

*Review Essay*

## **Bring Out Your Dead: Resurrecting the Folk Revival**

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ROMANCING THE FOLK. *Public Memory & American Roots Music*. By Benjamin Filene. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2000.

A RACE OF SINGERS. *Whitman's Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen*. By Bryan K. Garman. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2000.

DOWN THE HIGHWAY. *The Life of Bob Dylan*. By Howard Sounes. New York: Grove Press. 2001.

POSITIVELY 4th STREET. *The Lives and Times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Farina and Richard Farina*. By David Hajdu. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2001.

JOSH WHITE. *Society Blues*. By Elijah Wald. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. 2000.

“It’s difficult to attach yourself to the past or be paralyzed by the past in any kind of way.”

Bob Dylan<sup>1</sup>

When Pete Seeger was inducted in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1996, he had nothing to say. This contrasted markedly with the effusive praise offered by Judy Collins in her introductory comments. She characterized Seeger as “ever a voice of the needy, the poor, the disenfranchised.” By contrast, when Seeger mounted the stage of the Waldorf Astoria ballroom, he smiled at the audience seated around \$15,000 and \$25,000 tables, accepted the award, and promptly left the room. When reporters asked him to comment, Seeger observed that the honor amounted to “nothing.” When pressed to elaborate, he simply added, “I just did.”<sup>2</sup>

Was Seeger’s silence a simple matter of humility? It is difficult to respond to such an honor without succumbing to rank self-congratulation. Since the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame was instituted in 1989, acceptance speeches offer few examples of eloquence. Perhaps silence is preferable to the familiar litany of agents, managers, record executives, and family members without whom the occasion would have been impossible. That Seeger possessed little in common with the Jefferson Airplane or the R&B pioneer Little Willie John, to name but two of his fellow honorees, could have stirred his reticence.

Seeger might as well have had in mind what Arlo Guthrie said when his father, Woody, was inducted into the Rock Hall during its first ceremony in 1989: “I don’t know where Woody would be tonight if he were alive. But I guarantee you he wouldn’t be here.” Perhaps Seeger felt himself similarly out of place. If the Rock Hall stands for, among other things, a tribute to individual achievement, it nonetheless remains institutionally committed to the elaborate edifice of the American recording industry. The world from which Seeger and Guthrie emerged has assiduously embraced what Paul Nelson characterizes as “anticommercial snobbery,” coupled with an unflagging devotion to “the moral and aesthetic values of vernacular music.”<sup>3</sup>

Throughout his career of more than a half century, Seeger has objected to the domination of the mainstream music industry and its promotion of what he feels to be unreal sentiments rather than the commonplace beliefs assumed by the general public. In his mind, a fine line exists between, in the words of Andrew Ross, “what was praised as documentary reality and what was disparaged as sweetened or sentimentalized presentations of everyday life.”<sup>4</sup> Seeger has always dedicated himself to the proposition that music can galvanize the public’s moral fiber through their aesthetic sensibilities. Therefore, to accept an award for his skills as a musician would be to confuse a means with an end. Seeger

more than likely assumes that the measure of his career should be the lives he influenced, not the number of records he sold.

The incompatibility between both Seeger and Guthrie, on the one hand and an entity like the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, on the other illustrates the narrow niche that folk music occupies in the institutional consciousness of those who currently make and sell recordings on a mass scale. In his groundbreaking study, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll*, Simon Frith argues that rock music has always been dedicated to the profit system and refused to establish any demarcation between “rock’s commercial function and its cultural use.”<sup>5</sup> The ideological assumptions of those in the folk community have, by contrast, been less defined by the merchandising of its products than, Frith believes, “its attitude towards music-making itself.”<sup>6</sup> Technique is subordinated to truth-telling, and, therefore, one calibrates the “honesty” of a performer by “what they didn’t do,” what associations with the commercial mainstream they dismiss out of hand.<sup>7</sup>

This stance toward the profit motive and the system that supports it occupies a crucial position in the folk community’s commitment to an ideology of authenticity.<sup>8</sup> That very slippery concept can be taken to possess any number of definitions that include but are not limited to the public stance or persona of a performer, the material they play, and the kind of instrumentation and other accompaniment they employ. The “honesty” to which Frith refers means for a folk-identified individual a commitment to an unvarnished and seemingly unmediated stance before the public; a familiarity with the vernacular traditions of American popular music; and a preference for acoustic over electrified instruments. The collision between the promulgation of this stance and the attractions inherent in other forms of musical expression can be illustrated by any number of episodes, most memorably the rancor and rejection Bob Dylan experienced from much of the folk community when he electrified his repertoire at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. At the same time, the attraction and ideological weight of the folk community’s promulgation of the preferability of authenticity continues to exercise a significant amount of influence over the public, whether or not they consider themselves members of that community or sympathetic to its interests.

Two recent phenomena illustrate this process. First, the successful and award-winning reissue by the Smithsonian of the 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music*, originally put out by Moses Asch’s Folkways Records.<sup>9</sup> Assembled by Harry Smith, this collection of six LPs brought together material that Smith felt was among the best of the American vernacular repertoire released by commercial labels between the mid-1920s and the collapse of the record business in the midst of the Depression. For many years, performers in the folk community have considered Smith’s canon of material to encompass some of the most essential performances in the vernacular tradition. Much of the general public know neither the original recordings nor Smith’s collection but have become acquainted with the material over the past fifty years through its incorporation

into the playlist of present-day individuals. This process has been most recently encouraged since the collection's reissue by a series of public events dedicated to the *Anthology*, which are being filmed by the documentary director Morgan Neville for future release. The other phenomenon has been the even more commercially potent occasion of the soundtrack to the Coen Brothers 2000 film *O Brother Where Art Thou?* Predominantly re-recordings of vernacular material by present-day artists, this CD has sold over six million copies and won four Grammy awards despite a lack of radio airplay—crucial in the marketing of commercial music—or elaborate promotion. Its acceptance has led as well to a series of public concerts of the material and the filming of one, *Down From The Mountain* (2001), at the celebrated Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, Tennessee. In a moment when the commercial airwaves were given over to hard core rap or the saccharine sentiments of boy bands like 'N Sync and the Backstreet Boys, the unexpected fascination with the “high lonesome” vocalizing of seventy-five-year-old bluegrass legend Ralph Stanley, the most senior performer on the soundtrack, caught many in the music industry by surprise. His *a capella* rendition of “O Death” reacquainted the general public with vernacular music's commitment to authenticity and its obstinate refusal to ignore the inexorability of human turmoil and suffering.

The persistent collision between what the folk community believes to be the emotional and ideological bankruptcy of commercial music and its advocacy of the tenets of authenticity can be seen as well in the books under review in this essay. In some cases addressed to that segment of the academic community drawn to the ideological dynamics of popular culture and in others to a baby boomer public nostalgic for the bygone days of the 1960s, each volume interrogates how our investment in popular music extends beyond the simple matter of the cost of a CD. As Keith Negus states, “music is created, circulated, recognized, and responded to according to a range of conceptual assumptions and analytical activities that are grounded in quite particular social relationships, political processes and cultural activities.”<sup>10</sup> Artists as well known as Bob Dylan or as forgotten as Josh White reached audiences not only on the basis of the music they played but also because of the ideological assumptions that their music embodied. Phenomena such as the Folk Revival continue to hold meaning for their participants because they illustrate a unique synchronicity of cultural imperatives and propositions about how our society should structure itself.

Benjamin Filene's *Romancing The Folk* addresses the question of how certain forms of American vernacular music—what he calls “roots music”—emerged and distinguished themselves from the considerable body of mass marketed material. What kinds of material have been glorified, and in the process romanticized, he asks, as “‘pure’ sources out of which the twentieth century's commercial music was created” (94)? What has been the role of cultural “middlemen” such as Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger in this process? How have the practitioners of this material been “romanced” by outsiders, “in the sense both of wooing and of sentimentalizing them as Other” (5)? Clearly, asking such ques-

tions permits Filene to investigate the construction of authenticity in the domain of American vernacular music and call into question the body of assumptions and prejudices that led Lomax and Seeger, and many others, to bring “roots” music to a mass audience.

Each of the cultural “middlemen” Filene studies engaged in what he calls a “recursive process,” whereby the musical traditions they promoted were embedded in an idealized American past that conflicted with a debilitated and spiritually empty present (8). Individuals like Lomax and Seeger pursued a kind of cultural quest, a search for a musical grail that held the means to alleviate the social and cultural pollution caused by the proliferation of mass culture and the atrophy of identity wrought by industrialization. They believed quintessentially American values and beliefs were evaporating in the morass of mass-produced commodities. Only by intentionally isolating oneself from the influence of the commercial media could one encounter individuals whose culture was not infected by it. These musicians engaged in “roots music,” defined by Filene as “songs employing a musical language that is current, familiar, and manipulable by ordinary people” (4). “Roots Music” requires no special training or extensive material resources. Its value lies not in its marketability, but as a measure of our national identity.

Filene traces the origins of this quest by cultural “middlemen” to the activities conducted by nineteenth-century academic song collectors like Frances James Child and Cecil Sharp. Both Child, a Shakespearean scholar from Harvard, and Sharp, an English folklorist, believed that the music of the common man allowed access to forms of pre-industrial behavior that were superior to contemporary civilization. However, while Child and Sharp admired the virtues of rural poverty, they disdained the individuals who were forced to endure it. “Folk culture,” Filene states, “offered a way to knit society back together and return it to a simpler era—a peaceful time in which community bonds were held securely in place by class deference” (23). The perpetuation of “roots music” has ironically therefore sometimes solidified the edifice of prejudices that allows individuals such as those Sharp found in the Appalachians to remain second-class citizens. Alleviating their subordinate status might, it was feared, cause the evaporation of their unique musical achievements through absorption into the dominant culture. Better that they remain dirt poor and musically eloquent than become prosperous and succumb to the triviality of the mass media.

The other “middlemen” Filene examines perpetuated these dubious suppositions about class, community, and culture. Groundbreaking as many of their achievements were, Filene reminds us that a kind of smug superiority can co-exist with a talent for locating masterful musicians. This collision of good intentions and unexamined presuppositions runs through the relationship between the folksinger Leadbelly and the team of John and Alan Lomax, who “discovered” him in Louisiana’s Angola prison, where the father and son felt performers would be uncontaminated by the mass media. The assumption that one could “locate America’s strength and vibrancy in the margins of society” constitutes

for Filene a form of “outsider populism” (64). Moreover, it reflects either an unwillingness or an inability to question the attribution of some form of authenticity to those incarcerated by a racist system. Both father and son compounded this failure of analysis by parading Leadbelly before audiences clad in the garb of a prisoner until he protested that he wanted to appear in a suit instead.

The strength of Filene’s analysis is in his drawing together as effectively as anyone has to date the relationship between the phenomenon of “roots music” and the role of the cultural middleman. Yet I sense a hesitancy to move in certain directions that the subject demands. For instance, *Romancing The Folk* attends much more to the subject of cultural production than cultural reception. Filene tends to amalgamate diverse audiences into a unified mass and hence not distinguish between the variety of constituencies that appreciate “roots music.” In his discussion of Bob Dylan, Filene advisably accounts for the aggressive rejection of the singer’s initial electrification of his material, but he does little to consider how the public has received him in the years since. Take, for example, the recent recordings by Dylan of material from the “roots music” canon. Many critics rhapsodized over *World Gone Wrong* (1993) and *Time Out Of Mind* (1997), but how did listeners assimilate these stripped-down, unadorned renditions of classic blues and country music? George Lipsitz has stated that “one reason for popular music’s powerful effect is its ability to conflate music and lived experience, to make both the past and the present zones of choice that serve distinct social and political interests.”<sup>11</sup> There is not enough evidence in *Romancing the Folk* of the “lived experience” of audiences drawn to “roots music” and the diverse, even contradictory responses they have to that material.

Filene also fails adequately to address the collision between vernacular and commercial culture that is at the heart of the promotion of authenticity. He does touch on the matter in his discussion of the relationship between the Lomaxes and Leadbelly as well as in his chapter on the recording career of Muddy Waters on the Chess label. At the same time, little attention is given to the long careers of both Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger at Columbia Records, now owned by the Sony Corporation. How, for example, did Seeger maneuver his way through the demands of the corporate boardroom and not lose touch with his progressive politics? In Dylan’s case, how did his commercial success collide with the manner in which his material and public persona in the 1960s were predicated upon “inaccessibility and the surreal” (215)? Dylan was a source of chart-topping material for a number of artists during this period, some of whom shared little of his artistic agenda or the ideological suppositions affiliated with “roots music.” Closer examination of how this occurred could amplify Filene’s conclusion that Dylan’s career demonstrates that the folk revival “need not be backward-looking, marginalized, or anti-modern” (232). It is hard to characterize a body of music in such a way when it simultaneously appears on the hit parade.

Like Benjamin Filene, Bryan K. Garman engages in a “recursive process” that connects present day musical practices with their historical antecedents. *A Race of Singers* endeavors to illustrate how certain performers follow in the path of Walt Whitman and share his “collective social vision that opposed the exploitative, iniquitous relations that characterize capitalist society” (3). Garman’s benchmark for musical authenticity, in other words, amounts to a kind of ideological litmus test that, at times, bears the marks of what is caricatured as political correctness. The artists he admires, like Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, and Bruce Springsteen, follow in the line of Whitman’s promulgation of artisan republicanism. That stance promoted a balance between “personal liberty with social equality, self-interest with the public good” (8). Garman is, at the same time, cognizant that Whitman advocated radical social transformation more in principle than in practice. The poet professed the inevitability of socialism, yet he shrank from some of the implications of the doctrine, particularly so far as they applied to the full emancipation of women and African Americans. “Be radical—be radical—be not too damned radical,” he advised one of his acolytes (4).

Garman dwells as well on the implications of Whitman’s perspective on the relationship between men. The largely homosocial society that the poet espoused pivoted upon comradeship between freemen, and white freemen at that. Intimacy between these individuals could not be dictated by the conventions of heterosexuality, for that would restrict the liberated exchange of the affections as much as the power of capital exerted a stranglehold over the marketplace. Same-sex partners must be permitted the camaraderie that results from the principle of “adhesiveness,” a mutuality of the flesh and the spirit that rejected the subordination of one man over another. Blacks, however, were not deserving of such open-mindedness, Whitman believed, for there was “about as much intellect and calibre in the mass [of blacks] as so many baboons” (31). Women equally fell outside the parameters of “adhesiveness” and had no role in life other than child-bearing. Of Whitman’s blindness to the rights of others, Garman remarks that the poet on more than one occasion reinscribed power relations rather than subverted them.

Garman proceeds to assess the careers of popular musicians and their embodiment of authenticity, therefore, on the basis of the degree to which they support a collective social vision that exemplifies the tenets of artisan republicanism and an egalitarian treatment of women and people of color. Each, in the end, falls short, for Garman believes these performers, in different ways, recapitulate “the prophet singer’s egotism and his self-conscious construction of himself as the common man,” thereby revealing “his desire to become a quite uncommon man” (102). The uneasiness with social and economic hierarchies manifested by Guthrie, Dylan, and Springsteen fails to incorporate an equal vigilance about how the kind of material that Guthrie referred to as “hurting

songs” could all too easily illustrate one’s solitary scars rather than any kind of collective injury.

Garman’s examination of Guthrie’s career exemplifies his thesis. Undeniably, “this nasal-voiced Oklahoman shared Whitman’s contempt for wealth and insisted that music could deliver democracy to all citizens” (82). He believed that one must take the message of social justice out into the fields, labor camps, and union halls. Guthrie’s “hurting songs” provided a vehicle for calling attention to the needs of the working poor he encountered on the open road Whitman celebrated. At the same time, Guthrie never adopted a narrowly sectarian perspective on the proper vehicle of communication. He made commercial recordings for RCA Victor, performed on WCBS radio, and had his autobiography, *Bound For Glory*, released by a mainstream publisher, E. P. Dutton. He was never so damned radical as to assume that any of these activities sullied his reputation or compromised his polemics. Guthrie also recognized, and acted upon, that his physical appearance and unkempt persona appealed to audiences. “Rough-mannered, naïve, and unclean,” Garman states, “Guthrie emitted a strangely innocent but compelling masculinity that made him quite popular with left-wing women interested in experiencing proletarian romanticism firsthand” (95). He understood, as did Whitman, that the body and the body politic are interwoven. That did, however, also lead him to engage sometimes in episodes of sexual adverturism that amounted to little more than hedonistic acts of pleasure.

Guthrie’s authenticity was, therefore, never a simple matter of homespun virtues and an agitprop perspective set to music. Much as he wanted to come across as “just plain old Woody,” Guthrie was never so transparent. Even if his battered guitar bore the legend “This machine kills fascists,” Woody’s public persona drew as much attention to himself as it did to the causes he espoused. On more than one occasion, “His desire to be identified as a renowned ‘poet of the folkling field’ led him quite unintentionally to cut himself loose from the people he represented, to forsake his goal of community and equality” (129). Furthermore, Garman believes Guthrie’s legacy has been all too often ill-served, for his radicalism, conflict-ridden though it might have been, is abandoned in favor of the optimism and individualism that permeated much of his work. The communal vision of a unified democracy of the spirit embodied in a song like “This Land Is Your Land” takes the place of other works that call attention to the inequities of our national myths.

As much as Garman dedicates his analysis to the collision between artistic achievements and ideological assumptions, one finds oneself more than once confronted by a nagging confusion at the core of *A Race of Singers*. It seems pervaded by the “*cordon sanitaire*” that Andrew Ross believes characterized the cultural platform of the Communist Party’s Popular Front in the 1930s: how “categories of intellectual taste” became compromised by “strategies of containment” that supported dubious distinctions between appropriate and inap-



propriate forms of cultural expression.<sup>12</sup> One has the sense of Garman shoe-horning his subjects into a preconceived ideological mold, holding them up to an arbitrary standard rather than assessing how they dealt with the complex circumstances of their condition. At times, what Garman derides as outright evasion at worst and inept contradiction at least on the part of Whitman, Guthrie, and others seems more a matter of ambivalence or an honest effort to recognize that ideological matters are never as simple as they appear. Authenticity for Garman appears to be a narrow matter that constricts rather than liberates the realm of human possibilities.

Garman also gives the impression in *A Race of Singers* that the information conveyed by the material written by Guthrie, Dylan, and Springsteen is altogether transparent, so much so he is privy to its proper meaning. He fails to appreciate that any song of substance conveys a variety of impressions to its diverse audiences. To adopt the stance that a predetermined “message” is conveyed, received, and understood by an entire audience in the same manner assumes that a breakdown in communication results from the failure of the creator. As Keith Negus asserts, the point is “not simply to suggest that [a] song was ambiguous and open to interpretation,” but rather that “songs accumulate and connect with new meanings and beliefs as they pass through time and travel to different places.”<sup>13</sup> To operate in this manner Garman is forced to reduce popular music to a practice in didacticism and obliterate the subtlety and complexity of the material under consideration in *A Race of Singers*.

The attention paid by both Filene and Garman to Bob Dylan’s career attests not only to the continuing impact he has had on American popular music but also to the manner in which he embodies for many people the array of characteristics and assumptions associated with authenticity. His dedication to the canon of American vernacular music as well as his unswerving conviction of the importance of individualism has influenced several generations of both performers and consumers. At the same time, although more than a few writers have tried, the frequent impenetrability of his lyrics pale before his refusal to allow writers, and audiences, access to his private life. No matter how much we know about him, Dylan remains, by choice, an opaque individual who deters efforts to penetrate his protective armor.

This wariness toward public exposure of the private self parallels the frequent impenetrability of Dylan’s lyrics. Of them, Tim Riley observes “Dylan’s songs and deliveries are as point-blank as a chess match: masked strategies, hidden consequences, reckless sacrifices, offenses posing as defenses, cunning cloaked in ritual, and intellectual muscle draped in flirtatious gamesmanship.”<sup>14</sup> This elusiveness and the number of personae Dylan has adopted over the years complicate the effort to establish that a single identity hovers over the chess board. To assume a simple concordance exists between his life and his work is, therefore, a blind alley. “The most banal way to read Dylan songs is to link them up with his life, as though he had no greater ambition than to record his auto-

biography—this is the injustice his lesser profilers fall into,” Riley suggests.<sup>15</sup> Several writers have done so and assumed in the process an altogether uncomplicated notion of authenticity. The variety of faces Dylan has presented to the world reinforces how this concept can all too easily be reduced to a matter of transparency. Howard Sounes unfortunately commits himself to this unsatisfying perspective and reduces himself to a “lesser profiler” in the process. Ample in research though *Down the Highway* may be, the biography breaks little new ground and time and again merely parrots the conventional wisdom about Dylan’s achievements. The volume opens with the following unremarkable assessment of its subject: “Bob Dylan is an artist of almost unrivaled importance in modern, popular music. He is a great recording star, an extraordinary live performer, an iconic figure of popular culture, and, most importantly, he is the preeminent songwriter of our times” (ix). When a biographer begins with such a litany of superlatives, there is little they can do other than repeat them over and over again to the point that *Down The Highway* resembles an extended, and at times fatiguing, resume.

What Sounes does have to offer is a perspective typical of many current biographies: revelation of the least appetizing qualities of the subject at hand in an effort, one imagines, to bring an extraordinary individual down to earth. If the personae that Dylan offers to the public remain cryptic and inaccessible, Sounes illustrates how the private individual behind it is intensely career driven, often verbally inarticulate and as compelled to cast aside either romantic or professional partners almost as readily as he has musical styles. A desire to keep his private life off the record has led Dylan to conceal his marriage to and child with backup singer Carolyn Davis, yet revelation of the relationship by Sounes does little to untangle Dylan’s character or, more important, explain his music. In more than 400 pages of drab prose, Sounes achieves little except documenting that his subject has dedicated considerably more energy to creating songs than constructing enduring human relationships. In place of plowing through this unrewarding volume, one can gather the gist of Sounes’s rather elementary argument through a comment about Dylan by the veteran folk musician Oscar Brand: “He wrote a poem which was the life he wanted. He cast it for himself. He wrote it for himself, and he acted it himself. . . . That is what made him successful” (105).

David Hajdu’s *Positively Fourth Street* more successfully addresses the question of Dylan’s artistic evolution. It focuses upon the process of how a wide-eyed, ambitious nineteen-year old from Minnesota traveled to the bohemian circles of New York and became transformed into an assured and successful public figure in less than two-year’s time. Hajdu expands the image of Dylan embodied in Sounes as little more than a reclusive workaholic and illustrates in ample detail how Dylan treated the Greenwich Village music scene as did Child, Lomax, and others the various sites where they engaged in the practice of “outsider populism.” Almost like an artistic magpie, Dylan mined the repertoires

and record collections of the individuals he met so as to create his own playlist. The guitarist John Koerner, who knew Dylan as a freshman at the University of Minnesota, said of him, “he had an incredible ability to take things and absorb them and turn them around and put them right back out there as if they had always been a part of them” (69).

Some in the folk music community viewed this as a healthy and inevitable process of cultural assimilation; others chided Dylan as a willful young man on the make. Dylan’s early output focused on the inequities of a corrupt society and his public image drew upon the anti-hero mythos prevalent at the time that valorized music associated with social outcasts. He chronicled the indignities suffered by the downtrodden in a manner that artfully combined protest with poetry. Songs like “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “The Times They Are A Changin’” possessed the unique ability to be both radical and commercially successful. At one and the same time, they forcefully condemned social oppression and appealed to many listeners who may well have not shared, or even been interested in, the material’s polemical intent. The former song in particular rose on the record charts of the day in its cover version by Peter, Paul & Mary.

From the start, therefore, Dylan never possessed any absolute sense of what authenticity might mean, and he most clearly broke ranks with the folk music establishment when he stepped away from making topical statements in order to address matters of a more personal and poetic nature. Truth-to-self replaced adherence to a communally determined sense of meaning. As Hajdu states, Dylan felt constricted by the necessity of being “the hardscrabble troubadour of the working folk”; increasingly, he regarded himself as “a vaguely Edwardian young philosopher- aristocrat—a thinking dandy” (233). He adopted this persona on the cover of *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965) and embodied it even more emphatically in his choice of a manager. Many in the folk community turned for representation to the mild-mannered Trotskyist Manny Greenhill, but Dylan decided instead to hire the aggressive and deliberately belligerent Albert Grossman. His “menacing charm” won him few friends in the folk community, but Grossman believed his allegiance was to the financial well-being of his artists, not the social tranquility of a body drawn together through ideological and not contractual agreements (55). In the course of the short period of time that Hajdu chronicles, Dylan came to disparage the “morgue-y” music of the folk community whom he sarcastically dismissed as “a bunch of fat people” (239, 278). Whether such statements reflect Dylan’s genuine lack of interest in the polemics and the musical platform of the folk community or simple impatience with other people’s expectations about his career, Hajdu leaves to the reader. What he does make clear, however, is that Dylan was as eager to absorb what he could make use of from other people as he was to cast them aside when they had served their purpose.

The individuals Dylan left in the wake during the course of his meteoric rise to public celebrity include the other principal characters in Hajdu’s narra-

tive: Joan Baez, her sister Mimi, and Mimi's husband, the novelist and songwriter Richard Farina. Baez acts in the narrative as not simply Dylan's romantic partner and artistic co-conspirator but, more important, as a foil to his conception of music as essentially and inevitably a form of self-expression. She, by contrast, perceived herself as a conduit for the voices of others, not her own, and never abandoned her conviction that music must be a vehicle for the promulgation of social change. In addition, Baez's presentation of her gender took on a polemical tone of its own. Barefoot, devoid of makeup, and deliberately stripped of any kind of professional affectation, she came across at the start of the 1960s as, in Hajdu's words, "the negative image of Marilyn Monroe"; her "ascetic grace and brooding musical persona" appealed to her audience's turbulent emotions, caught between the inevitable conceit of adolescence and the collective demands of adulthood (61). "How many children of the cold war," Hajdu states, "sat on their floor next to their record players, listening to Joan Baez murmur of fate, helplessness, and death, thinking 'Yeah, they're my trials, too'" (60)? That her first album sold over a million copies and remained on the *Billboard* charts for 140 weeks indicated if nothing else that more than a few consumers gravitated towards the simple but potent combination of a bell-like voice and an acoustic guitar.

The gravity and emotional resonance of Baez's repertoire resonated with the young audiences of the day and convinced many to commit themselves to the political causes that she espoused. For a time, Dylan shared not only her commitment to social change but also the stages upon which she made it. As a couple, they were a curious collision of opposites. "Their voices were odd together," Hajdu observes, "a mismatch of salt pork and meringue; but the tension between their styles made their presence together all the more compelling" (160). Their collaboration indisputably helped Dylan to achieve public visibility and commercial success, yet at the same time, Hajdu implies, he appeared eager to abandon both Baez and the material their audiences approved of. The notion that he could embody the voice of a generation repelled Dylan more and more. He protested, "Me, I don't want to write for people any more—you know, be a spokesman. From now on, I want to write from inside me. . . . The way I like to write is for it to come out the way I walk or talk" (203). Baez increasingly felt this position reeked of solipsism as well as an abandonment of any kind of commitment to understanding or ameliorating a fragmented culture. She remarked, "He criticizes society, and I criticize it, but he ends up saying there is not a damned thing you can do about it, so screw it. And I say just the opposite" (236). Hajdu's sympathetic depiction of the couple's inevitable artistic collision and emotional abandonment of one another never succumbs to a tabloid-like investigation of their private lives. He remains focused upon how their collaboration epitomizes the distinctions between two views of authenticity and the consequences of choosing personal over social transformation.

The other principal line of argument of *Positively 4th Street* focuses upon the marriage of Mimi and Richard Farina, their musical collaboration, and his achievements both as a songwriter and novelist. Hajdu wishes to use the couple as a vehicle for engaging in historical revisionism. Not only does he want to reclaim Farina's literary achievements—his single novel, *Been Down So Long Looks Like Up To Me* (1966), was published the same day as his fatal motorcycle accident—but he also wishes to position him as a key figure in the music of the period. Farina first entered the folk scene as the husband of popular vocalist Carolyn Hester and taught himself dulcimer in order to accompany her. His career took off when he began a collaboration with Mimi Baez, whom he met in Europe when she was just a teenager. Divorcing Hester, Farina married Mimi and gained entry into the circle about Joan Baez. His sister-in-law added Richard's songs "Birmingham Sunday" and "Pack Up Your Sorrows" to her repertoire and recommended the couple to her label, Vanguard Records. They were signed following a successful premiere engagement at the 1964 Big Sur Festival, and Richard included two songs with electric accompaniment, "One-Way Ticket" and "Reno, Nevada," on their initial album, *Celebrations for a Gray Day*. He observed, "how long would people with contemporary poetic sensibilities be content to sing archaic material? Some of us had been listening to AM radio for a number of years" (227).

Aggressive in the promotion of their interests, Farina, like Dylan, signed with Albert Grossman to represent the duo, yet throughout their short career, he kept Mimi very much in the background. He failed to consult her about Grossman; intentionally inverted the order of their names on the second and last record, *Reflections in a Crystal Wind*; and refused to let her learn to drive, open a separate bank account, or even open the mail before him. Mimi was, therefore, understandably devastated and left to start her life over in more ways than one when Richard died on the occasion of her twenty-first birthday. Hajdu deliberately and successfully depicts Richard's truncated career and paints a complex and not always complimentary portrait of the Farinas' personal and professional collaboration.

However, Hajdu's efforts to elevate Farina to a position of musical innovator and unsung composer fail almost entirely. Not only had Dylan recorded with electric accompaniment prior to the Farinas, but there were others in the folk community engaged in comparable experiments in amalgamating disparate forms of performance. Also, his catalogue of musical material feels very much like a work in progress, not the fulfillment of a superior set of skills that Hajdu assumes. The ascription of authenticity to a young man cut down in the prime of life may possess romantic resonance, but Hajdu provides little to back it up other than his own rhetorical authority. The critic Greil Marcus may be excessive when he claims that Farina seduced Hajdu as he had others during the course of his lifetime. However, his judgment of the late writer's accomplishments seems undeniable: "Hajdu bets that a life un-lived cut short—a life unsul-

lied by failure, decline, or betrayal, can overshadow lives that were lived, that went on, past the golden moment when all things seemed possible, i.e. the world of American folk music from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s.”<sup>16</sup>

Elijah Wald engages in a comparable act of historical revisionism in *Society Blues* by endeavoring to revive and reassess the career of the African American performer Josh White. Although this prolific musician left behind an ample body of material recorded over the course of nearly forty years, most commentators dismiss him from the historical record or, more damagingly, castigate his repertoire as the sad efforts of a “mannered pseudo-bluesman.”<sup>17</sup> White is felt to have broken the virtually unspoken covenant that acts as a kind of ideological glue to the folk community: if one acquires excessive professionalism or crosses over from one professional sphere to another, this somehow profanes the very essence of the musical vernacular. Worst of all, should one record material that achieves commercial success, something must be dubious about that song such that it appeals to such a diverse audience. That White was a featured performer in any number of media and scored a hit with the pop tune “One Meat Ball” in 1944 only damaged his credibility. It would take a vigorous stretch of the imagination to reconceive that song as some kind of ironic commentary on poverty, particularly when it was featured by the Andrews Sisters as the flipside to their recording of “Rum and Coca-Cola.”

Nonetheless, Wald agrees with Michael Denning that White has been unfairly characterized as a diluter of vernacular musical practices.<sup>18</sup> Wald validates, even celebrates, the chameleon-like skills that led White to be “the one artist who can be found at every stage of the evolution of traditional or folk blues as a professional style” (xi). Rather than denigrate him as someone who bowed to the whims of fashion, Wald believes there to be value and a kind of nobility in “Josh’s distinctive blend of black cultural credibility with a smooth, white audience-friendly presentation” (xii). While not a book that engages in overt polemics, *Society Blues* incorporates a skillful and thought-provoking critique of the ideological presuppositions that guide the promotion of authenticity. Wald achieves this goal by sticking to the details of White’s career, not generalizing about its implications, yet the point comes across with clarity and conviction.

Wald sums up the contradictions of White’s varied and productive life on the first page of *Society Blues*:

Josh reinvented himself over and over, dramatically at first, then subtly, keeping pace with the world around him as he grew from a poor boy leading blind street singers through the South into an international star, darling of the nightclubs and guest of presidents. He was a rich blend of contradictions: “the Singing Christian” and a sly blues singer, an unschooled folk artist and a slick cabaret performer, a powerful voice for

social justice and the first black man to base his stage appeal on the seduction of white women (ix).

The breadth of his repertoire and the basis of this unshakable set of contradictions can be illustrated in that White made his name by appealing to both the vernacular audience and the elite body that hobnobbed at urban nightspots. He initiated his career as a prolific and commercially successful blues artist on the ARC label—the home of Robert Johnson—from 1932 to 1935 and later became a headliner at New York’s premiere venue, the racially integrated Café Society, in the 1940s. He appeared as well to stand on both sides of the political fence. If he recorded material that castigated Jim Crow segregation on the album *Southern Exposure: An Album of Jim Crow Blues* (1941), he later seemed to look out for his own hide when he became a friendly witness before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee. (White did not name names, but effectively softpedaled and backed away from his support of radical causes.) Even the other media which feature White illustrate the diverse elements of his career. His groundbreaking appearances on the Broadway stage, as in 1938’s *John Henry*, were counterbalanced by subordinate roles in a Hollywood B western (*The Walking Hills*, 1949) and a bottom-of-the-bill detective feature (*The Crimson Canary*, 1945).

However, Wald desires more than just to demonstrate that Josh White possessed a media-savvy approach to his career and did not discriminate between audiences or pursue an ideologically narrow agenda. He wants as well to get the reader to look beyond that, for a number of people, White “had committed the unpardonable sin of remaining a successful entertainer” and to reassess some of the significant achievements that marked his fulfilling life (267). Most of all, the accusation by Bastin, and others, that he was less than a bluesman flies in the face not only of the ARC recordings but also the equally eloquent socially conscious materials that he released in the 1940s. Wald concurs with Demming that *Southern Exposure: An Album of Jim Crow Blues* must be counted as “a landmark in American vernacular music” one made even more unique because such an ideologically forthright piece of material should be released by a mainstream record label.<sup>19</sup> It was an album that could be found, Wald adds, in virtually every progressive household of the day. Moreover, while critics of White’s music have assumed he expurgated virtually all evidence of his tumultuous upbringing in the American South, *Southern Exposure* resonates with his memories of racist oppression, including his father’s lamentable run-in with a belligerent white bill collector that led to his incarceration in a mental institution. In addition, Demming argues, both in this recording and a number of his ARC sides, White incorporated the experiences of working people in his native Piedmont region and their efforts to alleviate conditions through vigorous union organization. The theme of “mistreatment” that is often illustrated in the songs in an individualized manner can also be read as an allegorization of the more

systemic oppression that African Americans were forced to endure. So much for the mannered and “pseudo” nature of White’s repertoire.

*Society Blues* reminds us that the lines of demarcation between forms of musical expression are never as firm as some would believe. If anything, there has habitually been substantial permeability between different genres as practiced by different races and genders in this country. The interfusion of styles, it can be argued, constitutes a kind of cultural egalitarianism far in advance of anything we seem capable of achieving in the interactions of our daily lives. Nevertheless, the promotion of authenticity continues to exert considerable force over public consciousness. Take, for instance, the recent release of Bruce Springsteen’s new CD, *The Rising*. Many of the songs address the shocking episode of 9-11, and, clearly, a significant number of listeners feel his words resonate as a kind of national keening for the dead. Years after he proclaimed that we were born to run, Springsteen now convincingly proclaims that we are born to grieve. (It should be added the record has sold better than any of Springsteen’s work in a number of years.) Two recent stories in the *New York Times Magazine* additionally bring to mind how permanent a place authenticity has on the public radar. In “Who’s That Girl?” Lynn Hirschberg satirically chronicles the efforts of would-be mega-star Amanda Latona.<sup>20</sup> Signed to Clive Davis’s J Records, the twenty-three-year-old comes across as a kind of musical empty vessel, capable of commanding a range of musical styles and willing if not eager to follow the whims of her handlers. “Some artists are resistant to ideas,” a J Records executive states; “Amanda is not resistant.”<sup>21</sup> Quite the contrary, she is compliant to a fault, Hirschberg argues, and is devoid of any capacity for authenticity as a result. The other feature, “Queer As Folk” by David Hajdu, addresses the proliferation of lesbian performers who employ acoustic instrumentation and perceive themselves as embodying the folk ideology. He states,

Folk music has become the sound of lesbian culture. It is to gay women what cabaret and disco have been to gay men or what jazz has been to African-Americans—in the phrase Duke Ellington coined, “tone parallel” to a world unexplored in other musics. Resolutely political, intimately personal, steeped in tradition and connected to the earth, folk music carries deep-rooted associations with what it means to be a gay woman. “We’re seeing the coming together of a way of life and form of expression that’s kind of primary,” says Lisa Merrill, a professor of performance history at Hofstra University. “This doesn’t happen very often.”<sup>22</sup>

It is hard to come across a passage of commentary on music so rank with unquestioned generalizations. To cite but two: the aesthetic sensibilities of an entire race, gender, or people of a particular sexual orientation cannot be reduced



to a common denominator, and the forms of expression employed by women lose all manner of subtlety and complexity when they are equated with the natural and the primary. Nonetheless, no matter how much one might believe the notion of authenticity has been subjected to critical scrutiny, many commentators and communities of consumers appear to be committed to keeping it real.

## Notes

1. Mikal Gilmore, "Bob Dylan. The Rolling Stone Interview." *Rolling Stone* 882 (November 22, 2001), 64.
2. Details of the occasion can be found in Jeff Tamarkin and Lynne Thompson, "While Turmoil Surrounds It, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Puts On A Dismal, Dull Affair." *Goldmine* 407 (March 1996), 20-22, 163.
3. Paul Nelson, "Folk Rock," in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*. 3rd Ed. Edited by Anthony DeCurtis and James Henke with Holly George Warren (New York: Random House, 1992), 313. Nelson was, along with Jon Panake, the editor of the influential folk publication *The Little Sandy Review* (1950-67). One of the more biting and often controversial periodicals in the field, it revealed in what some others felt amounted to shameless and needless invective. Panake defends this editorial posture as a desire "to distinguish those records that evoked passion in us from those that were mere product." [Quoted in Ronald D. Cohen, Editor, *Wasn't That A Time!* Firsthand Accounts of the Folk Music Revival (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 111. Of the affectation (some might say infatuation) of predominantly white, middle-class males for the music of impoverished rural performers, Nelson adds, "It was absurd that city people drenched in popular culture—movies, pop music—would embrace rural and oral tradition. . . . It was absurd for people like us and others who were formally educated to embrace naïve culture." *Ibid.*, 113].
4. Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 48.
5. Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 57.
6. *Ibid.*, 29.
7. *Ibid.*
8. The slippery concept of authenticity has bedeviled the discussion of American vernacular music time and time again. Too often, it is defined in an unnecessarily unified manner and assumed to mean the same thing across vast stretches of time. I examine the concept in a transhistorical and cross-generic manner in "All The Memories Money Can Buy: The Persistence of Authenticity in American Popular Music," in *Crafting Sounds, Creating Meaning: Making Popular Music in the United States*, ed. Eric Weisbard (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).
9. When the Smithsonian reissued the Smith collection in 1997, it won two Grammy Awards—"Best Album Notes" and "Historical Album of the Year"—and went on to sell over 75,000 copies to date. Two noteworthy books on the folk revival take up Smith's work in some detail: Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) and Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997). I discuss the Smith collection and the responses to it by Cantwell and Marcus in "All Folked Up. Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music" in *Always On My Mind: Music Memory and Money* (Middletown: Wesleyan Press, forthcoming).
10. Keith Negus, *Popular Music In Theory. An Introduction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 4.
11. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 104.
12. Ross, *No Respect*, 5.
13. Negus, *Popular Music*, 19.
14. Tim Riley, *Hard Rain. A Dylan Commentary* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 19.
15. *Ibid.*, 218-19.
16. Greil Marcus, "You Gotta Lotta Nerve," *Mojo*, #91 (June 2001), 130.
17. Bruce Bastin, *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 434.
18. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (New York: Verso, 1996), 348-61.
19. *Ibid.*, 355.
20. Lynn Hirschberg, "Who's That Girl?" *New York Times Magazine* (August 4, 2002), 30-35, 42, 53, 56-7.
21. *Ibid.*, 30.
22. David Hajdu, "Queer As Folk" *New York Times Magazine* (August 18, 2002), 38.