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# BILL LOWE AND THE MUSIC OF EASTERN APPALACHIA

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BILL LOWE AND THE MUSIC OF EASTERN APPALACHIA

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
History

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by  
Heidi Baldwin McKee  
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## ABSTRACT

As the twentieth century progressed with radio and communications technology, the culture of the Appalachian mountains became an unexplored resource of vast cultural proportions. The Old Regular Baptist faith of the mountains had influenced creative thinkers in the area for generations, and the coming of settlement schools brought secular evaluation from outside the culture. As the people living in the mountains began to understand the uniqueness of their musical heritage, radio technology was becoming available on a much larger scale than ever before. Singers and songwriters from the mountains found eager audiences on a national level.

One of these musicians was Bill Lowe, of Pike County, Kentucky. His early experiences with music clashed with his family's belief system and he found himself caught up in the contradictions of southern spirituality. Despite these conflicts, he began a professional recording and performing career and embodied the values and traditions of rural Appalachian music for a national audience. This study will investigate the effects of the religious culture of the Appalachian mountains, as well as the effects of secular forces within the region. Bill Lowe will serve as an example of how these factors appeared as part of the larger national culture.

Using the author's interviews with Bill Lowe, as well as secondary sources regarding his life in the Kentucky hills, this study will consider these elements in correlation with authentic recordings of this music. Thus, elements of religion, exchange with the outside culture, and radio will be traceable in the music itself.

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## PROLOGUE

In the South of today, music is an integral part of a national trend involving themes, instruments, and subject matter easily recognizable—if not universal—to people throughout the country. However, in the early part of the twentieth century rural Appalachian folk music was a distinctive and rare form, characterized by the uniqueness given it by the aural tradition through which it evolved and the superstitious and fundamentally religious region in which it grew. The religious roots of Appalachian music went far deeper than the changes that would transform the sounds and develop it into a popular cultural phenomenon. Within that old religious tradition the personal and emotional elements of the faith cried out for the accompaniment of music in order to be deeply felt by the population. At the same time, the stern religious climate rejected many of the instrumental and secular elements of the musical tradition. For the purposes of this study, “Appalachia” refers to the rural areas of the mountain range isolated by lack of roads and cultural exchange with the broader national culture. Although there are many variations across the mountain range with regard to musical traditions, the pages that follow will use eastern Kentucky and the surrounding area as an example of such a microcosm of cultural development. The same study could likely be completed considering a set of musicians and tunes from another corner of Appalachia with minor variations on similar results.

While the southern Appalachian mountains at the onset of the twentieth century were a rich cultural setting for preserving traditional music, this underlying contradiction between the secular and religious spheres was apparent in the two streams of musical

thought, a microcosm of the conflict that influenced many aspects of southern life. Indeed, the traditional secular music from the region, including ballads, love songs, jigs for dancing, and other songs about all kinds of rural hardships and joys, owes its existence to the religious musical and cultural tradition so prevalent in the mountain culture.<sup>1</sup> In *Flashes of a Southern Spirit*, Charles Reagan Wilson discusses the Southern culture using Flannery O'Connor's insightful analogy of a "lens of faith"—"The things we see, hear, smell, and touch affect us long before we believe anything at all, and the South impresses its image on us from the moment we are able to distinguish one's own from another."<sup>2</sup>

O'Connor speaks of the fiction writer's fascination "with ultimate mystery as embodied in the concrete world of sense experience," and with those "conventions which, in the hands of the artist, reveal that central mystery."<sup>3</sup> While not all southern music is religious in nature and not all southern musicians embrace the label "gospel" music, it is essential to understand that Protestant evangelicalism has permeated southern culture to such a degree that it has colored much of creative work produced in the region. The southern evangelical faith and the superstitions, attitudes, and beliefs that accompany it have formed a context within which all artistic acts born from the region must subsequently appear. While change within the religious culture of rural Appalachia is slow and seems at times to be almost static, the significance of the religious influence is not its own transformation, but rather its effect on the musicians working within its reach.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn Neal, *Country Music, USA* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 503-505.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Wilson, *Flashes of a Southern Spirit* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 146.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

The following chapters will show how the lens of religion, as well as the complex processes of exchange in the settlement schools and other contact with the modern world, would come to shape Appalachian music through radio and public exposure into a unique form that would be a major contribution of rural southern people to the national culture.

My own path to the study of this music has been a winding one. I began my musical life as a cellist. More specifically, I began my musical life as a fifth grader with a cello, seeking to find out what it was about music that so moved some of the more influential people among whom I had thus far lived my small life. My grandfather was one of a handful of farmers turned textile mill workers in the far northwestern corner of South Carolina. Having lost an arm to the mill machinery, he was faced with either unemployment or relying on other means to make his way in the world. So he became a traveling music minister, spending days at a time traveling to tiny rural churches throughout South Carolina and Georgia and leading congregations in musical worship at tent revivals, camp meetings, and the like. He sang the old songs that his parents and grandparents had taught him, a musical inheritance that was an integral part of his earliest memory. I was fascinated by the faded and well-used hymnals lying in the sun in the rear window of his old Ford, and I was in awe of the way that for him time seemed to stop when he began to sing the spiritual songs of his faith. He would close his eyes and begin to sing and he was tangibly caught up in something much larger than his own story. His tireless travels on the weekends were a testament to his dedication to the thing that so ensnared him. I could not wait to feel it for myself, and I knew the cello would somehow be my way there.

Twenty years later, the cello has led me down an interesting road complete with my own travels and contributions to musical ventures both sacred and secular. The cello also led me in a roundabout fashion to the violin, or the “fiddle” in conversations with the family. When I at last got the courage to take my fiddle to the local museum one afternoon to watch Bill Lowe play and sing, I knew that I was watching someone who loved music in the way that my grandfather did. When he asked me to play *Amazing Grace* with him at the end of his short concert, I could hardly believe my good fortune. He could not believe that he had met a fiddle player who did not mind playing well and loud enough to suit him, for his hearing had begun to fail him in recent years. And so a friendship began. As I talked with Bill Lowe over the months and years following that day, it became apparent that he was well familiar with the power that I had seen music hold over my grandfather. I had to know more about the music that these men learned and loved throughout their entire lives in the Appalachian mountains.

I was fortunate enough to be able to talk about Lowe’s music and career with him in his own home, and to play music with him regularly. He was thrilled to learn of my desire to study this music and was excited that someone with a formal musical education wanted to learn what it was that made this music so unique, so very much a product of the rural mountains from where we all came. Lowe often speaks of the “secret” that remains hidden in music, an idea that many claim to grasp but that he asserts is known to only a small few. “I never got just exactly what I wanted out of music...I was always reading and playing, but you’ve got to seek, seek, seek,”<sup>4</sup> Lowe insists, describing the

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Lowe, interview with the author held in Lowe home, Walhalla, South Carolina, February 19, 2011.



path he followed in his dream of a musical career. For him, this path would mean a musical career, national recognition, and a ticket out of the mountains of his youth.

While his path led him far and away from the mountains of eastern Kentucky, the music of his childhood will always connect him to that place. He describes the attraction:

“Distractions in the cities takes the mind away...in the mountains, you hear the sounds of nature. There is a feeling that penetrates the core of a human being.”<sup>5</sup> While Lowe’s musical career has spanned both sacred and secular music from the mountains, the dichotomy between the two spheres has caused significant conflict within his life. His family’s association with the Old Regular Baptist Church, the branch of the Christian faith prevalent around his birthplace in Pike County, Kentucky, would both inspire and inhibit his growth as a young musician.

The Old Regular Baptist Church, a Christian denomination specific to the Appalachian region, received its current name in 1892. Organized in eastern Kentucky, the faith of Regular Baptists aligns itself with more primitive sects that reject modern methods of worship and lifestyle.<sup>6</sup> Although considered a separate branch of the Baptist faith, Regular Baptists’ beliefs align closely with those of the Primitive Baptists, another conservative group that professes to follow the conventions of the first generation of Christian churches. Ideological conservatism of this nature has traditionally maintained simple worship practices and customs associated with rural congregations of little means. Along Kentucky’s border with Virginia, in the area of Knott, Letcher, and Pike counties, the Old Regular Baptist faith found a stronghold in the impoverished and superstitious

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<sup>5</sup> Bill Lowe interview, February 19, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Bill J. Leonard, *Baptists in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 23.

population of farmers and later coal miners. The sect emphasizes an “election through grace,”<sup>7</sup> which argues that faith is the primary means of establishing religious virtue.

In keeping with these archaic beliefs, music answered to the deep sense of connection to a higher power. In their simple way, adherents to these old forms of the Baptist faith created their own music without instruments. Isolated in the Appalachian mountain range, their harmonies were unique but not complex, and the worship music took on the forms of comparable Gaelic-speaking congregations in the Scottish Highlands and Islands in which the leader sings the first line, and everyone joins in thereafter. This type of line-by-line hymnody involves the entire congregation and supports frequent variation in harmony, meter, and other elements of execution. Highly effective for involving all members of the congregation, regardless of musical background or social role within the church, this practice ensured that everyone would participate according to their abilities, and thus be actively engaged in the service. Rooted deeply in established Protestant tradition, the “lining out”<sup>8</sup> of hymns nurtured the innate musical sense of the mountain children growing up in the faith. In turn, these young believers would preserve it for their own children.

Most importantly, Regular Baptists stressed worship through traditional and extremely simple musical forms for worship. Effectively, their emphasis on unadorned musical structure created a distance between the worshippers of the faith and religious expression afforded by instrumental music. The exclusion of musical instruments from worship follows a trend throughout history of conservative religious leaders decrying

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<sup>7</sup> Leonard, *Baptists in America*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

music as a dangerously expressive addition to worship services.<sup>9</sup> Concerns often arise in religious communities about the secular nature of instruments and the power of music itself to detract from the moral lessons of worship. Indeed, the teachings of the early Christian church identified music as “the servant of religion, and only music that opened the mind to Christian teachings and disposed it to holy thoughts was deemed worthy of hearing in church.”<sup>10</sup> Surely then, the dead girl ballads and songs of unrequited love familiar to the rural community fell outside the approval of the church elders.

There were indeed beliefs of the Old Regular Baptist faith that sternly warned against other, secular types of rural music and the consequences of ignoring these rules could be dire. Within the church doctrine, strict moral guidelines played an active role in maintaining the congregation’s appropriate behavior outside the church walls.

“Churching” or “exclusion”—excommunication of repeat offenders in the crimes of drunkenness, adultery, gambling, lying, or other acts set forth as morally reprehensible—was not uncommon in these churches. Secular music played on instruments and strictly for recreational purposes was a concern based on this line of moral reasoning because, church officials warned, the enjoyment of music often led to drinking or gambling or any of a list of forbidden behaviors.<sup>11</sup>

While it is true that this fear of worldliness inhibited the enjoyment of secular folk tunes for some people in the southern Appalachians, it also ensured that religious music

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<sup>9</sup> Leonard, *Baptists in America*, 19-32.

<sup>10</sup> Donald Grout and Claude Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), 26.

<sup>11</sup> Bill Lowe interview, February 19, 2011.

would continue to have a strong foothold in the region's culture.<sup>12</sup> However, the predominance of evangelical Protestantism makes any concern about the religion's fading presence seem ungrounded. In a 1906 religious census, 96.6 percent of white southerners affiliated themselves with the Protestant faith; about 90 percent of individuals who joined churches joined either the Baptist or Methodist congregations.<sup>13</sup> The Protestant faith in one form or another was the rule and not the exception. The people of the southern Appalachian mountains embraced Protestantism to the degree that it became very much the "lens" to which Flannery O'Connor and Charles Reagan Wilson refer when they discuss the context of music and other creative arts in the South of the twentieth century and before. Wilson remarks that evangelical Protestantism "has dominated for so long that it offers creative people an idiom of its own" through stories, imagery and symbolism, institutions, rituals, and the experiences of the southern people.<sup>14</sup> The southern setting, complete with the superstitions and habits of God-fearing Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churchgoers, lent a rich culture of imagination to the creative tastes of the artistically inclined among the population.

As a means of cultural and individual expression, this familiar conflict of the sacred versus the secular world often claims music as its victim. In her ballad-collecting trip in 1917, Josephine McGill remarked upon the sacred music of the eastern Kentucky mountains, noting that the mountaineers' repertoire of religious music contained music

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<sup>12</sup> John B. Rehder, *Appalachian Folkways* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 230-243.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel S. Hill. *The South and the North in American Religion* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 110.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, *Flashes of a Southern Spirit*, 147.

found primarily in two hymn collections, *The Thomas Hymnal* and *The Sweet Songster*.<sup>15</sup> These volumes could be found in most mountain homes. However, more telling of the clash between sacred and worldly ideals is McGill's description of a particular singer's social behavior. "The singer was so much interested in conversation as often to interrupt his performance to discuss the ethics of singing—local revivalists having raised some doubts about the question," she wrote.<sup>16</sup> While the ballads and folk-tunes of the eastern Kentucky mountains were not in danger of being edited beyond recognition or banished on account of religious disapproval, they did make up a body of musical literature that religious authorities often publicly denounced as a distraction to the spiritual salvation of the mountaineers. That reality was a strong strike against this music in an isolated society of pious believers in the supernatural.<sup>17</sup>

Ironically, it seems that these secular tunes had a stronger foothold in the mountain society than may have appeared at first sight. *The Thomas Hymnal* and *The Sweet Songster*, found in virtually every mountain family's home, contained only lyrics and no printed musical tunes. For these southerners, there were precious few opportunities for formal music training. The occasional musical "prodigy" would be sent away to a larger, northern city or to Europe to receive a formal musical education. The rest of the mountain people learned in the aural tradition passed from generation to generation. Thus, these printed collections of religious hymnody could not hope to

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<sup>15</sup> McGill, Josephine. "'Following Music' in a Mountain Land," in *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (July, 1917), 364-384.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>17</sup> Bill C. Malone and David Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 26-29.

present a new “sacred” tune. They were able only to supply lyrics, which the Appalachian people would sing to the tune of the old, traditional, non-religious melodies that they knew so well. The words may have changed, but the music underlying those words remained a part of the southern Appalachian consciousness and heritage, as much so as idiomatic expressions or cadences of speech. As the messages of the traveling revival preachers lost their novelty after the emotional and flashy tent meetings and the people settled back into their daily lives, the preachers’ warnings about the sins of secular music seemed also to fade into the background of their imaginations, only to return again at the next meeting.

McGill’s account of her travels in search of Appalachian ballads also helps to reveal changing elements of the mountain people’s music as religion’s place in the local culture transformed in its own right. *The Cherry Tree Carol*, an old song “based upon Joseph’s momentary mistrust of Mary when she asks him to gather her cherries from a wayside tree and for the first time gives him a hint of her Precious Burden,” relates the importance of January 6 in the southern mountain dwellers’ religious tradition.<sup>18</sup> January 6 was customarily known as Old Christmas, and marked a time of celebration on a spiritual front for people in the eastern Kentucky mountains and all over Appalachia, even into the 1930s and 1940s. Long after the rest of the nation had adopted the more commercial and less spiritual “new” Christmas celebration, complete with Christmas trees and gift-giving, the pious mountain people reflected on the Nativity in a somber and holy observation on the later date in January.

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<sup>18</sup> McGill, “Following Music’ in a Mountain Land,” 375.

In *Singing Family of the Cumberlands*, Jean Ritchie remembered, “[w]hen I was a very little girl nobody in the country round really celebrated Christmas. Not what you’d call celebrate, you know. It was more of a religious time then, and it fell on the sixth of January. Old Christmas, we call it now. Maybe it was because the folks around were too poor to give fancy presents then... On Old Christmas Eve we’d sit fore the fire and Mom and Dad and Granny’d tell us about the baby Jesus born in a stable on this night.”<sup>19</sup> For the observers of Old Christmas, the purpose was reflection and introspection—the complete opposite of the changes new Christmas traditions promised to bring to the South. For the younger generations of mountaineers, the introduction of a new Christmas celebration was a chance for fun outside the stern judgment of their elders. The birth of Jesus was not a great part of the consideration. However, for both the mountain youth and the older people a new Christmas was an indication of a gradual secularization of thought regarding such social holidays.

Indeed the differences between generations in the hills of eastern Kentucky are more apparent in light of the celebrations of Old and New Christmas. In the daily journal recorded by Katherine Pettit and May Stone of the Sassafras social settlement in Knott County, Kentucky, the entry on September 1, 1901, relates a conversation between the teachers of the settlement school and the local mountaineers. As the ladies shared their own Christmas experiences, their local friends wanted to know if they were referring to Old or New Christmas. As May Stone relates the mountaineers’ explanation, “the Old Christmas, January 6, was Christ’s birthday and the old people observed that and the

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<sup>19</sup> Jean Ritchie, *Singing Family of the Cumberlands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 162.

young people had their frolics on new Christmas, December 25. There is no giving of presents or any religious celebration, but much drinking of moonshine, fighting, and general carousing.”<sup>20</sup> A distinct line was forming between the sacred and secular interpretations of the Christmas holiday. Changing social and religious customs reflected similar changes happening at the same time in the music of the Appalachian people. As Old Christmas became a custom associated with the older generations of eastern Appalachian folk, *The Cherry Tree Carol* fell in popularity and significance to a whole collection of carols and secular Christmas music from the outside world.

Although change was occurring within the spiritual culture of the eastern Kentucky mountains, the religion’s effects on the population were already established. The isolation of the mountaineers would soon be challenged by outsiders and modernization, but the spirituality in the minds of Bill Lowe and others like him would remain a vital factor in the way that Appalachian culture came to be a part of the larger national identity. The Old Regular religion of eastern Kentucky would remain a lens through which the mountaineers and their visitors from urban Kentucky would peer at each other, and would let its voice ring out on the radio waves carrying mountain songs to the rest of the nation. The following chapters will evaluate the effect of this religious lens in combination with the secular factors of settlement schools and radio technology on the music of eastern rural Kentucky in the first half of the twentieth century. These elements resulted in music that became a unique exported product from the Appalachian

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<sup>20</sup> Jess Stoddart, ed. *The Quare Women’s Journals: May Stone & Katherine Pettit’s Summers in the Kentucky Mountains and the Founding of the Hindman Settlement School* (Ashland: The Jesse Stuart Foundation, 1997), 248.



mountains. The task ultimately is to look to the music to investigate traces of the indigenous religion and evidence of the complex system of filters imposed upon the music of the hills to bring us closer to experiencing that in this fine, old musical form which Bill Lowe calls the “secret.”

## CHAPTER ONE

### SETTLEMENT SCHOOLS AND RADIO

Subsistence farming had been the established means of survival in the rugged terrain of the eastern Blue Ridge and Cumberland mountains ever since that area had represented the frontier and people began to call it their home. In the waning years of the nineteenth century, these mountaineers were making the bulk of their living with farming practices that had been in place since as far back as the eighteenth century, with little change in the means by which they survived and little change in their interactions with the outside world.<sup>21</sup> However, between 1890 and 1920, the vast Appalachian forests of virgin timber caught the attention of logging entrepreneurs from outside the region. Logging companies had found a cheap and fresh alternative to the New England forests whose timber resources they had exhausted, and leaders were eager to move to the southern region to meet industrial demand.<sup>22</sup> Finally, economic expansion had created the momentum needed for cultural exchange across the mountainous geographical boundary to begin.

A popular business practice for these logging companies was to purchase and lease acreage and use their thriving business interests to entice railroads to build in the area. After the land had given up all its timber, it would be mined by the same companies for coal at points along the mineral-rich Cumberland and Allegheny mountain plateaus.<sup>23</sup> Mining and the coal towns, the industrial byproduct of the mining phenomenon, would

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<sup>21</sup>John B. Rehder, *Appalachian Folkways* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 151.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 175.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 180.

see a rise and decline that was an important feature of the Appalachian culture between 1918 and the mid-1950s.<sup>24</sup> For the most remote mountain residents at the turn of the century, difficult terrain and poor options for transportation were the reality.<sup>25</sup> These obstacles, which meshed with the mountain people's tradition of making their living at home with their families, made factory work even less of a viable option than subsistence farming on paltry plots of land worked by their ancestors' hands for generations. Change in the Appalachian culture was a slow-moving current. In the counties of Knott, Pike, Perry, and Letcher counties, the Kentucky mountaineers were simply not very well connected to the outside world from whence these new practices came. Economic powers caught the interest of the mountain families out of necessity—children must be fed and families provided shelter despite any personal reluctance to join the modern South. Their natural resistance to change would cause observers to later reflect on the conditions of the local people living in the rustic one-room log homes made by preceding generations of their families. Indeed, the isolation of the rocky hills was so effective in preserving the mountaineer lifestyle that it caused two enterprising young women to remark in their memoirs that “it was hard to realize that we were not living in the time of our great-grandmothers.”<sup>26</sup>

So it was that into these remote regions two progressive young women set their sights for a social experiment in educating and assisting the mountain people of eastern

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<sup>24</sup> Rehder, *Appalachian Folkways*, 186.

<sup>25</sup> Phillip J. Obermiller, ed. et al. *Appalachian Odyssey* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 17.

<sup>26</sup> Jess Stoddart, ed. *The Quare Women's Journals: May Stone & Katherine Pettit's Summers in the Kentucky Mountains and the Founding of the Hindman Settlement School* (Ashland: The Jesse Stuart Foundation, 1997), 274.

Kentucky. There was a different sort of inquiry into the region than that of the money-driven logging and mining interests and would become significant as its own type of “lens” or filter through which the Appalachian region would become known to the rest of the world. Pettit, educated at Sayre Female Institute in Lexington, and Stone, a student of Wellesley, led a group of affluent young women who had found their newly-earned educations to be superfluous in a male-dominated society.

Katherine Pettit was born in 1868 to a family living in the rural country of central Kentucky. By the time she was in her mid-twenties she had involved herself quite thoroughly with numerous social and civic initiatives. Her interest in the feuds of historic proportion that crackled between families in the mountain areas met with her active involvement in such organizations as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) to pique her interest in becoming an ambassador of humanitarian aid to the people of the eastern Kentucky mountains. May Stone was also a member of such Progressive organizations as the WCTU and the Kentucky Federation of Women’s Clubs. A student for some time at Wellesley College in Lexington, Stone ascribed to the same social theories regarding class and educational thought. A series of short preliminary visits to the region and a visit to role model Jane Addams of Hull House gave Pettit and Stone a foundation for their assertion that the inhabitants of rural eastern Appalachia needed the help of their group of dedicated women. Their social settlement, Hindman, was not the first one of its kind in rural America, but it was among the earliest and for its time, quite radical.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Stoddart, *The Quare Women’s Journals*, 31-33.

The original model for the Hindman settlement was the urban Hull House, founded in 1889, and its purposes were the same. Pettit and Stone, along with their company of women, prepared to give training in cooking, hygiene, and all other manner of life skills. They would find themselves teaching some astonishingly basic lessons to even the adults living in the remote mountain regions. As part of this teaching initiative, the women sought to learn about and appreciate elements of the mountaineers' culture, recording and commenting on ballads and songs shared with them by the local people. Through such efforts traditional Appalachian music and its preservation became a topic of interest among the more artistically inclined of the visitors looking for cultural perspective.

Indeed the most distinguishing difference between the model Hull House and these social settlements in primitive mountain conditions was location. However, this singular contrast was responsible for many of the challenges facing these philanthropists in the mountains. Historian David Whisnant describes the effort as “an experiment designed to use that very imperiled cultural tradition as part of an educational program to help fit mountain children for life in the emerging new order without destroying the personal and social characteristics that made them at once so attractive and so vulnerable.”<sup>28</sup> Although evidence indicates that the mountaineers were eager for education and opportunity, illiteracy and isolation of the mountain people proved to be formidable obstacles. The Census of 1910 stated that 18.2% of mountain white people in

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<sup>28</sup> David Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 19.

Kentucky over the age of ten were illiterate, “illiteracy” defined as “inability to write.”<sup>29</sup> There were no regulations requiring children to attend school, and while education was a lofty goal, it was not a practical priority in the area. Knott County, where the county seat of Hindman was the choice for the women’s settlement, claimed an illiteracy rate of 33% among males of voting age. To the outside world, these eastern mountains were a world apart from the surrounding cities and towns, both cut off from opportunities for education and led by uneducated leaders.

The first trip these women took to the mountains was in 1899 to a place called Cedar Grove, about half a mile from the town of Hazard in Perry County. There they remained for six weeks, teaching kindergarten classes to children and sewing and cooking to some of the same and many of the adult mountaineers.<sup>30</sup> The next summer, in the year 1900, Pettit and Stone returned to host Camp Industrial with a few companions from among their temperance society acquaintances. This settlement was at Hindman, in Knott County. The site was larger and more complex, part of the women’s plan to offer yet more services to the local people. To the initial summer’s efforts regarding sewing, cooking, and kindergarten, the women added to the list of classes some elements of hygiene and music instruction. In a third summer, the women settled at Sassafras in Knott County. This location was extremely remote and difficult to reach, and the attending staff was smaller than at the camp at Hindman. This summer brought success to the group, but it became clear that the location at Hindman was a better choice for a permanent location. By this time, the WCTU and other such interested groups had begun

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<sup>29</sup> Stoddart, *The Quare Women’s Journals*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

to provide regular funding and express an interest in and appreciation for the women's work.<sup>31</sup>

While there had been talk by others of establishing a permanent settlement school in the area, it was at the urging of financial supporters in Hindman and surrounding areas that Pettit and Stone came to found a permanent school in 1902.<sup>32</sup> Another important factor in the decision to form a permanent institution was the vision of Uncle Solomon Everidge, Jean Ritchie's paternal grandfather. His plea to the "The Quare Women,"<sup>33</sup> so called because of the foreignness of their ways to the natives of the mountains, is indicative of the people's welcome extended to any friendly hope of education or opportunity. In a 1918 article in *Scribner's Magazine*, written by William Aspenwall Bradley and entitled "The Women on Troublesome," Uncle Sol described the area where he had spent his entire life. "When I was jest a chunk of a boy...and hoein' corn on the steep mountainside," he said, "I'd look up Troublesome and down Troublesome, and wonder if anybody'd ever come in and larn us anything. But nobody ever come in, and nobody ever went out, and we jest growed up and never knowed nothin'. I never had a chanst to larn anything myself, but I got chillern and grandchillern jest as bright as other folkses', and I want 'em to have a chanst."<sup>34</sup> He also echoed the region's concerns about the future that these offspring might make for themselves in the mountains, saying, "Times is a-gittin' wuss and wuss. When I was a boy I was purty bad. The next

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<sup>31</sup> Stoddart, *The Quare Women's Journals*, 19-23.

<sup>32</sup> Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine*, 28-29.

<sup>33</sup> Stoddart, *The Quare Women's Journals*, 13.

<sup>34</sup> Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine*, 82.

gination was wusser. What will this [next] generation be unless you women come to Hindman and help us?"<sup>35</sup>

While there is little doubt that his request was met with compassion and the women's sincere desire to help, Uncle Sol's image became a valuable tool in generating support and funding for the school. To the well-to-do of the Kentucky Bluegrass region, seeing his picture in a newspaper article or on a brochure from the Hindman settlement reminded them of their responsibility to those of lesser means, a social responsibility that echoed the Progressive movement's tenets regarding social welfare.<sup>36</sup> However at a superficial level, Uncle Sol's heartfelt appeal for future generations suggests to his audience that there were no schools in the region before the settlement school idea came into action. This was not the case. A man named George Clark had established a school in Hindman fifteen years earlier in 1887. Clark's school offered five months of primary school subsidized by county taxes and also five months of subscription school, or instruction paid for by private means. It was this land and the three-room school facility formerly called Buckner Academy that Katherine Pettit and May Stone took over as their new school at Hindman.<sup>37</sup> The original name of their school was the Log Cabin Settlement School, but they renamed it the WCTU Settlement School to honor that organization's extensive financial support to the project.<sup>38</sup>

A look at the list of financial contributors for the mountain settlement work reveals much of the motive on the part of the outsiders. Camp Industrial borrowed its

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<sup>35</sup> Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine*, 82.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Stoddart, *The Quare Women's Journals*, 39.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.



name from the “all-day educational programs” of the WCTU,<sup>39</sup> and the WCTU’s ability to fund the school’s undertakings meant that the social and moral initiatives supported by the group would serve as a basis for the curriculum they advocated in the settlement’s educational endeavors. The journals from the summer camps relate the women’s efforts at eradicating alcohol and tobacco from the mountain people’s lives and they found an audience for their mission among mountaineers of all ages. May Stone wrote that upon stopping with Katherine Pettit for a visit to a local school, “[she] showed [the teacher] how to make pin wheels for the children, while Katherine put the temperance gloves on them and gave them all some Scripture cards.”<sup>40</sup> Among the older children and young adults that visited them, the women shared information about the tobacco habit, and entreated these citizens to sign the “triple pledge.” Over the course of temperance efforts, the triple pledge appears to have had several forms; however, in this circumstance the pledge seems to be against the triple threats of alcohol, tobacco, and profanity.<sup>41</sup> These three indiscretions seem to constitute the bulk of the women’s distaste for mountaineer life.

A practical and pragmatic woman, Katherine Pettit soon realized that along with the security of being the WCTU’s namesake school came some challenging limitations. Her distaste for such a strong affiliation with the WCTU could have cost her contributors as the school grew.<sup>42</sup> As the experiment expanded, the WCTU’s yearly donations

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<sup>39</sup> Stoddart, *The Quare Women’s Journals*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 253-254.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>42</sup> Olive Campbell. *Southern Mountain Schools Maintained by Denominational and Independent Agencies* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1929).

became less able to cover all expenses. New contributors had to step forth, or the school would be lost. However, in 1916, the year in which the school became independent, the issue of Prohibition was causing disturbances all across the American political landscape. Any overt affiliation with such an organization may have been off-putting to some would-be supporters with deep pockets. The split was handled in friendly terms and the WCTU handed over the Hindman assets to an executive board.<sup>43</sup>

While the official curriculum of the Hindman settlement involved lessons on hygiene, housekeeping, and other such topics, there was a great deal of emphasis and commentary from the women on the local traditions and crafts of the mountaineers. Because these women and their methods were so graciously accepted by the natives of the region, and because they were among the first to examine the culture in an evaluative light, the tone invoked by their judgments and valuation set the precedent for all those who followed. While the Quare Women, as they were called, were not associates with the powers of the logging and coal companies that sought ingress to the region's store of resources, they represented another part of the same outside world, distinguished primarily by connection through literacy, money, and the familiarity with encroaching industry. It is important to note that both the mining companies and these women were outsiders, but they were outsiders with different gauges for evaluating the significance of such a region and culture.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Stoddart, *The Quare Women's Journals*, 45.

<sup>44</sup> Dwight B. Billings, ed. et al. *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 169.

Through the work of Pettit and Stone, a profitable enterprise materialized that benefited both their school and the mountain community. The Fireside Industries was a plan that involved the sale of handmade crafts from the mountain people to the world outside the eastern Appalachians. In the school's January 1914 newsletter, there was a report of a growing number of weavers who "appreciated this chance to secure a little income by keeping alive these disappearing arts."<sup>45</sup> This commercial alliance with the outside world became an illustration of the ways in which the mountaineers' world became encroached upon by the modern world lurking just past the mountain ranges.

These handmade products became quite fashionable for those in the middle and upper classes outside the area, but the demand was for items built not for function in the mountains—in other words, not built as though the mountain people would use the items themselves—but for decorative items common to the more modern lifestyle. Mountain women found themselves weaving not only blankets and such with foreign design features, but also weaving cloth napkins and other such ornamental trinkets that they would never have used in their own log cabins.<sup>46</sup> The association with authentic mountain people made the products very desirable to outsiders, but their desire was not for a realistic representation of Appalachian life. It seems more likely indeed that their want was for a conversation piece that would remind them of the benefits of their own advanced social position. The end result of changing the product to suit the market was that the people who constituted the market had no idea who these isolated people really were. Further, according to Whisnant, these artifacts made trinkets to outsiders were an

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<sup>45</sup> Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine*, 61.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

analogy for what was really happening in terms of cultural preservation. A process of selection was occurring that was filtering the mountain lifestyle and fitting particular elements of it into a pleasing story for city dwellers back home with electric lights and running water.

Like baskets and coverlids, people in towns and cities readily absorbed the music of the eastern mountains, although in not quite the same form in which it originated. From the first interactions with the mountain people, Pettit and Stone remarked upon their efforts to record some of the older ballads sung to them by their newfound friends: “We took down the words of as many of them as we could get, but the music is equally as unusual as the words.”<sup>47</sup> The women noted that the kindergarten children “took hold of the songs readily”<sup>48</sup> but that although the mountain folk enjoyed hearing the organ, they “were slow to join in the singing, as their way is so different from ours.”<sup>49</sup> With regard to the hymns sung at worship services, May Stone wrote that they were “lined out and all sung to the same tune.”<sup>50</sup> While it is doubtful that every hymn actually employed the same melody, it is likely that to an uninitiated ear, the Appalachian hymns of the fundamentalist Baptist faith had a very distinct style. If the reader imagines the scene of the well-bred May Stone hearing this music for the first time in the graveyard services Bill Lowe recalls as characteristic of the Old Regular Baptist faith, it is easier to understand her inability to relate.

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<sup>47</sup> Stoddart, *The Quare Women's Journals*, 68.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

The ladies provided their own music with a portable organ at Sunday schools and the District Teachers' Association meetings,<sup>51</sup> and also attempted to teach the children temperance songs. There is no evidence that the women overtly attempted to eradicate the mountaineers' traditional way of singing. Yet, it is evident by their friend Mary Stacy's assertion that she and her helper Rhoda sang their hymns "yourn way—not ourn"<sup>52</sup> that there was a great deal of flattery through imitation that occurred between the locals and the women of the settlement school. It was an easy path for the mountain folk to admire and learn from the pleasant-looking women in clean clothes who came bearing gifts of newspapers, Bibles, pictures, and books. Their innocence led them without question to follow these women's advice against behaviors reflecting immorality or alcohol and tobacco use. David Whisnant argues that by this process of selection Pettit, Stone, and their colleagues superimposed their own system of values—a system foreign to the mountain folk—onto the culture they observed. He says, "...although changing social and economic conditions in the mountains had forever doomed that culture as a functional basis for individual identity or family and community life, in the urban, middle-class world into which its professional carriers moved there was space, leisure, and money to promote, acquire, and 'appreciate' it as a cultural icon or possession—as one would a Navajo drum or a Wedgwood plate."<sup>53</sup>

However true Whisnant's argument of selective appreciation may be, the end of eastern Appalachia's isolation was certainly looming, regardless of the women's

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<sup>51</sup> Stoddart, *The Quare Women's Journals*, 83.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>53</sup> Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine*, 97.

interlocution. With the large timber and mining companies penetrating the forests and cities and railroads on the increase, frontiers were shrinking and industry becoming a major influence in the cultural world of the entire South. It was inevitable that the peace and isolation that the mountain people enjoyed would come to an end. As long as Pettit's and Stone's observations and influences remain under the microscope of historical perspective, their work was invaluable in serving as responsive ambassadors representing the modern industrial world. Had the mountaineers' first and only important contacts with the outside world been with the bosses and foremen of lumber companies, with no representative of the softer side of modern life, the situation would have been very different indeed. Modernization was inevitable; consideration and respect afforded to the mountain folk in the process was not.

To place the women's work into a wider perspective, at around the same time they were attempting these broad influences within the realm of the settlement school, the South as a whole was making considerable progress with regard to education. Public education was becoming universal, expenditures were rising, as were both teacher pay and the requirements to become a teacher and maintain a teaching certificate. New compulsory attendance laws ensured that the new school system would address the whole of society. In this way, the social settlement at Hindman was a model for the greater state and region with regard to the curriculum taught.<sup>54</sup> For elements of education and culture, the Quare Women were much more compassionate preservationists than those outsiders associated more with the business of industry and profit. It was through the efforts of

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<sup>54</sup> Stoddart. *The Quare Women's Journals*, 31.

Pettit and Stone that although changes came to the art because of the Fireside Industries, a dying skill was revived. Pettit wrote in the summer of 1900, “We found that many of the older women still spin and weave, but the young ones are not keeping it up and unless some new interest in it is revived, this great industry will die out.”<sup>55</sup> The same was true of music. Despite the isolation and sluggishness of change in eastern Appalachia, the older customs were vanishing. Pettit and Stone’s work brought attention to these customs and effectively preserved them in a more market-friendly state.

While the unfortunate truth is that Katherine Pettit and May Stone’s introduction into the mountain region brought about some changes in the culture through their conservation efforts, their coming was as inevitable as the end of the isolation mountaineers had so long enjoyed. Whether the historian considers these women as preservationists with pure motives or the face of the modern world bearing down upon the mountain people, they used their work to create an image of the Appalachian people that would last in the minds of those living in the “level-land.”<sup>56</sup> The staff and official powers at Hindman had consistently advocated educating children “back to their homes, rather than away from them” but David Whisnant asserts that these homes had come under direct cultural attack from “the profound economic and political inequalities and dislocations that were wrenching life in the mountains from its traditional moorings” and that “the only real chance young people would have for a decent life would lie in the world outside.”<sup>57</sup> Geographical deterrents to mingling with their neighbors in the flat

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<sup>55</sup> Stoddart, *The Quare Women’s Journals*, 86.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>57</sup> Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine*, 68.

lands were significant but not so strong that the two cultures would fail to meet, in the end finding a balance that would serve them both in the South that a national audience would soon hearing across the airwaves of radio technology.

The lasting effect of the Quare Women's significance in the musical exchange was also a product of how the people of eastern Appalachia chose to share their music. Evidence has shown that the mountaineers did absorb some of the influence from the women's music. As part of that broader culture outside the isolated mountains, the reader can understand or investigate what portions of the progressive outside world did not go into the fabric of rural mountain culture after the turn of the century. Yet, how can we know what songs and what musical forms these mountain dwellers may have omitted in the transmission to their visitors? Their perception of these visitors and their acceptance of the women as "good" may well have colored the songs selected for sharing or changing the inflection of a ballad's text. Perhaps even through the process of notation and transcription, these melodies transformed even as they were "preserved."

Significantly, there was a duality in the cultural exchange between the women of the settlement schools and the mountain people. In the schools, the teachers taught children songs from their own experience, music that came from both the more urban flatlands of Kentucky and from their affluent educations at progressive universities. Young children often watched their older brothers and sisters leave home to attend the settlement schools, dreaming of their own chance at enrolling there someday. Throughout her memoir, *Singing Family of the Cumberlands*, Kentucky folk singer Jean Ritchie remembers herself as an envious young girl listening to her older sisters sing the



new songs they had learned at the school at Pine Mountain.<sup>58</sup> Not only were the new songs of the settlement schools interesting and engaging to the young students, they were shared along with new standards of manners and social expectations. The Quare Women were not just teaching the children some songs, they were also sharing their own cultural and moral perspectives, shaped by the social principles guiding their philanthropy in the mountains as well as their own religious values.

From the other side of the cultural exchange, the mountaineers no doubt watched very carefully the newcomers bearing gifts of music, cooking lessons, and friendship. No doubt pleased beyond expression by even the smallest gifts of newspapers, magazine clippings, or a bit of a song, these rural people would have discerned that these were ladies of respectable society. How likely or comfortable then, would a mountaineer have been to teach them some of the more sordid songs of the Appalachian culture? The teachers' journals share some of this reticence, especially in the mountain people's concern over the enjoyment of banjo music. While the rare event of a fiddler passing through the region was a cause for celebration and dancing, banjo picking was not a pastime honored by most of the older generation of mountain folk.

In 1907, Katherine Pettit published a collection of ballad lyrics in the *Journal of American Folklore*. By this time she had established a second school at Pine Mountain, and both of these schools served as outposts for collectors coming to the area in search of the old ballads, including Josephine McGill, Cecil Sharp, and Olive Dame Campbell.<sup>59</sup> While the hymns may not have thrilled Miss Stone to worshipful enjoyment, the ballads

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<sup>58</sup> Jean Ritchie, *Singing Family of the Cumberlands*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955).

<sup>59</sup> Stoddart, *The Quare Women's Journals*, 55.

were a different thing altogether because of the stories they told and their much wider entertainment appeal. The more conservative of the mountain folk frowned upon anything musical except for “meetin’ house songs,”<sup>60</sup> but there were those among the younger generation who enjoyed even the scandalous picking of the banjo. Katherine Pettit wrote in the *Camp Industrial* journal from the summer of 1900, “Some of the people thought it was wrong to have any kind of music, but ‘meetin’ house songs.’ We forgot that and asked a boy to bring his banjo and give us some mountain music. A good sister hastened to urge us not to have a ‘banjo pickin’” and said only wicked folks would allow it and that some of the people were saying that we could not be good if we liked it.”<sup>61</sup>

In an effort not to offend those they were trying to reach, the women largely ignored an instrument that would make a profound historical impact in the music of eastern Appalachia, as well as on the commercialized version of the music that would call this land its birthplace and go on to make a huge impact on national trends. Thus, as the Quare Women endeavored to make a positive and endearing first impression on the Appalachian people, the rural people they came in contact with were also trying to present the “best” sides of their culture, one which these strange new visitors seemed to treasure in a way the mountain culture had never been examined before. The sharing of culture in both directions became a subjectively evaluative act. This conscious or unconscious filtering of the cultural exchange came to color Appalachian music in a manner much like that of Flannery O’Connor’s lens of religion.

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<sup>60</sup> Stoddart, *The Quare Women’s Journals*, 88.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

On a more secular level, radio technology was making progress in uniting the people of the Appalachian Mountains in a cultural exchange with the rest of the nation. The settlement school workers had established a system of evaluating and understanding the mountain culture, and in the following decades of the early twentieth century the mountaineers began looking outward at the national culture. Radio technology rose in popularity in the 1930s and 1940s, bringing commercial entertainment to more homes. Bill Lowe smiles when he remembers his father's purchase of a radio in the 1940s. While he notes that his father was concerned that "[they] would get too open" or too worldly and liberal, it was important to his father to receive timely updates on the progress of World War II. Unbeknownst to his father, Lowe was busy listening to the Carter family on the same radio and envisioning himself in the larger world outside Hatfield, Kentucky.<sup>62</sup> This small wonder from the modern world was elemental in enticing Lowe into the world of music. It demonstrated evidence of a life outside his father's house and the mountains in which he was growing up, while simultaneously allowing him access to a group who would eventually be one of the most influential in his life, the Carter family.

Thus, the radio became a contributing element in the conflict shaping the life of Bill Lowe the Appalachian musician. Radio technology meant that the boy's world was no longer insurmountably separated from the rest of the nation. He was able to hear the music the rest of America had begun to talk about, and eventually he was able to dream for himself a place in the fabric of American media. Lowe's understanding of success

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<sup>62</sup> Bill Lowe, interview with the author held in Lowe home, Walhalla, South Carolina, February 19, 2011.

would shift, guiding him to aim for audiences and performance halls outside the hills of Kentucky. In stark contrast with the regional identity he learned as a child, he was able to see himself as a young southern man with opportunities on a national level. While this raised his awareness of what was possible, it also heightened his awareness that he could not continue without violating the tolerances of his father's and the church's strict moral code.

In hindsight, it is possible that Lowe's father did him a service in forbidding his open pursuit of a musical career. By the time the boy was ten, he would have a strong foundation in the Old Regular Baptist faith thanks to his devoutly religious father. Perhaps the Carter family's music resonated so strongly with him because of their mastery of the sacred tunes he knew. From southwest Virginia, the Carter family—Sara, Maybelle, and A.P.—were close enough to Lowe's home state and realm of experience to catch his attention with songs like *Wandering Boy* and *Wildwood Flower*, songs the young Lowe had heard throughout his life from his mother's family. While furtively listening to the Carter family across the airwaves and away from his father's detection, the young Bill Lowe was essentially hearing his musical heritage broadcast for a national audience.

This music was not newly composed or created specifically for the radio experience. These tunes were old elements of the culture in which Bill Lowe and Appalachian children like him grew to adulthood. Popular recognition of such an important part of their youth surely spoke to their ambitions and influenced their paths as career musicians. But with each new generation comes transformation. Significantly, it

was Lowe's enthusiasm for the Carters that helped spawn his distinctive guitar strumming style. With no source other than their radio shows, he was not able to discern the sounds of an autoharp played by Maybelle and Sara Carter. In his quest to imitate the group's sounds, he sought to recreate the effect of the chorded zither instrument using only his guitar.<sup>63</sup> By the time Lowe learned that there was another instrument adding to the harmonic texture, he had already developed his own distinctive style using a system of arpeggiation that thickened the musical texture and afforded the guitar almost exclusive control of the melodic and harmonic drive in the ensemble. However, when asked about his technique, Lowe cannot offer any explanation of how he creates the idiosyncratic sound. Lowe is more comfortable discussing music in terms of how it makes him feel, and the message he wants to convey with it, rather than discussing technical ideas on a musical instrument.<sup>64</sup>

Both the radio technology evolving in young Bill's experience and the settlement schools at Hindman and Pine Mountain helped shape Appalachian music in the early twentieth century on a cultural level in much the same way the religion of the mountains influenced it from a spiritual angle. Children of Bill Lowe and Jean Ritchie's age began to see their musical inheritance from their families grow into a movement with national appeal. The settlement school workers' interest in the music had given the mountaineers and their children a sense of validation and pride that would work in conjunction with the growing availability of radio and broadcast opportunities to give traditional Appalachian

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<sup>63</sup>Bill Lowe interview, February 19, 2011.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

music an introduction to a national audience. The music of the mountains would become part of a larger national identity over the following decades.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE MUSIC OF APPALACHIA

What then were the musical effects of such convergent influences as the regional fundamentalist Protestantism, urban visitors to the area like Pettit and Stone, and the radio in Bill Lowe's early life? These changes were eroding the isolation long associated with the people of the Appalachian mountains. In the case of eastern Appalachia, the mountaineers' cultural conservatism and reverence for past tradition made for an isolation that was formidable enough to keep the music of the region distinct for decades to come.<sup>65</sup> That isolation has in large part spread to formal analysis of the form and construction of such music. Begun and preserved in the aural tradition, Appalachian music has remained largely the product of unprinted, often spontaneous musical sharing.<sup>66</sup> This writer believes that the absence of large samples of printed specimens has deterred many trained musical analysts from the task of interpreting chord structure and the function of melodic elements within this body of music. Therefore, much of the following analysis is my own, formed using a music teacher's understanding of the universal theory of musical construction in the western hemisphere. In an effort to balance the lack of secondary sources, this interpretation will consider such an understanding within the contexts of multiple musical sources and recordings.

In the world of Appalachian spiritual music, *Amazing Grace* is a widely used tune that has undergone countless transformations and variations as it has wound its phrases into the religious culture of the South. Though one could enter almost any denomination

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<sup>65</sup> John B. Rehder, *Appalachian Folkways* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 18-20.

<sup>66</sup> Adelaida Reyes, *Music in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 63.

of church in the southern states today and find this simple song in the congregational hymnbook, what has survived in print today to the mountain dwellers of eastern Kentucky around the turn of the twentieth century would have been but a sterile skeleton of their familiar, wandering melody.

The notes of *Amazing Grace* as printed in *The Broadman Hymnal*, a staple of southern Baptist churches in the Appalachian region, reveal a simple interpretation that uses only five notes of the traditional eight-tone scale—G, A, B, D, and E.<sup>67</sup> This pentatonic orientation of notes makes the melody easily identifiable, able to be quickly committed to memory and reproduced by the listener. Aurally, the result is quite like the familiar “open,” ringing resonance of simple folk tunes universal to many cultures—largely consonant, authentic cadences (resulting from the chord progression V<sup>7</sup>-I in any key signature), along with basic duple divisions of beats in repetitive and regular phrases. An authentic cadence functions in this type of arrangement to lead the listener’s ear easily and naturally back to the tonic, or “the central tone of a key.”<sup>68</sup> Supported by an unremarkable and static four-part harmony based almost entirely on a single G major chord, this generic version is representative of the tune as it appears in many modern worship services.

Upon immediate inspection, the reader of Jean Ritchie’s collection of family songs, *Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians*, will notice that Ritchie’s version of *Amazing Grace* calls for the song to be sung *a capella*, without accompaniment. A

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<sup>67</sup> B.B. McKinney, ed., *The Broadman Hymnal* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1940), 161.

<sup>68</sup> Edward Aldwell and Carl Schachter, ed. *Harmony and Voice Leading*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 4.



surface level interpretation of this direction might indicate a simplistic setting, focusing on a simple vocal line with no harmonic accompaniment. This assumption would be quite accurate. However, there is a much deeper implication of the term *a capella* in the context of a sacred song with such old roots in the spiritual traditions of the mountains. The total reliance on the voice in this version of the song is suggestive of Bill Lowe's account of song services in the cemetery of his childhood church, the Old Regular Baptist congregation. Paired with the regular phrasing and predictable cadences, the reader of this music can almost hear the song leader from the Old Regular congregation "lining out" hymns to worshippers amid the gravestones. Now taken in historical context, this simple direction takes on the tone of a past steeped in the religious settings of the rural southern mountains. While nearly all the many versions of ballads and other secular songs Jean Ritchie features in this volume include a simple chord progression for a basic instrumental accompaniment, *Amazing Grace* and the few other similar church songs are sung alone—*a capella*. These songs remain tied to their origins in the services of the Old Regular Baptist church, which—according to Jean Ritchie's account—reached the people of the Kentucky Mountains by means of circuit-riding ministers preaching to the gun-toting moonshiners in the community.<sup>69</sup> However the means by which this faith came to the mountains, it is clear that it remained a heavy influence on the music of the mountain churches well into the twentieth century.

If one imagines the simplified *Broadman* arrangement of *Amazing Grace* as a skeletal concept of the whole tune, Jean Ritchie's setting of the hymn is the entire animal.

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<sup>69</sup>Jean Ritchie, *Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 45.

From the first lines, the reader notices that there is no time signature—no means by which a musician might visually identify a scheme of counting the thing out and identifying stressed syllables. Rather, Ritchie notates the tune as four irregular phrases, consisting of nine, eight, eleven and one-half, and eight beats (in that order). Further complicating any exact metrical reproduction of the tune in her version, Ritchie uses fermatas, or holds, on important syllables within the melodic line to indicate a longer note in the phrase. The lack of a regular pattern of beat division would make this a particularly difficult adaptation for a large congregation of musically-untrained worshippers. The irregularity would confuse the call-and-response format of such services. It is likely that a version used in the lined-out hymns of the Old Regular services would feature yet another different phrase structure. Instead Ritchie's transcription is indicative of the unstructured, soloistic quality of many rural mountain singers, people who did not typically need to concern themselves with precision in counting rhythms or with reproducing a tune exactly the same way each time they sang. This version would likely result in very different-sounding performances if given to several Appalachian singers, especially when those singers bring to it their own family's tradition of how they have heard it sung.

Running along the bare bones of those four oddly-shaped phrases, the melody consists of a series of several more notes than the *Broadman* arrangement contains. While the five basic notes are present, there are also a wealth of passing tones, or tones that “form a stepwise connection between two stable tones” in a melody.<sup>70</sup> The addition

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<sup>70</sup> Aldwell and Schachter. *Harmony and Voice Leading*, 9.

of this type of note gives a “transitional” quality to the sound. Passing tones create movement, as do neighboring tones, or “active tones that decorate a single stable note rather than move from one to another.”<sup>71</sup> In Ritchie’s melody, the addition of the note F occurs both on the held, stressed points of the melody and functions as passing and neighboring tones to add interest and color around two critical notes of the tune’s structure, G and A.

The function of the note F on beats made long by fermatas indicates another marked deviation from the standard *Broadman* interpretation, a detail that supports the distinctive character that Katherine Pettit and May Stone would note in their observation of mountain songs at their settlement school in the first twentieth-century summers. While the indication is for the affected note to be held for longer than its original value, there is no hard and fast rule as to how long that actually is. Ending phrases on cadences that support the F note in this key would direct the ear of the listener to a harmony other than the simple G major harmonies present in *The Broadman Hymnal* because the note F does not fall within the notes of the G major chord. This more complex construction of *Amazing Grace* resulting from the addition of more scale tones creates more opportunity for additional chord changes and tonal color in the underlying harmony, whether vocal or instrumental. Such a harmony with so many possible chord progressions would not be as easily understood and repeated in a congregational setting, and would likely vary regionally by performer with regard to personal style and local tradition.

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<sup>71</sup> Aldwell and Schachter. *Harmony and Voice Leading*, 9.

The underlying commonality between these two versions of *Amazing Grace* is the text. Each form has four verses that are presented with exactly the same lyrics. This song is a sacred song, which means that the text had meaning for the mountaineers beyond the entertainment value of performance. This is not a song about human heartbreak and unrequited love. This is a tune that speaks of faith in God and the effects of God's grace on the believer's fate. Out of the solemnity with which the mountain people held their faith, these were sacred lyrics, not to be changed for paltry amusement. Further, the words follow very closely the rhythmic pattern of the phrases, making it difficult to insert extra words or to change the flow of the tune.

The reader of Jean Ritchie's anthology of notable tunes from her childhood will also note the presence of another popular song in the eastern Appalachian culture—*Barbry Ellen*, or as titled in Cecil Sharp's volume of collected ballads, *Barbara Allen*. Ritchie describes this version as the one heard frequently in Knott County, Kentucky, and notes that the tune came to her from her father, Balis Ritchie. *Barbara Allen* is a ballad, or a song that tells a story—often a story of unrequited love or unfortunate young ladies who have lost their virtue or their lives to sordid characters. These song stories were the perfect entertainment for close-knit mountain families gathered on front porches in the evenings.

Because *Barbara Allen* was a common tune among the mountaineers of eastern Appalachia, it is natural that there exist many variations of the song. Jean Ritchie says that although this particular version was the one taught to her by her father, there were “at

least three other tunes in the family” to which the tale of poor Barbara’s fate was sung.<sup>72</sup> In Cecil Sharp’s anthology of Appalachian folk songs there are sixteen different variations on the same tragic tale. The single common characteristic of all of them is the story of how Sweet William dies because of his love for Barbara Allen, who would go on to die of love for him on the following day, full of regret for leaving his love unreturned. Unlike the identical texts of the versions of *Amazing Grace*, the texts differ greatly in the number of verses, as well as the content of the lyrics included in each verse. The first tune that Sharp includes, one he designates as variation “A,” was sung to him by Lula McCoy of Chicopee, Georgia, in 1914. In this example, the narrator of the tale is Sweet William who begins by telling of the last days of his life: “I was taken sick, so very sick/...I sent for the only one I loved/ Her name was Barbara Allen.”<sup>73</sup> In other included versions, the narrator or storyteller is a third person figure outside the drama that unfolds.

Of the song *Lord Thomas and Fair Ellinor*, whose story is quite similar, Jean Ritchie remembered the daydreams it inspired, “And then would come the time when my heavy eyelids began to droop, and my mind to wander all around and the people in the ballads would pass before me out there in the sparkly dusk...alive and beautiful. Fair Ellender rode slowly by on her snow-white horse...Then in some easy manner that never had to be explained, I became Fair Ellender, and the movement of the porch swing became the slow, graceful walking of the white horses. Hundreds of people lined the broad highway as I rode by, taking me to be some queen, as the song wound its way to

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<sup>72</sup> Ritchie, *Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians*, 73.

<sup>73</sup> Cecil Sharp, *English Folk Songs*, Vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 183.

the tragic ending.”<sup>74</sup> In both these ballads the recounting of the tale in the first person perspective helps invite the listener into actively imagining themselves in the action. Seemingly minor differences such as text perspective and melodic embellishment can help trace the development and adaptation of these songs as they moved from family to family, region to region, and later from the old ways to the modern world.

Geographically, a reader can see links that trace the path this song has taken into modernity. Of the many versions Sharp offers of *Barbara Allen*, Jean Ritchie’s version is predictably most like the one sung to Cecil Sharp by Miss Ada B. Smith of Knott County, Kentucky, on December 16, 1907. The opening melodic notes create a pick-up, or a lead-in, to the first measures. These melodic tones are the same in each version—scale degrees 4-5-7-1, beginning on the same note, G. Again, Sharp designates the scale upon which the tune is based as the pentatonic construction—the use of five closely-related notes that offer simple and predictable harmonies. Yet, the identical key of both these adaptations suggests the Dorian mode, a tonal orientation slightly more complex but very common to Irish fiddle music and traditional songs and ballads.

From the list of variations Sharp provides, we can find other ways this particular music has appeared in the region. We would expect his version “A,” sung by Miss Lula McCoy of Chocopee, Georgia, in 1914 to be quite similar if not identical to the one sung by Miss Roxie Gay of the same county in February of the same year because of both temporal and geographical proximity. We might even expect this to be the case because of the similarities we have observed between the versions offered by Jean Ritchie and

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<sup>74</sup> Ritchie, *Singing Family of the Cumberlands*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 18.

Ada Smith. However, this is not the case. Ms. McCoy's tune is based on a pentatonic scale centered on the note G and begins its melodic pick-up with scale degrees 5-1-6-1, entering a 3/2 time signature that alternates with 2/2 just before each cadence. Miss Gay's version begins with a single note pick-up—scale degree 1—into a 2/2 meter with a much less active melodic line. This adaptation revolves around a hexatonic scale based on the note F, suggesting the major mode instead of the more simplistic pentatonic scale of the other version. How do we explain this difference in such a small region? The answer lies within the many twists and turns that dictated life in Appalachia. Sharp's careful notations in his anthology do not tell us if one of these women descended from a different part of Appalachia, or if perhaps these women knew multiple versions and chose this one to give to Sharp for their own reasons. Perhaps one or both of the melodies were made more elaborate in the context of sharing with visitors from outside the mountains. It may even be possible that the variation was given as a remnant from a previous generation, the result of an older relative's ties with yet another small community in the mountains.

To better understand the conditions surrounding such variation, consider the related example of the English ballad. In his 1976 book, *Ballad Studies*, E.B. Lyle suggests that when studying the distant roots of ballads and songs of tradition, "it is all the more vital to give close attention to those connections that can be traced, for they may be of interest, not only in themselves, but as indications of processes at work which would have a general application to the question of the lost literature of medieval

Scotland.”<sup>75</sup> If we apply Lyle’s example regarding the English ballad’s roots in an even earlier narrative to eastern Appalachian ballads and song, we see that the changes that occur in a ballad or tune within one culture can reflect change on a larger scale, even as that particular melody may actually be a relic of an even earlier culture.

The Ritchie family’s act of preserving these ballads for their children and their children’s children reflects a conscious desire to protect these songs as part of a heritage in which they had considerable pride. Their attention to preservation fits the trend of relatively slow change over time within their cultural values. In a surge of interest in local music, ballad collector Cecil Sharp travelled to North Carolina and dictated one of the most popular ballads in the South, and one of Jean Ritchie’s favorites. On September 14, 1916, Mrs. Hester House sang for him her version of *Lord Thomas and Fair Ellinor*.<sup>76</sup> Note the variation in the female character’s name—“Ellender” has been adjusted to “Ellinor,” a common pronunciation among sources in eastern Kentucky versus renditions from the Carolinas and farther South. However, in the verses of this version, Sharp records the name as “Ellendry,” an example of how small variations in text and context exist throughout the Appalachian region, even within the same tune. This tune was the same story that Jean Ritchie recalls her family singing as she dreamed on her porch in eastern Kentucky. Though the female character’s name did not survive untouched the aural translations that came to each of these parts of the South, the story remained constant—albeit with differently-stated verses—and the listener can hear

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<sup>75</sup> E.B. Lyle, *Ballad Studies*. (Great Britain: D.S. Brewer Ltd., 1976), 21.

<sup>76</sup> Sharp, *English Folk Songs*, Vol. 1, 115.



adaptations of the same original ballad in both the version collected by Sharp in 1916 and the one Jean Ritchie published from her childhood of musical memories.

A deeper comparison of the two versions of the Lord Thomas ballad reveals some telling structural variations as well. On the basis of thematic content, the two texts reveal much the same story. While the overall tale is the same, the difference lies in the syntax of the stanzas. The Ritchie family version includes a series of several apostrophic “O, Mother” additions to the text, perhaps to more readily fit the 6/8 time signature of Jean Ritchie’s published version in *Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians*. The 6/8 time signature is a triple compound meter—its overall large beats, or pulse, of the music consists of three smaller beats. Musical examples of a characteristic 6/8 meter sound include Irish or Scottish jigs and reels with a circular, driving tempo. In contrast, Sharp’s notation of Mrs. House’s version is in the time signature of 3/2. While both time signatures theoretically allow the same number of beats per measure of music, the 3/2 time signature gives the feeling of a duple compound meter—one in which the larger beats are divided into smaller multiples of two. The result is a different metrical basis for the listener’s ear, and thus a different representation of the same original material. While we cannot escape the subjective interpretations from the ears of the people creating these printed renditions, we can realize that differences in their final products reveal at least some significant difference in what they were trying to emulate.

It is important to note that though the actual texts of these two versions of the Lord Thomas ballad are not identical, the rhyme schemes are very close in nature. There is an overall, more general pace to the tale that is identical—despite the differences in

musical meter—and the matching rhyme scheme illustrates the point that these two songs did in fact come from the same older source. As an example, in the eighth verse of the ballad Ritchie offers these words, “Dispraise her not, fair Ellender, he cried/ Dispraise her not to me/ For I think more of your little finger/ Than of her whole body.”<sup>77</sup> Sharp’s version gives this: “Go hold your tongue, you pretty little miss/ And tell no tales on me/ For I love your little finger nail/ Better than her whole body.”<sup>78</sup> The meaning of these two stanzas is the same, but the words are different. And yet the similarity of the two rhyme schemes suggests a common meter in speech and song that is part of these adaptations’ essence.

Further, the modes of these two examples are different as well. Jean Ritchie’s version—the faster-moving, triple-meter tune—is presented in the key of e minor, a common key for modern ears. Sharp’s duple-meter, stately translation centers on a pentatonic scale based on the note D. To the modern listener, this mode results in a simple melody that is more predictable to the untrained ear and more easily replicated than the haunting e minor of Ritchie’s tune. To complicate the issue of origin and comparison even further, Sharp also offers an alternate rendering of the Lord Thomas ballad, which shares the 6/8 meter with Jean Ritchie’s version, but uses a heptatonic scale in Ionian mode, complete with multiple trill-like ornaments throughout. This form of the ballad came from Sharp’s interview with a woman known as “Mrs. Moore” from Rabun County, Georgia, on May 2, 1909.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ritchie, *Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians*, 60.

<sup>78</sup> Sharp, *English Folk Songs*, Vol. 1, 116.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

Within each of these representations, there are differences even regarding the intervals between notes of the melody. In other words, while the melodic lines may or may not begin on the same note, they do not always move in the same direction. This, with regard to the theory of printed music, means that in effect they are separate and distinct tunes. For example, Sharp's version opens with the interval of an ascending perfect fourth; Ritchie's, a descending minor third. The overarching, poetic story that accompanies these melodies is crucial to recognizing them as closely related material, despite how the notated versions of the music may have been altered into different melodies over time.

The aural tradition by which these songs have been passed down through generations of Appalachian families is responsible for a considerable portion of the variations that occur in comparisons of multiple versions of melodies. In most cases, the older generation—the family member doing the teaching—did not have any formal music training, aside from the repetition of simple folk songs learned in the mountain schools. In many cases as well, younger recipients of the musical knowledge had little training either. Music notation was simply not commonly known. In their journals, Katherine Pettit and May Stone write of one or two children who they were able to send away for formal music training at established urban schools, but these opportunities were the exception rather than the rule, and only held true for a very small minority. Most Appalachian children learned music in the same way as did Jean Ritchie and her family—through repetition from their parents and grandparents as they sat on the porch in the evenings. Family unity was more than just being in the same house because they had

little else to do; family unity was an important value to Appalachian families because it answered to their sense of identity. Because of the aural nature of how older family members shared this music with their children, there emerged a style in which “modifications are expected in the melody and lyrics of authentic folk songs because they are in flux, constantly changing....In contrast, once written, commercial, copyrighted songs usually have few variants.”<sup>80</sup>

What remains after the aural tradition has affected and developed this music is a series of striking and unique characteristics. With regard to identifying origins of this music, two of these traits are particularly useful: the prevalence and development of ballads and the idiomatic vocabulary of modes and meters. The ballad has long been regarded by musicologists like Sharp and his companions as a relic of very old English and Irish ancestry. Jean Ritchie’s talks with her “Uncle” Jason reveal the way in which families often relied on one or two “musicologists” of their own within the family tree to remember and communicate all the many verses of these long and wandering ballads. Many people of Appalachian descent who recall the ballads sung to them as children do so in much the same way Jean Ritchie did as she described Jason teaching her a new ballad: “The one about Roseannie sounded more modern than most of his songs, but he insisted that it was a very old one, although he didn’t know where it had come from exactly, and he sang it with tears in his eyes as though it had a special meaning for him.”<sup>81</sup> Jason’s authority within the family came from his experience. About the manner in which he’d learned the music, he said, “Every time Will Wooton’d sing one I hadn’t

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<sup>80</sup> Rehder, *Appalachian Folkways*, 245.

<sup>81</sup> Ritchie, *Singing Family of the Cumberland*, 131.

heard, I'd get around him later on and keep on until I'd learnt it. I got some from other singers, too, and pretty soon folks began asking me to plays just on account of that. I sort of got a reputation for it."<sup>82</sup>

Jean Ritchie recalled the nature of how a song might differ across even a small region, saying, "It was always a wonder to me how families living close to one another could sing the same song and sing it so different. Or how one family would sing a song among themselves for years, and their neighbor family never know that song at all. Most curious of all was how one member of a family living in a certain community could have almost a completely different set of songs than his cousins living a few miles away."<sup>83</sup>

The ballads were no exception to these circumstances. Long, winding stories with romantic imagery resembling fairy tales, these tunes were enhanced and adapted as part of the aural tradition. The change over time and between family lines of a particular ballad illustrate the illusive nature of a melody passed down in aural form, as well as the combined influence of many singers reproducing a tune that they may have heard just a little differently than their young sibling or cousin sitting on the other knee of their singing grandfather.

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<sup>82</sup> Ritchie, *Singing Family of the Cumberlands*, 119.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

## CHAPTER THREE

### BILL LOWE

In the rural mountains of Pike County, Kentucky, a very young but very determined Bill Lowe walked into the woods armed with a can of coffee and a guitar. He walked with his back to his father's admonitions about the devilment of music, and without doubt walked with a sense of wonder at the musical sounds he imagined pouring out into the world from his guitar. His destination was a desolate shack in the trees—an abandoned cabin that his father had let stand in neglect on the family property for years. This lonely spot was the place where his father had said he must go, if he insisted on continuing to learn the language of music. He had only a rudimentary start—a neighbor from across the river taught him three basic chords and how to tune his secondhand guitar. From that point, the boy relied almost entirely on his ears alone to find the music in the instrument. He did not concern himself with the hunting, fishing, and baseball games of boys his age. Instead, he delighted in spending hours in the shack his father had designated as the place for his music. Despite its isolation and lack of real protection from the elements, the young Bill Lowe was drawn to this place, still rooted in his family's religious heritage and yet pulled by the poignant tunes of folk music and the siren song of the stringed instruments.

It was painful to Lowe that his own family was split in their views on his new-found love of music. Lowe's conservative Baptist father warned that string music was a dangerous "party music" that would "destroy" his life.<sup>84</sup> "My daddy was an old Baptist.

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<sup>84</sup>Bill Lowe, interview with the author held in Lowe home, Walhalla, South Carolina, February 10, 2011.

He didn't like string music. He had played it himself, and he felt it would destroy me. He thought that people got drunk and played it and fought and stabbed and killed each other. And he thought that was what would happen to me." His father felt that playing music, especially with a string band of likeminded people, would lead to a lifestyle of violence, murder, and drinking—habits that blighted mountain society despite the recent Prohibition efforts of previous generations. However, the young man had discovered the at once joyful and mournful sound that for him only fiddles and guitars could conjure. The songs he heard sung on the radio and in the idle hours of his people had "set fire to [him] and there was no hope." His father's only solution was a compromise: "He gave me a house. We had several houses...well, my dad had got a big farm, that he'd inherited. And he gave me a big old house up there by the main road, with a big old heat stove in it. He told me to take that music, get it out of this house, and take it up there on the hill and have this house."<sup>85</sup>

For a young and impressionable musician, the music of his childhood would remind him always of his home and the haunting quality of his solitude in the woods. Speaking in later years of the musical environment in the mountains, Lowe remembers that his church's musical services were often held in cemeteries, an expression perhaps in remembrance of the dead, but also providing a memorable and poetic setting for the subject matter. This music became familiar to Lowe and others in his generation as "mouth music"—completely non-instrumental harmonies associated with religious services and practiced by the wider community, not only trained individuals among the

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<sup>85</sup> Bill Lowe interview, February 10, 2011.

crowd.<sup>86</sup> Not only did this practice eliminate the necessity of costly musical instruments or trained performers, it also offered a part to everyone. It was a very democratic form of music.

The careful listener hears Lowe describe his father's religious concerns over his music, but as he recites the list of possible dangers, there is an undertone of a spiritual influence on a wider social level. It is evident that the faith itself has been established itself in his perspective on a subconscious level. He does not simply hear his father's voice intoning a list of sins; in that private inner voice, he hears the teachings of his church. In the reasons Lowe gives for his choices of music and his actions growing up, there is an undertone of moral uprightness that deeply reflects a reverence for the Old Regular Baptist beliefs, despite his love of ballads and dance music. The nuance is an explicit expression of the boundaries the Old Regular Baptist faith imposed upon the music of Bill Lowe and his contemporaries.

However, rivaling religion's powers of influence in the boy's life was the sense of belonging and sharing he experienced from his family's secular musical tradition. While his father's admonitions aligned closely with the teachings of their Baptist faith, there were members of his nuclear and extended family who were willing to teach him the more worldly songs of his people, and who shared with him the sense of community and kinship that making music creates. His mother's brother Grover Runyon played banjo and fiddle, and Lowe recalls the simple versions of tunes such as *Pretty Polly* and others to which he refers as the "old English songs." Lowe also recalls Runyon's "dwelling"

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<sup>86</sup> Bill Lowe, interview with the author held in Lowe home, Walhalla, South Carolina, February 8, 2011.



voice, “almost like a chant.” For Lowe, musicological origins of these tunes are of little importance—“Somebody carted it over here from England and Scotland, I don’t know where, mostly Ireland...and I don’t know if it got better or worse,”<sup>87</sup> but these songs form the basis of his musical understanding of tonality and meter, expression and performance. After Lacey Stepp crossed the river and taught the boy his first basic lessons, Lowe had to rely on his ears alone to understand both what this music was and how it must be played. Standing between two clearly divided sides on the issue of secular music, Lowe soon found himself to be an accomplished musician, but also a faithful believer all too aware of the church’s unsmiling position on the music he wanted to pursue. These two opposing sides created a moral friction for the young man, and while he continued to play secular music Lowe’s work has paid tribute to his religious upbringing.

For Lowe, the music of his childhood formed under the influence of a strong religious atmosphere and divisions over sacred versus secular music among his family members. In such an isolated and rural setting, there can be little doubt that Lowe’s family was the center of his young world. Edward Ayers discusses regional identity as “an inheritance from the past, a moral and intellectual ‘heritage.’”<sup>88</sup> In the context of Bill Lowe’s life, his regional identity meant a sense of belonging to the rich musical culture of rural Appalachia, and specifically to the eastern Kentucky tradition of Primitive Baptist worship practices. Whether melodic or thematic in nature, the careful listener will hear in Lowe’s music regionally specific harmonies that reference a variety of religious and spiritual themes. Lowe calls his early years in southeastern Kentucky growing up “in

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<sup>87</sup> Bill Lowe interview, February 8, 2011.

<sup>88</sup> Edward Ayers, et al, *All Over the Map* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3.

another world” and traces his earliest musical memories to the mouth music cemetery singing that were such a part of his musical education. He remembers, “In the mountains, the old music sounds better,” and this experience became his “tuning foundation.”<sup>89</sup>

For Bill Lowe, the lens of religion in the mountain culture meant that he was not allowed to play secular music in his father’s house. His departure into the hills of eastern Kentucky to seek that music on his own was surely a defining point in both his musical journey and his relationship with his father and family. In the eyes of those for whom music is withheld as forbidden fruit there is often an added attraction, an irony in the face of the father’s fear that the young boy’s musical exploration would be his ruin. However as the South is a land of contradictions, there have been many other families for whom music has been a natural and harmonious part of their identity, both secular and religious.

Fewer than one hundred miles from Lowe’s home by road—and even less as the crow flies—little Jean Ritchie was born the youngest of fourteen children in her family’s home in Viper, Kentucky, a tiny village of some fifteen or twenty families in Perry County. For her, recollections of the best times in her young life were when “the song and tale-telling moved out onto the front porch...[e]ven before [she] was old enough to take much part in anything else the grownups did, [she] was doing [her] share in singing the moon up on those soft summer nights.”<sup>90</sup> For this little girl, music was a natural and important part of her family’s identity. She would later share this music with a much wider audience, but the child was not to know her destiny as she sat daydreaming to the ballads of her mother, father, and many sisters. As close as were the childhood homes of

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<sup>89</sup> Bill Lowe, interview with the author held in Lowe home, Walhalla, South Carolina, February 12, 2011.

<sup>90</sup> Jean Ritchie, *Singing Family of the Cumberlands*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 16.

Bill Lowe and Jean Ritchie and given the mere eight years that separated their births, the place of music in their respective families could not have been more different. Ritchie's father may have found a wider and more moderate context for the secular tunes he taught his children from his education as a school teacher in Knott County.<sup>91</sup> For Lowe, his father's unwavering reliance on the Old Regular Baptist faith foretold that his son's interest in music would lead him to a life of sin. His greatest fear and challenge to his own faith experience was the affinity for the "party music" that he was certain would ruin young Bill's moral foundation.<sup>92</sup> Yet, Lowe's love of his region's music would take him far and wide into the world.

When Lowe left Kentucky in 1950, he entered the U.S. Marine Corps and the Korean War. He remembers performing on the ship: "I played my guitar and sang. We'd be a thousand miles in the ocean of an evening, and we'd hear the PA system call us musicians to go down and draw out our guitars and banjos and so on. We'd have a singing."<sup>93</sup> At the completion of his enlistment, he married a young woman from California and entered the music scene there with his own country band show on KXLA in Pasadena, California. Further work with Channel Eleven in Hollywood and an almost successful contract with Decca Records sharpened his business sense to the profits and losses of the music industry, although surely many traditional recording artists were the subjects of exploitation in these decades because of their commercial naïveté. Lowe called this contract, which would have put him on stage with Johnny Cash and a few

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<sup>91</sup> Ritchie, *Singing Family of the Cumberlands*, 57.

<sup>92</sup> Bill Lowe interview, February 12, 2011.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

other up and coming artists to the southern music scene, “binding,” and refused to sign. Later, his work with Rounder Records would come to a halt after an intense argument over royalties. Because of family obligations and an apparent general mistrust of such formal contracts, Lowe stayed away from agreements that could have put him on larger stages for wider audiences. He says without regret, “I have always pushed fame away.”<sup>94</sup>

Despite his aversion to the business side of the music industry, Lowe has produced a significant number of albums. His name has appeared on the country charts, most notably with a song on the Sundown Records label called *Foolish Hearts* in the 1950s. In the 1970s he recorded two records with his band Cripple Creek. He continued to be active in the recording studios into the 1980s, a significant career in the swift pace of the music industry. Yet there are many lovers of music who do not know his name. His refusal of a contract to become one of Bill Monroe’s Bluegrass Boys was one of several decisions that would direct him back to his roots and home in Appalachia and away from the glittering spotlights of Hollywood.<sup>95</sup>

For several years, Lowe worked as a company musician for Marquardt Corporation, the conglomerate responsible for putting a man on the moon. This was a steady job and an enviable position for a trade musician of the time. Besides providing Lowe with increased financial security, this opportunity gave him exposure performing for veterans in Veterans’ Hospitals across the country. He describes this experience as “a really important job.”<sup>96</sup> Not only did it strike a chord with his own identity as a veteran,

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<sup>94</sup> Bill Lowe interview, February 12, 2011.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

but it also engaged his southern sense of remembrance of the past, a trait associated with the society in which Lowe grew to manhood since antebellum days.<sup>97</sup> While a few of Lowe's standard tunes do tell of soldiers and their sacrifices, the significance of his experience both as a veteran and as a veterans' entertainer is paramount in this comparison. The Bill Lowe that has fought in war and entertained national audiences is far more experienced than the little boy struggling with his first three chords on his father's farm, but his respect for his subject matter remains. Although Lowe's hands have played this music so often that he might even say he could play it in his sleep, he comes to it with fresh excitement at each performance, believing in the words he sings. The battered, secondhand guitar has been replaced by a priceless 1936 Herringbone Martin—one of seventy-three made—but the desire in the hands of the player remains unchanged.

As for the place of traditional music in his life, Lowe says, "It was not much, but it was enough. I took that music from there to here." Nowadays, "here" is his home in West Union, SC, but the trip to that point was a winding one. The music of his childhood remains sacred in Lowe's life because of its unique character and its effect on him. "There's a hidden thing to it, a secret," Lowe says, and after "hours of discussion, thought, reflection...[he believes], many think they have it, and most don't." In his description of others in the music business, Lowe recalls, "I've seen druggers and dopers. Something in the music takes over lives and takes things away."<sup>98</sup> One can hear within his description of what can happen to a musician in the business a reflection of his

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<sup>97</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 59-61.

<sup>98</sup> Bill Lowe, interview with the author held in Lowe home, Walhalla, South Carolina, February 23, 2011.

father's distrust of music in terms of morality. While he clearly does not believe that music leads all who follow it down a path of sin and misfortune, he does acknowledge the persistence of such vices in the music industry. This association is a clear result of his established faith in the religion of the Appalachian mountains. Music has a different function in his life, his listeners can tell, as he insists, "Music is a gift from God."<sup>99</sup>

Indeed, the distinct character of the Kentucky mountains followed Bill Lowe out of the state and throughout his travels. The practical influence of an agricultural society on a boy growing up in that region is clear, but for Lowe nature is also an important aspect of his musical and spiritual life. He reflects, "The music of Kentucky is a rare music. It is truly a one of a kind sound that is of the mountains and the deep valleys."<sup>100</sup> His association of Kentucky's indigenous music with the natural world is a direct application of an innate sense of connection to the earth. One cannot help but see the impact upon his music of so many musical church services conducted in the dusky half light of a graveyard in the evening. His characteristic lack of steady meter and unconventional phrasing techniques echo the line-by-line cadences of the old church choirs in which he grew up.

Perhaps more influential to Bill Lowe than any single determining element in his history is his distinctive southern identity. The Old Regular Baptist Church, his early musical role models, his father's lifelong work in the coal mines until his death at fifty-two, and all the broadcasting experiences of his lifetime are all aspects of his complex career, indeed even of his very nature. However, he is a clear illustration of a southern

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<sup>99</sup> Bill Lowe interview, February 23, 2011.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

perspective that W.J. Cash traced to the antebellum South. A key tenet of Lowe's simplistic explanation of his music is that he is "unique".<sup>101</sup> While this term can be extremely vague when applied to music, it must be considered for what it represents in his introspective mindset. From the growing emphasis in southern churches in Lowe's youth on "other-worldliness"<sup>102</sup> and individual salvation to the "romantic-hedonistic" impulses prevalent in the southern character,<sup>103</sup> Cash identifies a feeling of individual drive and ambition that Bill Lowe personified in his early career and personal life. Characteristically, Lowe is proud of his Kentucky lineage, and identifies himself clearly as a product of the region.

Bill Lowe's formative years were rich with a musical heritage that was indeed unique to the Kentucky mountains. However it was not merely his geographic location or the church services or any one of the numerous influences upon his life that served as the shaping force in his life. Rather, it was a culmination of musical influences both sacred and secular acting upon a boy raised in the southern tradition of personal ambition. When that child witnessed the ethereal cemetery singing of his people's faith, a musical exchange occurred that led to the music's continuation and ultimately its transcendence—from the rural and isolated upbringing of his youth to the recording studio and radio charts. The musical education given to him by his family had been shaped even in previous generations by religion and changes within the culture. It had become Lowe's turn to take that music onto national stages. Because of these all these developments,

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<sup>101</sup> Bill Lowe interview, February 23, 2011.

<sup>102</sup> W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1941), 290.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

Bill Lowe was able to reach younger generations of musicians who had searched for inspiration through similar technological pathways. With the rise of radio and television technology, Lowe acted as part of the next step in the proliferation of the Appalachian string music tradition, ensuring that more generations of southerners would hear the music of their region and perhaps identify a small part of themselves within those songs. For Bill Lowe, the “hidden things” in the music of his childhood would call him to serve as an ambassador to represent the Kentucky hills in the nation’s ever-widening musical culture.



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