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An Acute Sense of Place: The Songs of Norman Blake

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Appalachian Studies

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Masters in Appalachian Studies

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by

Thomas Jutz

December 2022

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Keywords: Norman Blake, songwriting, North Georgia, Northern Alabama, Alabama Great

Southern Railroad, sense of place

## ABSTRACT

An Acute Sense of Place: The Songs of Norman Blake

by

Thomas Jutz

American flat-picking guitarist, singer and songwriter Norman Blake holds legendary status among guitar players, bluegrass, and folk musicians.

The aim of this research is to analyze the interaction of sense of place in Norman Blake's songwriting. This research will explore the techniques Blake uses to create that acute sense of place. Elements of literary criticism, cultural geography, ethnomusicology, and sense of place studies, as well as historical background information on Northern Alabama and North Georgia will be employed to show how this particular region of Southeastern Appalachia has informed Blake's songwriting.

The research questions that I aim to answer are how a sense of place has influenced Norman Blake's songwriting, how his writing has influenced other songwriters in the field of 20<sup>th</sup> century folk music, bluegrass, Americana, and country music, and what songwriting techniques Blake has employed to create an acute sense of place.

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## DEDICATION

For Norman Blake, and all my other teachers

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### *Introduction*

The aim of this study is to analyze the sense of place expressed in the songwriting of Norman Blake. Norman Blake's influence on the flatpicking style of acoustic guitar playing has been widely recognized. Flatpicking refers to a playing style where the right hand picks the strings with a plectrum or "flatpick" versus with a fingerpick or the bare fingers. Blake is an excellent finger-style player but is mostly recognized for his flatpicking. He is considered one of the four main figures of flatpicking guitar, along with Doc Watson, Clarence White, and Tony Rice. For budding bluegrass and old-time country music guitar players, there is simply no way to bypass the canon of Norman Blake. His magnitude as a guitar player might to some extent explain why his significance as a songwriter has been so widely overlooked.

Blake defines his music as "music that falls someplace between British music and the old-time country music that is organic to this country" (Coats 26). It is difficult to narrow this definition down to a shorter term that is conducive to be used in the context of a study. I have decided to use the term *20<sup>th</sup>-century folk music*. This term indicates that Blake's music is defined by tradition, but also by the addition of new songs. I see this term as a subgenre of the wider field of country music.

Though a household name for aficionados of 20<sup>th</sup>-century folk music, in the mainstream, Blake's name is virtually unknown, except perhaps for his contribution to the movie "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou", for which he received a Grammy award. T-Bone Burnett, the producer of the soundtrack, says that Blake is "one of a handful of the best acoustic guitar players in the world" (Gross).

Blake is revered among songwriters in the field of 20<sup>th</sup>-century folk music, who strive to follow his lead in writing songs that are poetic, rich in historical detail, uniquely nostalgic, and always display a keen sense of place. Places make people, and people make places. That means that places inform the songs that people write, but it also means that the songs people write about specific places inform our perceptions of these places.

From the beginning of his recording career as a solo artist in 1972, Norman Blake has included a substantial number of original songs on his, to date, thirty-nine solo records. Some of these songs, such as *Church Street Blues* and *Ginseng Sullivan*, have been recorded by groundbreaking artists such as Tony Rice and Gillian Welch and went on to become standards of the Bluegrass genre. Blake's songs, from his first, aptly titled album *Home in Sulphur Springs* on, have shown a profound sense of place as it relates to the bordering areas of Northeastern Alabama, Northwestern Georgia, and Southeastern Tennessee, specifically around the towns of Sulphur Springs and Rising Fawn. Nothing of note has been written about this aspect of his oeuvre. The train, especially the steam train, holds a place of great importance in all styles of American roots music. Norm Cohen, in his seminal collection of American railroad songs *Long Steel Rail*, talks of the "refusal of the railroads to die quietly" (xix). Part of what is keeping them alive is the importance American song has given and continues to give, to the railroads. In one interview (Silverman), Blake briefly touches upon the impact the Alabama Great Southern Railroad had on communities in Northern Alabama and North Georgia when he was a child. Numerous songs in Blake's catalog address historic railroad incidents, reference the names of rail lines and use railroad-specific language. Blake was born in 1938, when steam trains were still in operation. In the same interview, Blake says that twenty-two steam trains passed through the town of Sulphur Springs when he was growing up and were the single source of daily



entertainment for people in the area. In the same interview, he also states that he “treasures these memories very dearly.” In an interview with Halsey, Blake goes as far as to say that if he hadn’t become a musician, “I would probably have liked to work on a railroad or something.” A history of the railroads in North Georgia will contribute to the understanding of how they informed the sense of place in Blake’s songwriting.

Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn, Norman Blake, John Hartford, and Tom T. Hall were some of the first songwriters of their generation in the greater field of country music, to write songs with a strong focus on their personal historical perspective. Parton and Lynn wrote from autobiographical and distinctly female viewpoints. Tom T. Hall’s stories were set in East Kentucky and Southern Ohio, and almost always written in first person. Blake recorded and toured with Hartford in the early 1970s. Hartford’s obsession with steamboats was mirrored by Blake’s love of the trains. While Hartford actually obtained a steamboat pilot’s license, his songs were often written from a more wistful and imaginary, first-person perspective. Blake wrote almost exclusively from his childhood memories, in first- and third person-perspective, and with a narrow focus on the place he grew up in in North Georgia.

Blake says that he wrote the songs for this first solo record out of necessity and that he decided not to record until he had some original material (Terrell). He was thirty-four years old at the time. It would be unusual if the ideas for the songs on this record had just come into Blake’s head at that moment. One can assume that he must have reflected on the characters and places they inhabited for a while before he wrote these songs. The writing of a writer like Blake, whose interior dialog is so firmly rooted in the 1920s and 30s and whose writing shows such a distinct sense of place, is worthy of deep exploration.

Blake has talked about finding inspiration in the songs of early twentieth century country music and about his motivation to try to write songs that live up to the standard of the old ones (Rodgers 2015). He mentions the poetry of early country music that has influenced him, as well as how much he appreciates the mention of dates and places in the writing of Woody Guthrie (Rodgers). Blake talks about his grandfather reciting old poetry and about his own love of “old archaic words and things” (Weisberger).

Although it’s impossible to guess how many songs Blake has written, almost all his, to date, thirty-nine albums feature some amount of original material. Most of Blake’s songs are written from personal experience, some about incidents he read about, and all of them are clearly situated in a particular place. Even if a particular place is not specifically named, the listener develops a sense for it, as in the song “The Keeper of the Government Light on the River.” In others, for example in “Ginseng Sullivan”, we know exact place names, the name of a rail yard and the name of a particular curve in the railroad tracks. An important aspect of this study is a structural analysis of three of Norman Blake’s most relevant songs as they relate to Northern Alabama and North Georgia, more specifically to Dade and DeKalb County and the towns of Sulphur Springs and Rising Fawn, as well as the Southern Railway, especially the Alabama Great Southern Railroad.

Luis A. Vivanco writes that “thick descriptive writing can help us see dimensions of a subject that we have not seen before” (144). My aim in this study is for the collected data and their interpretation to help supplement the existing literature on Norman Blake and to create a more conclusive narrative on his songs, since no substantial research on his songwriting has been conducted to date. I have taught in the songwriting program at Nashville’s Belmont University for eight years and am thus aware of the need to provide songwriting students with information,

gained through research, especially in the less-studied fields of bluegrass and Americana music. This research would be especially helpful for songwriting students in the context of Appalachian studies, since Blake's ties to the area are so strong and have influenced his work to such a large extent.

The aim of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of the sense of place expressed in Blake's songs, the techniques used to achieve that sense of place, and of the contribution of his songs to 20<sup>th</sup> century songwriting in the wider context of bluegrass, Americana, and country music.

### *Literature Review*

The existing literature on Norman Blake consists of articles on, and interviews with him. These texts are found in guitar- and acoustic music-related magazines, such as *Frets*, *Acoustic Guitar Magazine*, *Fretboard Journal*, and others, as well as on related websites. There are two instructional videos on his guitar playing, and one on his mandolin playing. The specifics of his guitar-playing technique and the instruments he plays have been written about in guitar magazines and are still widely discussed in a variety of online groups. *The Official Norman Blake Fan Page* on Facebook has 3,700 subscribers. None of these outlets deal specifically with Blake's songwriting, which is the focus of this study.

Few questions have been asked about Blake's songwriting, most of them are quoted, to some extent, in this research.

The collaboration between John Hartford and Blake on the genre-bending and -making album *Steam Powered Aereo-Plain* is briefly discussed in Andrew Vaughan's *Pilot of a Steam-Powered Aereo-Plain*. However, Blake's participation is only discussed as it relates to his role as Hartford's guitar player. Blake's career as a songwriter started after his collaboration with

Hartford ended. In an unpublished interview conducted by Jon Weisberger, Blake acknowledges that being a sideman for Hartford and Kris Kristofferson impacted him as a writer, but no further in-depth research has been dedicated to Blake's songwriting influences or the songwriting techniques he employs. Liner notes for some of Blake's albums are album-specific, inconclusive, and do not discuss matters of songwriting. This literature review is defined by the absence of literature on Norman Blake, especially as it relates to his songwriting.

This study aims to provide an academic look at Norman Blake's songwriting, specifically as it relates to the concept of place.

### *Methodology*

Qualitative research in interdisciplinary studies has only in recent decades been more widely accepted as a relevant procedure in academic research. With its background in anthropological study and informed by a constructivist worldview, qualitative study often stood accused of not producing provable data, of being too subjective and not objective enough (Silverman 7). In a highly interdisciplinary field such as Appalachian studies, many topics that are worthy of academic research do not lend themselves to a traditional post-positivist, quantitative approach, but move towards subjective descriptions and perceptions of reality. Scott et. al. observe that interdisciplinary research provides pathways that lead to multidimensional inquiry about complicated, in the case of this study, sense of place-based and ethnomusicological questions (197). The outcomes of qualitative research are emergent, meanings found are interpreted and re-interpreted throughout the process (Creswell 182). The provability of a hypothesis or thesis, which stands at the center of quantitative research, is less relevant, or not relevant at all in the qualitative approach. In part, this is due to the fact that in qualitative research, the focus is on the view of a particular topic, as it is perceived by research participants

(Silverman 17). Words used by the participants in the research to describe their experiences are more important than numbers. For example, in the case of this study, it is more important how and why certain people have been influenced by Norman Blake's songwriting than how many people have been influenced by it. In the same vein, a literary analysis of Blake's songs and their historical background does not intend to prove a hypothesis but aims to describe the structural elements and the emotional content of his work. Qualitative research is holistic. Participants' personal backgrounds, perceptions, and opinions are considered and become a part of an emergent study (Creswell 182). Flick notes that the researcher in a qualitative study is not an "invisible neutral in the field" (7) but participates in what he is observing. All observations in qualitative research are interpretative (Creswell 183), informed by the researcher's and the participants' personal backgrounds. All of these observations have led me to conclude that a qualitative, narrative research approach, comprised of literary analysis, ethnomusicological interviews and cultural geography is most appropriate here.

A sense of place plays an integral role in literature and songs alike. Milford states that "place is central to an understanding of a writer's work since the notion of place contributes to the larger meaning of what writers intend to convey to readers" (23). Gottlieb states that "A sense of place is intricately woven into literature, politics, social patterns of the region and provides the fabric from which both personal and regional identities are shaped" (342).

Ron Roach writes about a "pronounced sense of place in Appalachia," which is palpable throughout Blake's work (129). Donald Davis says that "In Appalachia mountains and home are synonymous," which perfectly describes Blake's approach to writing about place (215).

Legendary Appalachian scholar Loyal Jones says that Appalachians "more than most people

avoided mainstream life,” which is precisely what Blake has done throughout his solo career (13).

Cultural geography studies how cultures and societies grow out of their particular landscapes but also how those societies shape and build that landscape. Wagner and Mikesell observe that cultural geography is “a shared curiosity and set of preferences more than an explicit program or doctrine” (1). Cultural geography looks at all the different ways places influence culture and societies and the ways those express themselves in response. Though well-traveled, the landscape of Northern Alabama and North Georgia provides the lens through which Blake interprets the world around him. The human contribution to the landscape, in the case of Blake’s work, the railroad, is a major topic in his writing. Ironically, so is the disappearing of the railroad, another human contribution to the landscape of Southeastern Appalachia.

This study uses data collected from interviews, with participants that have been influenced by Blake’s songwriting, focusing on how they relate to the sense of place in Blake’s writing. The data collector in qualitative research is by virtue of the design the interviewer instead of an instrument, and his personal background informs the research (Creswell 181). Through my activities as a songwriter, producer, and guitar player in Nashville over the past twenty years, I have direct contact with some of the most prominent members of Nashville’s music community that can speak to Norman Blake’s influence on songwriting since the early 1970s. Interviewees were picked from that community. Through my past work, I also have the knowledge necessary to identify the questions that need to be asked and the topics that need to be studied to further the research on the sense of place in Blake’s songwriting. Since my bias as the researcher is that I was and continue to be heavily influenced by Blake’s work, these interviews will help to provide external validity. Through these interviews, I will aim to show how Blake’s

sense of place-based songwriting has influenced other songwriters. Gillian Welch recorded a version of Blake's "Ginseng Sullivan", wrote a song called "Wayside/Back in Time" that references Blake, and talks about Blake as a "kindred spirit" (Budnick). She played an important role in Blake's involvement in "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou". Her writing and stripped-down, performance style is directly related to Blake's and to the people that influenced him. Nashville hit songwriter Pat Alger was born in LaGrange, Georgia, and spent considerable time in North Georgia growing up. He remembers riding the "Queen and Crescent" railroad line that Blake mentions in his songs. Alger is only ten years younger than Blake and cites him as an influence. Although Alger's career has followed a very different trajectory, it would be valuable to know to what extent his writing has been influenced by Blake's. Master mandolinist Mike Compton, who recorded with Blake on the *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou* soundtrack, as well as on a duo album called *Gallop to Georgia*, and who stays in regular contact with Blake, would be an important source of information. Jefferson Ross, a songwriter from Georgia, who focuses heavily on the place of the American South in his work provides necessary insights. Famed songwriter, singer, and instrumentalist Tim O'Brien is a personal friend of Blake's, and says that he "holds him up as a model." Bluegrass musician and scholar Tim Stafford offers important insights to Blake's writing style. Bob Minner has spent many hours with Blake interviewing him and has generously offered some insight into them but insisted that nothing could be recorded. These are all highly successful writers or artists who come to their craft from different angles and have, to varying degrees, been influenced by Blake. To date, nobody has interviewed them specifically and at length about Blake's influence on their work and their interpretation of his work. How has the importance of place in Blake's work found its way into the songs of these writers? Analyses of these interviews would be new and important additions to the literature on

Blake. Joel McCormick is a close friend of Blake's who also lives in Rising Fawn, Georgia, and has known Blake for over forty years. Vintage guitar dealer and long-time friend George Gruhn offers a unique perspective on Blake.

In a qualitative study, the researcher is not looking for a static quality in the research topic (Given 31), but for emerging themes and narratives in the analysis of the collected data. With the exception of the conversations with Gruhn, Minner, and McCormick, all interviews were conducted by email. Rather than presenting these interviews separately I chose to make them a part of the overall narrative of this study, so observations made by the interview subjects relate would directly to certain aspects of the examined songs. The questions for each participant were the same as suggested by De Blasio (96). However, I indicated that these should be treated as open-ended questions, allowing each participant to insert their own interpretation of Blake's songs and how they have influenced their own craft. Participants were encouraged to freely extrapolate on these questions, but also to ignore questions they did not deem valid. The questions were:

- 1 When did you first hear Norman Blake's music?
- 2 What was it about his music, specifically his songwriting, that stood out to you?
- 3 How would you describe the sense of place in Blake's writing?
- 4 What, if any, importance does a sense of place have in your writing?
- 5 If it does have importance, how much of this do you attribute to Blake?
- 6 How has Blake's work and attitude influenced your writing overall?

This study uses elements of ethnomusicology. A seemingly simple description of ethnomusicology comes from Titon, who describes it as the study of "people making music" (xxii). Merriam writes that "ethnomusicology and anthropology grew up almost precisely at the



same time”, and that “each influenced the other, although the impact of the former upon the latter was greater” (4). In summary, ethnomusicology could be explained as the study of music in a particular cultural context. For this research, this means that studying the society and culture of Southeastern Appalachia in the late 1930s and 40s will be essential. The sounds of Roy Acuff, the Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers, The Skillet Lickers, and according to Melford, of Blake’s fiddle-playing cousin Earl Walraven and the Gospel guitar of a man named Cripple Charlie Clark permeated Blake’s early musical world and have to be seen in context with life in rural Southeastern Appalachia during that time. This research uses literary criticism, ethnomusicology, cultural geography, and sense of place studies to create a narrative to describe and analyze Norman Blake’s songwriting.

The main body of this study is an in-depth analysis, or close reading of three of Norman Blake’s best-known songs. Literary and musical techniques are examined, especially as they relate to the sense of place expressed in Blake’s songs.

## CHAPTER 2. A SENSE OF PLACE

### *A Sense of Place in Songwriting*

Creswell writes that “place is not the property of geography” (1). However, any definition of place in the physical world must start with a landscape. A landscape is the real-world manifestation of place, the purest form of place, uninfluenced by human interaction with the land. Landscapes are defined by flora, fauna, light, mountains, bodies of water, weather, and a plethora of other influences we consider the natural world. Hooks writes that “earth is a diverse ecosystem” that is “naturally organically balanced” (25).

Even the natural world, uninhabited by humans, was a place within a place, the Milky Way, which in turn is a part of the greater universe. The natural world as a place, shows us that place is at its essence a contracting and expanding concept.

Early in the evolutionary process migrations of animals, and the courses of waterways, informed footpaths and roads made and used by humans. Thus, even at this early stage of defining place, evolution factors in and shows us again that the concept of place is indeed of ever changing and evolving character.

Merriam-Webster defines geography as “a science that deals with the description, distribution, and interaction of the diverse physical, biological, and cultural features of the earth's surface.” Since cultural features are determined by humans this further defines place as interactional. Place is a dialog between landscape, humans that are native or non-native to the area, and the political and economic decisions they make, as well as environmental conditions.

Place is a concept of overlapping circles that Appalachian studies is well familiar with, or as Creswell writes, “place is not a specialized piece of academic terminology” (6). In the Appalachian context mountains fall prey to strip mining, small towns disappear for the sake of

damming rivers to harvest the power of water to turn it into electricity, and personal property is sold through broad form deeds for the exploitation of mineral rights. Deserted railyards and coal mines tell stories of the riches of the land, but at the same time stories of the depletion of the land, of erosion and pollution, and of a displaced people. And yet, the beauty of the landscape with its great biodiversity survives and interacts with its human inhabitants. Songs, sculptures, public parks, food, schools, and churches all contribute to the “ubiquity of place” (Creswell 6). Everybody uses the term place and yet, “no one quite knows what they are talking about when they are talking about place” (Creswell 6).

Place, in all its complexity, is one of humanity’s great themes.

Spiritual and religious traditions grapple with concepts of place to tell their origin stories and fight over places to ensure their traditions’ very survival. Pilgrims travel from one place to another to define themselves through a place that is far away from their home.

Humanity is destroying the environment, the physical world—the only place humanity has to make a conversation about place possible.

Place is one of the great themes in art, in literature, the visual arts, and music. But there are further, more complex, and philosophical implications than simply painting a picture about a place or singing about the place where you grew up. The Czech composer Bedrich Smetana wrote a symphonic poem called *Die Moldau*, but do we really learn something about one of Europe’s great rivers by listening to this magnificent musical piece if we have never seen it?

The German novelist Karl May, without ever having been to America, wrote hugely successful novels about Native Americans and their place in the American landscape that still inform the way many German youths are first introduced to Native Americans. Does this beg the question if place is real or imagined? Or does it beg the question if place is real and imagined?

Eastern European Bluegrass bands sing songs like “The Old Log Cabin in the Lane”, a song written for the important and distinct, if racist American artform of blackface minstrelsy. This song is about a place, although it gives no exact geographical location. It is a song about a romanticized place, the Southern plantation. It is sung from the perspective of a displaced, formerly enslaved person who sings about a place, or places, that existed but were never the kind and friendly places depicted in the song. Rather, they were places of cruelty, abuse, and perceived racial superiority. Furthermore, it is a song about a rural place that was first recorded in 1923, in an urban place (Atlanta) and has made history as the first commercially successful recording of “hillbilly” music, the term “hillbilly” itself being tied to the concept of place, albeit in confusing and stereotyping ways.

Swiss bluegrass bands sing songs like “The Old Home Place”, a song written by Dean Webb and Mitch Jayne, both members of the influential bluegrass band *The Dillards* that appeared in *The Andy Griffith Show*, a show about a fictional place, a town called Mayberry, in a factual place, Mount Airy, North Carolina.

Donadio, as quoted by Creswell says, “you discover the art through the place and the place through the art” (2). This is a statement that rings true if we look, for instance, at the writing of William Faulkner, whose novels offer a distinct view of life in Mississippi in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, although we find an added layer of complexity here as well, Yoknapatawpha County, where Faulkner’s novels take place, is not a real, but an imaginary county.

Is Donadio’s statement true if we think back to Karl May’s writing, or to European bluegrass bands singing about American places? Do we actually “discover the art through the

place and the place through the art” if it is created from not much more than an individual’s imagination, or if art and place are taken out of context?

If we turn to popular, contemporary literature, we may observe the intricate patterns of places that J.K. Rowling created in her *Harry Potter* novels. Clearly these places are fictional, but they led to the creation of real physical places such as *The Wizarding World of Harry Potter* at Orlando’s Disney World. Even without their manifestation in this amusement park, these places are real in the imagination of millions of people all over the world.

I am not offering these confusing examples of the different incarnations of place to play a game of intellectual whack-a-mole, but to show how truly complex the concept of place is, especially as it relates to art, and even more though, if we relate it to the artform of American song.

Native Americans had a spiritual connection to the places they inhabited, and sang about them, as well as to them. European settlers brought songs from many different parts of Europe to America, and enslaved people brought their music and songs with them. Musical traditions and songs merged in America. Without America as a physical place this merging would not have been possible. In turn, these diverse musical traditions defined, and still define America to us and to the world outside of the United States. Seen in this context, Donadio’s statement rings true. The fact that his statement rings true and not true at the same time further proves the ambiguity of the concept of place.

I would like to offer another thought that directly ties to the concept of place in the context of art, a thought that is at once hard to prove and hard to disprove. All writing that is emotionally relevant is about *home* and *time*. This is especially true, but not exclusively true, when we think about American song. All of us have a *home*, which connects to place, or are

longing for a *home*. If we are away from our *home*, *time* comes into play. We may be away from home for too long, or not long enough to discover what we set out to find. Some define themselves by having no *home*, like the free-wheeling gypsy from the ancient English ballad *The Gypsy Laddie* who finds his modern equivalent in America's Nobel laureate Bob Dylan, who called his second album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. Many Native Americans have been deprived of their ancestral homes. In the Appalachian context they have been driven from their homeplace. All other Americans come from a place that is not America, every white American's ancestral home is outside of America if we trace the origins far enough back in time. Home is an even more complex theme in the African American experience. White Americans came to America in search of something better, African Americans were brought to America to find something worse.

The concepts of *home* and *time* are directly related to place, home is a physical or emotional place that changes over time. *Home* and *time* are connected by longing. Longing for *home* or longing for a different *time*, and by belonging to a place. If we separate the word belonging into two words, we get the words *be* and *longing*, which may lead us to the thought that we may be *longing* for a *place* where we can fully *be* ourselves. Lopez writes about "the importance of belonging, of knowing the comfort that a feeling of intimate association with a place can bring" (xvi).

Ballads and tunes that have survived in Appalachia connect many of its people to their ancestral homes in England, Ireland, and Scotland. The sense of class that is expressed in many of these ballads relates back to the feudal systems in Europe but also reminds the Appalachian singers of their outsider status in the United States. African Americans sing about the exodus

from Babylon in many of their spirituals, finding solace in the topics of their adopted religion, fusing them with the tonal, melodic, and rhythmic sounds of their motherland.

The distinctly American sense of being elsewhere, combined with the desire to belong somewhere, lies at the heart of American song. From Foster's "Hard Times Come Again No More" to "The Old Log Cabin in the Lane", to Leonard Bernstein's "West Side Story", Chris Stapleton's "Traveler", and to the oeuvre of Norman Blake.

Country and bluegrass music are first cousins in origin and expression. Both artforms prioritize lyrical topics that deal with home, the absence of home, and the desire to live in a better world of tomorrow or yesterday. Both forms of music were created by working class people and marketed by businesspeople to working class people. The Appalachian sings about the loneliness of the mountains that are his home but also his prison. The poor white man from Texas and Oklahoma sings about the dust storms of the 1930s and the need to find a better place in California. The poor white singer from Mississippi sings about the train that will take him to a better place. Once that poor white singer becomes "The singing Brakeman", he, Jimmie Rodgers, sings about all of America, to all Americans. He sings about desolate and poor American places to get away from, and about rich and beautiful American places to get to. Tuan uses different words but expresses the same when he says, "from the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa" (6).

Bill Monroe sings about "going back to the old home", about the fox horn he is longing to hear, and about the music of his Uncle Pen, while his contemporary Mac Wiseman wonders "how the old folks are at home." In his song *Canadian Railroad Trilogy* Canadian songwriter Gordon Lightfoot sings about the days before the railroad, about the majesty of the North

American landscape, “long before the white man and long before the steel, when the big, majestic forest was too silent to be real”.

African American songs are defined by the desire to leave, to find a better place. Lawrence Levine writes that “Secular songs became increasingly popular in black folk culture in the decades following freedom” (191). And so Blind Willie McTell writes about leaving Statesboro, Georgia to “go to the country.” Sam Cooke says that he “was born by the river” and “just like that river,” he’s “been running ever since.” But he knows that “a change is gonna come.” Fats Domino is writing about “walking to New Orleans.”

American song is obsessed with the desire to find a home, to return home, it reaches for the future with one arm, and for the past with the other, especially during its formative years in the 1920s when it was stuck with one foot in the 20<sup>th</sup> century while the other was still in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—and that is the music that Norman Blake is most influenced by.

The vast American landscape could not have been fully explored without a constant focus on evolving means of transportation, which made moving from place to place a central theme in popular American culture. Movement and transportation are directly linked. Art, especially song, romanticized the means of transportation that were relevant in their respective time. In the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, trains and ships were sung about, only to be replaced by the American fascination with the automobile and the highway after WWII. The entire catalogue of one of the most distinct American songwriters, Bruce Springsteen, is permeated by these two themes. In his work the automobile and the road share the same almost mythical traits that the trains used to have in the American imagination.



Apart from songs that are merely meant to entertain, to be danced to, or to get drunk to, American song deals with place, which relates, as we have seen, to home and time, which are connected by a sense of longing and belonging.

Atlanta-based songwriter Jefferson Ross says that all good writing expresses a “sense of longing.” Songwriter Bob Minner states that that sense of “longing” is at the core of all of Norman Blake’s songs. Blake’s sense of longing and belonging is informed by the American experience of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by the place where he grew up and still lives, by the steam trains of the Alabama Great Southern Railroad, and by leaving and eventually returning to that place. Tuan observes that “one person may know a place intimately as well as conceptually” (6). This is certainly true for Blake.

Blake, in an interview with Goldenthal, says that while he and his wife Nancy were on the road they would be in beautiful places, out West for example, but that “the feeling that would overwhelm us, then and now, is thinking how far it was from home,” and that they would today get that same feeling just seeing such faraway places on TV. In the same interview Blake talks about a “nostalgia thing” that he describes as a “vibe” that he doesn’t “fully understand” himself. It is not necessary for a songwriter or poet to understand that sense of nostalgia, it may even be better if he or she does not examine, but simply lives and expresses it. Few individuals can do both. In the American context farmer, poet, and activist Wendell Berry may be one of the very few who can. Blake goes on to say, “I can certainly see it in my writing and things when it’s on paper,” which is an interesting statement, given that “on paper” refers to his lyrics but not to his music. Considering the musical component that is added to these lyrics, music that is so distinctly Southern, that expresses such a deep understanding of its own history, we begin to

comprehend the profound and acute sense of place expressed in Norman Blake's songs through language and music.

*Dade County, Georgia - Sulphur Springs, and Rising Fawn*

Dade County, Georgia is situated in the northwesternmost corner of the state of Georgia. It borders Tennessee to the north, and Alabama to the west. Dade County is a part of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which are a part of the Southern Appalachian Mountain Range.

Dade County was founded in 1837. According to Dade County's website, it was named after Francis Langhorne Dade, a US Army major from Virginia who was stationed in Florida at the end of the First Seminole War. Violence broke out again in 1835, leading to the Second Seminole War. Dade and all but three of the one-hundred-and-ten men he commanded on a mission from Fort Brooke to Fort King were killed in an ambush by Seminole Indians in December 1835. Dade's name was honored by naming several counties in several states, as well as several towns after him.

The land today known as Dade County was originally inhabited by Cherokee Indians who were forced to leave the area on the Trail of Tears in 1838. Few Cherokee Indians were allowed to return.

In 1860, the white population of Dade County was frustrated with the hesitancy of the state of Georgia to secede from the Union and toyed with the idea to secede from the state of Georgia and from the US, however, this remained an idea only, and contrary to popular myth, never happened.

During the Civil War, Dade County formed a company called *Raccoon Roughs* that fought in the Battle of Chattanooga. The Battle of Chickamauga, one of the largest battles of the Civil War took place in Dade County, as well as two other neighboring counties.

Dade County was called Georgia's "Lost County" because of its extreme isolation. Prior to 1939, there was no road that connected Dade County to the rest of Georgia without going through Alabama or Tennessee or across Lookout Mountain. This only changed in 1939, when Georgia built Highway 143 that lead North and South out of Dade County. In the same year the state of Georgia also purchased the land that would become Cloudland Canyon State Park. With its mountain vistas and the proximity to Chattanooga, Cloudland State Park remains a popular tourist attraction. Lookout Mountain is partially located in Dade County and is the home of Rock City, one of the South's most iconic tourist attractions.

According to the 2020 Census Reporter the population of Dade County is 16,183, with a per capita income of \$24,964. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) designates Dade County as transitional, meaning that these counties "rank between the worst 25 percent and the best 25 percent of the nation's counties". The county seat of Dade County is Trenton.

Dade County followed the typical political trajectory of Southern counties. It remained staunchly Democratic from the end of the Civil War though 1964, when it supported Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater in his opposition to the Civil Rights movement. Since then, Dade County has provided overwhelming support for conservative republican policies. It won Richard Nixon the highest nation-wide support of any county in 1972. Donald Trump won over 80% of the votes in his 2016 and 2020 campaigns.

The town of Rising Fawn, where Norman Blake lives, is within the boundaries of Cloudland Canyon State Park. Rising Fawn is named after the child of a Cherokee chief, in the tradition of naming a child after an occurrence that happened at the time of its birth. Rising Fawn is unincorporated, it is 28 miles from Chattanooga, and according to valleymls.com its population is 3954.

The unincorporated town of Sulphur Springs, Alabama is 6.1 miles from Rising Fawn. According to the DeKalb County website the first post office there was established in 1885. The depot for Sulphur Springs was on the Georgia side. It was an important stop on the Alabama Great Southern Railroad with a fifty-room hotel that also included six cabins. The sulphury springs in the area were considered beneficial to several health conditions and visitors flocked to the area to stay at the hotel or to take away the Sulphur water. Visitors had to be transported from the Sulphur Springs depot in Georgia to the Hotel on the Alabama side by horse-drawn buggy across the Ridge Road. Blake would later write a song called “Ridge Road Gravel” about that road, which today is still only a gravel road. The hotel was demolished in 1948. In 1918, the post office was relocated to Sulphur Springs, Georgia, where the actual train depot was, and consequently the mail had to be carried across the state line to the Sulphur Springs, Alabama. The DeKalb County website states that Sulphur Springs “has been a victim of modern medicine and the local drugstore” and that “few people live in the area” today. Sulphur Springs, Georgia is a community, not a town, with Sulphur Springs Station still showing as a geographical location on the map. Both communities are of importance in the context of Norman Blake since his 1972 debut album was called *Home in Sulphur Springs* and the 2006 album, he made with his wife Nancy is called *Back Home in Sulphur Springs*.

Today, Blake lives in Rising Fawn which is 5.9 miles from Sulphur Springs Station. According to New Georgia Encyclopedia he spent his childhood in both Rising Fawn and in Sulphur Springs, Georgia, which explains his fascination with the trains that ran through and stopped at Sulphur Springs Station.

Blake wrote an instrumental piece dedicated to the town entitled “Coming Down from Rising Fawn.” The romance he associates with this place, the love he has for it, comes through in

this simple title for a musical piece without words. The tender, and romantic nature of the name Rising Fawn captured and still captures Blake's imagination. In turn, he writes music not just informed by this landscape, but dedicated to this landscape, its people, and its trains.

### *The Railroad in Georgia*

Gates writes that "In the 19<sup>th</sup> century few subjects captured the imagination of the American public as firmly as the topic of internal transportation improvements" (170). In part, this may be due to the rising curiosity about other parts of the country spurred on by the popularity of travel writing in monthly magazines, and the sheer possibility of reaching faraway places made possible by the railroads. More than that though, economic development required the improvement of interconnected rail systems. In the case of Georgia, the railroad changed the participation of farmers from a pre-capitalist, barter-based system, to a capitalist market-based economy, especially for farmers located in remote sections of the northwestern uplands of the state. Savannah with its international port was one of the earliest railroad hubs in Georgia, but it was almost four hundred miles away from Dade County in the northwesternmost part of Georgia, with no direct railway connection.

Storey points out that by the early 1850s the state of Georgia "could claim more rail miles than any other in the Deep South". This was made possible by an 1836 convention in Macon, Georgia under Governor William Schley who proposed a trunk line that would connect the Georgia Railroad, the Central of Georgia Railroad, and the Monroe Railroad to the Tennessee River Valley. This railroad would cross "the Appalachian Mountains and terminate near Chattanooga, Tennessee" (Gates 173). The plan was approved, and construction began in 1838. By 1851, the line was completed. It connected Chattanooga with Atlanta, which had been founded in 1837, as the terminus, or mile zero, of the Western & Atlantic, with the name *Atlanta*

derived from the word *Atlantic*. The twenty-one northern and northwestern counties of Georgia, Dade County being one of them, benefitted greatly from this new Western & Atlantic rail line. Goods could now be transported southeastward, in and out of these remote areas, which resulted in a dramatic rise in population. Between 1840 and 1860 the population of the twenty-one counties served by the Western & Atlantic rose from 93,280 to 187,380 (Gates 179). With this new way of transporting their increased agricultural output, farmers had shifted to more profitable crops, grown on a larger scale, like oats, wheat, and cotton to maximize their profits. This also meant that the number of enslaved people that were needed to farm these lands almost doubled between 1840 and 1860. The completion of the Western & Atlantic made it possible for Chattanooga to become one of the biggest railroad hubs in the Southeast, connecting rail lines from Knoxville, Nashville, St. Louis, Louisville, and Cincinnati all the way to Savannah and New Orleans. Chattanooga, Tennessee, the city where “cotton meets corn,” was the hub that all these rail lines were passing through (Ezzell). Chattanooga was founded in 1830. Immediately after the completion of the Western & Atlantic Chattanooga turned into a boomtown, given its importance as a railroad hub but also as a central point for river traffic on the Tennessee River. Today, the Western & Atlantic route is operated by CSX.

Hamilton compiled an extensive list of rail lines that were relevant to Chattanooga, and the histories of the companies that leased and named them, where they started, stopped, and ended. In this study I will focus only on those that stopped at Rising Fawn, Battele, and Sulphur Springs, where Norman Blake lived.

The Wills Valley Railroad (WV) was founded in 1860 to connect Chattanooga and Elyton, Alabama, and was later extended to connect Chattanooga and Meridian, Mississippi. In 1878, the Wills Valley Railroad was reorganized into the Alabama Great Southern Railroad

(AGS), which Blake frequently writes and sings about. In 1883, the AGS and four other railroad companies organized a new route from Cincinnati, Ohio to New Orleans, Louisiana called the “Queen & Crescent”, based on the two cities’ respective nicknames, Cincinnati being the “Queen City”, and New Orleans “The Crescent City”. In 1969, the AGS was bought by the Southern Railway. The Southern Railway (SR) had been founded in 1894, operated in thirteen Southern states, and connected over 8000 miles of railroad track. It would operate until 1982 when the Southern and the Norfolk and Western were combined into the Norfolk Southern Railway. It remains in operation today. Murray as quoted by Hawkins writes about the Southern, “its most lasting impact was its contribution to the economic wellbeing of the region it served. Today's railroaders, whether they realize it or not, all share in the legacy of this remarkable railroad.”

Battele, a place that Blake sings about in one of his best-known songs “Ginseng Sullivan” is the first of three locations I will focus on, following the AGS from South to North through Dade County. Hamilton writes that at the beginning of the 20th century Battele “hosted hundreds of houses, a school, a commissary, a hotel, a post office, and an advanced water system.” Today, however, it is a “ghost town.” Hamilton goes on to say that “the Railroad played a part in both the establishment and the dissolution of communities.” This is certainly true for Battele, formerly called Eureka Coal Mines, one of several mines in Dade County, which was the main reason for the past prosperity of the town. Street writes for the Dade County Historical Society (DCHS) that “there was coal mining in Dade County since at least 1856 and probably earlier.” In 1872, former Georgia Governor Joe Brown became the head of the Western & Atlantic, and together with some investors founded the Dade Coal Company, which was mostly worked by convicts that were leased from the state of Georgia. Through this, the Western & Atlantic had its own cheap coal supply to run its trains and to fire the blast furnaces of the Rising Fawn Iron Works. When

smaller mines all over Appalachia were turned into truck mines, trains became less and less important and profitable, and when they disappeared, so did a lot of the towns they used to service. Coal mines in Dade County remained in operation through the 1970s. When trains stopped carrying the mail to small post offices in small towns, because the road and the automobile had taken over, the towns changed drastically. The railroad, the very entity that had literally put towns like Battele “on the map” also made them disappear, one of the great ironies of the interaction between landscapes and humans, or as Hamilton says, “the railroads were responsible for the creation of the town that later became the capital of the state of Georgia”, but “they were also responsible for the disappearance of some towns, even county seats.”

Sulphur Springs, which is located between Battele and Rising Fawn, was originally called Smith, but its name was changed in 1895 due to the popularity of its mineral springs. Sulphur Springs was a schedule stop, as opposed to a request stop, meaning that the train would always stop at such a station. Request stops (also called signal stops) could be whistle stops (a passenger could pull a chord to activate a whistle which would tell the engineer to stop) or flag stops (a flag was put up at a station to signal to the train to stop). Sulphur Springs was also a coupon stop, a place that had a counter where passengers could purchase tickets. This indicates that Sulphur Springs was a place of some importance since other stops on the line were not coupon stops. We may assume that people who visited and sought treatment in Sulphur Springs bought their return tickets home at that counter.

Rising Fawn was the next stop on the line. The blast furnaces of the Rising Fawn Iron Works contributed to the town’s prosperity throughout the later 19<sup>th</sup>, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hamilton writes that today it is “reduced to a fraction of its former glory.” Unlike Sulphur



Springs however, it remains a town of nearly 4000 inhabitants, with some local businesses. The visitors center of Cloudland Canyon State Park is in Rising Fawn.

The trains Blake remembers from his childhood were a regal presence in the rural South. They connected rural people to the industrialized world. The Pullman porters brought progressive newspapers and new music on 78 records from the North to black people in the South. The Pullman porters themselves represented a changing relationship between the races in the rural South. Becoming a Pullman porter was one of the very few ways to a middle-class life for African Americans. The people who worked in the section yards were itinerant workers and brought their customs and their music, as did the hobos. In Blake's time people were still coming back from WWII, in short, the trains were not just a form of entertainment, they were a tangible representation of a changing society. They underwent their own changes represented in the transition from steam to diesel engines. By its very nature, a train brings something and leaves something behind. People, goods, the mail, progress, change and, as for Blake, important and precious memories.

The cultural relevance of trains is represented in American song, not just of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century but also in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We may think of the importance of songs like Johnny Cash's *Hey Porter*, or the opening line of his most famous song *Folsom Prison Blues* that says, "I hear a train-a-coming." We may think about Elvis Presley's *Mystery Train*, about Arlo Guthrie's *City of New Orleans*, about the train as the place where Kenny Rogers' *The Gambler* (written by Don Schlitz) takes place, or in the modern era Josh Turner's *Long Black Train*. In the context of this study, we must certainly look at the mysterious metaphorical, and physical presence of trains in Norman Blake's songs.

## CHAPTER 3. NORMAN BLAKE – AN ABBREVIATED BIOGRAPHY

### *Family History and Early Career*

Norman Lee Blake was born on March 10, 1938, in Chattanooga, Tennessee. His parents were Lorraine Yvonne Blake and Rufus Larkin Blake. When Norman was eleven months old his family moved to a one-hundred-and-eighty-acre tract of land in Dade County, Georgia, that had been in the family for considerable time. In an interview with Terry Gross, Blake says that his father was an “inspector at Combustion Engineering in Chattanooga, Tennessee.” He goes on to say that his father would leave early in the morning to do his work in Chattanooga and then farm on the side in the late afternoons. Blake says that his mother “did mostly the housekeeping thing.”

In an interview with Peter Goldenthal, Blake states that he traced his family’s history back to one Thomas Kincade Blake, who was born in Chester, South Carolina in 1776. In the same interview, Blake displays an intricate knowledge of his family tree. Most of his ancestors are interred within miles of where Blake lives today in Rising Fawn.

Blake listened to the sounds of The Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers, Roy Acuff, Uncle Dave Macon, and The Monroe Brothers, on shows like WSN’s Grand Ole’ Opry from Nashville, Tennessee, but also to 78 records at the house of a tenant family that farmed on his father’s land. Another musician that was an influence on Blake was the great Georgia guitar player and singer Riley Puckett. Vintage guitar dealer George Gruhn, a friend of Blake’s since 1967, states in an interview with the author that Blake “had a pretty broad range of influences.” Blake’s cousin Earl Walraven played the fiddle and was an early influence on Blake, as was as a guitar player named Cripple Charlie Clark who young Norman performed with. Blake’s paternal grandmother played the guitar and he learned to play *Spanish Fandango* in open-G tuning from here, a tune he

would record on his first album in 1972. The fact that one of the earliest musical pieces he learned found its way on his first record indicates how much what Blake had seen and heard as a child influenced his future work. Since people and their cultural expressions are interwoven with landscapes and thus *make* place, we can see how immensely important this sense of place was for Blake.

Inspired by all this music Blake started to play mandolin, dobro, guitar, and fiddle. He dropped out of school in 1961, much to the dismay of his mother, to play music with the *Dixieland Drifters* on the *Tennessee Barn Dance* on the radio station KNOX in Knoxville, TN. This band included Charles “Peanut” Faircloth, a DJ that was popular in the Chattanooga area. According to Tim O’Brien, who has known Blake since the 1970s, the band’s style “was more progressive than Blake liked in the late ‘50s.” Blake then joined Melvin Goins, a popular musician who had been in a band called *The Lonesome Pine Fiddlers* but had ventured out on his own in the Pikeville, Kentucky area. Tim O’Brien says that this was when Blake first met Bluegrass pioneer Bobby Osborne, who showed Blake his Gibson F-5 mandolin. O’Brien says this was Blake’s “first glimpse of an F-hole mandolin.” He then joined a band called *The Lonesome Travelers* that was fronted by banjo player Bob Johnson, who would later be an enormously important point of contact for Blake. With *The Lonesome Travelers* Blake played the Grand Ole Opry, the most important stage and radio show in the US at the time. He toured as a member of Hylo Brown’s band and as a member of June Carter’s band. Blake’s career was on an upward trajectory but was interrupted when he got drafted into the US Army in 1961. He was consequently stationed in Fort Kobbe, Panama, where he became a radio operator. There, he also founded a bluegrass band called The Fort Kobbe Mountaineers. When he was discharged from the army in 1964, Blake accompanied his old bandmate Bob Johnson to a recording session with

Johnny Cash that Johnson was booked on. There Blake reconnected with Cash's future-wife June Carter Cash who he had accompanied on dobro as a part of her touring band. June Carter Cash introduced him to Johnny Cash who was intrigued by his wife's compliments of Blake's dobro playing. Consequently, Cash asked Blake to play on a recording session the next day, since he had wanted to add the sound of the dobro to his music. Blake borrowed a dobro from famed dobro player Josh "Buck" Graves and recorded "Bad News Travels Like Wildfire" and "Understand Your Man" with Cash. Blake and Cash would work together until Cash's death in 2003.

### *Nashville Years*

Between 1964 and 1967 Blake would perform and record with Johnny Cash, but also teach guitar, mandolin, and fiddle in Chattanooga. Blake started to perform on the Johnny Cash TV show in 1969. In 1969, Blake had also recorded with Bob Dylan on Dylan's "Nashville Skyline" album, a record that would introduce the sound of Nashville's musicians to the world of Dylan fans. At that point Blake had permanently moved to Nashville. By 1970, Gruhn had opened his store GTR, together with dobro master Tut Taylor and legendary luthier Randy Wood. Blake was renting a room in the GTR store where he taught guitar. He lived on Belmont Boulevard with his first wife Annie. Gruhn remembers going to that house three to four nights a week for picking parties, where local musicians would gather and informally play together. Blake continued to play with Johnny Cash on his TV show. In 1971, he recorded with Kris Kristofferson on Kristofferson's *The Silver-Tongued Devil and I* album. He had performed with Kristofferson prior to that, which is probably a result of meeting Kristofferson on the Johnny Cash TV show. In 1971, Blake also played on Joan Baez's version of "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down", and on The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's seminal *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*

album. That same year Blake became an integral part of the band that John Hartford assembled to record his ground-breaking album *Aereo-Plain*. The magnitude of playing on all these records within the span of two years cannot be overstated. Blake was a known entity as an acoustic musician in Nashville, although he never reached the renown of session players like Kenny Buttrey, Charlie McCoy, or Pete Drake. The reason for this may be that Blake from the beginning of his career was steeped in the musical tradition of early country and bluegrass music. While willing to experiment with new styles of playing and new production approaches, in certain contexts Blake was unwilling to bend too much to the demands of the shifting sounds in country music in the early 1970s. Ironically, this type of musical stubbornness made it possible for him to contribute to some of the most important records to come out of Nashville during that period. Blake, in an interview with Silverman, says that he threw the headphones against the control room window during the *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* recording sessions after he could not provide what producer Bob McEuen was looking for. Banjo legend Earl Scruggs consequently told McEuen, “Well, if you leave him alone, he’ll play something good.” That sense of being “left alone” creatively, stood at the forefront of Hartford’s *Aereo-Plain* record, on which the agreement between Hartford, producer David Bromberg, and the musicians, Blake, Tut Taylor, Vassar Clements, and Randy Scruggs was that any player could play whatever he wanted at any time, or not play at all. The other agreement was that the musicians would not listen to any playbacks but move on to the next song once they were satisfied with a take. Hartford’s songs for this record were groundbreaking in that they were almost avant garde in lyrical approach, but at the same time traditional in chord structure, melody, and instrumentation. On the follow-up record “Morning Bugle” Hartford only used Blake on guitar and jazz bassist Dave Holland on upright bass, with Hartford providing vocals, fiddle, and banjo. Blake was

willing to experiment on these records, to follow Hartford's lead in exploring new expressions in acoustic music that would ultimately lead to the creation of newgrass music, but as in the case of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band session was not willing to take creative input from people he did not fully respect in a musical sense. After Hartford disbanded the infamous Aereo-Plain band, Blake toured as a duo with Hartford for two years. Gruhn says that he got the sense that Hartford let Vassar Clements and Blake go not in a sense of firing them, but that Hartford believed so much in each man's mastery of his respective instrument and creative force, that he did not want to hold them back in their future endeavors. Blake briefly joined a band named Red, White and Bluegrass for nine months, but soon started to pursue a solo career.

#### *Recording Career as an Artist*

In 1972, Blake made his first solo record *Home in Sulphur Springs* that was released on Rounder Records. The choice of title is interesting here since Blake had not fully moved back to Georgia from Nashville yet. Gruhn says that Blake never really liked Nashville, that he did not like the hustle of the music business, and the business of city life. Blake later expressed that sense of displeasure and displacement in one of his most famous songs called "Church Street Blues", named after a downtown street in Nashville. The title *Home in Sulphur Springs* expresses an almost defiant sense of not belonging to Nashville, even though the city with its music business had provided an incredibly important launching pad for Blake's career. In Nashville Blake also had the opportunity to play with Bill Monroe at Randy Woods' Old Time Pickin' Parlor, which was part music venue and instrument repair shop. Monroe was at the club one night and was asked to play a few tunes. He replied that he'd be happy to do so, but only if Blake, who was in the audience, would back him up on guitar. This musical knighting by one of his earliest and most important influences must have given a strong boost in confidence to Blake

to fully pursue his solo career. He met his future wife Nancy Short in 1972, and in 1974 they made their first record together, called “The Fields of November.” They married in 1975 and have been performing together ever since, except for a three-year period starting in 1997, when they separated, divorced, and remarried. A classically trained cellist, Nancy Blake’s playing and singing added a new dimension to Blake’s music. The low register of the cello freed Blake up to expand his instrumental solos without him having to hold down the low end of the music. At the same time, the cello’s mellow arco tone added a new melodic element to his songs. Nancy’s alto voice blended beautifully with Blake’s tenor. Their voices were very close in register which made for a unique male, female vocal blend regardless of if she was singing a tenor or a baritone part to his lead vocal. Her voice is often somewhat reminiscent of Sarah Carter’s. Given the fact that Blake was so heavily influenced by the Carter Family, this tonal quality must have pleased him immensely. After meeting Blake, Nancy also started to focus on her guitar and mandolin playing and became a very accomplished rhythm guitar, and fine mandolin player. Her rhythm guitar playing anchored many of the duo recordings they have made, and she contributed several original instrumental tunes to their repertoire. Blake would go on to record some albums by himself, but would always return to the duo format, sometimes augmented by fiddler James Bryan, and always toured with Nancy. Together they created personae that were defined not only by the old music they played, and their original compositions that leaned heavily on traditional music, but also through the clothes they wore, and the instruments they played. Nancy and Norman Blake were hippies in attitude that dressed like depression-era people and played pre-depression-era music that was sometimes “hillbilly baroque” (Kasten). Through his association with George Gruhn, Tut Taylor, and Randy Wood, Blake had developed a taste for, and an understanding of, the tonal qualities of vintage instruments, mostly vintage guitars. It is

impossible to differentiate Blake's love for pre-war Gibson and Martin guitars from his songwriting. He says that "If you're gonna (sic) play music from that Depression era, there is something about those old instruments" (Campbell). In an interview with Goldenthal, Blake says about guitars, that "they affect what you do." Early on in his career, he would play several Martin dreadnaught guitars (the biggest-bodied guitar Martin manufactures) but later gravitated to smaller-bodied guitars with necks that join the body on the twelfth fret instead of the longer-scale fourteen-fret neck guitars. The choice of instruments certainly informed Blake's playing. The trained ear can identify what style of guitar he is playing on what recording, how it informs his performance, and how it influenced the creation of the respective tune or song. Unlike guitarists like seminal flat-picker Tony Rice, who played one guitar for almost all his career, Blake would buy and sell guitars without getting too attached to them. One of his early guitars, a one-of-a-kind, 1933 shade top, twelve-fret Martin D-28 guitar is currently for sale for two million dollars by an Arkansas instrument broker, a sum that is greatly inflated. Blake's guitars show up frequently at vintage guitar stores like Carter Vintage or Gruhn Guitars, which are both located in Nashville. The fact that they were owned and played by Blake adds value to these instruments, a fact that Blake, according to Minner, disapproves of. Even the prototype of a Martin Norman Blake signature model guitar was for sale several years ago at Gruhn Guitars. Blake does not seem to be emotionally attached to instruments, but rather buys instruments that represent his playing and writing style at any point in time, while letting other instruments that he has "played out" go (Minner). Blake perfectly sums up his approach to different guitars by saying, "you have to let everyone be what it is and let it find its own way" (Campbell).

Both Norman and Nancy Blake, early in their careers, gravitated towards a style of dress that is reminiscent of the depression era, with Blake wearing overalls, lace-up boots, long sleeve



dress shirts, a vest or tweed overcoat, workingman's flat caps, or plantation style straw hats. The engineer's watch on a golden chain became a feature of his way of dressing early on. Nancy prefers long, flowing dresses and work boots, which create a style all her own. Norman and Nancy Blake did all their touring since 1974 by car or van, they never flew, adding to the old-school traveling troubadour character of their performances. Relating to Blake's appearance O'Brien says that Blake "was older than the rest of the hippies" but had "long hair and wrote those songs", and that Blake "had a gravity like Doc." O'Brien is referring to legendary guitarist and singer Doc Watson here, who was well-known for his easy-going demeanor and his accessibility to younger musicians.

Gruhn says that Blake does not simply act like a man from a different time, but that he is from a different time, claiming that the world Blake was born into in North Georgia in 1938, was not very much different from the days of reconstruction and the ensuing years. At the same time, Gruhn says that Blake holds many progressive views which is evident when Blake talked to Silverman in 2017, saying that "there's nobody that's more against him than I am", referring to then-President Trump. Blake goes on to say that "my wife and I both think it's the worst thing that's happened to this country in quite a long time" but he also adds, "I always have hope for the future." Kasten writes that while the Blakes' oeuvre was only occasionally tinged by political overtones their "music has been an argument for humane and timeless values and principles — patience, respect, honesty, peace."

It is not the intent of this study to document every record that Blake has made, or every musical collaboration he was a part of. I will only focus on a few projects of great importance to Blake's career.

Apart from his solo records and the albums he made with Nancy Blake, Blake worked on several collaborative records. Two outstanding examples are the albums he made with Tony Rice: *Blake and Rice* (1987) and *Blake and Rice 2* (1990). These two records, by two very different guitarists, bound by their flatpicking playing styles and their bluegrass background, stand as two of the finest examples of highly skilled playing in the service of great songs that were mainly Blake's. The beauty and complexity of the tonal character of two guitars displayed on these records had previously not been heard and has influenced future generations of guitarists. Rice, arguably the most important guitarist in the history of Bluegrass music, recorded many of Blake's original songs, second only in number to those he recorded by Canadian songwriter Gordon Lightfoot.

A life-changing event that led to the possibility of Norman and Nancy Blake's retirement was Blake's involvement in the soundtrack for the 2000 movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Blake contributed vocals and guitars to the song *You Are My Sunshine* and an instrumental version of *Man of Constant Sorrow*. The movie went on to sell twenty million records in twenty years and made Blake a significant amount of money. Norman and Nancy Blake were a part of the *Down from the Mountain* tours that took the music of the movie on the road across the United States. T-Bone Burnett, the producer of the soundtrack hired Blake again in 2003 to work on the soundtrack for the movie *Cold Mountain*, and then again in 2007 for the Alison Krauss and Robert Plant album *Raising Sand*.

Blake has won one Grammy for his involvement in the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack. He was nominated for eight other Grammys.

In 2022, Norman Blake was inducted into the International Bluegrass Music Association's Hall of Fame. In 2007, Norman and Nancy Blake retired from touring. Blake

continues to write and record to this day. Today, Norman Blake and his wife Nancy are living in Rising Fawn, in a two-story house, they built in 1980, on a forty-acre plot of land.

## CHAPTER 4. SONG ANALYSES

Atlanta-based songwriter Jefferson Ross, who spent many years as a staff writer on Nashville's Music Row, hails from rural Georgia. He says that when he first heard Blake's songs "they sounded like they were carved just after the Ten Commandments, only in Deep South limestone." Blake's songs sound old and new at the same time. Bluegrass musician, songwriter and scholar Tim Stafford says that Blake's songs "have a truly timeless quality; they feel like they could have been written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the future." There is an elusive tone, sound, and cadence to these songs. Greil Marcus penned the term "the old weird America" referring to Dylan's *Basement Tapes*, but it also applies to Blake's narratives, characters, and scenes. Ross says about Blake, "there was no distance between his singing and the sound of my grandparents talking." Ross' grandparents would have been of the same generation as Blake's parents. His statement speaks to the fact that Blake's songs are always conversational in nature. Their vocabulary, both lyrical and musical, is that of the working class of Georgia. One gets the sense from Blake's songs that eleven-month-old Blake, upon moving to Sulphur Springs, took one look around and committed an entire microcosmos to visual, poetic, and musical memory. Ross says that Blake's writing is "mountain writing, but not of the cool, blue shadows of a West Virginia coal mine hollow," rather it is the music of the Southern edge of the Blueridge, or as Ross puts it, it is music "of a plateau where the latitude is lower and the sun a tad hotter." This music, these songs, are highly specific as they relate to place, not just because they name certain geographical names or names of people. We may want to consider those aspects only a part of what creates the sense of place in Blake's songs. We must keep in mind that almost all of Blake's recordings are based around his voice, and guitar playing, often accompanied by his wife's cello playing, and sometimes by James Bryan's fiddle playing, or a dobro part. There are

no tones used that would speak specifically to one place. No pedal steel guitar sounds that tell us whether we are listening to country music made in Nashville or in California; no electric guitar tones that tell us the difference between Buck Owens, The Grateful Dead or Chet Atkins; no clearly identifiable banjo style that tells us if we are listening to a North Carolina clawhammer player or a modern Scruggs style player; no use of chord voicings that date the guitar playing as post Tony Rice; there is no Cajun accordion that anchors the music in Louisiana; no twin fiddles that connect the music to the Texas or Oklahoma dance halls—there is only the sound of Blake’s, technically fairly limited voice, with its distinct Georgia accent, and its “often archaic” language (Stafford) and his guitar. And yet, through that simplicity of music and language, these songs immediately tell us where they take place, when, and who their protagonists are. In his guitar-playing Blake shifts between flat- and fingerpicking. Sometimes he also plays the dobro, banjo, or fiddle. His playing relates as much to the old-time music of the Blue Ridge as it does to the Piedmont Blues or the hard-driving sounds that came out of early country music recorded in Atlanta in the 1920s. There is clarity and ambiguity in his music. It is music by a White Southerner but also with clear influences of Black players and Black musical structures. Blake is a musical collector as well as a musical inventor which is what I am trying to convey in an ongoing effort in my work as a teacher and writer—that “innovation requires preservation.” Blake’s songs sound like we may have heard them before, but upon closer examination, they are highly inventive. Grammy-winning songwriter and artist Gillian Welch says about Blake’s influence on her early work, “I think I was wondering if it was possible to write new folk songs with the qualities of the old songs that I found most fascinating: timelessness, specificity, a sense of place on a sensory level, believability, the poetry of everyday speech. Norman’s writing showed me that this is possible.”

Blake's songwriting never feels belabored. He says what he wants to say in simple yet distinctive and concise terms. Stafford says that "he pulls more tangible sadness out of songs like *Lonesome Jenny* than almost any of his contemporaries." This refers to Blake's writing but also to his recorded performances, which are always natural, narrative, and without pathos. Stafford says that "as a performer, he always seemed to be a living link to an earlier time," and that he is "adept at telling real stories like *Ginseng Sullivan* and making them sound as realistic as fictional ones like *Last Train from Poor Valley* or *Randall Collins*." Blake always understood what so many, mostly young songwriters grapple with: songs *can* be autobiographical, but they do not *need* to be autobiographical to convey accurate emotion. Autobiographical and biographical material can be mixed with fiction if done in a cohesive way. Names and place names strengthen the narrative of a song lyric, in the same way rhyme and meter provide connective poetic tissue. Welch says, "I took great heart after discovering his work, and I know that it strengthened my resolve to pursue songwriting. His songs have that wonderful quality of effortlessness and inevitability that we all strive for, a feeling that it had to go this way." Through Blake's work writers like Welch gave themselves artistic permission to write songs that are set in a different time but in an accurate setting, even if they are fictional, or mix fiction and truth. Seminal writers like Tom T. Hall, Bob Dylan, Kris Kristofferson, and John Hartford opened new doors in songwriting, each in his own way blazing a new trail that allowed other writers to follow in their footsteps. Blake has done so as well. Welch herself has become a seminal figure as a songwriter. She was born in New York City, grew up in California, and moved to Nashville over thirty years ago. She says, "I need to be where the place names and the histories and stories are familiar to me. This is Place." She goes on to say that "one of the reasons I settled in Tennessee all those years ago is that my stories make sense here." Unlike Blake, she did not stay where she was

born, but rather moved to a place that she felt musically tied to, the American Southeast with its rich musical heritage. It was Blake's writing that showed her that she could have a musical home wherever she chose to if she took the craft seriously, and if she connected on a deep emotional level with the place she would write about.

Welch describes the inspiration she found in Blake's songs, especially as it relates to a sense of place like this, "It's sort of like Norman showed me a magic trick, not an easy one, but at least I knew it was possible."

Blake experienced the songwriting greatness of Cash, Kristofferson, Dylan, and Hartford firsthand. From my own experience as a sideman for Nanci Griffith, Richard Dobson, David Olney, and Mary Gauthier, I know that listening to great writing is different from "being inside" great writing, from interpreting and performing it. I am not trying to say that one can become a good songwriter by playing great songs by other people, but one can become a better songwriter by observing other peoples' songs from the inside out. Blake came to songwriting as an instrumentalist, which helped him to identify song structures and to keep his songs musically interesting without making them complicated. When he released his first album in 1972 his songs were fully formed, informed by his then 34 years of living and the times before him. He set the tone for his future work and never wavered from it. On the cover, we see a young man, who at the same time looks seasoned, an expression of resolve on his face, with the hair, beard, and glasses of a hippie, yet, different from the hippies of the time. O'Brien says this about one of Blake's best-known songs, "That song *Ginseng Sullivan* had really mysterious words. Just the idea of an itinerant ginseng hunter and seller was pretty much an opening into a different world." Blake brought exactly that "opening into a different world" to the songwriting of the early 1970s. He showed his contemporaries, as well as younger writers like O'Brien, that introspective and

philosophical songwriting was not the only worthy writing to be done, that paying attention to one's immediate surroundings could greatly inform good writing and open a whole new range of subjects worth writing about. Alger says that "I had no idea what ginseng was, but it sounded so exotic, yet the music was very traditional until the second half of the chorus where the chord changes become somewhat more adventurous."

I would like to use *Ginseng Sullivan*, the song that had such an impact on Tim O'Brien and Pat Alger, as the first subject of three song analyses that explore the intricacies of Norman Blake's songwriting.

### *Ginseng Sullivan*

*About three mile from the Battele yard*

*From the reverse curve on down*

*Not far south of the town depot*

*Sullivan's shack was found*

*Back on the higher ground*

This first verse provides a detailed geographical location. With a map of the area, or by being in the area, one could get very close to finding the place of Sullivan's shack near Battele in Dade County. Blake firmly places the character that is speaking in the South by using the expression *three mile*, instead of *three miles*, an antiquated, distinctly rural way of Southern dialect. Current is quoted by Brooks as saying that, "of all the real or imagined differences between Northerners and the Southerners, the speech difference is not only the most noticeable but also the most fundamental" (1). Whether Current is correct in his latter statement that it is the most "fundamental" difference between the two is not relevant to this study, but the former, that



it is the most “noticeable” is, since Blake uses in the very first line of this song, to point out his own Southern identity.

A reverse curve is a term in civil engineering for an s-curve. Blake does not use that term to show his prowess in railroad-related lingo but to give the listener a feel for the hilliness and remoteness of the place and to convey to the listener how much the railroad was a part of everyday life, of the landscape. The fact that Sullivan’s shack was on higher ground further speaks about the nature of the terrain; if there is higher ground there must be lower ground. Visiting the area, one gets a sense for the proximity of places in the lower parts while the higher parts are set apart and even more sparsely populated than the lower ones. By using terms like “about three mile” and “not far from” Blake uses Southern working-class speech, using coordinates that are based on familiarity with the terrain rather than by exact location. We also learn that the protagonist’s name was Sullivan, it could be a first name or a last name. Even the title does not let us know which it is, but the title gives us a feeling that the man was referred to as “Ginseng Sullivan.” It does not really matter if it is a first or last name, it is more a matter of defining the man by what he does—collecting ginseng. McCormick says that Sullivan was also called Pink Root by some locals, another indicator that people defined him by what he did for a living. Rural people would give a man a name like this, since in a rural place like Batelle there would not be a number of ginseng collectors, but most likely only one. The sheer fact that he is a ginseng digger tells us more about the place this song takes place in. It is a rural place. Ginseng only grows on remote hillsides. It also tells us something about the nature of the protagonist, he is a man with intimate knowledge of the environment. Only the skilled eye can identify where ginseng roots can be found, which is often determined by other plants and trees that it grows next to. It also firmly places the song in Appalachia, which the name Battele by itself would not. The

soil and climate of Southern Appalachia provide the conditions ginseng needs to grow. Digging for ginseng was a distinct Appalachian craft that provided a way to make money in times when most rural Appalachians lived outside a money-driven, mostly barter-based society. Up to today, ginseng digging, and recent pursuits to cultivate it, are used to provide incomes from mostly Asian markets. In a cultural context, it is used to show distinct “Appalachian-ness,” for example in documentaries like *American Hollow*. It is also the subject of books that are entirely dedicated to this infamous root, like Manget’s *Ginseng Diggers*, and of academic literature like Williams’ chapter in *Economic Botany*. Williams writes about ginseng, “The export reached 185,876 pounds in 1946,” a staggering number given the tedious nature of collecting ginseng (346). For somebody with no specific trade, ginseng hunting in 1946 may have provided a somewhat steady source of income. In 1946, Blake was eight years old and may well remember Ginseng Sullivan from those times.

Songwriters do not always think about all the things they convey in lyrics, nor should they. The most compelling songs give the listeners enough detail to anchor their imagination to a person or a place and time. Blake does both here. He gives us a physical location, the name of a person, and a sense that this song is taking place in a different time, which is also achieved through the sound of the music. Much like the first paragraph of a book, the first verse of a song should set a scene and pique the interest of the listener.

This verse consists of five lines in iambic foot, which means that an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable. Some syllables fall outside of that meter, which is normal, even in classic poetry. The rhyme scheme is ABCBB, meaning that lines two, four, and five rhyme, but lines one and three do not. The repetition of the rhyme in lines four and five lends an old character to the sound of the language, this is not something one would find a lot in commercial

songwriting post-1950. The fact that the first three lines provide a list of geographical points drives the narrative of this verse. The listener wonders, what exactly is happening in this location, and why it matters. Blake partially answers this with the last two lines. There is also a rhythmic repetition in the words “Battele” and “reverse” which Blake pronounces with the emphasis on the first syllable of each word, which makes both words sound old and distinctly Southern. The words of these first two lines are flowing together and almost make no sense unless one knows that the word “Battele” stands for a place.

*You could see him every day*

*Walking down the line*

*With his old brown sack across his back*

*And his long hair down behind*

*Speaking his worried mind*

Blake repeats the same rhyme scheme in this verse, as is the norm in most traditional-sounding American songs but adds an internal rhyme in line three with the words, “sack” and “back.” Internal rhymes provide additional structural tightness to song lyrics. The closer rhymes are together, the easier it is for the listener to understand the structure of lines, verses, and the whole song. In verse two we learn that “you could see him every day”, meaning that not just some people could have seen him, but anybody who would have been there at that point in time. Blake uses the *universal you*, the more complex nature of second-person narrative, which makes the listener a part of the experience. This speaks to the remoteness and sparseness of population of the place Blake is talking about. In a big city, not everybody would see the same thing or the same person, but in a small country town, one would. We also learn that Sullivan would “walk down the line,” he would follow the railroad track outside of town, and he did it “every day.”

This tells us that digging for ginseng was Sullivan's main occupation and probably his sole source of income. We learn that he carried an old sack, not a new one, which means that he was probably poor, and that he had long hair, which was certainly unusual for a man in the time of WWII or shortly thereafter. It depicts Sullivan as an outcast in the rural environment of Battele. He either did not have money to have his hair cut, did not live with a woman to cut it for him, or made a deliberate move by not cutting it. Blake perfectly "sets up" the chorus with the last line of this verse by saying that Sullivan was "speaking his worried mind." This indicates that the chorus will be shifting to first-person narrative, which indeed it will. "Setting up" the chorus is something that commercial Nashville songwriters and publishers are always concerned with. Each line, but especially the last line of each verse, has to provide a "lift" into the chorus. Old English or Scots Irish ballads or songs do not do that, they hardly ever even have a chorus. The importance of the chorus was a result of early blackface minstrelsy's efforts to entertain within relatively simple musical structures, carried forth into early country music melting with African American song traditions that placed more importance on repetition. We can see here that Blake emotionally and conceptually understands all these elements and uses them to lead us into a most memorable chorus. We also learn something about Sullivan's state of mind in this line, he is worried, and he now speaks directly to the people of the past, but also to today's listeners when he says,

*It's a long way to the Delta*

*From the North Georgia hills*

*And a tote sack full of ginseng*

*Won't pay no travelling bills*

*Now, I'm too old to ride the rails*

*Or thumb the road alone*

*Well I guess I'll never make it back to home*

*My muddy water Mississippi Delta home*

In the first line of this chorus, we learn that Sullivan is not native to North Georgia, that he is from “the Delta”, although we do not know yet which Delta. A sense of displacement comes through in this first line, which is a sense of place all its own. The second line spells out the larger context of where this song is taking place. While in the first verse the listeners learn about the very details of place, they now learn that this song takes place in “the North Georgia Hills.” In lines three and four we learn that even a sack “full” of ginseng will not provide Sullivan with enough money to buy a ticket back home. Williams writes about a “downward trend” in ginseng exports that started in 1947, this may be why Sullivan could not afford a trip back home (347). More than that though, the following lines five and six reveal the nature of Sullivan’s predicament, he is too old to “ride the rails”, in other words, to be a hobo, and he deems himself too old to hitchhike all by himself, which indicates the potential dangers of both means of transportation. The fact that Sullivan thinks that he is too old also tells us that he has been a ginseng digger in North Georgia for a long time, but he still does not have enough money to go back home, indicating that he has lived under an illusion for all this time to ever gather enough funds for the trip. Sullivan concludes the chorus with the thought that he will probably “never make it back to home.” The following line adds tremendous emotional impact to the chorus. “My muddy water Mississippi Delta home” shows a rhythmic rhyme with “muddy water” and “Mississippi” both having four syllables. The up-tempo nature of the music underlines the rhythmicity of these words. The rhyme scheme of this chorus is ABCB DEEE with lines two and four, and lines six, seven, and eight rhyming. Blake repeats the word “home”

as the last line of lines seven and eight. Repeating words, especially rhyming a word with itself, is often frowned upon in songwriting unless it is used as a stylistic element. Blake uses it as such here and creates great tension by repeating and thus emphasizing the word “home” which, as a concept of place, is at the core of this song.

*Well, the winters here they get too cold*

*The damp it makes me ill*

*You Can't dig no roots in the mountain side*

*With the ground froze hard and still*

*Gotta stay at the foot of the hill*

In verse three the listeners learn about the weather in North Georgia and the fact that the cold, damp air makes Sullivan sick. Whether this sickness is at the root of his predicament, of not being able to go home, is unclear, but it adds to the somewhat desperate situation Sullivan finds himself in. The listeners also learn that Sullivan cannot dig for roots in the wintertime, which means that he cannot generate an income during that time. Blake uses the word *froze* instead of the grammatically correct word *frozen*, another use of Southern dialect. All Sullivan can do is “stay at the foot of the hill”, another line that helps create a sense of place. Blake’s lines never feel rhythmically crowded, there is a natural flow to his language that is economical and descriptive at the same time. Each line is conversational and follows the speech patterns of the Southerner. Young writers often struggle to achieve this symmetrical prosody of the spoken word, with each syllable landing on the correct stresses and unstresses. Instead, they add notes to their melodies to accommodate for extra syllables, which in turn complicates and disturbs the musical flow. Blake never does that. The old poetry that he remembers his grandfather reciting, along with his love for and study of the simplicity of early country music, has instilled an

intimate understanding for poetic economy and symmetry in him that is an integral part of the writing for his first solo record, as well as for his future work.

*But next summer, things turn right*

*The companies will pay high*

*I'll make enough money to pay my bills*

*And bid these mountains goodbye*

*Then he said with a sigh*

In the final verse, Sullivan speculates about and even predicts a more positive future for himself. Blake uses two beautifully old and rural turns of phrase here when he writes “if things turn right” instead of “turn out right”, which would be the more contemporary way of saying this, and when he says that “the companies will pay high.” In modern English one would say “pay well”, “pay good”, or “pay better”, but Blake chooses to use this older expression that must be one he heard used all his life. Blake makes a deliberate effort to use this language. While it comes from a place of familiarity, it is also a choice that puts a narrative in a place and time. As with his preference for old ways of dress, and for vintage instruments, Blake chooses to express himself poetically in older ways and thus creates a distinct persona that is inseparable from his work. In the last two lines, the listeners learn that if things get better Sullivan will “bid” North Georgia goodbye, another old-fashioned turn of phrase, and then Blake repeats the line “and then he said with a sigh” that also concluded the second verse. Again, this line leads perfectly into the chorus. Using this line again is a stylistic choice rather than a mere repetition. It tells the listeners more about the character. Sullivan “sighs” twice in the span of a short narrative, which adds to the down-and-out nature of his situation. Blake leaves it open whether the listeners are supposed to feel sorry for Sullivan. He also leaves the story open-ended. Whatever will happen or has

happened to Sullivan is not revealed. Blake provides the listeners with a snapshot of a man in a landscape and leaves it at that. Through his words and music Blake invites the listener to become a part of the story, a part of the place where this story unfolds, and lets the listener determine how the story might end.

In an interview with Minner, Blake revealed that Sullivan was the character's first name and that he could not remember his last name, but that he was an unkempt man who would wear a set of overalls until it "would fall off." While this is interesting information, I chose only to reveal this at this point since the average listener would not be privileged to have this information, and because the lack thereof does not impede the power of Blake's narrative at all. Blake found a perfect way to strike a balance between detailed information and information that is withheld, which turned *Ginseng Sullivan* into one of the most timeless songs in the Bluegrass canon. Blake's version was recorded with lead vocal, guitar, and dobro. Tony Rice recorded this song on his highly influential 1979 album *Manzanita*. Remarkably, Blake's very traditional song can "take" the progressive approach of Rice's incredibly virtuosic band treatment. Rice's version is recorded at 111 beats per minute (bpm), while Blake's original is recorded at 94 bpm. Only a very well-written song, with highly symmetrical phrasing, can be sped up that much without losing impact or feeling rushed. On the other end of the spectrum, Gillian Welch and David Rawlings recorded the song in 2020 on their album *All the Good Times (Are Past & Gone)* at 62bpm, and the song does not suffer from this much slower treatment either. Blake's version included two instrumental dobro solos, played by Tut Taylor, that mostly follow the vocal melody, while Rice, Welch and Rawlings are a lot more improvisational in these solo spaces.

Pat Alger says about *Home in Sulphur Springs*, the album this song was on, "What impressed me most about Norman's album was his ability to sing while accompanying himself



with what sounded like, a very complex picking and chord pattern - something I was trying to perfect as well. It sounded so effortless, and on a sparsely produced record it provided just the right balance between his vocal and guitar with some added accompaniment by Taylor.” Not much can be added to this statement. Alger perfectly sums up what any writer and guitar player would observe when listening to this album.

Unlike many of the old songs by Jimmie Rodgers, The Carter Family, or Riley Puckett, all sources that are important to Blake, *Ginseng Sullivan* explores one character that is not the singer him- or herself. Observing other people in a detailed way was not a part of early country music which is one of the factors that sets it apart from the ballad tradition. Kristofferson’s *The Pilgrim*, and Tom T. Hall’s *Homecoming* may be some of the earliest character studies in country music from the late 1960s and 70s, but they were distinctly different from Blake’s songs. Kristofferson’s song was more philosophical; Hall’s mixed autobiographical matter with fiction, and always displayed an element of humor if often somewhat dark humor. Kristofferson’s delivery was more rooted in the Dylan-style singer-songwriter mode, while Hall’s was distinctly Nashville-sounding. Blake’s was something else, it sounded older, and yet it was a new song. This sense of holding on to the past while trying to move forward at the same time was an essential emotional aspect of early country music but more so of the American experience overall, and it is at the heart of Blake’s music and puts it distinctly in a place and time.

I am providing a chart of *Ginseng Sullivan* to point out some musical intricacies of this song. Blake recorded it in the key of D-major and plays it out of a D position on guitar. The D position on guitar has a clear “major feel” with the high E string (or first string) being fretted at the second fret to sound an F# note, which is the major third in the key of D. Many modern Bluegrass players avoid this position for its distinctly softer, and older sounding character,

preferring to put a capodaster (or capo) on the second fret of the guitar and then playing out of a C position, which again provides a true D chord.

Every chord has four beats, underlined chords indicate two chords per bar, chords in cursive indicate bars that only have two beats per bar, or three beats per bar (as in the chorus)

Intro:                GD   GB-   *A*     *D*

Verse 1:             *D*     DG   GD   GB-   *A*     *D*

Verse 2:             *D*     DG   GD   GB-   *A*     *D*

Chorus:              *D*     *G*     GD     *D*     *G*     *G*

CD   E-A   DG     *D*     *DGD*   *D*

Solo:                    same as verses 1 & 2

Verse 3:                same as verse 1

Verse 4:                same as verse 2

Chorus:                same as before

Solo:                    same as before

Chorus:                same as before

The chords used in this song are D (tonic), G (subdominant), A (dominant), and B- (relative minor to the tonic.) In addition to that, in the second line of the chorus, Blake uses a C chord in the key of D, a non-diatonic chord, meaning a chord not based on one of the steps of the major scale (here D-major.) He moves from C to D to E- to A, the first three chords moving up in whole steps. These chords accompany the lyric at its most revealing moment, “*Now, I’m too old to ride the rails, or thumb the road alone*” and provide dramatic musical support because of their ascending nature. The word *alone* lands on top of the A-chord, which gives the listener the

sense that the song has modulated to the key of A. In the closing line, Blake releases that tension by finishing the last line of the chorus with the tonic chord D and the subtonic chord G.

An interesting detail we can observe is the use of a two-beat bar in the verses and the use of a three-beat bar in the chorus. These uneven bars, that veer off the traditional 4-beats to the bar scheme, are often used in old-time country music since the meter follows the lyrics, instead of the lyrics being dictated by the meter. The feel of this song is not interrupted since the syllables of the lyric “carry” the listener through these passages. Blake achieves this smooth feeling because the stresses of the lyrics fall on the downbeats of the music (in this case, beat one of each bar). The words “*muddy water, Mississippi Delta*” land on the above-mentioned three-beat bar. If we divide this three-beat, or three-quarter bar, into two groups of four 16<sup>th</sup> notes, and one group of two 8<sup>th</sup> notes, we can observe that every syllable of “*muddy water, Mississippi*” corresponds with one 16<sup>th</sup> note, while “*Delta*” lands on two 8<sup>th</sup> notes. The rapid-fire effect of the first two words, and the slowing down of the last two, with the word “*home*” falling on the downbeat of the last bar, make this section so musically pleasing. In the classical way of reading sixteenth notes as 1 e + a this would look as follows:

Mu ddy Wa ter Mis si ssi ppi Del - ta Home

1 e + a 2 e + a 3 + 1

A writer like Blake does not write with these things in mind, he simply knows what he wants to achieve, and gets the correct result through a mix of listening experience, writing experience, and intuition. Alger perfectly sums up Blake’s songwriting on *Home In Sulphur Springs* when he says, “On that album Blake’s *sense of place*, which I identify as the landscape and the *mood* of the hills of North Georgia, comes through like a cloud cover on a moonlit night.”

### *Slow Train Through Georgia*

Joel McCormick has been friends with Blake for forty-nine years. He is an accomplished musician who has toured with The Stanley Brothers and The Forrester Sisters. He has an expansive knowledge of old-time music, often plays music with Blake, and when Blake was still performing, often acted as his driver as well. He is the magistrate judge of Dade County. He vividly remembers first hearing Blake play when McCormick was five years old. Blake was sitting under an apple tree in Rising Fawn waiting for his then-wife to get her hair done, while McCormick waited for his mother to get her hair done. McCormick was born in 1962, so this must have happened in 1967 when Blake was twenty-nine years old. This bucolic image of a child being fascinated by a musician is interesting because it shows that Blake, even at that relatively early age, had become a figure that contributed to the character of the place. Blake made the place come alive with music for a five-year-old child, in the very place that had made Blake, and would inform his entire future oeuvre.

Joel McCormick showed me around the area on a bright day in late summer. Driving around Rising Fawn, Sulphur Springs Georgia and Sulphur Springs, Alabama, and the area where Battele used to be, it becomes clear that the landscape of this place is inseparable from Blake's songs. Everything he sings about is to some extent still there, and at the same time, it is not. McCormick kept apologizing that all the places I asked about—the state-line church that sat right on the state line that Blake mentions in his interview with Gross; the Sulphur Springs Hotel; the Battele section yard with its sections houses near Sulphur Springs; the Rising Fawn iron works—were gone. Very few buildings remain from the time that Blake is singing about. Those that do are boarded up or dilapidated. The rail line cuts right through the area about a mile from the Alabama state line. Norfolk Southern freight cars are sitting on the sidetracks. There are very

few businesses. Those that had once been there closed when the passenger trains stopped running through the area, or later when Interstate 59 replaced Georgia State Route 11 as the main thoroughfare of Dade County. There are two gas stations right by exit four off Interstate 59, none on Route 11. Trenton, the county seat, is a small town with an old courthouse in the middle of town. McCormick took me to his office in a newer courthouse to show me a part of his vintage guitar collection, and his vintage pocket watch collection. He shares these passions with Blake, who according to McCormick comes to his office “a bunch” to talk and play music. McCormick says that Blake pulls around the side of the new courthouse where McCormick’s office is and honks his horn so McCormick can let him in the side door. McCormick says that he can come and go at the Blake’s House, that the door is never locked, and Blake usually greets him, calling him “son.” I am providing these somewhat anecdotal details to describe the sense of being of a different time that permeates the area, and because they inform my analysis of the second song *Slow Train Through Georgia*. This is one of Blake’s most personal songs, that at the same time is somewhat ambiguous and seems to mix perspectives of possibly different characters. The song leans heavily on images that relate to Rising Fawn as well as the greater South-East. Blake opens this song with another detailed description of place.

*Down by the county bridge Gondola Road*

*Hauling down to Birmingham the dirty ash-like coal*

*I shouldn't have let 'em move me on come sunshine, rain, or drought*

*'Cause just like the circle says southern serves the south*

Because of its proximity to the Alabama/Georgia state line, respectively the Dade and DeKalb County line, the bridge that Blake mentions in this first verse is most likely the Lookout Creek Bridge on Sulphur Springs Road. The bridge was built in 1921. The original bridge is not

there anymore, it was replaced by a newer one in 2002. Joel McCormick could not confirm that Lookout Creek Bridge is indeed the one Blake talks about in this song.

Gondolas are railroad freight cars with low sides and open tops. They are typically used to transport bulk materials, such as the coal that is referenced in the next line. Blake is very specific about the location that he describes in line one, although the described old bridge is not there anymore. Through this, he points out again that places are not only real when they are in physical existence, but that places that live in someone's memory can be just as real. This is in keeping with the rest of the song that stays somewhat vague in narrative, but not in emotion. *Vague* being a negative-leaning term, maybe the term *universal* would be better applied here, depending on how one reads and interprets this song. It is almost as if Blake speaks in geographical code, encouraging the listeners to find out more about the place he is singing about, dropping hints about locations that at the same time create a somewhat dark atmosphere, especially in this first verse. Gondola Road is not a specific location but may refer to a sidetrack of railroad that transported coal from one of the Dade County mines to the main line that connected it with Birmingham, which is 128 miles from Rising Fawn. The "*dirty, ash-like coal*" Blake writes about is lignite, or brown coal, the lowest grade of coal in terms of burning qualities, the highest in toxic byproducts. The reference to Birmingham indicates that the coal was used in the Birmingham steel mills. In line three, the protagonist of this song regrets his willingness to be sent to different locations, regardless of the weather conditions, although the weather here is also used as a metaphor for other conditions, for a lack of concern for the protagonist who is being sent about. Blake gives no further reference to who the protagonist, who's speaking in first person, is. It could be a railroad man, a conductor, an engineer, or one of the workers in the section yard at Sulphur Springs. Most likely Blake uses the protagonist as a

stand-in for himself, frustrated by the demands of the music business, and by the constant touring he had to do to survive playing acoustic music. The last line refers to the sign of the Southern Railway, a round yellow sign with green lettering. The middle of the sign shows the “SR” abbreviation in green letters, around it, in smaller letters is written “Southern serves the South.” What Blake is saying here is that a Southerner, like the protagonist here, should serve his own people, his own place, over pleasing other people or employers from other places. Blake takes actual locations, and an actual railroad sign, and turns them into metaphors for his displeasure with his condition. The first two lines are thoughts of a far-away place, while the last two lines are comments on a situation. We will see that Blake uses that same structure in a later verse.

*Chorus:*

*Hardships and troubles, Lord you know I have some*

*Getting older every day I'm a fair-weather bum*

*Let me tell you good people here it's just about time*

*To catch a slow train through Georgia and ease my worried mind*

In the chorus, the protagonist states that he has “*hardships and troubles,*” the word “*hardship*” being another old expression that is characteristic of Blake’s language. In line two he comes to the realization that time is running out and that he is not making the best use of his time. Blake was thirty-nine years old at the time this song was released. Turning forty is a time in life when one typically does not feel old yet but also knows that one is not young anymore. So it is with Blake who in the same line describes his protagonist, or himself, as a “*fair-weather bum.*” While Blake has always been thoroughly dedicated to his art and craft, he was never driven by ambition or success and would have rather stayed home instead of the near-constant traveling he had to do to support himself and his family. “Fair-weather bum” also refers to him

being a Southerner who is longing for the warmth of his homeland. In line three, the protagonist is addressing “*good people,*” possibly his fellow railway workers, but also, possibly an audience, maybe the people in the music business, that it is “*just about time*” to get himself on a train back home to Georgia, which would relieve his worries, a slow-moving train away from the hustle of the music business, and the constant touring. Picturing the railroad line that runs through Rising Fawn, imagining the rhythm of a slow-moving train, one can feel Blake’s longing for his home in these lines. The listener gets a strong sense that this song is about Blake himself, although Blake never fully commits to that perspective, as we will see in the second verse

*Forty miles an hour she's rolling down the line*

*Greasy rail, red clack trails through the long leaf pines*

*Anyplace that the sunshine falls is where I long to be*

*Sunshine Southern special won't you roll me to the sea*

Morrison writes that “between 1900 and 1950 the Americans built the biggest and most powerful steam locomotives on the face of the earth and ran them to the limits of their power” (3). He goes on to say that “the last to be built, in the 1940s, were five times as big and eight times as powerful as their predecessors fifty years earlier.” Strachta’s website *Steam Trains* contains some videos of refurbished steam engines running today and explains their mechanisms in detail. He describes the steam locomotives of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century as machines of “great lethality.” They were wonders of modern engineering that connected an enormous continent and were a big part of the economic development of the US. They spurred on the imagination of writers like Jack London and Mark Twain, as well as millions of people, especially children in rural areas who marveled at these locomotives that had up to 3000 horsepower. In the pre-automotive era, horsepower was not too abstract a term, since almost



everybody knew how to handle a horse, or at least knew what it felt like to be transported in a horse-drawn vehicle. Strachta writes that the concept of 3000 horsepower, “in those days, would have conjured a literal image of 3000 horses, the critters that powered civilization.” Considering that Blake would have seen some of these locomotives as a child, we can understand the impact they must have had on him. Trains in the 1940s could run up to 86mph but would, according to trainorders.com, typically run at an average speed of 49mph in un-signaled, or “dark territory.” Blake’s description in line one of verse two, of a train going “*forty miles an hour*” is then accurate, especially considering that the train may have made three stops, at Battele, Sulphur Springs, and Rising Fawn, on a stretch of fewer than ten miles. Blake refers to the train or the locomotive as a female in this first line. Train Conductor says that “for as long as steam locomotives have been around, crews have referred to it as female. ‘She’ and ‘the old girl’ are synonymous with steam locomotives. The reason for that is probably due to the engineer’s connection with the locomotive, speaking of “‘her’ as a she (sic), a living creature.” Blake leaves it up to us to decide whether he is talking about a fictive engineer talking about his engine, or if the real Blake is talking about himself. In line two he talks about “*greasy rails*” and “*red clack trails*”, referring to the fact that rails were, and are oiled by trains through mechanisms that have changed over the years to reduce friction between the steel wheels and the rails. He combines this technical detail with the wordplay “red clack trails”, which refers to the red dirt of Georgia and Alabama and the “clickety-clack” sounds of an old train. “*Rails*” and “*trails*” also provides an internal rhyme, which strengthens the stability of this line. In the second half of this line Blake provides another detail of place when he talks about long-leaf pines, which are found in North Georgia and Alabama. In line three Blake refers again to the “*fair weather bum*” image of the chorus. He states here that any place where there is sunshine is where he “*longs*” to be, this

time explicitly saying that he is longing for a different place. We may think back to the importance of a sense of longing in songwriting discussed earlier and how it relates to a sense of place. In line four Blake talks about the Sunshine Special, a rail line that started operation in 1915 and was a part of the Southern Railroad. However, this line connected St. Louis and points in Texas. Records that this train ran through Blake's area could not be found. It is entirely possible that Blake simply uses the term Sunshine Special, adding the word Southern, because he likes the sound of the alliteration and the fact that all three words have two syllables, a rhythmic rhyme similar to the one we have observed in *Ginseng Sullivan*. The disconnect between the images of North Georgia and Alabama and the Sunshine Special's route may simply be poetic license, the statement that he wants the train to "*roll him to the sea,*" however, is in keeping with one of the train's actual destinations, New Orleans. The term "*roll*" is used deliberately here, borrowing from many Blues songs that use the line "roll me, mama" as a sexual reference. Blake uses it as a double-entendre here, referring to the "*rolling*" of the train, but also to the "*rolling*" of the female qualities that he gives the locomotive when he refers to it as a "*she*" in line one of this verse, which thematically connects these two lines, and leads into the second chorus.

*Lord, I wish was living day by day someplace down the track*

*Come on gal, my old pal, Lord you know we'll not look back*

*I'll take this old guitar I'll play her every day*

*Like a slow train through Georgia roll my blues away*

In this last verse, the protagonist wishes to live "*someplace down the track.*" He does not specify where exactly, but we may assume that the word "*down*" stands for "South" in this context. He wishes to live from one day to the next, without the constraints of a schedule, be it a touring schedule, or a train schedule. In line two he refers to his "*gal*", which could mean the

train, it could also be a reference to Blake's wife and touring partner Nancy. He calls her an "*old pal*." She is not only his wife but also his confidant, his running buddy, or his companion of the road, and he assures her that there will not be any reason to look back if they get away somewhere South. He also creates another internal rhyme with the words "*gal*" and "*pal*". He says that he will play his "*old guitar*", which now, in the second to last line, to some extent, establishes that Blake was talking about himself throughout the whole song. Blake does play old, vintage guitars, and is known to play a lot at home, even after retiring from the road in 2007. In an interview with Terrell, he is very specific about this when he says, "Oh, I play all the time. I play every day. Oh yeah, yeah. I'll never quit that. I'm totally committed to playing." He puts the emphasis on the first syllable of the word "*guitar*", another element of Southern speech. He talks about his guitar as a female when he says, "*I'll play her every day*", a parallel to the locomotive he refers to as a female in the previous verse. In the last verse, he equates his guitar, a metaphor for the music he makes as the very part of his existence that "*Like a slow train through Georgia,*" can "*roll his Blues away.*" The train that could bring him home and the music become one and the same in this last line. Blake sums up the essence of his life as a musician in this last verse. All the romance of a life in music, of the images of his home and the trains that he loves so dearly become one. Alger describes Blake's songs as "mystical but believable", which describes this particular song "Slow Train Through Georgia" particularly well.

The rhyme scheme in this song is the same in the verses and the chorus. It follows a strict AABB rhyme scheme in trochaic foot, which means that a stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed syllable. The song is in the key of E-flat-major. Blake's guitar is capoed on the third fret, he plays out of a C position. On this song Blake shows great skill at fingerpicking the guitar. The basic picking pattern follows the classic alternating bass line that is characteristic of country

music. The thumb of the right hand picks the bass, while index and middle finger of the right hand play the melody in the instrumental sections. The song is in 4/4 time and recorded at approximately 76bpm. The chord shapes used are C (tonic), F (subdominant), G (dominant), and A-minor (relative minor to the tonic). Because of the capo position on the third fret the true chords the listeners hear are E-flat-major, A-flat-major, B-flat-major, and C-minor. There is nothing complicated about the chord progression, and yet, it creates an urgent sense of melancholy that we don't perceive when just reading the lyrics. Especially the movement to the minor chord at the end of the verses and of the chorus is used to great effect. The bass moves from the note C, over the note B to the A-minor-chord. Blake chooses not to use this move on verse 1, but he uses it on all the other verses and the choruses. A basic chart outline looks like this:

Intro: C C GC F FC F FC C GC

Verse 1: C GC F FC F FC C GC

Chorus: C GC F FC F FC CA- GC

Instrumental: C GC F FC F FC C GC

Verse 2: C GC F FC F FC CA- GC

Chorus: same as above

Instrumental: same as above

Verse 3: same as verse 2

Chorus: C GC F FC F FC CA- G F GC

Blake's vocal on "Slow Train Through Georgia" is at the top end of his range, which adds great tension and release to the verse and chorus melodies, especially when they release into the minor chord. Blake shows masterful ability of crafting a classic folk melody here. Musically,

this song could have been recorded by The Carter Family in the 1920s, but it is not copying anything, it just sounds familiar in feel. I interpret this song as the moment where Blake may have almost quit the music business.

Alger says, “Listening to Blake’s songs, I feel the sense of separation and satisfaction that comes from being disconnected to the world at large both geographically and socially – something that happens naturally way back in the hills and hollows.” This is the sense of longing Blake is expressing in this song, he wants to unplug, get back to the place that is familiar to him, where he can live free from the demands of the music business or society, and follow the pace of that place – the home he is longing for.

#### *Greenlight on the Southern*

When asked what he considers Blake’s greatest song, Stafford says that *Greenlight on the Southern* “is hard to beat.” It is a song that leans heavily on railroad lingo and slang. There is no emotional content in the lyrics of the verses, but Blake achieves incredible emotional impact through a brief, three-line chorus. The technical details about running a steam train in this song are such that Strachta, on his highly informative *Steam Trains* website, declares it “a good place to start” to understand some of the essential aspects of running a train.

*Standing on the sidetrack at the south end of town*

*On a hot dry dusty August day the steam pipe pouring down*

*The fireman with his long oil can oiling the old valve gears*

*Waiting for the semaphore the fast mail train to clear*

In this first verse, Blake talks about a train standing on the sidetrack, a parallel track to the mainline, where locomotives, passenger or freight cars, or entire trains, were positioned until it was their turn to move. We learn that this particular sidetrack was on the “*south end of town.*”

We are left to speculate about the specifics of this town but may safely assume that he is talking about Rising Fawn or Sulphur Springs. We learn that it is summer, the words “*dry*, ”*dusty*”, and “*day*” creating an alliteration that is rhythmical and poetically descriptive at the same time. We learn that the “*steam pipe*” is “*blowing down*,” a steam pipe being a mechanism that is controlled by the engineer from the cab, to clean build-up from the boilers of a steam locomotive. This was typically done when a train was standing, but ready to move. It could be dangerous for people to be too close to this, because of the heat of the steam. Engineers would also use this to keep people from getting too close to the locomotive. In the next line the listeners learn that the fireman would go around the train to oil the valve gears. Valve gears are mechanisms that allow steam to enter and exit from the cylinders of a steam train. A steam train had cylinders at the front end of each side of the train, closely located to the driving wheels that moved the train ahead. The listeners also learn that the brakeman uses a “*long oil can*.” Some oil cans used in railroading had spouts that were up to twenty-six inches long. Antique oil cans are highly sought after by steam train enthusiasts today. The fireman was one of two people needed to operate a steam train; the other was the engineer. The engineer operated the throttle to control the speed of the train, and if the train would go ahead or move in reverse. The engineer also had to blow the whistle of the train in a sophisticated series of long and short blasts, each of which had a special meaning. The fireman had to shovel coal from the tender (a small car behind the locomotive that carried water and coal) into the firebox in a way that covered the floor of the firebox evenly. The fire heated the water in the engine’s boilers to steam. The fireman had to make sure that there was enough water in the tender to supply a consistent amount of water to the boilers. The fireman worked under the supervision of the engineer and had to manually ring the bell from a mechanism in the cab when a train was rolling in or out of a station or depot. Both

the engineer and the fireman had to constantly monitor several pressure and level gauges to ensure that the engine was running smoothly. In the last line, we learn that both the engine and the fireman are waiting for the “*semaphore*” to “*clear the fast mail train.*” A semaphore is a mechanically controlled signal arm, or a set of two signal arms, mounted on a pole. The angle of the arm, or the arms, provides a set of information to the engineer, often indicating if the tracks ahead are clear or not. Blake again creates a sense of unity between man and train here, both waiting, maybe impatiently, to roll. In the second half of this last line, Blake lets the listeners know that the train he is talking about is “*the fast mail train.*” He uses the antiquated sentence structure “*the fast mail train to clear*”, versus “*to clear the fast mail train.*” This gives him the word *clear*, which rhymes with the word *near* in the previous line, but by no means does he use this structure as an excuse to create a rhyme, he deliberately chooses it to create old-sounding language.

*The engineer in the old high cab his gold watch in his hand*

*Looking at the waterglass and letting down the sand*

*Rolling out on the old main line taking up the slack*

*Gone today so they say but tomorrow he'll be back*

In verse two, Blake describes the other crew member needed to operate a steam train, the engineer. There is no specific railroad term that refers to “*high cab.*” We may assume that it simply looked high up from where a person stood observing a train. The engineer is checking his gold watch. The engineer’s watch was extremely important in the days of mechanical watches. If the watches of different engineers differed only by a few minutes, the result could be disastrous wrecks. Railroad companies would insist that their engineers had “railroad-approved” watches, by the same watchmaker, often Hamilton, to ensure that they ran as evenly as possible. The

engineer in this song has a gold watch. Engineers' watches were heavier and made of better materials than regular watches. This also tells the listeners something about the social status of a train engineer, a man who did not farm or work in manufacturing, who held a position of great responsibility. The details of the steam train in the previous verse, and the fact that the engineer is holding his watch, meaning that it is a pocket watch versus a wristwatch, position this song firmly in the late 19<sup>th</sup> or first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The chorus will reveal greater detail.

In line two, the engineer is "*looking at the waterglass.*" The waterglass was an extremely important gauge that told the fireman and the engineer if the part of the boiler directly over the firebox was sufficiently covered with water, if not, the boiler could explode. The fireman and engineer had to check the waterglass constantly. In the second half of line two Blake provides another detail of a steam train about to roll, "*letting down the sand.*" The engineer controlled a mechanism that poured a certain amount of sand on the tracks from a container on the engine called the "sand dome." This would prevent the driving wheels from slipping when a train started, but it was also used when a train slowed down. Since the rails were constantly lubricated, as described earlier, this was necessary to provide the steel wheels with enough grip on the rails. Line three describes the train finally moving slowly onto the main line "*taking up the slack.*" This is a railroad term for slowly increasing the speed one notch on the throttle at a time to allow each individual car to move forward smoothly without jerking cars ahead. An engineer needed considerable skill and experience to achieve this. Blake provides an astonishing amount of intricate, technical, railroad-related detail in these two verses. To uninitiated listeners, it is almost impossible to know what exactly he is talking about, unless they are of the age that Blake is and have the same fascination with trains. Otherwise, a significant amount of research is necessary to untangle the meaning of these two verses. The interesting aspect, from a songwriter's



perspective, is that despite the very technical nature of these two verses they display beautiful poetic flow. I have met many people who absolutely love this song, none of them are railroad enthusiasts, and yet, none of them are bothered by these verses that read more like a manual than a song lyric. The reason for this is that Blake is never in a hurry to say something, musically or lyrically. He confidently takes his time setting a scene, letting the sound of the lyrics and the melody merge into a flow that carries the listener along. He creates a sense of anticipation about what is to come, but not in a tense way. His lyrics and his music here do exactly what the train he sings about must do to function properly. There is no hurried way to achieve this, the same attention to detail required from the train operators to the train, from all the maintenance when it is standing still until it finally pulls out, is required from the songwriter creating this song, and the listeners listening to this song. After two verses the listeners find themselves entranced by the imagery and the melody, like being on a train, passing the scene where all this happens. O'Brien says about Blake's music, "He was into slowing it down, taking in the beauty of it, getting into the trance." Blake brilliantly conveys that sense of trance in this song.

In the last line of the second verse, Blake reverses the saying, "here today, gone tomorrow," and states that the train may be gone today, but that it will be back tomorrow. This line speaks both to the fact that a train carrying the mail would come and go every day or every week, but also to the relationship of the person with the train, watching it depart in fascination, eagerly awaiting its return.

*Oh if I could return, to those boyhood days of mine*

*And the greenlight on the southern southern railroad line*

The chorus is a complete break in poetic energy from the verses. In the chorus, Blake establishes that he himself is the spectator in this song. He is the young person, the boy entranced

by the train and its crew that he described in the verses. The simple use of the word “*oh*” that starts this chorus emphasizes his longing for the place and time where this happened. In the last line of the chorus, Blake talks about a green light, or “*greenlight*” as it is spelled in the song title. This can either refer to green lanterns that signaled to a train that it could go, but most likely it refers to the taillights of a steam train, which indeed were green. If we picture a young Blake watching the train pull off in the distance this interpretation makes more poetic sense. Blake refers to the “*southern southern railroad line*”, indicating that he is talking about the geographically located southern part of the Southern Railway. The repetition of the word lends itself perfectly to the melody. If one were to try to sing this last line without this repetition the melody would have to be either strangely elongated or cut abruptly short. Neither option would sound near as good as “*southern southern.*”

Welch says that “Leaving always helps clarify and embed something’s defining feature.” In the case of this song, it is the train leaving that reveals much about its own nature and relevance in a particular time and place, but it also reveals much about the writer, Norman Blake, who left that place to pursue a career as a musician, and in leaving found so much to write about that particular place and time. The drastic difference between the verses and the chorus makes this song emotionally impactful. The fact that Blake talks about “boyhood days” and not “boyhood years” emphasizes the fleeting nature of time in one’s youth. The days of a young person can seem endless, while in retrospect they seem extremely short. Blake experiments with these emotional juxtapositions in most of his songs. He is a writer that lives in different times, imagined, remembered, or in the present.

*Creeping down the rusty rails of the weed grown branch line*

*The section houses gray and white by the yard limit sign*

*The hoppers call the old high ball no more time to wait*

*Rolling down to Birmingham with a 10 carload for freight*

In the third verse Blake talks about a different train, this train is slowly moving down a sideline by the section yard. He describes the section houses, houses built by the railways for their workers. Much like mill houses in character, these were simple houses, probably worn down by the constant stream of different workers coming and going, who would live there for short periods of time, and without their families. The section yards were separated from town. We can assume that a considerable amount of music-making, drinking, and gambling was going on in the section yards. Nolan Porterfield describes one such scene in one of the Southern Railway's section yards in Mississippi in the late teens of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in his seminal biography *Jimmie Rodgers the Life and Times of America's Blue Yodeler*. He talks about "blacks kneeling in the shade of a boxcar on the sidetrack, rolling dice", listening to music "of a peculiar chanting rhythm", coming "from a cheap guitar in the hands of a rather good-looking lad in his teens", who turned out to be Jimmie Rodgers. Rodgers is clearly an influence on Blake. It is also easy to imagine that Blake himself witnessed similar scenes in the section yards around Battele and Sulphur Springs. Blake talks specifically about a "yard limit sign", which was a section of a main track that ran through a section yard, where certain rules about speed and movement applied, that were different from those outside the yard limit. In line three Blake talks about "hoppers" which is railroad slang for engineers. "Calling the high ball" means to give the train permission to proceed at full speed. The term refers to a ball mounted on a pole, that when raised gave this high ball sign. In the last line the train is on its way to Birmingham, probably carrying ten cars of coal, coal that was mined in Dade County, heading to the Birmingham steel mills.

*The whistle screams with a hiss of steam the headlight gleams clear*

*The drivers roll on the green and go getting mighty near*

*Handing up the orders to the engine crew on time*

*It's the Alabama Great Southern AGS railroad line*

Blake starts the last verse by describing two of the steam train's most iconic hallmarks, the steam whistle, and the headlight. Especially for people in the rural South in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these were powerful representations of a new age coming. Even to this day the sound of a train whistle, especially at night, holds a distinctly American fascination.

The green signal lantern is waved, the driving wheels start turning as the yard crew is handing the orders to the engineer, a symbol of everything working hand in hand, gear to gear, from signal to whistle, from piston to wheel, from yard crew to engineer. This is a metaphor for a functioning world, where every detail complements another. In the last line he tells the listeners which train, or trains, he is talking about, the Alabama Great Southern Railroad. Anchoring his narrative to the name of a real train makes this song come alive even more dramatically.

Blake offers no narrative arch in this song. He simply gives the listeners the image of a train awaiting departure and connects it to his childhood. He relies on the power of these images to hold the listener's attention. Again, he proves himself to be a master of poetic economy, no line, no word, no syllable is wasted.

This song follows an AABB rhyme scheme in trochaic foot. Blake uses some internal rhymes throughout but not in a consistent way, which is not necessary. The rhymes of his AABB scheme are close enough together to provide great internal stability.

There are several important recorded versions of this song, a solo version from Blake's 2011 *Greenlight on the Southern* album, one from Tony Rice's 1986 *Me and My Guitar* album, and one from the 1987 *Blake and Rice* album.

Blake's version is recorded at 75bpm, the Blake & Rice version at 78bpm, and the Tony Rice version at 102bpm. Even more so than with *Ginseng Sullivan* Rice's and Blake's version are vastly different. Blake's interpretation is a slow ballad, while Rice's is an up-tempo bluegrass song. I chose the 2011 version as the basis of my musical analysis and chose to omit intros, solos and outros since they are different in each version and not essential to what I aim to show.

The song is in 4/4 time. This version is the simplest of the three. The other two versions are using some chord substitutions and occasional passing chords. Ironically, the latest version from 2011 is the most basic one, in the key of D-major, using the chords D (tonic), G (subdominant) and A (dominant). Blake deconstructs his own song to the harmonic bare bones.

A chart would look like this:

Verse: D AD D A D AD D A D repeat

Chorus: D AG D GD A D DA D

Verse: same as above

Chorus: same as above

Blake's guitar playing is simple and relaxed. He plays with the capo on the second fret out of a C position. He connects the chords through seemingly simple bass runs, typical for old-time country music. The single bass notes are mostly alternating from the root note to the five note on beats 1 and 3, while beats 2 and 4 are downstrokes over the higher strings. The original version of this well-familiar country music guitar accompaniment was Mother Maybelle Carter's famous "Carter Scratch". Blake throws in some peculiar moves where he does not alternate to

the five note in the bass but rather to the three note, which is highly reminiscent of Riley Puckett's guitar style. He also throws in some distinctly syncopated licks that are quoting Jimmie Rodgers' playing. None of it is done to show off Blake's prowess on the guitar, rather these are subtle hints at the players who influenced him. Blake's playing is deceptively simple, and yet, many virtuosic guitar players would struggle to play these simple parts as rhythmically relaxed as Blake. Most young Bluegrass or country players do not know how to play this old guitar style anymore. It is a very specific approach that requires a lot of playing time. It is not as much a matter of technical skill, but rather of rhythmic feel. Every detail of his playing anchors this song in the time that Blake is singing about, his childhood.

Although I chose the 2011 solo version, I would like to say a few words about the Blake & Rice version. To many devotees the 1987 duo version of this song by Blake & Rice is the pinnacle of great guitar tone. The beauty of this version is otherworldly. It reinforces Frederic Chopin's sentiment that "nothing is more beautiful than a guitar, save perhaps two." It is telling that for many Rice fans his most beautiful playing is on a Blake song. Not much is known about their relationship, but the music they have made together has monumental importance to any guitar player in this genre, and Blake's songs were the vehicle for that.

## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

Norman Blake is a writer that expresses progressive views in conservative structures, that writes new songs that have all the hallmarks of old songs. He is an innovator on his instrument, the guitar, which anchors his innovation in ancient Appalachian tunes, as he is an innovator with his other instrument, the writing pen.

The research questions of this study are how a sense of place has influenced Norman Blake's songwriting, how his writing has influenced other songwriters in the field of acoustic music and what songwriting techniques Blake has employed to create an acute sense of place.

I aim to answer these questions by quoting some of the data collected from interviews, but also my extrapolating on some of my findings from the field of sense of place studies

hooks (sic) writes "that we know ourselves through the art and the act of remembering" (5).

Blake remembered the place he grew up in in his songs, from his first record on.

Over the relatively short period time of thirty-four years from when Blake was born to 1972, when he recorded his first solo album, the place he had grown up in had changed radically. Today it has changed even more, and yet, in many ways it has stayed the same. It has changed in the way that today, both locations of Sulphur Springs, in Georgia and in Alabama, only exist on a map. They do however live on in the memories of those who care to remember, like Blake and his friend Joel McCormick. The immense technological progress brought on by coal mining, by the Rising Fawn Iron Works, and the steam trains is nothing but a memory. The Norfolk Southern Railway's trains still rolling through the area are a mere reminder of the glory of the trains of the past. Blake's memories provide a pool of ideas for him that he mines to this day.

The fact that most of the places, and two of the towns he is singing about, have mostly disappeared makes his songs even stronger. We can only see them through Blake's memories.

If one goes to the area, the sense of seeing this place through Blake's eyes becomes even more pronounced, although so much of what he has seen is not there anymore. I understood his songs on a much deeper level after I visited the area, much like I gained a different, more intense understanding of The Carter Family's music after I first saw the Carter Fold in Hiltons, Virginia. Music holds place, and place holds music, for those who care to see and listen.

Gillian Welch offers this brilliant summary of Blake's worldview that informed his writing throughout his entire career, "I think that the area around Norman's home in Georgia IS the world for him. This is where his stories and his words come from. The wind is the way the wind feels down there. The train sounds the way the train sounds passing Rising Fawn. It makes his narrative voice beautifully consistent, and very true to himself." This is the reason why his songs sound so real and alive. Alive in the very place they come from, and alive to a world of listeners outside of that place. Welch says that Blake's sense of place is, "Baked in. Abiding deep in the cortex, like a childhood home where you always find yourself in dreams." Welch's dream analogy is interesting, considering what C.G. Jung said about dreams, that, "Dreams are impartial, spontaneous products of the unconscious psyche, outside the control of the will. They are pure nature; they show us the unvarnished, natural truth, and are therefore fitted, as nothing else is, to give us back an attitude that accords with our basic human nature when our consciousness has strayed too far from its foundations and run into an impasse." This quote is a perfect description of Blake's writing that seems to grow out of the North Georgia soil. His writing has a dream-like quality because most of it takes place in a place that is still there but at the same time not there anymore. Jung's quote speaks to a sense of inevitability. This inevitability



permeates the work of all artists of magnitude. We can feel it in Blake's songs, especially because they are so directly tied to place. Place dictates Blake's art, and through that inseparability between man and place, great art is created.

Blake's remembrances are not an intent to sell something to his listeners. The listeners feel as if Blake is writing and singing for his own enjoyment, not for commercial purposes. This is what makes his work so relatable, there is no commerce that stands between his music and the listener. Mandolin master, teacher, songwriter, and friend of Blake's Mike Compton expresses this notion like this, "Being acquainted with Norman (and Nancy) has retaught me that I much prefer decency and straightforward dialogue whether it's in music or poetry or people." Compton's statement expresses a sense of fatigue with the world of the music business, or the world at large, but it also says that the Blakes' way of doing things can point to an alternative way of "doing business" outside the mainstream. Through that attitude of the Blakes', Compton found a new way of relating to his own place of origin in Mississippi. He says, "I have learned to see what had once been invisible to me because I was too close to it, and it was all I knew. They (Norman and Nancy Blake) showed me what I've been overlooking and showed me how special it is, how powerful simple ways and pleasures can be." This statement summons up perfectly what Blake's songs and the music he has made with Nancy Blake have done for so many people. It provided a breath of fresh air, a break in the business of life, a break from the busy flurry of notes in bluegrass music, an inside view into old Southern ways, but also a way of rediscovering one's own past with its related places.

As much as Blake is a traditionalist it must be acknowledged that he greatly contributed to pushing acoustic music forward. The addition of Nancy's cello was a novelty in acoustic music in the mid 1970s, although the cello had been featured in some old-time string bands of

the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that Blake chose to write new songs that sounded old and discussed topics from a different time was a push into a new direction as well. Blake says, “You can’t expect music to exist on what it was. A live person has to give it something” (Romano 6). Blake has certainly done that through his songs.

Blake’s insistence on keeping the music pure, while at the same time, inserting new sounds and topics into it that are respectful of the music’s roots, he has opened doors for contemporary acoustic musicians, and songwriters. Blake says, “I consider music to be the highest form of the arts” (Coats 26). Blake has certainly lived up to keeping his art as pure as possible, while also pushing ahead into new territory.

When talking about the South, his home, Blake chooses to focus on mostly positive memories. It cannot be ignored that to some he may stand accused of ignoring the darker sides of the old Southern ways. However, Blake’s description of an older South are not rooted in “lost cause” nostalgia. He simply chooses to express his liberal, left-leaning political views only when relating them to the present day. Complete inclusivity of every aspect of a society of a specific place, through art, is simply not possible. The artist must decide what aspects to focus on, the audience can choose what art to participate in.

Gaston Bachelard writes that “Through the brilliance of an image, the distant past resounds with echoes” (2). Blake curates a museum of such images from a bygone era in his mind and songs. At Mike Compton’s *Monroe Mandolin Camp* in 2021 Norman and Nancy Blake participated in an afternoon Q&A session. Nancy talked about how Pablo Casals and Andres Segovia had “built cathedrals in their souls”, that were made of music. In the same way Blake has built “a cathedral in his soul” for the images of his past. He remembers the past on behalf of those who do not, or were born too late, but care to listen to his songs, much like the shamans

and elders of tribal communities tell the stories of days gone by. In the tradition of American Folk music that is so firmly rooted in the English and Scots Irish ballad tradition, we may think back to the *Gypsy Laddie* who constructs his own reality in which he has supernatural powers. Writers like Blake, Lynn, Parton, Dylan, Hartford, Hall, and Kristofferson have the literary equivalent of those powers. Each one of them created a distinct persona through their songs, through which they changed the course of American music. Blake's most powerful tool to do this was his way of remembering, or as Welch says about Blake, "all the memories and local mythologies are a well that never gives out, not for him."

Krystine Batcho says that "It is the interaction between the cognitive interpretation of the experience and the remembered emotion that determines nostalgic sentiment" (377). An individual must have had a concrete, tangible experience of place, to form the nostalgic sentiment prevalent in Blake's work. Blake had those experiences in his childhood. He actively remembers, by providing names of locations, by creating a sense of locale, and by providing the names of his characters, by presenting them in a dignified, respectful way. All his characters were poor people, working class people. Blake himself was never a rich man, but he always presented himself in that same dignified way, as a man who had made a choice to live his life a certain way.

Wendell Berry says, "I don't know any other place as carefully as I know this place, but if that amounts to anything more than a hobby, it has to mean that I honor the possibility that other people in other places would know their places as carefully as I know mine and might be as highly motivated to defend their places as I am to defend mine." Blake defends his place in his songs. Through that, Blake gives other writers permission to write about their native places, and

to adopt places not native to them as their own. A perfect example of that is Blake's great respect for Gillian Welch, although she is not native to the place she mostly writes about.

In 1913, Sidney Lanier, as quoted in David Wisnant's *All that is Native and Fine* says that the old ballads are "manful in necessary fight, fair in trades, loyal in love, generous to the poor, tender in the household, prudent in living, plain in speech, merry upon occasion, simple in behavior, and honest in all things" (54). We can find an astonishing parallel here to the liner notes of Blake's 2011 Smithsonian Folkways album *Greenlight on the Southern*, in which he writes, "I've seen the rural music I've loved since childhood grow fainter and farther away in a commercial and urbanized society that seems to care little for the charms of old-fashioned southern string music and its long-gone practitioners.... Here are some of the old songs I play and sing around home...one can live by the sentiment and poetry found in many of them." Blake has indeed lived by the poetry of these old songs, and through his own work has contributed to the survival of this style of music. He has inspired enough writers to ensure that his type of songwriting will live on.

Through my work as an instructor in the songwriting program at Belmont University in Nashville, I occasionally come across students who have an interest in older kinds of country music but do not know what to listen to. I suggested to one of those students that maybe he should listen to some of Blake's songs. After listening the student sent me an email saying this about Blake's songs, "there is a longing for home that I deeply relate to" and "these songs have inspired me a great deal." There could not be a better testament to the timelessness of Blake's songs than a 19-year-old student, whose previous interaction with country music reached only as far back as contemporary band The Avett Brothers. This timelessness comes from the fact that these songs are rooted in a certain time and place. Blake says, "Borrow from your own roots,

borrow from bluegrass, not from what's popular on the radio" (78). Young and old songwriters would do well to take this advice, to learn the language, both musical and lyrical of older styles of country music, to study them in-depth, before infusing them with new elements. Academic programs focusing on old-time and bluegrass music have their part to play in that education. Programs like the commercial songwriting program at Belmont University have their part to play in that as well. The focus of these programs should not be to limit new artistic expressions of young writers and players. However, a sense for the foundations of music must be paramount, especially in the context of old-time country and bluegrass music. Students and teachers alike can learn from Blake when he says, "That's my barometer, my yardstick, if I write something I want it to stand up against the best of the old" (Romano 8). This shows the great respect he has for this old music, that filled him with a sense of purpose throughout his career as a songwriter. It also speaks to the intricacies of the old music that are often hard to discover, and sometimes, especially to the un-initiated, difficult to appreciate. Recording quality, production assets, seemingly antiquated language, and, on the surface irrelevant topics all potentially get in the way of learning from the old music. Blake can be a conduit here. Tim O'Brien describes this when he says, "Monroe was kinda (sic) hard to understand at first. Doc (Watson) was very easy access. Blake was the best of both Doc and Bill, and he had long hair and wrote those songs." Blake's music is indeed accessible from different perspectives. One can approach it from a guitar-playing angle, from a songwriting angle, or simply from the perspective that he is a complete individualist in how he approaches music.

Pat Alger says, "When anyone asks me if such and such a song is really about me, I will usually say: 'no but I'm in it.' I suspect that Norman is in all of his songs too." Blake confirms Alger's notion in an interview with Miller when he says about his songwriting, "Sometimes it

comes from something I read, or something I heard someone say. It might be a feeling I don't want to directly expose, so I'll expose it through a story and write myself into it" (11). He has done so from his early work in songs like *Randall Collins*, but also in his later work in songs like *The Keeper of the Government Light on the River*, or *Bunk Johnson*. Blake speaks in the voice of these characters, in first person. They are always Southern characters; he knows their speech patterns well enough to provide a very defined image of them. (11). As "place is not bound by geography," as quoted at the beginning of this study, so song is not bound by biography or autobiography. Blake understands this well when he writes about other characters. He is more interested in creating a mood than presenting a complete narrative, as I have pointed out in the earlier song analyses. In the same interview with Miller, Blake goes on to say, "The world has become visually oriented. I try to be expressive enough, or bold enough, orally so that the listener can see the story as a picture in their mind." This statement shows that Blake writes with a clear intent, he knows what he expects from his songs, and he knows how to get the results. While his songs flow naturally it is important to understand that only a very skilled songwriter can achieve this effect. It takes years of practice, of reading both poetry and fiction, and of writing, to develop a voice as clear and unique as Blake's. Blake himself says, "If you play for a long time you start to refine and simplify. You weed things out and find the essence. Simplification happens in art as you get older" (Miller 11). This description of the evolution of his guitar playing lends itself perfectly to describe his writing as well, only it seems that Blake had achieved that sense of simplification from the beginning of his career as a songwriter.

To convey a sense of the magnitude of the impact that Blake has had on some of the writers I have interviewed for this study, this quote by Tim O'Brien is of great value: "Norman has always seemed to know pretty much exactly who he is, and given that, known what he'll do

and won't do. And he's always stayed the same throughout his career. I hold him up as a model. I'm a different animal but I have tried to reach something like that self-definition as I write and perform." Blake affirmed O'Brien's notion when he said in 2016, "Right now I just do whatever I want when I want" (Miller 9). The attitude of doing what he wants to do has served Blake well and has helped him create a catalog of songs that will stand the test of time.

Tim Stafford sums up Blake's status like this, "I just love the feel, chord structures, melodic approach and often archaic language of Norman's songs." Blake is a legend in the eyes of Stafford, who himself has become a writer and player that a lot of young Bluegrass musicians and writers look up to. In an article by Miller, Stafford says about Blake, "He still inspires me. His playing and songwriting so profoundly inform modern bluegrass artists that most don't even realize it" (6).

Bryan Sutton, one of the greatest contemporary flatpicking guitarists, and a very successful studio musician says about Blake, "He's a multi-dimensional musician, so I have days where I really dig into his songwriting and melodic sensibilities. Other days it's the command and general rhythmic pocket of his flatpicking." Few other people receive this kind of respect from some of the finest musicians within the Bluegrass world.

Gillian Welch says, "I see him as my creative kin. I hope he doesn't mind me saying this. I think the world of him and his work. I consider it an honor to know him as I do." This statement expresses the sense of belonging, community, and kinship that is at the core of the acoustic music community that looks up to Blake as an elder statesman, as a musician and songwriter who has changed something monumental within the music, while staying true to its origins. Blake says, "I just want to play well, learn more music, and learn something that I can

give to other people” (Romano 8), and as we can see by the statements of all the above-quoted songwriters, he has certainly done that.

I would like to quote poet Wendell Berry here, who to me, stands as philosophical kin to Blake. In his poem *This Place that You Belong to*, Berry says,

*Listen privately, silently to the voices that rise up  
from the pages of books and from your own heart.*

*Be still and listen to the voices that belong  
to the streambanks and the trees and the open fields.*

*There are songs and sayings that belong to this place,  
by which it speaks for itself and no other.*

I was not born into a place that spoke to me. The place where I was born, Germany, had lost its lore and song through the perversions of the Third Reich. Country and bluegrass music have provided me with such a place since I first heard it as an eleven-year-old boy. Later, in my early thirties, Nashville gave me a place to play, write, learn, and grow. When I discovered Norman Blake’s music, something shifted in me as a songwriter. Notions to please the mainstream fell by the wayside. Along with that, I discovered a purity in the music that was, and is, reflected in the Appalachian landscape. Today I spend a considerable amount of time in Johnson City, TN. I have found a place to write about, and I have Blake to thank for leading me there through his songs.

The last words of this study should belong to Norman Blake,

*Down the dirt roads of time  
Through the turpentine pines and the cotton fields far away  
To the red clay hills, the rocks, and the reels*



*Speed me safe home today*

*On the platform down at the old depot*

*By the mossy water tank*

*On the Alabama and Georgia line*

*Back home in Sulphur Springs*

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