

# Bypassing the Consumer: Popular Music, Poplore, and the *Idiosyncratic Path* of Van Dyke Parks

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There is something risky about discussions of music, or indeed much else besides, which rely upon the concepts of *people* and the *popular*. As Richard Middleton has recently observed, the terms have been used and abused to the point of redundancy. Over fifty years ago, Bertolt Brecht was sarcastically suggesting that in the wake of the failed Berlin popular uprising East German Communist Party leaders might dissolve the people and elect another; today, as Middleton puts it, “the tiredness of the people idea seems self-evident,” while most notions of the popular quickly tail off into “exhausted anticlimax.” Where once there were bogus people’s democracies and popular fronts for the liberation of X (but the oppression of Y), in recent years Middleton’s fellow inhabitants of Great Britain have endured the people’s princess, the people’s lottery and the people’s dome.<sup>1</sup> But if terms such as *people* and *popular* have been relentlessly exploited and devalued, then the very qualities that have invited such treatment also sustain their academic appeal: in spite of the accompanying drawbacks, their sheer flexibility is well-suited for discussions of such an amorphous phenomenon as popular music.

1. Richard Middleton, “Locating the People: Music and the Popular,” in ed. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton, *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003) 252-3.

Of more recent vintage than popular and people, the concept of *poplore* is also usefully accommodating – and as a result, perhaps, correspondingly problematic. It has neither been applied in as many contexts as the other terms, however, nor used for such a variety of non-scholarly purposes. Moreover, its scale is more restricted (speaking of communities rather than whole populations), while its subject matter is less amorphous (linked to sub-cultures instead of mass culture). In any event, considered in relation to notions of the popular, the *poplore* concept offers what Marshall McLuhan called an “anti-environment” capable of illuminating otherwise imperceptible features, contours and qualities of a given domain.<sup>2</sup> Its potential is all the more pronounced when such broad concepts are engaged in relation to a specific type of cultural expression; and it is further enhanced when addressed to individual examples. What follows reviews and draws on the concepts of *poplore* and the popular as applied to the field of music in order to appreciate the work of an artist whose career speaks to and is illuminated by both: the American musician, songwriter, arranger, and producer Van Dyke Parks.

I  
Raymond Williams notes in *Keywords* that the etymology of the word *popular* can be traced back to the Latin *popularis*: “belonging to the people.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, to paraphrase Middleton (who is himself paraphrasing Stuart Hall), there is “no *essence* of the popular,” no fixed content to the category of “popular music,” nor any fixed subject (“the people”) to attach it to.<sup>4</sup> If the general category of popular music has often been contrasted to *art* and *folk* music, for example, then such distinctions have grown increasingly hazy as long-standing differences over the semantics

2. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (New York: Bantam, 1968) 175; Philip Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* (1989; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998) 177-178.

3. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Glasgow: Fontana Collins, 1976) 198.

4. Middleton in Clayton et. al. 253; Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular’,” in ed. Raphael Samuel, *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) 238.

and etymologies of these terms have become compounded by disagreements as to their social, cultural, material, political, and historical domains. Attempts to identify one kind of music in terms of its alleged antonyms have as a result tended only to highlight the many grey areas between them. There are in addition numerous understandings – many of them overlapping, none of them fully satisfactory – of what the “popular” *within* popular music refers to. Among other things, it has come to signify market-oriented or commercially successful, as well as industrially mass-produced and distributed. The essence of the popular has been found, accordingly, in a hook-laden chorus, at the top of the music sales charts, on a vinyl or plastic disc, and through record shops or on-line stores. The “people” such music is “of,” meanwhile, have been associated politically with the working class, or culturally with the “common folk,” their social identities, and traditions. Paradoxically, the people’s music has in the process been granted both revolutionary and conservative powers.<sup>5</sup>

As the preceding remarks suggest, these many meanings of popular and the people have been valorized, polarized, and politicized. Understood in its commercial sense, for example, the epithet “popular” has been used to confer great legitimacy (think of musicologist Harry Smith’s decision to base his now-landmark *Anthology of American Folk Music* [1952] solely on commercially-released recordings: “records put on sale,” as Greil Marcus later put it, “to which people really had responded” because they considered them “worth paying for”).<sup>6</sup> But it has also implied “of little value” (most obviously in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s influential “culture industry” theories, where popular signifies not only trivial but positively malign).<sup>7</sup> Proletarian understandings of the “people’s songs” – exemplified by the organization of that name (1945-1949) which built on the work of the Almanac Singers col-

5. Middleton in Clayton et. al. 251, 253, 254, 260; Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990) 4-7; Deanna Campbell Robinson, Elizabeth B. Buck and Marlene Cuthbert, *Music at the Margins: Popular Music and Global Cultural Diversity* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1991) 10-11; Philip Tagg, “Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice,” *Popular Music* 2 (1982): 37-67. For a general review of concepts of “popular” in relation to culture, see John Storey, *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 6-18.

6. Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (London: Picador, 1997) 102.

7. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979) 120-167.

lective (1941-1943) – have long resisted the bourgeois popular appeal of Tin Pan Alley; advocates of vernacular or roots music, meanwhile, have more recently contrasted them to mass production-line pop.<sup>8</sup> In the United States, such distinctions and struggles have seen what Middleton calls the “imagined social space” of “the people” marginalized and subordinated, either by force or (more commonly) by appropriation: the former expressed via blacklisting and banning; the latter encompassing such practices as licensing, the niche marketing of “race records” or “protest music,” and the commodifying methods of the entertainment industry as such. Yet “the people” have also *resisted* such debasement: writing back to (or perhaps singing back at) dominant social, economic, political, and cultural orders – an exercise best exemplified, perhaps, by the elaboration of a “distinctive counterculture of modernity” and “politics of fulfilment [and] transfiguration” dubbed by Paul Gilroy the “Black Atlantic.”<sup>9</sup> In historical terms, meanwhile, an expansive and dominant capitalism, technological innovation, racialized social divisions, and frontier myth and experience have all helped shape the shifting contours of the popular in the United States.<sup>10</sup> In short, the popular in American popular music is multifaceted, contested, and marked by historical circumstance.

What all this has to do with the individual subject of this essay, Van Dyke Parks, can be condensed into two claims. Firstly, that through his 40 years and more in the business, Parks has traversed a great many of the contours of American popular music; secondly, that if his career has followed (as his “best of” collection put it) an *Idiosyncratic Path*, then it also offers a case study of the tensions in, as well as the dynamics and limits of, the popular music category and its social, economic, and cul-

8. Middleton in Clayton et. al. 254; Middleton, 3-4; Jason Toynbee, “Mainstreaming, from Hegemonic Center to Global Networks,” in ed. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus, *Popular Music Studies* (London: Arnold, 2002) 150-51. On the Almanac Singers and People’s Songs, see Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002) 28-35, 42-59; Peter D. Goldsmith, *Making People’s Music: Moe Asch and Folkways Records* (Washington DC and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998) 115, 174-77, 219.

9. Middleton in Clayton et. al. 254; Toynbee 150-51; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993) 36-38. For an ideology of people’s music as resistance grounded not in racial but political terms, see Irwin Silber’s contribution to ed. Ronald D. Cohen, “Wasn’t That a Time!” *Firsthand Accounts of the Folk Music Revival* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1995) 89-104.

10. Middleton in Clayton et. al. 254-5; Toynbee 154.

tural contexts.<sup>11</sup> To elaborate on these claims, what follows will briefly outline Parks' career and then relate aspects of it to various understandings of the popular. Finally, it will reconfigure these materials in terms of scholarly theories of poplore.

## II

Van Dyke Parks was born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in 1943. He was educated at the American Boychoir School at Princeton and Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh, where he studied composition and piano. In 1962, at the height of the American folk music revival, he dropped out of school to join his Los Angeles-based brother Carson: first in an acoustic duo (The "Steeltown Two") singing in clubs and coffee houses up and down the west coast, and then as part of the Brandywine Singers and the Greenwood County Singers, recording a series of albums and touring nationwide. These experiences led to work as a studio musician, from playing piano on the soundtrack of Walt Disney's *The Jungle Book* (1963) to working with (among others) The Byrds and Brian Wilson of The Beach Boys. Following a brief association with MGM, Parks in 1967 signed as recording artist and studio leader with Warner Brothers, for whom he has so far made seven solo albums: the first, *Song Cycle*, in 1968; the latest, *Moonlighting*, in 1998.

For over 25 years, Parks has also written both feature film and television documentary soundtracks (most recently, the music for Robert Altman's *The Company* [2003]), and has arranged and produced music for a wide range of well-known musicians, such as Bruce Springsteen, the Everly Brothers, Randy Newman, Sheryl Crow, and U2. Almost three decades before Ry Cooder began the work that led to the best-selling Cuban *Buena Vista Social Club* (1997) album, Parks had begun devoting energy to the promotion of what is today called "world music." By the early 1970s, under the aegis of Warner Brothers, he was also making some of the very first music videos as alternative promotional devices for

11. *Idiosyncratic Path: The Best of Van Dyke Parks*, compiled by Alan Price. CD: Demon/Diablo DIAB 807 (1994).

musicians to the damaging “rigors of the road” – though over ten years too early for them to appear on what later became MTV.<sup>12</sup> Pursued largely behind-the-scenes, perhaps, Parks’ career in music has nonetheless boxed every point of the cultural compass: from high art via folk song to the mass media, through movies, records and television; for over 40 years in the music business it has in the process also traversed the borders of the popular: in terms of sales, of aesthetics, of media, and of cultural trends.

However, it is not only the nature of Parks’ work that illuminates popular music’s distinctive features, but also its scope, integration, and timing. To begin with, his music has continuously traversed, mapped, and cultivated the musical borderlands of art, folk, and the popular. Trained within the classical tradition, Parks on the one hand has brought to the popular sphere a sense of art music’s aesthetic possibilities, programmatic scope, and orchestral resources. His debut MGM single, “Number Nine” (1965), for example, weds a translation of Schiller’s “Ode to Joy” to an arrangement of part of Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> *Symphony*. His first album, *Song Cycle* (1968), alludes to Beethoven, Mahler, Ives, and Schubert, and features a string quartet but no rhythm section.<sup>13</sup> Such music has been dubbed “symphonic pop” and (less accurately if more wittily) “baroque ‘n’ roll.” On the other hand, Parks has also drawn vernacular music into the popular realm. *Song Cycle*, for example, begins with a version of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century Child ballad “Black Jack Davy” and uses three times as many balalaikas as electric guitars.<sup>14</sup> Having taken part in the folk music revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s, moreover, Parks as artist and producer would go on to promote African American and Caribbean grass-roots materials before popular music audiences across the United States.

12. Matthew Greenwald, “The *MusicAngle* Interview: Van Dyke Parks: Song Cyclist and Brian Wilson Collaborator Speaks,” *MusicAngle*, July 2003 <<http://www.musicangle/feat.php?id=7&page=4>>.

13. Kenneth Fitzgerald, “Disc Misc.,” in Rudy VanderLans, *Palm Desert* (Sacramento: Émigré, 1999) 90. Parks was by no means the only songwriter or arranger to explore the potentials of the classical tradition. During the 1950s producer Mitch Miller had drawn on orchestral resources in his work for singers like Rosemary Clooney, as subsequently did Brill Building songwriters such as Neil Sedaka. Miller also played a pioneering role in bringing vernacular (in this case, country) music into the major label (Columbia) pop mainstream through vocalists such as Tony Bennett and Frankie Laine.

14. The earliest printed version of the song is recorded as number 200 in the fourth volume of Francis J. Child’s *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-1898). It was known among other titles as “The Gypsy Laddie” and “The Raggle Taggle Gypsies,” and was dated by Child back to at least 1720 if not earlier.

In the early 1960s he had started to learn more about Trinidadian music from the small Los Angeles-based exile community, notably steel band leader Andrew de la Bastide. Some 40 years later he would produce a musical celebration of the life and work of the leading calypsonian Lord Kitchener (Aldwyn Roberts) at UCLA's Royce Hall.<sup>15</sup>

In extending the scope and enriching the vocabulary of the popular, Parks' music has also arranged aesthetic conversations between its parts. His second album *Discover America* (1972), for example, combines the forms and rhythms of Trinidad's vernacular calypso and steel band music with the home grown arrangements associated with the Tin Pan Alley school of popular song and Hollywood film scores. His fourth album, *Jump!* (1984), elaborates folk materials rooted in the slave cultures of the Deep South – specifically the Brer Rabbit series of African American folk tales collected and retold by Joel Chandler Harris – into the basis of a (sadly unrealised) Broadway theatrical production.<sup>16</sup> His most recent studio album, *Orange Crate Art* (1995), brings together within a Californian framework many of the instrumental and stylistic resources explored in earlier recordings: from the Trinidadian steel drums on “Sail Away” and “Summer in Monterey” and the Spanish guitar on “Orange Crate Art” to the home-grown resources of ragtime, Broadway and barbershop, George Gershwin and Steven Foster that crop up everywhere. Just to pick up a copy of *Orange Crate Art* is to be exposed to Parks' expansive, combinatory aesthetic, for even as the recording's title alludes to the “folk-commercial” marketing imagery of the state's citrus industry, its jacket features examples of the high art *plein air* school of Californian impressionist paintings.

This integration process has not been solely musical. All of these works have been recorded under the auspices of Warner Brothers Records, a business whose growth from its creation in 1958 to major label status in just twenty years was based on the exploitation of com-

15. Personal interview, Los Angeles, October 2003. The concert in memory of Lord Kitchener (*Calypso: A Tribute to Kitch*) was staged at Royce Hall, University of California Los Angeles, on 12 October 2003. Produced by Parks, it featured leading calypsonians such as Mighty Sparrow, David Rudder, and Calypso Rose.

16. Parks has also published three volumes retelling some of the Brer Rabbit stories for children: *Jump! The Adventures of Brer Rabbit* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986); *Jump Again! More Adventures of Brer Rabbit* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987); and *Jump on Over! The Adventures of Brer Rabbit and His Family* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989).

mercially successful acts, from the Everly Brothers to Fleetwood Mac.<sup>17</sup> Parks' elaboration of the popular in *aesthetic* terms has been accomplished, that is, within the machinery of the popular in *commercial* terms. Here *timing* was both crucial and symptomatic. Van Dyke Parks signed to Warner Brothers just as the rapid growth of rock music, culture, and audiences was enabling the commercially viable extension of popular music's scope. Warner Brothers were at the cutting edge of this process, releasing between 1966 and 1970 albums by artists like Jimi Hendrix, Randy Newman, the Mothers of Invention, Buffalo Springfield, Captain Beefheart, The Grateful Dead, Crosby, Stills and Nash, The Doors, Van Morrison, Joni Mitchell, Love, Ry Cooder, and Neil Young. As arranger, writer, producer or musician on many such recordings, and via his work for artists signed to other labels (including The Byrds, The Beach Boys, and Harry Nilsson), Parks was therefore on the frontier and at the very heart of a major extension in the scope, nature, and production of post-war American popular music.<sup>18</sup>

To underline its amorphous and contradictory nature, however, in spite (or perhaps because) of his thorough explorations of popular music's fabric, contours and margins, Parks has never himself been very popular in *commercial* terms: on the contrary. His best-known album, *Song Cycle*, was in this sense representative. Regardless of the qualities that brought Parks enormous prestige *within* the industry, upon release the album settled quickly into what one observer has called "the cult-critical favourite category marked by worshipful reviews and microscopic sales." As Warner's marketing chief Stan Cornyn recently remarked, *Song Cycle* "moved out of the stores like a stone unable to roll." At the time, and in large part via Cornyn's own distinctive publicity materials, the record label was developing a carefully calculated (and financially-

17. Fred Goodman, *The Mansion on the Hill: Dylan, Young, Geffen, Springsteen, and the Head-On Collision of Rock and Commerce* (London: Pimlico, 1999) 43-52

18. Stan Cornyn, with Paul Scanlon, *Exploding! The Highs, Hits, Hype, Heroes, and Hustlers of the Warner Music Group* (New York: Harper, 2002) 110-168; Goodman, 56-81; Barney Hoskyns, *Waiting for the Sun: Strange Days, Weird Scenes, and the Sound of Los Angeles* (1996; London: Bloomsbury, 1997) 206-7. On the significance of Warner Brothers Records during these years, see Robert Lloyd, "One Brief Shining Moment: The Miraculous Half Decade When Warners Was the Heart of Rock & Roll," *LA Style* 4, 6 (November, 1988): 148-153, 197, 240-242; Paul Williams, ed., *The Crawdaddy! Book* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2002) 256-259. For a detailed listing of Parks' work for other artists, see the relevant page on Jan Jensen's Van Dyke Parks website *The Songcycler*: <http://vandykeparks.com/works.html>.



rewarding) anti-commercial public image. But when it became clear that very few people *had* – in the words of Warner’s initial advertising pitch – “become involved with Van Dyke Parks,” it was little consolation for Parks to see the label run a follow-up pair of full-page trade adverts on behalf of *Song Cycle* which, by offering virtually to give copies away, made the “album of the year” seem valuable, yet worthless. In the long run, Parks’ pointed observation that *Song Cycle* had been not a poor seller but a slow seller has been borne out. At the time, however, a statement by corporate Vice President Joe Smith included in the first ad may only have added insult to injury. *Song Cycle*, he remarked, was “such a milestone” that it went “sailing straight into the Smithsonian Institute, completely bypassing the consumer.”<sup>19</sup>

Though a backhanded compliment, Smith’s characterization of *Song Cycle* also inadvertently throws more light on the multi-faceted nature of the term “popular” in relation to music in general and Van Dyke Parks’ music in particular. On the one hand, in contrasting the Smithsonian and “the consumer,” it implies that Parks’ music had found a place in what has been called the “nation’s attic” but had also become estranged from those in whose name the attic was maintained. It was, in other words, fundamental yet marginal, valued more than used, in the people’s hearts but over their heads. On the other hand, in suggesting that *Song Cycle* was “bypassing the consumer,” Smith’s words also imply that such music should (and in other circumstances would) have enjoyed a large audience prior to its canonization. In the last part of this essay, these inferences – that some cultural forms may be popular but at the same time unappreciated; may be *of, for,* and yet also *beyond* the people – will be interpreted via the theory of poplore.

19. Kenneth Fitzgerald, “Wax Aesthetic,” in VanderLans 87; Cornyn 117; Ronnie Dannelley, “Van Dyke Parks,” *Ear Candy* 20 (March, 2002) [http://earcandy\\_mag.tripod.com/vandykeparks.htm](http://earcandy_mag.tripod.com/vandykeparks.htm); Domenic Priore, ed., *Look! Listen! Vibrate! Smile!* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1995) 204, 214. At the time, Stan Cornyn was by no means the only corporate executive pushing marketing in this direction, nor was popular music alone marked by anti-commercial sales pitches. On the commercialization of folk music, see Mikiko Tachi, “Commercialism, Counterculture, and the Folk Music Revival: A Study of *Sing Out!* Magazine, 1950-1967,” *Japanese Journal of American Studies* 15 (2004): 187-211. For the broader trend, see Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

### III

The term *poplore* was originally coined by cultural historian Marshall Fishwick. Further theorized by Gene Bluestein, W.T. Lhamon, and others, it refers to the folklore of modern urban life, and is intended to correct what these critics believe is an important theoretical shortcoming in the study of modern folklife. Established assumptions about the folk, folklore, and the folk process, they argue, derive from nineteenth-century European ideas and examples; however appropriate they once were, they are ill suited to advanced industrial societies like the United States. In an age of mass communications, they claim, the "folk" (understood as small, rural, autonomous and marginalized communities) scarcely exist; nor does the "folk process" if conceived (as Bluestein puts it) in terms of "anonymity, slow change over long periods of time, and isolation from popular, formal, and commercial influences."<sup>20</sup>

Societies like the United States are not *devoid* of modern equivalents of folk, folklore or the folk process; they differ significantly, however, from those of more traditional communities. According to Lhamon, therefore, modern urban societies retain groups of people who "act ... like a folk," such as "rock 'n' roll freaks, ... student activists, and civil rights workers." Their lore, like folklore, remains an amalgam of "stories, customs, patterns of belief and behavior and gesture which maintain the structure of community belief and self-expression." In its modern (poplore) form, in other words, it continues to serve such communities in ways that folklore served their rural predecessors (being "as true to its environment," in Fishwick's words, "as was folklore to an earlier one").<sup>21</sup> But unlike the traditional folk process, the poplore process is not distinguished by oral transmission, nor does its locus lie beyond the marketplace, nor is it necessarily anonymous or gradual. Instead, it is marked by

20. Gene Bluestein, *Poplore: Rock and Pop in American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994) 5. The term "poplore" was first used by Marshall Fishwick in his essay "Folklore, Fakelore, and Poplore," *Saturday Review*, 26 August 1967, 20-21, 43-44. But scholarly concerns about the shortcomings of established folklore theory in relation to folk music had been evident since the 1940s in the work of musicologist Charles Seeger. For an example of the abiding influence of established notions of the folk process, see Sam Hinton, "The Singer of Folksongs and His Conscience," in ed. David A. DeTurk and A. Poulin, Jr., *The American Folk Scene: Dimensions of the Folksong Revival* (New York: Dell, 1967) 68. Hinton also acknowledges and laments the limitations such norms entailed in relation to the urban folk music revival.

21. W.T. Lhamon, Jr., *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990) 108, 141; Fishwick 20.

what Bluestein calls the “influences of popular and commercial sources.” The products of poplore, meanwhile, are less hand crafted than mass-produced and -mediated, and far from being collectively authored, they “often show the stamp of clearly defined individual personalities.”<sup>22</sup> The transition between these two types of lore is therefore marked by continuity and change. Like its rural precursor in relation to grass-roots folk materials, the new lore (in Lhamon’s words) “invest[s] pop images with mythic resonance, ... locat[ing] patterns of usefulness in the bewildering panoply of instant images that the electronic media and ... consumer culture throw before contemporary audiences.” Yet while poplore “does the same thing with its facts as folklore did with its, ... the facts are different” – not only urban but also “instantly designed for speedy dissemination [and] frequently exploitative.” A “secondary process of response to pop facts,” Lhamon concludes, poplore – as did folklore for preceding generations – “helps ... us live.”<sup>23</sup>

When seeking to identify specific expressions of modern poplore, Lhamon cites the music of Bob Dylan as he moved “from acoustic performance to electric group jamming” and began to express “a folklore of the city” during the spring of 1965. Bluestein offers the example of one of Dylan’s inspirations, sometime Almanac Singer and People’s Songster Woody Guthrie, another well-known and innovative musician and songwriter for whom “folk” was in part a marketing category but who nevertheless “performed in a folkloric idiom” and “express[ed himself] within the framework of a folk process.”<sup>24</sup> As examples of folklore’s urban successor in action, both of these performers benefit from a generic verisimilitude deriving from their (abiding or recent) use of unadorned acoustic guitars and their broader cultural style. They benefit, too, from their perceived radicalism – political, social or cultural – which may be linked to what Bluestein considers the “progressive ... sometimes openly radical ... egalitarianism” common to the development of folklore and poplore.<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Filene has gone so far as to argue that Bob Dylan’s work “remained firmly embedded in the folk process ... [I]ong after his

22. Bluestein 5.

23. W. T. Lhamon, Jr., “Poplore and Bob Dylan,” *Bemington Review* 3 (December, 1978): 25.

24. Lhamon, “Poplore” 22, 25; Bluestein 8.

25. Bluestein 7, 9.

'folk' phase had supposedly passed."<sup>26</sup> But if Filene is persuasive in relation to Dylan, it seems rather more difficult to see how the music of Van Dyke Parks – indebted as it is to the classical tradition, to movie scores, and Tin Pan Alley – might also be understood in terms of even a contemporary, urban, variant of folklore and the folk process. Two other aspects of poplore theory, however, help clarify this otherwise incongruous association.

Firstly, poplore to its theorists is a *syncretic* form, characterized by what Bluestein describes as “a reconciliation of diverse beliefs, practices or systems of various tenets or principles.” As the examples of Guthrie and Dylan suggest, the case for syncretism commonly emphasizes poplore’s incorporation of folk culture properties (or vice-versa): thus to Bluestein poplore entails “creative individuals integrat[ing] sources similar to those appearing in older, more traditional cultures with popular or commercial elements.”<sup>27</sup> Yet as Bluestein’s description makes clear, poplore also draws on those industrially manufactured, commercial cultural forms collectively known as mass culture. Far from absorbing or eradicating all other types of cultural expression (as many mid-twentieth century critics feared), these forms have provided much of the material upon which poplore has drawn: in Lhamon’s words, “siphon[ing] off vitality from its ambient mass culture.”<sup>28</sup> According to critics like Lhamon, moreover, poplore’s syncretism also extends towards high art. Just as poplore is successfully nourished by a mass culture that may seek to absorb what Lhamon calls “oppositional agency,” so it also draws on the energies of any canonical high art – in this case Modernism – that ceases to “heed ... the human needs of its current context.”<sup>29</sup>

Seen in these perspectives, one might argue that by dint of its greater syncretism the music of Van Dyke Parks in some ways belongs *more* to the poplore tradition than the commonly cited work of Dylan or Guthrie. Not only does it mobilize a range of traditional folk materials (from within and beyond the United States); it also responds both to canonical mass cultural sources (such as the Tin Pan Alley standards of Cole Porter

26. Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) 215, 218, 230.

27. Bluestein 5, 8.

28. Bluestein 6-7; Lhamon, *Deliberate Speed* 139-41.

29. Lhamon, *Deliberate Speed* 101, 138.

and Hoagy Carmichael) and to the classical or art music tradition (from Beethoven to Ives), drawing on their energies to develop new musical vocabularies. According to Lhamon, Dylan's movement towards poplore derived from his sense that "simple acoustic guitar strumming" was no longer able to "show what's blowing in the wind," and was expressed via a variety of aesthetic and performing innovations: not just working in an amplified group format but "fracturing the words with the music" and "showing how seeming chaos was really satisfying complexity." Yet such syncretic developments also characterize Parks' (otherwise very different) work, as do the key traits (for Lhamon) of Dylan's post-folk revival musical and lyrical expression: its now-covert protest, its "energy devoted to overtly alternate ways of being in the world." No less than Dylan's landmark mid-1960s albums, Parks' *Song Cycle* offers "elliptical flashes of insight refracted off each other, seemingly without a central theme" – insights which appear "as resistant to clarification as the potpourri of unmediated life around us." If Parks' music resonates less than Dylan's with Lhamon's urban "folk," the explanation may lie partly in the means by which the two men have found "patterns of usefulness" within their respective "panopl[ies] of instant images." Where Dylan drew his "earliest, adolescent love ... for raw rock" through the "serious world of ... New York coffee houses" during the urban folk revival, locating within that "young music a younger lore than folklore," Parks carried through his own west coast folk apprenticeship a love of interwar popular music and the classical tradition – neither of them sufficiently youthful, novel, grass-roots, or iconoclastic, perhaps, to nourish an analogous contemporary response.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, and cognate to these temporal concerns, there is the question of what Lhamon calls the "lore cycle." Not only is poplore related formally to folklore, mass culture, and high art; it also constitutes part of a chronological *sequence* – the lore cycle – in which folklore moves via the condition of poplore towards canonization as art. Though it takes on a natural form, like the cycle of the seasons, the lore cycle for Lhamon is historical and shaped by technological, social, political, and other factors: the modern era, for example, began when the middle class gained sufficient power to "force its vernacular languages [its lore] into official

30. Lhamon, "Poplore" 23, 24, 28.

status,” while modernity’s poplore phase started when lore became mechanized even as an increasingly urbanized folk retained its inherited sense of community. According to Lhamon, such transformations foster the creation of “epochal style formations.” Just as “each emerging populace ... developed the art forms latent in the lore which encouraged its surge to power,” so when once-marginal “poplore publics achieve[d] truly secure positions in society” they discarded their “qualms about stains from their past” and sought “to memorialize their roots.” The latter “vital stage of the lore cycle” built towards a climax for Lhamon during the 1950s and into the 1960s: an “interval of risky boldness” when neither mass culture nor high modernism continued to serve “social needs,” and when a poplore emboldened by social and demographic change as well as access to new electronic technologies became marked by a “reve- latory unguardedness.”<sup>31</sup>

Considered in this context, not only the music but also the career of Van Dyke Parks can be seen as central to the poplore tradition. Though hardly of folk origins in social class terms, Parks was born in the deep southern heartland of American folklife and moved to the city – first Pittsburgh, then Los Angeles – at precisely the time when the poplore communities around whose circles he later moved (Lhamon’s “rock ‘n’ roll freaks, ... student activists, and civil rights workers”) were “scrambl[ing] onto the historical stage.” Less concerned, racism and segregation aside, about stains *from* the nation’s folklife past than stains *on* it, Parks from the late 1950s onwards began a series of creative explo- rations into its musical expressions, drawing them into imaginative inter- actions with established mass culture and high art, with all the “risk, edge, and spontaneity” (in the recording studio if not on the road) that in Lhamon’s words would “enrich ... cultural material all along the lore cycle.”<sup>32</sup> Beginning alongside his brother as a folk musician, Parks moved during the 1960s into close association with American popular musicians, and by the end of the decade was – in Joe Smith’s inapt phrase – en route to an imagined Smithsonian: the canonization, via pop and in short order, of what had once been grass-roots

Both in structural and historical terms, then, the theory of poplore

31. Lhamon, *Deliberate Speed* 99-101, 105-108, 109-112, 138.

32. Lhamon, *Deliberate Speed* 108, 136-138.

throws interpretive light on Van Dyke Parks' work. Yet one more feature of the lore cycle – its tendency to *accelerate* – remains to be mentioned in this connection. Particularly to critics inspired by Horkheimer and Adorno's "culture industry" thesis, advanced capitalist societies are marked by the gradual erosion of all other forms of cultural expression – of high art, of folk and minority cultures – at the hands of an increasingly monopolistic, industrially-produced mass culture. To Lhamon, however, the specter of a "flattened and domesticated society" devoid of cultural diversity and conflict (exemplified by Herbert Marcuse's vision in *One Dimensional Man* [1964] of a "society without opposition") is misleading. Though the lore cycle has been shaped by materialist forces, including class conflict and the business system, it has not tended towards uniformity and stasis; on the contrary, since neither folk nor mass culture have been "powerful enough to erase the other, ...when mass culture ingested what had been exterior to it, ideological dispute did not end, but came from inside...." Further, not only has the relationship between mainstream and marginal cultures involved absorption *and* resistance, defusing *and* differentiation; via mechanisms of social and cultural feedback "the contending parts of the culture [have also] stimulate[d] each other more intensely." The lore cycle, as a result, "turns faster" in modern times than in the pre-industrial era: in Lhamon's words, it "speeds and intensifies."<sup>33</sup>

Read in this light, Van Dyke Parks' music may be thought of as offering a microcosm of Lhamon's accelerating, intensifying dynamic. Over a 40 year period, from his earliest days in the popular music business through and beyond the recording of his most recent album *Moonlighting* (1998), Parks' work has enacted precisely the kind of cultural interactions that constitute the poplore phase of Lhamon's lore cycle: whether considered as a whole (comprising a sequence of recordings), in parts (as a number of distinct albums), or at a detailed level (as individual songs). To listen to the opening tracks on Parks' debut album *Song Cycle*, for example, may be to hear the lore cycle turning: first, a bluegrass style fragment of the traditional Child ballad ("Black Jack Davy") mentioned earlier and sung by an uncredited Steve Young; next, an arrangement – part schmaltz, part Beethoven-quoting classical – of a Randy Newman

33. Lhamon, *Deliberate Speed* 142.

song (“Vine Street”) about the making of music in the shadow of the corporate music industry; and then a Parks original (“Palm Desert”) in which conflicts between man and nature, commerce and community, mass culture and individual creativity, metropolis and hinterland, are played out over an arrangement whose orchestral resources combine the atmospheres of a Broadway show, a movie soundtrack, and a classical recital – all within the space of less than ten minutes. Not only does Parks’ work here exemplify poplore’s syncretism in musical terms; through its incorporation of multiple vocalists and writers it also embodies what Bluestein sees as a distinctively poploric individualism: one expressive of “the many voices without which it could not exist.”<sup>34</sup>

#### IV

Over the years, Van Dyke Parks’ achievements have arguably had as much of the poplore as the popular about them – more, if popularity is understood in solely commercial terms. Regardless of its absence from the *Billboard* charts, his music has exemplified the poplore tradition in its syncretism, its use of folk, mass, and high culture elements, its timing, and its capacity to speak both to and of its communities, however limited their size. Yet Parks’ work is in many ways also clearly popular: pursued at the institutional and geographical center of the American popular music industry; realized in collaboration with some of the world’s most commercially successful musicians; and embedded in and disseminated via a variety of popular mass media. That his efforts may be located within both paradigms illustrates their closely related nature. As Lhamon notes, for example, poplore not only draws on mass or popular culture for its own vitality but also furnishes “impulses” to that culture in return.<sup>35</sup> It is no coincidence that the mid- to late-1960s era of innovation and growth in American popular music came in the wake of the urban folk music revival: the creative poplore crucible for a number of its key figures. Significantly, perhaps, Parks negotiated the transition from folk to

34. Bluestein 10.

35. Lhamon, *Deliberate Speed* 142.



pop (which in this context also meant from east to west coast) two to three years before many of his better-known contemporaries.

As his work also demonstrates, however, poplore and the popular are to some degree at odds with one another as well. In Lhamon's formulation, for example, poplore serves social needs from which popular culture has distanced itself due to its growing subordination to narrowly commercial ends. It is possible, indeed, that the very achievements of Parks' music as poplore help explain its inability to secure a much broader popularity. As Lhamon argues, the survival of poplore depends in part on its agents' ability to turn mass culture to its own ends: "feeding off the mainstream culture, but creating alternate meanings for the signs and ideas they recombined."<sup>36</sup> The price of such alterity, though, is often paid in coin, on the charts, and with the general public. If it was a little presumptuous perhaps for Barney Hoskyns to suggest that in releasing *Song Cycle* Parks had "rather overestimated the intellectual capabilities" of his target audience (in Parks' words, the "errant youth ... showing up [in Los Angeles] in droves"), his observation nonetheless cogently hinted at the commercial underside of Joe Smith's earlier remarks about the album's trajectory from studio to Smithsonian (without sales).<sup>37</sup> Lhamon's lore cycle may have been accelerating and becoming more intense, yet perhaps Parks' poplore exercises – advanced, arguably, by his early move to Los Angeles – were moving too far ahead on the lore cycle curve, at least for popular taste.

Whatever the nature of the relationship between poplore and the popular, the relationships between their theoretical perspectives on the one hand and music on the other are reciprocal. If the concepts of poplore and the popular throw light on the music of Van Dyke Parks, that is, then his music certainly illuminates the concepts. In this sense it may be thought of rather as Herman Melville imagines his protagonist, the Cosmopolitan, in his 1857 novel *The Confidence Man*: like "a revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all around it." Finally, however popular it is, however much it constitutes poplore, it is only *idiosyncratic* in the most etymological of senses. There is, in other words, little that it abnormal or quirky (to cite two common understandings of the term)

36. Lhamon, *Deliberate Speed* 140-141; Bluestein 6-7.

37. Hoskyns 209.

about Parks' music, though it does constitute a distinctive, private or separate (Greek *idios*) expression of a mixture or mingling (Greek *sunkrasis*) of sounds. To Van Dyke Parks himself, meanwhile, the music stands up to any concept or term that might be thrown at it. As he told Erik Himmelsbach following the release of *Orange Crate Art* in 1995, "I like to think it's just popular music ... that isn't so popular."<sup>38</sup>

38. Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man, His Masquerade* (New York: Signet, 1964) 246; Erik Himmelsbach, "California Dreamer: The Story of Van Dyke Parks, America's Most Revered Unknown Musical Genius," *Los Angeles Reader* 18, 6 (17 November 1995): 11.