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FOR
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An
Autobiography
of
My Ears

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Back to the Country

To the new world of the postwar suburbs the old world came calling. A collection of songs transferred from old 78s, eighty-four of them—discarded dance tunes and country blues, murder ballads and gospel hymns and comical numbers from an earlier era of commercial recording—was released in 1952 by Folkways Records under the title Anthology of American Folk Music. The assembler was Harry Smith, then twenty-nine years old, a collector, underground filmmaker, occult philosopher, fabulist, and scrounger who sometimes claimed to be the illegitimate son of the satanist Aleister Crowley and who by the time of his death in 1991 had earned the nickname “the Paracelsus of the Chelsea Hotel.”

The anthology identified him only by name, but the self-designed booklet accompanying the set’s six LPs signaled the presence of a deep and deeply eccentric scholarship. The booklet’s idiosyncrasies ranged from headline-style summaries of old ballads—ASSASSIN OF PRESIDENT GARFIELD RECALLS EXPLOIT IN SCAFFOLD PERORATION, or ANNIE UNDER GRASSY MOUND AFTER PARENTS NIX MARRIAGE TO KING—to a wildly methodical cross-indexing: “Bible history quoted on record . . . Broken promise mentioned on record . . . Death instructions given on record . . . Echo-like relation of voices . . . Humming, records featuring . . . Mountain vantage point theme.”
In passing, Smith displayed an offhand familiarity with the corpus of early recordings and with all relevant printed sources.

Many of the performers featured in the anthology—they included Mississippi John Hurt, Uncle Dave Macon, Dock Boggs, Henry Thomas, the Carter Family, Furry Lewis, Blind Lemon Jefferson, the Memphis Jug Band, Charlie Patton, Clarence Ashley, Cannon’s Jug Stompers, Sleepy John Estes—would eventually become more or less celebrated, even if their music was never to be widely heard over the airwaves or in the aisles of supermarkets. In 1952, however, such music was more likely to be found, if at all, in attics or thrift shops or abandoned warehouses. It was the sound of cultural obsolescence, products no longer fit for broadcast or mass entertainment. Unlike the collections made in the field by such folk-music specialists as Alan Lomax, they were all commercial recordings made between 1927 and 1932, a period when previously marginal country music was recorded on a large scale as record companies discovered the potential of rural markets and when, as Smith noted, “American music still retained some of the regional qualities evident in the days before the phonograph, radio and talking picture had tended to integrate local types.” By the simple act of bringing these selections together, Smith essayed something like a one-man cultural revolution. Its effects were felt gradually, as the collection worked its way in subterranean fashion from one newly formed folk music devotee to another. Years later Peter Stampfel (of the Holy Modal Rounders) said simply, “If God were a DJ he’d be Harry Smith.”

That was one way to think of the collection, as a supernatural jukebox blasting out favorites for the dead, the old dead, from the time before there were jukeboxes, especially since so many of the songs have to do with death in every form, by drowning, by train wreck, by outlaw’s or assassin’s bullet, by self-inflicted stab wound. Dock Boggs, coal miner and moonshiner, set the pace in his knife-edge drone:

Go dig a hole in the meadow, good people
Go dig a hole in the ground
Come around all you good people
And see this poor rounder go down.

That was the kind of party it was, and in 1952 or 1962 or whenever you came upon it the jolt was perceptible. It would remain so, since the accumulated bloodlettings of neo-noir, neo-Gothic, post-punk, and hip-hop would make it no easier to accept the direct encounter with last things that such songs propose. In that light even the merriest music—the dance rhythms of Prince Albert Hunt’s Texas Ramblers or Hoyt Ming and His Pep-Steppers, the children’s song “King Kong Kitchie Kitchie Ki-Me-O,” the protracted comical adventures of drunkards and lechers—acquired an abrasive edge. The soothing and hypnotic aural environment to which so much latter-day pop music accustomed us would make this music permanently exotic: it felt like a music in which the world could not be escaped.

To speak of an abrasive edge is another way of saying that this was music about being wide awake. It was always at peak; it refused to become subconversational pulse or trickling background rivulet. Insistence, emphasis, exhortation: these were the qualities that united an otherwise utterly disparate collection of performances. Geographically, the performers came predominantly from the American South—from Lake Providence, Louisiana, to Burton’s Fork, Kentucky—but also from as far afield as Los Angeles, St. Paul, and Cincinnati. They worked, among other things, as coal miners, ministers, carpenters, mill hands, tenant farmers, and, yes, cowboys. Many were professional or semi-professional musicians, traveling with medicine shows or performing on the street. What these recordings captured was not the folklore of private pastime or family lore but the repertoire of public performance.

The anthology’s temporal reach extended both forward and backward. It consisted of songs that were recorded in the 1920s and ’30s, were collected in the 1940s, and attained wide if covert influence in the 1950s and ’60s. But for many of the musicians represented, 1928 was already the aftermath, the last time it was possible to retrieve an echo of a world whose rapid disappearance was signaled by the very fact that these songs were being recorded. That world stretched from the late nineteenth century, when the style of performers like Henry Thomas and Uncle Dave Macon was already taking shape at barn dances and tent shows and political rallies, to the eve of World War I;
an era when the hot news was of the depredations of Cole Younger in the 1870s, the assassinations of Garfield and McKinley in 1881 and 1901, the death of Casey Jones on the Illinois Central Line in April 1900, the sinking of the Titanic in 1912. Even those bulletins were late accretions to a body of knowledge extending back toward Indian war whoops, medieval enchantments, John the Revelator and his "book of the seven seals." We were in a place where history survived only by being transmuted into rhymes, charms, complaints, exorcisms, prophecies.

Purely as an arrangement—a profoundly satisfying juxtaposition attentive to echoes, responses, thematic parallels, and who knows what hermetic alchemical principles smuggled in by Smith—Anthology of American Folk Music itself functioned as a work of art. Designed to be heard precisely in the order laid down, it anticipated the sort of musical collage that would become perhaps the most widely practiced American art form: the personal mix tape of favorite songs that serves as self-portrait, gesture of friendship, prescription for an ideal party, or simply as an environment consisting solely of what is most ardently loved.

Smith's concept was vaster but equally personal. The songs did not so much refer back to an earlier America as reconstitute it. A single person was here mapping a lost or at least forgotten domain not in the name of tradition or collective will or social or musico logical theory, but merely out of his inexplicable sense of how everything falls into place. The elements were together because they belonged together; he knew. The anthology resonated with the demigurthic thrill of holding those elements in hand; it registered a search for hidden correspondences and occulted communications, and Smith moved as easily among its implications as a shaman rapidly switching voices during a dialogue with spirits.

That was pretty much what it seemed like to its listeners, even a decade after its first appearance; the soundtrack of a resurrection, an unbottling of hidden identities. After ten years, however, a whole culture had taken shape along the lines indicated by the anthology. The dead, it turned out, weren't all dead. Lost singers (Clarence Ashley, John Hurt, Dock Boggs, Furry Lewis) were found, lost careers revived in the form of albums and appearances at nightclubs and folk festivals. Ancient became contemporary in albums like Mountain Music Bluegrass Style (1959) or Old Time Music at Clarence Ashley's (1961–63); the emergence of young stars like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez helped prompt an explosion of youthful guitar and banjo and harmonica players; and at the triumphant Newport Folk Festival of 1963, the joining of old (Ashley, Boggs, Hurt, Bill Monroe, Mother Maybelle Carter) and new (Dylan, Baez, Judy Collins, Peter, Paul, and Mary, Ian and Sylvia) seemed to augur the formation of a new culture. It came to your doorstep, into your living room: the talk was suddenly all of picks and frets and capos, and there was, it seemed, a harmonica on every sideboard. With newly acquired technical skills came a newly acquired repertoire of attitudes and allegiances and made-up histories that came to feel like memories. The implications of that rebirth would remain for many unresolved, inseparable from all that came next. The 1997 re-release of the Anthology of American Folk Music in compact disc format inevitably raised as many questions about the late '50s and early '60s as it did about the late '20s and early '30s, evoking nostalgia for what was already a displaced nostalgia, as if the music were a treasured memento of an alternate life.

The CD box set of the anthology was an advanced specimen of the form, featuring a video and photographic appendix on CD-ROM, a book-length collection of essays and interviews, and detailed notes to each track (supplementing, updating, and sometimes correcting Smith's own notes, reproduced in facsimile) that together constituted a study guide to the field. The entry for Charlie Patton's "Mississippi Boweavil Blues," for instance, identified fifteen other sources for Patton recordings and thirty-five other recordings of this and other boll weevil–related ballads, by artists ranging from Blind Willie McTell to Brook Benton. Each song became an entry-way into a potentially unfinishable research project.

It provided further confirmation that the CD box set had become, in terms of reverent attention to detail, our moment's equivalent of the medieval illuminated manuscript. It was not enough to have learned how to capture sound; there must be an appropriate monu-
ment to enclose it and keep it from ever escaping again, to stabilize what would otherwise remain a drifting accumulation of sound effects. Hearing is the most slippery and intangible and therefore most haunting of experiences; and we have heard so much, more than we can remember or even process.

If the technology of recording and broadcasting has probably not made the world any noisier than it was—in some ways, as brass bands in the piazza give way to brass bands in someone’s headphones, it has made it quieter—the noise has at any rate become denser, and harder to interpret. Sound as a measure of location—a fairly direct clue, in simpler days, to what was coming this way and how soon it would get here—has been compromised ever more drastically by telephone, phonograph, radio, and their generations of offspring. Some point of no return was reached when you couldn’t tell the phone beeping in the movie playing on your computer from the phone beeping in your pocket. Edgar Allan Poe was by his own account driven half-mad by the infernal din of horses’ hooves on cobblestones in 1840s New York, but at least he knew where the noise was coming from. In the urban infernos delineated by Balzac and Dickens, however convulsive and hallucinatory they may have been, sound was still 100 percent live and therefore a reliable tool for navigation; at the very least, a shriek might guide you to (or away from) the scene of a crime, or the roar of a mob alert you to an approaching riot.

Modern sound technology offered new improved forms of disorientation, impossibly distant sounds, pre-recorded whispers, street barker’s piped into private dwellings, speeches from a podium whose center was everywhere, beeps and sirens that cut across space so sharply that their point of origin became indeterminable, canned laughter echoing down airshafts, canned music doing battle with other canned music in the discontinuous spaces of our own city, the multichannel not-quite-all-here city of Burroughs or Pynchon or Perec, where we spend much of our lives listening to what is not here, is no longer here, never was here to begin with.

Long usage blunts the anomaly of this, so that by contrast those moments when one may have grasped the oddness of the recording era’s wraparound wall of sound can seem in retrospect like flashes of mysti-

cal insight. A minor instance: on his 1957 album *Bonjour Paris*, Michel Legrand began his arrangement of “J’ai Deux Amours” with an ingenious reconstruction of the sound of an early (circa 1920) acoustic recording, complete with meticulously simulated surface noise, before gliding into a stunning demonstration of late-’50s hi-fi in its then-novel richness of tone and breadth of spectrum. At the time, the idea may have been to contrast the almost comical poverty of the old with the splendor—growing rapidly more splendid in those heady days of Dynagroove and Full Dimensional Sound—of the new. But the device also served, intentionally or not, as an alienation effect. It made the listener abruptly aware that this was a recording, and that if recording had a future it also had a past. Oddly, the shrill and spectral past—even in this ersatz, mimicked form—seemed more real than the dynamic, naturally balanced, full-dimensional present of 1957.

That contrarian impulse to travel against time’s current—to gravitate toward the noise and detritus filtered out by the culture of Dynagroove—was crucial to what became, after a lot of listening to a lot of old records, the early ’60s folk revival. The road to the future lay in the past, among forebears so forgotten that they had become alien, so alien that they could almost be invented. Early listeners agreed that the Smith anthology’s initial effect was of uncanny strangeness. It seemed a repository of “lost, archaic, savage sounds” or, in the words of filmmaker Bruce Conner, “a confrontation with another culture . . . like field recordings, from the Amazon, or Africa, but it’s here in the United States!” “Who is singing?” Greil Marcus asked. “Who are these people?” That was Harry Smith’s idea: “It sounded strange,” he said of the blues record that provoked his collecting career, “so I looked for others.”

Folk music was not supposed to be strange. The folk music that Smith’s younger listeners were likely to have heard in the 1950s—perhaps in elementary school, perhaps in summer camp—was purveyed by such intermediaries as Pete Seeger (both alone and with the folk quartet The Weavers), and Burl Ives, and Carl Sandburg. It might be droll, rambunctious, plaintive, bawdy, morally ignignant, or nostalgic—it might, if you were an urban type with what you considered more advanced tastes, be faintly embarrassing—but it was music de-
signed to restore a sense of intuitive collective warmth, as if everyone listening could be brought back into some lost circle of fellowship. The fifth-graders who sat listening to scratched LPs of Burl Ives singing “The Blue-Tail Fly” or “The Streets of Laredo,” or the Weavers segueing from “Goodnight Irene” into “Tzenia Tzenia,” or Woody Guthrie singing “This Land Is Your Land” surmised that folk songs emanated directly from the collective anonymity of The People, floated freely in a timeless inaccessible realm where folk life replicated itself from generation to generation, until some dedicated collector bothered to write them down. Emissaries carried them from those regions into ours, so that we might come to know our distant kin.

It all had to do with “the country”—but what country, whose country? For so many of those drawn into the folk revival, the very idea of the rural was something constructed out of artifacts and catch-phrases. It wasn’t just a matter of accents and peculiar sayings but of different worldviews, different systems of thought. There was not so much a dividing line as an abyss between the two cultures. For a post-war generation of urban and suburban children, the mountains and creeks and hollows of the songs might as well have existed on another planet.

I remember an elementary school textbook in which Jimmy and Judy from the big city went to visit their cousins in the country to find out the source of their milk and eggs, a visit that provided the occasion for a dialogue on the many differences between city and country. For a suburban third-grader, both city (skyscrapers, elevated trains, smoky harbors, suspension bridges) and country (barns, tractors, silos, haystacks) were exotic. In fact it was in trying to puzzle out a middle ground between these starkly opposed terms that the meaning of “suburb” began to dawn. Jimmy and Judy told their cousins about the technological marvels of the metropolis, but the country ultimately got the better of the comparison. The city kids were dazzled by a succession of miracles—“Oh, look at the pretty chickens!”—while the country folk exhibited an air of laconic and undemonstrative wisdom, secure in the knowledge that the old homestead was the ultimate source to which the city had finally to pay homage. Back to the land! “Lordy, where on earth did you think bacon came from?”

Mythologies of that sort had piled up like so many layers of insulation. The material collected by Harry Smith was new information, incomparably harsher and more tumultuous, as if intended to convey, “Everything you know is wrong.” What folk were these? The mood was not necessarily either collective or warm; more often it conveyed isolation, fear, even madness. As for intuition—the sort of instinctive and essentially impersonal expressiveness that was supposed to be the very definition of folk music—it was hard, given the almost freakish individuality of many of the performances, to avoid the sense of a craggy and fully conscious artistry.

In the 30s and 40s, under the influence of performers such as Pete Seeger and scholars such as Alan Lomax, folk music had been purveyed in more or less Marxist terms, as an expression of sweeping social forces, the soundtrack of a narrative marked by clear moral roles. (The breadth of vision of a Lomax or Seeger was in turn, inevitably, reduced to more simplistic terms by those whose agenda outweighed their knowledge.) Smith broke down that sense of large-scale evolution into molecular units, suggesting that the process was immeasurably more complex than the available schemata could account for. He ignored ethnic or geographic or chronological pigeonholing in favor of a tripartite division of his own invention, into Ballads, Social Music, and Songs. Ballads told stories, whether of murderous gypsies or hapless sharecroppers; social music ranged from square-dancing to apocalyptic preaching; as for songs, the most wide-open of the categories, ranging from “I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground” to “See That My Grave Is Kept Clean,” they turned out to contain an unsuspected freedom of poetic association. Everything about Smith’s presentation implied that to hear these at all, you had to forget categories and listen to each cut as the record of a distinct and mysterious event.

Smith’s most utopian gesture was to posit an American Folk Music without racial divisions. Careful to note every other detail about the records’ original release, he ignored the separation of country recordings into “race” and “hillbilly” categories, which record companies had enforced from the outset, even if the recordings were sometimes hard or impossible to separate by ear. Race records would evolve into modern blues and rhythm and blues, their hillbilly counterparts into
commercial country and western; half a life could be spent tracing the development of one strain or another. Much research effort has gone and continues to go into separating out the strands of American music, to intercepting the West African praise song or Irish fiddle lament before they collide, or surprising a square-dance tune in the act of acquiring (or discarding) a blues inflection. Smith’s arrangement suggested that—since every imaginable kind of crossover had already happened, had never stopped happening—there was more to be gained by listening to the records as singularities, categories of one, rather than as specimens of one type or another.

In terms of the mainstream culture of 1952—or 1958 (the year the Kingston Trio, with their monster hit “Tom Dooley,” became the living embodiment of folk music) or 1962 (the year Bob Dylan released his first album)—all these performers, whether black or white, were united in common strangeness. To gauge the surprise, it would be necessary to reinhabit the sonic universe of late ’40s/early ’50s pop music, whose perfected mellowness—a Modernaires or Mel-Tones kind of mellowness—was achieved at the price of a narrowed spectrum that excluded broad areas defined as noise. Even silence could qualify as noise, dead air, a disturbing spareness or starkness of tone. In those days when cowboys rode the range they brought their orchestra and echo chamber along.

It was as if the past was meant to survive only as a point of reference—at most as old songs done in new ways—not as something actually to be listened to. “Tennessee Saturday Night,” a 1947 country-and-western hit about the rough and rowdy ways of backwoods folks (“When they get together there’s a lot of fun / They all know the other fella packs a gun”), was sung in suavely self-kidding fashion by Red Foley, the already old-fashioned fiddle solo emanating from some harmless country of recollection. Most of the Smith anthology qualified by hit-parade standards as noise: grating, rasping, screeching, out of tune, out of time. The crushed-rock voice of Blind Willie Johnson, the wailing tambourine-accented calls and responses of William and Versey Smith as they memorialized the sinking of the Titanic, Dock Boggs with his voice made for what Greil Marcus describes as “primitive-modernist music about death”; these came from somewhere off the map.

In short order an underground army of mapmakers emerged, finding trails within the rapidly expanding recorded archive of old-time music—who could have imagined so many recordings had been made?—foraging for information that no one else had deemed worthy of organizing. A sort of do-it-yourself free-floating academy devoted itself to the tracking of variants and antecedents, chord changes and tunings, false labels and reversed identities: to determining the contexts in which the protagonist of “The Girl I Left Behind Me” either “read on a few lines further” or “rode on a few miles further” to find out the truth about his abandoned girlfriend, to pondering whether John Hardy (or was it Johnny Hard) carried “two guns” or “a gun and a razor” every day, to meditating on the non sequitur in “Little Sadie” when Sadie’s murderer is accosted by a sheriff—“He said, Young man, is your name Brown?”—and replies, “Yes sir, yes sir, my name is Lee.” Through this door you could enter history as it was in the act of changing and come to inhabit the old language before the smoothing-out of dialects. In that area of mutating information—conceived as an outlying borderland just beyond our settlement—fifty miles might make all the difference in how a particular story turned out.

All the scholarship in the world could not keep nonspecialist listeners from finding in the songs the ingredients for a narrative as thoroughly imaginary as Ivanhoe or Ernani. For a generation that lacked much sense of common national tradition it became the equivalent of Percy’s Reliques of Ancient English Poetry or Grimm’s fairy tales. Smith’s collection, and the other sources to which it pointed the way, opened up a secret literature, the poetry of an America that had been successfully excluded from the written record. Here was a down-home lexicon of fundamental terms: the river, the mill, the tavern, the mountain, the old dusty road, murders, bird calls, corn whiskey, graveyards, the train that carried my girl from town, journeys by sea to London Town or overland to the other side of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was like an induction into a space constructed by ritual gestures, droning modal chants of indeterminate function—
Same old man
Living at the mill
The mill goes around of its own free will

—which revealed what the listeners had least expected, a form of abstract art.

This body of songs proposed an aesthetic that promised to be actually usable. In some sense they were songs without authors, or songs that questioned the notion of single authorship and made it seem a rather bland and decadent subspecialization; songs that interpenetrated one another, words that went drifting and changing, disparate stories that were grafted together to generate further songs in a process that could have no end. Verses torn from their context—but then many of these verses had been adrift for a long time—seemed at once archaic and freshly concocted:

Like a mole in the ground
I'd root this mountain down

or

Single girl, single girl
She's going where she please
Married girl, married girl
Baby on her knees

or

I've been to the east and I've been to the west
I've been this whole world round
I've been to the river and I've been baptized
And now I'm on my hanging ground

or

A railroad man

He'll kill you when he can
And drink up your blood like wine.

Out of the swirl, chunks of phrasing bobbed up—“old plank road” or “new river train”—with the inscrutable force of half-understood ideograms.

The element of unknowability, of unlimited suggestiveness, was essential to the allure. A web of allusions stretched beyond any living person's ability to make the connections. Even when the songs dealt with recognizably real events the effect was dreamlike. The horror of the Titanic disaster lived on as inconsolable moaning chant in “When That Great Ship Went Down,” as if the ship would never stop sinking. When the wife of the assassinated McKinley confronts his killer in “White House Blues”—

Look here, you rascal,
See what you've done
You shot my husband
And I've got your gun

—we seem to be in the middle of some extraordinarily strange puppet play or verse chronicle. By contrast, Edwin S. Porter's 1903 film version of Czolgosz's execution, a harbinger of the modern with its laboriously faked verisimilitude, has a far more cut-and-dried and therefore unintentionally comical effect. The old songs were never comical except when they wanted to be.

The process by which folk music (however defined) came to enjoy its brief moment of ascendancy in the late '50s and early '60s was more circuitous and complex than most knew or cared to know. To learn all of it would have been to plunge into the specifics of a past that was more fun when it was left beautifully vague, when it was allowed to consist, in Robert Cantwell's words (in his passionate and absorbing study of the folk revival, When We Were Good), of “a tissue of illusion, of mountain cabins and southern canebrakes, desperados, tramps, maidens, farmers, banjo pickers, and wandering blues guitarists.” A generation tentatively sketched out, on beach or in woods
or down in the basement, a future of kazoo music and choral chant by the fire. An alternative autobiography was put together out of crimes and executions and haunted loves, a romance of bitterness and devastation and exile. The song was there to be entered again and again, an impersonal one-size-fits-all space where one could paradoxically feel most at home: "I am going down this road feeling bad." "Gonna build me a log cabin / On a mountain so high." No questions asked, no details needed. Wasn't that what folk music was for anyway, to be taken and changed into whatever one needed it to be?

Later, after the triumph of Pop around 1965, there would be relief for the young fans in realizing that they did not finally have to become coal miners or tenant farmers. A pinch of reality is just what fantasy needs to give it an aura of substance, and what a fantasy it was, with its dizzying cascades of stereotypical figurines and toy sets, gambler and floozy and moonshiner and deranged preacher, roadhouse and scaffold, mountain cabin and pitch-dark piny woods. In a 1960 article in Mademoiselle, Susan Montgomery registered a disenchantment with the scene, which would later read like an advance judgment on the decade to come: "This generation of college students . . . is composed of young people who are desperately hungry for a small, safe taste of an unslick, underground world. Folk music, like a beard or sandals, has come to represent a slight loosening of the inhibitions, a tentative step in the direction of the open road, the knapsack, the hostel."

It was a virtual South, then, existing in a virtual past; but then they always were. Delve the fantasy to its roots and you find another fantasy; look for untrammeled folk expression and you find one form or another of show business. Robert Cantwell, tracing back the folk lineage, found himself back among the artifacts of nineteenth-century minstrelsy: "The cabins, cottonbales, wagons, steamboats, and rail-fences . . . the piquant genre images of corn and cottonfields, the welcoming old plantation home, the harvest moons, the barefooted children, the magnolia, honeysuckle, and wisteria vine, all the wistful longing songs addressed to them, and the very 'South' itself, magically invoked by mere names, Kentucky or Carolina or Alabama—are the visual and linguistic coinage of the minstrelsy that has been circulating in America for a century and a half in thousands of forms beyond the stage itself." Copies, parodies, reversals, deliberate distortions, whatever was required to tone down, jazz up, smooth out, mess around, or make over: this had been the process of American music, of American entertainment, for so long before anyone took note that the recorded history could never be about anything but mixes, hybrids, crossovers. Pure strains could be imagined but not really experienced, since the moment they hit the air they became part of the fusion.

In America the primary imaginary purity was traditionally racial, although there were plenty of other purities—of region, of religion, of occupation, of technique, of sheer feeling—to extend the metaphor. Theodore Roosevelt, for instance, wrote an admiring preface for Cowboy Ballads (1912, by John Lomax, Alan's father), drawing attention to their echo of Anglo-Saxon outlaw ballads (a possible nod to the support Roosevelt had gotten in Missouri from Jesse James's brother Frank). The revival of traditional mountain music that flourished briefly in the 1920s received enthusiastic support from Henry Ford and the Ku Klux Klan, while the founder of the Archive of Folk Song spoke ominously of the threat of "Hebrew Broadway jazz" and the composer Lamar Stringfield wrote (in 1931) that "since the emotions of the Negro race are foreign to the white man, an essentially Anglo-Saxon nation derives its nationalism in music only from its own people . . . Naturally, the least affected of the folk-music that now exists in America is preserved by people in the mountainous country, or on the plains." You had only to listen, for instance, to the African-American stringband music of Nathan Frazier and Frank Patterson recorded, almost at the last possible moment, in Tennessee in the early '40s—versions of "Dan Tucker" and "Bile Them Cabbage Down" and "Corinne" that suggested the hidden origins of supposedly "pure" hillbilly music—to give the lie to the Anglo-Saxonists. But to do so you would have had to be digging pretty deep into the archives of the Library of Congress, on a mission with few sponsors.

In the '30s and '40s, folk music would be reclaimed for the left, a story full of unexpected oddities and digressions. The musicologist Charles Seeger and his son Pete got their first taste of folk music at the
New School for Social Research in 1931, listening to Thomas Hart Benton sing "John Henry"; and Leadbelly really was prevailed on to dress in convict stripes for some of his public performances after Alan Lomax had managed to get him sprung from Angola Prison. Whether or not the left-wing folk song movement was the best idea the American Communist Party ever supported, it was certainly the most successful. At high tide the movement made inroads into radio (the Almanac Singers on the Navy Department's Treasury Hour, Woody Guthrie on DuPont's Cavalcade of Stars) and Broadway (the Burl Ives musical Sing Out Sweet Land!). Eventually, the Weavers, who had taken their name from Gerhart Hauptmann's 1892 protest play about the coal struggle in Silesia, found their hits covered by the likes of Mitch Miller and Vic Damone; if the people's music was not to be enlisted in the service of ideological crusades, then it was to be looted for whatever saleable tunes it might have to offer.

But then every stage of the process reflects singular inflections and deformations. It was in the form of roving singing groups, redolent of collegiate glee clubs—the Kingston Trio, the Limelighters, the Brothers Four—that folk music muscle its way into the charts in the next decade. Softened up by "Tom Dooley" and "Greenfields," pop fans were ready for Baez and Dylan and the Newport Folk Festival ensemble, by which time folk music was inextricably entwined, again, with political action. Some would forever recall the resistance in Washington Square to Park Commissioner Newbold Morris's order to ban folksinging in 1961—the protesters beaten while singing "We Shall Not Be Moved"—as their first taste of what the '60s were going to be like.

Eventually even the folk revival would become ancient history. They all have their box sets now—Leadbelly, the Weavers, Alan Lomax, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan—row upon row of freeze-dried echo chambers. The metallic wheels have that gleaming, hygienic impersonality by which we recognize the new technologies: the home entertainment library is now ready to be loaded on the rocketship. We have entered an Alexandrian phase—or is it a Noah's Ark phase?—of storing and classifying and anthologizing the works of the past, and discover that an Alexandrian life has its distinct charms. The generations become coeval; whether you reach for the '20s or the '30s or the '70s may indicate no more than your taste in hats or song titles or cover designs. Last week you were in Zaire 1980, the week before in Paris 1952. Now, on a whim, it's Kentucky's turn; it is only a matter of determining where to set the dial of the time machine.

Differences were formerly mediated by physical space. If you wanted to hear mountain music you went to the mountains. Researchers of the heroic age—the Lomaxes and Seegers and Rinzlers—invested their physical being in the music. Free now to drop in anywhere unannounced, we listen in their secret fastnesses to Tibetan lamas or Moroccan jajouka musicians or the throat singers of Tuva. Like Johnny Mercer's old cowhand, we know all the songs that the cowboys (and the yak herders) know because we learned them all on the radio. Long familiarity with the industrial cycles of pop permits us to observe the rough being made smooth while calmly anticipating the moment when there will be novelty value in making the smooth rough again. Blues goes lounge, lounge goes industrial noise, industrial noise prepares to merge, perhaps, with Gregorian chant. Our new tradition, however designated—fusion, crossover, sampling, mixes—amounts to hardly more than a drastically speeded-up version of the way things have always happened. If a band in Madagascar plays the Bobby Fuller Four's "I Fought the Law" on traditional instruments or a London-based bhangra group fuses Punjabi folk music and James Brown grooves or an even newer group mixes all of the above in brief unrecognizable fragments, the process hardly differs from, say, an obscure Alabaman band of the 1920s lending Hawaiian inflections to a revamped English ballad whose original subject, somewhere back in the Middle Ages, was the blood libel of Jewish ritual murder.

As told by Richard A. Peterson in his book Creating Country Music, the formative stages of commercial country music—from Fiddlin' John Carson's pioneering recordings in Atlanta in 1923 to the post-humous mythologizing of Hank Williams after his death in 1953—consisted of a series of transactions, marketing decisions, calculated
changes of costume and instrumentation and repertoire in response to outside pressures.

In the mid-1920s the rapidly expanding record business was hungry for material and newly aware of the potential of specialized audiences. The companies recorded almost anything they could think of, on an extraordinary scale; over 10,000 new recordings were released in 1929 alone. One can almost hear the executives at Columbia or Vocalion planning their strategy: "Let's round up as many of these hill people as we can and see what they've got." The company scouts went out and found music that could be scooped up with a minimum of effort. Reading of the historic 1927 sessions in Bristol, Tennessee, at which Ralph Peer of Victor discovered Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, or other similar corporate forays, it is hard not to think of those scenes in old Westerns where the trappers come to the company depot to have their furs assessed and to be duly short-changed. The scouts who snapped up the music were mostly indifferent to it, as Polk Brockman, responsible for getting Fiddlin' John Carson recorded in the first place, freely acknowledged: "My interest in hillbilly music and black music is strictly financial."

The idea was not to launch musical careers but to take what the musicians already had and see what could be made from it. As Frank Walker of Columbia Records commented: "Their repertoire would consist of eight or ten things that they did well and that is all they knew. So, when you picked out the three or four that were best in a man's so-called repertoire you were through with that man as an artist . . . You might come out with two selections or you might come out with six or eight, but you did it all at that time." The Clarence Ashleys and Mississippi John Hurts sank back into obscurity for the next three decades.

It was a novelty to put old hearthside favorites on record, but the novelty was soon exhausted; most people did not want multiple versions of old murder ballads and square-dance tunes. The charm of Uncle Jimmy Thompson's old-time fiddle music wore off quickly when he appeared on the Grand Ole Opry's first program in 1925. In Peterson's account, "Uncle Jimmy started right in playing a string of jigs, breakdowns, and hornpipes. When after two hours George Hay, the announcer, tried to get him to conclude his performance, Uncle Jimmy said he knew 2,000 tunes and was just getting limbered up."

The Grand Ole Opry continued to pay lip service to its folk origins while moving as rapidly as possible toward smoother, more radio-friendly sounds. From the early '30s on, the music that got heard was mostly music tailored for the new marketing channels; songwriting became the basis for the industry, making old-time music a style—a "renewable resource" (in Richard Peterson's phrase)—rather than a fixed repertoire of inherited songs from which no copyright advantage was to be derived.

What we heard on the Smith anthology was how people sounded before they knew how they sounded, in the same way that the first movies briefly caught the demeanor of people who had never seen anyone on film. The vocal styles had not been corrected by reference to recorded music or adapted to the microphone. All that was about to change irrevocably, as singers learned how the voice could be something separate from its body. In his autobiography Truth Is Stranger Than Publicity, Alton Delmore of the classic country duo the Delmore Brothers tells how at their first recording session in 1931 they heard their recorded voices for the first time, and how in that instant everything changed for them. They didn't know their own voices: "There was something divine in that little can [the recording equipment] . . . that helped us immensely and changed us from two country farm boy singers to something 'up town' and acceptable to listeners who bought records and listened to radio programs. That was the whole secret of our good luck. Our voices took well to the microphone."

It is a moment in the history of disembodiment, the history of recording: the birth of the voice as unhinged object, linked to no particular point in space or time. By a series of incremental steps we end up in the never-never world of overdub and multitrack—from Bill Evans playing duets and trios with himself, Hank Williams Jr. and Natalie Cole singing duets with their dead fathers, Frank Sinatra singing duets with people he may never have met, down to the completely concocted ambient landscapes of technopop. Electronic collages deliberately inhabiting the land of Nowhere, records that are not records of anything but their own existence.
Go back to the genesis of recorded sound. On a July night in New Jersey, in 1887—make it a Gothic night, afflicted with lightning and bursts of thunder, a night when Victor Frankenstein might have been at work in his lab—Thomas Edison shouts into a telephone speaker attached to a diaphragm, to which in turn an indenting stylus has been affixed. A strip of paraffin-coated paper is positioned under the stylus: as he shouts, the paper is pulled along so that the stylus leaves a trail of agitated markings. A moment later, when the stylus is dragged back through the gouges, the assembled lab workers hear an echo, ever so faint and misshapen, of that shout. Edison’s assistant remarks, “Golly, it’s there.” A tiny cosmic fracture has occurred. “It’s there”: not only the shout but the time in which the shout was made. On a small scale the order of things—the flow that hitherto only went one way—has been reversed.

It must have been a very long time ago that Moe Asch, the founder of Folkways Records, could have said: “I always believed in the ‘one mike’ theory—I hate the stereo recordings, and mixing can never give you the accurate sense of the original sound. A hundred years from now it is as natural as the day I recorded it.” Once there was an emotional—not to mention a political—stake in having a sense of the reality on the other side of the mike, in visualizing the musicians actually playing and singing, in imagining their likely surroundings—even if many of the songs on Old Time Music at Clarence Ashley’s were really recorded not in the archetypal wood-frame house on the cover but in a Los Angeles recording studio; even if the Beach Boys’ Party, with its aura of background chatter and fizzing soda pop, was no more actual than sitcom laughter. It was around the time of that party—1966 or so—that the Moe Asch idea of “natural” sound began to slip into an unattainable archaic realm. There were too many options on the gadgets for anything ever to be natural in Asch’s sense anymore, and it was too much fun exploring the unnatural. Recording as constructed artifact began to replace the ideal of recording as preservation of a moment in time.

Yet we go back looking for what was preserved, a life sustained beyond its limits and with which we can achieve the most intimate of fusions through the relation of sound and ear. It becomes a matter of awe that the voice of the other, the fingers of the other moving on the strings, actually vibrate in the body of the hearer, in the absence of the world in which the sound originated. All gone: those mills and wagon-yards and cheap hotels, gone even the music halls and recording studios, along with the life that sustained them, save for what a machine has captured: Uncle Dave Macon shouting “kill yourself!” in enthusiastic exhortation, or Henry Thomas blowing a reed-pipe solo as if nothing else existed. The mystery of it deepens as we drift further from the original moments thus kept uncannily present.

The notion of lineal descent in art derived from a culture of apprenticeship becomes unwieldy when any given listener gets signals simultaneously from every direction. In the strange museum that technology opened for us, we relive earlier stages of the mixing process, wind the tape back in godlike fashion to one segment or another of the flux, tracing tones and patterns as they bounce from Swiss yodelers to Jimmie Rodgers and from Jimmie Rodgers to Doc Watson, from Blind Lemon Jefferson to Bob Dylan to the Four Tops, from gamelan music to Debussy to the Ivory Snow commercial, from Luisa Tetrazzini to Louis Armstrong to Billie Holiday, from Arnold Schönberg to Ennio Morricone to Lee Perry and the Upsetters. We are drawn to the beginning of our world—understood as somehow synonymous with the core of feeling—only to find a past that changed forever in being captured. The technology that lets us hear the songs also rapidly undermines the conditions in which they were created in the first place. Go back as far as possible and you find already only an echo of some unknowable music, wilder and richer.