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Race, Authenticity, and Reclamation in a North Carolina Old-Time Scene and in the Music of the Carolina Chocolate Drops

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**Race, Authenticity, and Reclamation in a North Carolina Old-Time Scene and in the Music
of the Carolina Chocolate Drops**

By Fiona Maeve Harrison Boyd

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in Music

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Introduction

*Here's to the land of the long leaf pine,
The summer land where the sun doth shine.
Where the weak grow strong and the strong grow great,
Here's to "Down Home," the Old North State.
- North Carolina State Toast*

Old-time music, a genre primarily bred from European and African musical traditions, is strongly linked to debates of authenticity, racial justice, and reclamation that have peppered the history of popular music in the United States. From the appropriation of the banjo to the white middle-class adoption of traditional music during the folk revival, black music has been cheated, time and again, from its own impressive legacy of innovation, power, and creativity. Old-time played a central role in community social life in the South during the 18th and 19th centuries and old-time string bands, ordinarily consisting of a banjo, a fiddle, and perhaps a guitar, were the popular musical accompaniment to social dances. Although segregated, both black and white musicians played old-time.

The genre, however, suffered through the challenges posed by racism of that troubled period. Old-time faded quickly among African Americans, ultimately giving way to the rising popularity of the blues in the early 20th century and the music industry's labeling of old-time as music for the southern white working class. Although the folk revival of the late 20th century stirred up a rekindled interest in traditional music for white middle-class Americans, black southerners have remained on the margins of folk genres.

In this thesis, I explore race in the history of old-time music, and how values of authenticity have shaped old-time musical traditions. By linking ongoing debates within the old-time community to the legacy of race in popular music history, I aspire to show the importance of the music and mission of the founding members of the Carolina Chocolate Drops (CCD),

Dom Flemons, who is of African American and Mexican descent, Rhiannon Giddens, who is of African American and Caucasian descent, and Justin Robinson, who is African American. Despite the weight of history, the CCD, a black old-time string band from North Carolina, formed in 2005. Since then, they have begun the work of reclaiming the genre for people of color. Having learned from the legendary African American old-time fiddler Joe Thompson, the CCD have revitalized the black old-time string band tradition.

I root my thesis in methods most closely allied with ethnomusicology. In conjunction with reading pertinent literature on the subjects of old-time, race, and American popular music, my research took me to Chapel Hill, North Carolina between February 20 – 23, 2016, to speak with musicians and scholars. While at Wellesley, I spoke with several musicians who were playing shows in Boston, spoke with a musician over the phone, and finally met with a professor at Wellesley in addition to regular meetings with my advisors in the Music department.

In this thesis, I argue that race has profoundly shaped the genre of old-time, and that as a result of old-time's complex and troubling place in American popular music history, the musicians playing today still contend with the effects of that history. The community of old-time musicians today is far from shielded from debates about appropriation, racism, cultural purity, and reclamation; therefore, through this thesis I hope to shed light on the details of these debates.

Chapter One situates old-time within the broader context of race in the history of popular music in the U.S. Beginning with a history of minstrelsy and the banjo, I then proceed to a section on old-time's role in the record industry in the 1920s and the whitewashing of the genre. I follow with an introduction to the middle-class old-time scene, which arose as part of the 1960s folk revival, finishing with a discussion of authenticity in the old-time community.

Chapter Two details the backdrop from which the CCD developed their sound as an African American old-time band. I briefly introduce the North Carolina Piedmont, the region from which the CCD originate, followed by the story of Joe Thompson, the African American fiddler who inspired the CCD's formation and who sustained a regional style of black fiddling single handedly until his death at age 93. Subsequently, I show why African American string bands declined in the early 20th century with a focus on the enduring racial heritage of both the fiddle and the banjo. I detail the musical characteristics of black old-time string band music within the context of old-time playing styles in the Piedmont, and differences between generations of players. Lastly, I detail each of the CCD's founding members' backgrounds and careers, finishing with a discussion of the implications of their music as a group.

Chapter Three presents contemporary debates about authenticity, innovation, and teaching styles in the old-time scene and discusses the CCD's role in reclaiming a place for people of color in the genre. I introduce the ethnographic portion of my research, detailing my biases, introducing my project, and talking about the challenges of researching popular music. Subsequently, I enter into a discussion of authenticity and innovation in old-time, incorporating passages from my interviews. Next I briefly speak about changes in teaching styles and old-time's place in the music industry today. This is followed by a discussion of the awareness and reactions to the African American history of old-time in the contemporary scene. Then, I detail the community's reactions to fame and the success of the CCD, and the lack of African American participation in the genre. Finally, I highlight the impacts of the CCD's work towards reclamation, empowerment, and positive change.

In studying the implications of the music of the CCD, African American contributions to the genre, and the most pressing questions and debates in the old-time community, I hope to pay

respect to those scholars and musicians who have tirelessly sought to educate about and advocate for the topics discussed in this thesis. In writing this thesis, I endeavor to reveal new characteristics of today's old-time scene and situate my findings within a broader ethnomusicological context.

Chapter One: Race, Popular Music History, and Old-Time Traditions in Black and White

The history of popular music in the United States mirrors the struggles, challenges, and hopes of generations of Americans throughout this country's turbulent history. Much of what we have accomplished as a nation has been made possible at the expense of our least enfranchised citizens. In order to fully appreciate the contributions women, people of color, and other oppressed groups have made to the innovations and achievements we are so proud of as citizens of the U.S., we must know our own history. The study of race, popular music history, and the music industry leads to a better understanding of our musical heritage, but also the narratives of systemic oppression and violence that still permeate our politics, language, and, of course, music.

Minstrelsy from the Early 19th Century to Today

Thus, slavery took its toll not only on the politics of the 19th century, but also on the music. In the 1830s, a genre emerged that reflected the racially charged disconnect between the realities of slavery and the fascination with African American culture and music. Growing out of working-class neighborhoods in northern U.S. cities such as New York, minstrelsy began as a way for young, white, working-class northerners to rebel against the marginalization they faced by using African American forms of expression. Before the Civil War, minstrel shows featured mostly white performers in blackface imitating stereotypical mannerisms of black folk. Minstrel songs portrayed romanticized images of interracial harmony between master and slave.¹

Claiming authenticity, minstrel performers presented their music, dance, and comic skits as true depictions of black music and culture. In *Segregating Sound*, Karl Hagstrom Miller argues that

¹ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 41.

minstrelsy exposed white Americans, especially northerners, to black music for the first time.² Although inaccurate in its depiction of African Americans, minstrelsy was the first manifestation of white America's obsession with black music and culture; that "love and theft" of black culture, as Eric Lott describes it, characterizes how the vast majority of American popular music, from popular song to blues, jazz, and rock 'n' roll, has roots in the racist origins of the minstrel show.³ After the Civil War, minstrelsy became a way to express nostalgia for antebellum South, singing of how simple and happy life was before the war, while ignoring the realities of slavery.

In *Exploring American Folk Music*, Kip Lornell highlights the ways in which minstrelsy reflected the everyday lives of rural Americans. He writes, "When people flocked to the minstrel stage, they reaffirmed America's slow emergence from the domination of European culture."⁴ Minstrel songs evoked images of the agrarian south, and "...helped to prepare northerners for their eventual glimpse of the "real life" of southern blacks."⁵ Old-time is a genre that treats universal aspects of the human condition, all within a framework of the rural South. Minstrelsy highlighted the daily struggles of southerners, albeit from a perspective of racism and ignorance.

From the 1840s to the 1880s, blackface minstrelsy dominated popular music in the United States. Jim Crow, the fictional character that came to represent racial segregation in the South, has its origins in an extremely popular minstrel song from 1828 entitled "Jump Jim Crow." Jim Crow epitomized the hybridity of the genre, depicting simultaneously white rural, black, and creole dialects. Minstrel tunes were often sung to popular Irish and Scottish

² Miller, 5.

³ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴ Kip Lornell, *Exploring American Folk Music: Ethnic, Grassroots, and Regional Traditions in the United States*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 57.

⁵ Lornell, 57.

melodies.⁶ Despite its blatantly racist depictions of black Americans, minstrelsy grew to be what Starr and Waterman argue was “...the first form of musical and theatrical entertainment to be regarded by European audiences as distinctively American in character” in their classic textbook.⁷ Based on African American stereotypes and influenced by American popular music, minstrel songs arose from the social climate of the era.

Not only did white musicians feel ownership over black expression, they also found no issue in using African-derived instruments such as the banjo, with its roots in West Africa, to facilitate this discovery. The banjo’s history in minstrel shows illustrates this dynamic of appropriation regardless of race. As Thomas Turino points out, even though slaves brought with them instruments made from gourds that would serve as the prototype for the banjo, white urban audiences first encountered the banjo on the minstrel show circuit.⁸ Miller states, “...the nineteenth-century juggernaut [was] founded on the premise that white artists could perform black music—that racialized sounds were not restricted to racialized bodies.”⁹ This feeling of ownership over African and African American music set the stage for centuries of erasure of black musicians’ contributions to American popular music.

At the time of the banjo’s rise to popularity, the instrument became available for commercial sale. White musicians soon adopted the instrument as their own, and its African and African American identities began to fade. Lornell claims that, “During Reconstruction the banjo gradually became more closely associated with Anglo-American music and began losing its

⁶ Lornell, 57.

⁷ Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music from Minstrelsy to MP3* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 20.

⁸ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 164-165.

⁹ Miller, 4.

African American identity. By the 1950s most blacks had lost interest in the instrument.”¹⁰

Turino describes the banjo as “...the American instrument” because it reflects the history of the United States.¹¹ From slavery all the way until today, the banjo has been used to stereotype and to tread on black identity, whether intentionally or not.

After the Civil War, African American musicians hoping to make a name and living for themselves began to tour with minstrel troupes. Along with changes in the professional opportunities for African Americans, musical depictions of black America had shifted dramatically to fit post-Civil War realities. After the war, sentimental ballads and coon songs rose to prominence as new forms of minstrelsy. Miller writes that in the 1850s “...minstrel show composers had turned toward depicting romantic nostalgia for an idealized southern past expressed through burnt-cork caricatures of black southerners.”¹² In the 1890s, at the height of the coon song craze, white against black violence was rampant. Miller writes, “Commercial coon songs provided the musical equivalent of the southern culture of racial violence, complete with the law’s refusal to punish the killers of black victims.”¹³ In this way, music and politics have been deeply linked throughout the history of the U.S.

Despite the racialized violence depicted in the coon songs of the late 19th century, black performers found ways to undermine a genre that was being used against them. In their music, black performers slipped in subtle political messages intended for their black audiences. They did all of this without “...disturbing the expectations of white audiences.”¹⁴ This resistance is present in the way black performers treat old-time music today. Despite the pressure to make

¹⁰ Lornell, 43.

¹¹ Turino, 165.

¹² Miller, 34.

¹³ Miller, 42.

¹⁴ Miller, 45-46.

white audiences feel comfortable, black musicians such as the CCD work to communicate their mission and their music to audiences of color.

Traces of the minstrel show are present in modern society. Many traditional American folk songs, such as “Turkey in the Straw,” come from 19th century minstrel repertoire. From the 1830s through the golden age of animation, minstrel stereotypes and songs circulated in cartoons and children’s songs. Although the most offensive cartoons no longer air on television, the subtler children’s songs continue to circulate. Likewise, old-time music, which was born out of both European and African American influences, boasts minstrel tunes in its classic repertoire. The legacy of minstrelsy continues in today’s popular music. Miley Cyrus, Iggy Azalea, Justin Bieber, and many other pop artists appropriate black culture in their lyrics, celebrity personas, and dance moves.

The Music Industry Discovers the American South

In the decades leading up to the turn of the 20th century, American musical culture experienced a radical change. With the beginning of the mass-production of sheet music and the ongoing culture of traveling musical troupes, the South was flooded with new musical material. Every genre of popular music made its way into southern musicians’ repertoires.

However, Thomas Edison’s 1877 invention of the phonograph led to the northern record label’s so-called “discovery” of southern music. At this time, record labels began to brand southern music according to their own preconceived notions of pastoral, simple, rural life.¹⁵

¹⁵ Miller, 1-3.

Miller argues that record labels' conclusion that pop music was not southern ignored the fact that southern music was everything musicians heard and played at the time.¹⁶

The myth that southern music was “pure” folk music permeated the way record labels presented southern music in its newly created market. Miller writes, “...[musicians] found favor by actively personifying the racial musical categories the academy and the phonograph industry associated with a southern culture defined through its primitivism, exoticism, and supposed distance from modern urban culture.”¹⁷

This historical concept that the South is defined by rurality and the North by modernity can be traced back to the mid-19th century. In his book *Genre in Popular Music*, Fabian Holt writes “...the opposition between notions of a simple life in the preindustrial rural South and a complex modernity in northern cities was a basic scheme in American popular culture, including literary fiction, blackface minstrelsy, and various forms of popular song.”¹⁸ In this way, art and popular discourse have perpetuated an image of the South that does not do justice to the plurality of the experiences of southerners. Largely unknown to the record labels, the South remained an imaginary place where northerners could project their notions of musical purity onto the musical traditions they uncovered.

Northern record label executives believed in the idea that white and black musicians sang differently, and therefore a “musical color line” was created in the music industry.¹⁹ Black musicians' albums were marketed as “race records,” while white musicians received the benefit of being marketed according to genre. In her book *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race*, Maureen Mahon argues that race records segregated the record

¹⁶ Miller, 3-4.

¹⁷ Miller, 21.

¹⁸ Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 31.

¹⁹ Miller, 15.

industry in the 1920s. Quoting author and polymath Steve Chapple and musicologist Reebee Garofalo, she writes that race music was “[...]a separate and unequal counterpart to the white controlled major record labels.”²⁰ African American musicians saw their music defined by the white record label executives.

Old-Time as Musical Genre

Old-time music, a genre of early country music that is derived from both African and European musical traditions and whose name was invented as an alternative to "hillbilly" music,²¹ was classified, in the same manner that race music was, differently than general popular music records. The creation of these separate catalogues marked the first time record companies had decided to separate certain categories of music off into distinct catalogues. Miller writes,

Separate catalogues suggested a correspondence between consumer identity and musical taste, one that was both holistic and exclusive. They implied that unique segments of the population were satisfied by particular kinds of records yet uninterested in others. Musical tastes were assumed to be narrow rather than broad. The race and old-time categories were the industry's biggest experiment in market segmentation to date.²²

Although these catalogues were incredibly successful, musicians were severely limited in the type of music they could play.²³

²⁰ Chapple and Garofalo qtd. in Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 149.

²¹ Turino, 163.

²² Miller, 188.

²³ Miller, 189.

Influenced by images and sounds of minstrel stereotypes, record executives established an image for old-time music that fit their fantasies and prejudices. In 1923, the first old-time recording proved a major success. Fiddlin' John Carson, a white old-time fiddler, set a precedent and an image for the marketing of old-time. Northern record label executives labeled old-time string band music as white, despite the fact that there were many popular African American old-time string bands at the time. Carlin writes, "By and large, African American string band music was ignored in favor of the more modern Black blues."²⁴ The blues fit the image of the southern black musician, and therefore African Americans' contributions to old-time were erased. Carlin continues, "Along with the rising popularity of the guitar, the cultural changes brought by World War II and the final death toll by rock and roll, the record companies helped in the extinction of the fiddle and banjo among African American musicians."²⁵ Although not fully responsible for the decline in African American old-time string bands during the 1920s, record companies played a central role in their growing scarcity.

Even within the race record category, African American musicians faced disproportionate challenges when it came to establishing creative agency over their own music. Mahon writes, "Historically, aesthetic shifts and economic success in the music industry have resulted from the exploitation of black American creativity and the marginalization of black American people...Black artists and executives work within a restricted range of creative possibilities, control fewer economic resources, and have limited decision-making power. Certainly, white executives and musicians face limits, but racially motivated patterns of discrimination have

²⁴ Bob Carlin, *String Bands in the North Carolina Piedmont* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 31.

²⁵ Carlin, 31.

shaped every aspect of the production and distribution of the music black Americans have created from the 1920s to the present.²⁶

Therefore, not only were African Americans pushed from the old-time market, but they were also limited in the genres deemed appropriate for their race and position. African Americans have lost agency in many genres. In old-time, mainstream narratives of the music have blatantly ignored African American contributions to the genre. Not only have African Americans not had the opportunity to control the image of the genre of old-time, but they have also not been able to have ownership over their own role in the genre. Black musicians face limitations and discrimination, and this paradigm continues today in the old-time community, even when the community does not intend to create such an environment. The blame, however, can be placed on society as a whole. African Americans struggle for the same societal benefits and privileges that white people take for granted in every level of society. Therefore, the music world is not shielded from the reality of race relations in the U.S. today.

Both race and old-time experienced restrictions based on the images ascribed to them by northern record label executives. Yet, these perceptions had lasting effects on American popular music. Miller writes, “The race and old-time categories sold millions of records and profoundly shaped American’s understanding of the nation’s vernacular music, yet they corresponded to the musical lives of no particular sets of artists or audiences. They resided at the edge of the difference between the music African Americans or white southerners loved and what predominantly northern corporate record men imagined that they did.”²⁷ Shifting from a music used primarily to accompany social functions, to a music employed not only as a tool for community-building and functioning but also as a commodity, the goals of old-time music

²⁶ Mahon, 147.

²⁷ Miller, 189.

making changed once the realization was made that the genre could be successfully marketed to audiences in the U.S.

Therefore, recorded old-time grew to be a construction of the traditional form of the music. With northern record label executives' biases and imagined perceptions of the South, old-time records did not fully represent the musical tradition as it existed in the South at the time. However, they deeply influenced American audiences. Stereotypes of old-time music persist to this day, which partially explains the lack of black participation in the genre, discussed in Chapter Two.

Although the commercial market for old-time music is virtually nonexistent today, the genre boasts a lively musical scene throughout the United States. Two currents pervade the scene – the revivalists who make the music their own, and the musicians who grew up listening to and playing the music. As nothing is clear cut in music, there is a very blurry line that separates these two currents. In the following chapter, I explore this hazy distinction in my discussion of authenticity in old-time. However, I focus first on the revivalists, who have played a major role in shaping today's old-time community nationwide.

Old-Time Revivals

During the 1960s, when hippie counterculture and back-to-the-land philosophies defined a generation of young people, old-time experienced a revival among the middle class.²⁸ Riding the folk music revival wave of the 1950s, young middle-class people began to form a community around participatory music making and dance.²⁹ Turino highlights the fact that white middle-

²⁸ Turino, 115.

²⁹ Turino, 155.

class Americans do not grow up around a culture of music making or dancing.³⁰ Therefore, these people were yearning for something more. Turino writes, “The ‘folk revival’ was one response to a need for participatory music making and dance and for emblems that would tie individuals to the idea of community and to what was deeply and alternatively American.”³¹ However, the term folk revival carries with it some baggage.

Turino points out that the term “folk” is a construction made by those outside of the community it wishes to describe.³² He argues, “The symbols *folk* and *traditional*, as currently understood, make sense only in relation to the broader premises of the discourse of modernity.”³³ Therefore, the concepts “folk” and “traditional” only make sense within the context of modernity. Those who have grown up with “folk” music do not think of it as such. Rather, they think of it as their music.

The middle-class old-time scene, to use Turino's term, was and is attracted not only to the music but to the lifestyle the community provides. Alongside back-to-the-land ideologies, the old-time scene values simple lifestyles that offer an alternative to urban life.³⁴ However, Turino points out that the idea of southern life being somehow simpler than northern life, is myth. He argues that not only was the South affected by industrialization, but also that “...rural life never was easy or simple to begin with.”³⁵ Nevertheless, the music opens the door for many from the North to discover a way of life based on communal music making, dancing, and down-to-earth values, however imaginary.

³⁰ Turino, 158.

³¹ Turino, 159.

³² Turino, 156.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Turino, 170.

³⁵ Ibid.

In this way, the middle-class old-time scene became its own community and crossed geographic borders. Turino argues that this is not an imaginary community but rather a group of people who crisscross across the United States who nevertheless share common values, musical inspirations, and playing techniques.³⁶ The middle-class old-time community has continued to grow, forming pockets around the U.S. In Chapter Two, I discuss the opinions of many musicians in this community alongside those who have grown up in the South listening to old-time.

Lines are blurred, however, when one attempts to determine who qualifies as a revivalist and who a “native.” Turino proposes that there are two traditions. Although historically it is clear that there have been these distinct traditions within the old-time community, the picture is less clear today. Since old-time no longer enjoys such an integral place in the social life of southern communities, fewer people are growing up listening and playing old-time with their relatives and close friends. Turino points to the fact that second-generation revivalists grow up around the music just as much as anyone from the South. However, musical tastes differ greatly between the two traditions, and therefore playing styles are distinct.

Turino argues that both traditions are equally authentic and thus contribute to social meaning for practitioners. He writes:

If authenticity is linked to decent signs, then both the rural community-based and the middle-class old-time traditions can be equally authentic, or true, to the people who practice and enjoy them; they are simply distinct traditions. I realize that there is a fine line between the argument I am making here and ones used to justify cultural appropriation, where members of dominant groups take up the traditions of less powerful groups and ultimately claim them as their own. This

³⁶ Turino, 161.

problem is partially alleviated, however, precisely by being clear about the nature of the tradition being performed, that is, by stating directly that middle-class old-time is a distinct tradition not to be confused with, or represented as, southern rural lifeways.³⁷

Although Turino makes a solid argument for the defense of middle-class old-time as authentic, he fails to acknowledge the blending that has occurred between the two traditions. Many of the musicians I spoke to in my research allied themselves with the “real” old-timers of the South rather than the revivalists of the north, even though they themselves could be considered revivalists in that they did not grow up with the music.

Perhaps, then, the distinction is in fact between the middle-class old-time scene and those who have grown up with the music, but is also contingent on the fact that those are in part chosen communities. Allegiances are solidified, and although your personal history affects the way you are perceived in either community, your intentions count for more than your claim on the culture.

Scholar George Lipsitz highlights the fact that not all appropriation is damaging. Sometimes, trading popular culture can strengthen creative communities or individuals. He writes:

It is important to document the harm done by uncomprehending appropriation of cultural creations, to face squarely the consequences of mistakes in reception, representation, and reproduction of cultural images, sounds, and ideas. But the biggest mistake of all would be to underestimate how creative people are and how

³⁷ Turino, 162.

much they find out about the world that the people in power never intended for them to know in the first place.³⁸

Thus, even though middle-class old-time players do not grow up with the music, and are in a sense appropriating old-time southern culture, the community that is created around the genre is meaningful and subversive. These musicians reject mainstream narratives of urban life in favor of more communal, shared lives with an emphasis on music and dance. Therefore, the old-time community has gained something by including these middle-class old-time players in their scene. Whether authentic or not, the tradition has value.

³⁸ George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (New York: Verso, 1994), 169.

Chapter Two: Joe Thompson and the Carolina Chocolate Drops: Reclaiming the Legacy of the Black Old-Time String Band

“Tradition is a guide, not a jailer,” said British playwright, novelist, and short story writer W. Somerset Maugham. This quote is the motto of the CCD, an African-American string band from Durham, North Carolina. Formed in 2005, the CCD play a unique subgenre of old-time music that comes from the Piedmont region of North Carolina. As previously stated, old-time string bands feature the fiddle and the banjo, and sometimes other instruments such as the guitar. Beginning in the 19th century, black and white musicians started to play at local dances. The bands were sometimes racially integrated. However, when segregated, the white musicians played for square dances, and the black musicians played for black dances, called “frolics.”³⁹ Until the invention of the television, the most popular social events in rural North Carolina were these dances.⁴⁰

North Carolina is a state with a vibrant musical tradition that continues to this day. Daniel Coston states: “North Carolina is a singing state...Both functional and decorative, music kept stories alive, held soldiers in step, wooed and wed lovers, praised God, and set toes to tapping.”⁴¹ Full of music festivals and domestic music making, North Carolina is home to many talented musicians, such as the Avett Brothers, Earl Scruggs and, of course, the CCD.

³⁹ Douglas Martin, “Joe Thompson Dies at 93; Helped Preserve the Black String Band,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/02/arts/music/joe-thompson-dies-at-93-fiddler-of-string-band-legacy.html>, accessed 4/20/16.

⁴⁰ “NC Piedmont Music,” *Pinecone.org*, May 19, 2014. <https://www.pinecone.org/content/nc-piedmont-music>, accessed 4/17/16.

⁴¹ Daniel Coston, *North Carolina Musicians: Photographs and Conversations* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1972), 1.

The Piedmont, meaning “the foot of the mountain” is located in the central part of North Carolina.⁴² The region borders the Appalachian Mountains, and is home to a large African-American population. Justin Robinson, notes that the Piedmont is “...the hilly part of North Carolina where a lot of – demographically – where a lot of black people settled.”⁴³ Figure 1 delineates the three regional elevations of North Carolina, and Figure 2 shows the percentage of African Americans in the total population of each county in North Carolina in 2000. The Piedmont is home to a majority of industry in North Carolina.⁴⁴

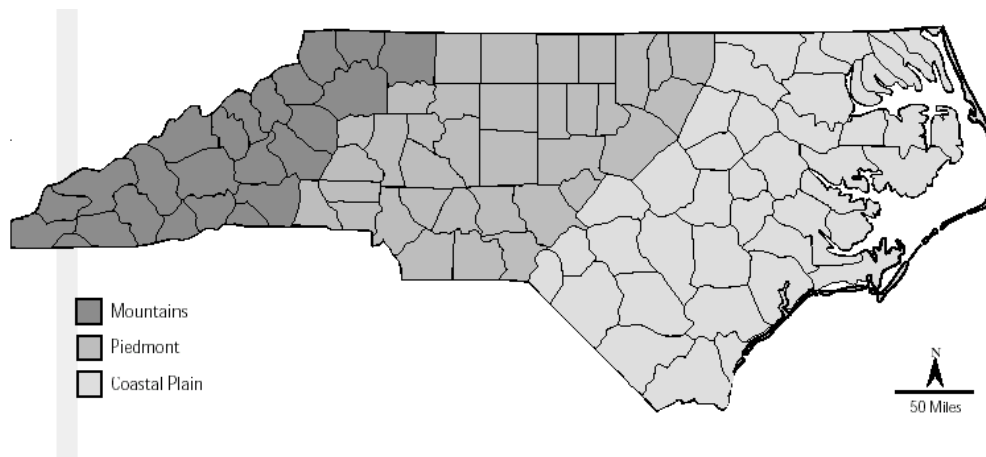


Figure 1. Regional elevations of North Carolina. Image source: <https://www.secretary.state.nc.us/images/region1.gif> accessed 4/20/16

⁴² Tony Cox, “Carolina Chocolate Drops Keep Piedmont Sounds Alive,” *NPR Music*, February 12, 2007. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7363722>, accessed 4/20/16.

⁴³ Cox.

⁴⁴ Carlin, 5.

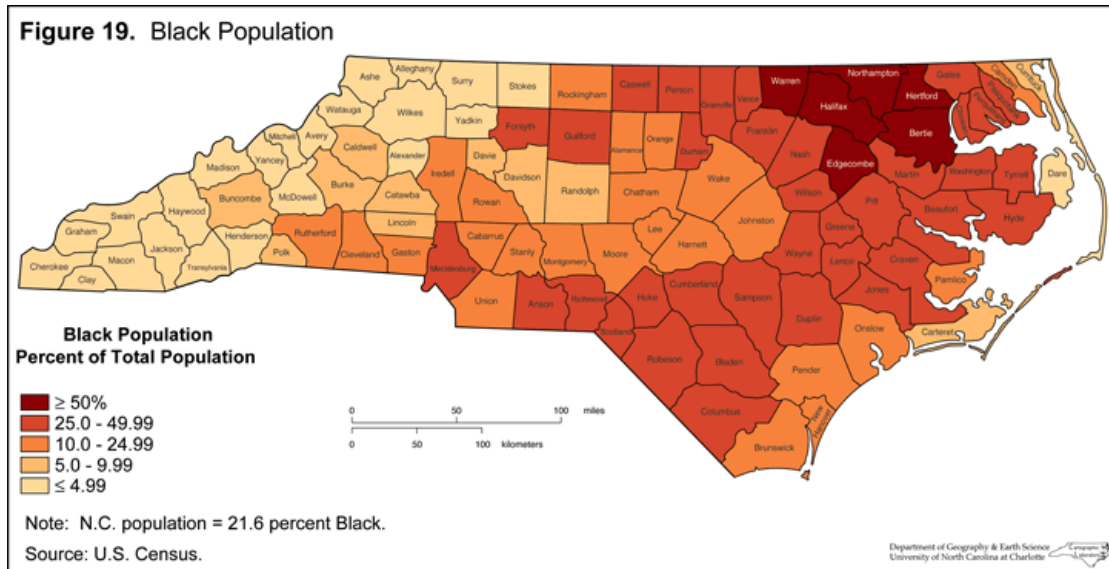


Figure 2. Percentage of African Americans in the total population of each county in NC. Image source: <http://ncpedia.org/sites/default/files/popfg19L.gif> accessed 4/20/16

Although slavery made a significant mark on the culture of the state, North Carolina held a smaller slave population than neighboring states. Only twenty-two percent of white residents in the Piedmont owned slaves.⁴⁵ Areas with larger populations of African Americans in the Piedmont are often connected historically to former slave settlements.⁴⁶ Black old-time string band music flourished in these communities.

The CCD's mission is to sustain a regional tradition of old-time that was passed down to them from one of the region's last traditional old-time fiddlers, Joe Thompson. The original CCD band members used to sit in Thompson's living room once a week and learn tunes, reveling in the opportunity to learn a tradition that was fading from the region's collective memory.

When the original CCD members visited Thompson, who at the time of the band's start in 2005 was in his eighties, they were learning a tradition that had been passed down for

⁴⁵ Carlin, 32.

⁴⁶ Carlin, 37.

generations among family musicians in the North Carolina Piedmont.⁴⁷ Thompson died in 2012 at the age of 93, and left behind a legacy of old-time string band music that lives on in the music of the CCD.⁴⁸

Joe Thompson grew up listening to his father play the fiddle near Mebane, North Carolina. His father, John Arch, had learned the instrument from Thompson's grandfather, a slave. Thompson began playing himself at a very young age, stealing wires from the screen door to use as strings. Thompson describes those early days, "Then I got to messing and messing and one day I hit a tune – must have been 'Hook and Line.' When Dad heard me play, he looked around and said, 'Well, that boy's playing the fiddle, ain't he?' He took an interest in me, and I got to learning pretty fast. A couple of days later he gave me his fiddle. And from that day on, I've come to where I am now."⁴⁹

By the age of seven he was playing fiddle at local dances with his brother, Nate Thompson, on banjo.⁵⁰ In his book *String Bands in the North Carolina Piedmont*, Bob Carlin writes, "The brothers were quite the sight, both still children whose feet didn't even reach the floor when sitting in those old-fashioned straight back chairs!"⁵¹ When the Thompson brothers were growing up, old-time string bands were a much sought-after form of entertainment. A family tradition, old-time music was an integral part of their daily lives.

Several years later, Thompson started a string band with Nate and his cousin Odell Thompson, both on banjos. The three toured throughout North Carolina.⁵² Although Joe

⁴⁷ Michael Hill, "About," *Band*, Carolina Chocolate Drops.

<http://www.carolinachocolatedrops.com/band/about.html>, accessed 4/20/16.

⁴⁸ Martin.

⁴⁹ Thompson qtd. in Cecelia Conway, "Hands up Eight and Don't Be Late: The Frolic Music of Joe and Odell Thompson," *North Carolina Folklore Journal* 37.2 (1990): 73.

⁵⁰ Martin.

⁵¹ Carlin, 42.

⁵² Coston, 169.

Thompson took a break from fiddling while he was away fighting in World War II, when he got back he began a 38-year career working in a furniture factory. In 1973, Kip Lornell, a graduate student in ethnomusicology at UNC-Chapel Hill, visited Thompson at his home, and urged Joe and Odell to start playing in public again. And play they did. The cousins soon began to tour all over the United States, including a performance at Carnegie Hall in 1990. Joe, Odell, and Nate were featured on renowned folklorist Alan Lomax's American Patchwork documentary film series.⁵³ Joe describes his busy touring days: "We played all these frolicking tunes. We played every-which-a-way. I can't tell you all where I been with this fiddle."⁵⁴

Although the world almost lost Joe's music for a second time after Odell died in a car crash in 1994, the fiddler recorded a solo album in 1999 entitled "Family Tradition." In 2007, Joe won a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and in that same year performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington.⁵⁵ In 2010, two years before Joe Thompson's death, Jessica Steinhoff of *Alarm Magazine* wrote, "Now 91, Thompson is thought to be the last living performer from the golden age of Piedmont string bands."⁵⁶ Now, the CCD are revitalizing the old-time string band tradition, and Joe Thompson's legacy can be heard in their music.

Despite its original popularity, the black string band tradition of the North Carolina Piedmont began to fade from collective memory as increasingly more black musicians began to play the blues, and the white string band grew to be seen as the face of the tradition that spawned bluegrass and country music.⁵⁷ As quality of life began to improve with industrialization, old-

⁵³ Martin.

⁵⁴ David Brower, "Joe Thompson at 90," *The Old-Time Herald*, Feb. – March 2009. http://www.oldtimeherald.org/archive/back_issues/volume-11/11-9/thompson.html, accessed 4/20/16.

⁵⁵ Martin.

⁵⁶ Jessica Steinhoff, "Carolina Chocolate Drops: Giving New Life to Old-Time Piedmont String Music," *Alarm Magazine*, October 15, 2010. <http://alarm-magazine.com/2010/carolina-chocolate-drops-old-time-piedmont-string-music-with-a-side-of-history/>, accessed 4/20/16.

⁵⁷ Martin.

time music was associated with a traditional way of life that was slowly being abandoned. Carlin writes, “Old times are equated with hard times; old music was left behind with the old ways.”⁵⁸ The rejection of old-time music in favor of the blues was not only caused by modernization, but also by African Americans' need to bury the past and look toward the future.

In their book *Southern Music/American Music*, Bill C. Malone and David Stricklin further explain the decline in interest in old-time music as a result of African Americans' desire to distance themselves from an oppressive past. Malone and Stricklin write, “Younger black musicians generally rebelled against that which was reminiscent of the slave past. The fiddle not only evoked ‘old plantation days,’ it was also identified with the presumed enemies of African Americans, the southern poor whites.”⁵⁹ Thus, African Americans forged a new path for themselves in popular music.

The blues provided a new medium for black expression. Malone and Stricklin write, “Emancipation brought African Americans new forms of discrimination and oppression, but it also permitted a self-expression that was not possible under slavery.”⁶⁰ African American musicians developed new musical forms that would allow them to express themselves more freely and more uniquely.⁶¹ In light of this shifting social context, old-time string band music fell out of favor.

In the face of the declining interest in black string band music, Joe Thompson kept the Piedmont tradition alive. Dom Flemons of the CCD states: “The fact that he kept playing the fiddle during that time is a rare and important link to an era that has faded in the black

⁵⁸ Carlin, 8.

⁵⁹ Bill C. Malone and David Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music* (Lexington, KY: U of Kentucky, 2003), 13.

⁶⁰ Malone and Stricklin, 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

community.”⁶² While his peers and even his brothers embraced the blues, Thompson remained a staunch supporter of the music he grew up with.

The genre of old-time string band music has roots in both African-American and European traditions.⁶³ Carlin writes, “The string band music of the Piedmont reflects the interaction between settler and slave groups in the inclusion of musical style and instruments from each group. The Germans and Scotch-Irish contributed a fiddle tradition and the melodies from songs and instrumental pieces. The African Americans brought [...] the banjo...”⁶⁴ Although commonly referred to today as an African-derived instrument, the banjo has a strong history of appropriation in the United States, already detailed in the first chapter.

As complicated as the banjo’s history through the transatlantic slave trade is, some musicians like the CCD continue to play different types of banjos to connect their music to the past. The banjo’s precursor was made from hollow gourds and animal hides.⁶⁵ Initially, only African slaves played the instrument.⁶⁶ Before the integration of banjo music into white southern musical traditions, banjo repertoire was passed down through generations of black families. Steinhoff writes, “Until the early 20th century, young white musicians usually befriended an older black musician if they wanted to learn [the music].”⁶⁷ The first written evidence of banjo playing in North Carolina dates from 1787, when an anonymous man wrote in his journal that, after finishing dinner in Tarboro, he “saw a dance of Negroes to the Banjo in his yard.”⁶⁸

⁶² Coston, 169-170.

⁶³ Martin.

⁶⁴ Carlin, 15.

⁶⁵ “Folkstreams: Joe and Odell Thompson,” Folkstreams. <http://www.folkstreams.net/principal,195>, accessed 4/20/16.

⁶⁶ Conway, 73.

⁶⁷ Steinhoff.

⁶⁸ Conway, 73.

There are several different types of banjos. The CCD highlight the three varieties of banjo that they use in performance on their website: the five-string banjo, which was passed down among slaves for 100 years; the plectrum banjo, which has four strings and is most commonly found among old-time jazz bands and Irish music; and the minstrel banjo, which became popular in the early to mid-1800s, and which is fretless and boasts a deeper sound. The CCD write, “[The minstrel banjo] is the first mass-produced style of banjo, and the first one the non-African Americans played.”⁶⁹

The other major instrument common to old-time music is the fiddle, another name for the European violin, which arrived in the United States with early British and German settlers.⁷⁰ However, even the fiddle has origins in African-American tradition, because slaves were made to perform the instrument for their masters beginning in the 17th century.⁷¹ If slaves were particularly musical, they were trained to play the fiddle at dances, which in turn increased their monetary value.⁷² Nevertheless, slaves played for their own entertainment as well. Their influence on country fiddling has gone undocumented, however, Malone and Stricklin speculate that “...the degree of mutual borrowing between blacks and whites may have been very large.”⁷³ Opportunities for cultural exchange between black and white musicians may have been more possible than one would expect in the segregated South. I discuss this topic further in Chapter Three.

In the early 19th century, the banjo and the fiddle, both a part of rich histories in the U.S., joined to create a musical genre that combined both Celtic-American fiddle styles and African-

⁶⁹ “Band,” *Instruments*, Carolina Chocolate Drops.

<http://www.carolinachocolatedrops.com/band/instruments.html>, accessed 4/17/16.

⁷⁰ Folkstreams.

⁷¹ Martin.

⁷² Carlin, 33.

⁷³ Malone and Stricklin, 11.

American banjo traditions: old-time.⁷⁴ Some scholars believe that the creation of this unique synthesis should be credited to African slaves. Martin invokes a statement made by scholar Paul F. Wells, stating, "[...]slaves were most likely the earliest musicians to combine violin and banjo."⁷⁵ Whether true or not, it is clear that both white and black musicians played a role in the creation of the genre of old-time music.

Since its inception, old-time music was an integral part of society in rural North Carolina. However, the history of the old-time string band has excluded the story of black performers: even though black musicians were at the forefront of the creation of country music, early country and old-time are seen as white genres by mainstream listeners even today.⁷⁶ Jessica Steinhoff writes, "...though Appalachian tunes have become the music of all Americans, there's another truth lurking in the shadows: the story behind the music has been whitewashed. We tend to remember the white banjo students but not their black teachers."⁷⁷ Not only is the black string band tradition important to the history of American popular music, but also the music was an essential part of daily life in the North Carolina Piedmont. Old-time music, as well as blues and gospel, were a "...part of the fabric of African American social experience in church, end-of-school celebrations, square dances, and fiddle contests."⁷⁸ Old-time music was important for the functioning of society, and for black identity. Pecknold argues that black identity was asserted through these musical forms. Serving the community on a daily basis, old-time, despite the

⁷⁴ Conway, 73.

⁷⁵ Martin.

⁷⁶ Steinhoff.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Diane Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 8.

“white racialization of its commercial variants,” remained an integral part of daily life in black communities.⁷⁹

For rural residents in the Piedmont, farming and music went hand in hand as essential parts of everyday life. Joe Thompson remembers, “...being able to hear from far away the music drifting from one tobacco barn or another.”⁸⁰ String band music was played by people of all professions, as there was no country music industry at the time.⁸¹ Carlin writes, “Musical instruments were present at the conclusion of...agricultural endeavors. Whether it was a corn shucking, a barn raising, or the like, a house dance accompanied by live music ended the day.”⁸² In this way, music was the thread that wove both white and black societies together.

In *Hidden in the Mix*, Diane Pecknold discusses the “imagined South” that arises from the failure to acknowledge black musical traditions. She writes that this attitude both “...erases...America’s black population and the suffering on which the South was built.”⁸³ The inability to include the black experience in the history of the US is shown in country music’s erasure of its black ancestry. Pecknold states, “...like much of American culture, country music has been a form of ‘playing in the dark,’ of using notions of blackness to elaborate and provide affective depth to white identity.”⁸⁴ To understand country music, one must take into account black contributions to the genre, because even though black musicians are excluded from mainstream discourse, they have greatly informed the playing of famous white country performers. Toni Morrison argues that there is a hidden “Africanist presence” in American

⁷⁹ Pecknold, 8.

⁸⁰ Carlin, 9.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Pecknold, 3.

⁸⁴ Pecknold, 5.

literature that informs white writing and creativity.⁸⁵ So too in country music, there is a black musical culture that informs white country music.

Pecknold goes on to show that one cannot even imagine black people playing country music, because the history is so hidden.⁸⁶ Although responsible for many instances of creativity and innovation in American popular music, black musicians are rarely credited for their contributions. White musicians often borrow mannerisms, phrases, dance moves, musical ideas, and more from black musicians and do not credit their sources. Throughout popular music history in the U.S., white musicians have reaped the benefits of black musicians' ingenuity.

The CCD are working to showcase this black history through their music because the black old-time string band played such a vital role in the community in which the band was born. Rhiannon Giddens, the lead singer of the CCD, states in an interview with Tony Cox of NPR: "It seems that two things get left out of the history books. One, that there was string band music in the Piedmont region[...]because usually it's restricted to being in the Appalachians; and two, that...black folk was such a huge part of string tradition[...]"⁸⁷ She explains that the Piedmont is a region that is home to a large black population, and that therefore the "music is indigenous to that area."⁸⁸ In addition to African Americans and Euro-Americans, Native Americans also made up a portion of the population of North Carolina. Old-time music was influenced by all three of these ethnic groups.⁸⁹

Beginning in the 1920s, black string band music became less and less popular. White string bands were recorded and disseminated under the slogan of "hillbilly" music, however, as

⁸⁵ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 6.

⁸⁶ Pecknold, 5.

⁸⁷ Cox.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ "Old Time Music – Digital Heritage," *Digital Heritage*, August 30, 2010. <http://digitalheritage.org/2010/08/old-time-music/>, accessed 4/17/16.

previously mentioned, black musicians began to play more and more blues. Douglas Martin of the *New York Times* writes, “The influence of black string bands on white country musicians slipped from memory.”⁹⁰ Martin infers that Joe Thompson was incensed by this whitewashed view of history, because in a 2004 interview he protested that when Elvis Presley sang the blues, “people thought that was white people’s music, too. That messes black people up.”⁹¹ Cecelia Conway, in her article “Hands Up Eight & Don’t Be Late: The Frolic Music of Joe and Odell Thompson,” describes the importance of Joe and Odell’s music to the legacy of the black string band: “Joe and Odell have lived the old musical traditions and shared them with university-educated visitors. They have told stories, listened, sung, and played. They represent the continuing, changing, and vital strands of an almost undocumented tradition.”⁹²

Similarities and Differences in Black and White Playing Styles

There is a nuanced story to be told about the string band tradition. Differences in the black and white styles are difficult to define. Black old-times tunes were called “Negro jigs,” and they placed emphasis on intricate, syncopated rhythms influenced by West African music. Coston explains that while the black old-time fiddling tradition heavily influenced the genres of country and bluegrass as did the white tradition, the black style was decidedly different than the style of the white fiddlers.⁹³ Although black and white musicians occasionally overlapped at social functions such as weddings and parties, their repertoires were distinct, and therefore their styles must have boasted individual characteristics.

⁹⁰ Martin.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Conway, 75.

⁹³ Coston, 170.

Black string band music "...draws upon slave songs, material common during minstrelsy, and dance tune repertory."⁹⁴ The black tunes favor subjects of "private tragedy," leaning towards the lyrical rather than the narrative.⁹⁵ The black fiddling style of the Piedmont region is energetic, powerful, and gritty in the bow arm. Joe states: "My daddy, he said I always light, he couldn't half hear me. Said I would need a heavy bow...Most white people don't like to hear that bow shuffle. But black people, it don't bother them. To hear it, that's what they want."⁹⁶ Not only does the fiddling style evoke the culture of the Piedmont's black population, but also the content of the music. Conway quotes fiddler Alan Jabbour who describes, "...songs that conjure up words and words that conjure up images that allude to life in the region. They create a story almost awakened by the music."⁹⁷ The music of Joe and Odell Thompson includes a large amount of singing. Conway describes their style:

Odell and Joe sing banjo songs with a lyric African-American aesthetic quite different from the narratives of white ballad singing. Their playing method, lyric song genre, and the complex interweaving between the instrumental and vocal performance are highly complex, improvisational, and, like their instrument and aesthetic, African-American. The tradition is the one that reflects directly upon the slave experience...⁹⁸

Their music evokes everyday life in rural North Carolina, and their music is emblematic of the rich musical history of the black string band.

⁹⁴ Conway, 78.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Conway, 77.

⁹⁷ Conway, 78.

⁹⁸ Conway, 79.

Joe and Odell Thompson's rendition of "Georgia Buck" is a good example of a dance tune that showcases their unique style of playing.⁹⁹ The incredible rhythmic consistency and vigorous fiddle and banjo playing showcase a style that was meant to accompany a neighborhood frolic. Odell's voice is strong so as to pierce through the thick instrumental texture of the song. Odell's banjo playing features brush strokes, which serve to add rhythmic accents and texture to Joe's intricate fiddling style. The Thompsons learned this tune from their father, and the lyrics represent the dangers that women pose to men.

However, there is some overlap between the two repertoires. The tune "Little Margaret," which the CCD feature on their 2006 album *Dona Got a Ramblin' Mind*, comes from the white tradition of the Appalachian Mountains. At the height of the old-time string band, songs were often shared between white and black musicians. Giddens states, "...this music back in the day was much more of a mixture, and people were swapping tunes and teaching other tunes. And there's a lot of white musicians who were learning stuff from black musicians and vice versa."¹⁰⁰ Thompson's repertoire includes songs from both traditions. Tunes such as "Georgia Buck," "Molly Put the Kettle On," "Black Eyed Daisy," and "Old Corn Liquor," can be found in the sets of both black and white musicians.¹⁰¹

What is remarkable about the legacy of the Piedmont region's old-time music is that it is a story of integration, and of relative cooperation between blacks and whites. Black musicians performed for community dances for both blacks and whites. Steinhoff writes, "At the time, it was one of the rare instances where the racial divide softened, if only for a few hours."¹⁰²

Giddens says of Joe's talent for community building, "He could bring the community together –

⁹⁹ "Georgia Buck" by Joe and Odell Thompson, *Black Banjo Songsters*, 1998.

¹⁰⁰ Giddens qtd. in Cox.

¹⁰¹ Carlin, 39.

¹⁰² Steinhoff.

black, white, he didn't care as long as you wanted to play the music. He was a very special guy.”¹⁰³ Folklorists argue that in some communities in the Piedmont, black and white musicians collaborated and exchanged musical repertoire.¹⁰⁴ In Cedar Grove, an unincorporated community in Orange County, North Carolina, and home to Joe Thompson, the white and black populations had a healthy rapport. Kip Lornell describes the dynamic in Cedar Grove as unique in that black and white residents “lived together in relative harmony.”¹⁰⁵ He attributes this cooperation to the homogeneity of industry in the town. Both white and black male residents were typically tobacco farmers.¹⁰⁶ Although the Piedmont boasts “relative harmony” among its residents, race relations remained hostile throughout the South. Despite the racial divide, old-time music allowed black and white residents to unite over a common interest – music and dance.

The CCD are continuing Thompson's legacy of acceptance, promoting their music to black and white audiences alike. They state on their website, “Yes, banjos and black string musicians first got here on slave ships, but now this is everyone's music. It's okay to mix it up and go where the spirit moves.”¹⁰⁷ In fact, most of their audiences are white, a trend discussed in Chapter Three.

Not only unique for its history of musical racial integration, the Piedmont boasts a distinct string band style that is different from much of the old-time tradition. The difference is in the instrumentation. Unlike “...the white fiddle-and-banjo music of the southern Appalachian

¹⁰³ Giddens qtd. in Parke Puterbaugh, “Giddens to Honor Mentor during National Folk Fest Performance,” *WRAL.com*, September 1, 2015. <http://www.wral.com/giddens-to-honor-mentor-during-national-folk-fest-performance/14866814/>, accessed 4/20/16.

¹⁰⁴ Carlin, 32.

¹⁰⁵ Lornell qtd. in Carlin, 39.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ “Band.”

region...[the Piedmont style] gives the leading role to the banjo, which sets the tone and tempo of the tunes.”¹⁰⁸

Since the turn of the century, banjo players in the Piedmont have been playing clawhammer style, which is a down-picking style that is unique to old-time.¹⁰⁹ The technique is named for the claw-like position the right hand forms. The clawhammer style boasts an intensely rhythmic quality.¹¹⁰ Odell Thompson describes his earliest impressions of the clawhammer style: “When I was first old enough to remember what a banjo was, that was the way they were playing it – the clawhammer style. They called it “thumping” the banjo. I didn’t know nothing about picking no banjo.”¹¹¹

In addition to clawhammer, the old musicians were known for the exuberance and grit of their playing. Joe Thompson described a clawhammer banjo player by the name of Johnny Wade as a “heavy banjo player.”¹¹² Joe goes on to describe the effect of Wade’s playing on the whole community: “He used to sit by the tobacco barn every night [a frequent opportunity for black-white musical exchange]. He’d be curing tobacco and sit out there and you could hear him clear across the country. That man could play it too. My uncle Jake said, ‘That was the only man I dread – Johnny Wade.’ ”¹¹³ The word “grit” is often used to describe African American playing styles; however, old-timey musicians of both races boasted this quality in their playing. Many of the musicians I spoke with in North Carolina described the African American style of playing as

¹⁰⁸ Steinhoff.

¹⁰⁹ Down-picking is a technique that requires the fingers to attack the strings in a downward motion. Bill Evans, *Banjo for Dummies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley), 2014.

¹¹⁰ There are many demonstrational videos on YouTube that will show you the different styles of banjo playing. Here is a video that shows the tune Cripple Creek played in three old-time banjo styles: frailing, clawhammer, drop thumb, and round peak. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-1k5q-z0vc>, accessed 4/17/2016.

¹¹¹ Conway, 75.

¹¹² Conway, 76.

¹¹³ Ibid.

emphasizing the rhythmic aspects of old-time over the melodic. They used the word “grit” to talk about this rhythmic intensity. Although many admitted that white musicians often played the same way, there was a clear trend towards describing the African American players as playing with grit, syncopation, and rhythm.

However, are these qualities that society blindly ascribes to African American musicianship? Old-time playing styles, whether white or black, boast complex and important rhythmic aspects, as well as syncopation and a certain scratchy, gritty quality. Joseph Decosimo, a fiddler and PhD candidate in American Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill who is currently writing his dissertation on old-time, questions the way in which African Americans are automatically labeled with certain sound qualities that may not be accurate.

Decosimo: Here’s a question – and I don’t have an answer to this. Does race sound a certain way? Cuz we’ve been told that it does, right? The idea of race as a category, or as a – something that organizes people socially, and in the gazillion other ways that it does –

Fiona Boyd: mmhmm.

Decosimo: We’ve been told that black sounds a certain way. And that white sounds a certain way. And like, one thing I’m wondering is like, does Indian – does being like an American Indian sound a certain way? I don’t have an answer to that –

FB: And like, a lot of the Chocolate Drops are actually mixed, so –

Decosimo: Yeah. No – but does whatever the mix is – does it – you know, do they sound more black because, like, -- and we’re told that like these things have certain sounds that go with them.

FB: mmhm.

Decosimo: umm.

FB: To you does Joe Thompson sound really different than –

Decosimo: I think Joe Thompson has – he has a sound, like, his – yeah, I mean I think he – but I would say this about many old fiddlers –

FB: It could just be his personal –

Decosimo: It could be idiosyncratic. Like is there – this is a question that people you know have kicked around for a long time, is like these questions of regional style, like, is there such a thing or is it – I love to think that like individuals – you know, I love to think that the creativity of individuals is like the thing that ultimately determines what –

FB: mmhm.

Decosimo: what something sounds like. But Joe – I would say Joe has a sound.

FB: mmhm.

Decosimo: and it, like, I can hear – you could play me, like within two seconds I would know it's Joe Thompson. And probably the same for Odell's banjo playing, like, pretty – they're distinct.¹¹⁴

Whether or not a certain sound can be ascribed to a musician's race, Decosimo highlights the uniqueness of individual playing styles. Joe and Odell Thompson have a particular sound that could be attributed to their influences, their race, their idiosyncrasies, or all of the above.

Decosimo presents the question of whether race sounds a certain way, or whether musicians have idiosyncratic ways of playing that trump racial categories. Perhaps musicians sound like both themselves and a synthesis of their musical influences. If true, it is likely that

¹¹⁴ Joseph Decosimo, personal interview, 2/22/16.

black musicians have a certain quality in common due to having been more exposed to black musicians' playing than white musicians' playing. Especially in the early 20th century, black old-time musicians, although in contact with white players, would have learned from close friends or members of their family. Therefore, a certain sound would develop that could be attributed to race. Today, however, influences are more varied, and it would be harder to prove that black sounds a certain way and that white sounds a certain way. Thus, a musician's sound is based on both their individuality and their influences, two aspects that can be a function of race.

Old-timers, whether white or black, played differently than old-time musicians do today for a variety of reasons. In an interview with Dom Flemons after his show at The Burren in Somerville, MA, in November 2015, the "American songster" (his self-chosen title) discusses Odell Thompson's banjo playing style as being similarly loud out of necessity. Traditionally, the string band was a genre with a specific social function – the square dance. Musicians would have to be able to play loud enough to be heard over the dancing and the noise. Flemons states, "The old-timers liked the big ass bluegrass banjos...because it was loud as hell."¹¹⁵ He says the goal was to "play it as loud and play it as hard as you can."¹¹⁶ Therefore, as a function of the time period and culture surrounding old-time string bands and square dancing, old-timey musicians played in a rougher, louder style than they do today. This statement can be applied to both white and black musicians.

Priorities have shifted today with the invention of the microphone and amplification as the genre shifts more towards stage performance. Flemons says that revivalists prefer "a more open-back [banjo] with the scooped out neck, so that they can play up on the neck to get the

¹¹⁵ Dom Flemons, personal interview, 11/12/15.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

really soft, intricate, clawhammer picking sounds.”¹¹⁷ Figure 5 shows an example of a banjo popular today.¹¹⁸ The BC-350 was designed by Bob Carlin and Wayne Martin, two banjo players whose names came up frequently in my discussions with old-time musicians in North Carolina. In Chapter Three I discuss my interview with Carlin himself. In contrast to today’s lighter banjos, Odell played on a Gibson Mastertone, a large bluegrass banjo.



Figure 3. Gibson Mastertone banjo. Image source: <http://c-nelson.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/1997GibsonMastertone003.jpg> accessed 4/17/2016.

¹¹⁷ Dom Flemons, personal interview, 11/12/15.

¹¹⁸ To see a close-up image of a banjo with a scooped fingerboard, visit this link: http://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0219/5272/products/scooped-neck_large.jpeg?v=1447353969. The thinner neck created by the scooped fingerboard allows musicians to play higher, intricate passages. In addition, today’s banjos are lighter, facilitating ease of playing.



Figure 4. Joe and Odell Thompson with Odell's Gibson Mastertone banjo. Image source: http://blogs.lib.unc.edu/sfc/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/P4705_Odell-and-Joe-Thompson.jpg accessed 4/17/2016.



Figure 5. BC-350 banjo with open back, scooped fingerboard. Image source: <https://www.goldtone.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/BC350-fi.jpg> accessed 4/17/16.¹¹⁹

The Founding Members of the CCD

The founding members of the CCD owe their start to Joe Thompson. In April 2005, the three young musicians met at a Black Banjo Gathering entitled “Then and Now” at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. Flemons describes the event as an opportunity to spread black string band music to a larger, intergenerational audience: “The gathering was organized to raise awareness of black string band music in the hopes that African-American

¹¹⁹ To read more about this banjo and watch a demonstrational video of Carlin playing the BC-350, visit this link: <https://www.goldtone.com/product/bc-350/>, accessed 4/17/2016.

musicians young and old could get together and form a community where everyone would know they weren't alone in the world. As Lomax might have put it, it was an exercise in cultural equity.”¹²⁰ To fully understand the extent to which the CCD shook up the old-time community, one must know the histories of each of the founding members and the different experiences they bring to the group. Their personal stories shed light on debates of authenticity in old-time music, and highlight the complex relationship between people of color and old-time music today.

Flemons views the event as a turning point in his musical career: “This event completely changed my mental outlook. I met Mike Seeger. I got to sit with Joe Thompson and realized that his music was a link to all of the folk music that I had been listening to, and in time I would learn how to play his family’s tune repertoire.”¹²¹ Originally from Phoenix, Arizona, Flemons travelled to the Black Banjo Gathering and met not only Mike Seeger and Joe Thompson, but also Rhiannon, and Justin, who were already acquainted. He immediately recognized the importance of the work his peers were doing in reviving the string band tradition, noting, “When I first saw Justin and Rhiannon playing together after a session at Joe’s, I became fully aware that with great serendipity we were reviving a tradition of music that could’ve died out if we hadn’t come along to give it new life.”¹²² Fate certainly played a hand in uniting these like-minded young musicians with the inspirational figure of Thompson.

Flemons is the son of a black father and Mexican mother. In school he played “auxiliary percussion,” which he describes as everything except snare drum. As a teenager, the “songster” was an active member of the Arizona folk scene. Largely self-taught, Flemons began exploring

¹²⁰ Geoffrey Clarfield, “An American Revivalist: Dom Flemons and the Return of the African-American String Band,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 6, 2012. <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2012/11/music/an-american-revivalist-dom-flemons-and-the-return-of-the-african-american-string-band>, accessed 4/20/16.

¹²¹ Flemons qtd. in Clarfield.

¹²² Ibid.

the music of the '60s folk revival – Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, and Dave Van Ronk.¹²³ In college, Flemons studied English, all while fostering a great love of folk music. Flemons describes his studies: “I was an English major, not a music student, when I went to college, and I had a great love of Shakespeare and Chaucer, the English poets, the Anglo-American ballad tradition, and folk music of all kinds.”¹²⁴ The first black string band tune Flemons ever heard was “Buttermilk” by Bob and Miles Pratcher. Since the fateful Black Banjo Gathering in 2005, Flemons has grown into a scholar, revivalist, and expert musician of American music.

Rhiannon Giddens (b.1977) grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina. Her great-grandfather was a rum runner during prohibition, and her white father and black mother broke color lines by getting married at a time when interracial marriage was still stigmatized.¹²⁵ Giddens, like Flemons, listened to a wide variety of music growing up. Giddens says of her childhood: “My parents were hippies...I listened to Peter, Paul and Mary, and I heard my dad singing a lot of Donovan, Cat Stevens and stuff like that. My uncle had a bluegrass band. I heard mass choirs on Sunday mornings and blues and jazz from my grandparents...I kind of heard everything, except for old-time music.”¹²⁶ Thus, Giddens was exposed to a broad range of music, an aspect of her childhood that is reflected today in her experimentation with many genres.

Giddens discovered old-time music rather circuitously. While an undergraduate studying opera at Oberlin College, Giddens attended a contra dance, which is a type of group folk dance similar to square dancing ordinarily accompanied by Irish, Scottish, old-time, or French-

¹²³ Clarfield.

¹²⁴ Flemons qtd. in Clarfield.

¹²⁵ David Fricke, “Rhiannon Giddens’ Old-Time Religion,” *Rolling Stone*, March 5, 2015. <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/rhiannon-giddens-old-time-religion-20150305>, accessed 4/20/16.

¹²⁶ Giddens qtd. in Lee Hildebrand, “Rhiannon Giddens Brings a Fresh Voice to an Old-time Sound,” *SFGate*, May 4, 2015. <http://www.sfgate.com/music/article/Rhiannon-Giddens-brings-a-fresh-voice-to-an-6232529.php>, accessed 4/20/16.

Canadian fiddle tunes. Quickly thereafter she joined the contra dance community at school. After returning home, she began attending local contra dances that featured old-time music.

The contra dance community is closely linked with the middle-class old-time scene mentioned in Chapter One. A part of a higher socio-economic class than traditional, rural old-time music making, the contra dance scene is comprised of a largely white, middle-class, educated group of members. Therefore, Giddens entered the old-time scene through what some would call a revivalist route. Some might question her authenticity because of the way she has allied herself with this community in revealing her personal journey to becoming an old-time musician.

Giddens learned to play the banjo after discovering its African roots, and she plays both banjo and fiddle on the CCD's recordings. However, today Giddens has launched her solo career with her 2015 debut album *Tomorrow Is My Turn*. Singing since age three, she has grown into a prominent figure in folk music and Americana. Her album boasts a variety of genres, including jazz, blues, gospel, and country. Giddens is a firm believer in the idea that everyone has a right to play folk music, no matter their background. She says, "[...]if a piece of music speaks to you, it doesn't matter which tradition spawned it."¹²⁷ Giddens takes this statement to heart, experimenting with diverse genres while remaining cognoscente of their respective histories. In April, 2016, Giddens was named Folk Singer of the Year at the 2016 BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards, becoming the first American to receive the honor. British folk singer Sandie Shaw presented her with the award, stating, "Your sheer artistry defies all known genres."¹²⁸ Giddens has become an

¹²⁷ "Push It Further: Rhiannon Giddens Takes A Turn On Tradition," *Morning Edition*, February 10, 2015. www.npr.org/2015/02/10/384943903/push-it-further-rhiannon-giddens-takes-a-turn-on-tradition, accessed 5/13/16.

¹²⁸ "Rhiannon Giddens Named Folk Singer of the Year at BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards," *Nonesuch Records*, April 27, 2016. <http://www.nonesuch.com/journal/rhiannon-giddens-named-folk-singer-year-bbc-radio-2-folk-awards-2016-04-27>, accessed 5/13/16.

internationally- successful folk singer, and her beliefs about authenticity, appropriation, and cultural purity shape the discourse around these topics in the U.S.

On her 2015 album, she pays tribute to America's strong women musicians who are so often ignored. David Fricke of *Rolling Stone* writes, "...the record, produced by T Bone Burnett, is a spiritual archaeology of American racial and economic struggle via sublime covers of songs identified with Nina Simone, Patsy Cline and Elizabeth Cotton, among others."¹²⁹ Giddens states that "Angel City," the final track of the album gives "...a thanks to 'these women who came before,' Giddens says. 'I'm standing on their shoulders.'"¹³⁰ Only after a long struggle for recognition was Giddens able to carve out a place for herself in the world of traditional country music as a woman of color. Not only African American men experience discrimination from the music industry. African American women had the double burden of asserting themselves in a community and in an industry that did not value the creativity of women or people of color.

Giddens is married to Michael Laffen, an Irish musician. The two have two young children together. The melting pot that is her family reflects not only America's history, but also the music she plays. Craig Silver of *Forbes* writes, "Her solo act...probes all the intertwined ethnocultural roots of America...a timeless, kaleidoscopic America: the sought-after, fought-over melting pot America."¹³¹ Digging into Irish music, as well as old-time and blues music, Giddens shows that American popular music is influenced by and is a mixture of a broad range of styles. In claiming many genres and heritages as her own, she is asserting her right to sing whatever moves her.

¹²⁹ Fricke.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Craig Silver, "Rhiannon Giddens: Musical Melting Pot Wows America," *Forbes*, April 15, 2015. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/craigsilver/2015/04/15/rhiannon-giddens-musical-melting-pot-wows-america/#4583236e653f>, accessed 4/20/16.

Perhaps the least traditionalist of the three founding members of the CCD, Justin Robinson grew up in Gastonia, North Carolina in a musical family. Gastonia is an old cotton mill town that drew people from the mountains of North Carolina and from upstate South Carolina at the turn of the century. Robinson describes the town, as an “[...]interesting place to grow up in, small town values, woods to run in, family close by.”¹³² Robinson started to play classical violin at age seven or eight. However, he stopped playing at thirteen, because the genre of classical music did not suit him. Robinson said, “When my parents told me they weren’t going to pay for any more lessons if I wasn’t going to practice, I thought, Thank goodness my plan worked.”¹³³

Robinson’s family listened to a broad range of musical styles: classical, country, R&B, and hip-hop, a diversity that has clearly affected Robinson’s creativity and ability to fuse different genres together. Gastonia was a musical community, with Earl Scruggs, the influential bluegrass banjoist, playing locally. Robinson says “[...]you couldn’t throw a rock without hitting a banjo.”¹³⁴ In addition, his mother sang opera, further contributing to his rich musical education. Since both Robinson’s mother and Rhiannon herself sing opera, the CCD have a strong grounding in classical music. Although some would view this experience as contributing to their inauthenticity, their classical training and exposure to a variety of musical forms contributed to their ability to appeal to audiences outside the old-time community and grow their mainstream success. Their diverse backgrounds, although perhaps met with judgment from within the scene, allow them to assert themselves in the music industry.

¹³² Robinson qtd. in Chris Mateer, “Justin Robinson (formerly of Carolina Chocolate Drops) Talks JR and the Mary Annettes’ “Bones For Tinder,” ” *Uprooted Music Revue*, January 16, 2012. <http://www.uprootedmusicrevue.com/2012/01/justin-robinson-formerly-of-carolina.html>, accessed 4/20/16.

¹³³ Robinson qtd. in Diane Silcox-Jarrett, “The Origin of Carolina Chocolate Drops,” *Our State Magazine*, January 1, 2010. <https://www.ourstate.com/carolina-chocolate-drops/>, accessed 4/20/16.

¹³⁴ Robinson qtd. in Silcox-Jarrett.

Although the CCD have inherited the energy and drive of Joe's playing style, it is evident in their interpretation of the old-time standard "John Henry" that they are influenced by 21st century aesthetic ideals.¹³⁵ Giddens' fiddle playing is more intricate and "in-tune" than Joe's, and the overall sound of the group is cleaner than the Thompson's rough texture. The CCD have also added vocal harmonies to the tune, which Joe and Odell never did.

While a student at the University of North Carolina, Robinson started to play fiddle in string band music. He heard that Joe Thompson was going to be at the Black Banjo Gathering, so "...off to Boone [he] went..."¹³⁶ In this way, Thompson united the three original members of the CCD. When the group formed, Robinson was the only founding member with a day job other than music – he was a paralegal. However, when the band started touring, he quit his job in favor of life on the road. Despite his love for the music, Robinson tired of touring. In an interview with Chris Mateer of the *Uprooted Music Revue*, Robinson explained: "I simply realized that the touring life is not for me...Also, being on the road kept me from my family (I'm married, plus we have a dog, a cat, and a horse.)"¹³⁷ Soon after leaving the CCD, Robinson began creating and performing music full time with a backing band called the Mary Annettes, comprised entirely of North Carolinian musicians. They released their debut album, *Bones for Tinder*, in 2012. Justin Robinson and the Mary Annettes play a wide palette of "postwar" styles: R&B, Motown, soul, hip-hop, and more.¹³⁸

In the epigraph to this chapter, I mention Robinson's favorite quote by W. Somerset Maugham, who included it in his literary memoir *The Summing Up*, published in 1938:

¹³⁵ Here is a video of the CCD performing "John Henry": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=usx6BID-arg>, accessed 4/20/16.

¹³⁶ Robinson qtd. in Silcox-Jarrett.

¹³⁷ Robinson qtd. in Mateer.

¹³⁸ Stephen Deusner, "Justin Robinson and the Mary Annettes: Bones for the Tinder," *American Songwriter*, January 9, 2012. <http://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/justin-robinson-and-the-mary-annettes-bones-for-tinder/Content?oid=2770981>, accessed 4/20/16.

“Tradition is a guide and not a jailer.”¹³⁹ Robinson lives by this motto. His extra-musical interests include forestry, cooking, entrepreneurship, and embroidery. His music is rooted in history in its instrumentation, however Robinson is in no way confined to one musical tradition.

Flemons, Giddens, and Robinson, three unique musical talents, were brought together by their mutual desire for the preservation of a fading musical tradition. The band’s original inspiration was Joe Thompson’s incredible knowledge of black old-time string band music. The three young musicians couldn’t believe their luck. Robinson states, “I was in awe and starstruck when I went to visit him the first time.”¹⁴⁰ The CCD’s weekly sessions with Thompson during the summer of 2005 would last as long as five hours each. Giddens says that “Joe never seemed to get tired as long as we were playing.”¹⁴¹ Thompson, who continued fiddling until his death at a very old age, was energized by the music he grew up with and helped to sustain. One can only imagine how he must have reveled in the opportunity to pass on his unique musical tradition on to a new generation.

At eighty-six years old, Thompson “[...]sealed the deal, transforming three wandering souls into a tight-knit ensemble.”¹⁴² The founding members felt honored to be carrying on a tradition that had been passed down through generations of everyday people in North Carolina and black Appalachia. In his biography of the band on their website, Michael Hill writes, “When the three students decided to form a band, they didn’t have big plans. It was mostly a tribute to Joe, a chance to bring his music back out of the house again and into dancehalls and public

¹³⁹ Jordan Lawrence, “Only One Original Member of the Carolina Chocolate Drops Remains, but the Group’s Mission Spreads,” *Indy Week*, March 12, 2014. <http://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/only-one-original-member-of-the-carolina-chocolate-drops-remains-but-the-groups-mission-spreads/Content?oid=3927728>, accessed 4/20/16.

¹⁴⁰ Robinson qtd. in Silcox-Jarrett.

¹⁴¹ Robinson qtd. in Silcox-Jarrett.

¹⁴² Steinhoff.

places.”¹⁴³ Although there was political intent and a desire to honor Thompson's legacy, the CCD wanted to be successful in the music world from the beginning. This subject will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

The CCD are honoring the old while ringing in the new with their old-time string band music. Flemons describes the ensemble's approach to the treatment of history through the word “Sankofa” which he describes as “an Asante term that's kind of a proverb that means go back and fetch it – bring the past into the present and into the future[...]One of the ways that it's depicted is by a bird flying forward while it reaches its beak back to touch its wing.”¹⁴⁴ The group makes sure to stress the continued importance of old-time music in the 21st century. Flemons states, “We're not trying to bring the old times back, but we're using them to help people enjoy themselves...Building community by getting people to sing and dance together at a concert makes sense in the modern world.”¹⁴⁵ Although their sounds are informed by the past, the messages of the songs the CCD play can easily be transposed to today's times. Steinhoff writes, “...Carolina Chocolate Drops blends the whimsy of eras past with the stuff that makes people human today: getting drunk, making out, showing off, and screwing up.”¹⁴⁶

In 2010, the CCD released their label debut album *Genuine Negro Jig*. Recorded for Nonesuch Records, the album was a great success, winning a Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Album.¹⁴⁷ *Genuine Negro Jig* revolutionized black string band music, bringing it firmly into the modern musical landscape. The CCD incorporate “...elements of blues, jazz, spirituals, minstrel

¹⁴³ Hill.

¹⁴⁴ Flemons qtd. in Geoffrey Dobbins, “Returning the Banjo to Its Black Roots,” *The Progressive*, May 2010.

¹⁴⁵ Flemons qtd. in Steinhoff.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Hill.

music, and several other styles.”¹⁴⁸ Just as the music of the South is a blend of many styles, the CCD's music reflects the plurality of their musical upbringing.

Although the CCD honor tradition in their treatment of string band music, they are able to take a step back from the historical implications of the music, and see what it means to people today. Flemons states that the CCD “...come from a new generation that can take the time to explore these repertoires with a new outlook and a distance from the past, especially when it comes to the minstrel material.”¹⁴⁹ The CCD acknowledge and attempt to come to terms with the troubling history of race in popular music, but they also don't let that history limit them.

The CCD are responsible for carrying on a rich tradition of black old-time string band music from North Carolina's Piedmont. String band music, which was popular at the turn of the century, evokes the everyday life of both blacks and whites in the region, and the genre's history highlights socio-cultural issues faced by Piedmont communities. Despite a legacy of little acknowledgement from the outside world, the black string band has experienced a revival, thanks to the CCD and Joe Thompson. Today, the CCD's music opens up a chapter in American history that serves to enrich, educate, and enthrall modern-day audiences.

¹⁴⁸ Clarfield.

¹⁴⁹ Flemons qtd. in Clarfield.

Chapter Three: Contemporary Viewpoints on Old-Time from a North Carolina Scene

Old-time is a genre that crosses socioeconomic, racial, and geographical boundaries. In an attempt to understand just a small portion of the old-time scene in the United States, I focused my research on the region of North Carolina in which the CCD got their start. Thanks to the Pamela Daniels Fellowship, I was able to travel to Chapel Hill, North Carolina for four days to meet, listen to, and interview musicians and scholars.

In the following chapter I discuss, among other topics, issues of genre, authenticity, innovation, and awareness surrounding the African American old-time string band legacy and how they relate to the CCD's success. I also discuss how the scene is responding to the CCD's success. In painting a portrait of the old-time community in the Triangle (Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill), I attempt to remain cognizant of my own biases and position as a northern, classically trained violinist of Scotch-Irish descent. Inspired by changes in the social sciences, scholars of ethnomusicology are looking to define and reveal their own subjectivity in their writing. In the introduction to *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, James Clifford argues that in every ethnographic text there is an element of fiction created by the ethnographer's biases. He writes, "Even the best ethnographic texts—serious, true fictions—are systems, or economies, of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control. Ethnographic truths are thus inherently *partial*—committed and incomplete."¹⁵⁰ Similarly, Thomas Turino discusses subjectivity in his book *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. He stresses the invented nature of culture and musical meaning, and the notion that ethnomusicology revolves around the individual. He writes,

¹⁵⁰ James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California, 1986), 7.

In terms of the practicalities of doing ethnomusicological field research and social analysis, however, I begin and end with individuals. I suggest that any general theories about artistic processes and expressive cultural practices would do well to begin with the conception of the self and individual identity, because it is in living, breathing individuals that ‘culture’ and musical meaning ultimately reside.¹⁵¹

Thus, it is necessary for ethnographers to examine their biases before launching into a discussion of culture of any kind.

As a Music major at Wellesley, I have studied mostly classical performance and history. However, I always knew there was a missing piece of history that was waiting for me to discover: America’s music. Intertwined with politics, race, gender, culture, and much more, the study of the music of the United States promotes a greater understanding of the people, heritage, and culture that make up America.

Born on a small island in Maine, and raised along the coast, I have yearned to explore the history and complexity of the United States. Sheltered from racial divisions in a state that is primarily white, I jumped at the opportunity to learn about and confront the tensions, complexity, beauty, and artistry of the south. I believe music has the power to be both a tool with which to understand society and a tool to bring people together. My conversations with old-time musicians have proven that music both shapes and is shaped by society.

My travels took me from musicians’ homes to jam sessions, to concerts, to professors’ offices. I spoke with self-proclaimed revivalists, traditionalists, and documentarians. Some musicians were originally from the South, and some moved there in part for the music! Although

¹⁵¹ Turino, 95.

many of the people I spoke with had connections to African American old-time musicians, no one outside of former Chocolate Drop Dom Flemons, with whom I spoke in Somerville, MA, were of color. In an effort to learn more about the way old-time crosses geographic boundaries, I spoke with Bruce Molsky, a well-known old-time fiddler and teacher originally from the Bronx, who nevertheless has a deep connection to North Carolina.

Before I launch into my findings, it is important to note how difficult it is to even define the genre of old-time. As previously discussed, the genre's name was created when the music needed to be marketed in the '20s. Like any musical genre, old-time is a living tradition, and has therefore incorporated elements from and been influenced by other genres. Old-time musicians often play bluegrass, folk, blues, and even classical music and bring their knowledge of those genres into their old-time playing. In his book *Genre in Popular Music*, Fabian Holt writes,

Categories of popular musics are particularly messy because they are rooted in vernacular discourse, in diverse social groups, because they depend greatly on oral transmission, and because they are destabilized by shifting fashions and the logic of modern capitalism. The music industry daily invents and redesigns labels to market musical products as new and/or authentic.¹⁵²

No genre exists in a vacuum, and although it was easier for record executives to label old-time music as a white genre and blues as a black genre, the musical and racial reality in the South in the early 20th century was in fact much more complicated.

When I asked Bob Carlin, an old-time banjo player and scholar originally from New York City, what old-time was called before the term was created, he replied, "music!" In shedding the label, perhaps the cultural context of the music is brought into sharper focus. Old-

¹⁵² Holt, 14.

time was ubiquitous at the turn of the century. There was no need to define it, because it was an essential and habitual part of life. Carlin goes on to say that for Joe Thompson, old-time was “his family’s music.”¹⁵³ The stigmas surrounding old-time or hillbilly music are perhaps more easily shed when the music is regarded as just that—music, deserving of respect. However, old-time's reputation is marred from years of racist history. Carlin states,

Now I'm not African American, and you need to ask maybe some middle and upper class African American people what they think, but I'm, my assumption is...that they just don't want to have anything to do with it, that the stigma of it from history is so strong that not only do whites not wanna face slavery, but blacks don't really wanna face slavery, because there's always...again, I'm projecting...but I think that there's a feeling not just of – they were the victims of this thing, but why didn't they rise up and throw themselves—throw it off sooner, and why did they allow themselves to be treated this way?¹⁵⁴

The history of slavery and racism still haunts the genre, and the CCD are working to shed some of the baggage the music carries in an effort to reclaim the music as their own.

Old-time music, much like classical music, is a tradition that values the maintenance of an idea of authenticity alongside family legacy and a respect for those who came before. Alongside technical mastery, old-time musicians venerate a certain authenticity that can be derived from bloodline or a commitment to source recordings and old-timey playing styles. Authenticity is awarded to musicians who can trace their lineage to the South, and who have played with the elders of old-time, and learned from old source recordings. Although many musicians do not outright subscribe to this ranking system, undercurrents of authenticity

¹⁵³ Bob Carlin, personal interview, 2/21/16.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

judgments flow freely under the surface of conversations about old-time. In this chapter, I use evidence from my interviews to illustrate how authenticity works alongside notions of “tradition” and “realness.” I show that authenticity in old-time serves to create divisions and distinctions between those musicians who have not grown up with the music and those who have.

Bob Herring, an Indiana-born fiddler who has played with many of the South’s most celebrated old-time musicians, sees a clear distinction between revivalist musicians and musicians who are what he calls “in the tradition.” According to Herring, if you are born into a family who has traditionally played old-time, then you have a certain pedigree that makes you “the real deal,” and “one of the folks they talk about.”¹⁵⁵ Despite Herring’s qualifications and commitment to old-timey playing styles, he has been told that he plays “Yankee old-time.” Is his sound truly different than his southern-born counterparts, or was that a comment directed solely at his northern heritage?

Mike Sollins, a fiddle and guitar player active in the Boston old-time scene in the ’70s before moving to North Carolina, along with Herring, considers himself in this same corner of the old-time scene as Bruce Molsky. Sollins, a self-described revivalist, is a steady presence at jams in the Chapel Hill area.¹⁵⁶ Another distinction arises, however, when northern old-time is considered its own tradition. Molsky believes that in one hundred years, there will be a recognizable northern sound that is based on southern music, in the same way that there is currently a southern sound based on “something else.”¹⁵⁷ Molsky reacts to the way in which traditions evolve, acknowledging a stylistic difference in playing, while citing the roots of the music. The distinction between the northern and southern sounds relates to debates around

¹⁵⁵ Bob Herring, personal interview, 2/20/16.

¹⁵⁶ Mike Sollins, personal interview, 2/20/16.

¹⁵⁷ Bruce Molsky, personal interview, 2/2/16.

authenticity in old-time. Northern musicians are regarded as less authentic than their southern counterparts, because the northern tradition is seen to have inauthentic roots.

“People play the way they speak,” says Molsky, “and I have a New York accent.” Although he “spent years trying to crawl in the heads of [his] heroes,” no amount of studying will erase his northern roots. It is hard to say if a respect of his sources and a mastery of the music is enough to grant Molsky passage onto the hallowed ground of musicians who were born into the tradition. However, there is wide acknowledgement of his influence. Perhaps authenticity can be earned.

Insofar as authenticity is a construction, it is still an integral part of the old-time community. In his book *Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm discusses the way in which traditions can be created based on the repetition of practices informed by the past. He writes, “Inventing traditions, it is assumed here, is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition.”¹⁵⁸ In this way, the old-time community centers itself around certain activities and practices grounded in the past, but nevertheless invented. From attending the same festivals and fiddler’s conventions, to listening to the same group of old recordings, to idolizing and learning from the same venerated old-timers, the community repeats these to such an extent that they have formed a tradition around these activities. I have found that authenticity in old-time has been invented around these activities, most notably the mythical legacies of the old-timers, and the source recordings of those players.

Shay Gourrick and Lucas Pasley, two southern-born fiddlers, describe themselves as “traditionalist” and “hyper-traditionalist” respectively. Gourrick is not at all open-minded about

¹⁵⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 4.

the music, and likes the old country sound.¹⁵⁹ He says, “...I happen to like the sound that...I hear from the real country fiddlers, that I don't hear in the younger urban fiddlers—just do not hear it.”¹⁶⁰ Gourrick, who grew up in Virginia, stresses his commitment to a country lifestyle. He distinguishes between the revivalist sound and the more “European” bowing style that characterizes the old-timers’ playing. Citing Tommy Jarrell, the influential fiddle and banjo player from North Carolina’s Appalachian Mountains, Gourrick prefers the repertoire, ornamentation, “eloquent” and complicated bowing patterns of the old-timers.

Interestingly, Molsky studied with Jarrell as part of a southern pilgrimage to learn from the old-timers. Although Jarrell is a source and influence for both men’s playing styles, they would be considered a part of very different corners of the old-time tradition. However, instead of highlighting a difference between northern and southern playing styles like Molsky does, Gourrick stresses a distinction between “educated, urban, liberal, wealthy” people and “country, conservative, religious, blue collar, not as educated” people.¹⁶¹

Pasley, who split his time as a kid between Long Island and Sparta in Alleghany County, NC, has family roots that qualify him to a certain level of authenticity. Alleghany is “ground zero,” according to Gail Gillespie and Dwight Rogers, two old-time musicians in the Chapel Hill area.¹⁶² Home to Tommy Jarrell, Kyle Creed, and Fred Cockerham, Gillespie and Rogers describe the county as the heart of old-time and the place where everyone from the north wanted to live in the ’70s. During the conversation, Pasley revealed that his great-uncle was Guy Brooks from The Red Fox Chasers. Gillespie basically jumped from the couch when she heard the news!

¹⁵⁹ Shay Gourrick, personal interview, 2/20/16.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Gail Gillespie & Dwight Rogers, personal interview 2/23/16.

For Pasley, all he had to do was tell his grandmother he was serious about learning to play old-time, and relatives like Brooks started popping out of the woodwork.

Due to his family connection to Alleghany, Pasley is dedicated to the music from his region. As I mentioned previously, Pasley is a self-described “hyper-traditionalist” who stresses the fact that he was able to learn from several older players who shaped his playing style. However, Pasley recognizes the difficulties that come along with playing traditional music. He says, “The big dilemma for traditional musicians is you have to respect the tradition, but on the other hand if all you do is mimic, then you have violated the spirit of the tradition.” He goes on to say that all of the great old-timers were “amazing innovators.”¹⁶³

In the end, Pasley is admitting to the same reality that Molsky is: old-time is a living, breathing tradition that is founded on innovation; yet, it is also a tradition that simultaneously maintains a respect for the old that roots it firmly in the past. Pasley says he struggles with the “dilemma” of traditional music, but that he knows that “...if it gets too far from the tradition, you’ve really lost something of value...but, if you don’t have enough spunk in there nobody really wants to dance and nobody wants to hear it.”¹⁶⁴ Thus, musicians must craft a careful balance of playing traditionally and appealing to audiences. Musicians walk a fine line between these two realms of authenticity and innovation. They are quickly judged if they sway too far on one side or the other.

Gillespie, Rogers, and Pasley all agree that Gourrick strikes that balance in his playing. However, Molsky, and most certainly the CCD may stray too far from the tradition for their liking. They all admit to the value of these innovators, however. Everyone I spoke with in North Carolina admitted to the hierarchical categorizing that goes on in the old-time community, and

¹⁶³ Lucas Pasley, personal interview, 2/20/16.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

this high level of awareness lends even more complexity to the politics of the scene. Glenn Hinson, a professor at UNC-Chapel Hill whose research focuses on African American expressive culture, describes the situation as the creation of “mythic structures of respect.”¹⁶⁵ These myths shape the way old-time musicians experience their music, and the associations they make among themselves. Although unspoken, these structures govern the way old-time musicians determine hierarchy within the community. The CCD challenge this hierarchical structure, and as a result have experienced significant pushback within the old-time community. I will further discuss hierarchies later in the chapter.

Joseph Decosimo embraces the messiness and complexity of his own lineage and musical influences. As the advisee of Professor Hinson, he is well aware of the “mythic structures of respect” that permeate the old-time community.¹⁶⁶ In highlighting not only the source recordings he has listened to and the old-timey fiddlers he has learned from, but also the circuitous way that he discovered the music and the impurity of his own musical heritage, Decosimo seeks to break down some of those structures.

Decosimo describes the old-time musicians as a “community of connoisseurs” or “expert amateurs.” Despite his critical academic perspective of the old-time scene, Decosimo’s wife, Kasey, still described him as a “purist.” Musical taste is musical taste and although he may acknowledge the hypocrisies surrounding ideas of authenticity, Decosimo still prefers those musicians who stick to the party line and play from the sources.

This sense of obligation to old-time tradition is present in the way Flemons frames his discussion of innovation. He stresses the need for musicians to “do it right” and to first learn

¹⁶⁵ Glenn Hinson, personal interview, 2/22/16.

¹⁶⁶ Joseph Decosimo, personal interview, 2/22/16.

their craft, and then to add their own personal style to the music. Flemons mentions that he spent many years learning to play, immersing in the music. He states,

I'm not – from the South either, I'm from Arizona, but see Rhiannon and Justin are both from North Carolina and for me, I started – when I started living in the South I understood the music in a different way, so when I play the music, I try to find a balance between what's on the old records and what I personally interpret, and then also what are the things that I've seen the people that have influenced me in person – what have they done? And I try to mix those things up to make a performance that comes out as my own.¹⁶⁷

Rogers would call this putting in your time.¹⁶⁸ All his hard work seems to have led him to a very distinct style that is very much his own, but that is historically informed, just as his philosophy dictates.

Hard work is highly valued in the old-time community. Gillespie and Rogers both agree that there is a rite of passage into the old-time world, earned by dedicating many years to learning from the masters of old-time, whether through recordings or in person. They call this a period of “apprenticeship.”¹⁶⁹ In describing their friends Wayne and Margaret Martin, both Rogers and Gillespie agree that authenticity is linked to a certain sound that is close to the playing of the old-timers.

Gail Gillespie: It was Wayne and Margaret – you know, who are just salt of the earth – wonderful people, too – but they learned – they're more – there's this authenticity thing – you can't – it's like this elephant in the living room.

¹⁶⁷ Dom Flemons, personal interview, 11/12/15.

¹⁶⁸ Dwight Rogers, personal interview, 2/23/16.

¹⁶⁹ Gail Gillespie, personal interview, 2/23/16.

Fiona Boyd: yeah.

Dwight Rogers: right.

Gail: They sound – whatever it means – you can't tell their music much from the old people. I mean, it's really –

FB: okay.

Gail: – really rooted. Okay, so they're playing at this string band festival –

Dwight: And they put their time in – like thirty to forty years of meeting –

Gail: oh yeah.

Dwight: meeting old musicians

Gail: oh yeah, it was a labor of love, you know[...]¹⁷⁰

In Gillespie and Rogers' eyes, meeting old musicians and developing an authentic, old-time sound is essential to becoming a true old-time musician. The two go on to describe the expectation within the community that musicians study from the old-timers. This expectation, never explicitly discussed, influences the way in which people judge each other's playing. Rogers says, "I think both of us are actually more open minded than we used to be, but there's a certain something that makes it old-time music and something that's not[...]"¹⁷¹ Gillespie, laughing, added that she has been accused of being a "gatekeeper", deciding for others what is authentic old-time and what is not.¹⁷² In this way, the old-time community has unspoken rules that govern whether musicians can claim authenticity or not.

Flemons highlights the difficulties in defining authenticity and in dictating who meets the community's standards. He says,

¹⁷⁰ Gail Gillespie and Dwight Rogers, personal interview, 2/23/16.

¹⁷¹ Dwight Rogers, personal interview, 2/23/16.

¹⁷² Gail Gillespie, personal interview, 2/23/16.

I will say that learning from somebody gives you more to work with. I'd say it's more like hmmm...it's almost like when you're cooking food, there's certain types of food...well, for example see we're in an Irish pub and see that have this tea of here, Barry's tea, which is an Irish breakfast tea, and see this has a very specific flavor that's not like Lipton's iced tea, an American brand. And so, it's very much like that, see you can still have a cup of tea with another type of tea from the states, but it's not this. Someone from Ireland would find offense to the American tea, just because they have such a better tea culture, so that there's a brand of tea that's strong. And so that's kind of the same way with music, so some can play extremely well, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they're playing the old styles of music in a way that is interesting for someone who knows better. Because that's also, authenticity is based off of what the performer and what the audience know, and if the audience or the performer doesn't know better there's no fault in that. But, when people do know better, that's when you start having discrepancies about "oh, well you don't play like this or you don't do this lick that way," but that comes from a place of knowing what the standard is. And so now in the post-digital revolution, the standards have kind of even changed again – just because it's a different world than it was when the New Lost City Ramblers were around, where they come from a place of...saying these old recordings exist and we're gonna play those styles because no one else has access to those recordings. And so, them playing it is the first access people have to that sound. Because it's all about what you hear first, you know...¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Dom Flemons, personal interview, 11/12/15.

Thus, authenticity is in the eye of the beholder, and discussing authenticity is a “slippery slope,” in the words of Flemons.¹⁷⁴ If community members begin to judge based on levels of authenticity, then they will lose sight of the music and the fact that the tradition is living. Further, it is impossible to accurately police a mythic concept such as authenticity.

Like Decosimo, Carlin also admits to the hypocrisy in policing who has a right to play old-time. During our interview at Muddy Creek Music Hall in Winston-Salem, NC, he mocked the people who would argue authenticity based on birth. Carlin says, “Paul Brown’s entitled to play string band music because his mother grew up in Virginia, but only half the time, because his dad was from New York City! Or I should be playing Klezmer music because I’m Jewish...I mean, I didn’t grow up with it, so it doesn’t make any sense.” Carlin believes that if you’ve studied from the “right people” and have gained enough skill, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t have the right to play old-time.¹⁷⁵

Joe Newberry, a banjo player, singer, and songwriter who comes from a singing family in Missouri and who cites his family as his first musical inspiration, he notes that regional old-time playing styles are being lost. He says it’s important to honor those styles. Much like Carlin, Newberry believes the music “belongs to everybody.” Unlike the other musicians I interviewed, Newberry was the only one to stress how much he admired folks who are playing today. For him, he knows it is important to honor both the old and the new.¹⁷⁶

The thread that continues to weave through discussions of legitimacy in old-time is the requirement that “real” old-time musicians listen to source recordings and seek out old-timers from which to learn. Everyone I have spoken with has cited musicians and recordings from

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Bob Carlin, personal interview 2/21/16.

¹⁷⁶ Joe Newberry, personal interview, 2/25/16.

previous generations as their first and most important inspirations. Newberry says the old players not only taught his generation how to play, but they also taught the young folks “how to be.” The old-timers welcomed the next generation to learn from them, and taught them, just by being themselves, to both play hard and work hard.¹⁷⁷

Old-time music today espouses both traditionalism and open-mindedness. Although many musicians in the community place importance on historic ways of playing old-time, they are in general very open when it comes to race and gender.¹⁷⁸ Hinson describes old-time as a “musical movement about stasis.”¹⁷⁹ The culture of old-time has evolved dramatically with major changes in the people who play the music; however, attitudes towards playing styles have remained staunchly purist.

Gourrick describes the current scene as “educated,” “urban,” and “open-minded” with many more influences affecting playing styles. When asked whether the repertoire has changed along with the demographics, he asserted that they had in fact changed in a way. Our exchange went as follows,

Fiona Boyd: Do you think the tunes have changed?

Gourrick: [laughs]

FB: Because do people...

Gourrick: Nobody's ever asked me that! No, the tunes haven't changed. They sometimes – tunes, it's not as easy as a tune being changed, as a tune – the feeling of the tune being changed.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Joe Newberry, personal interview, 2/25/16.

¹⁷⁸ Sarah Hankins, personal interview, 2/4/16.

¹⁷⁹ Glenn Hinson, personal interview, 2/22/16.

¹⁸⁰ Shay Gourrick, personal interview, 2/20/16.

What does Gourrick mean when he says the feeling of the tune has changed? In addition to a lifestyle shift that has accompanied changing demographics, many in the community seem to agree that the complexity of old-time bowing has been lost. Gillespie, Gourrick, and Pasley all mourn the loss of a deeply intricate, layered, complex, bow arm that characterized the playing of all the great old-timers.

This bowing, influenced by Celtic fiddling and European musical styles, is often filtered out of musicians' playing today.¹⁸¹ Gourrick says,

Gourrick: There's another guy named Henry Reed, who had a very European way of playing...and Henry Reed...was recorded a lot by Alan Jabbour, who was a folklorist,

Fiona Boyd: yeah.

Gourrick: And Henry – and at some point...some of Henry Reed's tunes were being played by people, and what happens is the complexity of his bowings, the – some of the complexity in the noting patterns were filtered out a little bit by a lot of people playing those tunes, *and* they were sped up...and when you speed things up on the fiddle, I'm just talking fiddle, you – sometimes the result is you have to take some embellishments and notes out to be able to play up to speed, and so in that regard it's more of a – the tunes haven't changed, but they've...been -- modified, simplified a little bit...simplified. Which is opposite of what you would think, you know? You'd think --

FB: yeah.

Gourrick: [laughs] Those really intelligent, college educated people would simplify something? Yeah, so...

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

FB: Well probably because they think it's simple...right, because –

Gourrick: And you know it's really hard to learn to play like that, it takes a long time. And a lot of people who got into old-time music, they, you know -- you can start playing old-time fiddle...in a month, six months, it's not that hard. So it's very easy to take something as complex, and just because you don't have the skill level, you just simplify it.

FB: right.¹⁸²

However, Gourrick presents the opposite phenomenon as well, stating that many educated musicians with theory backgrounds will take simple tunes and make them more complex. The objection Gourrick seems to have is centered around the act of changing the tune, either by making it simpler or more complex than the original.

Gourrick uses Highwoods String Band, one of the most influential revival bands of the '70s, as examples of musicians who developed a simpler bowing style in order to speed up the music.¹⁸³ Highwoods created a new sound, albeit full of energy and excitement, that profoundly changed old-time. Bowing styles are not necessarily divided by region, and old-time techniques cross geographic boundaries. Musical influences appear to be more important than geography; however, geography often affects what music you hear.

Many young old-time musicians today focus on innovation rather than historically-informed practice. Laura Risk discusses the implications of the bowing technique the chop on the North American fiddling practices. She states that North Atlantic fiddling technique is heavily influenced by collaboration among generations. Risk writes, “[...]the lived reality of North Atlantic fiddling is one of constant crossover, in which the horizontal flow of ideas (between

¹⁸² Shay Gourrick, personal interview, 2/20/16.

¹⁸³ For an example of the Highwoods sound, see “Fire on the Mountain,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4RmZroiOI>, accessed 4/17/2016.

members of the same generation but across regional genres) is often as great as the vertical (within one genre and from one generation to the next)[...]"¹⁸⁴ Therefore, the old-time musicians who innovate and experiment and are not governed by issues of authenticity and purity, exchange techniques and musical ideas with other genres in creating their own version of the music.

Because music travels so quickly and easily in the digital era, a growing group of people is discovering old-time on the Internet. Carlin points out a drawback to this phenomenon, noting that the Internet provides no context for the music. Musicians are less interested in the “roots of the music” than in finding their own unique sound and learning technique.¹⁸⁵

Teaching practices have also changed radically in the digital era. Not only do musicians learn to play from videos, but also there is more emphasis placed on heavy immersion at festivals and camps rather than on consistent study. Folks who learned to play old-time from Joe Thompson never got a written or oral break down of bowing or note patterns. Players would go watch, play with, and learn from Thompson at his home, and learn from example.¹⁸⁶ Today, teachers are more academic in the way they teach old-time, carefully explaining the tunes for people who consider old-time more of a hobby or a skill than a way of life like it was for the older folks.

Decosimo claims that old-time has been “institutionalized” and “codified differently” than it used to be.¹⁸⁷ Knowledge is imparted through lessons, the Internet, or old-time festivals where people immerse themselves in the music for a couple weeks at a time. This method fits with the lifestyle old-time musicians lead today. However, Decosimo does not believe these festivals

¹⁸⁴ Laura Risk, “The Chop: The Diffusion of an Instrumental Technique across North Atlantic Fiddling Traditions,” *Ethnomusicology* 57.3 (2013): 444.

¹⁸⁵ Bob Carlin, personal interview, 2/21/16.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Joseph Decosimo, personal interview, 2/22/16.

provide enough time for people to learn the music.¹⁸⁸ Carlin seems to mourn the loss of the experience of learning from an old-timer, describing them as possessing a “deep authenticity” that was appreciated by his generation.¹⁸⁹

However, some aspects of the old-time community have unequivocally improved with time. Although old-time is a genre unique in the way it has encouraged and allowed husbands and wives to play music together, gender barriers have still affected women instrumentalists. As in most musical genres, women are valued primarily as vocalists and often face prejudice as instrumentalists.¹⁹⁰ Gillespie says that fiddling was the “final frontier” for women in old-time, and that today there are perhaps even more women fiddlers as there are men.¹⁹¹

Despite the high level of playing and the healthy competition within the old-time community, the genre remains “fringe” in the music industry.¹⁹² The country music that is played on the radio today is far from the old-time sound. Writing on Country Music radio in 2002, Neil Strauss highlighted the new demographics of country music’s audience, “As country itself has shifted from rural working-class music to a pop soundtrack for the suburbs, a large audience is finding itself largely ignored by radio.”¹⁹³ Therefore, with a negligible audience outside of the players themselves, old-time music remains far from the mainstream, and musicians struggle to make a living playing the music full-time.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Bob Carlin, personal interview, 2/21/16.

¹⁹⁰ Thomasin LaMay and Robin Armstrong, “The Navel, the Corporate, the Contradictory: Pop Sirens at the Twenty-First Century,” in *Music of the Sirens*, ed. Lynda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 317-348.

¹⁹¹ Gail Gillespie, personal interview, 2/23/16.

¹⁹² Bruce Molsky, personal interview, 2/2/16.

¹⁹³ Neil Strauss, “The Country Music Country Radio Ignores,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2002. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/24/movies/music-the-country-music-country-radio-ignores.html?pagewanted=all>, accessed 4/20/16.

The unpopularity of old-time today amongst mainstream listeners is partly a result of the way the banjo is perceived. The banjo has grown to represent white rural poverty and hillbilly lifestyles. Although there are positive characteristics associated with the banjo, such as honesty, sincerity, and authenticity, the banjo has been caught up in prejudice and racism to such an extent that old-time isn't a genre comfortable or relatable for many, especially African Americans.

However, many are drawn to the more positive images associated with the banjo, as evidenced by the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* phenomenon. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is a 2000 Coen brother film starring George Clooney set during the Great Depression in rural Mississippi. The satirical film is based on Homer's *Odyssey* and its soundtrack features bluegrass, Primitive Baptist, and gospel music among other genres. Legendary producer T-Bone Burnett helped secure the soundtrack a Grammy award for Album of the Year in 2002.

Although the soundtrack enjoyed more mainstream success than could ever be imagined in the genres of bluegrass, old-time country, and gospel, selling 4.4 million copies, the music was never played on the radio. In his article, Strauss expressed a moment of hope for traditional country upon the album's success; however, radio programmers refused to make such a bold move. Strauss interviewed Luke Wood, president of Lost Highway Records, the record company that produced the soundtrack, who explained this refusal: "We operate in country within a box...And you can run up in the corners of the box, but if you get outside of it, the gatekeepers don't like it."¹⁹⁴ Therefore, despite the brief and unexpected success of the *O Brother* soundtrack, the music ultimately made little impact on mainstream country music in the United States.

¹⁹⁴ Wood qtd. in Strauss.

Despite the lack of enthusiasm in radio, the extraordinary success of the film and accompanying soundtrack helped catapult the banjo to commercial success after the film premiered. Carlin explains that, although the banjo was not featured on the soundtrack or in the film, there was nevertheless a huge spike in banjo sales. He explains that the banjo is so heavily associated with the genres of music played on the soundtrack and with the images of rural, country life, that viewers made fabricated the connection between *O Brother* and the banjo.¹⁹⁵ Therefore, the *O Brother* pop culture phenomenon serves to reinforce the fact that there is strong imagery associated with the banjo in ways that impact the racial politics of music.

The complex history of African Americans in old-time is discussed and understood, to varying degrees, among members of the community. During my conversations with musicians and scholars, a shaky portrait began to emerge of the levels of awareness and perceptions of African American musicians' roles in old-time. Although the general public does not know about the African American contribution to the genre, all of the musicians I spoke with were keenly aware of the history. Some were more willing than others to talk in detail about what they knew, but all were vehement about the importance of African and African American influences in the genre.

There is no concrete record of the overlap between black and white musicians in old-time; however, scholars have pieced together a hazy portrait of their interactions by analyzing repertoire and historical descriptions of situations in which black and white musicians would have had the chance to hear and play with each other. For example, Hinson believes that black and white musicians had the opportunity to play with each other, an observation that many shy away from making. He describes a typical tobacco season as a moment in the year when white and black musicians played together and listened to each other as part of each night's

¹⁹⁵ Bob Carlin, personal interview, 2/21/16.

entertainment in the warehouses in cities such as Durham and Winston-Salem. Because this was not a formal performance space, there was no racial segregation, and therefore there must have been a high rate of musical exchange among the musicians.¹⁹⁶

Although there was clearly a great deal of respect for talent and accomplishment between black and white musicians, Hinson makes sure to stress that all of these interactions existed within a racist framework.¹⁹⁷ Opportunities for exchange, although more frequent than history makes them out to be, were still limited and constrained by an extremely racist society.

However, there were unavoidable moments of interaction between black and white musicians. For example, Joe Thompson, who grew up in rural North Carolina, describes the way he learned songs from just listening to his white neighbors sing from afar. In the brief introduction to his rendition of “I Shall Not Be Moved” on his album *Family Tradition*, Thompson attributes this version to a white neighbor he had growing up who lived about a half mile from his own house. He says that “...every day, especially if it was a beautiful, sunshiny day, he would get out there singing this song...”¹⁹⁸ Thompson loved the song so much, that he still sang in the style of his neighbor.¹⁹⁹ Even though Thompson does not mention any direct interaction between himself and his neighbor, a song was passed down in a way that allows the two to transcend social expectation.

Although scholars of African American music are aware of the quality of interactions that black and white musicians had with each other during the late 19th to early 20th centuries, there is a mystery that surrounds black participation, or lack of participation, in the genre today.

Gourrick points out that although old-time has been influenced by African American musical

¹⁹⁶ Glenn Hinson, personal interview, 2/22/16.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Track commentary on Spotify, “I Shall Not Be Moved,” *Family Tradition*, accessed 4/20/16.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

aesthetics, there are very few black musicians playing today. He describes the question of African Americans in old-time as “a big mystery.”²⁰⁰ Many are aware of the African American musical influences and accomplished black old-timers; however, few can explain the lack of black musicians in the contemporary old-time scene.

In the early 20th century, African American string bands, once a vibrant part of social life in the rural south, grew to be few and far between. Carlin explains that the rise of coon songs solidified the connection between minstrelsy and the banjo. Black musicians did not want to be associated with this racist imagery and therefore, as previously mentioned, gravitated towards other musical forms. In addition, when record companies discovered and began to market old-time music, they firmly established the hillbilly aesthetic of the white, rural, working class man as old-time’s image. Therefore, old-time was categorized as white, and blues was the way for black musicians to express themselves in recorded music.²⁰¹ Black musicians distanced themselves from a genre that was intentionally whitewashed. Carlin says, “...I’ve said in the past – I like to say that you know, that the – what they did is...they threw the...the black banjo and fiddle music out with the racist bathwater. The baby...the blackface baby was thrown out with the racist bathwater...”²⁰² Neither black nor white musicians wanted to face the racist history of the banjo and of old-time music.

Despite the lack of diversity in old-time, the community is alert to questions of race and African American musical lineage. However, Decosimo deems this a “hyper awareness” about race that ultimately constructs a level of blackness in the music that isn’t really present. He says, “a hyper awareness and a strong desire to connect and understand and perhaps at times construct a kind of blackness...to this music. I think that most players, even players who are just

²⁰⁰ Shay Gourrick, personal interview, 2/20/16.

²⁰¹ Bob Carlin, personal interview, 2/21/16.

²⁰² Ibid.

beginning, have some awareness, especially because of the way the Chocolate Drops kind of bring this all into focus...”²⁰³ Thus, the CCD burst onto a scene that on the one hand values blackness, and on the other is incredibly unfamiliar with it.

Decosimo takes his observation about awareness of African American musical influences a step further, stating that “...there is a heightened awareness, of like African American contributions to the music, and at times I think that blackness is fetishized, and people are like wanting it to be...they want it to be there, and I think in various ways it is there. But like, the way that it gets like performed now...it may be heightened.”²⁰⁴ The problem here seems to lie in the fact that the old-time community is aware, and interested in, the genre’s multiracial history, and yet is homogenous and therefore only capable of constructing blackness in the music, rather than truly honoring and expanding said diversity.

That the CCD were able to overcome the extraordinary weight of stigma surrounding black people playing old-time music is noteworthy. Although the original members of the CCD grew up among classically trained, middle class musicians – situations that purists would deem inauthentic to old-time – they felt a strong connection to the tradition. Carlin says that, for the CCD, playing old-time “[...]was a way of them to connect to, what they felt, was a deeper tradition.”²⁰⁵ Even though the CCD did not grow up “in the tradition,” they endeavored to assert themselves and claim a space for themselves in a genre whose aesthetic has not always welcomed them.

Hinson highlights that the CCD are acting with political intention in playing old-time. He remarks that “...a lot of the African American musicians who are actively seeking to revive the music...there’s a politic to it, there’s a deep politic, that’s about a cultural reclaiming, that’s

²⁰³ Joseph Decosimo, personal interview, 2/22/16.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Bob Carlin, personal interview, 2/21/16.

about...you know it's not just about let's play the music for the fun of playing the music. That's a big piece of it, but it's also...let's retell this story, let's reclaim this music, let's bring this music back to, not only our communities, but also communities who don't think of it as having any black community, or black contribution."²⁰⁶ Not only are the CCD educating the old-time community as to what it means to be black in traditional southern music, but they are also opening up a discussion among the broader listening community about race in the history of American music.

How did the old-time scene respond to the CCD's success as a group? Their reception in the community was not only influenced by the statement they were making about race, but also by their status as performers and professionals rather than "expert amateurs," to again quote Decosimo. Although Rhiannon, Justin, and Dom had a commitment to carving a space for people of color in old-time music, they also had professional goals. With their high-energy performances, the CCD have achieved a level of fame that is unprecedented in the genre. Decosimo describes their flashy performances: "...they put on a *show*, and Dom was a total showman, and Rhiannon...had a – she has...stage presence out the wazoo..."²⁰⁷

Because the community so values authenticity and traditionalism, fame is not usually something that is valued among old-time musicians. Newberry describes the CCD as having "real spark," a sentiment shared by everyone with whom I talked. Although all were willing to sing the CCD's praises, there was apprehension in regards to their status as professional, touring musicians. Decosimo states that the more famous you are, the less popular you are in the old-

²⁰⁶ Glenn Hinson, personal interview, 2/22/16.

²⁰⁷ Joseph Decosimo, personal interview, 2/22/16.

time scene.²⁰⁸ There is a substantial amount of jealousy in the community towards anyone who can make a living playing the music.

Despite this resistance to fame, the community widely acknowledges the positive impact the CCD have had on the tradition. Decosimo says that the CCD are responsible for a heightened awareness about old-time's racially problematic history, and for a reclamation of the music on the part of African Americans. Decosimo states, "I think that, like, their role has been to like recover this strand of, and sort of broader American musical traditions, and especially like vernacular music from the South, like they've brought an awareness to like the umm they've like reclaimed something that had been labeled...I think they've like undone some of the work of record companies."²⁰⁹ In highlighting African American contributions to old-time, the CCD have helped open the community's eyes to a complex, problematic, and ultimately enriching side of the old-time tradition.

Gillespie reveals that the CCD's visibility within the genre helped "legitimize the music for the white folks."²¹⁰ No longer was the black history of old-time solely present in academic journals, books, and among the few black old-timers that made it into the spotlight. The CCD catapulted the discussion of race in old-time to another level.

Despite the CCD's fame, however, their audiences remained limited demographically throughout their career as a band. Although the founding members' respective current musical projects continue to open up a space for people of color in folk and traditional American music, their audiences remain largely white. Among all of my interviewees, everyone expressed concern that the CCD's audiences are homogenous and that their message doesn't fully reach the people it is intended for.

²⁰⁸ Joseph Decosimo, personal interview, 2/22/16.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Gail Gillespie, personal interview, 2/23/16.

However, Hinson argues that the breakthrough moments for the one or two people of color in the audience at concerts given by the CCD or the wider Chocolate Drops community have invaluable impact. When I asked, “Do you think [the CCD have] already made a huge impact here or is it pretty slow progress?” Hinson replied with two moving stories about the positive influence the CCD are having on the next generation of black musicians and music lovers.

You know, I saw Rhiannon in the Fall at the National Folk Festival, which was in Greensboro, and Rhiannon and Justin and Rhiannon’s sister, a few other people were there, and it was really interesting because outdoor, free festival, downtown Greensboro. So you have...you have a community, working class African Americans who don’t necessarily who Rhiannon is, who are there, and they’re sort of wandering over to the stage surrounded by all these white folks, and they’re watching, and it was really interesting to watch the reaction...because because Rhiannon was talkin’ to *them*, and she was pointing to them and talking to them very pointedly. And I was watching this kid, who must have been, couldn’t have been more than 7 or 8 years old and he was, young African American kid, working class background, clearly, was so into that music and was so proud. And he was, he was there with his grandmother. And his grandmother was movin’ to the music. And and he was like, he was like “I didn’t know this was our music?!” and he’s dancing and he’s doing all these hip hop moves to, you know, to Rhiannon and the folks up on stage. And I’m thinking “that’s exactly what she’s trying to do, that is, right there, that one moment, you know, it could be in this whole audience of white folks, but that one 8 year-old kid who is

makin' that connection, dancing to the music, and saying "I didn't know this was our music." You know, Rhiannon would say the whole festival was worth that moment.²¹¹

Not only did the little boy absorb the CCD's message, but also he thoroughly enjoyed himself listening to a very old musical tradition. He was able to relate his own experience with hip-hop to one of its musical predecessors – old-time.

This was not an isolated incident. Through her success as a performer, Rhiannon is spreading her message about old-time music in meaningful ways. Hinson details another instance of interaction between Rhiannon and a young child interested in the music. He recounts,

There's a great, a little video, actually a YouTube thing, cuz you know, she was at the Grammys, right? And there's this scene of her at the Grammys and, she's talking about keeping it real, and she's outside playing in the streets...and there's that little kid who walks up and and they're like, taking the time. "Try this instrument out!" And she makes this comment like, this is really what it's about. And and she does believe that. That's really, that's about how do you reclaim. How do you reassert this primacy of this in your own community.²¹²

Despite her rising stardom, Rhiannon still focuses on educating and reclaiming the genre of old-time for African Americans and people of color in the United States. She uses her fame and talent to reach as wide and as meaningful an audience as possible. Being able to both attend the Grammys and perform for a child on the street on the same day takes shows that Rhiannon has a strong commitment to her mission.

²¹¹ Glenn Hinson, personal interview, 2/22/16.

²¹² Ibid.

All the original members of the CCD are active in the politics of race and old-time music. Hinson points to each musician and shows that they are all engaged, in various ways, with their mission. He says,

I mean Dom is really well known in New York in all these white music circles, so he plays, he plays with everybody. Umm, but it doesn't mean that he's not so profoundly aware...of what he's trying to do. And I would say Rhiannon even more, because Rhiannon has has has, her voice is much more, she's been *very* forward about just the politics of this. So important, the politics of it. And Justin is out, Justin's teaching young kids. I mean, that's his whole thing now is I'm gonna teach black kids to play the banjo. You know? And that's not about who am I gonna be jamming with, it's about there's a mission here. There's a mission to remind and a mission to reframe.²¹³

Although no longer a band, the CCD established a precedent for young African Americans and people of color to interact with old-time in the 21st century. The effects of their work will be seen in coming generations of musicians.

Perhaps the CCD's largest impact will be among musicians and fans outside of the close-knit old-time community. Decosimo mentions that the CCD's listeners do not come from within the old-time community.²¹⁴ As previously mentioned, the CCD's fame in a way separates them from the old-time scene, which is inherently casual and amateur. Among all of the musicians I interviewed, apart from Newberry, who seems to maintain an incredibly open-minded attitude towards younger generations of old-timer players, there is consensus that the recordings they listen to are all old. These musicians value old,

²¹³ Glenn Hinson, personal interview, 2/22/16.

²¹⁴ Joseph Decosimo, personal interview, 2/22/16.

“authentic” recordings over contemporary interpretations of the music. Although the CCD have had a major impact on the old-time community, the audience that is most effected by their music and by their mission are fans outside of the scene.

Therefore, the CCD have played a role in countering the erasure of African Americans in depictions of country and old-time music, which renders African American musicians invisible in their communities. The old-time scene values authenticity in the form of an adherence to ritualized practices, such as loyalty to source recordings and to old-time playing styles. These practices have resulted in the creation of an invented tradition. However imaginary, the standards of the old-time community are rigid. The CCD challenge these rules, incorporating their own creativity and unique perspectives as people of color in the genre. Although the music industry has a history of both limiting and claiming black expression, the CCD have managed to assert themselves in the national market.

Conclusion

The contemporary old-time scene is deeply affected by issues of race, authenticity, and innovation, made more complicated by the addition of the CCD. In this thesis, I have shown that the troubling history of minstrelsy in the U.S., as well as the music industry's invasion of the South in the 1920s alongside the exclusion of African American musicians from mainstream country music narratives, have given rise to the false notion that old-time is a rural, white American genre.

Before the 1920s, African Americans constituted a large part of the old-time community in the rural South. Musicians such as Joe Thompson played for the social dances that played an important role in the social life of every community. However, during the 1920s, the black old-time string band began to fall out of favor. Although Thompson continued to play, many African Americans found new expressive power in the blues, rejecting old-time as it became associated with white, rural "hillbillies." Today, black participation in old-time is extremely low. Despite this fact, the CCD is working to reclaim and revitalize the black old-time string band.

Although the CCD has brought new life to old-time music in performance, and awakened interest in new generations of African American kids, the band has encountered debates about authenticity that challenge their status as old-time performers and disseminators. The old-time community, comprised of both people who have grown up in the tradition, and people who have come to the music later in life, is hierarchical in structure and relies on factors such as family lineage and commitment to source recordings in order to determine whether a musician is authentic or not.

During the folk revival, white, middle-class, educated, urban musicians adopted old-time as a community-building alternative to mainstream suburban culture at the time. Developing

their own playing styles, revivalists created a new tradition of old-time in the North. Today, however, the traditions overlap, and the “mythic structures of respect” that are deemed so important are difficult to uphold in the age of the Internet and fast, efficient transportation.²¹⁵

Through interviews and research into secondary sources, I have shown that debates about race, authenticity, innovation, appropriation, among others, shape the contemporary old-time scene. The CCD’s formation in 2005 shook up the old-time community in a way that it had not experienced before, forcing it to examine itself for prejudice, bias, and ultimately leading its members to reflect on its history. I conclude that the CCD has made a positive impact on the old-time community, and on listeners outside of old-time. Their process of reclamation is what inspired me to write this thesis, and is what will help inform Americans about the true story behind our popular music history. In writing this thesis, I hope to have shed light on contemporary viewpoints in the old-time scene, and honored the mission of the CCD by situating their music within the broader context of American popular music.

²¹⁵ Glenn Hinson, personal interview, 2/22/16.

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