



HIDDEN IN THE MIX

DIANE PECKNOLD, EDITOR

THE
AFRICAN AMERICAN
PRESENCE IN
COUNTRY MUSIC

HIDDEN THE MIX

HIDDEN THE MIX

The
African American
Presence in
Country Music

DIANE PECKNOLD, EDITOR

Duke University Press Durham and London 2013

© 2013 Duke University Press. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ©. Designed by Courtney Leigh Baker and typeset in Arno Pro, Veneer, and Trade Gothic by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hidden in the mix : the African American presence in country music /

Diane Pecknold, ed.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8223-5149-8 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8223-5163-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. African Americans—Music—History and criticism. 2. Country music—History and criticism. 3. African American country musicians.

I. Pecknold, Diane.

ML3479.H53 2013

781.642089'96073—dc23 2013005284

“Playing Chicken with the Train: Cowboy Troy’s Hick-Hop and the Transracial Country West” was previously published in *Southern Cultures* 16, no. 4 (Winter 2010). Reprinted with permission. www.southerncultures.org.

Contents

Introduction *Country Music and Racial Formation*

DIANE PECKNOLD

1

PART ONE Playing in the Dark

1

Black Hillbillies

*African American Musicians on
Old-Time Records, 1924–1932*

PATRICK HUBER 19

2

Making Country Modern

*The Legacy of Modern Sounds in
Country and Western Music*

DIANE PECKNOLD 82

3

Contested Origins

*Arnold Shultz and the Music
of Western Kentucky*

ERIKA BRADY 100

4

Fiddling with Race Relations
in Rural Kentucky

*The Life, Times, and Contested
Identity of Fiddlin' Bill Livers*

JEFFREY A. KEITH 119

PART TWO New Antiphonies

5

Why African Americans
Put the Banjo Down

TONY THOMAS 143

6

Old-Time Country Music in
North Carolina and Virginia
The 1970s and 1980s

KIP LORNELL 171

7

"The South's Gonna Do It Again"

*Changing Conceptions of the
Use of "Country" Music in the
Albums of Al Green*

MICHAEL AWKWARD 191

8

Dancing the Habanera Beats
(in Country Music)
*The Creole-Country Two-Step in
St. Lucia and Its Diaspora*

JERRY WEVER 204

9

Playing Chicken with the Train
*Cowboy Troy's Hick-Hop and the
Transracial Country West*

ADAM GUSSOW 234

10

If Only They Could Read
between the Lines
*Alice Randall and the Integration
of Country Music*

BARBARA CHING 263

11

You're My Soul Song
*How Southern Soul Changed
Country Music*

CHARLES L. HUGHES 283

12

What's Syd Got to Do with It?
*King Records, Henry Glover, and the
Complex Achievement of Crossover*

DAVID SANJEK 306

Bibliography 339

Contributors 361

Index 365

Introduction

COUNTRY MUSIC AND RACIAL FORMATION

Diane Pecknold

Country music's debt to African American influences and musicians has long been recognized. In his canonical history of country music, first published in 1968, Bill Malone opened with the frank acknowledgment that country was distinguished from its European ballad roots by "influences from other musical sources, particularly from the culture of Afro-Americans," and emphasized the fact that "country music — seemingly the most 'pure white' of all American musical forms — has borrowed heavily" from African Americans.¹ Other historians have been equally quick to point out the role relatively unknown African American musicians have played in shaping the styles and repertoires of the most important performers in the country canon: the partnership between Lesley Riddle and A. P. Carter that produced much of the Carter Family's repertoire; the influence of African American blues musicians and railroad hands on Jimmie Rodgers; Hank Williams's tutelage as a young man with the street musician Tee Tot Payne; the expansive influence of Arnold Shultz on the guitar playing of western Kentuckians such as Bill Monroe and Ike Everly.² However, such acknowledgments, as Pamela Foster has pointed out, tend most often to imagine the role of African Americans chiefly as influences on their white peers, and thereby obscure from view the African American performers and audience members who not only lent their blues sensibilities and chord progressions to white country musicians but played country and old-time themselves.³

Over the past several decades, scholars have begun to redress this emphasis on "influence" by recovering the presence of a series of rich, varied, and geographically diffuse black country traditions, not only in the precommercial era but in the twentieth century as well. Foster's groundbreaking books

on African American involvement in country music, *My Country: The African Diaspora's Country Music Heritage* and *My Country, Too*, persuasively argued that African American participation in the playing and production of country music has been more a rule than an exception. Work by Cecelia Conway, Karen Linn, Kip Lornell, Paul Oliver, and others, has demonstrated that the African American banjo tradition profoundly influenced nearly all American popular music, including country, and that it survived well into the mid-twentieth century in places like Virginia, North Carolina, and Mississippi, as did a robust string-band tradition.⁴ Recent revivals of black banjo and string-band music by ensembles like the Carolina Chocolate Drops and the Ebony Hillbillies and on CDs such as Otis Taylor's *Recapturing the Banjo* attest to the continuation of those traditions into the twenty-first century. The harmonica player DeFord Bailey, the first instrumentalist to achieve individual star status at the Grand Ole Opry, was belatedly elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2006, based in part on the work David Morton and Charles Wolfe had done in recalling the magnitude of Bailey's popularity.⁵ The tradition of African American singing cowboys in the 1930s and 1940s, including Herb Jeffries and Louis Jordan in one of his many incarnations, is similarly finally receiving its due.⁶

While the burgeoning literature to which this collection contributes has very usefully helped to restore the history of black participation in country music, little of it offers us substantial help in unraveling what becomes, as a result, an obvious paradox: that country music includes a long-standing tradition of black participation and contribution but remains nonetheless "white" music. Standard encyclopedic treatments of the genre still yield opening statements defining it in explicitly racial terms, as "a type of music derived primarily from the traditional folk idioms of the white rural southeastern United States" or "a style of 20th-century American popular music that originated among whites in rural areas of the South and West."⁷ So why does this mythology persist in spite of ample evidence to the contrary? What ideological work does the erasure of country music's multiracial origins and history accomplish?

As Aaron Fox points out, it is too simplistic to argue either that "country's whiteness simply speaks for itself as evidence of a foundational racism" or that "its whiteness is a historical accident."⁸ One aim of this volume is thus to examine how the genre's whiteness was produced and is maintained, to imagine country music not merely as a cultural reflection of a preexisting racial identity but as one of the processes by which race is constituted. The social history of working-class white southerners told through the stan-

dard mythology of country music omits not only African American engagements with the genre but also the role of race and racism in southern white working-class experience. Too often the country imaginary presents the poor white southerner simply as the downtrodden working man, without reference to the way class and regional identity intersected with hierarchies of race and gender; without reference, for example, to the way Jimmie Rodgers or Elvis Presley answered the challenges southern industrialization and urbanization posed to white working-class masculinity through their appropriation of tropes of musical blackness.⁹ We need not indulge in “an unquestioning fondness for pre–Civil War Dixie,” as one reporter suggested contemporary country music often does, to construct an imagined South that “represents a view of history that erases both America’s black population and the suffering on which the South was built.”¹⁰ As Geoff Mann argues, country remains white in large part because its nostalgia proposes “a cultural politics of time” that suppresses specific histories of racism and domination to produce a pose of “dehistoricized innocence” and “naïve victimhood” that allows whites to lament their own loss of privilege without acknowledging ever having held it.¹¹

Recent scholarship calls attention to country’s role in constructing white identity and to the ongoing ideological work required to maintain the fiction of the genre’s “natural” whiteness.¹² Karl Hagstrom Miller has convincingly shown that, as it emerged out of a variety of commercial and vernacular practices into a cohesive genre, country music *became* white, and did so in relation to a shifting landscape of social and symbolic practices that supported white hegemony. The fiction that divergent musical practices reflected racial difference offered cultural legitimacy to the increasingly strict imposition of Jim Crow segregation. In turn, the social boundaries policed by segregation ensured that black and white musical practice in the South would, in fact, diverge more sharply in both commercial and vernacular arenas.

In his examination in this volume of early black artists whose work was released in hillbilly record series, Patrick Huber explains how the recording and marketing practices of the phonograph men maintained the fiction that the generic separation of hillbilly and race reflected racial difference. But he also reveals how much uncertainty attended this process, suggesting that, while they almost certainly sought to conceal the racial identity of the black artists they released in hillbilly catalogues, a label’s A&R (artists and repertoire) men did not necessarily make racial difference the dominant factor in assessing genre difference. Huber thus demonstrates that, even as record companies’ advertising strategies capitalized on the romantic mythology

that hillbilly music reflected an authentic and distinct white southern culture, their own production practices gave the lie to such beliefs.

That the work of naturalizing racial difference through genre distinctions remained incomplete even through the zenith of the Jim Crow social order is evidenced by the confusion surrounding the success of Ray Charles's 1962 album, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*. As my own essay suggests, the music industry's search for a generic framework in which to understand the album pointed to the instability of racialized genre conventions but also showed how class and regional associations contributed to the maintenance of racial difference. Ultimately observers elided the racial dynamics of *Modern Sounds* and emphasized instead its importance in recasting the class identity of white, working-class southerners, an interpretation that drew in part on Charles's own musical conflation of race and class.

Erika Brady's examination of the contested legacy of Arnold Shultz similarly illuminates the ways that class and race intersect in the construction of country's whiteness. Though Shultz is widely revered among the pickers of the region, local resistance to crediting him with the "invention" of Kentucky's Travis-style thumbpicking simultaneously expresses both hostility to largely middle-class white outsiders who seek to impose their own historical narratives on the community and fear of being cast as racist appropriators. Brady's analysis suggests the ways music's racial discourses can also operate to elaborate class identity, not necessarily by asserting whiteness as a form of cultural capital but by declaring the value of subaltern, insider class knowledge and cultural ownership against the knowledge produced by authoritative outsiders. The ways class status and conflict have shaped different audience communities' divergent interpretations of Charles and Shultz thus recall Stuart Hall's famous contention that, whatever its autonomous power as an ordering ideology or individual or group identity, race can also be "the modality through which class is . . . lived."¹³

One consequence of country's laboriously enforced whiteness has been the particularly acute difficulty African American country musicians have faced in negotiating racism and notions of racial difference in their artistic and personal lives. Jeffrey A. Keith's account of the life and career of the Kentucky fiddler Bill Livers demonstrates how the visible presence of African American country artists nonetheless frequently serves to reaffirm the genre's whiteness. Livers's fiddling talent afforded him avenues of social mobility that were off-limits to his peers because of racism, but white musicians often viewed him as the embodiment of their own conceptions of race and black identity. Early in his career they regarded him as a comedic mas-

cot whose presence served to confirm white supremacy by counterexample; later he served as a symbol of simplicity and naturalism that bolstered white musicians' own claims to rural authenticity. And although Livers was widely admired for his fiddling talent, he was never free from the requirements of social deference that racism demanded in his own Kentucky community.

Such constraints are echoed by Charles Hughes's account of the career of Arthur Alexander, whose 1962 hit "You Better Move On" figured as a charter moment in the development of southern soul but whose involvement in and contributions to the country canon have been less widely acknowledged. While Alexander joined the Dot roster and participated in the Combine songwriting collective with Dolly Parton, Kris Kristofferson, and Ray Stevens, Music Row executives felt they could not market his blend of country and soul because it sounded "too black," while R&B stations shied away from his country connections.

Clearly, 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. To stop at this observation, however, threatens to recapitulate the very racial hegemony it seeks to expose, obscuring the subjectivity of the black artists and fans who fashion their own identities partly through their practice of country music. Indeed popular and critical representations of country have focused so intently on its whiteness that it has become difficult to imagine a form of black engagement that does not call racial identification into question. (This inability to imagine blackness and country as coming together in any sensible way is, appropriately enough, reflected by the fact that Microsoft Word flags the combination of *black* and *country* in a single adjectival phrase as a grammatical error.) In movies like *Nashville*, *Boogie Nights*, and *Borat*, black country artists and fans are played for laughs at the expense of supposedly racist white country devotees or of African American buffoons whose unease with their own racial identity is figured through their love of country. The idea of a meaningful African American connection to country is so synonymous with the humorously bizarre that when the director David LaChapelle sought to expeditiously embody surrealism in his "Fantasy Ranch" commercial for Burger King, he offered the image of Darius Rucker playing a jingle-ized version of "Big Rock Candy Mountain" in a sequined cowboy outfit (a maneuver that ultimately demonstrated the unpredictability of the mutual circulations of race and music when Rucker actually became a country star).¹⁴

The tropes of both racial identity dysphoria and surrealism prevalent in popular culture representations also persist in critical discourse on black

engagements with country. One online review of the rapper Snoop Dogg's album *Ego Trippin'* (2008), which included a duet with Willie Nelson dedicated to Johnny Cash, demonstrated the ease with which pop culture stereotypes are woven into critical dismissal. "At age 36, is Snoop Dogg going through a mid-life crisis?" the review's subtitle asked before its author remarked, "Somewhere in the making of . . . *Ego Trippin'*, Snoop appears to have lost his way. . . . [His] evolution—admitted MTV star . . . gangsta rapper . . . Cher imitator . . . Morris Day singer . . . set reppin' Crip . . . Hollywood scenester . . . back to gangsta rapper . . . loving and faithful husband (er, sortve) . . . gangsta again—wouldn't be complete without one last confusing musical costume change: Country singer."¹⁵ As is often the case, Snoop Dogg's interest in country becomes, in this assessment, not just another symbol of his confusion about who he "really" is but the quintessential marker of alienation from a genuine black self.

Even positive scholarly, critical, and journalistic explorations of African American engagements with country have perpetuated distinctions that problematize the black country tradition even as they seek to restore it. Dozens of popular press articles over the past decade have repeated the litany of African American engagements with country and precountry styles, a line that runs from black string bands and DeFord Bailey through Chuck Berry, Ray Charles, and the Stax sound, to Charley Pride and Stoney Edwards, to Cowboy Troy, Rissi Palmer, and Darius Rucker. But even after rehearsing this trajectory, they invariably frame their inquiries in terms of the genre's enduring whiteness. "Country music may be the largest segregated corner of American music today," noted Bruce Feiler in one of the earliest of such articles, before puzzling with forthright dismay over Nashville's continued exclusion of African American artists, the industry's slighting of black listeners, and the popular failure to acknowledge African American contributions to country.¹⁶ "Country is often seen as the whitest, most segregated of all styles: the redneck soundtrack of the racist South," reported another, before offering profiles of several African American country hopefuls.¹⁷ Thus even as they work to reveal black engagements with country, such treatments simultaneously reinforce the whiteness the genre has come to symbolize. Among both sympathetic and cynical critics, black country artists and fans are imagined, as Adam Gussow suggests in his contribution to this collection, as always already exceptional, racially scandalous, and transgressive.

One goal of this volume is to question the related notions of racial and musical authenticity implied by such assessments. In this regard it joins an

ongoing debate about the category of “black music.” Guthrie Ramsey describes this debate as centering on the degree to which musical “retentions” representing the persistence of “African sensibilities . . . in the Americas and the Caribbean” continue to “exist and unite the African diaspora culturally and spiritually.”¹⁸ Scholars such as Samuel Floyd, Amiri Baraka, and Portia Maultsby have argued for the persistence of specifically African styles, techniques, and musical tropes across diasporic cultures, but also more globally for a set of “musical tendencies,” “mythological beliefs,” and “interpretive strategies” that form an identifiable “African cultural memory.”¹⁹ As Ronald Radano and Paul Gilroy have pointed out, however, such arguments frequently result in a conception of “black music” that posits it as being “expressive of the absolute essence of the group that produced it” and correlates “an enduring black musical presence with the myth of a consistent and stable socio-racial position of ‘blackness.’”²⁰

But the essentialism sometimes proposed by the concept of black music cuts both ways. Rejecting the very idea of black culture, Gilroy suggests, is “tantamount to ignoring the undiminished power of racism itself and forsaking the mass of black people who continue to comprehend their lived particularity through what it does to them.”²¹ Whether or not its claims to representationality or Africanness are fabricated, music has served as a foundational material in constructing the bulwark of shared cultural identity from which various groups within the African diaspora, in radically divergent historical, economic, and social circumstances, have staged their struggles against the brutalities of structural racism. Thus the stakes of analyzing the relationship between music and racial identity are at least as much about our own investments and the dynamics of contemporary racial hegemony as they are about originary musical traditions or the degree to which such traditions reflect a consistent cultural essence or sensibility.

This collection should not be read as seeking to undermine the notion of black culture or black music, either by asserting that country really is “black” music or by merely exploiting the counterintuitive juxtaposition of the genre’s white racialization with the social identities of its black artists, entrepreneurs, and fans. Instead these essays attempt to address the shifting and multifaceted ways in which resilient black identities are fashioned through musical production, whether that music is construed as “black” or not. Seen from this position, the production of black music, both materially and as a concept, is offset from potentially essentialist understandings of race. The specific instances and changing forms of black participation in country music over the twentieth century suggest that there is ample middle

ground between a conception of black music that assumes the expression of a fixed socioracial position and one that obscures how the consistent imposition of racism, in its many and flexible forms, has shaped the lived experience of blackness throughout the African diaspora of the West, and thus the needs, desires, and commitments expressed through its musical practices.

The telling re-racialization of one African retention central to the sound of country music illustrates the need to remember that music helps to constitute race rather than expressing an essence that precedes it. Examining the decline of the banjo in black dance music between 1900 and 1930, and its concomitant transformation into an aural signifier of whiteness in old-time country, Tony Thomas urges us to consider the lived experiences of changing social and material conditions as being at the center of the “blackness” of any musical culture. Thomas rejects persistent assertions that African Americans abandoned the banjo in reaction to its associations with racist black-face minstrelsy, arguing instead that the five-string banjo most commonly played in old-time string bands became obsolete when the guitar proved better suited to newer blues singing and dancing. That the banjo became irrelevant to black popular music in the United States while it persisted in white-dominated old-time and then country music, he argues, reflects the cultural effects of the new spatial and social relationships of Jim Crow segregation and the growth of a particularly white agrarian nostalgia during industrialization and urbanization.

Even within a system of apartheid as ubiquitous and powerful as Jim Crow, however, local social dynamics created different trajectories of cultural transmission and different identities produced through music. Kip Lornell recounts his own journey in uncovering the rich tradition of community-based “old-time country music” played by African Americans in the Piedmont of North Carolina and Virginia, documenting the “easy mix” of blues, old-time, and gospel that persisted into the mid-twentieth century in the region and showing how that mix was part of the fabric of African American social experience in church, end-of-school celebrations, square dances, and fiddle contests. “Old-time country” remained popular because it was a functional, integral part of the fabric of everyday life for Lornell’s informants and one process through which their subjectivity as black people was produced, in spite of the increasingly white racialization of its commercial variants.

By the end of the civil rights era, country was, in the words of Aaron Fox, “widely understood to signify an explicit claim to whiteness . . . as a marked, foregrounded claim of cultural identity,” thanks in large part to politicians

like George Wallace and Richard Nixon, who mobilized the music as part of an effort to “use the emotional issues of culture and race to achieve . . . a ‘positive polarization’ of American politics” without resorting to overt racism.²² Yet it continued to serve as a tactical cultural resource that could also signify very differently. Extending the analysis of Al Green’s country repertoire begun in his monograph *Soul Covers*, Michael Awkward argues here that Green’s invocations of “country” on *The Belle Album* allowed him to synthesize “his mannish brashness and his ‘feminine’ vulnerability, as well as seemingly incommensurable elements of the national cultural landscape.”²³ The result was a post-civil rights version of black masculinity rooted in the specific history of the exodus from the rural South to the urban North, and an expression, in the intensely personal vocabulary of faith, temptation, longing, and self-possession, of how the effects of structural racism might be lived as individual feeling. For Green, “‘country’ and its cultural specificities,” as he understood them, signified an artistic identity more authentic and more connected to a shared historical experience of race than the smooth Philadelphia soul style with which he had become an established star.

Together Thomas, Lornell, and Awkward demonstrate that the relationship between country music and black identity has frequently been shaped not by abstract confrontations with racism as an ideology but by the locally specific lived social worlds that evolved within and against racism’s institutional manifestations. For all of its local particularities, however, the American system of racial hegemony also circulates globally as a powerful symbolic resource, sometimes in unexpected ways. Jerry Wever’s investigation of the thorny identity politics of U.S. country music in St. Lucia emphasizes the historically contingent relationship between music, race, and nation in the United States by reframing it in a global context. Though the popularity of the music prompts concern among intellectuals who see it as both racist and colonialist, Wever shows that St. Lucian fans have selectively pulled on country’s repertoire for those songs and styles that accord with their own Afro-Creole dance and musical traditions. Dancing the habanera beat to country music, he argues, demonstrates the instability of the genre’s whiteness in the U.S. context by preserving and celebrating its Creole origins and gestures to the unpredictable ways in which the sounds of the Black Atlantic continue to resonate in a global postcolonial culture.

Wever’s reframing, with its emphasis on the tension between the elite and the popular, also serves as a reminder that postcolonial and, in the United States, post-civil rights social orders have reconfigured what Paul Gilroy identifies as the antiphony of black culture, creating a world in which “calls

and responses no longer converge in the tidy patterns of secret, ethnically encoded dialogue,” in part because the intersections of race, class, and power also converge in less and less tidy patterns.²⁴ As Adam Gussow suggests, efforts to defend and disrupt racialized music categories may both rely on “a residual nostalgia for the certainties, and scandals, of the color line.” Yet both the Afro-Creole curations of the St. Lucian dance floor and the spectacular transracialism staged by the U.S. hick-hopper Cowboy Troy (Coleman) redraw that line, not in the service of denying its continuing potency but as a way of locating its function as a contact border rather than a separating boundary. Placing Cowboy Troy in the long literary and cultural genealogy of the transracial West and the shorter genealogy of rap-country hybrids, Gussow argues that Coleman’s deliberately menacing, racialized self-presentation and his direct confrontation of Nashville’s cryptoracism is nonetheless delivered through a lens of spectacular transracialism, creating “a space in which ‘blackness,’ even while summoned up, is playfully amalgamated with its imagined Other.”

In her examination of the songs and fiction of Alice Randall, Barbara Ching suggests that Randall’s lyrics, frequently rendered by white artists, force the listener to imagine multiple and ambiguous racial identities and to hear the unanticipated ways those identities intersect with historical racism. In her novel *Pushkin and the Queen of Spades*, Randall similarly juxtaposes violence and commonality, love and theft, in part through the black female protagonist’s love of country music and her use of it to “translate” her life for her son. Such work, Ching and Gussow argue, directly addresses the history of American racism while using the terrain of country music as a staging ground for denaturalizing racial difference.

If racial discourse has served as a proxy for class distinction in contexts as diverse as civil rights-era Nashville and the thumbpicking community of western Kentucky, Randall’s interventions, as Ching points out, target not only racial dichotomies but also class-cultural hierarchies. Her ambiguous invocations rely in part on a reconfiguration of the relationship between race and class, both in country music and in American society, at the turn of the twenty-first century. The growth of the suburban black middle class (at least prior to the recession of 2008) and country radio’s shift to middle-of-the-road, adult-oriented pop have converged to create a space in which black participation in country music requires no “dramatic provocation.”

The most optimistic contemporary observers suggest that perhaps the trends of the past decade, including rap-country collaborations such as

the duets of Snoop Dogg and Willie Nelson and Nelly and Tim McGraw, the Muzik Mafia's "music without borders" stance, and a handful of persistent African American country aspirants like Rissi Palmer and Darius Rucker will add "diversity to this lily-white genre."²⁵ But even when critics hail the mixture of racially marked musical styles and bodies, few have the temerity to suggest, even playfully, as the *New York Times* critic Kelefa Sanneh did, that perhaps "in an age of rapping cowboys and hip-hop-loving country crooners," "twangy" dirty south hip hop collaborators Paul Wall and Killa Kyleon should "get a chance to flash their platinum teeth on CMT" with their song "Country Boy."²⁶

Such a suggestion will undoubtedly raise hackles, even among those who wish to break down the racialization of genres by exploring music that circulates across boundaries of racial and musical difference; the twanging guitar accents, title, and southern regionalism of "Country Boy" come nowhere near making it a "country" song in stylistic or marketing terms. This reticence points to the fact that the connections between race and genre rely on a host of critical and scholarly discourses about purity, authenticity, and commercialism that are not explicitly about race. As Christopher Waterman has pointed out, "Performers, genres, texts, and practices not consonant with dominant conceptions of racial difference have . . . often been elided from academic, journalistic, and popular representations of the history of American music," and one of our aims here is to undermine the critical distinctions that have supported racialized genre boundaries and cast black engagements with country as both historically marginal and aesthetically suspect.²⁷

The general hostility to crossover as inherently inauthentic is perhaps the most notable of these distinctions. One telling example of the implicit racialization of this discourse appears on a countdown of "the oddest—and most successful" pop-country crossovers offered on the AOL country website "The Boot." By opening its discussion with a reference to the "Vegas showgirl eying Nashville's greener pastures" in Alan Jackson's 1994 song "Gone Country," the editors frame their discussion in terms of the calculated, inauthentic commercialism Jackson was protesting. And while the site asserts that the tradition of pop crossovers into country "goes back to Tony Bennett's cover of Hank Williams' 'Cold, Cold Heart,'" and that some country crossovers may be born "of genuine affection for the genre," it also reminds readers that crossovers are frequently produced by artists seeking "to jumpstart a flagging career." As is often the case, the rhetorical categories of the bizarre, the inauthentic, the commercially suspect, and the racially transgres-

sive become conflated: African American artists constitute a full 25 percent of the list, a proportion well out of keeping with their representation in the ranks of pop-country crossovers.²⁸

Several of the essays in this collection thus unapologetically expand on and contest the musical and social practices that define the boundaries of “country” and suggest that one reason race has remained so central to genre definitions is that racial crossover destabilizes the very concept of genre, reliant as it often is on homological conceptions of audience cultures. Charles Hughes traces the multiple connections between Nashville, Muscle Shoals, and Memphis—what he calls the country-soul triangle—emphasizing the institutional affinities and circulation of artists across generic boundaries. While he forcefully argues that the southern soul sound was at least as important to country music’s development as country influences were to southern soul, he also demonstrates that the African American participants who profoundly shaped the triangle’s musical exchange were relegated to roles that kept them out of view and on the margins of the country industry.

David Sanjek more explicitly engages with the notion of racial crossover in his discussion of Henry Glover’s legendary production work. Glover, he argues, helped the country artists he produced avoid the racial masquerade that typified many white versions of R&B hits, instead encouraging artists like Moon Mullican and the Delmore Brothers to create what he sometimes called “advanced” or “new” country, a style that leavened traditional country arrangements with the emerging sounds of R&B. The music he and his artists produced within a strictly country marketing scheme presaged the destabilization of racially bounded genre categories occasioned by the arrival of rockabilly. Like Hughes, Sanjek reveals both the permeability and the tenacity of racialized genre boundaries by interrogating the relationship between notions of musical and racial authenticity.

IN 2008 BARACK OBAMA closed the Democratic National Convention, and his speech accepting the party’s nomination for president of the United States, with Brooks and Dunn’s “Only in America.” At least as represented in *Rolling Stone*, Obama was no fan of country music; the eclectic iPod playlist the magazine described included exemplars of nearly every genre of American popular music except country and Broadway musicals. Yet his use of country music at this pivotal point in his campaign indicated a good deal about the racialized meanings of country music and both the persistence and the instability of its whiteness. During the primary contest, Obama’s

ability to reach white, working-class voters—the demographic most often associated with country music—was vigorously questioned; indeed the presumed racism of those voters was frequently cited as a reason he might be a weaker potential nominee than his opponents. In this light, the party’s use of the song can be read simultaneously as a (perhaps premature) declaration of victory in reconstituting the New Deal coalition across racial lines and as a concession that race continues to constitute that coalition’s most significant point of political fracture, making it desperately necessary to de-race Obama by associating him with the whitest of white American culture in order to allay racist fears about angry black men.

But such explanations seem necessary, and make sense, only if we accept country’s whiteness and Obama’s blackness as fixed and natural. Otherwise the song was a nearly perfect reflection of the candidate’s biography and aspirations. Its title directly recalled his observation at the 2004 Democratic National Convention that “in no other country on earth is [his] story even possible.” Its assertion that in America “we all get a chance” and its suggestion that any child on a city school bus “just might be president” perfectly mirrored the biographical narrative Obama outlined for himself throughout his campaign. Even the original video for the song echoed Obama’s desire to stake out a racial middle ground: as the faces of the children on the bus come into focus, their black-and-white images switch from positive to negative, so that every child appears momentarily as both black and white. It would be as naïve to see black performances of country as a musical panacea for bigotry as to suggest that the election of a black president marks the end of American racism. But perhaps we would read country’s racial (and class) politics, and this particular moment in its history, most accurately as a palimpsest in which the surface script of binary races and cultures can only partially obscure the contested and complex nature of racial formation.

Notes

1. Malone, *Country Music USA*, 5.
2. Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?*; Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*; Escott, Merritt, and MacEwen, *Hank Williams*; Smith, *Can’t You Hear Me Callin’*.
3. Foster, *My Country*, vi.
4. Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*; Linn, *That Half-Barbaric Twang*; Lornell, “Pre-Blues Black Music in Piedmont North Carolina”; Lornell, “Non-Blues Secular Black Music in Virginia”; Oliver, *Songsters and Saints*; Wells, “Fiddling as

an Avenue of Black-White Musical Interchange"; Wolfe, "Rural Black Stringband Music," 32–35; Waterman, "Race Music"; Carlin, *String Bands in the North Carolina Piedmont*; Rosenberg, "Ethnicity and Class."

5. Morton and Wolfe, *DeFord Bailey*.

6. Allmendinger, *Imagining the African American West*, 66–83; Leyda, "Black-Audience Westerns and the Politics of Cultural Identification in the 1930s"; and Adam Gussow in this collection. For a good narrative overview of black country traditions and their influence on soul music particularly, see Hoskyns, *Say It One Time for the Broken Hearted*.

7. "Country Music," *Encyclopedia Americana*, Grolier Online, <http://ea.grolier.com.echo.louisville.edu/article?id=0110880-00>; "Country Music," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/140388/country-music>.

8. Fox, "White Trash Alchemies of the Abject Sublime," 50.

9. Bertrand, "I Don't Think Hank Done It That Way"; Feder, "Song of the South," 110–43.

10. Martin Hodgson, "The Hidden Faces of Country," *Observer* (London), July 16, 2006.

11. Mann, "Why Does Country Music Sound White?," 89.

12. Mann, "Why Does Country Music Sound White?"; Miller, *Segregating Sound*; Feder, "Song of the South"; La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie*; Thomas, "There's a Whole Lot o' Color in the 'White Man's' Blues"; Thomas, "The Color of Music"; Ching, "The Possum, the Hag, and the Rhinestone Cowboy"; Ching, *Wrong's What I Do Best*; Campbell, *Music and the Making of a New South*.

13. Hall, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance," 55.

14. "Cowboy Hootie Sings for Burger King BK," Adland: The Commercial Archive, <http://commercial-archive.com/node/118841>. The commercial's original irony was compounded when, in the fall of 2008, Rucker released *Learn to Live*, a full-length country album for Capitol Nashville. The album and its first single, "Don't Think I Don't Think about It," both hit number 1 on the country charts.

15. "Album Review: *Ego Trippin'*," idk, <http://idknada.wordpress.com/2008/04/06/album-review-snoop-doggs-ego-trippin>.

16. Bruce Feiler, "Has Country Music Become a Soundtrack for White Flight?," *New York Times*, Oct. 20, 1996.

17. Hodgson, "Hidden Faces of Country."

18. Ramsey, "Editor's Introduction," vi.

19. Maultsby, "West African Influences and Retentions in U.S. Black Music," 25–26; Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*; Baraka, *Blues People*.

20. Gilroy, "Sounds Authentic," 114; Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 3.

21. Gilroy, "Sounds Authentic," 126.

22. Fox, "White Trash Alchemies of the Abject Sublime," 44; Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 379–81.

23. Awkward, *Soul Covers*.

24. Gilroy, "Sounds Authentic," 134.
25. Bobby Reed, "Examining the Color of Country Music," *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 2, 2006.
26. Kelefa Sanneh, "Ebony and Ivory Learn to Share Country Home," *New York Times*, May 5, 2005.
27. Waterman, "Race Music," 167.
28. Brian Manfield, "Gone Country: Crossover Crooners," The Boot, <http://www.theboot.com/2008/06/05/gone-country-snoop-dogg>.

PART ONE

PLAYING IN THE DARK



Black Hillbillies

AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSICIANS

ON OLD-TIME RECORDS, 1924–1932

Patrick Huber

In the summer of 1930 Ralph S. Peer, RCA-Victor's A&R (artists and repertoire) man, arranged a working holiday in Hollywood for Jimmie Rodgers, the nation's leading hillbilly recording star. There, working at a relaxed pace during the three weeks between June 30 and July 17, Rodgers recorded fifteen selections at the newly completed Victor Hollywood Studios on Santa Monica Boulevard. Several of these sides would become among his most famous recordings, including "Blue Yodel No. 8 (Mule Skinner Blues)," "Pistol Packin' Papa," and "My Blue-Eyed Jane." But the most celebrated recording Rodgers made in Hollywood, what his biographer Nolan Porterfield calls the "pièce de résistance" of these sessions, turned out to be "Blue Yodel No. 9," recorded on July 16 and composed by Rodgers himself. Originally titled "Standin' on the Corner," "Blue Yodel No. 9" was a standard twelve-bar blues featuring Rodgers's signature yodeling refrains and comprising verses in which Rodgers, adopting the persona of a Beale Street hustler, boasts of his sexual prowess, his expensive clothes, and his handiness with a .44 Special.¹

On September 11, 1931, fifteen months after its recording, "Blue Yodel No. 9" was released on Victor 23580, coupled with "Looking for a New Mama," in the label's "Old Familiar Tunes and Novelties" series, among other records intended for sale chiefly to southern white record buyers.² Considering Rodgers's primary audience, RCA-Victor's release of the record in its flagship label's hillbilly series made commercial sense. At the same time, however, this decision effectively obscured the extraordinary inter-

racial collaboration that produced this now-classic recording, for accompanying Rodgers on “Blue Yodel No. 9,” as is now commonly known, were the brilliant young trumpeter Louis Armstrong (1901–71) and his estranged second wife, the pianist Lillian Hardin Armstrong (1898–1971). The exact details of how this remarkable session came together are now unfortunately lost to history.³ But regardless of its origins, it ranks as one of the most famous recording sessions in the history of American popular music, touted by country music and jazz scholars alike as a seminal event that brought together two of the twentieth century’s greatest musical entertainers at the peak of their artistic abilities. And the recording itself, one of thirteen blue yodels that Rodgers recorded between 1927 and his death in 1933, represents an amalgamation of musical styles: a standard twelve-bar African American blues composed of floating verses, sung in a nasally white Mississippi drawl, that featured both vaudeville-inspired yodeling and New Orleans-style jazz accompaniment. Indeed the inclusion of “Blue Yodel No. 9” in the most recent editions of both Brian Rust’s *Jazz Records, 1897–1931* (1982) and Robert M. W. Dixon, John Godrich, and Howard Rye’s *Blues and Gospel Records, 1890–1943* (1997) indicates, as Porterfield has observed, that this particular Rodgers recording transcends the genre of what we today call country music. Although “Blue Yodel No. 9” may stand out as one of the truly great American recordings, Rodgers’s collaboration with the Armstrongs was only one of at least twenty-two racially integrated hillbilly recording sessions that occurred before 1933. And Louis and Lillian Armstrong were only two of the nearly fifty African American singers and musicians who appeared on commercial hillbilly records between 1924 and 1932.⁴

Country music scholars have long acknowledged the significant African American influence on country music prior to World War II, in the form of ragtime and blues, vocal and instrumental styles, musical mentors, and even the West African-derived banjo itself. But they have far less often recognized the actual participation of African Americans in the recording of this music, then called “hillbilly music” or, alternately, “old-time music.”⁵ Since at least the mid-1950s, scholars and discographers have been aware of a handful of prewar hillbilly recordings featuring racially integrated bands or African American artists, but these records have received surprisingly little scholarly attention, and have generally been treated either as historical anomalies or as interesting but otherwise unimportant curiosities.⁶ And much misinformation continues to circulate, even within country music books and liner notes to CD anthologies published within the past decade. For example, in the booklet accompanying Yazoo’s seven-CD boxed set, *Kentucky Mountain*

Music: Classic Recordings of the 1920s and 1930s (2003), the chief annotator makes the bogus claim that Taylor's Kentucky Boys, an otherwise all-white string band featuring a black fiddler, represents "the only group to record in the 1920's and 30's with an interracial construct." Elsewhere another eminent music scholar declares that this band's April 1927 sessions rank as "the first integrated recording sessions in American music history; jazz could not claim an integrated session until 1931"; both halves of this statement are patently false.⁷

The chief reason for these historical inaccuracies, as well as the primary obstacle impeding research in this subject, has been the lack of a comprehensive discography of prewar hillbilly records. But now, thanks chiefly to the publication of Tony Russell's monumental *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921–1942* (2004), which was more than twenty years in the making, the fuller history of African Americans' participation on early country music recordings can begin to be told. Russell's reference work and its race records counterpart, Dixon, Godrich, and Rye's *Blues and Gospel Records, 1890–1943*, allow scholars to compile an accurate and fairly complete discography of all of the known commercial hillbilly records on which African Americans performed before World War II.⁸ And what this newly emerging discography reveals is that African Americans actively participated in the hillbilly recording industry almost from its very beginning.⁹ To be sure, records featuring African American artists were far from common, constituting only about 1 percent of the approximately eleven thousand hillbilly records released in the United States before 1933, but their numbers are far greater than most country music scholars and fans have generally appreciated. Between 1924 and 1932 black and white artists collaborated at twenty-two racially integrated sessions that produced sixty-nine recorded masters (see appendix A).¹⁰ Additionally fourteen different African American artists or acts recorded forty-three known selections that appeared on hillbilly records during this same period (see appendix B). Altogether forty-nine African American musicians participated in the recording of at least 112 masters for the hillbilly recording industry before 1933. These recordings were released, in various series, on a total of 204 domestically issued sides, and of these sides, no fewer than 178 of them appeared on hillbilly records or on records otherwise intended for sale in the hillbilly market.¹¹

Examining these prewar records on which African Americans performed can tell us much about the commercial hillbilly music of the 1920s and 1930s. Far from being merely historical anomalies, these records not only document the remarkable, though too-often-unacknowledged participation of

African Americans in this genre of American music, but they also reflect the significant amount of interracial musical cooperation and exchange that produced these recordings. Far more than being merely interesting and important examples of interracial musical collaborations, these prewar records also expand and deepen our understanding of the hillbilly recording industry during its formative period. They indicate that the commercial hillbilly music recorded before 1933 was far more complex and diverse than the narrow marketing categories created by talking-machine firms suggest. Finally they offer important and tantalizing glimpses into the unspoken perceptions and production decisions that guided the recording and marketing of such records, areas of inquiry for which much, if not most, of the industry-generated documents have been lost, discarded, or destroyed.¹²

These African American records raise a number of intriguing and important questions about the prewar hillbilly recording industry that produced them. For example, how, in an age of pervasive racism and Jim Crow segregation, did so many racially integrated sessions occur? Whose idea was it to record white and black musicians together, and why? How was it that a commercial music genre, which from its earliest advertisements was so deliberately and overtly linked to whiteness, came to include more than 175 records featuring African American artists? In promoting these records, did companies attempt to conceal the racial identity of these African American artists from the southern white consumers who supposedly constituted the chief market for hillbilly records? While it remains difficult, if not impossible to formulate definitive answers to such questions, studying these records suggests new ways of thinking about and understanding commercially recorded hillbilly music prior to 1933.¹³

WHEN U.S. TALKING-MACHINE companies began to record and market blues and old-time music during the early to mid-1920s, they effectively began the process of transforming southern vernacular music, heard for decades at fiddle contests, dances, house parties, tent shows, and other social gatherings, into immensely popular commercial products. This music, the product of more than three centuries of vibrant cross-racial exchange and adaptation, was profoundly and inextricably multiracial, but talking-machine companies, in an effort to streamline their marketing efforts, separated the music of black and white southerners into special categories of “race” and “hillbilly” records. First commercially recorded in 1920, race records encompassed blues, jazz, gospel numbers, and sermons marketed to African Ameri-

can consumers across the nation. Hillbilly records, first recorded in 1922 and so named in order to capture the music's supposedly white rural southern origins, consisted chiefly of southern fiddle tunes, string-band numbers, old parlor ballads, and religious songs, and were marketed primarily to rural and small-town white consumers, particularly in the South. But contrary to the claims of Donald Clarke and other music historians, this industrywide practice of separating the music into two racially encoded categories had little to do with the existence of de jure racial segregation in the American South. Rather this decision was motivated primarily by practical and commercial considerations. Dividing race and hillbilly records into special series allowed talking-machine companies to target specialized markets of consumers more effectively with their advertising and marketing campaigns. Moreover such series also made it easier for the firms' jobbers (local or regional distributors) and retailers to select from an entire catalogue of several thousand records those releases that would most appeal to their customers. This division was, however, premised on the racist beliefs of northern white middle-class executives who assumed, as the folklorist Bill Ivey has written, that "consumers select music based upon race" and that "musical style and race are inextricably linked." What began as merely marketing categories soon evolved, for all intents and purposes, into musical genres, as the sociologist William G. Roy has noted, and the generic labels of *race* (first applied in 1921) and *hillbilly* (first used in 1925) would remain the sound-recording industry's dominant terms to describe black and white southern vernacular music until *rhythm and blues* and *country and western* replaced them shortly after the end of World War II.¹⁴

In developing these two musical genres, talking-machine companies applied many of the same methods and policies that they had been successfully using since at least 1904 to market foreign-language records to various immigrant communities in the United States. Chief among these was the practice of dividing catalogues into separate series of discrete, numerical blocks of records designed to target particular groups of consumers. Originally, most companies had released records of blues and old-time music in their standard domestic popular series, usually "without racial designation," as Roy notes. In 1921, however, Okeh inaugurated the first race series, its 8000 series, and within two years Paramount and Columbia, eventually followed by Vocalion, Brunswick, and Victor, established similar series for their African American records. This marketing practice was soon applied to hillbilly records. Around January 1925, the Columbia Phonograph Company became the first to establish a special series for what it defined as "old-time

music” when it created its famous 15000-D “Familiar Tunes—Old and New” series (originally “Old Familiar Tunes”), the counterpart to its 14000-D race series. Prior to the mid-1930s, all of the major record labels involved in the hillbilly music field except for Gennett released such records in specially designated numerical series that paralleled their special numerical blocks of race records (see table 1.1).¹⁵

To obtain new material for their expanding race and hillbilly record catalogues, talking-machine companies either invited southern artists to record in their northern studios or, increasingly after the adoption of the electrical recording process in 1925, sent mobile crews to record these artists on portable equipment at southern field sessions, particularly in Atlanta, Dallas, Memphis, and New Orleans. Although talking-machine firms usually marketed the recordings of black and white southern artists in separate record series, their crews typically recorded the selections for their race and hillbilly catalogues on the same “recording expeditions,” as they were called at the time, using the same temporary studios for both groups but often scheduling sessions for black and white musicians on different days or sometimes different weeks.¹⁶

In hindsight, the artificial categories of “race” and “hillbilly” records did far more than help talking-machine firms organize their inventories and rationalize their marketing and distribution efforts. These classifications also contributed to what Christopher A. Waterman, in his provocative essay in *Music and the Racial Imagination* (2000), has called “the naturalization of racial categories” within American popular music. Through their advertisements, record catalogues, and monthly supplements, record companies imbued both race and hillbilly records with certain social and cultural meanings that were intimately connected to race and racial difference.¹⁷ For example, the literature developed to promote hillbilly records emphasized the supposedly white, Anglo-Celtic origins of the music heard on these discs by portraying it as the authentic folk expression of southern mountaineers. As the 1928 *Brunswick Record Edition of American Folk Songs* explained, “The only True American Folk Songs . . . are the songs of the Southern Mountaineers. Like the minstrels of old, the modern Bards of our southern mountains go about singing the simple songs of the people’s own making, relating the gruesome details of a local murder, the latest scandal of the community, the horror of a train wreck, the sorrow of unrequited love, etc.” The associated marketing labels for hillbilly series, such as Okeh’s “Old Time Tunes,” Brunswick’s “Songs from Dixie,” and Vocalion’s “Old Southern Tunes,” as well as the quaint pastoral images of the barn dances, log cabins,

TABLE 1.1. Race and Hillbilly Series of the Major U.S. Record Labels, 1924–1935

<i>Label</i>	<i>Series numericals</i>	<i>Series title</i>	<i>Years of activity</i>	<i>Approx. no. of releases</i>
BRUNSWICK				
Race	7000 series	NA	1927–32	234
Hillbilly	100 series	“Songs from Dixie”	1927–33	497
COLUMBIA				
Race	14000-D series	NA	1923–33	681
Hillbilly	15000-D series	“Familiar Tunes — Old and New”*	1924–32	783
OKEH				
Race	8000 series	NA	1921–35	967
Hillbilly	45000 series	“Old Time Tunes”	1925–34	580
PARAMOUNT				
Race	12000 series	NA	1922–32	1,157
Hillbilly	3000 series	“Olde Time Tunes — Southern Series”**	1927–32	324
VICTOR				
Race	V-38500 series	NA	1929–30	132
Hillbilly	V-40000 series	“Native American Melodies”†	1929–31	336
Race	23250 series	NA	1931–33	183
Hillbilly	23500 series	“Old Familiar Tunes & Novelties”	1931–34	359
VOCALION				
Race	1000 series	NA	1926–33	746
Hillbilly	5000 series	“Old Southern Tunes”‡	1927–33	497

Sources: Robert M. W. Dixon, John Godrich, and Howard Rye, comps., *Blues and Gospel Records, 1890–1943*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997 [1964]), xxiii–xl; Tony Russell, *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921–1942*, with editorial research by Bob Pinson, assisted by the staff of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9–26; Charles K. Wolfe, “The Bristol Syndrome: Field Recordings of Early Country Music,” in *Country Music Annual 2002*, ed. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 207.

* Columbia’s 15000-D series was originally called “Old Familiar Tunes.”

** Paramount later called its 3000 series “Old Time Songs” and, alternatively, “Old Time Numbers.”

† Beginning in May 1930 until the series termination in January 1931, Victor referred to its V-40000 series as “Old Familiar Tunes & Novelties,” and the firm later used this title for its subsequent 23500 series.

‡ In its catalogues and promotional literature, Vocalion also variously described its 5000 series as “Special Southern Records,” “Old Time Tunes,” “Old Southern Melodies,” and “Old Time ‘Fiddlin’ Tunes’ and Southern Melodies.”



FIGURE 1.1.
Front cover of *Old Time
Edison Disc Records*
brochure, ca. 1928.
Author's collection.

and stands of mountain pines that often graced the covers of hillbilly record catalogues and promotional brochures, all hearkened back to a preindustrial rural South, particularly a Mountain South, that was deeply embedded in the American popular imagination. But within this sentimentalized advertising landscape, African Americans were almost nowhere to be found, except for an occasional image, such as the plantation scene of “happy darkies” featured on the cover of a ca. 1928 *Old Time Edison Disc Records* brochure (fig. 1.1). In fact promotional literature sometimes explicitly defined hillbilly music in direct opposition to the African American–inflected jazz and popular offerings that composed the bulk of record sales during the 1920s. A 1927 newspaper advertisement for Columbia’s “Familiar Tunes—Old and New”

series, for example, promised to satisfy the musical tastes of those record buyers who “get tired of modern dance music — fox-trots, jazz, Charleston — and long for the good old barn dances and the ‘Saturday night’ music of the South in plantation days.” Amid the widespread concerns that Henry Ford and other cultural conservatives harbored about the morally corrupting influences of jazz music and modern dances, copywriters and illustrators tried to present hillbilly music as a wholesome, white Anglo-Saxon alternative to the growing sensuality and crudeness that seemed to define the nation’s mass culture. And it was as a result of being defined in opposition to these other genres of popular music that hillbilly music gained much of its social significance and meaning in Jazz Age America.¹⁸

The truth, of course, is that much of the music found on the hillbilly records of the 1920s and early 1930s was the product of decades or even centuries of dynamic cultural interplay between white and black musicians, and many of the songs and tunes issued on these records were of black origin or borrowed from black tradition. Occasionally record catalogues and monthly supplements even mentioned these cross-racial borrowings. Victor’s 1924 *Olde Time Fiddlin’ Tunes* brochure, for example, remarked that on its record of two “wonderful old Negro Spirituals,” former governor Alf Taylor and His Old Limber Quartet rendered the selections “exactly as they took [them] from the lips of the old Negro master of the hounds.” But the accompanying photograph of the string band made clear that these records were decidedly white interpretations of traditional black songs. Although talking-machine companies occasionally issued African American artists’ recordings in hillbilly series, no photographs of these recording artists, to my knowledge, ever appeared in the promotional literature for these records. With few exceptions, old-time record catalogues and advertisements disseminated images of an idyllic white rural Mountain South that existed outside of modern urban America, a closely knit, socially homogeneous and harmonious world free from flappers, foreigners, and African Americans. Talking-machine companies’ use of these “whitewashed” textual messages and pictorial images effectively concealed the interracial character of much of the music heard on prewar hillbilly records and thereby rendered practically invisible African Americans’ involvement in early commercial country music.¹⁹

DESPITE THE SEPARATE racially based record series and marketing strategies that talking-machine companies established, a close investigation of the discography of prewar hillbilly records reveals a surprising amount of inter-

racial collaboration at recording sessions. Although the pervasive racism and segregation of the Jim Crow South discouraged such interactions, black and white southerners occasionally played music together in a variety of public and private settings, including at one another's homes, at neighborhood dances and house parties, on theater stages, and even in studio waiting rooms at recording sessions.²⁰ Inside recording studios, however, such interracial collaborations proved to be relatively rare, even within the thoroughly multicultural field of jazz, before the mid-1930s. But within hillbilly music—a musical genre that has often been perceived as unsophisticated, culturally backward, and even politically reactionary—racially integrated sessions, while by no means common, occurred with greater frequency than in any other genre of American popular music except for vaudeville blues (the first integrated session for which dates at least to May 1921).²¹

Between 1927 and 1932 white and black musicians participated in at least twenty-two racially integrated recording sessions that produced hillbilly records. Some of these sessions seem to have been spontaneous events resulting from the coincidental presence of white and black artists at a particular field session. Others appear to have been carefully planned collaborations, such as the April 1927 Gennett sessions involving Taylor's Kentucky Boys, a studio string band from Garrard and Jessamine counties, in south-central Kentucky. Named for its manager, Dennis W. Taylor, the band featured an African American fiddler, Jim Booker (1872–1940), from Camp Nelson, in Jessamine County, who was the son of a former slave, himself a fiddler. On April 26, 1927, in what was the first known racially integrated recording session in country music history, Booker and two white members of the band, banjoist Marion Underwood and guitarist Willie Young, recorded a pair of traditional southern fiddle breakdowns, "Gray Eagle" and "Forked Deer," at the Starr Piano Company's studios in Richmond, Indiana. At a second session later that same day, Booker collaborated with Underwood and a white singer, Aulton Ray, to produce two additional sides, "Soldier Joy" (*sic*) and "Maxwell Girl" (a variant of the well-known "Buffalo Gals"). The Starr Piano Company released all four of these recordings on its flagship label, Gennett, and advertised them in its 1928 *Gennett Records of Old Time Tunes* catalogue, where copywriters described these selections variously as "Old Time Playin'" and "Old Time Singin' and Playin'."²²

In August 1927, four months after his debut sessions, Booker returned to the Starr studios, along with his younger brothers, guitarists Joe (1890–1966) and John (1892–1986), to record again with Taylor's Kentucky Boys. Also accompanying them was a mandolin-playing neighbor, Robert Steele (1882–

1962), who was also African American. On August 26 and 27, the Booker brothers and Steele, either individually or in various combinations, waxed fourteen sides as members of this otherwise all-white string band. Six of these interracial recordings featured the fiddle duets of Jim Booker and Fiddlin' Doc Roberts, as he was billed on records, the most famous and extensively recorded Kentucky fiddler of the prewar era.²³ Besides recording as a member of Taylor's Kentucky Boys, Jim Booker also recorded two numbers at the August 27 session with his brothers and Steele in an all-black string band called the Booker Orchestra. Although Gennett did not follow the industry practice of issuing old-time records in a special dedicated series, company files indicate that these two recordings, "Salty Dog" and "Camp Nelson Blues," were "made for Hillbilly" and thus intended to be marketed to southern white consumers. Collectively the twenty Gennett sides on which Jim Booker or one of his brothers performed chronicle a portion of the rich African American fiddling and string-band traditions that existed in south-central Kentucky in the first decades of the twentieth century. Significantly these recordings also reveal that white and black old-time musicians in the region shared a common repertoire and similar performance style, and music historians have particularly noted the tightly knit interplay between Booker's fiddling and Underwood's banjo playing on "Gray Eagle" and "Forked Deer."²⁴

Three months after these sessions with Taylor's Kentucky Boys and the Booker Orchestra, the Starr Piano Company studios hosted another racially integrated session involving two more Kentucky recording artists promoted by the talent scout Dennis W. Taylor. In November 1927 Taylor took Welby Toomey, a white Garrard County singer, and Sammy Brown (dates unknown), an African American multi-instrumentalist from Lexington, to the Starr studios in his Model T Ford. A barber by trade and the son of an English immigrant father, Toomey had first heard Brown playing as a one-man band on the streets of nearby Versailles, Kentucky, and, in a 1969 interview, recalled that Brown had six fingers on each hand. On November 22, in Richmond, Brown recorded three blues songs, including "The Jockey Blues," on which Toomey recalled performing. According to Godrich, Dixon, and Rye's *Blues and Gospel Records, 1890–1943*, an unidentified second voice does appear on this recording, based on surviving Gennett session sheets, but it is practically inaudible on the recording, except for one point when it seems to mimic a neighing horse. If Toomey's recollections are accurate, this may indeed have been his sole contribution on this recording. In any case, immediately following this session, Brown backed Toomey on four sides of

religious and parlor songs, playing the guitar and occasionally the harmonica and an instrument identified in the Gennett files as a “jazzbo” (presumably the makeshift instrument, common in early jazz and jugs bands, that consisted of a kazoo attached to the body of some brass instrument such as a saxophone or a trombone). None of Toomey’s four collaborations with Brown was ever released, however, although two of Brown’s selections, including his purported side with Toomey, were issued on Gennett and two subsidiary labels for the race records market.²⁵

Although the integrated lineups of Taylor’s Kentucky Boys and Toomey-Brown appear to have been studio bands that existed only to make records, other interracial recording sessions grew out of long-standing musical partnerships. One such series of sessions involved the legendary Louisiana duo of the white Cajun fiddler Dennis McGee and the French-speaking black Creole accordionist and singer Amédée Ardoin (1898–prob. 1942), who performed together at dance halls and private house dances in southwestern Louisiana for more than two decades. The two men met in 1921 while sharecropping for the same landlord near Chataignier, in Evangeline Parish, and they soon struck up a musical partnership out of which, considering the racial climate of the era, evolved a rather intimate friendship. Encouraged by their landlord, McGee and Ardoin began playing together for white *fais do-dos* in the neighborhood. Ardoin, who was greatly admired for his expressive singing and syncopated, blues-inflected accordion playing, was much sought after for local dances and other social gatherings in both white Cajun and black Creole communities. But his musical partnership with McGee challenged the racial customs of Jim Crow Louisiana, and playing for white audiences often posed serious, even dangerous problems for the diminutive Ardoin. Another Cajun fiddler, Wade Frugé, recalled that he had to obtain the host’s permission to bring Ardoin to certain house parties, and that sometimes at these parties “a lot of them old Frenchmen would start drinking homebrew and they’d try to cause trouble for Amédée [*sic*].” Indeed, one popular local account attributes Ardoin’s psychological breakdown and eventual death in a Pineville, Louisiana, mental asylum to a severe beating he received from two white thugs for reportedly breeching conventional racial etiquette at a house dance he was playing for near Eunice around 1940. What had so outraged his two assailants, according to the story, was that Ardoin had accepted a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his brow that had been offered to him by the daughter of the white homeowner.²⁶

Together Ardoin and McGee teamed up to make twenty-two recordings for the Columbia, OKeh, Brunswick, and Bluebird labels between 1929 and

1934. The duo cut their first recordings together on December 9, 1929, at a joint Columbia-Okeh field session in New Orleans under the direction of the Okeh A&R man and talent scout Polk C. Brockman. At this historic session, Ardoin and McGee waxed six Cajun waltzes and two-steps, with the accordion and fiddle sharing the lead, including the now-classic “Two Step de La Prairie Soileau (Prairie Soileau Two Step)” and “Two Step de Eunice.” All of these sides, credited on the record labels only to Ardoin, were released in both Columbia’s and Okeh’s small special series of Acadian French, or Cajun, records. Less than a year later, the duo returned to New Orleans, where they recorded ten sides for the Brunswick label at the Roosevelt Hotel on November 20 and 21, 1930. Unlike Columbia and Okeh, Brunswick did not employ a special numerical series for its Cajun records. Instead the firm released all of these titles, which consisted of waltzes, one-steps, two-steps, and blues, under the billing of McGee and Ardoin in its “Songs from Dixie” series. Two of them, “Amadie Two Step” and “La Valse a Austin Ardoin,” were also issued on the Canadian Melotone label, presumably for the French Canadian market. The duo’s final session together occurred on August 8, 1934, in San Antonio, Texas, and produced six sides for RCA-Victor’s budget-priced Bluebird label. Today music scholars consider McGee and Ardoin’s classic recordings to be among the most influential in the history of Cajun music, and nearly all of the songs found on them have become standards within the Cajun repertoire. And, reflecting the multiethnic nature of his dance music, Ardoin is widely acknowledged as one of the principal architects of both modern-day Cajun and zydeco music.²⁷

Another racially integrated recording session that emerged out of a long-standing musical relationship occurred at a 1927 Charlotte, North Carolina, recording session, under the direction of Victor’s A&R man Ralph S. Peer. There, on August 9 and 10, Victor’s mobile unit recorded eight numbers by the Georgia Yellow Hammers, a white Gordon County, Georgia, string band that had made its recording debut earlier that February. Accompanying the band on the trip to Charlotte, but apparently in a separate automobile, was a Gordon County duo called the Baxters, composed of fiddler Andrew Baxter (ca. 1872–1955), an African American farmer who was reportedly half Cherokee, and his son, Jim (1898–1950), a singer and guitarist. “They could play breakdowns; they could play blues; they could play church music; they could play *anything*,” recalled Gus Chitwood, whose father, the fiddler William “Bill” Chitwood of the Georgia Yellow Hammers, sometimes performed at local dances and picnics with the Baxters. In Charlotte the Georgia Yellow Hammers and the Baxters recorded separately. But on “G Rag,” the Georgia

Yellow Hammers' final recording of its August 9 session, Andrew Baxter replaced the band's regular fiddler, George "Bud" Landress, who instead provided a humorous spoken introduction to the instrumental. Although Baxter sometimes performed with members of the Georgia Yellow Hammers back home at social gatherings in Gordon County, their collaboration on "G Rag" appears to have been a spontaneous event that originated in the recording studio that day.²⁸

Although most of the racially integrated recording sessions before 1933 that produced hillbilly records appear to have involved musicians who played together at least on occasion, others seem to have been collaborations between white and black musicians who may have known one another but who never performed together outside of the recording studio. In the summer of 1927, a few weeks before the Atlanta session at which the Georgia Yellow Hammers recorded with Andrew Baxter, Ralph S. Peer and two recording engineers visited Bristol, Tennessee, the first stop on a three-city southern recording expedition. Between July 25 and August 5, during the now-legendary 1927 Bristol Sessions, Peer and his crew recorded seventy-six selections, including the debut recordings of Jimmie Rodgers and of the Carter Family, who would become the two most popular hillbilly recording acts of the pre-World War II era. Among the seventeen other acts that participated in these sessions was the Johnson Brothers, two white vaudeville musicians probably from nearby Johnson City, Tennessee. The duo, guitarist Charles Johnson and his brother Paul Johnson, a singer, steel guitarist, and banjo player, had recorded for Peer at Victor's main studios in Camden, New Jersey, less than three months earlier, and, impressed by the musicianship of the brothers, Peer appears to have personally invited them to record again, at the Bristol sessions. On July 28, 1927, in a vacant warehouse on State Street in Bristol, the Johnson Brothers waxed a half-dozen selections, four of which featured instrumental accompaniment by an obscure musician named El Watson (dates unknown), who was probably also from Johnson City. Watson, the lone African American artist to record at the 1927 Bristol sessions, played the harmonica on the Johnson Brothers' recording of "The Soldier's Poor Little Boy." On the three other selections, "Two Brothers Are We," "A Passing Policeman," and "I Want to See My Mother (Ten Thousand Miles Away)," Watson backed the duo on the bones, a percussion instrument popular among minstrel and medicine show performers. Although the Johnsons may have known Watson in Johnson City, his accompaniment of this white brother duo at this session appears to have been an improvised collaboration that occurred only at Peer's suggestion. At the session immedi-

ately following this one, Charles Johnson returned the favor, sitting in as the guitarist for Watson's recording of the harmonica blues instrumentals "Pot Licker Blues" and "Narrow Gauge Blues." Since the firm had not yet established dedicated series for either its race or its hillbilly records, Victor released both of Watson's sides, as well as three of those of the Johnson Brothers, in its 20000 domestic popular series.²⁹

Like the Johnson Brothers' 1927 recording session with El Watson, most of Jimmie Rodgers's collaborations with African American sidemen appear to have been impromptu events, arranged on the spur of the moment either by Ralph S. Peer or perhaps even, as his biographer Nolan Porterfield suggests, by Rodgers himself. Besides his historic 1930 recording of "Blue Yodel No. 9" with Louis and Lillian Armstrong, Rodgers participated in at least three other racially integrated recording sessions, two of which occurred during a June 1931 RCA-Victor field session in Louisville, Kentucky. On June 11, at the first of these interracial sessions, Rodgers recorded the bawdy "Let Me Be Your Side Track" with the St. Louis blues guitarist Clifford Gibson (1901–63). For unknown reasons, however, Peer decided to release another version of the song, recorded immediately following this one, on which Rodgers supplied his own guitar accompaniment. Discovered in RCA's vaults in 1990, the unissued take featuring Gibson's guitar accompaniment—a recording that Porterfield has hailed as "like no other performance of this era"—was finally released more than sixty years later on Bear Family's six-CD boxed set *Jimmie Rodgers: The Singing Brakeman* (1992). On June 16, 1931, five days after his session with Gibson, Rodgers cut "My Good Gal's Gone Blues," accompanied by the all-black Dixieland Jug Blowers (credited on the Bluebird record as the Louisville Jug Band), a five-man Victor studio group that included vocalist and jug blower Earl McDonald (1885–1949) and fiddler Clifford Hayes (1893–1941), both of whom were veterans of Louisville's flourishing jug band scene and often played for white patrons at high-society parties and hotel dances during Derby Week.³⁰

Far less is known about Rodgers's fourth, and earliest known, interracial session, but according to Porterfield, it resulted from an incident that took place during RCA-Victor's August 1929 field session in Dallas. On Saturday night while in town for the five-day session, Rodgers went out carousing to "a dancehall in the black section of east Dallas," where he heard an African American jazz band that he enjoyed, and he promptly recruited the musicians to accompany him on a recording at his Monday session. On August 12, at the temporary studio set up in the Jefferson Hotel's banquet hall, Rodgers recorded one side, a vaudeville stage version of the well-known ballad