henry Whitter “Ommie Wise,” Vi 21625, 1927.

¹⁹⁵ Jerome Dowd, *Life of Braxton Craven*, (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton, 1896), 100.

“In Deep River's bottom your body shall lie!”¹⁹⁶

Craven’s version of the song described Naomi Wise pleading with Lewis to spare the life of their infant. On May 6, 1915, the Winston-Salem *Union-Republican* published a folk version of the ballad that featured Naomi pleading for the life of her unborn child. Several other vernacular versions retaining the murder of Naomi and her unborn child were also in existence in the 1920s. This would suggest that whilst the murdering of a woman and her unborn child may have been acceptable narratives within folk culture, they were almost always deemed unsuitable for inclusion on recordings of Old Time music.¹⁹⁷ In fact, only one of the many recordings made in the 1920s retained this scene or anything like it.¹⁹⁸ The narrative in this form does not satisfy any desire for justice, nor is the social order restored.¹⁹⁹ In this sense, 1920s recordings of “Naomi Wise” and “Ommie Wise” appear to tell the story of a murder with little social commentary on the heinous nature of male-on-female brutality and, unlike in the British originals, or in earlier American revisions, there is

¹⁹⁶ “Song of Naomi Wise” reproduced in Braxton Craven, *Life of Naomi Wise, True Story of A Beautiful Girl: Enacted in Randolph County, N. C., About the Year 1800*, publisher and date unspecified, 28. Using the pen name Charlie Vernon, Craven published the story in The Greensboro *Patriot* over a three-week period in April 1874. The song appeared at the end of the story as a slightly different version entitled “Poor Naomi” in the *Patriot*, on April 29, 1874. Although the differences are very slight, viewing both versions enables a more substantial appreciation of the re-writing process and the role that memory plays in shaping the ballad form. The newspaper-published version of the song is available to view online at UNCG Digital Collections, stable url,

<http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/ref/collection/GSOPatriot/id/10552>, accessed: 10/01/2015.

¹⁹⁷ Arthur Palmer Hudson, “Poor Naomi (Omie Wise)” in eds. Henry M. Belden and Arthur Palmer Hudson, *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore, Volume Two: Folk Ballads From North Carolina*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1952), pp. 690-698.

¹⁹⁸ Whilst the absence of the unborn child from the narrative may appear to be the rule in 1920s commercial recordings, there is, however, an exception. Thomas C. Ashley’s 1929 recording of “Naomi Wise” did include a verse that made mention of a young one: “Take pity on my infant and spare me my life, / Let me live single if I can’t be your wife.” Co 15522-D, 1929. Ashley’s recording appears to be anomalous in this respect.

¹⁹⁹ David Atkinson argues that the appeal of murder ballads is in part due to the desire to see justice served. Whilst the American derivatives often omit these narrative threads, many British broadsides feature the punishment of the murderer. See David Atkinson, “Magical Corpses: Ballads, Intertextuality, and the Discovery of Murder,” *Journal of Folklore Research*, 36, 1, (Jan. – Apr., 1999), pp.1-29, 2, 4.

no legal or extra-legal retribution exacted against the murderer. Such narrative omissions may well reflect contemporaneous anxieties pertaining to female sexuality, immorality and the stability of white Anglo Saxon Americanism, rhetorically licensing male murder of wanton women and pre-emptively stopping them reproducing.

“Pearl Bryan” is another example of an American murder ballad that was sanitized in recorded versions of the 1920s. Vernon Dalhart cut the track for Columbia in November 1926, as did musical partners Burnett and Rutherford. Bradley Kincaid also recorded a version in 1929 for Gennett, although Kincaid’s recording was unissued. The tale of Pearl Bryan was based on a murder that took place in late January, 1896. Pearl Bryan was pregnant, had gone to see her Scott Jackson, boyfriend and the father of the unborn child, and Jackson’s associate Alonzo Walling, seeking an abortion. The operation had complications and it cost Pearl her life. Her headless body was found shortly afterwards. As Anne B. Cohen shows, newspaper accounts of the murder and the trials of the two men made a great deal of the pregnancy.²⁰⁰ However, Vernon Dalhart’s 1927 musical account of the murder, again, written by Carson Robison, makes no mention of Pearl being with child. Appealing explicitly to youthful and impressionable female listeners, Dalhart sang:

Young ladies if you listen,
Now a story I’ll relate,
It happened near Fort Thomas,
In the old Kentucky State.

²⁰⁰ Although there are many works that discuss these events, none match the breadth and scope of Anne B. Cohen’s study. Her work on Pearl Bryan’s murder extensively covers press accounts of the time and a plethora of ballads that circulated as a result of the case. See Anne B. Cohen, *Poor Pearl, Poor Girl!: The Murdered Girl Stereotype in Ballads and Newspapers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973).

The song proceeds to dramatize events around the murder, making no mention of why Pearl travelled to see the two men. It alludes to sexual relations in the final stanzas, offering a fairly didactic warning to female audiences about the perils of inappropriate, extra-marital sexual relations:

Young ladies now take warning,
Young men are so unjust,
It may be your best lover,
But you know not whom to trust.

Pearl died away from home and friends,
Out in that lonely spot,
Take heed, take heed, believe this girls,
Don't let this be your lot.²⁰¹

“Knoxville Girl” and “Pretty Polly” were among the most frequently sung and recorded murder-ballads of the interwar years and had their roots in earlier British broadsides. Once more, the dominant patterns of revision as British originals and American folk versions were transformed into commercial recordings, reveal something of the moral climate and gendered anxieties of the 1920s.

Both ballads began as cautionary tales that warned against the perils of pre-marital sex. “The Berkshire Tragedy” is widely considered to be *one* of the main texts from which the American ballad “Knoxville Girl” derives. Similarly, “The Gosport Tragedy” is widely thought of as the ballad from which “Pretty Polly” emerged.²⁰² A few stanzas from each ballad and their respective derivatives reveals

²⁰¹ Vernon Dalhart “Pearl Bryan,” Co 15169-D, 1926.

²⁰² For a detailed analysis of the lineage of “Knoxville Girl” see G.M. Laws Jr., *American Balladry from British Broad-sides*, (Philadelphia: The American Folklore Society, 1957), pp. 104-122. See also Charles K. Wolfe, “The Knoxville Girl” in ed. Charles K. Wolfe, *Folk Songs of Middle Tennessee: The George Boswell Collection*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), pp. 55-56. For extended reading on the lineage of “Pretty Polly” see Paul Slade, *Unprepared To Die: America’s Greatest Murder Ballads and the True Crimes That Inspired Them* (London: Soundcheck Books, 2015), pp. 143-177. For brief discussion of the omission of pregnancy from “Pretty Polly,” see also Charles K. Wolfe, *Kentucky Country: Folk and Country Music of Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), pp. 7-8.

how details of the slaying of pregnant females are notably absent in 1920s recordings, and the shift in motivations for the murders. For instance, a 1796 version of “The Berkshire Tragedy” features the following stanzas:

My tender parents brought me up,
Provided for me well,
And in the town of Wittam, then,
They plac’d me in a mill.

By chance upon an Oxford lass,
I cast a wanton eye,
And promis’d I would marry her,
If she would with me lie.

But to the world I do declare,
With sorrow, grief and woe,
This folly brought us in a snare,
And wrought our overthrow.

For the damsel came to me and said,
By you I am with child:
I hope, dear John, you’ll marry me,
For you have me defild.²⁰³

Unlike the later American variant “Knoxville Girl,” “The Berkshire Tragedy” spells out that the young female is pregnant. This situation becomes the catalyst for murder. Because of the absence of obvious causality in recorded versions from the 1920s onwards, the song appeared to tell the story of a girl murdered on a whim rather than as a result of an unwanted pregnancy, with all that might bring in terms of inconvenience for the father and shame for the mother.

Riley Puckett first recorded the song for Columbia (Co unissued, 1924) but for reasons unknown it was rejected by the label. However, it was cut a number of times by southern artists operating in the old-time genre in the years following. Georgia’s Arthur Tanner, brother of Gid Tanner of the Skilletlickers fame, recorded a version

²⁰³ “The Berkshire Tragedy, or, The Wittam Miller,” 1796, stanzas 2-5, *Harding B.* 6 (97), digitised facsimile available at Bodleian Library Ballads Online, stable url, <http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/static/images/sheets/05000/00711.gif>, accessed: 21/09/2014.

in January 1925, (Co unissued). He then re-recorded the track in June 1925 (Pm 33162). Kentucky's Lester McFarland and Tennessean Robert A. Gardner, also known as Mac and Bob, recorded a version for Vocalion in December 1926 (Vo 5121). Arthur Tanner recorded it again with "His Cornshuckers" in April 1927 (Pm 33162). This was followed by Kentuckian Ted Chestnut's version in May 1928 (Sil 8156). Although the ballad underwent significant changes as it travelled over land and sea, there is, however, a narrative strand that remained integral to the plot of old and new versions. A young man falls for the beauty and charms of a young girl. He leads her to a deserted spot near water, beats her brutally with a stick, and disposes of the body in the water. In almost every variant, the young girl pleads for mercy but to no avail. In Arthur Tanner and his Cornshuckers 1927 version of "Knoxville Girl" there is no mention of pregnancy. Instead, listeners simply learned that marriage was out of the question:

Go there, go there, you Knoxville girl
With dark and rolling eyes,
Go down, go down, you Knoxville girl
You'll never be my bride.²⁰⁴

Without motive in recorded versions, there is, as Graeme Thomson argues; "no clear purpose for the girl's murder given."²⁰⁵ The fact that the song was recorded at all in the 1920s suggests the belief—at least among many artists and their record labels, that the tale of the murdered girl would hold appeal for a record-buying public. Moreover, the versions that artists committed to shellac as *fixed* narratives, taking into account the omissions and edits especially, reveal much of the social climate in which they enjoyed popularity.

²⁰⁴ Arthur Tanner and His Cornshuckers, "Knoxville Girl," Co 15145-D, 1927.

²⁰⁵ Graeme Thomson, *I Shot a Man in Reno: A History of Death By Murder, Suicide, Fire, Flood, Drugs, Disease and General Misadventure as Related in Popular Music* (London: Continuum, 2008), 60.

Asides from the obvious omission of pregnancy from later derivatives of the original British Broadside, there are also contrasting representations of the mother figures in recordings of “Knoxville Girl” that also speak to issues of gender and social control in the the1920s, particularly as they played out in the US South. “The Berkshire Tragedy” introduces the girl’s mother in the following stanzas:

Soon after that, her mother came,
As you shall understand,
And oftentimes did me persuade,
To wed her out of hand.

By contrast, “Knoxville Girl” presents listeners with a very different mother figure, that of the male protagonist:

I started back to Knoxville,
Got there about midnight,
And mother she was worried
Woke up all in a fright.

“My son, my son what have you done,
To bloody your clothes so?”
The answer I gave mother,
Was “bleeding at my nose.”

The function of the mother figure in the recordings of “Knoxville Girl” is significantly different than in the earlier broadside variants. In “The Berkshire Tragedy” she is the mother of the female victim. She is not simply confined to home and hearth. She is presented as mobile and forthright, opting to visit the soon-to-be murderer at his home, where she appeals to him to marry her pregnant daughter.

The contrasting representations of motherhood in the early ballad and its later derivative are revealing. Given many southerners’ predilection for preserving tradition, including masculine codes of behaviour, the account of the bloodied clothing may have held appeal for listeners who could imagine a bloody nose as the

result of a physical altercation with an adversary.²⁰⁶ That the mother in “Knoxville Girl” epitomises the caring stay-at-home matriarch, worrying over her bloodied son is unsurprising. As chapter one demonstrates, traditional southern concepts of womanhood venerated the “four cardinal virtues” which were, as Hazel Dicken-Garcia and Kathryn M. Neal note; “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.”²⁰⁷ In this context, the mother is safe in her rightful place: the home. In stark contrast, a young girl who is simply willing to walk out unattended with a male is summarily killed. Within the logic of the recording, there is not even an unwanted and inconvenient pregnancy to explain the male violence; the spectre of pre-marital sex may have lurked somewhere in the background – not least as some listeners would doubtless have remembered older version of the ballad even as they heard and bought newer revised recorded versions – but on shellac even minor transgressions from established notions of female propriety could have lethal consequences.

Had the 1920s recordings of “Knoxville Girl” included the narrative thread about pregnancy, the inclusion of a mobile mother figure with a “sexually immoral” daughter would have symbolised the antithesis of the saintly domesticated goddess that so many other popular roots recordings sentimentalised. Moreover, that she could have given birth to such a wanton child would most likely have suggested hereditary characteristics, passed down genetically. Gerald V. O’Brien and Autumn Molinari contend, sexual immorality, amongst other traits, was thought of as a

²⁰⁶ For more on the history of southern codes of honour and masculine behaviour in the Old South see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, 1982 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 25th Anniversary Edition), for deeper context and a more nuanced understanding of the lasting impact of these codes, see also Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, & Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

²⁰⁷ Hazel Dicken-Garcia and Kathryn M. Neal, “Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the Cult of True Womanhood” in eds. David B. Sachsman, S. Kittrell Rushing and Roy Morris Jr., *Seeking a Voice: Images of Race and Gender in the 19th Century Press* (Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2009), 179. See also, Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, pp. 4-8, 195.

hereditary attribute “that could not be changed through environmental or cultural influences.”²⁰⁸ Writing in 1914, eugenicist H. H. Goddard argued that feeble minded people “will have the same mental capacity and possibilities generation after generation.”²⁰⁹

This ideology, whether explicitly invoked, or as part of a more general desire to quarantine and ultimately eradicate “undesirable” social characteristics, paved the way for the forced sterilization of females who were perceived as a threat to the social welfare of the United States. Again, these national preoccupations took on special resonances in the South. In a triumph for the eugenics movement in 1927, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the forced sterilization of Carrie Buck of Charlottesville, Virginia. Buck was thought to have been “feeble-minded”: a condition passed on from her mother. Oliver Wendell Holmes, the Supreme Court Justice wrote: “It is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind.”²¹⁰ On this matter, an unnamed representative of the University of Virginia has stated:

It is likely that Carrie’s mother, Emma Buck, was committed to a state institution because she was considered sexually promiscuous, that the same diagnosis was made about Carrie when she became an unwed mother at the age of 17 due to being raped, and that her daughter Vivian was diagnosed as “not

²⁰⁸ Gerald V. O’ Brien and Autumn Molinari, “Religious Metaphors as a Justification for Eugenic Control: A Historical Analysis” in eds. Darla Schumm and Michael J. Stoltzfus, *Disability in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Sacred Texts, Historical Traditions and Social Analysis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 141-166, 144.

²⁰⁹ Henry H. Goddard, “Heredity of Feeble Mindedness”, Reprinted from *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. L I, No. 205, July 1912, 174. Digitised version available at stable url, <https://bir.brandeis.edu/bitstream/handle/10192/27437/624%20p-30.pdf?sequence=1>, accessed: 17/05/2015

²¹⁰ U.S. Supreme Court, *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. 200 (1927), pdf available at stable url, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/274/200/case.html#207>, accessed: 20/04/2016.

quite normal” at the age of six months largely in support of the legal effort to sterilize Carrie.²¹¹

Although this was a landmark trial, sterilization laws had been in place in Virginia since 1924.²¹² With this critical context in place, the death of the young girl in “Knoxville Girl” figuratively resolves her as a threat: she is snuffed out. The assertive mother of the girl in “The Berkshire Tragedy” is simply omitted and replaced by the type of caring homebody that so many other old-time songs sentimentalized.

“Knoxville Girl” is not completely lacking in moralising themes regarding murder. The vision of flames of hell around the narrator’s bed suggests that his guilt and psychological torment are punishment for his crime. Plagued by the memory of his own actions, he recalls the prospect of eternal damnation, followed by a stanza in which he details his incarceration:

I rolled and tumbled the whole night long,
Was troubles there for me,
Flames of hell around my bed
And in my eyes could see.
Carried me through to Knoxville jail
They locked me in a cell,
My friends all tried to spare me
But none could pay my bail.

That none of the protagonists friends could pay his bail suggests their own and perhaps his insolvency. The quick shift from hell to cell suggests that should listeners at the time fail to be sufficiently discouraged by the threat of eternal

²¹¹ Online exhibit, Eugenics in Virginia: Buck v. Bell and Forced Sterilization, Historical Collections at the Claude Moore Health Sciences Library, 2004, stable url, <http://exhibits.hsl.virginia.edu/eugenics/>, accessed: 20/04/2016.

²¹² For a detailed account of this law and its passing, see Paul. A. Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck V. Bell* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), 91-102. See also Willie V. Bryan, *In Search of Freedom: How Persons with Disabilities Have Been Disenfranchised from the Mainstream of American Society and How the Search for Freedom Continues* (Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 2006), 126, Young Park, *The Dark Side: Immigrants, Racism, and the American Way* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2012), 250.

torment, they could at least expect to end their days in jail if they committed murder.

And yet, the male character is unable to resist the urge to blame his predicament on the murdered girl's sister

Her sister swore my life away,
For she'll-a seal-a doubt,
She said I was the same here man,
To get her sister out.²¹³

The female victim in "Knoxville Girl" has much in common with the ill-fated "Pretty Polly." Significantly, there is no mention of pregnancy in any of the available commercial recordings of "Pretty Polly," whereas in its chief British source "The Gosport Tragedy" the narrator reveals:

But yet all in vain, she his suit did deny,
Though he still did Press her to make her comply;
At length with his cunning he did her betray,
And to lewd desire he led her away.

But when with-child this young woman were,
The tydings she instantly sent to her dear;
And by the good Heaven he swore to be true.
Saying, I will wed no other but you.²¹⁴

First recorded as "Purty Polly" by John Hammond in 1925 (Ge 5697), the song was recorded again in October 1926 by Lester MacFarland and Robert A. Gardner (Vo 5026). It made it onto shellac twice again the following year. Virginian banjoist Dock Boggs recorded the track for the Bristol label at a session held in New York in March 1927 (Br 132). B. F Shelton from Corbin, Kentucky recorded a version for the Victor label in Bristol Tennessee four months later (Vi 35838). There is no mention of unwanted pregnancy in any of these derivatives. However, they do allude

²¹³ Arthur Tanner and His Cornshuckers, "The Knoxville Girl" Co 15145-D, 1927.

²¹⁴ "The Gosport Tragedy: Or, The Perjured Ship Carpenter" c. 1728-1763, stanzas 9-10. Digitised version available at English Broadside Ballad Archive, stable url, <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/32460/xml>, accessed: 20/09/2014.

to sexual activity before the murder takes place. In “Pretty Polly,” having proposed, Willie appeals to Polly, ‘Before we get married, some pleasures to see.’²¹⁵

The wily invocation of pre-marital sex here, albeit in this case with the spectre of male threat, violence and murder hovering over the “invitation” to pleasure, fits into a trend towards more permissiveness when it came to discussing – and even engaging in – sex for pleasure in America. The initial release of these commercial recordings coincided with a kind of sexual revolution that potentially empowered women and simultaneously thrilled and shocked many Americans. American birth control advocate Margaret Sanger and her British counterpart Marie Stopes continued to advocate birth control for women—a course of action that led to Sanger’s arrest and imprisonment in the previous decade. During this period, early feminist activists embraced aspects of Freudian theory that explicitly indicated that sexual impulses were normal driving forces in both men and women. To add to this, a number of highly-publicised sex scandals involving Hollywood stars such as Clara Bow and Fatty Arbuckle made headlines.²¹⁶ In the 1920s, public references to sex

²¹⁵ B. F. Shelton “Pretty Polly,” Vi 35838, 1927.

²¹⁶ As Mary K. Trigg observes, “The rise of the sexologists and the popularity of Sigmund Freud fed into this changing cultural landscape. Feminists like Mabel Dodge Luhan and Emma Goldman, who considered sexuality self-defining and a critical part of human experience, claimed Freud as a leading authority on the topic. They were charmed by Freud’s definition of sexuality as a driving instinct in both genders, one linked pleasure rather than solely to procreation.” See Mary K. Trigg, *Feminism as Life’s Work: Four Modern American Women through Two World Wars* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 67. Clara Bow had a very successful career playing “flapper” types on celluloid, but was publicly attacked in the press for her off-screen behaviour, which bore a resemblance to the characters she played. The press reported a series of scandals involving her love affairs and improper behaviour. See Catherine Gourley, *Flappers and the New American Woman: Perceptions of Women from 1918 through the 1920s* (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2008), pp. 22-24. For more on Bow’s character as a flapper both onscreen and off, see also David Stenn, *Clara Bow: Runnin’ Wild* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), pp.33-76. Fatty Arbuckle was charged, but later acquitted with the rape and murder of Virginia Rappe in September, 1921. Sensational tabloid coverage of the trial ruined the star’s career, resulting in the banning of his movies at the time. See Kelly Boyer Sagert, *Flappers: A Guide to an American Subculture* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010), 125. For a detailed account of the trial, see Matthew Pate “The Tragedy of Arbuckle, “Prince of Whales”” in eds. Frankie Y. Bailey and Steven Chermak, *Crimes and Trials of*

became much more common. What may have been confined to the private sphere in years gone by became significantly less clandestine. Indeed, as Martha May notes, “the 1920s represented a distinct break with America’s sexual past.”²¹⁷ And yet, rather than detail sexual activity in explicit terms, the recordings of these ballads merely suggest it. The latent suggestiveness, rather than explicit acknowledgement of sexual permissiveness may have reflected tensions about newer models of sexual propriety, not least in the South where Old Time religion held a tight grip on prevailing attitudes to such matters.

It is highly likely that many southerners would have been familiar with the narrative of “Pretty Polly,” its history, and also with the history of “Knoxville Girl” long before these songs were recorded. Unlike some of the more bawdy Blues recordings of the time, many Old Time recordings tended to avoid explicit references to sex. And yet, attitudes towards female sexuality were certainly shifting. This did not sit well with southerners who feared that morality was in decline. As Nancy Maclean explains, some white supremacists, including members of the revitalized Ku Klux Klan, who claimed to be acting in the best interests of their female counterparts cautioned females that they should “return to chaperons” and “confide in their mothers as their forebears had.”²¹⁸ In this context, the ballads functioned in much the same way that they did in their earlier incarnations, warning of the perils of illicit sexual relations, and most likely figuratively resolving troubled male authority. Like “Knoxville Girl,” the narrative in “Pretty Polly omits additional elements found in the early broadside versions and retains mainly the lovers’ walk to an isolated spot

the Century, Volume 1: From the Black Box Scandal to the Attica Prison Riots (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), pp. 55-72.

²¹⁷ Martha May, *Women’s Roles in Twentieth-Century America*, (Westport: Greenwood, 2009), 39.

²¹⁸ Nancy Maclean, *Behind The Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 115.

and the murder itself. The fact that the ballad's narrative suggests that Polly is autonomous, mobile, and prepared to be sexually active: therefore functions as the catalyst for murder. The women in these ballads are generally killed for their willingness to engage in sexual conduct outside of marriage. As Theresa Goddu argues, in the case of "Pretty Polly" the murder "both enacts Willie's "pleasure" and eliminates the threat of Polly's sexuality."²¹⁹ Whilst "Pretty Polly," unlike "Knoxville Girl," features no mother figure, Polly's murder retains the same symbolism and resolves through lethal violence the problem of female autonomy and licentiousness.

Behaviour that deviated from the strict moral codes of true southern femininity—an exclusively white concept, according to the region's whites—as Tara McPherson argues, was potentially damaging to ideas of purity and chasteness.²²⁰ The presence of transgressive women in American popular culture incensed Evangelical preacher Billy Sunday. On February 11, 1922, South Carolina newspaper the *Spartanburg Herald-Journal* published Sunday's diatribe against the decline of the American movie industry's morals. The direct cause of the Sunday's furious outpourings was the presence of "vampish" women onscreen and the threat of unbridled sexual impulses that such "femme fatales" could ignite in lustful men. Sunday railed:

The woman game is as dangerous as T.N.T. No one ever played it and got away with it. Women's eyes have slain more men than poison gas. The devil himself could not get Adam to bite until she baited his hook with a woman and they have been quibbling ever since. Their smiles and love sighs have caused multitudes to strike out and they will as long as the human race endures.²²¹

²¹⁹ Theresa Goddu, "Bloody Daggers and Lonesome Graveyards: The Gothic and Country Music" in ed. Cecilia Tichi, *Reading Country Music, Steel Guitars, Opry Stars, and Honky-Tonk Bars* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 45-64, 54.

²²⁰ Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 149.

²²¹ "Billy Sunday Says Movies Must Clean House Or Else Blow," *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, February 11, 1922, 1. Billy Sunday's diatribe against flappers and "vampish"

The fact that this was deemed newsworthy at the time reflects the growing fears over new models of sexuality in America, not least in the South. New women caused a great affront to traditional sensibilities in the southern states. The white southern belle or lady was an historic model of southern femininity to which southern women were expected to adhere to or strive to attain. Any deviation from chaste or pure behaviour would suggest that the female in question had more in common with women of other races who were deemed as animalistic and overtly carnal. In the eyes of traditionalists, flappers and “new women” openly flouted traditional constructions of gendered propriety—and were routinely chastised for their transgressions. For many years in the South, African American women had also been thought of as congenitally licentious and lustful—the very antithesis of the white southern “lady.”²²² White women who did not conform to prescriptive ideals of femininity were thought of as more inclined to engage in sexual conduct with men of other races. Indeed, as Kathleen Blee observes, to white supremacists, “dating and marriage across racial or ethnic lines evoked the same images of white female exploitation and usurpation of white men’s privileges that fueled the Reconstruction-era Klan.”²²³ In 1923, a writer for official Klan newspaper *The Imperial Nighthawk* articulated grave concerns over the relative fertility rates of black and white Americans, breeding patterns, and the impact these factors would have upon the stability of white society. “Colored races rear families much faster than white races

women was not simply a singular male’s perspective on female transgression in the public arena. A number of female Evangelists of the time also publicly derided this new model of femininity. See Thomas A. Robinson and Lanette D. Ruff, *Out of the Mouths of Babes: Girl Evangelists in the Flapper Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²²² For more on conventions of white southern femininity and the representation of African American women, see Anastatia Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women’s Organizations in North Carolina, 1880-1930* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 1-6.

²²³ Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 87

and we must protect the white race in this country,” bemoaned the writer.²²⁴ The fear of miscegenation was ever-present, fusing with fears over the sexual conduct of young women. The perceived threat that mixed-race children, and “feeble-minded” offspring posed to the social order was of primary concern to eugenicists and Klansmen alike. Just as Jude Riley has described how these anxieties came to pervade a good deal of southern literature during this period, often ending in tales of personal tragedy and communal ruin, so they also informed many of the murder ballads recorded in this period.²²⁵ Thus, whilst talk of marriage generally precedes the murder in the ballads, allusions to pre-marital carnal activity before the murders suggest a correlation between lust, sex, and, for the women, death.²²⁶ In this context the killings figuratively resolve the threat of female sexual agency and transgression whilst reifying white southern masculine authority. This is of course, not unproblematic, given that these male characters are actually murdering women. One of the main driving points here, then is that mothers and “classic” southern womanhood is to be protected, whilst deviance is punishable by death.

Another crucial historical context for the relative absence of men murdering their unborn and illegitimate children in these recordings was the political battles and debates over abortion rights and legislation in the 1920s. Anti-abortion legislation in America was introduced just after the middle of the Nineteenth

²²⁴ “Points Out Peril to White Supremacy,” *The Imperial Nighthawk*, August, 29, 1923, 8. Digitized version available at stable url, <http://www.historyonthenet.com/authentichistory/1921-1929/4-resistance/2-KKK/nighthawk/index.html>, accessed: 20/ 06/ 2017.

²²⁵ See Riley, 'Idiot-Brained South' throughout.

²²⁶ In an exploration of the presence of the gothic in country murder ballads and its relationship with the British broadside tradition, Theresa Goddu argues that these ballads represent sex as being “anything other than safe” and that “love in these songs becomes just another type of death.” See Goddu, “Bloody Daggers and Lonesome Graveyards,” 52.

Century. By 1890, almost every state had passed laws criminalising abortion.²²⁷ Effective contraceptive methods were hardly widespread in the early part of the Twentieth Century. Withdrawal was extremely unreliable, douching proved fairly ineffective, and as Margaret Sanger noted, 43 percent of contraceptive chemicals were absolutely ineffective.”²²⁸ Thus, the chances of falling pregnant through sexual activity would have been far greater. That “Knoxville Girl” and “Pretty Polly” became formulaic in their narrative omissions of murdering pregnant females at the end of a century in which abortion had been criminalised suggests that they reflected contemporary anxieties over such issues. Their sustained popularity during the 1920s also suggests that they continued to appeal to the nervous guardians of traditional values, reflecting anxieties over women’s increasing sexual autonomy and independence. Writing on nineteenth-century America, Nicola Beisel and Tamara Kay suggest that whilst “laws regulating abortion would ultimately affect all women, physicians argued that middle-class, Anglo- Saxon married women were those obtaining abortions, and that their use of abortion to curtail childbearing threatened the Anglo-Saxon race.”²²⁹

The introduction and enforcement of the Racial Integrity Act in Virginia in 1924 had at its core, the intention of improving and stabilizing racial purity of that southern state in the first instance, although its supporters hoped similar measures would be adopted across the region, if not the entire nation. Spearheaded by Virginian physician Walter Ashby Plecker, Tennessean Methodist preacher and political activist Ernest Sevier Cox, and a Virginian musician named John Powell,

²²⁷ Nicola Beisel and Tamara Kay, “Abortion, Race, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century America” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (Aug., 2004), pp. 498-518, 498.

²²⁸ See Peter Engelman, *A History of the Birth Control Movement in America* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), pp. 75-79.

²²⁹ Nicola Beisel and Tamara Kay, “Abortion, Race, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century America” *American Sociological Review*, 69, 4, (Aug., 2004), pp. 498-518, 499.

the Racial Integrity Act coincided with and was informed by the scientific racism at the heart of the eugenics movement. Mixed-race marriage became illegal as a direct result of this act, reflecting underlying fears of miscegenation and its impact upon white America. In 1925, John Powell was invited to address the Georgia legislature. Powell's pleas contributed to the adoption of a Racial Integrity Law in Georgia in 1927—the same year that Alabama took similar action.²³⁰ Musical narratives that detailed the murder of women who appeared to be sullying the purity of the white south, and by extension, jeopardising its future, may well have had added cultural capital during this time. Arguably, narratives that featured white protagonists killing unborn and potentially healthy white children could have caused a great affront to southern sensibilities regarding the preservation of racial purity and healthy, white Americanism in the region. For many opponents to abortion, termination of healthy babies was thought of as “race suicide.” In 1906, Dr. T. F. Lockwood wrote:

If mothers had full control of conception and gestation, it would be but the expiration of the present generation until the final extinction would come. The civilized portion of the globe would be depopulated by the follies of a people who would willingly sacrifice an entire nation merely for present social enjoyment and motives.²³¹

Lockwood's comments not only articulate his belief that abortion posed a serious threat to the racial makeup of American society, they also demonstrate his vehement

²³⁰ For more on Powell, Georgia, and Alabama see J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 85. Additionally, the fear of miscegenation was deeply ingrained into the psyche of white southern men and had been for quite some time. See for instance, Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 147. See also Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 25th Anniversary Edition), 134, 165-166, 237, 287-89, 294, 296, 297, 305-24. For a deeper understanding of the contents and implications of the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, see *An Act To Preserve Racial Integrity*, digitized version available at stable url, http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/encounter/projects/monacans/Contemporary_Monacans/racial.html, accessed: 05/03/2015.

²³¹ T. F. Lockwood, “Criminal Abortion; A Prevailing Evil against the Unborn Generation; a National Crime Committed for Mere Social Promotion” *Journal of Missouri Medical Association* 3 (1906-1907), pp. 220-231, 220.

opposition to sex as a pleasurable leisure activity. The fact that women might take control of their own bodies and actually engage in sex for enjoyment rather than procreation posed a significant menace to racial and gendered hierarchies. Such moral concerns were compounded by pervasive racist stereotypes about black sexuality. Caricatures of over-sexed, wanton black women who used and luxuriated in their bodies in what were, according to the gender and class codes of the day, profoundly unsettling and unrespectable ways, abounded and were embodied in the Sapphire figure. Meanwhile, a major fear in the minds of white southerners, perhaps particularly men, was that the region's white women were more likely to fall prey of the imagined sexual prowess and predatory nature of African American men. For John Powell, however, miscegenation not only jeopardised the Anglo-Saxon purity of the white South, it was imagined to threaten whiteness on a global scale. Powell argued: "With the constant interchange of population between Europe and America, Europe would likewise inevitably become tainted. This would mean the degeneration of the whole Caucasian race, the annihilation of white civilization."²³²

In particular, Powell was part of a movement that increasingly celebrated the rural, especially the mountain, South and its white inhabitants as repositories of racial purity and good, old-fashioned values. These were the sorts of places and the sorts of people from which old-time music was supposed to come. Generally speaking, representations of mountain folk were sanitized in marketing materials for old-time music. Rather than present mountain folk as savage, isolated, barbarians to consumers, as they appeared in other popular cultural forms, healthy, fun-loving,

²³² John Powell, "Music and the Nation" *The Rice Institute Pamphlet*, Volume 10, Number 3 (July 1923) pp 125-163, 138, digitised edition available at stable url, https://scholarship.rice.edu/bitstream/handle/1911/8712/article_RI103127.pdf?sequence=7, accessed: 20/02/2015.

white folk graced the covers of catalogues.²³³ In his pioneering study on the politics of cultural intervention in Appalachia, David Whisnant shows how several powerful and influential individuals, including John Powell, constructed an image of southern mountain culture that promoted Anglo Saxon heritage as the true, defining culture of the Appalachians and a source of pride and inspiration for the entire white South. Commenting on the White Top Folk Festivals of the 1930s, Whisnant reveals how organisers Annabelle Buchanan and Powell rejected many performers who wished to take part because they did not appear to accurately represent the type of white, mountain folk that the organisers wished to construct as the authentic Appalachian heritage. As Whisnant wryly reflects, “The risk of celebrating folk culture in public was therefore that the folk, if left to themselves, might celebrate the wrong thing.”²³⁴ Whisnant’s observations reveal some of the continued forces that helped to perpetuate the image of mountain inhabitants as being unspoiled by the advent of modernity. However, rather than assume that all of the artists who recorded this material were simply pious, God-fearing, respectable white folk who shared little in common with the violent male characters in the songs, it is important to acknowledge that these were normal working people, actively embracing consumer culture, with a diverse array of cultural background and, in the case of Ted Chestnut, temperament.

²³³ See Riley, ‘Idiot Brained South’ throughout.

²³⁴ David Whisnant, *All That Is Native & Fine: The Politics of Culture In an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), pp. 181-253. For Whisnant’s comments on public celebration of folk culture see 229. For deeper context, see Cecil Sharpe’s *English Folksongs from the Southern Appalachians*. In the introduction Sharpe acknowledged that he had in fact, gone looking specifically for evidence of Anglo-Saxon culture in the mountains. Because of this agenda, he paid scant attention to the many home-grown ballads he encountered in the American region. The result was his book which privileged the English tradition as a main aspect of mountain life in Southern Appalachia and largely discredited home-grown American folk culture, including the exchange between African Americans and southern whites, and the influence of this exchange on southern vernacular forms.

In personal correspondence with Kentuckian fiddle maestro Doc Roberts, Ted Chestnut, one of a number of artists who recorded “Knoxville Girl,” made clear his anger regarding an apparent royalty dispute with fellow singer Dick Parman. In the letter, Chestnut fumed:

If Dick is still darned sure I owe him and so darned set on collecting it, I don't see why he hasn't got guts enough to tell me about it. If he ever names it to you again you tell him to say something to me about it. I'm going to London the last of this month and I'm going to hunt him up and find out what its all about. Just tell him attack my rep once and I'll attack him to the hospital for about 6 months. I'm plumb sick and tired of his lying and crookedness. He has tried every way to knock me since I've been with you and now I reckon he's trying to make you think I'm as dishonest as he is.²³⁵

Regardless of the technicalities of the argument, Chestnut openly acknowledged his own propensity for violent behaviour. This was not a threat of throwing punch in anger. Rather, Chestnut declared a premeditated intention to cause serious physical harm to Parman. Additionally, his fury over the royalties demonstrated that although ostensibly grounded in tradition, this music, like the artists that performed and recorded it, was also deeply entrenched in the business culture of modern commerce, copyright and consumerism. It was, essentially, at odds with the concept of pure, unspoilt, white America that Powell would project as integral to the region. In other correspondence with Roberts, Chestnut wrote him a list of ten songs that he learned “from some of the old folks” where he lived. Given the trend for ballads during this period, Chestnut thought that they were ideal recording choices, and well suited to the consumer market for roots music of the 1920s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, on the list was a sentimental mother song entitled “My Mother Was A Lady” (Ge 6480, 1928)

²³⁵ Ted Chestnut, personal letter to Doc Roberts, c. 1928, The Doc Roberts Papers, 1910-1938, Box 2, Folder, Y, Hutchins Library, Special Collections & Archives, Berea College, Kentucky.

However, first on that list was the ballad “The Fatal Wedding.”²³⁶ The ballad, written by William H Windom and Gussie L. Davis in 1893, relates a tale of bigamy, a dead child and an abandoned wedding. Both Vernon Dalhart and Bradley Kincaid had previously recorded versions of this before Chestnut suggested it to Roberts. Most likely, Chestnut saw potential in recording the song, precisely because of the earlier success of Dalhart and Kincaid. The first two stanzas, minus chorus read:

The wedding bells were ringing on a moonlit winter's night,
The church was decorated, all within was gay and bright,
A woman with a baby came and saw the lights aglow,
She thought of how those same bells chimed for her three years ago,
I'd like to be admitted, sir, she told the sexton old,
Just for the sake of baby to protect him from the cold,
He told her that the wedding was for the rich and grand,
And with the eager watching crowd, outside she'd have to stand.
She asked the sexton once again to let her pass inside,
"For baby's sake you may step in," the gray-haired man replied,
"If anyone knows reason why this couple should not wed,
Speak now, or forever hold your peace:" the preacher soon said!
"I must object," the woman cried, with voice so meek and mild,
"The bridegroom is my husband, sir, and this our little child."
"What proof have you?" the preacher said. "My infant," she replied,
She raised her babe, then knelt to pray, the little one had died.²³⁷

The final stanza reveals that the bridegroom dies “by his own hand.” The child and the father are buried the next day, while the mother of the child is promised that she will be cared for by the parents of the bride. It is significant that the song includes the dead infant. Unlike the “murdered-sweetheart” ballads in which the death of an unborn child is omitted in the shellac recordings, the lyrics in popular recordings of this song remained faithful to the original. Presumably, those working for the labels deemed the tragic tale of the death of the child in “The Fatal Wedding” fine for

²³⁶ Ted Chestnut, personal letter to Doc Roberts, April 12, 1928, The Doc Roberts Papers, 1910-1938, Box 2, Folder, Y, Hutchins Library, Special Collections & Archives, Berea College, Kentucky.

²³⁷ Wm. H. Windom and Gussie L. Davis, “The Fatal Wedding,” (New York: Spaulding and Gray, 1893), John Hopkins University, Sheridan Libraries Special Collections, The Lester S Levy Sheet Music Collection, Box 140, Item 128, digitised version available at stable url, <http://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/catalog/levy:140.128>, accessed: 19/04/2015.

public consumption as a southern Old Time recording, because the child had actually been born. Again, there seems to be a refusal, or at least a feeling of great unease on the part of record label staff to allow themes of infanticide into popular music. However, the emergence of murder ballads without infanticide as commercial recordings cannot be accredited solely to southern anxieties about racial purity. There are other factors to consider.

Many of these songs covered grim musical narratives and appealed to public appetites for the macabre, morbid, and sensational. The public, fuelled by the press, became increasingly drawn to murder narratives during this period too. A number of high profile murder trials simultaneously repulsed and thrilled the public during this period. The cases of Richard Loeb and Nathan Leopold, William Hickman, Ruth Snyder, and a number of others all featured regularly in highly-dramatized press accounts of their trials for various grisly murders. The American public's preoccupation with murder can, in part, be accredited to the press's coverage of these high-profile trials. Taking their lead from the yellow journalism that began in the late Nineteenth Century, a number of newspapers competed with other forms of cheap literature and with movies instead of "real" newspapers."²³⁸ Ballads often mirrored this style of dramatic narrative, and the coupling of grisly themes on recorded sides reflected this. Vernon Dalhart recorded "The Death of Floyd Collins" for the Columbia label in 1925. On the flip side of the disc was Dalhart's own rendition of the murder ballad "Little Mary Phagan" (Co 15031-D). The inclusion of the two songs on one disc reveal marketing techniques of those working in the industry and

²³⁸ John R. Brazil, "Murder Trials, Murder, and Twenties America" *American Quarterly*, 33, 2, Summer, 1981, pp. 163-184, 163, 164. For an account of the rise of yellow journalism see W. Joseph Campbell, *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies* (Westport: Praeger, 2001), pp.25-34. See also David Ralph Spencer, *The Yellow Journalism: The Press and America's Emergence as a World Power* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), pp. 53-95. Jim Willis, *100 Media Moments that Changed America* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010), 17.

indicate their belief that at least a section of the public simply wanted songs of death and blood.²³⁹ This was not lost on a writer working for *Talking Machine World* in December 1925. Musing over the reasons for this new interest in sombre ballads, the writer noted:

The fact that the public or a fair portion of it has decided on a funeral dirge type of offering should not be taken as an atavistic tendency. It is rather a desire for something different. This desire can be taken advantage of by both the popular publisher and record maker, and songs of good ballad order, love songs and other numbers particularly lending themselves to solo voices with a minimum of arrangement should meet the situation and bring on a period of prosperity that would be far larger than the results obtained by merely catering to what may be a limited vogue for songs of pathos.²⁴⁰

Asides from recordings of “murdered-sweetheart” ballads, recast from old broadsides, many of these songs were written to order by professional songwriters. Labels relied, in part, on the writing abilities of figures such as Carson Robison and Andrew Jenkins to help pen fresh event songs. This was in accordance with public demand as perceived by industry A&R men, whose livelihood depended on an acute sense of consumer tastes. That Robison wrote a new version of the Naomi Wise story demonstrates this approach to rewriting and selling repackaged “tradition.” Columbia’s Frank Buckley Walker stressed that he “must give tremendous credit” to Robison, for his natural writing ability. Walker proudly described how he would approach Robison with an old tale gathered from the South and within 24 hours the New York-based songwriter could deliver a new song detailing the events.²⁴¹ This

²³⁹ For more on the prevalence and function of event songs in the 1920s, see Charles K. Wolfe “Event Songs” in ed. Tichi, *Reading Country Music*, 188-199. For Wolfe’s comments on Dalhart’s Columbia recordings of “The Death of Floyd Collins,” “Little Mary Phagan” and their popularity see 190-194.

²⁴⁰ “What the Popularity of Hill-Billy Songs Means in Retail Profit Possibilities,” *Talking Machine World*, December 15, 1925, 177. Digitised version available at stable url, https://archive.org/stream/talkingmachinew21bill/talkingmachinew21bill_djvu.txt, accessed: 11/09/2015.

²⁴¹ Mike Seeger interview with Walker as reproduced in “Frank Buckley Walker: Columbia Records Old-Time Music Talent Scout,” stable url

strategy allowed record companies to exploit the public's interest in grisly musical narratives.

Paradoxically, these traditionally cast songs were often new products of modernity. The writer of the December 1925 article in *Talking Machine World* readily acknowledged that much of the popular old-time music was simply a modern take on old traditions: "The public has revolted and turned to that which was a most radical change, the solo songs of several generations ago, brought up to date and made into a pathetic song on some current topical event or catastrophe."²⁴² The writer's announcement that the songs were actually new compositions written to a formula that made them *appear* old, drew attention to the constructed nature of "tradition" in the context of southern culture. Indeed, a number of people working within the burgeoning commercial roots music business were deliberately constructing an image of rustic southern "authenticity."²⁴³ Frank Walker would later reveal how the songs were altered in order to sound like true representations of the southern musical tradition and way of life—concepts that many consumers, whether located in the South, southern migrants, or non-southerners embraced because accepted pervasive, highly nostalgic and sentimentalised recreations of a

<http://home.comcast.net/~victrolaman/maischfrankwalker.pdf>, 9, accessed 1/2/2015. Writing of this kind did not always sit well with those involved in the industry and beyond. For a fuller account of the implications that writing-to-order had upon attitudes towards grief and loss in the public domain see also, Alan Sutton, *Recording the 'Twenties: The Evolution of the American Recording Industry, 1920-29*, (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2008), pp. 85-86. For details of how Polk Brockman encouraged Andrew Jenkins to write event songs that would appeal to the public's sentiments, see also William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 149-150.

²⁴² "What the Popularity of Hill-Billy Songs Means in Retail Profit Possibilities." 177.

²⁴³ See for instance, W. Fitzhugh Brundage who contends that "southern culture at the dawn of the twentieth century was explained—not to mention exploited—so as to affirm purportedly primordial, innate and enduring divisions among the region's and nation's peoples." W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "Why Americans Look to the South for Authentic Culture" in eds. Martyn Bone, Brian Ward, and William A. Link, *Creating and Consuming the American South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015), pp. 27-48, 29. See also Karen Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 1-8.

mythologised South. This reveals the paradoxical nature of the old-time music boom of the period. In the quest for authenticity, many aspects of “traditional” southern culture were carefully constructed, overly-romanticised, and at times simply invented. Nevertheless, these concepts appealed to consumers all across the nation amidst the anxiety and tension that modern times brought in their wake. The consumption of murdered-sweetheart ballads on commercial records indicated a market for “traditional” music in which themes of social control were present, if not always prevalent. Moreover, record labels saw the lucrative potential in selling public domain songs.

The reasons why the labels wanted old ballads can largely be explained by economic factors: record companies such as Victor, Columbia, Okeh and many others were exempt from paying royalties on traditional “composer-unknown” songs that had been in the public domain for a substantial period of time.²⁴⁴ Record labels looking for maximum profit with minimum financial risk would almost certainly have relished the prospect of recording “murdered-sweetheart” ballads, because they owed no songwriter royalties. Additionally, because these ballads had traditionally been disseminated orally, there was a strong likelihood that many variants could exist. Should a perceptive individual get a singer to change a line here or there, then the altered ballad could effectively be considered a new version. For instance, at a session organised by record mogul Ralph Peer, B. F. Shelton is credited as composer of “Pretty Polly” on his 1927 recording of the song for the Victor label. At another Peer-supervised session Red Patterson is credited as composer of the traditional

²⁴⁴ In an interview Polk Brockman explained the reason for the interest in recording traditional music, arguing that the labels “were getting that stuff without royalties...if they put on the pop tunes they’d naturally have to pay royalties on them.” Cited by Karl Hagstrom Miller in *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 235-236.

American murder ballad, “Down on the Banks of the Ohio.”²⁴⁵ When G. B Grayson’s recorded “Ommie Wise,” Peer engineered the session and Grayson is credited as the composer. This demonstrated the scrupulous business acumen of Ralph Peer. Indeed, Barry Mazor, a leading Peer biographer argues that it was “perfectly legal and sometimes viable to own and charge for an original variation unique and strong enough, with enough value added, that people want to turn to it repeatedly and specifically—and are willing to pay for it.”²⁴⁶

Whilst many artists had extensive repertoires, the industry capitalised on traditional ballads during this period because they sold well and yielded maximum profit. Moreover, the labels most certainly responded to public demand. These ballads began as cautionary tales warning of the dangers of pre-marital sex in Eighteenth Century Britain partly in an effort to curb immoral behaviour and control illegitimacy levels. Once they travelled overseas they became songs that punished transgressive female sexuality, whilst on occasion, exalting the merits of the stay-at-home matriarch. The absence of narrative threads that detailed the murder of pregnant women in the recorded 1920s versions most likely reflected cultural taboos about eugenic themes in popular cultural forms. These recordings flourished in a period when conservative fears over the demise of 100% Americanism. The symbolic death of potentially sexually promiscuous women during this period may

²⁴⁵ For details see “Pretty Polly” *Discography of American Historical Recordings*, s.v. “Victor matrix CVE-39736. Pretty Polly/B. F. Shelton” stable url, http://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/800013991/CVE-39736-Pretty_Polly. accessed: 05/03/2015. See also “Ommie Wise” *Discography of American Historical Recordings*, s.v. “Victor matrix BVE-40306. Ommie wise / G. B. Grayson,” stable url, http://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/800014537/BVE-40306-Ommie_wise. accessed: 05/03/ 2015. See also “Down on the Banks of the Ohio” *Discography of American Historical Recordings*, s.v. “Victor matrix CVE-39799. Down on the banks of the Ohio / Red Patterson; Piedmont Log Rollers,” stable url, http://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/800014054/CVE-39799-Down_on_the_banks_of_the_Ohio. accessed: 05/03/2015.

²⁴⁶ Mazor, *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music*, 83.

also have figuratively resolved fears over “feeble-minded” women and the threat they posed to the social welfare of American society. However, these recordings were also ideally situated in a period when the public interest in sexuality and scandal was heightened and exploited by sensationalized press coverage of such themes. The ballads on disk blended sex, scandal and violence in a commercially popular musical form. They also managed to advance notions of southern white racial integrity and reassert traditional social, especially, gender dynamics at a time when all of these things were coming under increasing scrutiny and attack.

Chapter Four

“Wild Women Are the Only Kind That Really Get By”: The “Classic Blues” and Female Resistance in the 1920s.

Writing on the nature of the relationship among the Blues, politics and the black women’s club movement of the early twentieth century, Dawn Rae Flood argues that whilst “the predominant black female leadership of the day combatted injustice through modest self-representation, blues women instead asserted their power as fully realized sexual beings.”²⁴⁷ Whilst this argument has merit, it nevertheless limits the political significance of female Blues to the sexual arena, thereby ignoring or undervaluing recordings that attacked or critiqued political institutions, legal apparatus and social practices that oppressed African Americans. Doubtless, the overt sexuality of female Blues was an exceptionally important contribution to public discourse on gender-politics, race, and society during the period. Indeed, in her 1924 recording of “Wild Women Don’t Have The Blues,” Ida Cox’s female character proudly confessed,

You never get nothing by being an angel child,
You better change your ways and get real wild,
I wanna tell you something, I wouldn't tell you a lie,
Wild women are the only kind that really get by,
But wild women don’t worry, wild women don’t have no blues.²⁴⁸

Often singing of female sexual desire, Cox, and other seminal female superstars of the Classic Blues period, such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, made outstanding contributions to commercial Blues music and black female discourse during a period in which black American women faced oppression because of their race, gender, and

²⁴⁷ Dawn Rae Flood, *Rape in Chicago: Race, Myth, and the Courts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 81-82.

²⁴⁸ Ida Cox, “Wild Women Don’t Have The Blues,” Pm 12228, 1924.

quite often, class. There already exists a fairly voluminous literature on Rainey and Smith. Writers and scholars such as Hazel Carby, Angela Davis, and Daphne Duval Harrison have contributed important and incisive work on these women, stressing how they embodied and articulated crucial dimensions of the black female experience and, often via their bold and brassy sexual performances, expressed a measure of pride, independence and agency.²⁴⁹ This chapter aims to demonstrate the political engagement and social critiques offered by the “wild women” in the records of artists such as Ida Cox, Rosa Henderson, Victoria Spivey, and Josie and Lizzie Miles. Embedded in their recorded output are lyrics and vocal performances that spoke to and of pressing issues for many black women and men in quite explicit terms, often in songs that superficially seemed to belong in the far more capacious category of highly sexualized, risqué female Blues. Since clearly there was a personal and collective politics of empowerment in many of the sexual Blues that captured a proud, demanding and boastful, if sometimes caricatured and stereotypical, black female sexuality, the distinction at times seems fragile. But the songs under scrutiny here exhibited other layers of meaning. In these songs, the blueswomen were able to question and resist male authority within personal relationships, whilst also calling into question the legal institutions and judicial systems that were supposed to provide protection to their communities, revealing a level of overt political engagement that is seldom acknowledged in scholarship on the Classic Blues period.

²⁴⁹ See for instance, Hazel Carby, “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues” in eds. Robin R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), pp. 746 – 758. Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1999), Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

As far as commercial recordings are concerned, the Classic Blues period began in 1920 with Mamie Smith's recording of the Perry Bradford penned "Crazy Blues," a song in which a performed female character tells of her intention to kill a policeman. The fact that a black woman was able to sing these controversial lyrics with no alarm or cause for concern may have reflected a belief on the part of whites that black women posed little political threat to the broader society's strictures. Whilst women had been granted the right to vote in 1920, many blacks, including black women were routinely denied the opportunity to do so, not least in the southern states where systemic racism allowed the suppression of most black political activism. Southern blacks were disenfranchised by a number of methods, including rigged literacy tests, poll taxes, grandfather clauses, and a plethora of other legalistic and social mechanisations, not least the ever present threat of economic sanctions or violence.²⁵⁰ As Richard K. Scher notes, historically, blacks attempting to register to vote, or "actually cast a ballot, often faced the most staggering consequences: they could be and were thrown off the land, fired from jobs, run out of town, and had their children kicked out of school."²⁵¹ Commenting on the promises of female enfranchisement after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, Mary Ellen Pethel notes that in southern states such as Tennessee, "black women would find that enfranchisement of their gender would be trumped by disenfranchisement based on race."²⁵² In this context, the women of the

²⁵⁰ Wendy G. Smooth, "African American Women and Electoral Politics: Translating Voting Power into Officeholding" in eds. Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox, *Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 167-189, 170.

²⁵¹ Richard K. Scher, *The Politics of Disenfranchisement: Why is it So Hard to Vote in America?* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 39.

²⁵² Mary Ellen Pethel, "Lift Every Female Voice: Education and Activism in Nashville's African American Community, 1870-1940," in eds. Beverley Greene Bond and Sarah

Classic Blues era, both real and performed, gave a public, political voice to legions of disenfranchised black women in the North and South. At a time when many black women were simply denied the opportunity to actively participate in American political life, commercial Blues records bridged that gap, to an extent, speaking to and of women in black communities and the hardships they faced. Among the most pressing of those problems, exacerbated by black inability to exercise significant political influence, was the racial inequity evident throughout the criminal justice system and in basic law enforcement. If this was a community-wide problem, it played out in particular ways for black women and this was reflected in the Classic Blues.

When they weren't following Mamie Smith in threatening to kill the police, the characters in these songs sometimes sang of racism in the police force, and its effect on their dealings with African Americans. At other times, female characters boasted of their willingness to use explosives to free even abusive partners from prison. In all these respects, women's Blues communicated powerful political messages, offering implicit and explicit critiques of discriminatory law enforcement practices and unfair criminal justice systems under the guise of popular entertainment.

Wilkerson Freeman, *Tennessee Women: Their Lives and Times, Volume 2* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), pp. 239-269, 261. Significantly, Charleston, South Carolina's *News and Courier* publicly derided blacks and deliberately impeded their voices in the political process. This was quoted in *The Crisis*, October, 1920. The writer of the article reassured readers: "It is well known that since the passage of this law, no Negro has been allowed to register, unless the registrar, under the wide discretion given him, permitted him to do so. The registrar can refuse to be satisfied, and generally does refuse to be satisfied with a Negro man's ability to read and write the constitution to the registrar's satisfaction....Negro women will be placed in the same statute as the Negro men. When she applies for registration, she will not be able to satisfy the registrar of her ability to read and write the Constitution, certainly not to his "satisfaction,"" reproduced in Lorraine Gates Schuyler, *The Weight Of Their Votes, Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 52.

On Bradford's recommendation, Smith, backed by Her Jazz Hounds—an all-black band comprising Johnny Dunn, Dope Andrews, Ernest Elliott, Leroy Parker and most likely Willie “The Lion” Smith, stood in a New York recording studio on Tuesday, 10 August 1920 and sang:

Now I've got the crazy blues, since my baby went away,
I ain't had no time to lose, I must find him today,
I'm gonna do like a Chinaman, go and get some hop,
Get myself a gun, and shoot myself a cop,
I ain't had nothin' but bad news, now I've got the crazy blues.²⁵³

As Gussow notes, it would have been unheard of for an African American male to sing such lines at the time without sparking huge fears of black insurgency.²⁵⁴

Bradford's lyrics seem to imply a necessary distancing from “normal” black behaviour in order to dramatize the intention to shoot the policeman. In this case, the threat is veiled through a series of characters. Bradford's lyrics stereotype members of the Chinese community as murderous drug abusers, and are mediated through Smith's female character. It is important to remember that this recording session took place only a year after the “Red Summer” of 1919 in which race riots rocked America and intensified racial tensions. This was an exceptionally turbulent period and particularly violent for blacks on a national level. As Ann V. Collins stresses, throughout this year, white mobs “lynched 78 blacks, 10 of whom had served in the military and 11 of whom were burned alive.”²⁵⁵ Many whites feared a new form of black militancy after the return of African American soldiers from World War I.

²⁵³ Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds, “Crazy Blues,” OK 4169, 1920.

²⁵⁴ Gussow, ““Shoot Myself a Cop,”” 12.

²⁵⁵ Ann V. Collins, *All Hell Broke Loose: American Race Riots From the Progressive Era Through World War II*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), 71. This racial tension was felt on a national level and the period was fraught with nervous strain. Jan Voogd observes that the riots that rocked America in 1919 were because of “hysterical racism” and that because “black citizens were continuing their struggle for social equality” this racism was exacerbated, see Jan Voogd, *Race Riots and Resistance: The Red Summer of 1919*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2008), 3.

Additionally; they resented what they perceived as the invasive presence of blacks in locales that had previously been free of racial diversity.²⁵⁶ Commenting on racial violence in Chicago in 1919, a writer for Fredericksburg, Virginian newspaper the *Free Lance Star* reported that

The Negro district has been steadily increasing in recent years with the influx of Southern negroes, who came to work in big industrial plants. Their encroachment on white neighborhoods caused considerable trouble, and during the past year many clashes.

Negroes have charged that a number of bomb explosions in the district in recent months were directed against families of their race by white neighbors.²⁵⁷

At the least, 26 race riots flared up during April and October 1919. The sheriff of Pine Bluff, Arkansas felt compelled to report in 1920 “that he watched black people closely in anticipation of an uprising.”²⁵⁸ Elsewhere in the southern states, whites

²⁵⁶ This was a particularly turbulent time for race-relations. David F. Krugler observes that “New Negroes were quick to recognise the link between manly armed resistance and the fight for political rights.” See David F. Krugler, 1919, *The Year of Racial Violence: How African Americans Fought Back* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 30. Barbara Foley argues, that whether the riots “were precipitated by economic pressures or simply by the refusal of returning black soldiers to abide by what Richard Wright was to call the “ethics of living with Jim Crow,” African Americans demonstrated an unwillingness to respond passively to abuse and violence.” See Lynn Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 13. As Lynne Dumenil notes, “Race riots in Chicago and other cities in 1919 signified new dynamics in urban areas that had experienced significant African American migration during the war years. Migration to the North as well as wartime military service helped to create a militant spirit among African Americans.” Dummil also notes that each riot “had its own etiology, but the roots of conflict were in white denial of rising black expectations. Thus in Chicago whites resented black competition for jobs, their encroachment on white neighborhoods, and their political influence—tensions that were ignited over the murder of a black youth who had drifted while swimming in the white section of Lake Michigan. See Lynne Dumenil, *Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 8, 287-288. See also Aurie A. Pennick and Howard Stanback, “The Affordable Housing Crisis in the Chicago Region” in ed. John P. Koval et al, *The New Chicago: A Social and Cultural Analysis* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), pp. 231- 238, 231.

²⁵⁷ “Race Riots in Chicago,” *Free Lance Star*, July 29, 1919, 3. Digitized version available at stable url, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1296&dat=19190729&id=fJpUAAAIBAJ&sjid=mo8DAAAIBAJ&pg=3742,1513086>, accessed: 09/06/2016.

²⁵⁸ Details of the sheriff’s complaint and of other fears of insurgency can be found in Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 108.

“feared racial and political upheaval.” Nervousness that African Americans would “climb the social ladder” or even tear it down was pervasive. This anxiety factored into the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan.²⁵⁹ That the voice communicating such a controversial message in “Crazy Blues” was female, as opposed to male, is crucial when considering historical perceptions of dangerous black masculinity and the special threat it was widely believed to pose to the social order. By extension, this reveals much about perceptions of black women at the time, indicating that they appeared less dangerous, and a fairly insignificant threat to the racial status quo in the minds of the larger white society.

Batker argues that the “contingencies of performance” often made the themes in the Blues awkward to interpret. As in the case of “Crazy Blues,” working-class blueswomen might easily be singing male-authored lyrics to middle-class African American or white audiences.²⁶⁰ Indeed, it is useful to consider the intended market for records some of these Classic Blues when evaluating their significance as meaningful, public expressions of resistance for black women. As music historian Allan Sutton asserts, Mamie Smith’s records were actually “not intended solely for black customers” as some prominent writers contend. Smith’s appearance alongside celebrated Irish tenor John McCormack in an Okeh distributor’s full-page advertisement indicates a mixed racial demographic of consumers. In another advertisement for “Crazy Blues” the images and copy drew heavily upon minstrelsy, suggesting that labels hoped these records might appeal to the sensibilities of white

²⁵⁹ Kelli B. Nelson, ““A Nobler Victory”: East Tennessee Daughters of the Confederacy and the Search for Tradition” in eds. Beverley Bond, Sarah Wilkerson Freeman, *Tennessee Women: Their Lives and Times-Volume 2*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), pp.101-124, 112.

²⁶⁰ Carol Batker, ““Love me like I like to be”: The Sexual Politics of Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the Classic Blues, and the Black Women’s Club Movement” *African American Review*, 32, 2, (Summer, 1998), pp. 199-213, 202.

as well as black consumers.²⁶¹ In 1923, one of the leading labels to issue female Blues, Vocalion, assured dealers:

In connection with the new records there will be issued special supplements, hangers and window strips for the use of dealers, and it is believed that those located in centers where there is a large colored population will find in the new records an excellent medium for developing Summer trade, as well as business for the rest of the year. Incidentally, the records are expected to appeal to a large portion of the white race.²⁶²

In this respect, the messages, some of them highly politicized, that the early blueswomen communicated, were expected to reach a racially diverse community of consumers. Moreover, these early songs provided the opportunity for more black women to enjoy relatively lengthy, if not altogether lucrative careers, whilst such artistry publicly resisted gendered and racial adversity.

That Perry Bradford wrote these lyrics with a commercial, perhaps even bi-racial market in mind signifies in some respects a decisive move towards vocalising frustrations at white oppression and systemic racism. However, that he had Smith, a black woman record them suggests that he may have believed that a woman could potentially articulate black grievances against injustice and wrongdoing in a way that their male counterparts could not at the time. And yet, in reality, black women had made relatively little social, economic, educational and political progress in the “real world.” Whilst the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 may have afforded white women a voice in the political sphere, it nevertheless failed to overcome or even challenge long-standing state laws that disenfranchised African

²⁶¹ Allan Sutton, *Race Records and the American Recording Industry, 1919-1945: An Illustrated History*, (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2016), 12-13, 16.

²⁶² “Aeolian Co. Announces First List of Race Records” *Talking Machine World*, (July 15, 1923), p.137. Digitized version available at stable url, <https://ia601700.us.archive.org/23/items/talkingmachinew19bill/talkingmachinew19bill.pdf>, accessed: 20/02/2017.

American women in the Jim Crow South.²⁶³ As Lorraine Gates Schuyler notes, even after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, African American women in the southern states were “generally unable to access the polls.” Whilst many white women of the day “wanted their issues represented, not their “identity,”” as Schuyler contends, legions of black women of varying classes needed their issues *and* identity represented.²⁶⁴

Although black women in the South were unable to access the polls in any great number, opportunities appeared to be less restrictive for their northern counterparts, many of them migrant southerners. And yet, the advances made by northern black women were modest at best. As Julie Gallagher argues, these women “got a big toe inside the doors of both the Democratic and Republican Party machines working as poll watchers, campaign workers, and, when possible, as critics of racist practices.” These advances may have been important for black women, but, as Gallagher contends, they also “represented the limits of women’s forward movement.”²⁶⁵ Historically, black women have been members of two subordinate groups with limited access to authority and resources within society and, as Diane Lewis stressed in a seminal article, were “in structural opposition with a dominant racial and a

²⁶³ Anne D. Gordon, “Introduction,” in eds. Anne Dexter Gordon and Bettye Collier Thomas, *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965* (Amehurst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 3.

²⁶⁴ Lorraine Gates Schuyler, *The Weight Of Their Votes, Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 10, 9. June Sochen notes that “when black women went to the polls in Alabama or Georgia, they found that white election officials had a bag of tricks ready to prevent them from voting. If a black woman could read a complicated text put before her, the white official would find some other obscure reason why she was ineligible to vote. And any woman who persisted was threatened with violence if she did not obediently slink away.” See June Sochen, *Herstory: A Woman’s View of American History, Volume 1* (New York: Alfred Publishing Company, 1974), 279.

²⁶⁵ Julie A. Gallagher, *Black Women and Politics in New York City*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 37.

dominant sexual group.”²⁶⁶ In this context, from a gendered and racial perspective, the political implications of Smith’s vocal on “Crazy Blues” mark the importance of black female resistance in popular cultural forms. Smith’s female character is resistant against a masculine oppressor and, given that policemen of the time would either be white, or enforcing white law, she is resistant against the dominant racial group.²⁶⁷ As Adam Gussow argues, “Crazy Blues,” intermingles romantic and political resentment and “reconfigures the badman tradition as a badwoman tradition, a lyric discourse of gun-knife-, and dynamite-inflicted vengeance against black lovers and white oppressors.”²⁶⁸ In songs such as “Crazy Blues” and many records that followed in its wake, blueswomen were publicly able to give a voice to the

²⁶⁶ Diane K. Lewis, “A Response to Inequality: Black Women, Racism, and Sexism” *Signs*, 3, 2, (Winter, 1977), pp. 339-361, 343. Commenting on the structural opposition of black women to dominant racial and sexual groups, bell hooks stresses that black women “are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or as a present part of the larger group “women” in this culture. When black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgements of black women; when women are talked about racism militates against a recognition of black female interests.” See bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 7. Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins argues that “The assumptions on which full group membership are based—Whiteness for feminist thought, maleness for Black social and political thought, and the combination for mainstream scholarship—all negate Black women’s realities. Prevented from becoming full insiders in any of these areas of inquiry, Black women remained in outsider-within locations, individuals whose marginality provided a distinctive angle of vision on these intellectual and political entities.” See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 12.

²⁶⁷ Although they were only a “tiny minority,” black policemen were active in Harlem during this period. See Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 165. See also Marvin W. Dulaney, *Black Police in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 22, 28. See also Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: 1995), 26, both works cited by Gussow in *Seems Like Murder Here*, 301.

²⁶⁸ Gussow, “Shoot Myself A Cop” 13. William Van Deburg writes of “bad men”: “The Potential to kill or maim was ever present—but their function as agents of change ensured that these acts were carried out to improve the lives of beleaguered kinsmen.” See William Van Deburg, *Hoodlums*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 68. Lawrence Levine argues that “the specific ways in which hostilities are expressed and transcendence symbolized are revealing; the face a hero assumes is crucial. The appearance of new heroes, the alteration of old ones, and the blending of the new and old that went on continually have a great deal to say about the changes in black situation and consciousness that were occurring.” See Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 370. In this context, the reconfiguration of this tradition situates female Blues artists as harbingers of political change for black women.

issues and the problems of identity in a way that so many other black women were denied. Moreover, they were also able to challenge issues concerning law enforcement and the failure of the police to protect black communities, at a time when racial tensions were fraught. It is difficult not to read the lines in “Crazy Blues” as a reaction to injustices such as these. Indeed, William Tuttle notes the “virulent denunciations by the black press” of the police’s failure to apprehend people who had planted explosives designed to kill members of the black community.²⁶⁹

In Rosa Henderson’s 1926 recording of “Chicago Policeman Blues” (Vo 1021) her female character was much more explicit in how she felt about the law and those that purported to uphold it. A meditation on unfair treatment at the hands of corrupt and ineffective law enforcers, “Chicago Policeman Blues” systematically censures the police force of the time. Henderson’s female character sang:

Policemen in Chicago, they can’t police at all,
Policemen in Chicago, they can’t police at all,
They only wear that uniform, all blue, just for a stall.

Most every cop in town, black and white all have a grudge,
Most every cop in town, black and white all have a grudge,
If you don’t know, you’d better learn to say “good morning judge.”

I’ve got the blues, Chicago policeman blues,

²⁶⁹ William Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 159. For added, deeper context, it is also worth noting that the coroner’s jury of the 1919 Chicago riots reported: “Our attention was called strikingly to the fact that at the time of race rioting, the arrests made for rioting by the police of colored rioters were far more in excess of the arrests made of white rioters. The failure of the police to arrest impartially, at the time of rioting, whether from insufficient effort or otherwise, was a mistake and had a tendency to further incite and aggravate the colored population.” See Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a race Riot*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), 36. Digitized version available at stable url, <https://ia600207.us.archive.org/24/items/negroinchicagost00chic/negroinchicagost00chic.pdf>, accessed: 08/02/2016.

I've got the blues, Chicago policeman blues,
They wouldn't give a pick o' you for Peter or Paul, they'd send you away for
absolutely nothin' at all,
I've got the blues, Chicago policeman blues.

I've got the blues, Chicago policeman blues,
I've got the blues, Chicago policeman blues,
I'm 'spressin' my opinion, just the way I feel, Pigs are but the only things
supposed to squeal,
I've got the blues, Chicago Policeman blues.²⁷⁰

As these lyrics suggest, black policemen were also a part of life in Chicago.

Although there are no definitive statistics for the number of black officers, they nevertheless existed. In 1922 a group of black ministers in Atlanta appealed for the appointment of black policemen, commenting that black officers in Chicago “served with distinction.”²⁷¹ Within the framework of Henderson’s song, the black officers are grudge-bearing bullies who bear little, if any, difference to civilians in the eyes of the female character. The implications of these lyrics should not be underestimated. The lawlessness associated with prohibition was not confined to bootleggers, gangsters and villains. During this period the police were often as corrupt as those they purported to exercise legal control over. As Edward Behr argues, as opposed to the many gangsters of the period, the “many venal, conniving police and law enforcement officials who supplemented their incomes with mobster money” constituted a sizeable proportion of criminals operating in Chicago during the 1920s.²⁷² There is no discernible difference between the characterizations of policemen and civilians in Rosa Henderson’s recording. The uniform is merely a change of clothing and does not indicate a transformation of character.

²⁷⁰ Rosa Henderson, “Chicago Policeman Blues,” Vo 1021, 1926.

²⁷¹ Dulaney, *Black Police in America*, 39.

²⁷² Edward Behr, *Prohibition: The Thirteen Years That Changed America*, (London: BBC Books, 1997), 176-177.

Rosa Henderson's female character's open denigration of the Chicago Police Department's morality seemed to anticipate the activities of black Harlem numbers runner, Stephanie St. Clair, also known as Madam Queen, by more than half a decade. St Clair publicly exposed NYPD officers for corruption during the early 1930s. As LaShawn Harris argues, St. Clair "did not fit normative notions of respectability, nor was she the conventional black female activist or business leader of the 1920s."²⁷³ A similar argument can be made for blueswomen such as Rosa Henderson—or at least the characters she performed as. Perhaps black outsiders and renegades, whether in real life or in popular culture, sometimes felt more able to confront abuse and corruption among the police than did ordinary black citizens, who had to live in worlds where police power was often absolute and capricious – and sometimes lethally applied. Henderson's character, like St. Clair, publicly denounces the Chicago Police Force. This recording underscores the importance of women's Blues as a mode of cultural resistance and as a highly politicized art form, indicating that women's Blues dealt with contemporary issues that were pertinent to the black community, including physical brutality, police ineffectiveness, and sexual themes, often within the framework of a single recording.

Some of these women often performed in theatres, clubs, and recorded work on labels including Paramount, Columbia, and the only black-owned label of the time, Black Swan.²⁷⁴ The blueswomen of the 1920s, the Classic Blues period were pioneers. Hazel Carby argues that these women "occupied a privileged space." Not only could they "speak the desires of rural women to migrate," they could also "voice the nostalgic desires of urban women for home," which, as Carby points out,

²⁷³ LaShawn Harris, "Playing the Numbers" *Black Women, Gender + Families*, 2, 2, (Fall, 2008), pp. 53-76, 65.

²⁷⁴ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, xii.

“was both a recognition and a warning that the city was not, in fact, the promised land.”²⁷⁵ The lyrical content of “Chicago Police Man Blues” communicated powerful messages about urban centres and their failings, not least in the lack of police protection for African Americans. These women performed as characters that showed clear signs of resistance to male oppression. Significantly, many of them addressed themes of spouse abuse both real and figurative, responding with fervour to the double standards, the accusations, and the vitriolic labelling of women by men.

The worlds these women created in performance contained narratives of female resistance to their prescribed roles as women and also as members of the African American community. In these worlds, they wept, moaned, and hollered their way through musical tales of joy and woe and were equally capable of inflicting violence—at times lethal, upon an intimate partner. As Angela Davis argues: “The independent women of blues lore do not think twice about wielding weapons against men who they feel have mistreated them. They frequently brandish their razors and guns, and dare men to cross the lines that they draw.”²⁷⁶ On occasion, blueswomen would sing in character as murderous females, candidly acknowledging their crimes to judges and representatives of the judicial system, and by extension, indicating to their audiences, both male and female, that a problematic “daddy” could be dealt with by lethal force. Ida Cox’s 1925 recording of “Misery Blues” (Pm 12258) on the Paramount label is a prime example:

Early this morning, when everything was still,
Early this morning, when everything was still,
My daddy said he was leaving, though it’s against my will.

He said I’m leaving mama, and your crying won’t make me stay,
He said I’m leaving mama, and your crying won’t make me stay,

²⁷⁵ Carby “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime,” 752.

²⁷⁶ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 34.

The more you cry, the further I'm going away.

A man is like a car, that you have to overhaul,
A man is like a car, that you have to overhaul,
Keep him three or four weeks, and you can't get along at all.

Inverting what would become a classic metaphor for women as sexual objects in Blues, Cox's female character compares men to cars. They are material goods, possessions that can be ridden, reconditioned and ultimately gotten rid of using whatever means necessary, including lethal violence.²⁷⁷ This female is financially solvent, for not only does she infer that she is familiar with car ownership, she explicitly tells her listeners that she bestowed precious stones on her love interest, before announcing her intention to kill him:

I gave him everything, from a diamond on down,
I gave him everything, from a diamond on down,
The next thing I give him will be six feet of ground.²⁷⁸

These female characters resisted subservient status and were not dependant on their men. Moreover, the Ida Cox example was far from anomalous. Many other women, Sippie Wallace included, also sang of getting rid of their husbands.

After her audition for OKeh Records' general manager, Ralph Peer in 1923, Texan Sippie Wallace (born Beulah Belle Thomas in Houston, 1898), also known as "The Texas Nightingale, soon signed a contract with the company. From that point on, and for a number of years afterwards, Wallace enjoyed considerable national

²⁷⁷ See for instance, Blind Lemon Jefferson's "D. B. Blues" in which his male character sings, "I'm crazy about a Packard, but my baby only rates a Ford, /A Packard is too expensive, Ford will take you where you want to go." Blind Lemon Jefferson, "D. B. Bues," Pm 12712, 1928. Perhaps the most famous comparison is in Robert Johnson's "Terraplane Blues," ARC 7-03-56, 1936. For commentary on these metaphors, see Paul Oliver, *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (London: Cassell, 1968), 216. For a more nuanced discussion, see Christian O'Connell, *Blues, How Do You do?: Paul Oliver and the Transatlantic Story of the Blues* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 150-151.

²⁷⁸ Ida Cox, "Misery Blues" New York, NY: Pm 12258, late Jan. 1925.

success as a Blues singer and composed many of her own songs.²⁷⁹ Accompanied by her brother Hersal Thomas, Wallace entered a New York recording studio to cut some tracks for Okeh on Saturday, 22 August 1925. One of these was a number that she had penned with her husband, Matt Wallace. Throughout the song; “Murder’s Gonna Be My Crime” (OK 8243) Wallace’s powerful vocal delivered the following lines:

I woke up this morning, with blues three different ways,
I woke up this morning, with blues three different ways,
I had two minds to leave you, and one mind to stay.

I took Matt Wallace, to be my reg’lar man,
I have took Matt Wallace, to be my reg’lar man,
‘Cause he pleases me, delving in the other one’s hands.

I’m charged with stealing, but murder is my crime,
I’m charged with stealing, but murder’s gonna be my crime,
‘Cause I’m gonn’ kill my baby, if he don’t change his mind (don’t change your mind).²⁸⁰

The fact that Wallace wrote these lyrics with her husband and named him in the song, suggests that he was complicit in helping her to project a strong and assertive female persona. Wallace’s female character is in a position to “take” Matt from another woman to be her “reg’lar” for services rendered. Moreover, she is fully prepared to kill if he could not or would not commit to her and leave his other woman. In both respects the emphasis is upon female ownership and entitlement, a stark contrast from traditionally gendered hierarchies, in which male proprietorial rights and expectations are usually paramount. When set against the political backdrop of “real-life” for many African American women, these recordings appear

²⁷⁹ Virginia Burns, *Bold Women in Michigan History*, (Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2006), 92. For extended reading on Wallace see also Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 113-146.

²⁸⁰ Sippie Wallace, “Murder’s Gonna Be My Crime,” OK 8243, 1925.

to challenge the hegemonic conventions of the time. Groups such as the National Association for Colored Women (NACW) had long emphasised moral purity and chasteness as part of their agenda to uplift the race. However, Blues lyrics challenged these narrow strictures of respectability. As Jayne Morris-Crowther stresses, attempts by the NACW to conform to older models of sexual propriety simply “threatened to make the organisation an anachronism” during a period of rapidly-changing sexual mores. Indeed, Morris-Crowther argues that conforming to the racial and sexual ideologies of white values “helped maintain white power and thereby inadvertently contributed to the racial oppression black women were ostensibly opposing.”²⁸¹ Whilst Wallace’s female character does not project an image of chastity, she is nevertheless insistent on a monogamous relationship in which she is the dominant party and is prepared to use lethal violence should male non-conformity be an issue. Of course, there was little sign of female solidarity and sisterhood here; rather the song celebrated the kind of fierce individualism and concern to secure property and reputation that was often marked masculine in American culture. Indeed, one aspect of female empowerment within the Classic Blues that few scholars have fully confronted is the collateral damage within the black community these kinds of songs sometimes captured; some even undermined ideas of black sisterhood through the assertive individualism and arch-competitiveness of their no-nonsense “wild women.”

While Sippie Wallace and Ida Cox may have merely threatened the lethal violence in their commercial output, other women Blues singers performed as murderesses, providing them with a chance to publicly engage in discourse on domestic abuse, and, to an extent, the failings of the law. One of the most prominent

²⁸¹ Jayne Morris-Crowther, *The Political Activities of Detroit Club Women in the 1920s: A Challenge and a Promise*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 84.

and successful artists was Victoria Spivey. Born in Houston Texas, 1906, Spivey began playing music at the age of twelve around the Houston area. She made her first recording for Okeh records in 1926.²⁸² On Monday, 31 October 1927, Victoria Spivey stood awaiting her recording session to begin in a studio in New York (a city that she loved and made her home for many years) with songwriter and pianist Porter Grainger and guitarist Lonnie Johnson. The trio cut two tracks as part of a staggered three-day session for Okeh. One of these tracks was the dark and brooding composition entitled “Blood Thirsty Blues” (Ok 8531).²⁸³ Accompanied by Grainger and Johnson’s melancholic minor key arrangement, her female character emotively lamented:

Blood, blood, just look at all that blood,
Blood, blood, look at all that blood,
Yes, I killed my man, a lowdown good-for-nothing cub.

The opening functions as an invite. Spivey’s female character emphatically encourages her audience to spectate, to be voyeurs at the scene of her partner’s death. The listener is prompted to visualise the brutal scene whilst the instrumentation augments an overwhelming sense of pathos. She continues to dramatize the events that have led to her man’s demise:

I told him blood was in my eyes, and still he wouldn’t listen up to me,
I told him blood was in my eyes, and still he wouldn’t listen to me,
Yet instead of giving him sugar, I put glass in his tea.

²⁸² Dave Junker “Victoria Spivey” in eds. Cary D. Wintz, Paul Finkelman, *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance Volume 1 & 2 A-Z*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), no pagination, digitised copy published by Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005, available on Google Books, stable url,

https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=0L0ULjto_OEC&pg=PT2629&dq=Victoria+Spivey+born&hl=en&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Victoria%20Spivey%20born&f=false. See also, Daphne Duval Harrison, “Victoria Spivey” in ed. Susan Ware, *Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary, Completing the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 605-606, 605.

²⁸³ *Catalogue of Copyright Entries, Part 3: Musical Compositions, New Series, Volume 23, For the Year 1928*, (United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1929), 418.

I'm not a saint fool, you can put me down and let me walk,
Not a saint fool, you can put me down and let me walk,
You know I'm a mighty mean woman, and I won't stand for no backdoor.

The only man I ever loved, I done send him to his ruin,
The only man I ever loved, I done send him to his ruin,
Yes I know I'm bloodthirsty, but I'm wonderin' what my poor man's doing.²⁸⁴

Spivey's character is robustly assertive, and yet, whilst murderous, she shows her humanity. Alluding to her man's infidelity as the cause of death ("won't stand for no back door") she then refers to him with a sense of pity, he is kept alive in her memory as her "poor man." However, in "Murder in the First Degree" (OK 8581) her female character is more callous and pities only herself, bemoaning her own position in jail for murdering a cheat:

Well I'm laying here in this jailhouse, scared as any fool can be,
Yes I'm laying in this jailhouse, scared as any fool can be,
I believe they're going to hang me, from what my lawyer said to me.

My man got running around, with a woman he know I can't stand,
My man got running around, with a woman he know I can't stand,
Add one notch on my gun, and the world's rid of one trifling man.

In this example Spivey's female character relates the tale almost with a sense of pride. The act of adding "one notch" on her gun is redolent of Old West gunfighters cleansing the territories of their enemies, or perhaps of hunting – again, both culturally defined as male preoccupations; in this case, Spivey's "trifling man" is hunted and killed like common vermin. However, in the following stanzas she argues to the judge that if the roles were reversed, a man who killed a trifling woman would be set free. Moreover, she claims possession of the man, to be disposed of as she sees fit:

²⁸⁴ Victoria Spivey, "Blood Thirsty Blues" OK-8531, 1927.

Judge if you had killed your woman, and had to come before me,
If you'd have killed a woman who trifled, and had to come before me,
I'd send her to the gallows, and judge'll let you go free.

I said I ain't done nothing, but kill a man what belong to me,
I said I ain't done nothing, but kill a man what belong to me,
And here they got me charged, with murder in the first degree.²⁸⁵

Blues biographer Daphne Duval Harrison notes how Spivey's "seeming obsession with eerie subjects" permeated her recordings around this period. Whilst this may be true, it is unlikely that Spivey or her label were "gambling with public taste" when these records were issued, as the biographer also argues.²⁸⁶ A more plausible argument would be to suggest that these records actually fed into a broader narrative of female resistance, and replicated stories that were appearing on a fairly regular basis in some black publications. It is, perhaps, unsurprising that murder became a trope in Blues music and narrative song of the 1920s. The tabloids of the day had taken to heavy reportage of crime stories, national disasters (which, as Chapter Three shows, also became popular themes in Old Time music), columns offering advice on relationship problems, sex and marriage and a host of similar material that would likely have offered titillation. Similarly, black art and creative writing during the 1920s, also dealt with lurid, often quite sensational themes around sex, death and violence. That popular music such as the recorded Blues contained similar themes reflects its inception, in part, as a product of a particular historic, technological and cultural moment. The age of modernism and mass culture enabled a market for women's Blues, and by extension gave voice to some of the problems experienced by their communities.

²⁸⁵ Victoria Spivey, "Murder in the First Degree," OK-8581, 1927.

²⁸⁶ Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 155.

For many black women the onset of modernity did not afford them the same benefits experienced by many white women. Their status was far from equal during the 1920s and subsequently the amount of political leverage they possessed was comparatively weak. In this context, tales of murder, female brutality, and women's resistance may not simply have been titillating forms of entertainment. In reality, the threat of violence in intimate relationships and the need to strike back, whether literally or figuratively was serious and therefore newsworthy. In this sense, given that there was an appetite for bloody tales of female revenge that fitted in with the yellow press, female "murder Blues" could, conceivably, be consumed as empowering tales of payback and role reversal by black listeners.

The black newspaper the *Amsterdam News* regularly ran stories describing the "New Negress, the woman with knives" towards the latter part of the decade. As Stephen Knadler stresses, tabloid reportage of women striking back against oppressive violent partners "constituted one of the few discourses on domestic violence available to Harlem women in the 1920s." Knadler argues that such sensationalised stories "were also meant to be functional and generative of African American women's performance of their own identity."²⁸⁷ The lyrics and musical aesthetics of Victoria Spivey's "Blood Thirsty Blues" are a prime example of this kind of performativity. Moreover, the advertising copy seems to point to the women who dominated the articles in the *Amsterdam News*. As Knadler notes: "In many of the domestic violence stories it is not only the woman's physical and emotional integrity which is being challenged, but her control –as the primary wage earner-of

²⁸⁷ Stephen Knadler, "Domestic Violence in the Harlem Renaissance: Remaking the Record in Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Toni Morrison's *Jazz*: Women With Knives," *African American Review*, 38, 1, (Spring, 2004), pp. 99-118, 99-100.

the “room.” In “Murder in the First Degree” Spivey’s character is a wage-earner, revealing that she has invested more than mere emotions in the ill-fated union:

I scrubbed them pots and kettles, I washed and ironed the white folk’s clothes,
Yes I scrubbed them pots and kettles, I washed and ironed the white folks
clothes,
And he got it like I made it, I killed him judge and that’s all I know.

Although domestic violence is not implied in the lyrical framework, her female character is nevertheless emblematic of strength, working to support her partner and refusing to be exploited within her relationship. Unlike the “overstuffed mammy” stereotype that often characterised black women, Spivey’s female narrator is a domestic worker who earns money, is in possession of a strong will and is prepared to kill rather than accept unfair treatment from a love interest. In this respect, she is far removed from what Billie Holliday’s biographer Farah Jasmine Griffin describes as the “asexual mammies, loyal and devoted to their white employers and charges” of white imaginations.²⁸⁸ In one sense, murder notwithstanding, she provides an alternative role model for black women, she is a sexual being and a worker, and yet as a murderous black woman, she resists any labelling as a passive silent female in the context of years of male brutality and control. On rare occasions, this kind of resistance to subjugation, oppression, and physical abuse was exemplified in newspaper ads for such music.

Mark Dolan argues that at times advertisements for commercial Blues recordings portrayed blueswomen as “role models” similar to those presented in the “black press generally.”²⁸⁹ OKeh Records’ advert for Victoria Spivey’s “Blood Thirsty Blues” is an excellent case in point. The advert for this song which ran

²⁸⁸ Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can't be Free, be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday*, (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 29.

²⁸⁹ Mark K Dolan, “Extra! Chicago Defender Race Records Ads Show South from Afar,” *Southern Cultures*, 13, 3, (Fall 2007), 112-113.

January 21, 1928, depicts a woman kneeling over her dead partner with the mock-headline “I Have Killed My Man” emblazoned across the top of the image. Underneath the image, in keeping with the sensationalist tactics employed by the advertising strategists for this particular record is the strapline “Blood Thirsty Woman Confesses!” The advert seeks to garner pity for the killer, who has taken a knife to her once-beloved: “Oh! You are filled with pity for this blood-thirsty woman whose soul is in such **TORMENT!**”²⁹⁰ Images of what Dolan describes as “assertive women capable of triumphing over men in abusive relationships” when combined with a sensationalised mock-headline are certainly powerful forms of advertising.²⁹¹ By extension, this kind of marketing, coupled with the poignant lyrics, the musical aesthetics of Spivey’s impassioned vocal and Porter Grainger and Lonnie Johnson’s instrumental accompaniment, communicated powerful messages about women and their comparative physical and mental weakness (or lack thereof) to men, whilst tying themselves to reporting trends in some black newspapers and creative arts.

Many of these recordings regularly alluded to, and at times explicitly denounced the effectiveness of policing and the failure of institutions to provide adequate protection for African American communities, not least the many women murdered at the hands of abusive partners and husbands during the time. Thus, their political significance should not be underestimated. Victoria Spivey’s music is no exception. Just as Mamie Smith’s and Rosa Henderson’s vocal assaults on city policing had political implications, so did Spivey’s murderous Blues. Her records and the relationship they have with the “women with knives” in the black newspapers of the day, acknowledge a failing of the police in their ability to provide

²⁹⁰ Image taken from Yesterday’s Papers, stable url, <http://john-adcock.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/race-record-advertisements-from-1926-29.html>, accessed 04/01/2014.

²⁹¹ Dolan, “Extra!” 112-113.

adequate justice or protection for many black women in danger. It would be reductive to suggest that only black women were at risk from abusive and murderous partners. However, the statistics for bringing black wife-murderers to justice in Chicago from 1910-1930 were far lower than those of white offenders. In their study of wife-murder, Cynthia Grant Bowman and Ben Altman stress:

It was obviously much more possible for a Black man to disappear into a Black neighbourhood or perhaps into the South and thus escape the Chicago police than it was for European American offenders to escape. On the one hand, the black community may have been more hostile to the police and protective of community members being sought by them; on the other, the police may not have cared as much about the murders of Black women and thus not have put as much effort into the search for the killers.²⁹²

Clearly, for whichever reason, the police failed to bring a far greater number of black offenders to justice. This reveals the limitations of the judicial system with regards to protecting black women and providing adequate deterrent to potential future offenders. Moreover, Bowman and Altman also suggest that readers of newspapers that reported the deaths of (white) European American women may have “felt more threatened by these deaths than by those women who lived in circumstances perceived to be quite different than their own.” Spivey’s murderous Blues and the news reports of women who killed their spouses may well have provided meaningful narratives of female resistance at times when the official channels and systemic racism impeded the collective voices of many African American women.²⁹³ As

²⁹² Cynthia Grant Bowman and Ben Altman, “Wife Murder in Chicago: 1910-1930,” *Journal of Law and Criminology*, 92, 3, Spring, 2001-2002, pp.739-790, 783.

²⁹³ These songs and performances may have acted as a safety valve for black female resentment, it is plausible to suggest that popular culture may well have acted as a surrogate for organized protest, inspiring a different set of habits and practices within communities of consumers, as Brian Ward notes, “Any attempt to use twentieth-century black popular music forms” such as the Blues “to probe mass black consciousness which fails to view them as simultaneously cultural commodities and creative forms of individual and communal expression is deeply suspect.” See Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues and Race Relations* (London: UCL Press, 1998), 11. On this, Patricia Hill Collins argues that “Musicians, vocalists poets and other artists constitute another group from which black

Bowman and Altman observe, one of the reasons for this apparent failure to provide adequate protection to black women is that the Chicago police might have been “more sensitive to political pressure coming from Anglo and white ethnic groups.” Bowman and Altman’s research tells a grim tale: black men “stood a one in four chance of escaping the Chicago police and never being held accountable for the murder of their wives.”²⁹⁴

Female Blues singers such as Spivey communicated exceptionally important aspects of life for many black women who had inadequate protection from the police as they dealt with abusers and would-be-murderers. Harlem Renaissance playwright Marita Bonner dealt with the topic of systemic mental abuse in her play *The Pot Maker*, in which a black man dies at the hands of his wife for repeated emotional abuse. These women voiced what many others were incapable of in public arenas. \commentating on the status of black women in the 1920s, Bonner wrote the following in *The Crisis*:

So—being a woman—you can wait. You must sit quietly without a chip. Not sodden—and weighted as if your feet were cast in the iron of your soul. Not wasting strength in enervating gestures as if two hundred years of bonds and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty.²⁹⁵

Bonner’s frustration is apparent in the extract. She cynically encapsulates the long wait for equal status as women, and as black American citizens. However, blueswomen also gave public performances that projected similarly resistant

women intellectuals have emerged. Building on African-influenced oral traditions, musicians in particular have enjoyed close association with the larger community of African American women constituting their audience. Through their words and actions, grassroots political activists also contribute to Black women’s intellectual traditions.” See Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 17.

²⁹⁴ Bowman and Altman, “Wife Murder in Chicago,” 784.

²⁹⁵ Marita Bonner, “On Being Young—A Woman—And Colored,” originally published in *The Crisis*, 1927, as reproduced in eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. Mackay, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), pp. 1244-1247, 1247.

personas. The title of Rosa Henderson's 1923 recording of "I Ain't No Man's Slave" sent out a clear message to consumers: the Blues was a powerful conduit, enabling female artists and consumers to unify and take a stand against the many forms of injustice they faced. At the very least, these songs articulated, perhaps even helped to create a kind of shared consciousness of racialized and gendered oppression that could, given the right circumstances, be leveraged into political action and protest, and even when it was not, may have helped to underpin a sense of shared grievance and psychological resistance. A public refusal to accept subservient status to any man was a powerful message on its own for the time, but when the resistance implies the opposition of slavery of any kind, Henderson's recording should be acknowledged for its subversive implications. Although slavery may have been officially outlawed around seventy years prior to the date of these recordings, it is important to situate them properly within the context of a notable re-emergence of white supremacist organizations that started in the 1910s and reached a zenith in the 1920s. If white supremacists could not legally enforce slavery in the 1920s, they could and certainly did believe that the old system was favourable to white (predominantly male) power.

Whilst Klan activity may have centred mainly in the South and Midwest in the 1920s, it is unlikely that any southern migrants living in northern centres would have been unaware of Klan atrocities in the southern and Midwestern states. Black newspaper the *Chicago Defender* featured a cartoon on March 31, 1923 entitled "One Must Be Extinguished." The cartoon depicted a fiery cross in the hand of a Klan member who was attempting to do battle with the Statue of Liberty's torch-bearing hand.²⁹⁶ The fact that the Klansman's robed arm is the same height as the

²⁹⁶ "One Must Be Extinguished" *Chicago Defender*, March 31, 1923.

Statue of Liberty suggests the level of support the organisation had garnered by this point in time. Whilst Rosa Henderson's song is not about white supremacy per se, a title that rebuked slavery and male control suggested that her female character refused to accept the status quo on numerous levels and would have sent out a powerful message in a period in which the stability of traditional gender conventions was shifting. Recorded only a month earlier, Henderson's "Good Woman's Blues" (Vi 19084) featured a similarly militant female who announced "and so for every good woman, I'm singing this song" before warning her partner: "Daddy if you don't like my way of living, pack up your stuff and go."²⁹⁷ In another recording, "He's Never Gonna Throw Me Down" (Pe 12100) Henderson performs as a woman who not only invalidates the effectiveness of judicial methods, but also alludes to her willingness to commit murder should her man "throw her down":

Jailhouse doors won't keep my man from me,
Jailhouse doors won't keep my man from me,
'Cos if he's fooling round, I'm surely gonna cut him down.

Drugstore sellin' poison by the pound,
Drugstore sellin' poison by the pound,
'Cos I sure love my man, he's never gonna throw me down.²⁹⁸

Henderson's female character meets force with force. If her man dares to "throw" her down, she will not hesitate in "cutting" him down or poisoning him.

In many of these Blues, domestic violence, whilst not always made explicit, often looms as a possibility, haunting even nominally "loving relationships." This is well exemplified in Lizzie Miles' recording of "Police Blues" (Cq 7082) cut in New York in 1927 for the Conqueror label, with Clarence Johnson accompanying on piano. Miles lamented:

²⁹⁷ Rosa Henderson, "Good Woman's Blues," Vi 19084, 1923.

²⁹⁸ Rosa Henderson, "He's Never Gonna Throw Me Down," Pe 12100, 1923.

Somebody, somebody, come and get this man of mine,
He blacked my eyes, he broke my nose,
Pleads to my soul, I'm dying.
This no-go man, is in his sin, he calls before I know,
He knocked me for a row of pins, with my ironing board,
Police, police, policeman, take this man away from here.
He broke everything across my head, from the dishes to the rocking chair.

I believe this man is crazy, he calls his razor deuce,
He turns me nearly every which way but loose,
Police, police, policeman, come and get this man of mine.²⁹⁹

Whilst the lover of Miles' female character is incarcerated at her behest, she is nevertheless deeply unhappy. This is a complex text in which listeners learn that the woman tolerates domestic abuse because of her man's formidable sexual abilities. However, other racialized dimensions are embedded within these lyrics too. Refusing to accept his confinement she shows a flagrant disregard for the judicial system and, in the stanzas that follow, threatens to either break him free or blow it up. This kind of behaviour was more typical of whites who sometimes engaged in jail-breaking to lynch African Americans who were being held in police custody.

Whilst a greater number of instances of this kind of behaviour happened in the southern states, extra-legal measures were not confined to that region. In 1920 for instance, Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson and Isaac MgHie were taken from a jail cell in Duluth, Minnesota, and lynched by a large white mob. The *Duluth Ripsaw* lambasted the police and their apparent failure to protect the black youths, advocating "the "thorough house-cleaning" and "elimination of every yellow member" of the police department who had failed to protect the blacks from the mob."³⁰⁰ Given this context, the words of Miles' female character in "Police Blues"

²⁹⁹ Lizzie Miles, "Police Blues," Cq 7082, 1927.

³⁰⁰ "The City's Shame," *The Duluth Ripsaw*, June 26, 1920, p.2 as reproduced in stable url, <http://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/lynchings.php#lynchings>, accessed: 01/05/2016. For a much more thorough account of this tragedy, see also Michael Fedo, *The Lynchings in*

serve a similar purpose in exposing the failures of the legal system. Whilst she initially exercises power over her man by refusing to remain a silent victim of domestic abuse, she then negates white mob rule by assuming extra-legal measurements as her own prerogative. The act of threatening to destroy the penal facility signifies the symbolic destruction of an unjust and racist institution. Although her intentions are not to lynch her lover, the threat of extra-legal measures offer a kind of symbolic parallel to the extra-legal rituals of lynching:

I got the heebie jeebies 'cause my man's in jail,
Help me find somebody who will go his bail,
He beats me and he kicks me and he dogs me 'round,
But I've simply got to have him when my love comes down.
I'll get a job a-workin' on the railroad track, to make myself some money so
just get him back,
He's got himself a heart that's just as cold as ice, but lordy when he's lovin'
me so dog-gone nice,
Police, police, policeman, bring my daddy back to me,
I'll break in the jail to get him out, oh I'll blow it up with TNT.

It ain't nobody's business if he's mean to me, I love him like the sailor likes to
sail upon the sea,
Police, police, policeman, bring my daddy back to me.³⁰¹

For many years, press accounts of southern lynchings had been widely publicised.

The way that the press detailed these horrific incidents was sensational. The reportage was also condescending and often assumed the guilt of the black victim.

The victims of the lynchings were predominantly (but not exclusively) male. As E. L. Ayers noted in 1992:

Duluth, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000). Additionally, although extra-legal activity including breaking into jails to carry out lynchings happened elsewhere in the US, it was especially prevalent in the South, William Fitzhugh Brundage notes that in Georgia, "mass mobs took 44 percent of their victims from jails and 72 percent from the hands of the law." Whilst in Virginia, mobs "took 47 percent of their victims from jails, and all of their victims from the custody of law officers." See William Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 39.

³⁰¹ Lizzie Miles, "Police Blues," Cq 7082, 1927.

Although most lynchings were inflicted in response to alleged murder, most of the rhetoric and justification focused intently on the so-called “one crime,” or “usual crime”: the sexual assault of White women by Blacks. That assault sometimes involved rape, while at other times a mere look or word was enough to justify death.³⁰²

The fact that the female character has the “heebie jeebies” because her man is in jail should not be trivialised. Writing of jook joints and the post-Reconstruction period, Katrina Hazzard-Gordon stresses that during a period when “African Americans were terrorized, lynched, and excluded from public life...The reign of terror forced the black community into a tightly knit cultural group.”³⁰³ However, as Adam Gussow counters, “that reign of white terror, resisted and transformed resurfaces within the “tightly knit cultural group” as a mode of identity formation and collective pleasuring.” As Gussow also shows, later Mississippi bluesmen transformed the whippings “into a playful party game.” Blues singers, Gussow argues, grieve as they celebrate, “using their own and each other’s bodies to reinscribe and redress the soul-deep wounds engendered by histories of violent white domination.”³⁰⁴ In women’s Blues such as Rosa Henderson’s “He’s Never Gonna Throw Me Down” and Lizzie Miles’ recording of “Police Blues,” the blueswoman assumes the role as aggressor and not bound by the constraints of a flawed system that failed to adequately protect blacks from extra-legal measures and many black women from aggressive partners.

It is tempting to criticise the female character in “Police Blues” for her continued love of a man who routinely beats her. However, like many popular Blues songs of the day, this was not penned by the recording artist. Tom Delaney is credited as songwriter. The strength of Lizzie Miles’s female character shines

³⁰² E. L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-century American South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 158.

³⁰³ Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin’: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African American Culture*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 81, as cited in Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 203.

³⁰⁴ Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 203

throughout the song, largely due to her impassioned delivery of the lyrics. However, she is prepared to forgive her abusive lover because he is sexually skilled. It is noteworthy that Delaney wrote a song in 1924 entitled “All The Girls Like Big Dick.”³⁰⁵ Unsurprisingly, “All The Girls Like Big Dick” never made it out into the public domain for commercial consumption. Although less crude, similar sentiments seem to underpin the final stanzas of “Police Blues.” And yet, whilst Delaney may have wished female artists to express a dependency on their irresistible, sexually potent, men within song, any such agenda was subverted by the strength of Miles’s bold, unabashed delivery of the lyrics. Martha Copeland and Rosa Henderson also cut the track, suggesting its popularity amongst artists, those in charge of their repertoire, and the record buyers upon whom both singers and record company employees depended for a living. As with Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues,” “Police Blues” had a male composer, and yet it was women’s voices that communicated these messages to the public and, in the process, reinscribed them with new layers of meaning, or at least of female authority.

To conclude, the women of the Classic Blues period were able to voice community frustrations about failings of a legal system that was supposed to protect black communities amid the racial turbulence and xenophobia of the 1920s in a way that many black males could not without arousing fears of insurgency and attracting massive white retribution. While many black male songwriters would have been well aware of the status of African American women, particularly those of lower-classes, they perhaps saw the potential in blueswomen as grassroots political stealth activists, operating in the arena of popular culture. The Classic Blues empowered black women to a degree, giving them an opportunity to identify and hear creative

³⁰⁵ Bruce Bastin, *The Melody Man: Joe Davis and the New York Music Scene, 1916-1978* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 27.

responses to their doubly-oppressed status as women, and also as black Americans – often with an additional mode of oppression in so far as many black women were also poor. Whilst they may not have preached a politics of respectability in the same way that Club Women did, they nevertheless respected themselves enough to stand tall and proud in the face of adversity, defending their personal honour and, by extension, that of their fellow community members. Paradoxically, this assertiveness, generally a cause for pride and a basis for some kind of racial and gender solidarity, sometimes meant that the women in these songs claimed their independence, fought for power over lovers and rivals, and exacted bloody revenge against the men and women of their own communities who crossed them. Consequently, while Adam Gussow correctly stresses that the appeal of “Crazy Blues,” like that of the other Classic Blues songs analysed in this chapter, may well have lay in “the complex symbolic rebellion it enacted, the truth it spoke to white power” it is important to recognize that this complexity included a tendency towards glorifying certain kinds of intra-communal tensions and rivalries, often around matters of sex and infidelity. These were themes at the heart of much American popular music, but they played out in particularly pernicious ways in the racial stereotyping of the black community. In other words, the powerful expressions of female independence and agency evident in these Classic Blues singers and their challenges to white and male power, came at a cost. Still, given the racial climate and the injustices blacks continued to endure as they attempted to achieve a modicum of equality and power in an unforgiving, oppressive society, Gussow rightly celebrates these pioneering women for communicating powerful messages about “the memories, fears, and desires of a black urban public in formation.”³⁰⁶

³⁰⁶Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago:

Chapter Five

Single White Girls: Roba Stanley, Sara Carter and Marital Myths in 1920s Old Time Music

During the 1920s, generally speaking, there were few female Old Time music artists on shellac. Labels and their A&R men concentrated their efforts on a plethora of male artists mainly hailing from the southern states and a number of commercially successful males living in Northern centres. However, towards the middle of the decade, at around the same time that Fiddlin' John Carson made his recording debut, label executives also turned their attention to female artists Samantha Bumgarner and Eva Davis in 1924. Although the recording debut of these two women marked the entry of women into the world of early recorded country music, their lyrics posed little threat to southern patriarchal norms. In contrast, the recording of Roba Stanley's "Single Life" in 1925 suggested that labels were looking for something fresh, potentially subversive and, most importantly, saleable. Not until 1927 would a white female voice follow in Stanley's footsteps, decrying the pitfalls of marriage and servitude. This chapter considers Roba Stanley and Sara Carter as pioneering females in early recorded Old Time in the sense that their music challenged conventional notions of southern womanhood and familial commitment. It argues that these recordings intersected with and offered a distinctively white southern female response to the debates and anxieties over newer attitudes towards marriage, sexuality, and female autonomy that we have already seen characterised the era. Encouraged to record this kind of material by label A&R men and executives such as Polk Brockman and Ralph Peer, these women gave a public voice to legions of

The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 163.

southern females and the realities of womanhood for many, whilst enjoying the financial benefits, if modest, that their new roles as recording artists afforded them.

During the Nineteenth Century, coverture had set the precedent in terms of married and non-married women's rights. Wives' legal identities—under coverture—were encompassed under their husbands'.³⁰⁷ Based on William Blackstone's Commentaries of the Laws of England, coverture was defined by Blackstone as such,

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing.³⁰⁸

The removal of US coverture laws in 1921 marked a significant step forward for women, and the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment granted women political enfranchisement in the public sphere; within the private sphere, in spaces such as the family home, matters were not so simple. As Gretchen Ritter notes, "this new status remained underdeveloped and uncertain as the rules of marital status continued to animate women's citizenship outside the electoral realm."³⁰⁹ Conventional assumptions about what constituted the ideal marriage were shifting during this turbulent time in terms of gender politics. Companionate marriage gained popularity throughout this period. Companionate marriage was a union in which like-minded

³⁰⁷ Gretchen Ritter, "Gender and Citizenship after the Nineteenth Amendment", *Polity*, 32, 3, Spring 2000, pp. 345-375, 362. See also Hendrik Hartog, *Man and Wife in America: A History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 121. Tiffany K. Wayne, *Women's Roles in Nineteenth Century America* (Westport: Greenwood, 2007), 17. G. Edward White, *Law in American History, Volume II: From Reconstruction through the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 209. Joseph R. Conlin, *The American Past: A Survey of American History, Volume I: To 1877* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2010, 9th edition), 102.

³⁰⁸ William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England, Volume 1* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765), 430. Digitized version available at stable url, <https://archive.org/stream/BlackstoneVolumeI/BlackstoneVolume1#page/n445/mode/1up>, accessed: 14/05/2017.

³⁰⁹ Gretchen Ritter, "Gender and Citizenship after the Nineteenth Amendment," *Polity*, 32, 3, Spring, 2000, pp. 345-375, 346.

couples embraced the concept of marriage as a partnership of equality, bound by romantic rather than economic commitments, in which “companionates” were committed to fulfilling each other’s sexual and emotional requirements. This type of union was a direct rebuttal of traditional patriarchal models of marriage.³¹⁰

Right-wing populist organisations and defenders of traditional American, white family values, such as the Ku Klux Klan, were horrified by such a concept, and rallied against these newer models of marriage, aligning them with the perceived evils of atheism, communism, consumer culture, and rising divorce rates.³¹¹ In 1927, responding to critics of “companionate marriage,” American judge, social reformer, and founder of the US juvenile court system Benjamin B. Lindsey offered the following sentiments,

In a country whose popular premise in sociology, as in religion, is that sex is sin, and that it is capable of becoming something else only by virtue of a miraculous cleansing rite, I doubt if that word “Companionate” could have been smuggled past the clerical guards unchallenged by any means whatever. It would inevitably be as a red rag to all who believe, with St. Paul, that “it is better to marry than to burn,” and that we would all be a lot fitter for heaven if we didn’t marry at all—marriage being, by this code, a concession to our sinful lusts.³¹²

³¹⁰ Rebecca L. Davis, ““Not a Marriage at All, But Simple Harlotry”: The Companionate Marriage Controversy,” *Journal of American History*, 94, 4, (March 2008), pp. 1137-1163, 1140.

³¹¹ Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 78, 114. This was not a universal sentiment within the organisation, however. As Kathleen M. Blee shows, Klanswomen objected to the fraternal secrecy of Klansmen, claiming that it “violated the essence of ‘new marriages’ in which women were equal partners with their husbands.” See Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 24. See also Nancy F. Cott’s comments on Lindsey, his opposition to the Klan, and his insistence that if couples found themselves unhappy, they could mutually consent to divorce after two years without alimony or alternative provisions for support: Nancy F. Cott, “Marriage Crisis and all that Jazz” in eds. Kristin Celello and Hanan Kholoussy, *Domestic Tensions, National Anxieties: Global Perspectives on Marriage, Crisis, and Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 49-66, 56-57.

³¹² Ben B. Lindsey and Wainwright Evans, *The Companionate Marriage* (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1927), vi. For more on Lindsey’s life and work, see Charles Edward Larsen, *The Good Fight: The Life and Times of Ben B. Lindsey* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books 1972). See also Frances Anne Huber’s PhD thesis, *The Progressive Career of Ben B. Lindsey, 1900-1920* (University of Michigan, 1963).

Lindsey's support for companionate marriage reflected his personal progressive values, but the notion of companionate marriage was met with fear and disgust by the vanguards of traditional family values. On May 3, 1928, the *Evening Independent* of St. Petersburg, Florida reported that Rev. George A. Cooke's Episcopal address "contained condemnation of companionate marriage, a denouncing of debasing literature and the alleged obscene tendency of the theatre." On members of the congregation who were indifferent to companionate marriage, Cooke urged pastors to "drop them from membership."³¹³ Rev. W. A. Crawford Frost of the Episcopal Church went a step further, suggesting that women in companionate marriages should wear a ring letting others know they would not resent advances from men other than their husbands. The pastor insisted,

If the time ever comes when such alliances are recognised by law, civil or ecclesiastical, it would seem to me that the various States, or perhaps the federal government, should make it compulsory for every woman married in this way to wear a ring inscribed with letters what kind of a wife she is.³¹⁴

These religious leaders publicly voiced their disgust at newer models of marriage, at time urging the government to shame women (not men) who agreed to such an unholy, but nevertheless harmonious union. And yet, reality of life within traditional models of marriage placed a huge demand on many women, forcing them into lifestyles that were less than idyllic, a hard lesson in an era in which enfranchisement suggested to females that their empowerment was imminent. Many women were not

³¹³ "Methodists Meet at Kansas City: Companionate Marriage and Obscene Shows Condemned in Bishop's Address," *The Evening Standard*, May 3, 1928, 1. Digitized version available at stable url, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=950&dat=19280503&id=3OpPAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=hFQDAAAIBAJ&pg=5647,2745157>, accessed: 07/07/2017.

³¹⁴ "Pastor Would Put Labels on Companionate Brides," *Reading Eagle*, December 5, 1927, 10. Digitized version available at stable url, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1955&dat=19271205&id=IJQhAAAIBAJ&sjid=bJgFAAAAIBAJ&pg=4776,1104837>, accessed: 07/07/2017.

afforded the autonomy, comfort, equality, and freedoms they may have desired.

Within the household, the demands placed upon many married women were at once physically and emotionally draining. As Lu Ann Jones argues, with regard to North Carolina farm-women, the “timeless basic chores of housekeeping—cooking and preserving food, washing and ironing clothes, and cleaning house—required skills, stamina, and artistry.”³¹⁵

Jones’ account of womanhood and homeliness during this period explores the lives of those who laboured to fulfil their traditional obligations as women in the context of southern patriarchal power. However, southern women from rural locales did not always suffer their given lot in silence, as Lorraine Gates Schuyler demonstrates in her scholarship on southern women and political leverage. Schuyler documents how a debate over suffrage and the impact it would have upon politics, marriage, and the nature of familial relationships “raged for three months in the editorial pages of Tennessee’s *Putnam County Herald*.” The letters, Schuyler notes, demonstrate that “rural men and women were keenly aware of the connection between women’s expanded political authority and challenges to male authority in the home.”³¹⁶ One woman, identifying herself “Not an Old Maid,” appealed against the idea that wives cook for husbands to stay in favour, railing, “this idea keeps you over a hot cook stove when you might be holding a good position down town making a nice salary...So, women, don your short skirts, bob your hair, get into your car, go to the polls and vote.”³¹⁷

³¹⁵ Lu Ann Jones, “North Carolina’s Farm Women Plowing around Obstacles,” in eds. Michele Gillespie and Sally G. McMillen, *North Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), pp. 215-237, 219.

³¹⁶ Lorraine Gates Schuyler, *The Weight of Their Votes: Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 30.

³¹⁷ “Not an Old Maid,” *Putnam County Herald*, 1 October 1923, quoted in Jeanette Keith, *Country People in the New South: Tennessee’s Upper Cumberland* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 184. Also quoted in Schuyler, *The Weight of Their Votes*, 30.

When “Not an Old Maid” tried to change the habits of women in southern locales, she juxtaposed notions of Old Timey tradition, certainly in the realm of gender roles, with developments of the modern age, of flappers, independent womanhood, of automobiles and women as workers. Newspaper editorials and letters in publications like the *Putnam County Herald* sometimes gave women space to voice their concerns. Had “Not an Old Maid” been musical and given the opportunity to record, she would no doubt have relished the chance to spread her views still wider. However, unlike the legions of southern males who recorded Old Time music during this period, female recording artists were almost non-existent until at least a decade later. The exceptions, however, are worth considering for what their work reveals about both the workings of the early recording industry and the ways in which ideas about marriage, sexuality, and gender relations more broadly, were treated in popular music. In particular, it is worth drawing attention to a handful of songs that departed from the idiom’s typical affirmation of patriarchal authority and traditional gender hierarchies to clearly demonstrate distaste for, and at times, despair towards conventional notions of marriage.

Given, the paucity of female artists, and the limited avenues available to women of securing gainful employment during this period, the appearance of the first female artists recording Old Time music marks an important point in the history of early country music. The first female voice on commercially recorded Old Time records was fiddler and vocalist Samantha Bumgarner, a native of Sylva, North Carolina. Accompanied by Eva Davis on banjo, the pair recorded eleven songs for the Columbia label in New York, April 1924. These two women were pioneers; they were, the first women to record Old Time music on shellac without a family

ensemble.³¹⁸ In this respect, the pair were “historically important” if a little “musically stiff” as Norm Cohen points out.³¹⁹ However, a young female musician from Dacula, Georgia would shortly become the first solo female to record Old Time music.

In July 1924, around nine months after “Not an Old Maid” urged young females to leave the old-timey traditions behind and become proactive regarding women’s rights, a young songstress named Roba Stanley was about to begin her short recording career.³²⁰ Perhaps somewhat ironically, Roba would cut one of her own Old Time compositions that overtly championed female resistance to male control, “Single Life”; a song that negated the institute of marriage. She was the daughter of Robert Stanley, a prominent fiddler who was a regular attendee and competitor in fiddling conventions in Atlanta. Having learnt to strum and pick from her brother, Roba accompanied herself on guitar when she sang. The young musician often went out performing with her father and southern greats such as Gid and

³¹⁸ It is widely acknowledged amongst scholars that Bumgarner and Davis were pioneers as the first women to record country music. See Thomas A. Adler, “Is There a Link between Bluegrass Musicianship and Sexuality?” in ed. Thomas Goldsmith, *The Bluegrass Reader* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 288-297, 290. Ruth Banes, “Dixie’s Daughters: The Country Music Female,” in eds. Melton A. McLaurin and Richard A. Peterson, *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music* (Langhorne: Gordon and Breach, 1994), pp. 81-112, 89. Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 30. See also Tom Cloer, “Aunt Samantha Bumgarner: Pioneer in Southern Appalachian Music,” *Pickens County Courier*, 07/10/2013, stable url, <http://www.yourpickenscounty.com/aunt-samantha-bumgarner/>, accessed: 01/07/2017.

³¹⁹ Norm Cohen, *Traditional Anglo-American Folk Music: An Annotated Discography of Published Sound Recordings* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 390.

³²⁰ The matrices state that August was the month that these recordings took place, but Roba Stanley denied this emphatically when questioned, arguing that she had met her soon-to-be-husband by then, and suggested that July was, in fact, the month that she recorded. John W. Rumble and Bob Pinson, Interview with Roba Stanley and Dr. Charles Mitchell, April 13, 1985, Nashville, Tennessee, Country Music Foundation Oral History Project, Country Music Hall of Fame Museum and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee, Item Number: OHC27-LC.

Arthur Tanner, Fiddlin' John Carson, and played at her family home with Riley Puckett.³²¹

When asked how her recording career began, Roba recalled that Polk Brockman requested that Robert Stanley took her along,

Well, we got this letter from this Mr. Polk, is all I remember. My dad got it. He wanted my dad to bring me and come and make some records. He wrote the letter. So Dad made the appointment, and we went out to Atlanta and made the records.³²²

Sometime in July, 1924, Roba accompanied her father and harmonica player William Patterson to a session organised by Polk C. Brockman, a talent scout and sometime "producer" of Okeh records at a recording studio in Atlanta. Together, The Stanley Trio cut "Nellie Gray" (OK 40271) and "Whoa Mule" (OK 40271). Roba's father then left her and Patterson to record "Mister Chicken" (OK 40213) and a track entitled "Devilish Mary" (OK 40213). The latter featured Roba singing in character as a male who had married a feisty young girl,

When I was young and in my prime,
I thought I never would marry;
Fell in love with a pretty little girl,
And sure 'nuff we got married.
Rink come-a-dink-dum-a-derry,
Prettiest little girl I ever did see,
And her name was Devilish Mary.

We both was young and foolish,
Got in the devil of a hurry;
We both agreed upon one word,
And the wedding day was Thursday.

It did not take Roba long to subvert the notion of the subservient, dutiful wife.

Unlike the legions of women who were expected to accept domesticity as their station in life once married, this female character resists her role as servant as the

³²¹ Rumble and Pinson, Roba Stanley Interview.

³²² Ibid.

domain of women. This lyrical strategy allows Roba to dramatize the narrative in a way that gives the husband his voice, as he decries his wife as the devil,

We hadn't been married but about three weeks,
Till she got as mean as the devil,
An' ever' time I looked cross-eyed,
She knocked me in the head with the shovel.

However, the next stanza reveals the real reason why the wife is branded in such a derogatory manner by her husband. She refuses her domestic responsibilities as a dutiful wife,

She washed my clothes in old soap suds,
She wouldn't do no dishes,
She let me know right from the start,
That she's gonna wear the britches.³²³

The resilience in Roba's female character is notable, especially given the historic context of this recording. As a young female, earning money recording music, and travelling in a male-dominated arena, Roba herself was at odds with the forces of tradition. Moreover, her female character, "Devilish Mary," was ideally situated in debates centred upon women's rights and male expectations of women in the marital home at the time of recording. Popular culture in the area in which she grew up, reinforced traditional concepts of male-female relations in movie theatres. As Georgina Hickey notes in her study of Atlanta during the Progressive Era and into the 1930s, the "growing convergence of Hollywood movies around themes of love, traditional gender roles, and morality" reinforced to women that they should "just choose between pursuing careers and creating solid and lasting families. Through happy and fulfilling images, these films reinforced the primacy of family and

³²³ Roba Stanley, "Devilish Mary" OK 40213, 1924.

marriage.”³²⁴ Roba’s female characters, however, did little to reinforce the primacy of family and marriage. Characters like “Devilish Mary” sent out clear messages that marriage could be far less than harmonious, and that some women, whether fictional or real could refuse to accept their status as unequal to their male counterparts.

“Devilish Mary” was the first indication that Roba’s music had the potential to subvert traditional gender models. It was an implicit acknowledgement of female resistance to male control in popular song. She recalled being paid \$50 per song. Together with her father, the two wasted no time in using the money to buy their own means of transport, a boon for travelling musicians. They travelled to and from the next recording journeys in from Atlanta in a car that they bought with the money that they made from the recordings. The young Roba clearly enjoyed her new-found earning potential. As she recalled, “This was the first money I’d ever made, really, to amount to anything, so we pooled our money and bought us an old Ford, a brand-new Ford.” Clearly enamored with such an acquisition, she admitted, “We thought we were something with that brand-new Ford.”³²⁵

In early January 1925, the now financially solvent and also mobile Roba travelled with her father and Bill Patterson to record more sides for OKeh. The trio cut a rendition of “Railroad Bill” whilst only Roba and Patterson recorded “All Night Long” and also a version of “Little Frankie” in which a female protagonist kills her wayward man. The latter provided yet more evidence that the young Roba was in a position to create, and perhaps even champion fiery female characters who were simply not prepared to keep quiet in the presence of men. However, it would be her recording of “Single Life” (OK 40436) that would enable Roba to make a first-

³²⁴ Georgina Hickey, *Hope and Danger in the New South City: Working-class Women and Urban Development in Atlanta, 1890-1940* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 76.

³²⁵ Rumble and Pinson, Interview with Roba Stanley.

person declaration of female independence and directly reject the notion of marriage, not only in a male-dominated industry, but in a culture that was largely reluctant to embrace newer models of womanhood. It must have been a thrill for Roba to stand in front of the horn in the Atlanta studio and sing:

Do not care for pretty little things,
Always felt like dancing,
Streets all lined with one dollar bills,
Girls all sweet and dainty.

Single life is a happy life,
Single life is lovely,
I am single and no man's wife,
And no man shall control me.

This was indeed a bold statement for time. Roba's female character seemed to speak to and of the realities of marriage, and the tensions of gender politics within the marital home during the 1920s. It is an implicit acknowledgement and negation of the continuation of traditional models of marriage in a modern age. This is bolstered further when her female character also acknowledges the presence of love interests within the song, suggesting sexual encounters with amorous males,

Some will come on Saturday nights,
Some will come on Sunday,
And if you give them half a chance,
They will stay 'til Monday.

Dabbling with the messenger of love, Roba's female character appears to soften her views. However, in "Single Life" she cannot resist characterising Cupid as a lusty male, intent on impeding, or completely silencing the female voice,

Cupid came last Saturday night,
Took him in the parlour,
Every time he'd hug my neck,
He'd say now don't you holler.

In the parameters of this song, boys rely on amorous chit-chat and the showering of money on "pretty little" girls to assure them of the integrity of their love,

Boy fell in love with a pretty little girl,
He'll talk as gentle as a dove,
He'd call her his honey and spend all his money,
And show her he's solid on his love.

In this respect, Roba's female character acknowledges an implicit understanding that men think girls, and women, can be bought as a consumer item. However, the next stanza functions as a direct rebuttal of such a notion, followed by a meditation on female resistance to domesticity, a refusal to use domestic appliances in a conventional manner,

Would not marry a red-headed boy,
Would not marry for money,
All I want is a brown-eyed boy,
To kiss and call me honey.

Boys keep away from the girls I say,
And give 'em plenty of room,
For when you're wed they'll bang you 'til you're dead,
With the bald-headed end of the broom.³²⁶

Although the violence is playful in the final stanza, Roba's use of masculine imagery (bald-headedness being primarily associated with men) functioned as a red flag to interested boys who might have had designs on crowding, domesticating, and perhaps even dominating their love interests in the marital home. This broom is not to be used in any conventional manner, at least not for this plucky female. Instead, it is comically transformed into a deadly weapon, to be used for busting and not dusting. Norm Cohen argues that like Samantha Bumgarner, Roba was significant only for her "chronological priority." Although Cohen acknowledges that Roba's and other songs "touch on some important issues concerning the role of women," he appears reluctant to give much credit to the significance of female resistance on these early commercial recordings.³²⁷

³²⁶ Roba Stanley, "Single Life," OK 40436, 1925.

³²⁷ Cohen, *Traditional Anglo-American Folk Music*, 390.

Given the fierce debates that were raging around marriage and women's rights, her lyrical output seems even more remarkable, additionally, given her position as one of the few privileged female artists recording Old Time during this period. When interviewed years later, Roba remembered her position as a female recording artist proudly, "You didn't hear too much women playing," she acknowledged. Proudly, she later confessed, perhaps more keenly aware then of the tensions surrounding women's rights and the shifting nature of marital relations in the time in which she recorded; that "'Single Life' was a right cute one."³²⁸ It would be two years before another female voice would call into question the institute of marriage. Unlike Roba's "Single Life," the next female voice on an Old Time recording to demonstrate resistance to conventional models of womanhood and subservience in the marital home could not be described as a "cute one" as Roba fondly remembered her own recording.

In the summer of 1927, three figures travelled from their homes in Maces Spring, Virginia to Bristol, Tennessee. With hopes of making a recording that would open the doorway to musical success, Alvin Pleasant Carter, his wife Sara, and her cousin, Maybelle were making their journey in response to an advert in placed in a local newspaper by music mogul Ralph Peer, looking for local talent. The trio, led vocally by Sara and Maybelle, with A.P. as additional and occasional baritone, blended Gospel styles, perfecting their close harmonies and were drawn to the sacred sounds of the Pentecostal singing. Led by Maybelle playing Blues-inflected licks on guitar (a style she learned from African American musician Lesley Riddles), their

³²⁸ Rumble and Pinson, Interview with Roba Stanley.

sound meshed black styles of playing with the sacred sounds of the white, rural South.³²⁹

They expected little to come from the session. In conversation with Charles Wolfe, Sara recalled travelling to Bristol to record,

Well, we went up there to Bristol, and Mr. Peer, you know, he put the ad in the Bristol paper for all talent to come up and try out. So, Maybelle, A.P., and I, we decided that we'd go up. Of course, we didn't think anything about it; just thought it more or less, just a trip. And we went up there, and so Mr. Peer he took us in there and we...he sat down and he listened to us, and we made three records. First record we made was "Bury Me Under The Weeping Willow," and I don't remember, we made three rec—six songs.³³⁰

The six songs the trio recorded would become a milestone in the history of early recorded country music. On Monday, August 1, besides from "Bury Me Under The Weeping Willow" (Vi 21074) the trio recorded "Little Log Cabin By The Sea" (Vi 21074), "The Poor Orphan Child" (Vi 20877), and "The Storms Are On The Ocean" (Vi 20937). However, the following day, they cut another two tracks. The trio recorded "The Wandering Boy" (Vi 20877) and at Ralph Peer's behest, Sara Carter would perform a solo vocal on a song entitled "Single Girl, Married Girl" (Vi 20937).

Sara was reticent about singing the song: "I didn't wanna sing that song. I didn't like it, and I told Mr Peer, I says, "I don't like that, I'd rather not sing that." However, Peer was adamant: Sara revealed, "Oh," he says, "I want you to sing that."

³²⁹ James A. Cosby, *Devil's Music, Holy Rollers and Hillbillies: How America Gave Birth to Rock and Roll* (Jefferson: MacFarland & Company Inc., 2016), 94. In an interview with Dr. Charles K. Wolfe, Maybelle acknowledged that she learned to play guitar "from a colored boy." Source: Charles K. Wolfe, Interview With Mother Maybelle Carter, Middle Tennessee State University, Center For Popular Music Selections, Manuscript Collections, Charles K. Wolfe Audio Collection, Accession Number: 05-023.

³³⁰ Charles K. Wolfe, Interview with A.P. and Sara Carter, Middle Tennessee State University, Center for Popular Music, Charles Wolfe Audio Collection, accession number, WolfeC_273_594-1_A.P. Carter_Sara Carter Interviews.

So I sung “Single Girl”—sang it as a solo.”³³¹ The lyrical composition of the song was delivered with pathos by Sara,

Single girl, single girl, she's going dressed fine,
Oh, she's going dressed fine,
Married girl, married girl, she wears just any kind,
Oh, she wears just any kind.

The opening stanza was an implicit critique of marriage, the joyous decorative process of the female body-lost after the honeymoon period of courtship, and subsequent rules of attraction inherent in courtship rituals, of the loss of female autonomy within the marital home. As if to almost accentuate this concept, in promotional shots for the musical outfit, the Carters dressed not in country rube attire, nor in exotic finery. Instead, they appeared in what resembled “Sunday best”, or as Curtis Ellison notes, “late Victorian attire.”³³² They looked sombre in promotional shots. In one such image, A.P. Carter sits central with Sara and Maybelle either side of him. As they stare directly at the camera lens, their facial expressions suggest an air of utmost seriousness and sobriety. They were as Barry Mazor notes constructed as “icons of country domesticity.”³³³

The combination of sober attire, serious facial expressions and a male as the central figure projected an image of traditional Christian American family values: a salve to those who feared the changing nature of marriage and gendered hierarchy during this period. However, this merely lent Sara’s solo performance of “Single Girl, Married Girl” an ever greater poignancy, as she dismantled the myth of marital

³³¹ Wolfe, Interview with A.P. and Sara Carter.

³³² Curtis W. Ellison, *Country Music Culture: From Hard Times to Heaven* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 28.

³³³ Undated Black and White Promotional Photograph of The Carter Family, Country Music Hall of Fame Museum and Archive, Muleskinner News Collection, 5th Floor Archives, Box Number 92, digitized version available at stable url, http://digi.countrymusichalloffame.org/cdm/search/searchterm/Muleskinner_CarterMaybelle_193YMMDD_print_01, accessed: 28/09/2015. Barry Mazor, *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2015), 108.

bliss. Indeed, as Edward P. Comentale observes, the Carter Family's recording of "Single Girl, Married Girl" "takes only three short verses to unpick the entire romance of southern womanhood." If modernity offered a partial empowerment for a proportion of women, Sara Carter's performance of the song positioned married life in structural opposition with any freedoms that the modern age afforded young single females at the time.³³⁴ It was far more scathing and pointed in its implicit criticism of marriage in the 1920s than Stanley's was. Unlike the wilful and single character that Roba performed, Sara sang as a married woman bemoaning the pitfalls of the realities of marriage; fondly remembering the single days when familial demands such as child-rearing and lack of personal finance did not inhibit and govern female autonomy.

Sara's performance, on record, of an insightful woman depicting the downfalls of married life, drew listeners' attention to the benefits of having no intimate ties or familial responsibilities. However, as Susan K. Cahn notes, the "very freedom to buy nice dresses and exert autonomy" most likely "facilitated the courtship process and transition to married life, with its baleful return to the economic dependency, poverty, and family responsibility that working girls had briefly escaped."³³⁵

Single girl, single girl, she goes to the store and buys,
Oh, she goes to the store and buys,
Married girl, married girl, she rocks the cradle and cries,
Oh, she rocks the cradle and cries.
Single girl, single girl, she's going where she please,
Oh, she's going where she please,
Married girl, married girl, baby on her knees,
Oh, baby on her knees.

³³⁴ Edward P. Comentale, *Sweet Air: Modernism, Regionalism, and American Popular Song* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 97.

³³⁵ Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 29.

Although Sara was reluctant to sing the track, Ralph Peer was convinced of the lucrative potential in her voice. Peer acknowledged, “as soon as I heard Sara’s voice, that was it. You see I had done this so many times that I was trained to watch for the one point...As soon as I heard her voice, why, I began to build around it and all the first recordings were on that basis.”³³⁶ The gamble paid off, “Single Girl, Married Girl” proved to be one of the most successful songs for the trio. Sara was astonished at this, revealing, “when we got our first royalty, why, the “Single Girl, Married Girl” was the, had sold the most, the very one that I didn’t wanna sing!”

It is clear that label executives saw the potential in female Old Time artists and songs that openly critiqued male control in the marital home during this period. Moreover, it is also evident that songs such as “Single Girl, Married Girl” appealed to listeners, suggesting that consumers admired and embraced the messages inherent in such songs. Although the presence of women on Old Time recordings of the 1920s was scarce, Roba Stanley and Sara Carter’s public criticisms of conventional models of marriage were aptly timed in a decade in which fierce debates raged over tradition and modernity. Roba did not mirror the sentiments of the characters that she performed. She married at the age of seventeen, three weeks after meeting her love, and quit her life as a musician almost immediately. When asked about whether her husband influenced this decision, she replied, “I met him, and it was love at first sight, and it lasted thirty years until he died. But he never cared—I don’t know. He never liked for me to be in the limelight, I guess.”³³⁷ In one sense, Roba’s marriage bore all of the hallmarks of companionate marriage; her union was one of love. However, her husband’s influence over her decision to leave her musical career

³³⁶ Ralph Peer quoted in Mark Zwonitzer with Charles Hindberg, *Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone? The Carter Family and their Legacy in American Music* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2002), 100.

³³⁷ John Rumble and Bob Pinson, Interview with Roba Stanley and Dr. Charles Mitchell.

behind also suggests that there existed a tension between the two, and that together, they believed that Roba would be better off settling down to family life at a young age.

In contrast, Sara Carter's marriage to A. P. in many ways would come to reflect the lyrical content of "Single Girl, Married Girl." Having only "wanted little more from recording than to make some relatively easy money compared to farm work," Sara found herself and her children "regularly abandoned" by her husband as he travelled to collect songs. In short, Sara had become the person she had not wanted to sing about. As Barry Mazor, notes, by the following decade, "the act that represented the very image of rural domesticity" would be "privately pulled apart by domestic tensions."³³⁸ Roba Stanley's and Sara Carter's appearance on shellac during this decade marked an important development in musical history. Moreover, their outspoken commentaries on marriage were ideally situated in debates over women's rights at a time when the promises of enfranchisement offered only modest hope of empowerment. Both communicated powerful messages about modernity, and women's place in the public and private spheres through the "new" medium of commercially recorded Old Time music.

³³⁸ Mazor, *Ralph Peer*, 178, 108.

Chapter Six

Guns, Knives, Streetwalkers and Wives: Male Control and Female Resistance in Depression-era Blues Recordings

Although the 1920s had provided record labels with a wealth of talented Blues artists from the southern states, the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the ensuing Depression that ravaged America in the following years had a devastating impact on the recording industry. Six million records sold in 1932, a number that accounted for only 6% of the total record sales in 1927.³³⁹ Whilst the market for recorded Blues suffered during this period, demand for the music did not entirely diminish. The drive to economise within the industry led to the suspension of the southern field recording trips that had generated a good deal of Blues, as well as Hillbilly, records in the 1920s. Consequently, for much of the 1930s, the commercial recording of Blues, like legions of southern blacks, had largely migrated to northern centres.³⁴⁰ Most of the main recording activity took place in the ever-expanding metropolises of New York and Chicago. Recordings often reflected this transition, as the rawness of the Country Blues was replaced by a more urbane, citified sound. The lyrical content

³³⁹ William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 163.

³⁴⁰ During the 1920s, around 800,000 southern blacks had left the region and headed towards northern centres. See Erin Royston Battat, *Ain't Got No Home: America's Great Migrations and the Making of an Interracial Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 176. Derron Davis, "Toward a Socio-Historical and Demographic Portrait of Twentieth-Century African Americans" in ed. Alferdteen Harrison, *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), pp. 1-19, 10. Herbert S. Klein, *A Population History of the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 169. Record labels began to curtail their field recording trips, and focused their attention on recording in fixed studios in northern centres once the Depression took hold. See Jeff Todd Titon, *Downhome Blues Lyrics: An Anthology from the Post-World War II Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990, second edition), 7. See also Brian Ward and Patrick Huber, *A & R Pioneers: Architects of American Roots Music on Record* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, forthcoming), 42.

of these recordings often reflected the grittier side of life. Jon Michael Spencer asserts that during this period, Blues lyrics “became increasingly trivialized and standardized” and that their reduction “to the common theme of unrequited love and sexual prowess” is typical of the Blues recorded during the Depression.³⁴¹ Whilst this chapter accepts Spencer’s argument in part, he is wrong to dismiss this as an industry driven trend that diluted, or “trivialized” the cultural significance of the Blues. The argument here is that the ascendant themes of “unrequited love and sexual prowess” in recorded Blues assumed greater significance during this period precisely because they formed part of larger discourses on black poverty, male bravado, domestic violence, and vice that were themselves intensified by the hardships of the Depression. Artists sung of the brutal treatment of working girls, illuminating woefully dangerous conditions faced by many black women as they turned to prostitution in a desperately struggle to make ends meet in the real world. Bluesmen adopted and adapted the negative stereotypical image of the razor-wielding African American male, popularised (often for white consumption) in coon songs of the late-Nineteenth Century. These compensatory, ruthlessly hyper-masculine identities appeared as counterpoints to the anonymity and emasculation that extreme poverty forced upon many African American men, as already-scarce and low-paid jobs diminished during the Depression. A & R men continued to exert a great deal of influence over their artists’ commercial output, at times encouraging them to record material that they sometimes personally despised. And yet, in spite of their distaste for their recorded output, male and female Blues artists collectively highlighted the economic and social strain that the Depression placed upon the black

³⁴¹ Jon Michael Spencer, “The Diminishing Rural Residue of Folklore in City and Urban Blues, Chicago 1915-1950,” *Black Music Research Journal*, 12, 1, (Spring, 1992) pp. 25-41, 39.

community and, in particular, the ways in which those pressures played out in relationships among and between the sexes. The chapter begins with a brief sketch of the situation facing African Americans during the Depression and its impact on gender roles.

The Wall Street Crash of 1929 ushered in the worst period of economic adversity in American history. Although many whites felt the effects almost immediately, the majority of African Americans had long endured financial hardship and extreme poverty owing to limited and poorly-paid employment opportunities. Nevertheless, the huge loss of employment that resulted from the Crash further devastated already impoverished African Americans, as systemic racial discrimination exacerbated the economic repercussions of agricultural and industrial decline. Unemployment levels for blacks were grim, in 1932, 30% of blacks were out of work in Chicago, Cleveland's unemployed black population was 33%, 37% in Detroit 37%, 25% in New York and 28% in Philadelphia.³⁴² Blacks endured a culture in which the ideology of "last hired, first fired" prevailed. Whites took many jobs that had previously been available to black Americans, and also stayed in threatened jobs longer than their black counterparts.³⁴³ Franklin Delano Roosevelt's landslide victory over Herbert Hoover in 1932 brought a new Democratic government to power. Many African Americans had traditionally pledged their allegiances to the Republican Party, while much of Roosevelt's support came for the staunchly Democratic and equally staunchly segregationist white South. As a result,

³⁴² Kevern Verney, *Black Civil Rights in America* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 24.

³⁴³ Neil A. Wynn, *The African American Experience during World War II* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 16. Kevern Verney, *African Americans and US Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 31. Kevern Verney, *Black Civil Rights in America* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 24. William Storey, *US Government and Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, 2nd edition), 181. Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *To Ask for an Equal Chance: African Americans in the Great Depression* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 27.

he was unwilling to deal directly with racial issues in his 1932 presidential campaign. Unsurprisingly, this initially gained him scant support from many black communities. Challenging white supremacy in an overt manner would have been campaign suicide.³⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Hoover's apparent indifference to the plight of African Americans had encouraged at least some leading black intellectuals to urge black support for the Democrat. In the November 1932 edition of the NAACP's *Crisis*, Reverdy C. Ransom pleaded:

If for no other reason the platitudinous reply of President Hoover to the sobbing eloquence of the self appointed delegation of Colored men which recently called upon him at the White House, should suffice to turn the disgusted allegiance of all self respecting Negro voters to Franklin D. Roosevelt. In his preelction campaign four years ago, as well as throughout his occupancy of the White House, President Hoover has never taken a whole hearted stand for the political recognition of the Negro voters who have supported him and his Party... In politics nothing goes by favour, all things are won out of the strife of battle. An uprising of Negro voters against Mr. Hoover and his party, would free our spirits equally as much as Mr. Lincoln's Proclamation freed our bodies. After nearly Seventy years of outward freedom, we as a people should not remain slaves at heart.³⁴⁵

Once in office, the Roosevelt administration initiated an array of New Deal policies that moved, generally speaking, from those concerned with immediate emergency relief for the destitute, though programmes aimed at economic recovery, to reform measures designed to shore up the economic and financial against further catastrophic collapse. Amid an alphabet soup of agencies and programmes, the Roosevelt administration sought to improve conditions for the nation's poor, assuming that blacks required no special treatment but would benefit greatly from the universally beneficial effects of New Deal policies and legislation. However, the

³⁴⁴ Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 17, 18.

³⁴⁵ Reverdy C. Ransom, "Why Vote for Roosevelt" *The Crisis*, November 1932, 343.

Digitized version available at stable url

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=AVgEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=crisis+roosevelt+1932&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjn2pOH6NLXAhVMJFAKHxHVBXoQ6AEILDAB#v=onepage&q=crisis%20%20roosevelt%201932&f=false>, accessed: 06/07/2015.

benefits for African Americans were uneven, especially in the South, where white segregationists were often in charge of administering New Deal programmes at the local level. For example, whilst The National Recovery Administration (NRA), Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), provided a modicum of support to African Americans, they could not provide adequate protection to blacks against discrimination from potential employers, from agency officials, and other whites who were committed to white supremacy and opposed to black citizenship rights.³⁴⁶ As Spencer R. Crew notes, even prior to the onset of the Depression, many migrating black males typically found employment performing “dirty, backbreaking, unskilled and low-paying” jobs, whilst their female counterparts found themselves as similarly low-paid domestic workers. Not only were these avenues of employment the least desirable, they were, as Crew stresses, “the ones employers felt best suited their black workers.”³⁴⁷

³⁴⁶ Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 87, 195-196, 208. William E. Leuchtenberg, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal: 1932-1940* (New York: Harper Perennial edition, 2009), 185-187. Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941, Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), 188-195. Joe W. Trotter, "African Americans, Impact of the Great Depression on" in ed. Robert S. McElvaine, *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression Vol. 1* (New York: Macmillan, 2004), pp. 8-17, 8.

³⁴⁷ Spencer J. Crew, “The Great Migration of Afro-Americans, 1915-40,” *Monthly Labor Review*, March 1987, 35-36. The migration of southern blacks to urban centres in the North and elsewhere was greatly influenced by black publications such as the *Chicago Defender*. The *Defender* sought, as Alan D. DeSantis shows, to “persuade southern blacks to migrate to the North by waging a migration campaign that utilized the recurring themes found in the American-Dream Myth.” Alan D. DeSantis, “Selling the American Dream Myth to Black Southerners: The *Chicago Defender* and the Great Migration of 1915-1919” *Western Journal of Communication*, 62, 4, (Fall 1998), pp. 474-511, 474. However, in many respects, these migrants faced similarly dire conditions. Recent scholarship shows that those who left the South in search of stability and opportunity “did not benefit appreciably in terms of employment status, income, or occupational status.” Rather, inter-regional migrants, such as those heading to Chicago, New York and other urban centres “often fared worse than did southerners who moved within the South or those who remained sedentary.” Suzanne C. Eichenlaub, Stewart E. Tolnay and J. Trent Alexander, “Moving Out but Not Up: Economic

Employment opportunities for black women in industry and commerce were already limited, but became even scarcer as getting white men back to work was often prioritised by New Deal administrators. Many sought work in domestic service – long a major source of female black employment, but one which was also struck by the Depression, as rich and middle-class families tightened their belts and let servants go. Retrospectively, bluesman Willie C. Thomas told Blues scholar Paul Oliver:

You see, a woman could get a job at that time, but a man couldn't hardly get it. Want a little money, had to get it from her...in the time of the Depression. And it gave a man the blues: he's been the boss all the time and now the Depression come and she's washin' at the white folks yard. And she's cookin' there and she can get a little money but she's feedin' him so he can't cut up too much...It been hard when a man been boss of his own house and the Depression come and *she* gonna have to be the boss.³⁴⁸

Whilst there was some truth in Thomas' observations, the realities of domestic work for many African American females were grim. By the middle of the decade, economic conditions had sent wages for domestic work plummeting, resulting in black women being paid scandalously low wages for their efforts. In New York, Pittsburgh, St Louis and Chicago, immigrant housewives attempted to uplift their own social status by bargaining with African American women, offering them pitiful, but essential finances to perform domestic chores in their homes.³⁴⁹

In 1935, NAACP investigator Ella Baker and journalist Marvel Cooke visited New York to uncover the financial exploitation of black women in what was known as the "Bronx Slave Market." Their findings featured in the *Crisis* in November of the same year. Baker and Cooke informed readers:

Outcomes in the Great Migration," *American Sociological Review*, 75, 1, (February 2010), pp. 101-12, 101.

³⁴⁸ Willie Thomas interviewed by Paul Oliver in Paul Oliver, *Conversation with the Blues, Jazz Book Club Edition* (London: Readers Union Ltd., 1967), 51.

³⁴⁹ Erin Royston Battat, *Ain't Got No Home: America's Great Migrations and the Making of an Interracial Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 106. Annelise Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 38.

Rain or shine, cold or hot, you will find them there—Negro Women, old and young—sometimes bedraggled, sometimes neatly dressed—but with the invariable paper bundle, waiting expectantly for Bronx housewives to buy their strength and energy for an hour, two hours, or even for a day at the munificent rate of fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, or, if luck be with them, thirty cents an hour. If not the wives themselves, maybe their husbands, their sons, or their brothers under the subterfuge of work, offer worldly-wise girls higher bids for their time.³⁵⁰

The article highlighted the plight of legions of African American women as they desperately strove to earn money, whilst drawing attention to unscrupulous males who, treating female hardship as an opportunity, attempted to lure impoverished black women into having sex with them for money, perhaps believing and attempting to exploit essentializing stereotypes about unfettered black female sexuality. As this chapter shows, prostitution was a reality of Depression-era life for black and white Americans, and a number of black male and female Blues singers narrated tales of working girls in their recordings. Baker and Cooke also touched upon other crucial issues, stressing that the financial relief provided by FDR's government was insufficient. "In an effort to supplement the inadequate relief received," they argued, "many seek this open market."³⁵¹ Black Women's Club members became deeply concerned about young black women who travelled to northern centres in search of a steady, if derisory wage. Slave-like working conditions and the gross exploitation of young and old black female domestic workers provided an impetus for Club Women's action.³⁵² In the 1930s, Anna Julia

³⁵⁰ Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke, "The Bronx Slave Market" in *The Crisis*, 42, November, 1935, pp. 330-340, 330. Digitized version available at stable url, https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=4lcEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=the+crisis+november+1935&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj2_Yr1iavXAhXDyKQKHReHAcwQ6AEIKjAB#v=onepage&q=the%20crisis%20november%201935&f=false, accessed: 30/03/2015.

³⁵¹ Baker and Cooke, "The Bronx Slave Market," 330.

³⁵² Lillian Serece Williams, *Strangers in the Land of Paradise: The Creation of an African American Community, Buffalo, New York 1900-1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 186. Danielle Phillips, "Cleaning Race: Irish Immigrant and Southern Black Domestic Workers in the Northeast United States, 1865-1930" in eds. Leslie Brown,

Cooper sought to improve the social standing and conditions for domestic workers through better training which would enable them, in turn, to impress their employers and earn both better rewards for their work and help improve the image of the race.

In one speech, Cooper urged:

Let us look at the facts. Under slavery there was the most vigilant, the most intelligent, the most successful natural selection known to man to form this class of house servants who were to be in immediate and constant contact with the master class... The house servants were the cream by natural endowment first, and by most careful training and contact afterwards... Today they represent the thrift, the mechanical industry, the business intelligence, the professional skill, the well ordered homes, and the carefully nurtured families that are to be found in every town and hamlet where the colored man is known... In the first place, the association of the domestic in the home of her employer is by necessity most intimate and responsible... She can refute prejudgements, allay opposition, and mold favourable sentiment without ever opening her lips on the Negro problem. The character of the service is important and the service itself when properly appreciated and performed has the same elements of dignity as other services.³⁵³

This quotation makes clear Cooper's own sentiments: black women who worked in domestic service were as dignified as those in other occupations and as deserving of respect. As Cooper's acknowledgement of the "Negro problem" suggests, however, African Americans were generally viewed as a lower class of people, regardless of their class or status. Indeed, the many negative stereotypes that attempted to essentialize black Americans testify to this. As this chapter shows, white constructions of black womanhood often reduced them to the level of highly sexualised, deviant and barely human.

In a related, yet somewhat different, way African American masculinity had also long been defined by many whites as hypersexual, animalistic and violent, traits that underpinned the threat that black men were believed to pose a threat to the social

Jacqueline Castledine and Ann Valk, *U.S. Women's History: Untangling the Threads of Sisterhood* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), pp. 13-31, 27-28.

³⁵³ Anna Julia Cooper "On Education" circa 1930s, reproduced in eds. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan, *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper, Including A Voice from the South and Other Important Essays, Papers and Letters* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), pp.248-258, 254-255.

order. Such stereotypes existed alongside equally reductive ones that focused on black ignorance, sloth and gullability. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, a plethora of “coon songs” depicting stock racial stereotypes that denigrated blacks had circulated the US. White minstrel types parodied blacks as simple, lazy, comical, but also quite often as dangerous, violent, and ruthless. Sheet music for “coon songs” featured front-cover artwork depicting flamboyantly dressed black males wielding straight razors. Songs such as Sam Lucas’ song “De Coon Dat Had De Razor,” John T. Kelly’s “That Black Man from Troy: A Disturbance in Coondom,” and May Irwin’s 1896 composition “Bully Song” all featured artwork portraying dangerous black male subjects, dressed in finery—itsself the vehicle for a kind of mockery, since blacks were not “meant” to be rich and seldom knew how to deal with any wealth or refinement-and wielding straight razors.³⁵⁴ White illustrators traded on derogatory stereotypes of black masculinity and affluence as a dangerous combination, suggesting that racial advancement posed a danger to the social order. The images functioned as a method of maintaining control over African Americans.³⁵⁵ As chapter two shows, similar negative representations of African

³⁵⁴ See Sam Lucas & Wm. F. Quown, *De Coon Dat Had De Razor*, White, Smith & Co., Boston, 1885, Library of Congress, African American Sheet Music 1850-1920, stable url, <http://memory.loc.gov/award/rpbaasm/0700/0756/075601r.jpg>, accessed: 20/02/ 2014. John T. Kelly, *That Black Man from Troy: A Disturbance in Coondom*, New York: M. Witmark & Sons, 1897, Library of Congress, African-American Sheet Music 1850-1920, stable url, <http://memory.loc.gov/award/rpbaasm/0700/0706/070601r.jpg>, accessed: 20/02/2014. Charles E. Trevathan, *May Irwin’s Bully Song: Widow Jones*, White-Smith, New York, 1896, Duke University Libraries Digital Collections, Historic Sheet Music, stable url: <http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/sheetmusic/n/n05/n0572.8/n0572.8-1-72dpi.html>, accessed: 20/02/2014.

³⁵⁵ The messages contained in the accompanying illustrations and lyrics to antebellum minstrel sheet music could not have helped African Americans as they strove to improve their social standing in America. As Stephanie Dunson notes, these images “amused parlor-dwelling Americans and eased middle-class uncertainty by marking the woeful extremes of social failure. Unchecked and unchallenged for decades, these images informed and influenced attitudes about black identity by importing devastatingly racist ideology into the American home in the guise of harmless entertainment.” See Stephanie Dunson, “Black Misrepresentation in Nineteenth-Century Sheet Music Illustration,” in ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular*

Americans remained pervasive in marketing materials for recorded Blues during the 1920s. Although advertising materials for recorded Blues drew less upon plantation stereotypes during the 1930s, recordings made in this period featured a plethora of characters that seemed to wilfully play to and appropriate negative stereotypes. At times these characters seemed to relish and revel in their supposed “otherness,” challenging and destabilizing the ideological foundations of such myths, perhaps in a bid to humorously disarm the stereotypes themselves. And yet, at other times, such negative representations of black identity may have spoken untold truths about the effects of financial collapse on black communities during the 1930s. The early recording career of Skip James speaks to some of these issues.

Over a period of two days in February 1931, Mississippian bluesman Skip James entered a makeshift recording studio in Grafton, Wisconsin and cut eighteen tracks for the Paramount label. Under the supervision and guidance of Art Laibly; Paramount Records’ head of Artists and Repertoire, James cut some of his most memorable and influential work at this extended session, recording songs that conjoined themes of romantic abandonment, desperate poverty, and vengeful hypermasculinity. Among these recordings were the eerily bleak “Hard Time Killing Floor Blues” (Pm 13065) and the hauntingly melancholic “Devil Got My Woman” (Pm 13088). Both recordings gave a platform to James’ formidable skills as a guitar virtuoso, vocalist, and observer of a changing social and domestic landscape in the midst of an economic crisis. In “Hard Time Killing Floor Blues, James’ male character gave voice to the feelings of desperation and hopelessness felt by many

Culture, 1890-1930 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011,) 54. For more on minstrelsy and its relationship to the age of technology, see Louis Chude-Sokei, “The Uncanny History of Minstrels and Machines, 1835-1923” in ed. Stephen Johnson, *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), pp. 104-133.

African Americans who faced increasingly dire conditions as a result of economic collapse. With Laibly in close proximity, James accompanied himself on guitar and sang an exquisite, haunting falsetto:

Hard times here, everywhere you go,
Times is harder, than ever been before,
Well the people are drifting from door to door,
Can't find no heaven, I don't care where they go.

Let me tell you people, just before I go,
These hard times will kill you, just dry long so,
When you hear me singing my so lonesome song,
These hard times can last us so very long.

Well you say you had money, you better be sure,
Because these hard times will drive you from door to door,
Sing this song, and I ain't going to sing no more,
Hard times will drive you from door to door.³⁵⁶

Although James recorded this song in Wisconsin, the desperation of the displaced and dislocated people it described, reflected very real social conditions for many American citizens all across the US. Not least the legions of southern blacks who migrated to urban centres in the North and elsewhere in search of a modicum of stability, if not prosperity.³⁵⁷

Laibly was apparently surprised by the bluesman's scathing articulation of black discontent about the effects of the Depression. Afterwards, the white A&R man encouraged James to either "compose or rearrange a song about a gun."³⁵⁸

Laibly was one of a number of influential white mediators of the race record business who, as William Kenney stresses; "insisted that aspiring African American

³⁵⁶ Skip James "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues," Pm-13065, 1931.

³⁵⁷ According the U.S Census, during the period 1910-1940, Chicago saw a 24.6% rise in its black population, while New York's black population increased by 15%. United States Census Bureau, stable url, <https://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/020/508.php>, accessed: 28/07/2016.

³⁵⁸ Stephen Calt, *I'd Rather Be the Devil: Skip James and the Blues* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008), 5. See also Gayle Dean Wardlow, *Chasin' That Devil Music: Searching for the Blues* (Milwaukee: Backbeat Books, 1998), 39.

Blues and Gospel singers record titles, melodic lines, and lyrics that had not been recorded before.”³⁵⁹ The resulting song was “22-20 Blues” (Pm 13066), a piano Blues that further showcased James’ talents as an instrumentalist. Moreover, this piece was an expression of male dominance and masculine prowess:

If I send for my baby, and she don’t come,
If I sent for my baby, and she don’t come,
All the doctors in Wisconsin won’t help her none.

And if she gets unruly, and gets so she don’t wanna do,
And if she gets unruly, and gets so she don’t wanna do,
I’ll take my 32-20, I’d cut her half in two.³⁶⁰

Lyrically, “22-20 Blues” is a prime example of misogynist male Blues. Skip’s male character refuses to accept any kind of transgression on the part of his love interest, seeing it as an affront to his manhood and sense of selfhood and self-worth.³⁶¹

In “Devil Got My Woman,” James’ male character opined:

I’d rather be the devil, to be that woman’s man,
I’d rather be the devil, to be that woman’s man,
Aw, nothin’ but the devil, changed my baby’s mind,
Was nothin’ but the devil changed my baby’s mind.

The woman I love, woman that I loved,
Woman I loved, took her from my best friend,
But he got lucky, stole her back again,
And he got lucky, stole her back again.³⁶²

During this period, courtship was often interrupted as families and individuals were forced to move around in search of work. As Jeffrey S. Turner argues, dating was

³⁵⁹ William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 132.

³⁶⁰ Skip James “22-20 Blues,” Pm-13066, 1931.

³⁶¹ For more on misogyny and male control in black music traditions from early Blues through to R n’ B see also Brian Ward’s chapter ““Down in the Alley”: Sex, Success, and Sociology Among Black Vocal Groups and Shouters” in Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations*, (London: UCL Press, 1998), pp. 56-89. For an account of early Blues, male control and the impeding of the female voice see also Matthew B. White, ““The Blues Ain’t Nothin’ but a Woman Want to Be a Man’: Male Control in Early Twentieth-Century Blues Music.” *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 4, (Winter, 1994), pp. 19-40.

³⁶² Skip James, “Devil Got My Woman,” Pm 13088, 1931.

governed by “frugality and financial vigilance.”³⁶³ Skip’s male characters, like many displaced and impoverished African Americans, would have been on the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Changing sexual practices during this period reflected the dire economic strain many African Americans found themselves under. Some women resorted to “treating”: engaging in sex with more financially solvent men to acquire items that may have been either basic, or luxurious, but were simply unaffordable.³⁶⁴ The female character in “Devil Got My Woman,” could simply have needed emotional or sexual stimulation. However, she could easily have been one of the growing numbers of women who resorted to “treating” to survive. In this context, the creation of a compensatory robust masculine identity in songs such as the more ruthless “22-20 Blues” may have figuratively redressed black male anxieties over their position in the social structure during the harsh financial climate of the 1930s. However, that “22-20 Blues” came to fruition at Art Laibly’s request reveals not only what white recording industry personnel expected from their black artists; but what they thought prospective customers actually wanted to hear.

As Stephen Calt, a leading biographer of James’ notes, the ill-fated female in “22-20 Blues” was probably nothing more than an “imaginary girlfriend.”³⁶⁵ However, the fact that James composed material of this nature at Laibly’s request demonstrates that white mediators of the “race record” business had a direct bearing upon what consumers, both black and white, might have understood to be representative of the black experience at the time. The speedy composition of these lines suggests the pervasiveness of misogynist imagery in the Blues lyrical repository. It is unclear whether Laibly meant for James to record a “gun song”

³⁶³ Jeffrey S. Turner, *Dating and Sexuality in America: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 10.

³⁶⁴ Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating and Prostitution in New York City: 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), xvii, xxv.

³⁶⁵ Calt, *I’d Rather Be the Devil*, 5.

specifically about the brutal control of women. However, in a detailed and comprehensive study of Paramount Records, Alex van der Tuuk suggests that Laibly's inspiration may have stemmed, in part, from James Wiggins' 1929 recording of "Forty Four Blues" for the label.³⁶⁶ Whilst the actual violence is merely implied in Wiggins' track, its underlying presence is evident, and it shares with James's recording the theme of male vengeance in the face of a perceived transgression and slight by a woman, with violence serving as a means to restore male pride, control and a sense of appropriate order:

I walked on and on with my forty four in my hand,
I walked on and on with my forty four in my hand,
I was looking for my woman, involved with another man.³⁶⁷

The advertisement that Paramount ran for "22-20 Blues" in record stores provides further insight into how white industry mediators constructed popular notions of blackness during this period. The image depicted a cartoon scene of a gun-toting black male dressed in a hat. The figure gazes through a window upon a man and woman enjoying drinks. The onlooker brandishes a gun. The ad also featured a photograph of James, hat in hand, suggesting that there may be similarities between the fictional character and James the performer. That James was also pictured standing proudly next to a car may have suggested to white consumers that mobile black males, especially those who could afford their own transport were potentially dangerous. However, to impoverished blacks, the image of a stylishly-dressed African American male with his own transport may have served as a positive symbol of black success during bleak times for African Americans. Although the

³⁶⁶ Alex van der Tuuk, *Paramount's Rise and Fall: The Roots and History of Paramount Records* (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2012), 169. See also Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 67.

³⁶⁷ James "Boodle It" Wiggins, "Forty-Four Blues," Pm 12860, 1929.

advertisement did not present an image of the plantation stereotype, it nevertheless featured an armed, potentially dangerous black male.³⁶⁸

Whilst it is important not to confuse the characters with the performers, on occasion bluesmen's lives bore similarities to those of the characters that they performed. In an interview with Stephen Calt, James recalled a gunfight at a "house frolic" in which he was playing piano. The singer revealed how he produced a shotgun, and "levelled the gun on the dance floor." Rather than reminisce about the incident with regret, Calt stresses that James's re-enactment of the incident "spoke of his dissatisfaction with not having killed everyone in sight."³⁶⁹ The accuracy of this tale cannot be verified. However, such wilfully negative self-representation indicated James' wish to be known as a force to be reckoned with. In the depths of the Great Depression, the performance of dangerous hypermasculine black characters, such as Skip's brooding and vengeful male character in "22-20 Blues" may have represented a compensatory kind of masculinity in times of crisis. James and his characters, on record and in interview, appear to be variants of the "Bad Nigger" types that have sometimes been embraced in black folklore and popular culture as unbowed symbols of personal independence and even racial liberation. The appeal of such symbolic figures may have been higher than usual at a time of acute economic and social hardship, especially when those hardships threatened the traditional foundations for male authority and self-respect.³⁷⁰

James' confession to Stephen Calt about his ability to be ruthless was not anomalous. Country bluesman Bo Carter revealed to Paul Oliver that appearing

³⁶⁸ Image of the Paramount "22-20 Blues" advert and details of its usage kindly provided by John Tefteller at Blues Images Limited.

³⁶⁹ Calt, *I'd Rather Be the Devil*, 128.

³⁷⁰ Jerry H. Bryant, *Born in a Mighty Bad Land: The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 89-98. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 407-420.

robustly masculine was imperative. Carter (real name Armenter Chatmon) told Oliver that he was once confronted by a much younger male. Challenging Bo's masculine resolve, the younger male demanded: "I wanna see who *is* the man!" to which Bo responded by asking his wife to bring him his pistol. The challenger fled but the pair met again at a later stage when Carter was ageing and his sight was failing. The younger male pointed out that the Bo's failing eyesight disadvantaged him. Carter responded: "No, I can't see no more, but I got my knife in my pocket. I got my hand on my knife and I'll open it with my teeth and cut your throat."³⁷¹ In a similar manner to Skip James, Bo's confession that he was willing to use weapons to win physical confrontations suggested a need to project an air of toughness, of ruthlessness if needs be.

Although his recorded output was darkly comical and risqué, Bo Carter's lyrics (like many ribald Blues songs) nevertheless blend sexual and violent imagery, revealing interplay between the two themes. In songs such as "Let Me Put My Banana in Your Fruit Basket" (Co 14661-D, 1931) Carter drew upon lists of implements that could be figuratively used to cut or slice their way through the act of coitus. Beginning with a banana as the given penis metaphor, Bo uses a succession of hard, sharp objects to describe sex in terms of cutting and stabbing:

Now my baby's got the meat, and I got the knife,
I'm gonna do her cuttin', this bound to solve my life,
And I'm tellin' you baby, I sure ain't gonna deny,
Let me put my banana in your fruit basket, then I'll be satisfied.³⁷²

The imagery suggests a hard, masculine body capable of making incisions and penetrating the softer female. Bo also alludes to his needle, and his dasher in this recording. Here, sex is a means of self-gratification, with no interest in whether the

³⁷¹ Interview with Bo Carter, Oliver, *Conversation With the Blues*, 55.

³⁷² Bo Carter "Banana in Your Fruit Basket," Co-14661-D, 1931.

female is fulfilled or even hurt. Bo's character appears to be interested simply in his own pleasure or relief, whilst switching from addressing his audience to directly addressing his intended conquest. The performance is theatre, from the self-affirmation of his own sexual potency, to self-portrayal as a dominant and sexually active man to his listeners. Indeed, the appearance, if not the fulfilment of manliness is, in some ways, a survivalist strategy; a performance with life-solving potential. Carter recorded many other songs with similar themes. "Pin in Your Cushion" (OK 8887) and "Ram Rod Daddy" (OK 8897) featured his trademark thinly-veiled bawdy metaphors, allowing him to perform in character as a highly-sexed male, capable of penetrating anything, or any woman. Whilst in his hilariously self-deprecating "My Pencil Won't Write No More" (OK 8912) he lamented the loss of sexual potency.³⁷³

Commenting on hard and soft masculine binaries, James Penner argues that sexual metaphors have "profoundly influenced the historic conception of masculinity."³⁷⁴ The interplay of sexual and violent imagery in Bo's lyrics was probably meant for comedic effect, although it is difficult to say with absolute certainty exactly how successful these "in-jokes" were amongst black consumers. However, a number of Blues recordings from this period provide a more compelling and troubling account of sexual violence and masculinity.³⁷⁵ The characters in these recordings appropriated negative stereotypes of black manhood, performing as characters not dissimilar from the dangerous razor-wielding subjects of the "coon songs." These vengeful male characters threatened unruly female partners with

³⁷³ Bo Carter, "Pin in Your Cushion," Ok 8887, 1931. Bo Carter, "Ram Rod Daddy," Ok 8897, 1931. Bo Carter, "My Pencil Won't Write No More," Ok 8912, 1931.

³⁷⁴ James Penner, *Pinks, Pansies, and Punks: The Rhetoric of Masculinity in American Literary Culture* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2011), pp. 14-15.

³⁷⁵ The suggestiveness in these lyrics is similar in nature to bawdy folk versions of the legend of John Henry and his powerful "hammer." For accounts of sexual metaphor in folk versions of John Henry, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 420-424.

disfiguration for their indiscretions, boasting of their willingness to cut and maim women who dared to cross them. In 1935, Louisiana Johnny recorded “Razor Cuttin’ Man” (Vo unissued). Although Vocalion chose not to release this recording, it nevertheless signified the beginning of a trend in the 1930s for razor Blues in which black artists performed as the bullies that had amused white parlour-dwellers decades earlier. Johnny sang in character:

I hate to do this baby, but you know you won’t treat me right,
I hate to do this baby, but you know you won’t treat me right,
You’d a cause me to carry my razor, both every day and every night.

Oh I’m a razor-cuttin’ man, baby you sure goin’ to fall,
I’m a razor-cuttin’ man, baby you sure goin’ to fall,
I’m gonna slice and cut you, yes there won’t be nothin’ left of you at all.³⁷⁶

These verses symbolise the complete figurative destruction of the female subject, but also appear to willingly work against any attempts to eschew negative stereotypes of black masculinity. Exactly why this recording did not make it onto shelves is unclear. Paul Oliver speculates that it may “suggest sensitivity on the part of the record companies to the possible offence, and even influence, they might have caused.” And yet, as Oliver also notes, labels had no such scruples with issuing Arkansas-born Washboard Sam’s piano-driven version of “Razor Cuttin’ Man” (BB B6765):

I’m gonna buy me a razor, babe as long as my right arm,
I’m gonna buy me a razor, babe as long as my right arm,
I’m gonna cut and slice you, from this day on.³⁷⁷

The answer to the question over these discrepancies may rest upon the fact that the recording industry did not see any meaningful signs of recovery until after 1935.

³⁷⁶ Louisiana Johnny “Razor Cuttin’ Man-1,” Vo unissued, 1935.

³⁷⁷ Washboard Sam, “Razor Cuttin’ Man,” BB B6765, 1936. For Oliver’s comments on these discrepancies, see Paul Oliver “Looking for the Bully: An Enquiry Into A Song and Its Story” in ed. Robert Springer, *Nobody Knows Where the Blues Come From: Lyrics and History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 119. For details of Washboard Sam’s place of birth and death see, Robert Riesman “Washboard Sam” in ed. Edward Komara, *The Blues Encyclopaedia Vol. 1* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1050.

Richard Bernet and Larry Burriss argue that very quickly from this point “the recording industry emerged from its sales slump. In 1935 sales of records and players accounted for a paltry \$9 million. One year later, in 1936, sales had blossomed to an unexpected \$31 million.”³⁷⁸ In this case, the labels may indeed have been sensitive to consumers in search of lighter and more upbeat lyrical content. It is also likely that the labels cared less about black entertainers and their chance to make good in broader popular culture than they did about profit. They were, after all, in the business of making money. Thus, the economic uncertainty in the years leading up to 1935 would have greatly influenced the decision not to risk unnecessary expenditure. Pressing and distributing songs with explicitly, perhaps offensively violent lyrics was a risk labels thought hard about taking in a time of pinched budgets.³⁷⁹ This hypothesis has added credence in light of Decca’s decision to release Charley Jordan’s 1937 recording of “Cutting My ABCs” (De 7353).

Jordan’s recording of “Cutting My ABC’s” was arguably the most brutally violent of recorded Blues songs of the 1930s. Vaudeville duo Butterbeans and Susie (Jodie and Susie Edwards) initially recorded the song in 1924; a version by Billy Higgins and Josie Miles followed shortly after.³⁸⁰ The earlier, 1920s versions attempted to cast a humorous light upon the struggle for power within intimate relationships, even when that struggle resulted in domestic violence. However, rather than present a one-sided, male-dominated dramatization of power contestations, Butterbeans and Susie’s stage act publicly acknowledged female resistance to male attempts to assert control:

Beans: Now you hard-hearted beater, you dirty mistreater.

³⁷⁸ Richard D. Bernet and Larry L. Burriss, *Controversies of the Music Industry* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), 12.

³⁷⁹ Bernet and Burriss, *Controversies of the Music Industry*, 12.

³⁸⁰ Butterbeans and Susie, “A To Z Blues,” Ok 8163, 1924. Josie Miles, “A To Z Blues,” Ajax 17080, 1924.

Here's what I'm going to do to you.

Sue: What are you going to do, Butter?

Beans: Now if you don't come home...

Sue: Sure won't be there

Beans: ...by the break of day...

Sue: What are you going to do?

Beans: I'm going to put something on you, mama, that you didn't carry away. I'm gonna knock knock on your head, that artichoke brain. Also, I'm gonna give you two nice black eyes. When I hit you mama, you gonna have yourself a fit. I'm gonna turn your nose up so it will rain in it. Now when I hit you, you gonna fall down. You gonna do a funny stunt. I'm gonna hit you so hard, you gonna hear your grandpa grunt. I'm gonna take my razor and cut you round and round. When I get through cuttin' on you Sue, I'm gonna run you clean outta town. 'Cause when I gets mad, I love to fight. You're a dirty mistreater and you ain't treatin' your papa right.³⁸¹

Susie's reply to this threat was: "Well I've got a razor and it's a blazer. I'll light you up just like gasoline."³⁸² The interplay between the Vaudeville couple may well have been violent, but it was also darkly comedic. Susie's refusal to accept violent mistreatment communicated a clear message of black female resistance. Drama of this kind certainly did not adhere to the politics of black respectability of the 1920s. However, Susie's character, like those of her many female contemporaries who sang the Classic Blues dealt with black female sexual politics in the public arena.

In stark contrast, Charlie Jordan's "Cutting My ABCs" allowed no female intervention. There was no female partner to provide a voice for women's resistance to male brutality. Nor was there any comedic element to his performance. As a solo male vocal, Jordan's delivery of the lyrics, and their implications, provided a deeply troubling expression of black masculinity defined by extreme violence and a brutal form of male domination:

I'm gonna cut your nappy head four different ways,
That's long, square, deep and wide,
When I get through with my left-hand razor,

³⁸¹ Butterbeans and Susie script as reproduced in Leo Hamalian and James Vernon Hatch, *The Roots of African American Drama: An Anthology of Early Plays, 1858-1938*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 156.

³⁸² Butterbeans and Susie as reproduced in Hamalian and Hatch, *The Roots of African American Drama*, 156.

I know we going to take a ride,
I done got tired, the way my baby treated me,
When I get through with my left-hand razor, I swear she'll stop messin' with
me.

I'm gonna cut A-B-C-D across your eyes, neck and head,
They gonna take you to the hospital, but you ain't gonna be dead,
I'm gonna cut E-F-G across your nose, mouth and face,
When I get to H-I-J-K, you'll be hollerin'; "what's gonna take place?"
I done got tired, the way my baby treated me,
When I get through with my left hand razor, I swear she'll stop messin' with
me.³⁸³

The male character's emphasis on spelling is revealing. In slavery and then in the Jim Crow era, many southern blacks were denied literacy by powerful whites because of a more general fear that education would assist them in their quest for freedom and equality; to a lesser extent, poverty, demographics and naked racism had also combined to depress black literacy rates around the entire nation further compromising the struggle for black rights.³⁸⁴ The quest for literacy is also broached in another Depression-era razor Blues, Big Bill (Broonzy)'s 1938 recording "I'll Start Cutting on You" (Vo 04095):

Don't feel over me, I was raised up *hard* (?)
I got something girl that would do a dog,
You went to school to learn how to read and write,
I just only learned how to fuss and fight,
I'm gonna start cuttin' on you,
Yes I'm gonna start cuttin' on you,
Yes I'm gonna start cuttin' on you baby, to let you know how it feels.³⁸⁵

³⁸³ Charlie Jordan, "Cutting My ABC's," De 7353, 1937.

³⁸⁴ As a result of the abolition movement, black anti-literacy laws had existed in every Deep South state from the 1830s. As Keri Leigh Merritt notes, "Literate slaves and free blacks historically had been the instigators and leaders of slave rebellions, and slave owners devised strict legal codes preventing African Americans from becoming literate." Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 152. See also Raymond Smock, *Booker T. Washington: Black Leadership in the Age of Jim Crow* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009), 29. Deborah Gray White, *Let My People Go: African Americans 1804-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 37. For a classic account of black slave literacy and empowerment, see Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston: Published at the Anti-Slavery Office, 1849).

³⁸⁵ Big Bill, "I'll Start Cutting On You," Vo 04095, 1938.

The threatened violence in Big Bill's recording appears to have a class, as well as a gender dimension: there's some jealousy lurking that the woman has had more opportunity to learn, and therefore to get on in life, than the uneducated man, whose life, according to the song, is harder marked by physical conflict. In Charley Jordan's song, this gendered resentment around literacy boils over into actual and alarmingly sexual violence; the male character conflates his acquisition, or at least his terrifying practice, of literacy skills with knife-play and sexual violence in order to inscribe the female anatomy in the most brutal manner, genital mutilation:

I'm gonna cut L-M-N across your chin, neck and breasts,
And you ain't gonna complain to me more of that mess,
I'm gonna cut O-P-Q on both shoulders, hands and arms,
You're gonna suck chewin' gum 'n candy your whole life long,
I done got tired, the way my baby treated me,
When I get through with my left-hand razor, I swear she'll stop messin' with me.

I'm gonna cut R-S-T across your abdomen and secret place,
Now when I get along down there that's when runnin' will take place,
I'm gonna cut U-V-W on both thighs, legs and feet,
So you can't even walk up and down the street,
I done got tired, the way my baby treated me,
When I get through with my left-hand razor, I swear she'll stop messin' with me.³⁸⁶

The implied motivation here is female sexual transgression. The punishment is to prevent physical mobility and further sexual transgressions. In this respect, "Cutting My ABCs" reinforces the notion that women were expected to be stay in their allotted social and physical place, submissive and controlled, by any means necessary. This character's woman will be so physically disfigured that she "can't walk up and down the street" while the violence has presumably rendered her sexually unavailable.

³⁸⁶ Jordan, "Cutting My ABC's"

The performance of such openly negative and potentially damaging black male characters on record during the 1930s raises questions. Commenting on why black artists also chose to write “coon songs” in the late nineteenth-century, Paul Oliver suggested that composers “chose to work in the popular idiom of the day” and that by sharing the jokes about black essentialism “they defused them.” Importantly, Oliver argues that “by writing them better they established a foothold for black songwriters.”³⁸⁷ This is a well-grounded argument, and serves as a useful foundation for evaluating the cultural significance of razor Blues and the performance of dangerous black masculine character types in 1930s Blues recordings. The black bully was, as Jerry Bryant notes; “the id to the more genteel black superego, a man who lived on the margins, who was familiar with violence and death, and who reacted impulsively to any perceived personal injury, from friend or foe, man or woman.”³⁸⁸ Blues historian Charles Keil argues that the central problem for black performers was:

Not so much to discover or create a new identity, as, first to accept an identity that is already available, and, second, to transform into working assets whatever crippling liabilities may be associated with that identity.³⁸⁹

Given the limited employment opportunities available to working-class black men and women during this period, decisions to record such material could simply be credited to business acumen by musicians in times of economic desperation. Recordings provided an opportunity to earn at least a little money. However, it is worth noting that the depiction of knife-wielding males on record also coincided with black-made gangster films such as Harry Fraser’s *Dark Manhattan* and *Bargain*

³⁸⁷ Paul Oliver, *Broadcasting the Blues: Black Blues in the Segregation Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 28.

³⁸⁸ Jerry H. Bryant, “*Born in a Mighty Bad Land*”: *The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 10.

³⁸⁹ Charles Keil, *Urban Blues*, 1966, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 15.

With Bullets (1937). These films emerged as a few African American filmmakers began to take control of their own artistic output and modes of representing the race, showing the grittier side of life in urban centres, and providing consumers with a variety of character types that were not always positive. Whilst such materials provided what many believed to be negative representations of African Americans as criminals, the themes they broached nevertheless intersected with the harsh realities of life for many blacks as they struggled during this period.³⁹⁰ Although white mediators controlled the market for recorded Blues, the compensatory performance of dangerous black male characters may have provided the male collective with lawless folk heroes, not bound by the laws of white men, and who, importantly, did not direct their violence towards white men exclusively. Such characters are a cultural phenomenon that had a rich and meaningful history in African American folk culture.³⁹¹ These artists were earning modest sums of money as entertainers, whilst many African Americans struggled to find work of any description.

³⁹⁰ Ron Wilson argues that “The black screen gangster in race films can be seen as a reflection of the black urban experience during the Depression years, primarily through their representation of segregated black communities, their use of vaudeville humour, and black music.” See Ron Wilson, *The Gangster Film: Fatal Success in American Cinema* (New York: The Wallflower Press, 2015), 102. See also bell hooks on black film-maker Oscar Micheaux’s output during this period. hooks argues that although Micheaux “aimed to produce a counter-hegemonic art that would challenge white supremacist representations of “blackness,” he was not concerned with the simple reduction of black representation to a “positive” image. In the spirit of oppositional creativity, he worked to produce images that would convey complexity of experience and feeling.” See bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 133. For more on Oscar Micheaux see J. Ronald Green, *With a Crooked Stick: The Films of Oscar Micheaux* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). See also Patrick McGilligan, *Oscar Micheaux: The Great and Only: The Life of America's First Black Filmmaker* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008). That bluesmen might create similar characters during this period suggests a correlation between the two and a decisive move away from the image of simple, idle blacks who merely accepted their lot in an oppressive society.

³⁹¹ See for instance John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), pp. 171-220. Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000, 2nd edition), 58-60. See also Lawrence Levine’s classic work on the bad man tradition and his importance in folklore and black culture and consciousness, See Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-*

Female artists also earned much-needed money, and performed in character, at times as prostitutes. Although the performance of such character types may have carried the risk of perpetuating essentializing stereotypes about black female sexuality, they provided meaningful commentary on paid sex work during times of economic adversity, whilst also allowing female artists scope to challenge conventional notions of propriety. At times female (and male) characters told of the harsh treatment of prostitutes and the desperate lack of finance the Depression created for them, whilst at others they celebrated female sexuality, humanising black working girls and resisting reductive gendered and racial profiling. For decades, prejudicial and damaging characterizations of black women existed in the American imagination. These stereotypes ranged from Mammy and her later incarnation Aunt Jemima, to the Jezebel and the Sapphire figures. Mammy was asexual, domesticated, and an exemplar of maternal perfection. She was unerringly devoted to her white employers and the wellbeing of their children. Mammy's successor Aunt Jemima, was also domesticated, revered for her skills in the kitchen and other domestic chores, but less for her devotion to children that were not her own.³⁹² In contrast, black women had also long been characterized by many whites as sexually insatiable and inherently promiscuous. This misconception was perhaps most clearly represented in the figure of the Jezebel. She was imagined as perpetually libidinous

American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 30th anniversary edition), 370-403. Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 173. William L. Van Deburg, *Hoodlums: Black Villains and Social Bandits in American Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 68-142.

³⁹² Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 2, 4. Yvonne D. Sims, *Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black Action Film Heroine Changed American Popular Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2006), 41. Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1-14.

and genetically devoid of normal, civilizing human emotions such as self-control.³⁹³ Although this concept of black womanhood had its inception in the days of slavery, it had unhealthy longevity in the white imagination. Ingrid Banks notes that black women's bodies had long been viewed by whites as the "site of uninhibited sex" and "less than human and outside the realm of femininity."³⁹⁴ As Patricia Hill Collins notes, the Jezebel is in many ways akin to the Hoochie: a figure who "participates in a "cluster of deviant female sexualities,"" some of which are "associated with the materialistic ambitions where she sells sex for money."³⁹⁵ Whilst it is important to draw a distinction between the Jezebel, who is driven to seek sex by her own preternatural animalistic impulses and unquenchable desires, and "working girls," who are more likely to be driven by economic need, the distinctions have often been blurred in the white American, perhaps especially male, imagination, in which the historic construction of the black female body is innately sexual. The dire financial conditions during the 1930s forced many black women in urban centres and rapidly-

³⁹³ For more on the Jezebel, see Bernadette J. Brooten, who argues: "The ideological construct of the lascivious Jezebel legitimized white men's sexual abuse of black women; for if black women were inherently promiscuous, they could not be violated. This myth allowed white men to perpetrate a colossal hoax: white men could use their power to commit sexual aggressions while pretending to maintain the moral superiority of their slaveholding status... In addition, Jezebel defined black women in contradiction to the prevailing image of the True Woman, who was virtuous, pure, and white. Black women's sexual impropriety was contrasted with white women's sexual purity. While white wives were placed on pedestals of spotless morality, all black women were, by definition, whores." Bernadette J. Brooten, *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacies*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 45. For more on the longevity of the Jezebel stereotype and her sustained appearance in contemporary popular cultural forms such as rap, see Kellina Craig-Henderson, *Black Women in Interracial Relationships: In Search of Love and Solace* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2011), 110-112. See also Julia S. Jordan-Zachery, *Black Women, Cultural Images and Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 39-41.

³⁹⁴ Ingrid Banks "Women in Film" in ed. Todd Boyd, *African Americans and Popular Culture: Vol. 1, Theater, Film and Television* (Westport: Praeger, 2008), 71. See also Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014) pp.82-94. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 81-85.

³⁹⁵ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 84.

expanding metropolises of the North into prostitution, thereby “legitimizing” essentializing white racialized and gendered notions of what it meant to be a black woman.

As Elizabeth Alice Clement shows, in New York City during the 1930s, prostitution emerged as a two-tier system that was “highly organised at the top and chaotic, poorly paid and extremely dangerous at the bottom;” while some women working in the top tier endured financial exploitation and on occasion physical abuse, those working in the bottom tier regularly faced “violence, low pay, periodic arrest and incarceration.”³⁹⁶ As Clement stresses, the bottom tier comprised a disproportionate amount of black streetwalkers and tenement prostitutes. Over a fifteen year period, the number of black women operating in the sex trade grew considerably. For instance, in Chicago in 1914, the percentage of black prostitutes appearing in court was sixteen. By 1929 that figure had risen to seventy percent. This rapid rise in the number of black women working as prostitutes coincided with the Great Migration of southern blacks not only to Chicago, but to other cities in the Midwest, Northeast, and South.³⁹⁷

The migration of these women and their need to turn to vice brought about a moral panic on the part of white and black intellectuals during the early part of the twentieth century. These intellectuals utilised and elaborated a discourse pertaining to uncontrolled black female sexuality and the threat it posed to the relations between the black and white middle-classes. As Chapter Two shows, black

³⁹⁶ Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love For Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 204. Additionally, it is estimated that fifty percent of prostitutes arrested for soliciting in New York during the 1930s were black. For more on this see D’emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 1998, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012, 3rd edition), 296.

³⁹⁷ Cynthia M. Blair, *I’ve Got To Make My Livin’: Black Women’s Sex Work in Turn of The Century Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 227.

intellectuals placed a premium on race motherhood as a means of racial uplift. Commenting on overt sexuality, prostitution included, Hazel Carby argues that these realities posed a “threat to the formation of black masculinity in an urban environment.” However, by the 1930s, prostitutes were no longer targeted by reformers and many saw these women as the unfortunate product of the Great Depression.³⁹⁸ A number of male and female Blues records of the late-1920s and the 1930s provided commentary on the prostitution and violence in their lyrics. The financial crisis that accompanied the Depression placed an enormous amount of pressure upon co-habiting, married couples, and individuals in need of extra income in order to support family members. Of the many women arrested for soliciting, an increasing number revealed that the need to stay above the poverty line was their primary motive for turning to the sex trade. As Elizabeth Clement stresses, the stories these women related “reveal the desperation with unemployed or absent husbands, hungry children, and dependent parents.”³⁹⁹

That married women resorted to prostitution at this time would have had no small impact upon marital relations. On occasion the failure to bring home money could result in violence. In 1932, ‘Hi’ Henry Brown cut the track “Nut Factory Blues” (Vo 1692) in New York for the Vocalion label in which his male character sang of the violence faced by married working girls in St. Louis:

Jelly roll keep working, just about Sixteenth Street,
Jelly roll keep working, just about Sixteenth Street,
Well they got a nut factory where the women do meet.

Got a nut factory, where they work so hard,
Got a nut factory, where they work so hard,

³⁹⁸ Hazel Carby, “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context,” *Critical Inquiry*, 18, 4, *Identities* (Summer, 1992), pp. 738-755, 741. Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 169.

³⁹⁹ Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love For Sale*, 208.

Well it's all over the country, husbands ain't got no job.

Saturday evening, when they draw their pay,
Saturday evening, when they draw their pay,
Well they don't draw nothing, if husbands don't draw them away.

Some draw a check, oh babe, some don't draw nothin' at all,
Some draw a check, oh babe, some don't draw nothin' at all,
Well, they don't draw nothin' they husbands bust them in the jaw.⁴⁰⁰

Brown's lyrics provide compelling social commentary on violent abuse of spouses and partners. Unlike other songs, the male character in this example is not bragging of his own brutal sexual dominance over females. Rather, he related a scenario that detailed the plight of many black women during this period. As LaShawn Harris shows, for some men, "violence functioned as a weapon against an evolving and gendered informal economy."⁴⁰¹ Max Haynes argues that this song was less about prostitution and "more of a protest against mis•treatment of black women and the general situation (in 1932) where many were paid such a low wage (or "nothin' at all") that they were forced on to the streets."⁴⁰²

Harlem Renaissance literary great Zora Neale Hurston addressed the theme of violence within intimate relationships in her classic novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie Crawford, Hurston's main female protagonist, is physically abused by one of her husbands and savagely beaten by another. Heather Duerre Humann argues that Hurston's novel "offers a glimpse of the types of challenges faced by black women." Many of these women, argues Humann, "confronted racism and discrimination in a patriarchal society at the same time as their own families sought

⁴⁰⁰ 'Hi' Henry Brown, "Nut Factory Blues," Vo 1692, 1932.

⁴⁰¹ LaShawn Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 45.

⁴⁰² Max Haynes, "Nut Factory Blues" online article, stable url, <http://www.earlyblues.com/essay%20nut%20factory%20blues.htm>, accessed: 20/09/2015.

to control them and force them into silence and submission.”⁴⁰³ Although Janie is not a streetwalker, Hurston’s portrayal of the violence Janie endures at the hands of men is also typical of the kind of violence depicted in many male Blues during this period, not least in the brutal treatment of prostitutes. Whilst a large number of these recordings are inherently misogynist, songs detailing prostitution and violence towards black women formed part of an important discourse on violence against black women and are important cultural texts to be situated alongside other works from the Renaissance.

In December 1936, Hokum outfit Bob Robinson and His Bob Cats cut four tracks in a Chicago recording studio session for the Bluebird label. Among these tracks was a rollicking piano number entitled “Down in the Alley” (BB B7898). However, the upbeat musical aesthetic of this piece, combined with Robinson’s alluringly smooth vocal delivery belied the dark lyrical content. The song detailed sexual violence as a means of controlling working girls and their services:

Now a woman from the alley may fuss and fight,
You can black her eye but she’ll treat you right,
Now take me down in the alley, just take me down in the alley,
Just take me down in the alley—if you wanna satisfy me.⁴⁰⁴

These lyrics explicitly stated that the use of violence was the most effective method of getting a streetwalker to comply with whatever macabre sexual demands a “customer” placed upon them. Commenting on prostitution in Detroit, Holly M. Karibo asserts that the economic downturn of the 1930s resulted in the closure of parlours. As a result, many women working as prostitutes had to resort to streetwalking; a practice that placed them at much greater risk of dealing with

⁴⁰³ Heather Duerre Humann, *Domestic Abuse in the Novels of African American Women: A Critical Study* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014), 21.

⁴⁰⁴ Bob Robinson and His Bob-Cats, “Down In The Alley” BB B7898, 1936.

violent clients.⁴⁰⁵ In this sense, the song addressed important realities pertaining to the plight of these women.

Other songs that broached the subject of prostitution emphasised, not the travails of working girls, but rather the unremittingly tough and sexually assertive African American masculinity. For instance, whilst Big Bill Broonzy's male character on the Midnight Ramblers' high-octane track "Down In The Alley" did not explicitly describe the brutal treatment of prostitutes, a resolutely macho persona is nevertheless present when the male character tells of his preference of working girls:

I'm a tough man, I don't want nothin' nice,
Goin' down the alley where the women shootin' dice,
So take me down in the alley, so take me down in the alley,
So take me down in the alley if you wanna satisfy me.⁴⁰⁶

Whilst Bill's male character has an obvious desire, and possible need to liaise with a streetwalker, he impressed upon the listener that females of this sort were unsavoury: there was "nothin' nice" about them. These lyrics obliquely nodded to the sensibilities of the politics of respectability that held overt sexuality among black women and, certainly engagement in vice, as particularly damaging to racial uplift. And yet, Bill's character felt inclined to go "down in the alley," signposting that such women were also attractive to him, if only to satisfy his own sexual impulses. There was an undeniable paradox in that the kind of subservience to an irrepressible male sexual drive that Broonzy and other bluesmen portrayed in their music was frequently couched as an acceptable, even typical black male vice, also perpetuated racist stereotypes and contravened the politics of respectability; meanwhile, they routinely vilified black women for succumbing to their own sexual impulses, or for

⁴⁰⁵ Holly M. Karibo, *Sin City North: Sex, Drugs, and Citizenship in the Detroit-Windsor Borderland* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 39.

⁴⁰⁶ Midnight Ramblers, "Down In The Alley," Vo 03517, 1937.

indulging in sex for money, status and opportunity on the grounds that it was disreputable.

Although Bob Robinson's lyrics suggested that the brutal treatment of a prostitute would ensure she would "treat you right," his own views differed greatly from the characters he performed on record. Robinson married Aletha Dickerson, a composer who had also been secretary to Paramount A&R man J. Mayo "Ink" Williams for a number of years, eventually carrying out important A&R duties in her own right. Aletha told *Songwriter's Review* in February 1950: "Back in 1935, the depression was at the very peak, and it hit us hard." In the same interview, Aletha also suggested that those desperate times called for desperate measures:

When you're down to your last dollar, you can (1) starve to death; (2) ask for charity; or (3) do the kind of work you do not want to do, but are forced to do it if you want to continue eating regularly.⁴⁰⁷

Whilst she was referring to writing songs for which she and her husband had little or no taste, her comments are equally applicable to the legions of women forced into the dangerous world of vice during the same period. When considering the construction of brutal masculinity and the violent treatment of the working girl in "Down In The Alley," Aletha's personal correspondence is revealing. "My personal taste in music, as well as that of my husband," she wrote in a letter, "ran to classics and pop music. We both loathed the type of music we were forced to compose and record."⁴⁰⁸

The fact that she and Bob hated the kind of music that they were pressured to write and record casts a very interesting light on white mediation of the black

⁴⁰⁷ Aletha Robinson, "I Worked For A Hack Writer," *Songwriter's Review*, February, 1950, digitized version available at American Song-Poem Music Archives, stable url <http://www.songpoemmusic.com/hack.htm>, accessed: 01/02/2016.

⁴⁰⁸ Aletha Robinson Letter, as reproduced in Alex van der Tuuk, *Paramount's Rise and Fall*, 135.

experience at the time. During the previous decade, many African American artists would have been able to provide a non-Blues repertoire if requested, but owing to the trajectory of a recording industry that was in the process of creating discrete markets of consumers largely defined by race, they were invariably encouraged to record almost exclusively Blues.⁴⁰⁹ Although these musical markets enabled blacks to operate within the music industry for financial gain, the label executives also dictated the kind of material available to struggling black musicians with hopes of improving their financial solvency.

Themes of prostitution on recorded Blues were not the exclusive domain of male artists during the 1930s. Lucille Bogan, Georgia White, Lil Johnson, and Memphis Minnie also related tales of the hardships of life for working girls during this period. Songs such as Bogan's "Tricks Ain't Walkin' No More" (Br 7186), Georgia White's "Walking the Street" (De 7277), "I'll Keep On Sitting On It (If I can't Sell It)" (De 7192), Lil Johnson's "Come And Get It" (Vo 03530) and Minnie's "Down In The Alley" (Vo 03612) dealt with prostitution from a female perspective, giving a public voice of resistance to the legions of women working in the sex industry. They simultaneously highlighted the effects of economic adversity on African American women forced into prostitution, and at times, these artists delighted in flaunting their own sexuality on records. Born in Amory, Mississippi, Lucille Bogan proved a formidable talent during the 1920s. Under the pseudonym Bessie Jackson, Bogan would become renowned for her risqué lyrics that covered themes of alcoholism, spousal abuse, lesbianism, and of course, prostitution. She

⁴⁰⁹ Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 56. See also Brian Ward and Patrick Huber, *A & R Pioneers: Architects of American Roots Music on Record* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2018), 131-157, for information on A & R man Don Law, Robert Johnson's repertoire and influence over black musical styles see 166. See also Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 221-227, 232-240.

began her recording career in June, 1923 for the Okeh label, recording for Paramount towards the end of the decade, and eventually moving to Brunswick as the 1930s drew ever-nearer.⁴¹⁰ In February 1930, she first recorded the unreleased “They Ain’t Walking No More” in Chicago for the Brunswick label. With an unknown accompanist on piano, Bogan sang in character:

Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down, I can't make my livin' around this town,
'Cause tricks ain't walkin', tricks ain't walkin' no more,
I said, tricks ain't walkin' no more, tricks ain't walkin' no more,
And I got to make my livin', don't care where I go.

I need shoes on my feet, clothes on my back,
Get tired of walkin' these streets, all dressed in black,
But tricks ain't walkin', tricks ain't walkin' no more,
I said, tricks ain't walkin' no more, tricks ain't walkin' no more.⁴¹¹

Although Brunswick initially took the decision not to release “They Ain’t Walking No More,” they had a change of heart in March of the same year. In December, Bogan again assumed the guise of the streetwalker in her recording of “Tricks Ain’t Walking No More.” Her impassioned voice and performance style were ideally matched to the lyrical content of both songs. In “Tricks Ain’t Walking No More” Bogan sang:

Times done got hard, money's done got scarce,
Stealin' an' robbin' is goin' to take place,
'Cos tricks ain't walkin', tricks ain't walkin' no more,
I said tricks ain't walkin', tricks ain't walkin' no more,
An' I'm goin' to rob somebody if I don't make me some dough.

I'm going' to do just like a blind man, stand and beg for change,
Until these arresting officers, change my tricking name,
'Cos tricks ain't walkin', tricks ain't walkin' no more,
I said tricks ain't walkin', tricks ain't walkin' no more.⁴¹²

⁴¹⁰ Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 444. Guido Van Rijn, “Lucille Bogan” in ed. Edward K. Komara, *Encyclopedia of the Blues* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 134. St. Sukie de la Croix, *Chicago Whispers: A History of LGBT Chicago before Stonewall* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 100.

⁴¹¹ Lucille Bogan, “They Ain’t Walking No More,” Br 7163, 1930.

⁴¹² Lucille Bogan, “Tricks Ain’t Walking No More,” Br 7186, 1930.

In a manner not dissimilar to Skip James' in "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues," Lucille Bogan's characters sung tales of impoverished desperation from the perspective of wanderers, these characters represented the droves of streetwalking women forced into prostitution, struggling through the hard times. Lyrically, Memphis Minnie's 1931 recording of Bogan's "Tricks Ain't Walking" was almost identical to the original recording in terms of lyrical content. However, at this stage in her career Minnie had a more rural Country Blues sound (it would soon be "citified" under Lester Melrose's direction in Chicago), augmented by Kansas Joe McCoy on accompanying guitar. In a sense, this combination seemed to broaden the geographical scope of discourse on impoverished sex workers. Although this recording took place in Chicago, it had a distinctively rural sound. Arguably, this different musical aesthetic may have reminded migrant consumers that impoverished working girls existed in southern locales as well as northern centres.⁴¹³

Although life was often grim for working girls, female artists sometimes used the theme of prostitution to rejoice in black female sexuality and flagrantly contest notions of propriety. In this way, they not only responded to the ambivalence, at best, and the vicious denunciations, at worst, of female sexual needs and expressiveness so apparent in many male Blues, but they also carved out a precarious kind of sexual independence. Openly challenging the politics of respectability and its

⁴¹³ Memphis Minnie, "Tricks Ain't Walking No More," Vo 1653. Prostitution was of course, a reality in southern states too. Garry Boulard argues that in 1930s New Orleans, vice, narcotics and gambling "nearly rivaled the river for the permanent role they played in the life of the city." Garry Boulard, *Huey Long Invades New Orleans: The Siege of a City, 1934-36* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 2005, 2nd edition), 126. See also Janice Branch Tracy on how prostitution "thrived" in 1930s Mississippi, Janice Branch Tracy, *Mississippi Moonshine Politics: How Bootleggers & the Law Kept a Dry State Soaked* (Charleston: The History Press, 2015), 91. For accounts of southern prostitutes visiting Mississippi's Parchman Farm Penitentiary during the 1930s, see Christopher Hensley, *Prison Sex: Practice and Policy* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 144.

religious affiliations, Lucille Bogan again assumed the guise of prostitute in an explicit recording of “Shave ‘Em Dry” (ARC unissued) in 1935 and sang:

Oh great God daddy, if you can't shave 'em baby won't you try?
Now if fuckin' was the thing, that would take me to heaven,
I'd be fuckin' in the studio, till the clock strike eleven,
Oh daddy, daddy shave 'em dry, I would fuck you baby, honey I'd make you cry.

Now your nuts hang down like a damn bell sapper,
And your dick stands up like a steeple,
Your goddam ass-hole stands open like a church door,
And the crabs walks in like people,
Ow, shit, ooh baby, won't you shave 'em dry.

A big sow gets fat from eatin' corn,
And a pig gets fat from suckin',
Reason you see this whore, fat like I am,
Great God, I got fat from fuckin'⁴¹⁴

Unsurprisingly, this record—equal parts hilarious and poignant—did not make it past the censors and onto the shelves for general consumption, although some scholars believe that it may have been released as a party 78.⁴¹⁵ Nevertheless, these lyrics provided compelling evidence of black female resistance to prescriptive gender models. Lucille’s pornographic challenge to God defied intellectual notions that feminine propriety and the sacred life defined “real” black womanhood. At a time of severe economic hardship and no little malnutrition, her wanton and scandalous character appears to be getting fat, not through frugal living and respectability, but by selling sex. In an unreleased test pressing of “Till The Cows Come Home,” her female character appeared to challenge white essentialist assumptions about black character:

You know both a my mens, they are tight like that,
They got a great big dick just like a baseball bat,

⁴¹⁴ Lucille Bogan, “Shave ‘Em Dry,” ARC unissued, 1935.

⁴¹⁵ Robert M. W. Dixon & John Godrich, *Blues and Gospel Records, 1902-1943* (Essex: Storyville, 1982), 100.

Oooooh, fuck me, do it to me all night long,
I want you to do it to me baby, honey, till the cows come home.⁴¹⁶

Drawing on mythical assumptions concerning black male hypersexuality and physicality, Bogan's female character playfully conjoined sexual imagery with notions of athleticism and violence. The triple image of the penis as phallus, sports equipment and also as potential weapon allowed her female character to embrace her own sexuality whilst figuratively empowering black males who may have felt emasculated under a system that denied them full claim to citizenship and by extension, their own feelings of manliness.

Female resistance in Blues recordings of this period was not confined to voicing and figuratively confronting the violent treatment of black women at the hands of black men. In 1935, Minnie recorded two tributes to African American prize-fighter Joe Louis, "He's in the Ring (Doing That Same Old Thing)" (Vo 03046), and "Joe Louis Strut" (Vo 03046). Louis was primed to fight Italian Primo Carnera. It was a bout that gained formidable political significance. In many black Americans' minds, Carnera represented Benito Mussolini's regime, as Italy attempted to invade Ethiopia. Louis' sixth-round victory over the Italian positioned him, perhaps quite unwillingly, as a political symbol of African American strength in times of intense racial disharmony.⁴¹⁷ Minnie's "He's in the Ring" featured a character that not only championed the fighter for his skills and prowess, but also dreamt of wealth and community support:

Boys if I only had ten hundred dollars, I'd a-laid it upon my shelf,

⁴¹⁶ Lucille Bogan, "Till The Cows Come Home," 1933. This was a test pressing, unissued at the time, although it has since appeared on various '30s compilation albums. Recording details verified by Howard Rye.

⁴¹⁷ Chris Mead, *Joe Louis: Black Champion in White America* (New York: Dover, 2010), 156. Patrick Myler, *Ring of Hate: Joe Louis Vs. Max Schmeling : the Fight of the Century* (New York: Arcade, 2005), 41. For commentary on Louis as a symbol of anti-Nazism in his 1936 bout with German Max Schmeling, see also Lewis A. Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs Schmeling* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 158.

I'd bet anybody pass my house, that one round Joe would knock him out,
I wouldn't even pay my house rent, I wouldn't buy me nothing to eat,
Joe Louis would take a chance with them, I would put you on your feet.⁴¹⁸

In another line, Minnie's female character sung, "Crying he carried a mean left, and he carried a mean right, / And if he hits you with either one, / same as a charge from a dynamite." Minnie's character delights in the potential of powerful, black physical masculinity as a means of making money. The earnings could be used to put the boys on their feet. Like Louis' "dynamite" punch, Minnie's delivery of the lyrics was explosive. In many ways the explosive metaphor reflected the political climate of this period too. This was an incendiary time for African Americans.

Perplexed with ongoing unemployment, housing problems, and violent treatment at the hands of the police, African Americans rioted in Harlem in March 1935.

Already incensed over the ghettoization of Harlem, blacks erupted in violence over an incident involving a stolen penknife and the injuries caused to the sixteen-year-old Puerto Rican thief and his black female captor who restrained him for the act.

Seventy-five blacks were arrested and a total of fifty-seven civilians and seven policemen were injured.⁴¹⁹ Violence erupted again in June 1936 following Joe

⁴¹⁸ Memphis Minnie, "He's in the Ring (Doing That Same Old Thing," Vo 03046, 1935. See also Memphis Minnie, "Joe Louis Strut," Vo 03046, 1935.

⁴¹⁹ Cheryl Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode?: Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4. Karen Juanita Carrillo, *African American-Latino Relations in the 21st Century: When Cultures Collide* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2017), 55. Reed Ueda, *America's Changing Neighborhoods: An Exploration of Diversity Through Places* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2017) 538. See also David Maurrasse, who argues that "The compounding pressure of the various forms of discrimination, and the lack of opportunity in so many areas, helped spawn" these riots. David Maurrasse, *Listening to Harlem: Gentrification, Community, and Business* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 25. See also Charles M. Lamb, who argues that black newcomers to the North were forced to live in "deteriorating, overcrowding housing – conditions that changed little until housing construction increased in the post-World War II period." Charles M. Lamb, *Housing Segregation in Suburban America Since 1960: Presidential and Judicial Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 27. See also Lillian Serece Williams, who shows that in Buffalo, by the 1930s, "the housing shortage was so grave that the Buffalo Municipal Housing Administration could no longer ignore it. The agency sought federal funds to construct low-income housing units." Lillian Serece Williams, *Strangers in the*

Louis' defeat by German Max Schmeling, suggesting the level of exasperation felt by New York's black community as their symbol of strength and hope was toppled. The *Gettysburg Times* reported that "700 special policemen were required to quell an outbreak of shooting, stabbing, street fighting and other disorders." The police, according to the newspaper, attributed the violence to "pent up excitement and arguments over the defeat of Louis."⁴²⁰ The report made no mention of the fact that up to sixty percent of Harlem's black population were unemployed and that almost half of the families in the neighbourhood were on relief.⁴²¹

There were many more Blues and jazz recordings that celebrated Joe Louis and his formidable physical prowess, for example, Joe Pullum's "Joe Louis Is The Man" (BB B6071) Carl Martin's "Joe Louis Blues" (De 7114), and Lil Johnson's "Winner Joe (The Knockout King)" (Vo 03604). Enormous psychological investment in the outcome of Louis's fights apparent in Harlem and, indeed, throughout black America, was connected to his capacity to exhibit a particular kind of black male physicality, violence and authority at a moment when black male social and economic power was especially fragile. In Louis's case, this quest for power and control was channelled into the broadly acceptable world of professional boxing and directed against other men of all races and nationalities. In many male Blues, the targets of male physicality and the drive for power and authority were often black women; the battle for male pride and self-respect was regularly channelled into a desire to dominate and control black women, especially

Land of Paradise: The Creation of an African American Community, Buffalo, New York 1900-1940 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 90.

⁴²⁰ "Police Quell Harlem Riots" *Gettysburg Times*, June 22, 1936. Digitized version available at stable url

<https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2202&dat=19360622&id=8bclAAAIAIBAJ&sjid=wPwFAAAAIBAJ&pg=5979,92994&hl=en>, accessed: 05/07/2015.

⁴²¹ Lauri Johnson, "A Generation of Women Activists: African American Female Educators in Harlem, 1930- 1950," *The Journal of African American History*, 89, 3, "New Directions in African American Women's History" (Summer, 2004), pp. 223-240, 224.

their sexuality. Sometimes, as some of the recordings by Lucille Bogan and Memphis Minnie attest, female Blues singers also noted this male imperative and were even complicit in celebrating a brutal male sexual violence. Although far from synonymous, the widespread valorization of Joe Louis's masculinity and the projection on recordings of ruthless macho personas, such as the razor-wielding badmen, both represented cultural attempts to recuperate black manhood at a time of tremendous, and highly gendered, black social and political frustration.

This chapter has explored the myriad ways in which bluesmen sought to control their female counterparts (real or imagined) on record and some of the female responses to those efforts, from rejection and resistance to a sort of vexed acceptance. The prescription of such masculinist ideology both on record and in the real world reveals the extent to which historical notions of masculine authority were inextricably tied to notions of gender and race in the context of white male capitalist culture. As bell hooks notes, historically, black men wanted to be recognised as “men”, as “patriarchs, by other men, including white men. Yet they could not assume this position if black women were not willing to conform to prevailing sexist gender norms...gender roles continued to be problematic.⁴²² These issues remained pervasive throughout the 1930s and provided artists and songwriters with plenty of material.

⁴²² bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 98.

Chapter Seven

Who's "Wearing the Britches Now"? Male Control and Female Resistance in 1930s Hillbilly Music

During the 1930s, the development of commercially recorded country music marked a departure from the folk traditions that were closely tied to artists and image during the 1920s. As Michael Campbell observes, it was "inevitable that country music would evolve as soon as it became commercial music...the pressures of the marketplace and the curiosity and creativity of the musicians all but guaranteed it."⁴²³ As with the Blues, much of the music of the time reflected tensions brought about by economic hardship that often intensified interlocking anxieties pertaining to gender, sexuality, and race and ethnicity. Commenting on country music's struggle for respectability, Jeffery J. Lange argues that male and female performers in the 1920s and 1930s "accentuated the preconception of women as virtuous homebodies providing a refuge from the corrupting influences of secular society."⁴²⁴ Whilst there is some truth in this, this chapter reveals that a number of recordings made by women and men provide evidence of female resistance to domesticity and prescriptive gender roles, at times celebrating a mode of female sexuality which was at odds with both notions of respectability and dominant ideology of male social control. Furthermore, eugenic ideas continued to intersect with and shape Hillbilly music, while the sexual voracity attributed to some southern females had a decidedly racial dimension, with "excessive" female sexuality conventionally held to be a trait

⁴²³ Michael Campbell, *Popular Music in America: The Beat Goes On, Fourth Edition*, (Boston: Schirmer, 2013), 120.

⁴²⁴ Jeffery J. Lange, *Smile When You Call Me a Hillbilly: Country Music's Struggle for Respectability, 1939-1954* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 13.

of “exotic” races, African American women, the perpetually libidinous mixed-race mulatta, and Mexican women who were often viewed as “hot tamales.”⁴²⁵ The imagined sexual impulses of “exotic” races evidently held appeal for some male characters in Hillbilly recordings showed a prurient fascination with such behaviour, even as, on and off record, white men regularly attempted to assert authority over transgressive women. However, the recorded output of a number of female artists at this time challenged at least some, if not all traditional models of gender and formed part of a larger discourse that sought to negate white male privilege and control over female sexual and other freedoms.

Indeed, although as with old time music in the 1920s, commercially recorded Hillbilly music in the 1930s was dominated by men, the new decade witnessed an increasing number of women on shellac. This chapter examines how a number of these women challenged notions of male authority and superiority, singing of female control within the marital home. Some even rejected marriage altogether, while others exercised freedom of choice over their sexual conduct. The female characters on these recordings, as with those of their predecessors in the 1920s, signified the beginning of a collective female voice in commercial recordings of Hillbilly music. Moreover, they also reflected a slow, unsteady path to empowerment in the real world as women fought for equal rights during times of intense financial hardship and anxiety over the stability of gendered and racial hierarchies. Of course, the changes in white women’s roles, aspirations, and conditions that were overtly and covertly inscribed in the Hillbilly music of the 1930s were related to equally

⁴²⁵ “Hot tamale” is a pejorative term historically used to describe Mexican, Latino, and Chicana women. As Irene Isabel Blea notes: “There are bad words, racist and sexist words, like *mamasita* (little hot mama) and *hot tamale*, used to describe Chicanas. Chicana feminists have dealt with these words for over one hundred and fifty years. They have been stereotyped as bitches, lesbians, man haters, ball busters, and other much less flattering names.” See Irene Isabel Blea, *U.S Chicanas and Latinas Within a Global Context: Women of Color At The Fourth World Women’s Conference* (Westport: Praeger, 1997), 37.

significant changes in social, economic, political and ideological worlds of white men that were similarly captured by male Hillbilly singers. This chapter also considers those artists, to demonstrate how Hillbilly music captured some of the key gendered conflicts of the Depression era, in particular an increasingly desperate battle to retain male authority and control against perceived threats from women. Whilst many recordings reflected economic hardship, fears over the “wilful libido” associated with newer models of womanhood continued to permeate Hillbilly lyrics, often in an even more intense form than in the previous decade.

As we saw in the previous chapter, in the context of African Americans, the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression put enormous strain on traditional gender roles not least in the sphere of employment. As Anthony Badger notes, Women’s earnings became “particularly crucial for working-class families where husbands were thrown out of work. For many middle-class families, a wife’s income was the only means of sustaining the levels of consumption enjoyed in the 1920s.”⁴²⁶ Indeed, in a bid to curtail consumption patterns and encourage a positive outlook during this period of hardship, Eleanor Roosevelt published a book entitled *It’s Up to the Women* in 1933. In it the First Lady stressed:

The women know that life must go on and that the needs of life must be met and it is their courage and their determination which, time and again, have pulled us through worse crises than the present one. The present crisis is different from all the others but it is, after all, a kind of warfare against an intangible enemy of want and depression rather than a physical foe. And I hold it equally true that in this present crisis it is going to be the women who will tip the scales and bring us safely out of it... Many of us are afraid because we have lost pleasant things which we have always had, but the women who came over

⁴²⁶ Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 23. For commentary on women’s consumption patterns during the Depression, see also Jennifer Barker-Devine, ““Make Do or Do Without”: Women during the Great Depression” in eds. Hamilton Cravens and Peter C. Mancall, *Great Depression: People and Perspectives* (Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2009), pp. 45-64. Gillian Nichols-Smith, “Women Facing the Emergencies of the Great Depression and World War II: Women’s Rights” in ed. Crista DeLuzio, *Women’s Rights: People and Perspectives: People and Perspectives* (Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2010), pp.157-176, 157.

in the Mayflower did not have them, neither did the women who farmed in the uplands of Vermont during the Civil War. Perhaps we need again a little of the stern stuff our ancestors were made of. In any case, it will do us no harm to look at ourselves critically in relation to some of the problems that confront us today.⁴²⁷

Eleanor was certainly not alone in her notion that critical thinking about the Depression was paramount. Others were observing the Depression and drawing their own conclusions about its significance as an indicator of the many social ills that capitalism and consumer culture produced. Ideas about mass consumption and its many perils were also bound up in discourses of desire for distasteful things, perhaps even a fetish for novelty, and a perceived moral decline that threatened to undermine social cohesion and traditional values. Commenting on the links between eugenics and the Great Depression, Susan Currell argues,

To some observers, the Depression was a result of the unrestrained force of capitalism, in which base instincts and greed had reigned without check. Others went further and paralleled the uncontrolled greed, individualism, and lust for profit of the business community with a lack of control over the willful libido. The perceived threat to the nation's health and financial well-being was not just the rhetoric of an extreme Right or of supporters of fascism; for reform eugenicists, capitalism itself was dysgenic by allowing the "race suicide" of an elite and producing at the same time an uncontrolled surplus of humans, made all too apparent by the breadlines and dole queues.⁴²⁸

1930s Hillbilly recordings reflected cultural and economic anxieties that the Depression brought in its wake, not least in the sphere of intimate relationships and contestations of power within them.

⁴²⁷ Eleanor Roosevelt, *It's Up to the Women* (New York: Nation Books, 2017), digitized by Google Books, no pagination supplied. Stable url https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=JaN1DgAAQBAJ&pg=PT131&lpg=PT131&dq=eleanor+roosevelt+it%27s+up+to+the+women&source=bl&ots=KUMVirPsDC&sig=fOvpgeteCngVHh-wchffnnTBc4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwir_M3r3YLYAhWFaVAKHTyCD1M4HhDoAQgsMAE#v=onepage&q=eleanor%20roosevelt%20it's%20up%20to%20the%20women&f=false, accessed: 07/04/2017.

⁴²⁸ Susan Currell "Introduction" in eds. Susan Currell and Christina Cogdell, *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s* (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 2006), 5.

Although resistant female voices were an under-recognised feature of a number of recordings from this period, there is no disputing the fact that many lyrics reinforced traditional gender roles and reified patriarchal authority, as did accompanying promotional materials. A prime example of this can be readily found in a movie short for Mississippi's Jimmie Rodgers, released at the turn of the decade. Rodgers is one of the most successful country artists to have emerged since his recording debut on Thursday, August 4 in Bristol, Tennessee, 1927. Whilst misogyny is not a recurring theme in his music, "Blue Yodel -1" (Vi 22142) exemplified a continuing trend for threatening male-on-female violence and murder in southern commercial roots during this period. The dramatization of Jimmie singing this song in the movie short communicated powerful messages about traditional gender roles and the perils of female transgression. Jimmie's onscreen male character sang:

T for Texas, T for Tennessee,
T for Texas, T For Tennessee,
T or Thelma, that gal made a wreck out of me.

If you don't want me mama, you sure don't have to stall, lawd lawd,
If you don't want me mama, you sure don't have to stall,
'Cause I can get more women, than a passenger train can haul.

I'm gonna buy me a pistol, just as long as I am tall,
I'm gonna buy me a pistol, just as long as I am tall,
I'm gonna shoot poor Thelma, Just to see her jump and fall.⁴²⁹

The lyrics to "Blue Yodel -1" exemplify the trope of murder, or threatened murder as a male response to being spurned by a woman. The threat of murder attempted to figuratively regain male control over newer models of womanhood. The song enjoyed huge success after its initial release in 1927. One of Rodgers' major

⁴²⁹ Jimmie Rodgers, "Blue Yodel -1," Vi 21142, 1927. The full song is also featured in the movie short *The Singing Brakeman*, Columbia Pictures Corp., 1930.

biographers, Barry Mazor, argues that the singer “understood his audience, understood them not by what he learned or heard *about* them, but by what he shared with them elementally.”⁴³⁰ Rodgers shared the South and the southern experience with his audiences. By this point in time, Rodgers was already a major early country star, with proven sales. Clearly, neither Victor nor Columbia thought that misogynistic lyrics would damage his popularity.

Set in a railroad station, the film shows Rodgers engaged in conversation with two much older women whilst he awaits his transport. One woman waits on Jimmie whilst another is busy with her needlework. After a very brief exchange with Rodgers, one of the women asks him for a song: “How about my favourite?” Reminding her that he wants a cup of coffee, Rodgers begins to play “Blue Yodel - 1.” The visual performance of the song, coupled with the lyrical content, allowed male prowess to reign supreme. Whilst Thelma was in grave danger for rejecting Jimmie’s male character, it was perfectly acceptable for him to have many women. Beaming with joy, the elder lady gazes fondly at Jimmie whilst he croons his murderous threat. Both women represented long-held notions of female propriety. Rodgers’ performance of “Blue Yodel -1” to enthusiastic, approving older women suggested at the least their tacit acceptance (maybe even approval) of potentially lethal force as a method of controlling unruly female behaviour.

The two women are situated in what is ostensibly their workplace. In this respect they do not fully fit the mould of the sentimental mother, a “Victorian idol who was the mistress of the home and the moral guide for men,” as Kristine

⁴³⁰ Barry Mazor, *Meeting Jimmie Rodgers: How America’s Original Roots Music Hero Changed the Pop Sounds of A Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8.

McCusker notes.⁴³¹ However, their roles onscreen revealed much about women's place in the public sphere, and foreshadowed the limited opportunities that the Depression would allow women in the coming years. The reality for many women at this time was that most work offered to them was actually grounded in conventional notions of gender mores. This continued throughout the decade. As Laura Kapke argues, instead of providing women with vocational training or advancement, the bulk of relief work allocated to them during this period "merely replicated" their perceived function as homemakers.⁴³² And yet, married women were routinely denied this kind of work due to marriage bars that restricted employment opportunities for married women. These gender-based proscriptions were contested by the Woman's Bureau, the Women's Trade Union League and the National Woman's Party.⁴³³ The performance of "Blue Yodel -1" in the *Singing Brakeman* movie not only reinforced the notion that women should be perform domestic duties

⁴³¹Kristine M. McCusker, "'Bury Me Beneath the Willow': Linda Parker and Definitions of Tradition on the National Barn Dance", in eds. Kristine M. McCusker and Diane Pecknold, *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), pp. 3-23, 14.

⁴³²Laura Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 10. See also Martha May's work on the "domestic ideal" in Martha May, *Women's Roles in Twentieth Century America*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2009), pp. 1-14. Gillian Nichols Smith, "Women Facing the Emergencies of the Great Depression and World War II: Women's Rights in the 1930s and 1940s" in ed. Crista DeLuzio, *Women's Rights: People and Perspectives*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010), pp. 160-164. Additionally, it is significant that Eleanor Roosevelt, whilst strongly advocating women's right to work relief; also assumed that the majority of women desired and "ought to concentrate on, homemaking and child-rearing." See Miriam Cohen "New Deal: 1933-41" in ed. Helen Tierney, *Women's Studies Encyclopaedia, Volume 2*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 990, cited in Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression*, 10.

⁴³³Leslie Gale Parr, *A Will of Her Own: Sarah Towles Reed and the Pursuit of Democracy in Southern Public Education* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 82. Constance Coiner, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 40. Claudia Goldin, "The Rising (And Then Declining) Significance of Gender" in eds., Francine D. Blau, Mary C Brinton, and David B. Grusky, *The Declining Significance of Gender?* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009), pp. 67-101, 80. Landon R. Y. Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 90.

as work; it communicated clear messages about the perils of rejecting male proprietorial rights over women. Such ideas were met with resistance, and female challenges to prescriptive gender models were not entirely absent from recordings.

Closely following the movie short, Rosa Lee Carson figuratively tempered Jimmie's male character's controlling ways on record. Carson, who by this point had discarded the name Moonshine Kate, recorded her own version of "Blue Yodel -1" entitled "Texas Blues" (OK 45444). In her version she claimed sexual autonomy and mobility as female rites of passage,

T for Texas, T for Tennessee,
T for Texas, T for Tennessee,
Any old place I hang my hat, is home sweet home to me.

Where was you Papa, when the train left the shed,
Where was you papa, when the train left the shed?
Standing in my front door, wishing to God I was dead.

The first stanza was a direct rebuttal of the traditional concept of home. It is not a fixed location in which women must stay and serve family and, particularly, their menfolk. Unlike domesticated homebodies, Rosa Lee Carson's character was free from the ties of household chores and operates more like the ubiquitous male ramblers of both Hillbilly and Blues music that were frequently on the move in search of pleasure and better economic or sexual opportunities. Moreover, these lyrics implied that the South need no longer be considered as home either. Carson's character appeared to reject the South's once-solid grasp of male control over its women. Indeed, the second stanza seemed to respond directly to Jimmie's male character, taunting him. Unlike the ill-fated women in the "murdered-sweetheart" ballads, this female character not only survived to tell her story, she openly acknowledged the primary motive for murder, boasting of her own sexual appetite,

I got nineteen men, I'm looking for myself one more,
I got nineteen men, I'm looking for myself one more,

And when I find this one more, I'll ask for nineteen more.⁴³⁴

Whilst these lyrics imply a need, or at least a desire for men, Carson's female character perceived them as commodities to be owned, they were hers for the asking. Commenting on consumerism in the Depression, Devon Hansen Atchison argues, that for women, "the achievements, the new behaviours, and the attention to consumption of the recent past were put on the backburner."⁴³⁵ Carson's female character openly flaunted and rejoiced in her leisure pursuits, seeking out and enjoying sexual encounters with men who were hers for the asking. In this respect she figuratively transgressed the social and economic limitations placed upon women during this period, somewhat paradoxically by adopting many of the traits associated with the predatory, or at least sexually opportunistic, men celebrated in a lot of male roots music.

Consumer culture and the effects that the Depression had upon the workforce profoundly impacted upon the gendered dynamics of family hierarchies. In 1931, business entrepreneur and philanthropist Edward Filene wrote:

Undoubtedly, since the head of the family is no longer in control of the economic process through which the family may get its living, he must be relieved of many of the responsibilities and therefore of many of the ancient prerogatives of the patriarch. Women, for instance can no longer be his subjects; and...are likely to discover that their economic well-being now comes not from the organization of the family, but from the organization of industry.⁴³⁶

Although Carson's female character gives no indication that she is in any way affiliated with industry, she certainly rejected prescriptive gender roles, challenging male authority and privilege. In the same session that produced "Texas Blues,"

⁴³⁴ Rosa Lee Carson, "Texas Blues," OK 45444, 1930.

⁴³⁵ Devon Hansen Atchison, "Shades of Change: Suntanning and the Interwar Years" in eds. Cheryl Krasnick Warsh and Dan Malleck, *Consuming Modernity: Gendered Behaviour and Consumerism before the Baby Boom* (Vancouver: UCB Press, 2013), pp. 161-178, 171.

⁴³⁶ Edward Filene, *Successful Living in This Machine Age* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1931) 96.

Carson also recorded a number entitled “Raggedy Riley” (OK 45444). In melody and structure, the song was very much like Roba Stanley’s recording of “Devilish Mary” from the previous decade. Carson’s female character sang:

When I was young and in my prime,
Swore I never would marry,
Fell in love with a pretty little boy and sure enough we married,
Rum-tum a rink-tum Riley,
Prettiest boy, ever I saw, his name was Raggedy Riley.

We both was young and foolish,
Start in a mighty big hurry,
We both agreed on two little words and the wedding day was Thursday,
Rum-tum a rink-tum Riley,
Prettiest boy, ever I saw, his name was Raggedy Riley.

We’d been married but about two weeks,
Both got mean as a devil,
Every time he look outside I knocked him in the head with a shovel,
Rum-tum a rink-tum Riley,
Prettiest boy, ever I saw, his name was Raggedy Riley.

Washed his pants in old soap suds,
I filled his back with (scratches?)
Let him know right at the start that I’m gonna wear them britches,
Rum-tum a rink-tum Riley,
Prettiest boy, ever I saw, his name was Raggedy Riley.

In the final stanza, Carson’s female character suggests that entering into marriage for financial gain or love is no longer essential; her next union will be about asserting female power:

If I marry again in this world,
Won’t be for love or riches,
I’ll marry a little man just about my size, so I can wear his britches,
Rum-tum a rink-tum Riley,
Prettiest boy, ever I saw, his name was raggedy Riley.⁴³⁷

As Chapter Three shows, marketing materials for Old Time music and the lyrical content of “murdered-sweetheart” ballads in the 1920s showed how eugenic ideology permeated popular culture, extending to the realm of recorded music. Like

⁴³⁷ Rosa Lee Carson, “Raggedy Riley,” OK 45444, 1930.

the transgressive females punished in 1920s Old Time recordings, Carson's female character represented a newer model of womanhood, which arguably seemed even more intensely imposing and threatening to male authority as the effects of the Depression exacerbated already-unstable traditional models of gender. Her candid acknowledgement that a controlling male wishes that she—a woman with a formidable sexual appetite—was dead, suggests a potential and figurative resolution to the problem of female sexual agency and its supposed negative impact on the health of white America. Perhaps the crucial shift here is that Carson's character escaped death and found the strength to proudly assert her independence and womanhood, resisting the attempts at male control of her sexuality, regardless of the consequences for the future of the race that eugenicists might ascribe to her behaviour. Moreover, in suggesting that she could decline marriage in future, she also reflected the grievances female activists had against restrictions on married women's employment opportunities.

Beyond Rosa Lee Carson's transformation of "Blue Yodel -1" there were other signs that at least some female Hillbilly singers were also taking issue with Rodgers' potentially murderous male character and traditional gender expectations in Hillbilly music more generally. On June 12, 1931, Rodgers entered a recording studio in Kentucky with The Carter Family. Recording for the Bluebird label, they cut "The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers in Texas"(BB B6762). A mixture of dialogue and music, the recording was scripted and dramatized to give the impression that Mother Maybelle, Sara, and A. P. Carter were visiting Rodgers at home with his mother. In some of the dialogue sections, A. P. and Jimmie briefly exchanged comments on Texas:

A. P.: "Jimmie, I guess you kinda like Texas?"

J. R.: Oh boy, I like Texas and how, everybody like Texas. You know boy, this is a country out here where men are men and the women are proud of it.

Jimmie's comments underscored the importance of traditional models of masculinity in Texan culture. In conversation during the late-1930s, one-time sheriff of Jack County, Texas, Sam Rogers recalled of his younger days "I rode the range when men were men and women weren't governors. That sounds old, I know, but men had to be men in them days."⁴³⁸ In this recording, Rodgers' male character constructs women as approving of similar time-honoured southern traditions. Further dialogue between Rodgers and the mother character ensues. Reinforcing her domestic role, Jimmie asks her about preparing chicken for the Carters. After a short exchange, Sara Carter asks Jimmie, "how about a little music?" Jimmie replies: "I don't know Sara, I've had the blues all day. I guess you've got no business with the blues unless you can sing 'em. You help me to sing this old T for Texas thing huh?"⁴³⁹ After agreeing, the two perform a duet of Rodgers' "Blue Yodel -1." However, the song is cut short just before the declaration of his intentions to shoot Thelma in the third stanza. In its place, is yet more dialogue, but this time between Rodgers and the Carters. The addition of a female voice on this rendition of "Blue Yodel -1" and the subsequent omission of the murderous threats against Thelma suggests that careful handling of such themes was necessary. Aligning the Carters with a murderous male who celebrated his own sexual precocity may have offended or at least confused consumers. The Carters publicly embodied wholesome, domestic, white American family values, whilst Rodgers' male character, boasted of his own insatiable sexual prowess and willingness to use violence against non-compliant women. White

⁴³⁸ Phipps, Woody, and Sam J. Rogers, Texas, 1941. Manuscript/mixed material. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, stable url, <https://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh002553/>. Accessed: 04/07/ 2017.

⁴³⁹ Jimmie Rodgers (Assisted by The Carter Family), "The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers in Texas," BB B-6762, 1931.

women who deviated from strict codes of propriety were simultaneously desired and punished, sometimes imagined as non-white in their behaviours. Whilst a number of male characters appear to have imagined, and desired the libido of non-whites to be formidable, it would have been both titillating, and by extension, frustrating, to imagine that a white southern woman could be capable of the same impulses and acts. Sara M. Evans notes, these factors reveal the paradox of southern womanhood. Evans states that the “meshing of sexual and racial symbolism throughout southern history created a mythology which functioned as a powerful weapon against social change.”⁴⁴⁰ This paradox was identified, and at times, figuratively “resolved” through the medium of popular music.

In order to fully appreciate the complexity of this paradox, its relationship with Hillbilly music of the 1930s, and pervasive attitudes towards the perceived sexual habits of non-whites, it is necessary to engage with multiple constructions of femininity and masculinity in recorded Hillbilly music of this time. It would be reductive to simply brand Rodgers a misogynist on the strength of “Blue Yodel -1.” As Barry Mazor notes, there is a “sweet angel” or a “sunshine girl” to match every “triflin’ woman” or “meanest gal in town” in Rodgers’ recorded output.⁴⁴¹ Mazor’s observations on Rodgers are equally applicable to many artists operating in the early country genre in the 1930s. Some singers even imitated Rodgers’ style and substance and quickly recorded both cover versions of “Blue Yodel -1” and their own misogynist contributions to the Hillbilly repertoire, a number of which communicated conflicting ideas about womanhood and desirability, although not an imitator of Rodgers’ style, Dave McCarn’s recording of “Everyday Dirt” told of

⁴⁴⁰ Sara M. Evans, “Myth Against History: The Case of Southern Womanhood” in eds. Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords, *Myth and Southern History, Volume 2: The New South* (Champaign: Illini Books Edition, 1989), pp. 141-154, 154.

⁴⁴¹ Barry Mazor, *Jimmie Rodgers: How America’s Original Roots Music Hero Changed the Pop Sounds of a Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 303.

infidelity and domestic violence. Thus, it reflected a kind of regularity, if not ubiquity of such themes in this music. North Carolinian McCarn had as Patrick Huber notes, a “remarkable talent for composing darkly comical social protest songs.” His composition, “Everyday Dirt” (Vi V-40274) was yet another reworking of an old English ballad that told the story of a cuckolded wife beating her husband. McCarn’s version turned the tables, allowing his male character to wreak a modicum of revenge on an untoward wife. According to Huber, this reworking “oddly foreshadowed McCarn’s own future violent assaults on his wife and his resulting stints on the chain gang.”⁴⁴² Recorded for the Victor label in Memphis in 1930, McCarn sang in character:

John built on a rousing fire,
Just to suit his own desire,
His wife called out with a free good will,
“Don't do that, for the man you'll kill!”
John reached up and down he fetched him,
Like a racoon dog he caught him,
He blacked his eyes and then he did better,
He kicked him out upon his setter.

His wife she crawled in under the bed,
He pulled her out by the hair of the head,
“When I'm gone, remember this!”
And he kicked her where the kicking is best.

The law came down and John went up,
He didn't have the chance of a yellow pup,
Sent him down to the old chain gang,
For beating his wife, the dear little thing.

Even though the husband drags his wife by the hair and beats her lover, McCarn’s narrator cannot resist the temptation to have a small jibe at the cheating woman,

⁴⁴² Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 164, 189.

referring to her as a “dear little thing” after revealing her infidelity to listeners. In the next stanza he reveals how the husband beat his wife too:

When he got off, he went back to court,
His wife she got him for non-support,
John didn't worry and John didn't cry,
But when he got close, he socked her in the eye.

However, this is a complex tale of love, possible lust and perhaps finance. It is, after all, the wife who has the money to pay the bail:

Took John back to the old town jail,
His wife she come and paid his bail,
Won't be long till he'll be loose,
I could tell more about it but there ain't no use.⁴⁴³

In conversation with Archie Green and Ed Kahn, McCarn revealed that he had learned the original ballad “Will the Weaver” from the wife of his friend Howard Long. As he explained he was unimpressed with the tune, but even more so by the lyrics:

I didn't like the words too much because Will, let's see... Yeah, I believe the woman's husband came out worst at the last, you see. After Will had been treating him bad, you know. But his wife flew in on him with a stick, you know. Afterwards he got the worst, her husband, end of the bargain after all. And will was doing all the meanness and dirty-working, and she was taking after Will, I believe. Up with a stick and down shed. Done something, knocked him or something, her husband. I changed that because I thought it ought come out for the man a little bit... Because he was the one getting two-timed.⁴⁴⁴

McCarn's refashioning of the lyrics punished transgression on the part of the woman; the wife's betrayal and her violence towards her husband was a score that he clearly felt the need to figuratively correct. This kind of physical retribution also featured in Cliff Carlisle's “A Wild Cat Woman And A Tom Cat Man” (BB B6350) recorded for the Bluebird label in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1936. The title alone

⁴⁴³ David McCarn, “Everyday Dirt,” Vi V-40274, 1930.

⁴⁴⁴ Interview with David McCarn by Archie Green and Ed Kahn, Stanley, North Carolina, August 19, 1961, Archie Green Collections, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Special thanks to Patrick Huber for making this available.

suggested that both parties were complicit in affairs outside of their relationship.

Carlisle's narrator revealed:

She hit him in the head with a slat from the bed, and he staggered to his feet,
He made a pass again, and he hit her on the chin,
And he knocked her out in the street.

Her nose was bleeding, and his eyes was black, boys it was a sight,
Wild cat woman and a tom cat man,
Put up a pretty good fight.⁴⁴⁵

Whilst the woman is beaten in this song, she nevertheless gives as good as she gets to her abusive partner. Carlisle's narrator puts the two on an even keel in the final two lines and in a way figuratively empowers the woman, apparently endorsing her own physical retaliation to male violence. In 1931, Gail Laughlin of the National Woman's Party noted, "One of the first impulses in these times of depression is to wallop the ladies."⁴⁴⁶ As Holly Allen suggests, Laughlin was probably not "suggesting that men literally "walloped" women when confronted with financial hardship (though some apparently did): rather, she was describing a tendency to scapegoat women for the economic crisis and to curtail their civic and economic opportunities."⁴⁴⁷ Songs such as these allowed for the figurative walloping of women on record for the purposes of entertainment, maybe even of cathartic release as an alternative to "real" violence, although that was common enough. The added complexity, here, though, is that Carlisle's narrator recognizes and respects the woman's pluckiness in fighting back.

It is worth noting that, had these events actually taken place, and the case gone to court, the woman could not have expected to find any females on the jury. Women were generally deemed ineligible for jury service and usually had their cases heard in

⁴⁴⁵ Cliff Carlisle, "A Wild Cat Woman And A Tom Cat Man," BB B-6350, 1936.

⁴⁴⁶ Gail Laughlin quoted in Holly Allen, *Forgotten Men and Fallen Women: The Cultural Politics of New Deal Narratives* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2015), 98.

⁴⁴⁷ Allen, *Forgotten Men and Fallen Women*, 98.

front of all-male jurors: an obstacle that attorney Robert H. Richards acknowledged in a 1933 address to the National Woman's Party in Delaware. At the meeting, Mabel Vernon, a Delaware National Woman's Party organizer rallied,

We all perceive difficulties and setbacks that women are encountering these days which sometimes make us feel that we are slowly slipping back into the dark ages ... They challenge us to show what stuff we are made... In the present economic crisis women find themselves helpless as individuals.⁴⁴⁸

Vernon's comments reflected the often deleterious effects of the Depression on women, northern as well as southern, in many arenas; effects that were reflected in the Hillbilly music of the era, not least in the ways that white male artists related expressions of female sexuality and related lapses of moral rectitude to ideas of white racial impurity.

In a sense, idealized, chaste and respectable womanhood in Hillbilly music, as in much white culture was deemed the preserve of white women. Yet, paradoxically, many artists, across their repertoires, sometimes in single recordings, expressed simultaneous desire for sexually voracious women while condemning or punishing such behaviour, or warning against its wide social implications. Sometimes, they attempted to reconcile any apparent paradox between unseemly male recognition of and desire for sexually adventurous women and their notions of appropriate female behaviour by casting more licentious and libidinous women as racial or ethnic others. In a complex blend of prurient interest, admiration, and rejection for flagrant expressions of female erotic independence male characters on Hillbilly recordings sometimes constructed female sexuality in highly racialized terms, at times championing female agency whilst at other times denigrating it. This sense of

⁴⁴⁸ "Richards Hits at Jury Panels Excusing Women," the Delaware *Sunday Morning Star*, November 5, 1933, 1, 4. Article available at stable url <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2293&dat=19331105&id=Z94mAAAIBAJ&sjid=VgIGAAAIBAJ&pg=2631,8324&hl=en>, accessed: 17/04/2017.

constructing a flexible, gendered ideal of womanhood was perhaps best exemplified in Jimmie Davis' recording of "I Want Her Tailor-Made" (BB B 5359, 1933).

Louisiana-born Davis first recorded in 1928 and had a career in music, film, and politics that spanned eight decades. A number of his early songs reflected the fears of many southern males regarding growing female autonomy and non-traditional sexual conduct. In the years preceding his commercial success as a recording artist, he had taught at the all-girl Dodd College. Whilst there he put out a number of recordings under the singular name Jimmie. This, according to the singer, was in case he was connected to the material during his time active as a teacher. Davis told interviewer Ronnie F. Pugh:

I was afraid they would fire me if they knew I was singing some of these country songs, we were just singing out there, see. But I didn't know whether they would like that or not, so I taught a year, and I got a chance at another job, so I took that, went as clerk of the criminal court. And I knew that wouldn't interfere with the singing, and the singing wouldn't interfere with me as a clerk.⁴⁴⁹

As his career developed, Davis felt less inclined to distance himself from his recording persona, and cut several songs that implied a correlation between declining sexual morals of southern women and the perceived carnal behaviour and impulses of non-whites. In "I Want Her Tailor-Made" his male character expressed a desire to meet an "easy-rockin' mama"—the kind that can be found in Mexico:

I'm looking for a mama, like I met down in Mexico,
I'm looking for a mama, like I saw in Mexico,
She's an easy rockin' mama, she'll rock you anytime you go.

⁴⁴⁹ Ronnie F. Pugh, Interview with Jimmie Davis, Nashville, Tennessee, October 10, 1983. Country Music Hall of Fame Museum and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee, Oral History Collections, Item Number: OHC85. For more on Davis' time at Dodd, see Gus Weill, *You Are My Sunshine: The Jimmie Davis Story: an Affectionate Biography* (Gretna: Pelican, 1998), 46. See also Lange, *Smile When You Call Me a Hillbilly*, 50. Miriam G. Reeves, *The Governors of Louisiana* (Gretna: Pelican, 2004, 6th edition), 113.

I want her fast like lightning, one hundred in the shade (spoken: I like ‘em hot),
I want her fast like lightning, one hundred in the shade,
I want her made to order, I want her tailor-made.

It is important to note that Davis’s narrator did not want a Mexican woman per se. Rather, he wanted one similar to the kind that he had found in Mexico. There is a clear distinction. In the third verse, however, he suggests that this particular kind of non-conformist southern-born women may share important character traits with the sexually alluring and apparently available Mexican “easy rockin’ mama”:

She was born in old Kentucky, raised in the Everglades,
She was born in old Kentucky, raised in the Everglades,
I mean I got her measure, I got her tailor-made.⁴⁵⁰

The equation of non-white women with uninhibited sexuality was not a new racial stereotype in the American imagination. As Arnaldo De Leon notes, in the nineteenth-century, white Americans imagined that Mexicans had “descended from a tradition of paganism, depravity, and primitivism.” And yet, whilst Mexicans were “a type of folk that Americans should avoid becoming,” the imagined exoticism and untamed sexual conduct of various putative non-white ethnic groups in the US held considerable appeal—not least to southern men.⁴⁵¹ And yet, dominant notions of propriety and entrenched racial codes, particularly the emphasis on the supremacy of white Anglo-Saxon blood and cultures, meant that the attractions of Latinas and their imagined sexual appetites were rarely embraced publically, or at least not without some sense of shame. This was a guilty pleasure that sat uneasily alongside virulent condemnations of Mexican immorality. In 1930, eugenicist Roy L. Garis described

⁴⁵⁰ Jimmie Davis, “I Want Her Tailor-Made,” BB B5359, 1933.

⁴⁵¹ Arnaldo De Leon, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes towards Mexican in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 6.

to Congress the threat to the physical and moral health posed by Mexican immigrants:

Their minds run to nothing higher than the animal functions—eat, sleep, and sexual debauchery. In every huddle of Mexican shacks one meets the same idleness, hordes of hungry dogs and filthy children with faces plastered with flies, disease, human filth, stench, promiscuous fornication, bastardy, lounging, apathetic peons and lazy squaws, beans and dried chili, liquor, general squalor and envy and hatred of the Gringo. These people sleep by day and prowl by night like coyotes, stealing anything they can get their hands on, no matter how useless to them it may be. Nothing left outside is safe unless padlocked or chained down. Yet there are Americans clamouring for more of this human swine to be brought over from Mexico.⁴⁵²

Such remarks found a keen audience as the tensions over immigration and the influence of non-white peoples on American national identity that had been such a conspicuous part of the 1920s found new life amid the economic distress and social anxieties associated with the Depression. In 1935, leading Eugenicist C. M. Goethe wrote to the press,

The press recently carried a story of a Mexican leaving home one morning, the father of seven children. He returned at night finding his family increased to ten.

These Mexican triplets, the Canadian quintuplets, both turn the calcium light on Amerind (American-Indian) fecundity. With no data available as to whether the French-Canadian quintuplets inherit Amerind blood, it is well known, nevertheless, that the very high birthrate of Quebec is due, in a great degree at least, to the Indian strain. Again, the fecundity contest in Mexico City some years ago showed peon families of 36, 35, 34 children.

⁴⁵² Roy L. Garis, "Mexican Immigration—A Report by Roy L. Garis for the Information of the Members of Congress" in *Western Hemisphere Immigration: Hearings Before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, House of Representatives, Seventy-First Congress, Second Session, On the Bills, H.R. 8523, H.R. 8530, H.R. 8702, to Limit the Immigration of Aliens to the United States, and For Other Purposes* (Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1930), pp. 424-454, 436. Digitized version available at stable url, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d00857932t;view=1up;seq=3>, accessed: 17/04/2016.

It is this high birthrate that makes Mexican peon immigration such a menace. Peons multiply like rabbits. The enclosed diagram will remind you again how the law of differential birthrates works.⁴⁵³

That Mexicans were dehumanised by both men whilst discussing their lifestyles and racial traits reflects the very negative and anxious view held by many Americans, some of them in positions of power, that Latinos were insatiable and, left unchecked, dangerously fecund. Thus, it may be no coincidence that a year before Jimmie Davis sang of fast and loose Mexican women in “Tailor-Made,” Mexican actress Lupe Velez had graced the silver screen as “Princess Exotica” in the suggestively titled *The Half Naked Truth*. Velez appeared in a number of movies during this period, predominantly cast as a “hot tamale”—a character that in the case of *The Half Naked Truth*, displayed “aggressive sexual behaviour” as Alicia I. Rodriguez-Estrada argues.⁴⁵⁴ Like Velez’s movies, Davis’ “Tailor-Made” underscored the existence, and at times, appeal of racialized stereotypes that focused on unfettered exotic sexuality of non-whites during this period.

The Mexican woman that Davis’s narrator sang of in “Tailor-Made” epitomised the concept of what Stephanie Greco Larson calls the “halfbreed harlot”—the kind of women that were imagined to be “lustful, hot-tempered, sexual and a slave to their passions.” Moreover, as Larson notes, stereotypes of this kind also appeared in

⁴⁵³ C. M. Goethe, Letter to the Press, dated March 21, 1935, Cold Spring Harbor, DNA Learning Center, item ID 11028, digitized version available at stable url, <https://www.dnalc.org/view/11028-C-M-Goethe-letter-to-the-Press-about-high-Mexican-birthrates-includes-quote-Peons-multiply-like-rabbits-.html>, accessed: 20/04/2016.

⁴⁵⁴ Alicia I. Rodriguez-Estrada, “Dolores Del Rio and Lupe Velez: Images On and Off the Screen, 1925-1944” in eds. Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage, *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women’s West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 483. Significantly, Lupe Velez took her own life in the 1940s having fallen pregnant with actor Harald Ramond’s love-child. Her suicide, Michelle Vogel stresses; was the result of the actress’s inability to bear the shame of being unmarried and with child, a predicament that could easily have put the label of feeble-minded on unwed women with children at the time. For more Velez’s suicide see Michelle Vogel, *Lupe Velez: The Life and Career of Hollywood’s Mexican Spitfire* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2012), 6.

popular culture as “prostitutes who “like the work.””⁴⁵⁵ When a song such as “I Want Her Tailor-Made” and is contextualised in this way, it reflects a paradox of male desire for easy sexual gratification, and the mistrust born from the reality of female sexual agency. The desire for and simultaneous repulsion towards exotic sexuality reflected the contradictory values of the time. Whilst “easy rockin’ mamas” may have been fun, they were deemed untrustworthy. Moreover, they provide important commentary upon the way that many Americans understood gender mores, sexual conduct, and their imagined relationship to ethnicity and racial purity.

That Davis’s narrator found this kind of female in Kentucky in 1933 evinces a belief that engaging in pre-or extra-marital sex could no longer be dismissed exclusively as a trait of “exotic” races. That myth had long been a staple of most respectable forms of popular culture, particularly those invoking or emanating from the South, where virginal southern belles and faithful southern wives dominated a cultural landscape, occasionally modified in cautionary tales by the appearance of “fallen” white women – whose fall often involved a racial as well as a sexual transgression. The harsh economic climate of the 1930s had an adverse effect upon ethnic-relations and gave rise to what Balderrama and Rodriguez term “a frenzy of anti-Mexican hysteria.”⁴⁵⁶

Mexican women who resided in the U.S were expected to assimilate and adhere to a prescriptive set of ideals that would enable them to become accepted in the broader society. In 1929, Pearl Idelia Ellis’s instructional book *Americanization*

⁴⁵⁵ Stephanie Greco Larson, *Media & Minorities: The Politics of Race in News and Entertainment*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2005), 61.

⁴⁵⁶ Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 1. As Larry Naylor notes, during this period “the general anxiety being experienced by most Americans simply revitalised the stereotype image Americans held of Mexicans.” Larry L. Naylor *American Culture: Myth and Reality of a Culture of Diversity* (Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 1998), 134.

through Home-making provided details of what was expected of young Latina girls as they attempted to make their lives in a country that largely did not respect them or their race. In the introduction to her work, Ellis stated, “If we assimilate the countless number of Mexicans that cross our southern border, either legally or otherwise, to better their condition in a new land, we must begin at the basic structure of their social order—the home.”⁴⁵⁷ Elsewhere in the book, Ellis suggested that Mexican girls loved sewing and that they should be schooled to perform such duties with zeal, adding that those who did not learn satisfactorily would be a burden on society: “When she leaves school, she should know how to plan and sew for herself and for her future family when she marries. The young matron who depends on charitable institutions to make her first layette is not a good recommendation for our public schools.”⁴⁵⁸

If Ellis’ publication showed white respectable expectations of young Mexican women, the title of Davis’ “I Want Her Tailor-Made” reflected conflicting ideals, including the sense that women should be just as *men* wanted them. This is clear in many early roots recordings. On the one hand, women in country songs were desired and at times championed for their apparent generosity with sexual favours. On the other hand, they were punished on record for the same behavioural traits. Writing on country music in the Cold War period, Peter La Chapelle argues that if allowed too much freedom in their leisure pursuits, women might “turn to sexual indiscretion where they risked being tagged with one of an ever-growing list of honky-tonk epithets: abusers, cheaters, home-wreckers, two time traitors, heart breakers” and

⁴⁵⁷ Pearl Idelia Ellis, *Americanization Through Home-making* (Los Angeles: Wetzel Publishing Co., Inc. 1929), Preface. Retrieved from Library of Congress, stable url [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/cool:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(lg35\)\)::bibLink=h?ammem/coolbib%3A@field\(NUMBER+@band\(amrlg+lg35\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/cool:@field(NUMBER+@band(lg35))::bibLink=h?ammem/coolbib%3A@field(NUMBER+@band(amrlg+lg35))), accessed: 17/04/2016.

⁴⁵⁸ Ellis, *Americanization Through Home-making*, 13-14.

even ““the root of all evil.”” Whilst this commentary focuses on a later period in the development of country music, La Chapelle points out that the apparent misogyny in the later honky-tonk music originated in the 1930s.⁴⁵⁹

The fact that women may have sought pleasure outside of wedlock also indicated that they could no longer be viewed as the pure and submissive property of southern men. If this had always, to some extent, been the case, such non-traditional behaviour and affronts to ideals of propriety and male control appear to have occupied an increasingly prominent place in popular culture, including Hillbilly music. In this respect, Davis’s recording of “You Can’t Tell About the Women Nowadays” (Vi 23746) also reflected the rising fear of unbridled white female sexuality and a willingness to discuss it in Hillbilly songs. Stressing that women were not to be trusted, his male character sang:

You can’t tell about these women nowadays,
You can’t tell about these women nowadays,
Now I know just how they feel, when they start to rock ‘n reel,
You can’t tell about these women nowadays.

You can’t tell about these women nowadays (spoken: no sir)
You can’t tell about these females nowadays,
When you’re in bed fast asleep, out the back door mama creeps,
You can’t tell about these women nowadays.

You can’t tell about these women nowadays,
You can’t tell about these females nowadays,
When you’re in church jumpin’ up and down—sweet mama’s got a man goin’
round and round,
You can’t tell about these women nowadays.

⁴⁵⁹ Peter La Chapelle, ““Spade Doesn’t Look Exactly Starved”: Country Music and the Negotiation of Women’s Domesticity in Cold War Los Angeles” in eds. Kristine McCusker and Diane Pecknold, *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), pp. 24-43, 36. For added context, see Teresa Goddu’s work on the tradition of male-on-female violence in country music. Teresa Goddu, “Lonesome Graveyards and Bloody Daggers: The Gothic in Country Music” in ed. Cecelia Tichi, *Reading Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars, and Honky-Tonk Bars*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 45-64.

The resolution to such transgressions for this male character was violence:

You can't tell about these women nowadays,
You can't tell about these women nowadays,
Directions on the can say sprinkle and run—if she's a mean mama I'll get my
gun,
You can't tell about these women nowadays.⁴⁶⁰

Davis' male character indicated his belief that women may not be the pure and sexually innocent beings that they were once imagined as, a stark contrast from the church-attending men that the narrator appealed to. In this song, overt female sexuality is unchristian and sinful and implied a departure from the white patriarchal values of the church.

Whilst Davis's earliest recordings may not have been his most popular, they nevertheless laid down the foundations for a very successful career. Moreover, they articulated very real concerns for many southern men at the time—a factor that doubtless contributed to their popularity. Grady McWhiney and Gary B. Mills wrote that:

Davis could write an enduringly popular country song because he could express the emotions of the common folk in a way that they could understand and appreciate. He was their bard, their poet, who told in song their successes and failures, their hopes and fears.⁴⁶¹

Although the argument put forward by McWhiney and Mills is most likely directed towards Davis's later work, it serves equally well in an exploration of the themes that the singer covered in his earlier pieces. For instance, in "The Shotgun Wedding" (Vi 23746) Davis adopted the persona of a young male who is forced to marry his sweetheart by her family because she is either pregnant or deemed as "spoiled" by her engagement in premarital sexual relations: "I went to see my sweetheart, her

⁴⁶⁰ Jimmie Davis "You Can't Tell About the Women Nowadays", Vi 23746, 1932.

⁴⁶¹ Grady McWhiney and Gary B. Mills, "Jimmie Davis and His Music: An Interpretation," *Journal of American Culture*, Summer 83, 6, 2, pp. 54-57, 56.

Daddy met me at the door, / Said “My boy we gonna have a wedding here like we never had before, / She was my daughter—and you done her wrong.”⁴⁶² The opening stanza reveals that sexual activity before wedlock goes against the prevailing social and ethical code within the parameters of the song and that pregnancy is a likely result of sexual relations. However, of particular interest is the father’s reaction to the predicament his child finds herself in. “She *was* (emphasis added) my daughter, and you done her wrong” he tells the narrator. The use of past-tense implies that her premarital sexual activity has resulted in either his loss of ownership of the girl, or that he rejects his daughter because she has been “sullied.” Seemingly, social and family ostracism is the new death or female punishment in these songs, and yet the father thinks that social standing can be saved by the wedding. Although Davis relates the story of the father to the listener in “The Shotgun Wedding,” it is clear that if a marriage goes ahead then the social order can be restored to a degree. However, within the song the mother appears as bloodthirsty and intent on seeking vengeance, perhaps more threatened by the prospect of sullied reputations, caused by other women: “Her mother was runnin’ and prancin’, forty-four in each hand, / Said “Let’s cancel this here wedding and send him to the Promised Land, / She was my daughter, and you done her wrong.”

As Chapter Three demonstrated, unmarried mothers posed a threat to the social order. Significantly, the young girl is not vilified by the narrator in any way. This marks a clear distinction between the representation of the much-sentimentalised matriarch in many southern songs, and the young women who are punished for breaking “traditional” sexual mores in murdered-sweetheart ballads. The song broached the shift in ideas about sexual morality, reflecting the reality that people

⁴⁶² Jimmie Davis, “The Shotgun Wedding,” Vi 23746, 1932.

did engage in carnal relations out of wedlock. However, in vilifying the mother, the narrator appears to reject traditional gender roles, thus complicating notions of what actually constitutes female propriety. Whilst both parents are aggrieved at this situation, it is the mother who is prepared to commit murder. Moreover, the father's pacification by his daughter's marriage ensures that females continue to remain the rightful "property" of men.

The timing of Davis's recordings and the themes that they cover reflect pressing issues in the harsh economic climate of the Depression. Asides from anxieties regarding male power, the risk of unwanted pregnancy was also a peculiar cause for concern. As Rickie Solinger argues, in an era when large numbers of men could not find work and avoided matrimony, many "unmarried and unemployed couples had sex anyway."⁴⁶³ Moreover, as Solinger notes, by the 1930s, most married women and quite a few unmarried women were aware of contraception even if use was uneven: they "knew that something—some object, some substance, some method—was out there," and naturally "they wanted it for themselves" and "wanted to be able to get what they needed legally."⁴⁶⁴ These circumstances interacted to continue the reshaping of American sexual mores and habits, if not so much prevailing ideals, that had begun in earnest around World War One and which would reach high-tide in the 1960s.

Because of the economic climate of the 1930s, not only did marriage rates drop, but divorce rates fell, too, since people often could not afford the loss of shared income, or the legal and alimony costs, that could accompany a divorce.⁴⁶⁵ Should a

⁴⁶³ Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America*, (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 103.

⁴⁶⁴ Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power*, 103.

⁴⁶⁵ See Morris Dickstein, *Dancing In the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression*, (New York: W. W Norton & Co., 2009), 224. Cases of inharmonious partnerships and the

relationship be less-than-harmonious, many couples would have little choice other than to “stick it out” until they were in a better financial position to part company. In “Don’t Marry The Wrong Woman” (Ba 32885) Carlisle’s male character began by warning other men about the perils of cohabiting with an unsuitable match, before finally advising that *all* marriage would result in male ruin at the hands of women:

She said that she loved me, but now it’s too late,
For all of my love, has turned into hate.
Although we have parted, she pesters me yet,
She fills my poor heart with shame and regret.

So take warning boys, they’ll make your hair grey,
Don’t you get the wrong woman, or you’ll have to pay.
A woman has made a wreck out of me,
Don’t you marry any woman, but live a life that is free.⁴⁶⁶

When considered on its own, “Don’t Marry The Wrong Woman” could simply be viewed as little more than an isolated piece of advice from a character performed by Carlisle. However, as Joseph Guttman argues, during times of economic hardship, the desire—if not always the practical opportunity—to dissolve a marriage may be greater than at times of prosperity. These factors should certainly be taken into account when considering a song such as “Don’t Marry The Wrong Woman.” Moreover, when considered alongside other titles such as “Hen Pecked Man” (Ba 33226) it is clear that these songs fit within a broader pattern of music that oftentimes denigrated womanhood and reflected contemporaneous tensions:

Come on be a man or a mouse, and make your wife understand,

inability to divorce due to financial causes are well documented. For more on this see Paul R. Amato and Shelley Irving “Historical Trends in Divorce in the United States” in eds., Mark A. Fine and John H. Harvey, *Handbook of Divorce and Relationship Dissolution* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp 41-48, 47. Joseph Guttman comments upon this trend and argues that during the Depression the “price tag on divorce was apparently greater than the motivation.” Factors such as these would have increased animosity between couples whose relationships were already fraught with tension. See Joseph Guttman, *Divorce in Psychosocial Perspective: Theory and Research*, (New York: Psychology Press, 2009), 14.
⁴⁶⁶Cliff Carlisle, “Don’t Marry The Wrong Woman,” Ba 32885, 1933.

That you are the head of the house, and not a hen pecked man,
I'm washing the babies and mopping the floors, it's more than I can stand,
Got nobody to blame but myself, for being a hen-pecked man.

The answer to this conundrum for Carlisle's narrator could be found in the use of violence. He stressed:

The only thing to do then boys, to make your wife understand,
Pull up and sock her right in the eye, then you're not a hen-pecked man.⁴⁶⁷

Much like their Blues counterparts, songs such as these sought to figuratively re-establish male authority and control, indicating a collective sense of ever more depleted male power and with it self-respect during the period. Again, it is important to acknowledge that the apparent misogyny in these records did not necessarily reflect the artists' own attitudes or views on the correct way to manage intimate or domestic relationships with the opposite sex. Rather, they provide compelling evidence of a trend of routinely degrading women in popular roots music of the time. Cliff Carlisle acknowledged, "Actually to put a song over, or to make a good rendition of a song, especially one you write yourself—and I hope you don't get the wrong impression...you have got to be more or less an actor, and you act it in your own mind."⁴⁶⁸ Although perhaps somewhat self-serving and certainly recorded long after the 1930s, Carlisle's comments suggest a degree of personal detachment from his misogynist lyrics and the sometimes violent male characters he performed as on record. However, the fact that songs of this nature regularly enjoyed major commercial success suggests that they captured some of the gendered antagonisms and tensions of the time.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁷ Cliff Carlisle "Hen Pecked Man," Ba 33226, 1934.

⁴⁶⁸ Interview with Cliff Carlisle, August 18, 1962, Lexington, Kentucky, by Eugene Earle and Archie Green, Southern Folklife Collection FT# 4068. Cited in Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 75

⁴⁶⁹ It is, however, difficult to say with absolute certainty, the gendered breakdown of consumers of these songs.

Cliff Carlisle's brother Bill also recorded similar songs, and the pair often recorded together. Bill Carlisle's "I'm Wearing the Britches Now" (BB B6478) featured a male character asserting a resolutely macho persona, threatening violence against a woman, and attempting to regain control:

First five years, love was blind
You wore the britches all the time,
You lousy sow, but I'm wearing the britches now (spoken: I'm really wearing them things too).

Used to let me tell you just what to do,
But now, mm gal, I'm-a-telling you
You lousy sow, I'm wearing the britches now.

Daddy's gonna start getting' wise
And whip you every day for exercise,
You lousy sow; I'm wearing the britches now.⁴⁷⁰

Not only is the woman threatened with brutality in this example, she is reduced to an animal-like status, is nothing more than a "lousy sow." In some respects, the depiction of the insubordinate woman as sub-human links to frequent characterisations of non-whites in the white racist imagination, where blacks and other racial and ethnic groups were often portrayed as sub-human, to be controlled with physical force or superior mental power. Here, it is yet another expression of the drive for social control in the context of anxieties about threats to white male privilege. Whilst the eugenic policing of women's sexuality sometimes reflected fears over racial contamination and degeneration, domestic violence often reflected fears over gendered challenges to white male supremacy.

Because of the dearth of authoritative sources it is notoriously difficult to ascertain the precise gender, let alone class, or even racial composition of the audiences for these songs, whether on record or in live performances. All that exists

⁴⁷⁰ Bill Carlisle "I'm Wearing The Britches Now," BB B-6478, 1936.

is little more than fragmentary information from trade magazines and record companies and testimony from artists and record company executives to go on. Still, it is probable that the sustained popularity of this kind of material during the ravages of the Depression may well mirror the realisation for many men that once-stable positions of power and authority were no longer steadfast. Most likely, these songs functioned as a form of escapism or catharsis through which men could attempt to negotiate the shift in gender-based power relations. As one unemployed father told Mirra Komarovsky, “I wore the pants in this family, and rightly so. During the Depression, I lost something. Maybe you call it self-respect, but in losing it I also lost the respect of my children, and I am afraid that I am losing my wife.”⁴⁷¹

Carlisle’s male characters appear to share similar anxieties to Komarovsky’s interviewee. Given the restrictions on married women in the workforce, and the patriarchal expectations of them at home, married life may simply not have appealed to all women. Throughout the chapters on Blues and Hillbilly we have considered many black and white female singers who bristled at and sometimes flagrantly defied the norms of married life. Conspicuous among those white artists who sometimes offered an alternative vision of female fulfilment beyond the institution of marriage, although notably without anchoring that alternative vision to sexual freedom, was the hugely successful Ruby Rose Blevins. Better known as Patsy Montana, in 1935, the Arkansas-born singer cut many tracks that championed the life of the cowgirl out on the frontier. One of her earliest, and most significant proto-feminist offerings was a track entitled “The She Buckaroo” (ARC 6-04-53). From the opening lines, Patsy’s character directly repudiated a life of raising children, cooking and cleaning:

Some gals they like babies and houses and things,

⁴⁷¹Mirra Komarovsky, *The Unemployed Man and His Family: The Effect of Unemployment Upon the Status of the Man in Fifty-Nine Families* (New York: Dryden, 1940), 41.

But give the feel of a horse that has wings,
I'll ride him straight up, like all cowboys do,
I'm a straight ridin' lassie, a she buckaroo.

Patsy's female character was out to level the field, stating as much when she aligned herself with "all cowboys." This challenge then became a boast by a fiercely competitive woman in the following stanza,

If you make for rodeos, you'll find me right there,
Ridin' and ropin' and winning my share,
Of the prizes they give, make he-men feel blue,
I'm a prize winning lassie, a she buckaroo.

Not only was Patsy's female character out for material gains, she relished the opportunity to "make he-men feel blue." The combination of physicality and skill acquired her wealth and enabled her to stand defiant in the tough, male-dominated world of rodeos. To add insult to injury, this empowered female shifted gear in the third stanza and declared her contempt for men,

Sure I'm stuck on myself, but what do I care?
There's no-one around me to give me some air,
But I've never walked home on my tiptoes, ooh-ooh,
I'm a man-hatin' lassie, a she buckaroo.

Although Patsy Montana sung in character against the pitfalls of domestic life, her recording coincided with a time of rising gender conflict within the actual rodeo circuit. During the early part of the 1920s, female rodeo riders had been serious competitors against men in rodeo. Praised for their athleticism, female rodeo riders had even competed against men in the arena. This sense of equality on the rodeo circuit did not last though.

In 1927, female rodeo star Mabel Strickland had petitioned the rodeo board of the Pendleton Roundup to compete directly with males to win the coveted title of "All Around Cowboy." She was denied her request and was awarded the title of

“Queen” instead—a title that implied demotion for Strickland. From this point and throughout the 1930s, women’s presence within rodeos came in the form of sponsor competitions. The sponsor competitions awarded the female with “the best costume, physical beauty, and bloodline.”⁴⁷²

The emphasis on physical beauty, and blood lineage revealed the presence of eugenic ideology within the rodeo. Patsy Montana’s performance as a man-hating rodeo rider in the 1930s figuratively challenged social control over women in a number of ways. Unlike those who received awards for their racial purity, her female character was out to win money not via her clothing, beauty, nor bloodline. Physical ability and a dogged determination to resist male authority and control would bring her the riches and respect her talents deserved. In the final verses, at one level she appeared to change tack slightly,

Some day when I’m ready, I’ll ride down the road,
I’ll rope me a cowpolk that’s never been throwed,
I’ll hawkeye him tight, ‘til he swears he’ll be true,
I’m a man-ropin’ lassie, a she buckaroo.

I’ll throw away my chaps and get dresses instead,
I’ll learn to make biscuits and maybe cornbread,
We’ll live in a town, I think that will do,
And goodbye to Patsy, the she buckaroo.⁴⁷³

Less than an indication of a change of heart, these final lines can actually be read as evidence of further resistance to prescriptive gender roles and the expectations associated with marriage; at the very least, they show a profound ambivalence to the prospect of wedlock that is far removed from the giddy joy that usually accompanied that prospect in popular music. Montana’s character shows no joy at the prospect of moving to a town as a wife, she simply thinks “that will do.” The loss of freedom

⁴⁷² Tracy Owens Patton and Sally M. Schedlock, *Gender, Power, and Whiteness in Rodeo: Breaking Away from the Ties of Sexism and Racism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012) 68.

⁴⁷³ Patsy Montana, “The She Buckaroo,” ARC 6-04-53, 1936.

associated with the shift from wide open spaces to an urban settlement has its counterpart in the loss of her freedoms as a single woman to the constraints of marriage. The final line shows a more certainty than the rest of the verse: Montana is clear that her marriage will mean saying “goodbye to Patsy,” the loss of her previous and, it is implied, nominally “truer” identity. Montana’s character appeared to both acknowledge and critique conventional expectations of women during this period. Indeed, Eleanor Roosevelt, whilst strongly advocating women’s right to work relief, assumed that the majority of women desired and “ought to concentrate on, homemaking and child-rearing.”⁴⁷⁴

As it happened, the First Lady’s musical taste included all-female string band The Coon Creek Girls, a four-piece musical outfit consisting of Kentuckian sisters Lily May and Rosie Ledford, Evelyn Lange, and Esther Koehler. Even more than Patsy Montana, the Coon Creek Girls appeared to joyfully embody wholesomeness and domesticity, an image carefully constructed by manager John Lair. Against Lily May’s wishes to record material that directly addressed contemporary social and economic realities for mountain folk and many others, Lair wanted the outfit to entertain and uplift their audiences rather than depress them with songs of poverty, tragedy and hardship.⁴⁷⁵ Lair had already made Lily May Ledford perform in clothing that reinforced a dowdy image, more in keeping with the sentimental mother character that had won the nation’s hearts the previous decade. In her autobiography, Lily May recalled:

In the long old-fashioned dresses and high-top lace-up shoes that Mr. Lair had me wear, I felt like an old lady and not at all pretty. Mr. Lair discouraged my

⁴⁷⁴ Miriam Cohen “New Deal: 1933-41” in ed. *Helen Tierney, Women’s Studies Encyclopaedia*, Volume 2, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 990, cited in Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression*, 10.

⁴⁷⁵ Kristine McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels: The Women of Barn Dance Radio* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 95.

buying clothes, curling my hair, going in for make-up or improving my English.⁴⁷⁶

In 1938, the group made its recording debut in Chicago, cutting nine sides for Vocalion. The bulk of the tracks reflected Lair's influence in constructing their image. "Sowing On The Mountain" (Vo/OK 04278), "Old Uncle Dudy (Keep On Fiddling On)" (Vo/OK 04278), and "Flowers Blooming In The Wildwood" (Vo/OK 04659) all nodded towards the agrarian life and familial ties. The Girls also cut a version of "Pretty Polly" (Vo/OK 04659) at the same session. Lily May recalled that she had learned "Pretty Polly" as a youngster from her mother, demonstrating that murder ballads in which the ill-fated female was brutally killed by her sweetheart were not solely the domain of men. Indeed, whilst her mother apparently viewed songs such as "Little Frankie" and "Little Corey" as old songs for drunkards, the fact that she passed "Pretty Polly" on to Lily May allowed a female voice to sing the tale of Polly's pleas for mercy and tragic demise, rather than consigning them only to male performers, whose versions of the tale were, in some respects, just another example of historic attempts to govern women's ability to speak out for themselves.⁴⁷⁷ Still, given their non-threatening, wholesome image, the Girls' rendition of "Pretty Polly" also reinforced notions of feminine propriety and echoed warnings about the dangers of sexual transgression that had characterised recordings of "murdered-sweetheart" ballads by white men in the previous decade. Perhaps, because of this ultra-respectability, Eleanor Roosevelt chose the Coon Creek Girls to represent the music of the Ohio Valley at a showcase in the White House attended by George VI and Queen Elizabeth. The performance was intended to represent all kinds of American music. Tenor Lawrence Tibbett represented opera, black classical

⁴⁷⁶Lily May Ledford, *Coon Creek Girl* (Berea: Berea College Press, Reprint edition, 1991), 16.

⁴⁷⁷Ledford, *Coon Creek Girl*, 8.

soprano Marion Anderson also performed as did Kate Smith performing popular music whilst folklorist and ballad collector Alan Lomax performed western folk music. The Coon Creek Girls performed two favourites of the president and the First Lady: “How Many Biscuits Can You Eat” and “Get Along Miss Cindy.” However, they also performed the eminently respectable, romantic, old-English ballad “The Soldier and the Lady.” Perhaps not surprisingly given its content, “Pretty Polly” did not make it onto the short set-list that Lily May and her bandmates performed for the esteemed audience that night.⁴⁷⁸

In spite of the presence of female artists on Old Time shellac, tensions arose within a commercial music industry when women proved themselves as successful and competitors to their male musical counterparts. In an interview in the early 1980’s, Lily May revealed that male country artists were often less-than receptive to women working within the field of commercial roots music. When asked what it was like for female musicians starting out in the 1930s, Lily May replied:

Well I tell you it could get pretty rough, because there wasn’t many women in the business, it was mostly the men and the boys, and they felt very much in the saddle, and they *were*. But, uh, a few of us managed to edge in, you know, occasionally, and so we met with some hostility from the more polished musicians. They’d worked so hard to perfect theirs and they thought that mine was pretty rough, and very rough, and they uh, they... I don’t know, they were a little hostile, they, they, and they would tease and torment and get pretty insulting sometimes, so it wasn’t easy at all.⁴⁷⁹

At other times during the interview Lily May revealed that on occasion one or two male country singers showed “downright contempt” for women and that the men acted as though the women “had moved in on their territory.”⁴⁸⁰ It is clear from Lily May’s comments that women were not altogether welcome in the world of

⁴⁷⁸ Ledford, *Coon Creek Girl*, 24-25.

⁴⁷⁹ Outtakes from a country music programme *Fire on the Mountain* (listed incorrectly as *Headwaters*) which aired in the U.S in the early 1980’s, digitized version available at stable url, <https://archive.org/details/0264LilyMayLedford>, accessed: 28/04/2015.

⁴⁸⁰ *Fire on the Mountain Outtakes*.

commercial country music at that time. The hostility displayed by these male musicians may have reflected the same kind of concerns about male power and prerogatives, and the tensions surrounding women's place and changing gender dynamics that also found expression in the Hillbilly music of the Depression era. Although women like Lily May portrayed sentimental mother types in their public performances, they worked as paid female entertainers at a time when not all men, let alone all white male Hillbilly musicians, were able to find gainful employment and therefore, according to prevailing social norms, fulfil one of the main expectations of a man – to earn a living.

To conclude, country music's development as a commercially recorded and marketed form and steady deviation from "traditional" folk culture may well have resulted in fewer recordings of British-derived murdered-sweetheart ballads. However, the music of Jimmie Rodgers, Jimmie Davis, Bill and Cliff Carlisle, and their contemporaries showed some continuities; they articulated male desires for sexually promiscuous females, while simultaneously denigrating those women as wanton and untrustworthy for the same perceived behaviour. These ideas of alluring, yet forbidden sexuality were sometimes imagined as the traits of non-whites, of "exotics" in ways that linked to continued white concerns around spurious notions of racial integrity and the debasing effects of racial-mixing. Apparent elsewhere in Hillbilly were many male-authored and performed songs that clearly expressed a desire to assert, or reclaim, control over women during a period of intense economic hardship and equally intense social change. At a time when many men felt their economic power, social prestige and ability to conform to the expectations of masculinity waning, music which restored male agency and power, sometimes through brutality and violence, may have provided both escape and catharsis.

Moreover, the conflicting attitudes towards women expressed in these songs, which still oscillated between reverence for an idealised compliant and faithful female and violent contempt for any women who deviated from those ideals, even those whose deviations made them sexually tempting, allowed for the tailoring of women in Hillbilly music to enable men to negotiate a rapidly-changing cultural landscape.

Against the grain of male expectation and desire, during the 1930s some women were actively resisting attempts at gender-based social control in terms of their political and social engagement, incursion into new employment roles and quest for greater sexual freedoms. Some simply refused to accept their allotted place in the social structure, even as others endorsed and helped to perpetuate the highly gendered and generally patriarchal status quo that pertained in America, nowhere more so than in the South, which gave rise to so many Hillbilly artists. Again, the music of this era reflected this complexity, with its many currents and counter-currents. Certainly, the increasing, if still relatively limited, presence of female Hillbilly artists on shellac gave rise to a kind of grass-roots cultural activism through which they sometimes questioned, contested and resisted, even to the point of physical as well as verbal retaliation, white male privilege and attempts to enforce male control. In sum, the development of commercially recorded Hillbilly music in the 1930s continued to be shaped by its close relationship to contemporary socio-economic and cultural developments, providing social texts that illuminate the fraught period in which they enjoyed popularity.

Conclusion

During the interwar period Americans fiercely debated issues of class, gender, and race-based hierarchies. Whilst the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 officially enfranchised women, the route to empowerment would be long and arduous. Although white women were generally able to vote, black women were routinely barred from going to the polls. Over a period of two decades, black and white women's club movements fought tirelessly against white male privilege and authority. For many communities, motherhood and marriage were the respectable ideal. In the early 1920s, in southern and Midwestern states, white supremacists stressed the importance of motherhood and traditional family values as the bedrock of American life. Although not conforming to white ideals, many black Americans strove to attain equal status, placing a premium on motherhood and nurturing as ideal models of womanhood, thereby projecting a collective sense of respectability. These proscriptions reinforced traditional views of gender and ideas about race and class, centralizing black and white women as the bearers of the responsibility of community and national repair within their respective racial groups.

Battles over gendered hierarchies and female empowerment continued throughout the 1930s. Although white supremacist groups were notably less-prominent during this period, racist ideology and attempts at reifying white male authority and privilege remained firmly entrenched in the daily lives of many Americans. The anxious times of the Great Depression exacerbated these tensions as jobs became scarcer. Black women increasingly turned to domestic work and prostitution, forced into roles that at times may have legitimized long-held notions of

black female essentialism. Many white women also undertook domestic roles and yet were denied work as domestics depending on their marital status. Such proscriptions were, perhaps unsurprisingly, met with resistance, in the real world and in the worlds created on shellac recordings. Marriage itself became a contentious issue as women's increasing, although modest, empowerment enabled them to question, and at times reject traditional ideas about married life and gender politics within the marital home.

The activities of recording labels during the interwar period have left us with a rich and diverse array of music, comprising myriad styles and flavours. The commercial recording of Blues, Gospel, sacred sermons, Old Time and its later incarnation Hillbilly music allowed a select few southern and non-southern men and women the opportunity to make financial gains as entertainers, whilst providing consumers with a wealth of music that informed and was informed by the cultural milieu in which it initially enjoyed success. For some artists, the financial benefits were great, for others, less so. Nevertheless, the "birth" and subsequent popularity of commercially recorded roots music in the interwar period made an indelible imprint on popular culture of the time and has continued to do so ever since. These recordings provide historians and music scholars alike with compelling social texts. Whilst they do not qualify as documentary evidence of the gendered and racial power contestations that took place in the real world of this period, the themes they broached nevertheless intersected with many socio-political debates concerned with hierarchies of class, gender, and race.

The emergence and popularity of commercially recorded Old Time music in the 1920s coincided with national anxieties about the forces of modernity. Record labels capitalised on the nostalgic appeal of the romanticised and much-mythologized

pastoral South of yesteryear. The region became one upon which the nation projected its fears and desires at a time when many saw the new age of technological advances and alternative models of gender as a threat to tradition and heritage. The family unit, with mother in the hearts, hearths, and homes of much of the nation's imagination became central to discourses about old-fashioned values and respectability. Old Time music was perfectly poised, to communicate powerful messages about these values through the medium of shellac records and marketing materials. The popularity of "murdered-sweetheart" ballads, reflected in part growing fears, and eventually legal measures, to limit the threat that perceived sexual deviancy of white southern women may have upon the moral fabric of the southern states, and America more broadly. Transgressive women perished in grisly musical narratives of lust and deceit, whilst house-bound mothers fared comparatively better. Doubtless, overwhelmingly racist imperatives informed methods of social control over white women during this period. Although Old Time music lyrics were at times entirely free of white supremacist ideology, many themes intersected with, and at times directly represented the sentiments of white supremacists about racial and gendered hierarchies and the reification of white male authority. Female artists during this period, Roba Stanley and Sara Carter, most notably, resisted social expectations of white women to marry and rear children, at times rejecting older models of marriage, whilst at others, critiquing the unfair demands placed upon married women. However, their black female counterparts bore an even heavier burden as members of an oppressed sexual group, but also as members of an oppressed racial group. In this respect, the recordings of the Classic Blues singers of the 1920s seem arguably even more remarkable in their number, and content.

A plethora of Classic Blues artists that enjoyed success confronted spousal abuse, and gave a collective voice of resistance to black women at a time when they had precious little political leverage in their personal relationships, and also in the wider arena of electoral politics. On occasion, male composers and lyricists were able to voice their frustrations about police brutality against African Americans through these exceptional women. That these women were able to forge careers as paid, travelling musicians at a time when white supremacy and systemic racial discrimination severely inhibited opportunities for black female progress, and black progress more generally, is testimony to their importance and the significance of their contribution to black working-class women's political discourse at a grass-roots level. At times, delighting in their own sexuality, these women also contested prescriptive, idealised models of womanhood that black intellectuals stressed were the route to racial uplift. They sang of the burden of black womanhood, articulating their own desires, fears, and occasionally their anger at the obstacles that black women faced as members of two oppressed groups. And yet, these women also empowered their black male counterparts now and then. Praising black male physicality, they rejoiced in musical tales of male sexual prowess and physical toughness, but also of tenderness. In these recordings they humanised characteristics so often dehumanised by powerful whites as they sought to control black Americans at large.

The burgeoning popularity of Country Blues from the middle of the 1920s onwards provided black working-class men with opportunities to make financial gains, albeit modest, as paid entertainers. Although their lyrics covered many themes, a disproportionate amount of these recordings featured misogynist content, at times exacerbating the hardships faced by black women as members of two

subordinate groups. Sacred offerings reinforced the importance of race motherhood and the politics of black female respectability. Male characters in many Blues recordings denigrated alternative models of black womanhood that challenged male control, whilst simultaneously desiring sexually voracious females, thereby mirroring many of the tensions that modernity brought in its wake. Collectively, the themes in these recordings intersected with debates about racial progress and black communities' expectations of their women. Although most bluesmen hailed from differing social-class backgrounds to leading black intellectuals, their recorded output nevertheless often reflected the burden that black women had to shoulder throughout this turbulent period.

As the 1920s drew to a close, financial collapse intensified hardship and employment opportunities for blacks. The Blues recordings that followed in the wake of the Depression throughout the 1930s reflected the dire financial conditions that African Americans faced. Male hostilities towards women intensified on record during this period as characters threatened to cut, maim, and kill their female counterparts. The few Blues women that remained successful during this period of extreme poverty sang of prostitution, robbery, but also of collective resistance, alluding to hopes of black empowerment in the face of housing problems, racial harassment, unemployment, and police brutality. Inextricably bound to these themes were intense gendered tensions; themselves often the side-effects of systemic racism, intensified by the debilitating effects of the Depression. Although record label executives encouraged artists to record music that may have legitimised essentializing stereotypes of blackness, they nevertheless gave a small number of working-class musicians the opportunity to "benefit" financially from the modern age, providing them with a public platform upon which they could voice the harsh

realities of life for legions of dislocated and disenfranchised black Americans in rural locales as well as urban centres.

Hillbilly music during the Depression also reflected the gendered strife that economic collapse exacerbated. On recordings, male characters acknowledged female resistance to imbalanced gender politics in the marital home. They also explicitly acknowledged the shift in female sexual behaviour and at times constructed overt female sexuality in distinctly racialized terms, mirroring continued efforts to control and regulate female sexuality in the real world. Whilst these male characters chastised women for sexually transgressive behaviour, they nevertheless also acknowledged the appeal of overtly sexual women. Female artists openly challenged these proscriptive methods of gender profiling, of labelling and control, asserting and celebrating their own femininity as a challenge to white male authority. In many respects the themes in these recordings spoke to and of political developments during the 1930s, in which female advances seemed to be slowing, if not receding. And yet, a number of recordings enabled resistant women's voices to be heard in public through the medium of commercially recorded Hillbilly music.

Although this study has attempted to give a balanced and thorough overview of the relationship that commercially recorded roots music of the interwar period and the era's gender politics, it certainly makes no claim to being exhaustive. Given the focus on recorded music, it does not pay much attention to radio as an outlet for live roots music; or to the voices of resistance that were doubtless heard in live performances throughout these decades. Rather, it has been conceived as an attempt to offer insights into the reciprocal relationship between major social, economic, ideological and political forces and an important strain of American popular musical culture and commerce. The focus has been primarily on gender, particularly the

representations on shellac of changing, and often hotly contested notions of womanhood and manhood; representations which themselves helped to shape how such concepts were understood, performed, and sometimes challenged in American society in ways that often varied according to race, class, region, and sexuality. Above all, however, this thesis offers an interdisciplinary study of how black and white female efforts to resist male control played out in some of the commercially recorded roots music of the interwar years.

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